

Heaven Can Wait

by Benjamin J. Stein

TUESDAY

SOMETHING SICKENING IS HAPPENING in California and in the nation. If we had a stricter set of laws about such things, what is happening might well be called "sedition," but since we have a First Amendment that allows free speech except for corporations and pro-life advocates, let's just call it what it is: sickening.

Basically what is happening is partly that Al Gore is traveling around the state on behalf of that extortionist in a gray flannel suit, Gray

Davis, and he is trying to save Davis's sorry self by appealing to the Democratic Party's most reliable base, the black voter. And what is Al Gore saying? That somehow, in some way that cannot be measured or seen, the black voter in California is the victim of racism just by the fact of the recall being called and a ballot measure being proposed to not (yes, not) collect data on race in California. I actually heard a long excerpt from a Gore speech at a California community college or other school in a mostly black area of Los Angeles played not once but twice on the local news radio station. If I can paraphrase the former V.P., he said to his audience, "Now, you will hear the Republicans say there is no racism left in California. But there is still plenty all around you whether it is obvious or not, even if it's hidden, and it is oppressing



you and the only way to avoid it is to vote Democratic." (Again, this is a paraphrase.)

What wicked lies.

The truth is that in fact there is almost no institutional racism, and certainly no official racism left in California, and relations among the races are cordial at every level one sees. The truth is that Al Gore is doing what he did with almost lethal effect in the 2000 election. He is trying to whip up paranoia and ill feelings between and among races to get votes. He is

trying to make the blacks, who have seen the most thorough revolution in human advancement in the history of blacks in America in the past 50 years (since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision desegregating schools) feel as if nothing has been accomplished and they are still back in the days of the Klan. Again, all of this is being done to get votes for a fellow Democrat who is a thug in a different way, Gray Davis, and to continue gathering data on race so racism can still be put into

practice in California.

When this comes from Jesse Jackson, we don't really feel it is surprising. Fictitious talk about racism is a business for Jesse Jackson. It has made him rich. We have modest standards for him.

But Al Gore was in high national office. He has claims to moral leadership. In fact, he is the lowest

form of demagogue, the kind who sets race against race for personal and political gain. I saw a lot of the same in the most recent debate of the Democratic candidates for President in Baltimore a couple of weeks ago, and while it was positively subtle compared with what Gore was doing, it had the same ugliness about it: it was an explicit attempt to tear the nation apart based on meretricious appeals to racism and paranoia.

I cannot even imagine what the outcry would be if Mr. Bush spoke to a white audience and tried to whip them up into a frenzy about blacks and Hispanics. The media would scream the house down.

But Al Gore explicitly attempts to stir up racism in our glorious California, most welcoming of all places on the planet, a place where no one in any authority gives racism anything but the cold shoulder—and the media does not say, “boo.” The Democratic candidates for President appeal for black votes to a wholly fictitious “fact” of Republican “discrimination” against blacks and it is taken for granted that it’s not worth mentioning, despite its obvious nation-splitting effect.

As I said: sickening. For these people to lay claim to leadership of a nation they would tear apart for votes is nothing less, and maybe something worse.

MONDAY

I am a great fan of Elia Kazan. His movies were among the waking dreams that have informed my life.

His *Splendor in the Grass* in particular was probably the best movie on growing up in America, and on wealth and the loss of it that I have ever seen. Its depictions of Yale, and how the only warmth to be found there was at the pizza parlor, was especially poignant for me, a graduate of Yale Law School (who eventually came to love the place).

But as I read his long obituaries, I was struck by several facts of his life:

For one, it astounds me that 50 years down the road, he is still being criticized for being a friendly witness before a congressional committee investigating the penetration of Soviet Communism into America.

It must be clear to everyone who is not brain dead by now that Stalinist Russia was the most acute of dangers to human decency, was the most evil regime in history except maybe for Hitler’s, and had no real redeeming features. Yet to have “outed” the agents of this evil entity is still controversial in Hollywood and New York. This is a deep embarrassment to this nation and to the entertainment world generally.

