

budget movies, which are one of two types. First, there is the movie about the family in the mountains and their love of and struggles with nature. Second, and more predominant, is the gore movie, wherein imaginative mutilations are key. Basically there exists, overall, a bipolar situation: "grand" (sic) movies and garbage.

High Road to China is a mediocre movie. Thus there is something to be said for it. It is light entertainment: adventure (sometimes contrived) dominates the plot; humor is evident while seriousness isn't. It could have easily turned into a variation on Blake Edwards's *The Great Race* (1965) as countless other period movies did (*High Road to China* is set in the late 20's), but Mr. Hutton avoids that cheap pitfall. This movie could mark the return of ordinary movies (not *films*), but it's unlikely: too many want to grow up and be George Lucas and too many others want to show that punk a thing or two. More's the pity. In this age of extremes, it's a good feeling to be able to chew popcorn and watch a mediocre movie. (SM) □

The Agony and Some Dentistry

Sophie's Choice; Written by Alan J. Pakula (based on the novel by William Styron); Directed by Alan J. Pakula; Universal Pictures.

Serious consideration was given to skipping *Sophie's Choice*. But, as Mr. Styron gave a nod to the film—an extraordinary event in that fuzzy area that separates Novel-land and Hollywood—as one of the better American actresses performs in the film, and as we are driven by a prickling of conscientiousness, we gave in. We also visit our dentist on a regular basis. The dental visit is typically painful but worthwhile. *Sophie's Choice* lacks the latter characteristic. □

Agitprop Division: Hollywood

by Herbert I. London

Ever since the Committee of Ten and the subsequent publication of Victor Navasky's *Naming Names*, Hollywood and its many subsidiaries have been in the throes of an anti-anticommunist ground swell. This movement, which began as a modest effort to counter extremely naive interpretations of communist sabotage, has become a frontal assault on almost all aspects of bourgeois-capitalist culture—its economic system, military policies, and cultural values. A film director may not always have a direct and easily discernible message, but he will have a message.

In some respects 1982 is a landmark year since the film campaign against our society has hit the financial jackpot. Propaganda pays. Before I overstate the case, let me point out that although Costa Gavras's *Missing*—a misguided and misleading attack on CIA activities in Chile—was not a financial success in the U.S., it was a box-office smash in Europe. Its theme is consistent with current rhetoric at European universities and the suppositions of the Green Party in Germany. However, the films that count financially and artistically are targeted at the values of Western culture and, from the looks of things, have hit the bull's-eye. Let me begin my list of the five most propagandistic films of 1982 with the one that will be the biggest financial success in the industry's history: *E.T.*

This film by Steven Spielberg, which is advertised as appealing to the child in everyone, is an attempt to characterize government officials as heartless creatures and to attribute to the extraterrestrial an intelligence, sensitivity, and warmth that presumably we cannot find in ourselves or our neighbors. The film begins with the alien and friends engaged in plant recultivation; a more benign activity for "save the earth" types cannot be found. Appearing on the scene are some ominous characters whose faces are not seen, but whose motives are perfectly clear from the close-up of their keys. These are the captors—government captors it turns out—with ice running through their veins and a malevolent yen to experiment on these creatures from outer space in their thoughts.

E.T. is thus a combination of teddy bear, St. Francis, and Wernher Von Braun. He can be a doll at one moment, a loving saint the next, and then a scientist reaching across the galaxy to contact his friends. What more can one ask from this

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I Disagree

by Stephen Macaulay

Although well-intentioned, Dean London's examination of what he terms "the five most propagandistic films of 1982" is an example of the kind of polemicizing that should be dropped from the agendas of conservative individuals and organizations if they intend to partake in *serious* cultural discourse. First, the form. It is the popularity list, the kind of thing that makes *People* magazine possible. "In" or "out," "hit" or "miss," or, in *People* parlance, "Picks & Pans"—all of these are meant to be organizational poles which are ready-made and already hung with the current artistic fashion. No personal cerebration is required. The message is: here's what to think; believe us. The selection of the worst—Dean London's approach—is just the

Mr. Macaulay reviews movies for the Chronicles.

obverse of the same coin and thus has the same value. Second, the content. It is remarkable that Dean London is so dismissive of *Missing*. Costa-Gavras, the man who also directed *Z* (1969), is openly an ideological enemy; he is a serious foe and should be addressed as such. That *Missing* was not a "box-office smash" in the U.S. doesn't mitigate the destructive power of the movie. The few, the elite, always form policies; the masses follow. Instead of coming to grips with a serious foe, Costa-Gavras, Dean London launches into an attack on what are featherweights by comparison and employs techniques reminiscent of Marxist literary criticism: one part mind reading (vide Marx and Engels on Balzac) and one part metaphysical twisting of innocent facts. As I have covered four of the five films Dean London lists in *Chronicles*, my comments will be brief.

