

International. This Trotsky could not tolerate. Through the Mexican press, he announced that he "no longer shared moral proletarian solidarity with Diego Rivera and thus could not continue living in his house."

In April of 1939, after spending two years and three months at the Riveras', the Trotskys, their aides, and bodyguards moved out and settled in Vienna Street, also in Coyoacán.

For the next year there was no communication between the two couples, although they lived less than a mile from each other. Meanwhile, the G.P.U. grip around Trotsky tightened. A plot to assassinate him, headed by the communist painter David Siqueiros, was organized. According to Nicholas Mosley, "The conspirators gathered in a studio-room on Cuba Street in the city on the night of 23rd-24th May [1940]. They were mostly artists, ex-soldiers, mineworkers, the unemployed. There was with them an agent of the G.P.U. known as Felipe. They had acquired police uniforms; they dressed up. The second-in-command of the raid, a painter called Pujol, wore the uniform of an army lieutenant. Siqueiros himself wore the uniform of a major, with dark glasses and a false moustache. They carried ropes, rope-ladders, rubber gloves, incendiary bombs, a rotary saw, several revolvers, and at least two machine guns . . . the moustache Siqueiros wore, was a 'Hitler' moustache [and] instead of an officer's hat he had a [First World War] 'Kaiser' helmet." It was a combination of "murderous solemnity and face."

Trotsky, however, was not amused. In his letter to Mexican President Cárdenas, written immediately afterwards, he described what had happened. "A gang of twenty assassins attacked my house at night, tied up the guards, broke into my study, threw fire bombs into the house and into the yard, wounded my grandson, and kidnapped one of my aides." For some reason, he chose not to mention that he and Natalia survived only by chance, rolling out of their bed and hiding behind it when their bedroom was hastily machine-gunned from the doorway.

A few days later, the corpse of Trotsky's kidnapped aide was found buried in the basement of the house of Siqueiros's relatives.

Since the quarrel with Rivera was

widely known, Diego (who was not involved) became a suspect. He escaped arrest thanks only to his mistress, who drove him away in her truck under a pile of oil paintings. Shortly thereafter, he left Mexico for San Francisco. And thus he wasn't in the country when the second, successful attempt on Trotsky's life was carried out three months later.

Though the house on Vienna Street was turned practically into a fortress, with a steel door and watch towers, and was guarded round the clock by the Mexican police and by Trotsky's bodyguards, the assassin had no trouble getting in, since he was a boyfriend (alas, G.P.U. planted) of Trotsky's devoted secretary Sylvia Ageloff.

After he hit Trotsky with an ice pick, which went two-and-three-quarter inches into his skull, "Trotsky leaped to his feet . . . and came towards him, sweeping the objects off the table and hurling them at him—the books, the dictating machine, the ink-well, the paper-knife—he grappled with Mercader, tore the ice-pick from him, got hold of his finger and bit it." Natalia and the guards who rushed into the room saw Trotsky bleeding profusely, but on his feet, and Mercader, in shock, screaming: "They made me do it! They've got my mother!" Trotsky died the following evening.

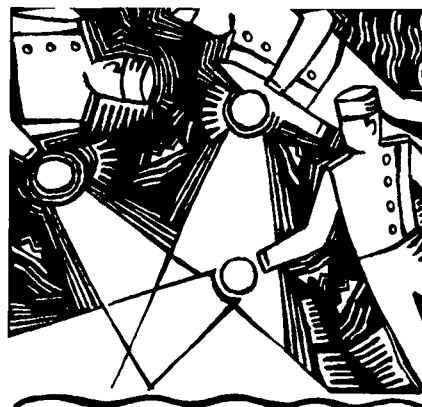
After his death the Riveras made an amazing transformation. Diego turned into a Stalinist. And he begged to be admitted into the paranoically Stalinist Mexican Communist Party. To get party favors, he even claimed that he was involved in the Trotsky assassination, which was not true.

The change with Frida was no less dramatic. She started hating Trotsky. And the more she hated him, the more passionate, the more obsessive grew her love for Stalin. His photograph was tacked permanently over her bed. And lying in this bed, afflicted with syphilis and a bone disease, barely able to hold a brush, she would devotedly paint Stalin's portrait.

Now, in the Blue House, there is not even a trace of Trotsky. And in the bedroom where he and Natalia spent more than two years, stands the bust of Cuba.

Leon Steinmetz teaches creative writing at Harvard.

