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## Screen

### Not-All-Too-Bad Kids and Inept Blasphemy

*Breaking Away*; Directed by Peter Yates; Written by Steve Tesich; 20th Century-Fox.

*Peppermint Soda*; a film by Diane Kurys; a Gaumont/New Yorker Films Release.

*Monty Python's Life of Brian*; Directed by Terry Jones; Written by Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin; Handmade Films.

by Eric Shapearo

W. C. Fields, that great visionary, may have had the right instinct: during the last two decades, we have begun to realize that neither the atom bomb, nor bolshevik Russia, nor the corruption of power are the real threats to America. It has begun to dawn on us that the supreme danger is kids. The word "kid," in itself, is full of treachery and traps. "Kid" is not a homogenous notion which works at many levels of normal consciousness. A four-year-old kid can already carry the miasma of lethal disruption of reality; a 12-year-old can menace our most cherished principles and our very sense of civilization; an 18-year-old can breed debaucheries, both carnal and mental. And recently, the 30-year-old kid has become a symbol of malignant incoherence, a feeble-minded, mostly drugged burden to society, who occasionally throws bombs at police precincts and whom the liberal press calls a socially frustrated kid when he is caught. We did not heed the advice of Fields, who recommended strangling kids the moment they made their "kidness" into an argument: consequently, we had Berkeley, Charles Reich and Yuppies.

Now, two movies tell us that perhaps we were not completely wrong in re-

fraining from the mass-murder of kids. *Breaking Away* is exceptionally convincing. Its picture of life and people is shamelessly romanticized (what's wrong with that?) and has the power to stay with us for a good while after we leave the movie house and come home to watch the dreary news on TV. The film brings back an attractive goodness in a remarkably unobtrusive way. In my generation, we had movies that stayed well-ensconced for decades in "the dark chambers of our imagination"—as the biblical prophet Ezekiel described this part of our awareness with his literary elegance. Later, these same films were tried before the liberal culture's kangaroo courts and convicted of distortion, or falsification of reality; but then, not long ago, they were paroled as camp and nostalgia. Even if their idealism was a fib, so what? They enriched us, while their absence today impoverishes us. They knew how to be disturbing without being destructive. And *Breaking Away*, a sort of *Bildungsroman* in a hamburger-pizza-stand landscape, rescues something of their almost forgotten flavor. The story is about an Indiana working-class boy who discovers the taste of defeat and triumph, that life is both ugly and lovely, and how the class consciousness of someone who is 19, and in the very middle of America, can be a source of strength and joy, not hatred and disdain à la *Mother Jones*.

There's no such idealized unity of tone in *Peppermint Soda*, a French tale about two sisters, 13 and 15 years of age. They are in the midst of the torments of feminine puberty. The older sister approaches the dilemmas of growing up with routine recipes and somewhat stereotyped unconcern. The younger still dwells in a muddle of murky girlishness, and thus is much more interesting. There's a light touch in their quandaries of high school life

and the process of their acculturation into womanhood. It would sound like platitude to call this the Gallic sense of humor, rather, it's nested in the director's empathy with their condition. They are both believable and appealing. Their love for their mother, while sailing through the roily waters of a split family home and so-called modern lifestyle in the contemporary urban choas, somehow becomes more precious than if it were framed by *Little House on the Prairie* attitudes. Diane Kurys has an insistently sketchy style. She thinks, perhaps, that it loads her film with allusions and innuendos. Rather, it makes it a bit fuzzy.

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I was an unabashed fan of the Monty Python group and genre as long as their subject matter was idiocy. They were great when they commented on this elemental and cataclysmic force which, perhaps, rules mankind's history to a larger extent than we dare to admit. However, when the boys' endeavors in the domain of imbecility scored prodigiously, their vanity grew in proportion to their success. They decided to put their exertions into commenting on philosophy. This fateful mistake turned them into idiots, and *Life of Brian* serves as a perfect example of their pratfall.

