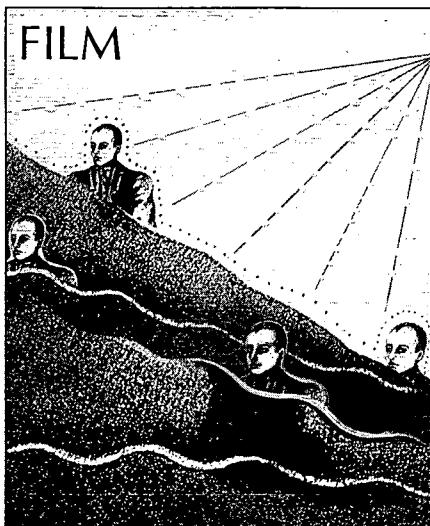


FILM



Star Turns

by David R. Slavitt

Bugsy

Produced by Mark Johnson

Written by James Toback

Directed by Barry Levinson

Released by Tri-Star Pictures

Meeting Venus

Produced by David Puttnam

Written by István Szabó and

Michael Hirst

Directed by István Szabó

Released by Warner Brothers

Gangster movies show us an arc, the parabolic rise and fall of a career where ambition comes a-cropper, where there is payment extracted by the inexorable fates for the hubris of the protagonist. But in these terms, *Bugsy* is no gangster movie. Indeed, the closest comparison I can think of is *Tucker*, another film about the way America maltreats her visionaries. Benjamin (Bugsy—but not to his face) Siegel is a gangster, a business associate of Meyer Lansky and Charlie Luciano, but at the opening of the film he is already at the top, doing well, riding high, taking care of business and even bending the rules a little to accommodate minor failures of faith and trust of a nebbish old friend like Harry Greenberg. (Elliot Gould as Greenberg does his best work in movies in years.)

What brings Bugsy down isn't anything like the unwritten moral code, the risks implicit in a career of crime, or the im-

placability of the Fates and Furies. It's worse than that. He is ruined by real estate development. His creation—the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas—is a visionary enterprise, and that, according to James Toback's screenplay, is enough to bring down anyone—hero, anti-hero, or even ordinary human being. Had Siegel only stuck to his nasty last, he might have made out as well as Luciano (who went off to retirement in Sicily) or Lansky who lingered on for years in Miami. But the vulnerabilities of legitimate business are too great for him.

Not that Siegel is such an astute businessman. The costs of the Flamingo escalate from a million to three and then to six or so, of which sum Siegel's paramour, Virginia Hill, turns out to have skimmed a third. Ordinarily, Siegel would have noticed such speculation. It is dramatically demonstrated that he can do quick arithmetic without taking off his shoes and socks. But he is bemused not only by the woman but also by his own grand idea of what he can do to the huge open space of America. He is dazzled and dizzied by the possibility of legitimate profits that are all but beyond calculation.

It's a wry and rueful kind of joke for a large movie to be making, but movies get made for odd reasons and therefore can do improbable things—sometimes even well. Here, at least a few of the motives seem clear. Warren Beatty, one of the film's coproducers, wanted to be Bugsy Siegel, saw the part as right for him, indeed as irresistible. Annette Bening, Beatty's wife, plays Virginia Hill, and they have some lively scenes together—which surely didn't hurt. James Toback, the writer who also appears in a minor part, happens to be a compulsive gambler who has a thing about Las Vegas, a combined loathing and fascination that made the Siegel story numinous and inviting for him.

The great scene in the film is one in which Beatty stands alone in the Nevada desert and sees . . . nothing! All this nothing, waiting to be made into something. Mickey Cohen (Harvey Keitel) and Virginia Hill are watching from the road and just don't get it, because they see what's there, an expanse of arid land. Siegel sees past that to pure possibility. He sees what isn't there, and it is a grand and funny moment. We know how it will be, how the electric power from Hoover Dam will run air conditioning that will in turn enable Las Vegas to happen. We know then that Siegel's madness—his

"bugsiness"—is correct. But we can see more than Siegel does, for we realize that the convention of this kind of film requires him to die, and we also know that the Las Vegas he imagines is going to be tacky, shoddy, and as dreadful as it is wonderful.

A mark of the seriousness of this film is that it reminded me of Saul Bellow's remarkable novella, *The Bellarosa Connection*, in which there is a similar rhapsody to the contradictions of grandeur and sleaze that America perseverates. Bellow says of his almost eponymous Billy Rose that he "wasn't big: he was about the size of Peter Lorre. But oh! he was American. There was a penny-arcade jingle about Billy, the popping of shooting galleries, the rattling of pinballs, the weak human cry of the Times Square geckos, the lizard gaze of sideshow freaks. To see him as he was, you have to place him against the whitewash glare of Broadway in the wee hours. But even such places have their grandees—people whose defects can be converted to seed money for enterprises. There's nothing in this country that you can't sell, nothing too weird to bring to market and found a fortune on. And once you got as much major real estate as Billy had, then it didn't matter that you were one of the human deer that came uptown from the Lower East Side to graze on greasy sandwich papers."