FILM



Joanne Berg

Dreams, Ideals, and Jokes

by David R. Slavitt

Dreams

Produced by Hisao Kurosawa and

Mike Y. Inoue

Written and directed

by Akira Kurosawa

Released by Warner Brothers

Man Without Pigs

Produced and directed

by Chris Owen

The Women Who Smile

Produced and directed

by Joanne Head

The plan was terrific—as many plans are. I'd go up to New York to see selected films of the Museum of Natural History's 14th annual Margaret Mead Film Festival, but I could also catch the new Akira Kurosawa film too. This way, I'd have something to bail out with, some high ground to flee to after the anthropological films—from which, as you may already have gathered, I was expecting a rather less lofty level of artistry. All those tendentious documentaries about saving the rain forests and the beastliness of men would be worth sitting through, I believed, because some of them would be unintentionally funny or legitimately interesting, or even good.

I do, still, feel a small frisson of anticipation at the start of a film—which is a bigger deal than the start of a

book. You have to go somewhere, after all, get seated and settled, and wait that anticipatory few minutes in which the venerable shape of the auditorium speaks its subliminal message of drama and ritual. All the seats are pointed one way to a screen that may or may not be curtained, and there is a kind of invocation, a hope that this time the experience may be OK, or better than OK—wonderful and splendid. The opening of a book, even a new book with that shy smell of ink and glue, is an agreeable instant, but it doesn't last long. The preliminary and prefatory moments at the movies are enough a part of the experience to deserve some attention. And I mention them here in part to establish my *bona fides*. Even at the Museum of Natural History, sitting in the theater at which the films were screened for the press, I had that pleasant sense of anticipation.

But, as I have already implied, plans gang aft agley. It was Kurosawa who, in *Dreams*, became suddenly tendentious and preachy in a series of vignettes that begin well but end disastrously. We are promised dreams but get tirades against nuclear destruction and ecological ruin and a batty *Utne Reader* vision of some utopian village where they don't have electricity and where hundred-and-three-year-old sages spout suggestions about how linseed oil is an adequate power source before getting up to join a funeral procession in a long sequence of band music, bell-ringing, flower-brandishing, and goofy grinning.

Well, maybe it's just me. Being an

American, I am somewhat inured to this trendy stuff. It's the Japanese who may find it more interesting or (with reason) irritating. There are hunters wandering through the bamboo groves of Szechwan trying to kill pandas for their skins so that Japanese toymakers can produce toy pandas made of the genuine article for the offspring of the nation's showier tycoons. It's the Japanese who have those float nets that kill dolphins and who are still out there harpooning whales. It's the Japanese who rely on imported oil. (Linseed oil isn't going to run those Hondas, Datsuns, Isuzus, and Toyotas, old philosopher-san.) Maybe Kurosawa is just being impish, using his considerable clout to say these improbable things. Or maybe it's all a put-on. These eight separate sequences are "Dreams" after all, and nightmares can be about the propagandists as much as about the polluters and nuclear power advocates.

But I have the dismal certainty that these are simply Kurosawa's sincere convictions, which may be interesting to know about but are no more the basis for the formulation of public policy than they are the appropriate starting point for the making of interesting films. Somebody once said—it may have been Buñuel—that all movies are either dreams or documentaries. And while dream sequences are, in commercial Hollywood movies, usually an embarrassment, the great directors do a lot of dream stuff. From *Le Chien Andalou* on down through Fellini and Bergman and Buñuel, and

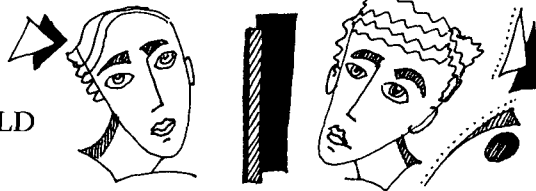
including much of Kurosawa's own best work, there are rifts and, on occasion, whole movies that work at a level that has nothing to do with the easy truth of correspondence of realistic cinema. The first several sequences of *Dreams* are valuable additions to that tradition. "Sunshine Through the Rain" has a mysterious fairy-tale quality and an oneiric *gravitas*. We are entirely invested in the little boy who is hiding among the huge trees as he watches the forbidden wedding procession of the foxes, listening to their eerie music and watching their slow, peculiar dance. That there is a punishment for this spying—his and ours—hardly needs to be explained, for Kurosawa has invested the scene with magic and guilt, for which there must be payment, and even then the foxes' forgiveness is hardly assured. "The Peach Orchard" and "The Tunnel" are also small masterpieces, and if "Van Gogh" is oddly flawed—Martin Scorsese's portrayal of Van Gogh is bizarre—there is a technical triumph from Lucasfilms as the young Japanese art lover romps through familiar Van Gogh paintings, walks those quivering roads, darts in and out of those numinous trees, and watches the crows swoop and soar through that unbelievable sky.