The movie is about Christianity's dawn. Religious feelings are among the most complex and valuable of human instincts: how can they be examined in art and drama without sounding offensive? A difficult question, endemic to Western civilization. Anatole France, an agnostic, created Abbé Coignard, a Catholic priest, who both sins and regrets in such a touching way that reading his adventures brings to the Church more benefit than harm. France certainly did not want to help religion, but his genius kept telling him that since faith is profundity and human warmth, using

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derision against it would certainly backfire. *Life of Brian*, which artistically is an assemblage of mostly dull, frantically noisy and underdeveloped skits, tries to

do exactly what France knew to avoid: it presents religion as twaddle. The effect is like discussing phenomenology on *Saturday Night Live*—a doleful flop. □

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## Music

### Truth Through the Art of Riff

Josef Skvorecky: *The Bass Saxophone*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

by Douglas A. Ramsey

It is possible, although I have seen no serious defense of the idea, that the recent defections to the United States from among the ranks of the Bolshoi Ballet had their inspiration in political ideology. Even fellow members of the Bolshoi company, however much they have attempted to devalue the talents of the defectors, have rather wistfully agreed that the Koslovs and Aleksandr Godunov wished for the opportunity to explore areas of dance forbidden by the Soviet Union. There is little possibility of establishing an underground ballet company to perform avant-garde works late at night in the cellars of Moscow and Kiev, and no chance of sneaking modern dance movements into the traditional repertoires of state-controlled Soviet ballet companies. The thought of some daring performer slipping a few Martha Graham touches in among the prettinesses of *Swan Lake* is alluring but ludicrous. So the Nureyevs, Baryshnikovs and Godunovs defect.

In literature, painting and music, the opportunities for defiance are broader. The *samizdat* is well known, as are the punishments of those who dare to write for it. Defection is once again the answer for a few who are courageous and lucky, or who have accumulated enough international fame to provide a kind of immunity.

Those within repressed societies who

wish to absorb the output of banned artists find ways of doing it. Modern paintings hidden away and surreptitiously enjoyed, rumpled *samizdat* manuscripts passed from hand to hand, phonograph records purchased on the black market, tape recordings endlessly dubbed and redubbed; all of this involves degrees of heroism. Elsewhere\* I have written about the strange encounter during World War II between the editor of this journal and a Nazi soldier. Leopold Tyrmand, a Polish forced laborer in Germany, discovered by chance that the soldier was a fellow jazz enthusiast. At considerable risk, they spent a Sunday afternoon in a rowboat in the middle of a river, alternately spelling one another at the oars and the crank of a wind-up phonograph, listening to the recordings of Benny Goodman.

There are no doubt millions of stories about people putting themselves in peril to enjoy what they seek in art. But to create under circumstances of repression and fear, knowing that detection could mean the end of everything, seems even more daring. That, in part, and on the surface, is Skvorecky's theme in the poignant title story of *The Bass Saxophone*, and, more explicitly, in "Red Music," the essay that begins the book. Skvorecky, growing up in occupied Czechoslovakia, was a semi-professional dance band tenor saxophonist consumed by the "forceful vitality," the "explosive creative energy" of jazz. He and his fellow musicians did not think of their beloved jazz as protest

music, "... but of course, when the lives of individuals and communities are controlled by powers that themselves remain uncontrolled—slavers, czars, fuhrers, first secretaries, marshals, generals and generalissimos, ideologists of dictatorships at either end of the spectrum—then creative energy becomes a protest." Jazz, he says, "was a sharp thorn in the sides of the power-hungry men, from Hitler to Brezhnev, who successively ruled in my native land."

The essay catalogues the ways in which jazz survived in Europe under the Nazis; secret jam sessions with hidden lookouts, phony song titles ("The Wild Bull" for "Tiger Rag," "Evening Song" for "Stardust"), forbidden reception of short wave broadcasts, band arrangements smuggled in by Wehrmacht officers, swing bands in Buchenwald and Terezin. European repressions of jazz were far worse than American ignorance and neglect of jazz. Merely shunned in the United States, but pursued, bedeviled, and outlawed by the fascist rulers of Europe, jazz became a recognized cultural force there decades ago, and only now may be achieving high cultural respectability here. It was not the repression that established jazz in European culture, although, strangely, it may have helped to ingrain it. Europeans seem to have grasped the significance of the music almost from the moment of its recognizability as a distinct idiom, as far back as 1919, when Ernest Ansermet, the great Swiss conductor, wrote of Sidney Bechet's "rich inventiveness," and "bold, disconcerting freshness." It is a commonplace of jazz history that the first sensitive critics of the music were Europeans. Early American evaluations of jazz were conducted on the level of show business publications specializing in weekly grosses and the doings of movie stars.

When the young Skvorecky was discovering Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Chick Webb, Andy Kirk, and the Casa Loma band (he and his friends thought Casa Loma was the band leader), appreciation of jazz was

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\*Album notes to "Dig," Miles Davis, Prestige 24054.