Second, on a more personal note, I was stunned to read that Kazan, a Greek, apparently, and not a Jewish man as I had thought, went to Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in the mid-twenties and worked his way through washing dishes

and bartending at fraternities that would not admit him. This, he said, filled him with rage and made him feel a permanent antipathy towards establishment life in America. The fascinating part for me is that my father, Herbert Stein, the late economist and public policy commentator, entered Williams in 1931. He was a Jew and not rich, and was not allowed to join any of the fraternities on the beautiful campus. He also worked as a dishwasher at a fraternity, Sigma Chi, that would not even remotely have considered him as a member. When I asked him thirty years after that if the experience had made him bitter about the time and place, he said that far from feeling bitter, he was grateful for the fine meals he had at the Sigma Chi house kitchen and for the opportunity to pay for his schooling at such a great school in the

midst of the Great Depression.

I guess that this is the difference between a powerful, smoldering actor/director who works his way up to the top of the most competitive business on earth, show business, and an extremely mild-mannered economist. But I cannot help think that my father had it right, and was enabled to go on his way with far less of a burden of anger and resentment than Elia Kazan carried, to his detriment (since carrying rage is always a detriment) for a large part of his life. He had obviously lost it by the time he made *Splendor in the Grass*, which is as elegiacal about America as *Gentleman’s Agreement* is downbeat.

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I was impressed that Kazan, a diminutive fellow of no great looks, had apparently been the love interest of some of the great beauties of the silver screen, including the peerless Marilyn Monroe. In fact, as he related it, the night she announced her engagement to Joe DiMaggio she spent in bed with Kazan. There is something intensely uplifting about that in terms of the appeal of intensity and intelligence for women (and I guess for men, too), just as there is something depressing about Marilyn Monroe's approach to life in that story. Hollywood, and life generally, offers far more opportunity than one would suppose if one based one's life exclusively on what happens in high school.

But mainly, good-bye to a man who was too smart and too independent to be a Communist stooge, smart enough to see what was good as well as what was bad in the society that had once filled him with rage. He was a giant in his vision, and maybe Marilyn saw that in him. Come to think of it, she had a yen for giants ... and Yankees.

SATURDAY

So, here I am eating Vietnamese food in Georgetown with Wlady and Mike Long, and savoring the delicious crispy rolls, and then off onto M Street to walk along and get stared at by young men and women and give them autographs.

It is great. And then down to the Georgetown waterfront near the Sequoia Restaurant with its many lights. And what I am thinking, pure and simple, is what Wlady has just said. "We used to think earthly life was horrible and paradise awaited us when we died. Now we have made earthly life into a paradise and we fear death. It can't possibly be as good as life as we know it in America." I know Wlady is a devout follower of the Church of Rome so he is kidding about the last part. But he makes a good point. Life here is truly great. What an achievement for a nation to make a life so great that mortals think we are in heaven day by day. And because I love my readers, I am going to tell you my favorite places on this earth, and then maybe you

can list yours and feel gratitude that you have them in your life:

- My apartment at the Watergate late at night when I am not tortured by the noisy construction nearby and can feel the breeze coming off the Potomac, look at my parents' mementos, and feel as if they are dancing around me, saying, "Life is

short, Benjy. Enjoy it while you can. Enjoy every minute, no matter what we said when we were alive. Now we are immortal and know better." I look at them in their college yearbooks, look at my Christmas lights that I keep burning all year, and am in bliss.

- Hill's Resort in Priest Lake, Idaho. Simply the most beautiful spot with the best food in America, plus the kindest people—if you dare, go up to Upper Priest Lake. It is unchanged for millennia and is perfection itself.

- The Edgewater Hotel in Sandpoint, Idaho. The most beautiful beach I have ever seen stretches outside your window and then an endless lake and mountains beyond that. Perfection at a bargain price.

- The Capitol by night. The majesty of the Republic in all its visual glory.

- Malibu by night from my deck, with the coyotes screaming and the stars twinkling by the bil-

"We used to think earthly life was horrible and paradise awaited us when we died. Now we have made earthly life into a paradise and we fear death."

lions overhead, and the waves crashing.

- The health club pool at the Fairmont Princess in Bermuda, simply the most magnificent pool I have ever been in on the most magnificent island. A staggeringly perfect pool on top of a hill overlooking the boundless ocean. Miss it at your peril. Bermuda is as good as it gets.