So, yes, go see it, even expecting to be disappointed and assaulted by the last three segments. The successes of the film are worth the nuisance, and even the last three preachments have their attractive visual aspects. Kurosawa seems incapable of a badly framed or improperly lit shot.

At the museum, I was more comfortable, and my expectations of entertainment were not disappointed. These were some of the funniest movies I've ever seen. Chris Owen's *Man Without Pigs* is about one John Waiko, the first Papua New Guinean to be awarded a doctorate and become a professor (at the Australian National University). He returned to his New Guinea birthplace, Tabara, to celebrate, and the anthropologist filmmakers came along to record this event. Evelyn Waugh at his nastiest could not have devised a more scathing indictment of lazy, unreliable, shiftless, envious, competitive, crafty, greedy, and unattractive natives conspiring to humiliate the only member of the family, clan, or village who

LIBERAL ARTS

A SIMPLE 'YES' WOULD SUFFICE



Some right-wingers seem to think a homosexual cabal has existed in the recent administrations. Do you know of closeted gay conservatives in such a position of influence?

[Mr. Liebman]: No. Frankly, even if I knew, which I don't, I wouldn't say.

—from *The Advocate's* "coming out" interview with *Young Americans for Freedom* founder Marvin Liebman in its July 17, 1990, issue.

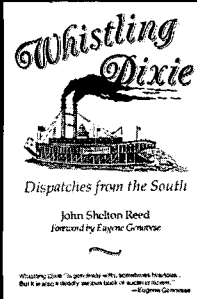
ever amounted to anything. There is endless bickering about what size pigs are to be killed and who is to get which parts of them, and whether the butchering should take place before the work is done or afterwards. There isn't any money, and the barter system doesn't work very well because the villagers spend most of their time wrangling, making long and absurd speeches in which "atta atta" is a frequent phrase, and the translations of which are impossible for any satirist to rival. "You have displayed your wealth in feathers," one "bigman" sneers. And another proclaims, "We Bosida are men of station: we seem lazy, but that is not true!" Well, of course it isn't the whole truth. "Deceitful and contemptible" also need to be added. And "stupid." The preparations for the party are interrupted by a sudden rainstorm, and there is much debate over who caused the rain and whose magic might make the rain go away.

As in the Kurosawa film, there is a general ecological concern with the preservation of the rain forest. The big hunter—whose name, I swear, is Kippling—boasts that he has killed 637

wild pigs and thirty-odd cassowaries in his lifetime. He is obviously worried about the intrusion of the logging companies. If there are to be depredations, the natives want them to be their own. One of the chiefs actually says, "If we want development, we should develop ourselves." The grammatical ambiguity of this suggestion is probably not intentional, but the remark is nonetheless hilarious—because they can't even organize a pig killing or the logistics of a small parade. John Waiko comes walking down the street in his doctoral robes surrounded by savages in beads and feathers, and there is an incident. Someone jostles someone else to get a better view. But because it's a party, they're all carrying spears that are mostly ceremonial but that can nevertheless cause wounds. So a fight erupts, which produces another series of daffy debates and harangues, the climax of which is Dr. Waiko's having to make a kind of peace, drawing a line down the middle of the street, and making the groups keep to their respective sides. The uppity Ph.D. has been reduced to the idiotic level of the village to which he has returned, and

the order of disorder has been restored.

Joanne Head's *The Women Who Smile* was the other triumph of the festival. A study of three women of the Hamar, who live, as the nasal if not actually snooty narratrix tells us, "in remote communities scattered across the dry bushlands of Ethiopia." In a great rush, all those social-studies films of junior high school come back, and we are expecting to be mildly uplifted and, not quite incidentally, taught rather more than we may ever need to know about the imports and exports and the charming customs of the region. But *The Women Who Smile*, while conforming mostly to the requirements of that high-minded genre, has its novelties. For one thing, it is clearly a feminist document. There is a sisterly solidarity among the subjects of the film, the female voice that lectures and explains their lives to us, and the female filmmaker. Before the main title, when we get the Hamar explanation about the making of life, we are put on notice about what to expect: "The man's milk and the woman's rain—her blood—come together" to make the new baby, and "if the baby



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smiles, it will be a woman."