The attack on *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* is the most astonishing. Certainly the film is open to interpretation. It is a testimony to Steven Spielberg's abilities as a filmmaker that *E.T.* can support multiple interpretations. Dean London's most serious problem is that it portrays government officials as enemies to little aliens and little children: it is, he thinks, "a snide swipe at . . . American authority." My interpretation is somewhat simpler. Spielberg is simply portraying the adult as authority figure, a characterization that is a convention in fairy tales. Remember Peter Rabbit? That little brown creature was chased by a very large man who made a particular noise as he walked, one that sent Peter scurrying. Peter knew that if he didn't hop, he would be cut up for a stew or pie. I've yet to hear *Peter Rabbit* characterized as an antiauthoritarian story, but there it is, with all of the elements of *E.T.* Peter Pan didn't want to grow up because he knew that if he gave up the magical ability to believe in fairies he would become a humorless adult who would undoubtedly have problems with films like *The Wizard of Oz* (Dorothy as anarchist? Gore Vidal has raised the point of her possible seditious nature and his wit is notably lacking)

and *E.T.*

The female disguise seems to disturb Dean London most about *Tootsie*. The man in women's clothing has had a long and respectable history in the theater, and because Milton Berle had a penchant for pumps doesn't negate that history. While the film does have a pro-E.R.A. message, Dean London, I think, misses the point of the scene he offers as evidence. Isn't Hoffman's repentance actually a ploy? The woman he addresses is one that he has been, correctly, lusting after throughout the film. His words are ones he knows will win her and thus permit him to ungirdle his hormones. His, it seems, is a variation on "But I *really* love you" spoken in the backseat of a car, not the feminist sniveling of an Alan Alda or Phil Donahue. As for *Gandhi*

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interplanetary angel? His adversaries, however, conceal their eyes with inhuman masks and their insensitive actions with jargon-laden language. Who are these pursuers of arbitrary law and order? NASA officials; yes, the same people who brought you a step on the moon are now characterized as the Brown Shirts of intergalactica. No wonder U.N. representatives thought this film was so noteworthy; it simply confirmed their vitriolic assumptions about the United States. This film is not only a symbol of friendship across the solar system, it is also a snide swipe at government authority generally and American authority specifically.

If *E.T.* is the United Nations film of the year, *Tootsie* is the E.R.A. vision of tomorrow. What is ostensibly a five-minute transvestite sketch for the old *Show of Shows* has been converted by director Sydney Pollack into a statement for the so-called women's movement. Dustin Hoffman, who dresses in drag to secure a part on a soap opera, comes to appreciate how badly women are manipulated by chauvinistic men wishing to gratify their egos at the expense of unwary fe-

male and Solidarity: as far as I know, its "symbolic acts and demonstrations" (e.g., the cross in the Gdansk shipyard and the general strikes) have been most effective. Communist thugs can't defeat people who wear pictures of the Virgin on their lapels; thugs can crush those who act in kind. Dean London is right and wrong about *The Verdict*. Correct in his general interpretation. His selection of detail is wrong. In cases when a search for truth is being made, a search with serious effects on human lives, isn't it possible that the sanctity of a U.S. Postal box could be violated? Finally, the attack on *Garp*: basically, Dean London is correct. But surely he exaggerates. That "millions" will experience a sea change from the interpretation of Irving's garbage is unlikely. Thousands, perhaps. □

males. Hoffman comes to see the wickedness of his ways and, in a "tender-hearted" moment at the end, demonstrates to a woman that he fully appreciates the difficulties women face. Never again will he flex his machismo psyche at singles' parties; he has been converted. Another victory for androgyny; another sexist vanquished. *Tootsie* has done for feminists what *Kramer v. Kramer* did for single-parent families. With the success of this film another nail is driven into the coffin of differentiated sex roles.