- Anywhere my son is laughing and smiling;

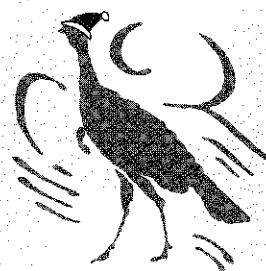
- Anywhere my wife is smiling and holding my hand.

- Anywhere I feel peace, the greatest gift.

Also anywhere I have friends. ☺

Ben Stein is a writer, actor, and economist in Beverly Hills and Malibu.

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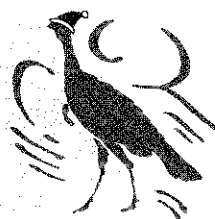
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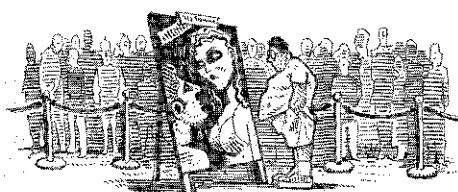
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JAMES BOWMAN



Pulp Garbage

TO BE A MOVIE CRITIC IS TO LIVE with disappointment. Every now and then we have the pleasure of a *Showgirls*—a movie universally damned by critics, including me, and public alike—to cut through, for just a moment, our haunting sense of failure. But much, much more often the movies we like are ignored by the public and the movies we hate prove to be box-office smashes. So when I looked into my morning paper on the Monday after it opened and saw that Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 1* had romped home at number one for the weekend with takings of \$22.7 million, it was with a feeling of heart-heaviness that was hardly unfamiliar. True, there was the additional disappointment that came from having allowed myself the half-hope that the movie's failure would be so resounding as to bring down Miramax and Harvey Weinstein—who famously said that his studio was “the house that Quentin Tarantino built” with the smash-hit *Pulp Fiction* in 1994—and maybe Disney into the bargain. But, deep down, I knew that that was too much to hope for.

The one comfort critics often have in seeing their judgments rejected so emphatically is a sense of solidarity among themselves. They even take a certain pride—now it can be told!—in their lonely advocacy of minority opinions which may be supposed to demonstrate their superior taste. In the case of *Kill Bill*, however, there was nothing like a critical consensus. In fact, there could hardly be a movie better calculated to divide the critical fraternity between those who loved and those who hated it. It's hard to imagine that there could be any third view of *Kill Bill*, though some of those who hated it damned it with faint praise—I suspect just to show that they “got” it and were under no illusions that Tarantino was trying and failing to make a movie

that looks like real life. He was, of course, not. Instead, he was trying to make a movie that looks like other movies—and the more obscure, junky and unwatchable the other movies are the better he likes them.

This has always been his *modus operandi* and makes him the Prince of Postmodernists. But he goes further than this. Knowing that if you make a movie that is an imitation not of life but of other movies it will bear the marks of its artificiality, he goes all out to emphasize these—as if to make sure that the dimmer sort of critics will “get” it. Thus he puts a slightly built young woman, played by Uma Thurman and known in the movie only as “The Bride” or Black Mamba, into the classic role of the honor-bound seeker of revenge. He portrays her cutting a pathway through a phalanx of enemies, most of them men much larger than herself, to get at the object of revenge, not because he doesn't know that this makes the very idea of the honor quest into an absurdity but because he does. Making it an absurdity is part of his purpose. Who could come away from *Kill Bill* with anything remaining of what is already the vestigial idea of what it means to be “a man”?

But he's not doing it for ideological reasons. This movie does not touch real life at any point—not even that point—and Tarantino is proud of it. He told Hugh Davies of the London *Daily Telegraph* that *Kill Bill* “definitely does not take place on planet Earth.” For once, this is an understatement. Lots of movies don't take place on planet Earth, but put recognizable human characters—sometimes in elaborate alien prostheses—on other planets or on spaceships between planets. *Kill Bill* doesn't deal with any such trivial detachment from reality as that. Instead it aims for and achieves an effortlessly complete dissociation from the universe as we know it. As the Asian production designer put it to Rick Lyman of the *New York*