Well, of course! Women are the ones who smile and are good, and men scowl and are brutes and beasts. And, as it turns out, wife-beating is one of the main occupations of the Hamar. The men seem to think that if they don't beat their wives, then the wives won't listen to them, will just—in the words of one of the Hamar males, "just lie around farting all day." The women's consciousness has not yet been raised, and they are woefully unaware of any possible alternative lifestyles.

What makes this poignant and even entertaining is that the liberal disapproval of wife-beating comes into conflict with the liberal notions of how we ought to respect the folkways of these tribal people. If the preservation of the Hamar way of life is a valuable and worthy aim, that means the preservation of wife-beating, which is the only way anybody can get the women to go sweep up the goat droppings. "Bonko, would you like to be a woman?" the field anthropologist asks in that wonderfully earnest tone of voice social scientists and elementary schoolteachers share. Bonko giggles and says no. "Because a woman is beaten and a man is not," he says. But then he trumps this otherwise losing trick by saying, "It's the custom!"

We see a native dance, mostly jumping up and down. We see a naming ceremony. Some little girl is getting named. Lots of names. "Truck," "Airplane," "Rain," and "Coolness" are among the names she is given, because it was raining when she was born, and there was a cool breeze, and, presumably, a truck drove by and a plane flew over. And the baby is passed from hand to hand, and there are large gourds with goeey stuff in them that people half drink, half eat. And they sing their tuneless and repetitive songs, praying for wealth and plenty, these half-naked savages in the middle of the poorest country on earth.

Wagh, even if he were still alive, couldn't make cruel jokes like this anymore. Or if he did, they couldn't get published and distributed. But then he wouldn't have to exert himself. The anthropologists are out there in the bushland, carrying on his work for him, and the museums are showing their films. All we have to do is smuggle a

little intelligence into the auditorium. And security devices haven't yet been invented to keep that out.

David R. Slavitt is a poet and novelist who lives in Philadelphia.

LITERATURE



Jeanne Berg

The Virginia Cavalier

by Marshall W. Fishwick

"We are Cavaliers," novelist William Caruthers boasted, "that generous, fox-hunting, wine-drinking, dueling and reckless race of men which gives so distinct a character to Virginians wherever they may be found."

If we look closely at the Cavalier, will we find the quintessential Virginian?

"Cavalier" was originally an English term signifying political affiliation, not social status. The migration to colonial Virginia was largely a middle- and even lower-class affair; most of the early landholders were small farmers. The relatively few settlers of wealth gave manners a warmer tone and emphasized the ideal of country life. "They gave Virginians their passion for handsome houses and fast horses, and brought to public life something more than it had before of the English notion that offices should be held for the benefit of the gentry." Time embroidered the truth and made the rough places smooth; more and more Virginians became Cavaliers. It is simple enough to explain why. They wanted to

be Cavaliers.

To sanctify the Cavalier legend in literature became a primary task for Virginia writers—and it was by no means easy. Rich in social virtues, the rural aristocracy was poor in intellectual cross-stimulation; to write was to go it alone. The most articulate members of society entered law, politics, or the ministry. In these three fields of endeavor, there developed an intellectual rigidity and a tendency to evaluate any idea against the background of its origin. Thought was often rated according to notions of social prestige—a habit extremely detrimental to creative thinking, as many otherwise loyal sons bitterly complained.

Hence the literary output of Virginia's early writers consisted mainly of travel accounts (like those of John Smith and Henry Norwood) and histories (of which those by Hugh Jones, William Stith, and Robert Beverley are best known). In the 18th century poetry and fiction with some relationship of style and subject began to appear. One hardy theme was aristocracy and privilege, reflecting the general antidemocratic strain in Southern thought. Stereotypes and symbols epitomizing the plantation economy, class-consciousness, and sectional pride were nurtured tenderly. Lacking originality, most Virginia writers of the period built on foundations laid by a Scotsman and a Yankee. The Scotsman was Sir Walter Scott, and the Yankee James Fenimore Cooper. In a sense, Virginia literature begins with them.

Scott's Waverly Novels were America's first best-sellers. Over five million copies came off American presses between 1813 and 1823; no one knows how many more were imported. In these novels the self-made Virginia Cavalier and his lady found a mirror of their life and ideals. From them sprang the obsession with genealogy that still grips the state. "It was good form," William E. Dodd tells us, "for Southern gentlemen to place Sir Walter Scott's novels on their library shelves and for all Southern boys and girls to read these books as the great models of life and good breeding." Men would saddle their horses and ride to town when a new Scott novel was expected. The whole region became infected by the Sir Walter disease.

The other pattern-maker, James