Perhaps the most successful artistic accomplishment of the year belongs to Richard Attenborough and his film *Gandhi*. This is indeed a film of grandeur which, in part, explains why it is so pernicious. The photography and acting are so compelling that one is tempted to gloss over the message. However, Attenborough can't resist his instinct for didacticism. Again and again the viewer is reminded that passive resistance works. As the screen version of *Gandhi* notes, "Even in the case of Hitler I would practice these methods; for in the long run tyrants fail." I should like to think *Gandhi* was right about the "long run," albeit the jury is out on that question. But what

about the short run? Is an extermination camp fertile ground for the practice of passive resistance? Does one quote Gandhi in the gulag? Is the pressure applied on the British government in the form of symbolic acts and demonstrations maneuvers that can be successfully adopted by Solidarity? What concerns me about this film is that it provides ammunition for the antinuke, propacifist adherents and, significantly, may affect fence sitters on the issue of nuclear-weapons deployment in Europe. One cannot underestimate the influence of the visual media, especially when the director has an ax to grind. If the upshot of this film is that large portions of its audience believe that passive-resistance tactics are appropriate to our present condition, then the slide into tyranny may not be far removed.

Next on my hit list is *The Verdict*, a film with all the clichés of *Rocky II* and *The Paper Chase* rolled into one loud cheer for the underdog. Paul Newman plays a hard-drinking Boston lawyer who is having difficulty compromising his values for the legal vultures who make the rules. Along the way Newman tilts swords with an unscrupulous panjandrum of the legal profession who will do anything to win his case. James Mason, who plays this antagonist's role very effectively, says, "I get big fees because I win." This is the logic of Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." But in this case, the loser wins. On the face of it, there is nothing particularly wrong with seeing an underdog win—I'm all for that. Nor do I have any gripe with the critical portrayal of lawyers. What is troubling is the director's view that *no one* plays by the rules—not lawyers, not doctors, not even Newman, who breaks into a mailbox to secure evidence for his case. No one is untainted. The moral of this story is that when no one plays by the rules, the rules can be ignored. This is moral relativism with a vengeance. The director seems to be proclaiming: "Laws were meant to be broken." At the end of this film one wonders: Justice for whom? What laws can

be defended? Here is a cynic's impression of a brave new world without common norms, morality, or even simple decency.

The last of the top five is also among the most tasteless films I've ever seen. *The World According to Garp* is John Irving's joke on the *New York Times Book Review* and the Hollywood *glitterati*. This is inhuman satire that pokes fun at every conceivable bourgeois convention and involves—with various degrees of seriousness—castration, sex change, self-mutilation, masturbation, and murder. There is no topic spared in John Irving's perverse imagination. If this perversion were kept within the covers of his financially successful book, I would be annoyed but not outraged. The young are more inclined to see video pornography than print pornography. However, since this story has been adapted into film and degrades the millions who have and will see it, I cannot contain my dismay. At the risk of hyperbole, I would describe Mr. Irving's book as a comprehensive assault on middle-class sensibilities. It is designed to shock until

you've been shocked so often that there is nothing left but some form of acceptance and, in some instances, bemusement. But this is not a comedy, nor is it satire in the usual sense, notwithstanding the silly comments in the *New York Times*. This is degradation in which the human spirit is reduced to a scatological depiction in living color.

What these propaganda films demonstrate is that the campaign to undermine America is in full swing in the land of Norman Lear. I cannot prove a causal relationship between the message in these films and social despair, but I am confident in suggesting that these films play a part in it. This is not an argument—I should hastily note—for censorship, although the well-being of any social system is based on literary tastefulness and social order. What I am contending is that the film industry has lost any semblance of balance. It is what Daniel Bell called a cultural contradiction of capitalism. It is a revolutionary force aiming its ardor at the youthful consumers of mass cult. □

THE AMERICAN PROSCENIUM

Affirmative-Action Election

The mayoralty race in Chicago had plenty to do with race, of course, and it would be futile to go once again into the validity or nefariousness of those rudimentary passions that accounted for the contest's by-now-familiar image. Yet what and how much was made of its more intricate aspects? To our mind, no convincing assessment had been formulated as of election day on the pernicious abuse of the commonsensical symmetries which, after all, for better or worse, rule the basic sensitivities of us all—black and white alike.

Actually, what was at stake this time was neither racial nor party politics, but the notion of how we administer absolution for venial sins in the public domain.

Overblown as it may sound, that facet of the ganglion of issues, which predicated the election, may decide the direction into which both our civilization and democracy are moving. We agree that a man's complexion may govern some political emotions on a visceral level, but we suspect that *unfairness*—a slightly bland word at first sight—when perceived as a structural flaw of the social environment, can bring some dispositions to a state of boiling hatred. Mr. Washington's candidacy was widely perceived by Chicago's white population—regardless of party affiliation—as something wildly, monstrously unfair. Only Chicago blacks and white liberals, who accounted for his victory margin, were blind to this factor. This makes us quite pessimistic. Blemishes, even de-