Siegel, too, finds himself in a promised land he can't quite enter, or, worse, one that he ruins by entering. Beatty plays Siegel with a zest that never worries about the camera's candor. Risking unattractiveness, he manages to look coarse, in some shots like Jerry Orbach playing a villain. And he is all appetite. In one scene he humiliates an associate who has tried to swindle him, Meyer Lansky, and Charlie Luciano (not a good idea) and forces the man to get down on all fours, bark like a dog, grunt like a pig, and accept a shower of blows and insults. These exertions having whetted Siegel's appetite, he returns to the dinner table to wolf huge forkfuls of food—which is enough to arouse in turn Virginia Hill's passions, and she starts fondling and nibbling him. They sink down to the floor together, pulling the tablecloth down with them and upsetting the food.

Still, Siegel has aspirations toward refinement. He dresses well, even foppishly, can exert a sunny charm, and even alone is often engaged in peculiar projects of self-improvement, especially of his diction, so that at unlikely moments he per-

forms elocution exercises. ("Twenty dwarves took turns doing handstands on the carpet.") At first, these gestures seem to be mere jokes, but one gets the sense that the interior of Siegel, his mind and soul, are as vacant as Nevada. He is allowed or even required to imagine something, and the terrain seems in no way to limit what he can invent.

Siegel dies, but Las Vegas happens and is there, in the movie and in the world, someone's vision materialized, or, just as unsettling, our true natures revealed to us. The eminent Philadelphia architect, Robert Venturi, suggested in the late 70's in *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* that we ought to give some serious thought to the buildings, signs, and all the tawdry glitz of that peculiar city. Barry Levinson, James Toback, and Warren Beatty, taking him at his word, have made an elegant, improbably witty, and darkly thoughtful film.

If America has its problems, though, Europe is hardly any paradise—or at least not according to what we gather from István Szabó's new film, *Meeting Venus*. In a few broad strokes, we get indications of the political, historical, and ethnic rivalries that make it all but impossible for reasonably intelligent and talented people to collaborate, say, on a production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Well, it's a simple enough premise, too easy and programmatic if anything, and a long list of sim-

ilar films comes immediately to mind, from *A Night at the Opera* to any of those show-biz morality plays in which the indomitable Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney put on a show ("We'll do it in the barn!").

In other words, I had my trepidations, going in. But since *Mephisto* I have been following István Szabó's work, and it has never been terrible. I was therefore willing to waste a couple of hours if, at the worst, I could pass the time looking at Glenn Close. She is terrific, gorgeous, and almost convincing as she lip-syncs to Kiri Te Kanawa's Elizabeth. She arrives at an opera house in Paris, and she and the conductor have an affair—of course. The conductor, Zoltan Szanto, is played by Niels Arestrup, and he is fine too, able to suggest intelligence and sensibility without being sappy, and with a kind of puppy-dog attractiveness. More important, Szabó's verve is altogether winning. The fluidity with which he gets us from inside his besieged conductor's head to external reality, and then just a bit beyond that, is a most gratifying technical achievement.

Once the not-very-complicated conceit of the film has been demonstrated in the first twenty minutes or so, the film can afford to relax and devote itself to having a good time. There are a variety of send-ups of the eccentricities of the members of the company and the crew. "The artists behave like bureaucrats, and the bu-

reaucrats behave like artists," somebody complains. The ingenue is voracious and ambitious. The paymaster—or perhaps it is a paymistress?—is monstrous and conspiratorial. The first tenor is a petty crook as much interested in automobile parts as in opera. The second tenor is a dun-drethead. The choreographer is predictably perverse. The sets are aggressively modern and displeasing. Worst of all, the management is manipulative and the unions are absolutely Kafka-esque. Szanto attempts to negotiate his way, among these obstacles, talking all the time about dedication to the music, and to Wagner, but he is speaking a language nobody seems to understand.

At this point, where we are engaged but hardly transported, Glenn Close makes her appearance as the perhaps-just-a-little-bit-aging soprano, and she takes the film into her own expressive hands. Szabó and the movie are home free from here on. The love affair may not be altogether a surprise, and the setup is obvious, but there is a sense of fun, an inventiveness, a mastery to which we yield quite cheerfully. In one extraordinary shot, a Close close-up, for a few beats, nothing happens. She is just reacting to a silence on the part of the conductor, a failure on his part to answer a question she has asked. And we watch her as, without saying anything, and hardly even moving a muscle, she goes in thirty seconds or so from adoration to apprehension, to dismay, to rage . . .

Brilliant! Brava! Go see this!

Meanwhile, what happens with the story?

What can they do that isn't trite or banal or insultingly stupid? The question, in more practical terms, is how to indicate the salvation of the production, how to show an aesthetic and even moral triumph, and do this in visual terms. We can't trust our ears, after all, because anyone old enough to go to such a film understands that it's dubbed. We have to see a moment of grace.

In an elegant piece of business, this is just what happens. For just a few frames at the appropriate moment of the performance, Szanto's baton bursts into bloom—like the pilgrim's staff in the opera! Another triumph!

For that thirty-second shot of Glenn Close and then this splendid bit at the end, which I suppose is Szabó's, *Meeting Venus* is a must.

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

LIBERAL ARTS



FRAT EQUALS COED

Bowdoin College officials have voted to ban fraternities and sororities "that exclude students because of gender," reported the *Maine Sunday Telegram* last March. Scott W. Hood, a spokesman for the college, said the resolution "prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, color, gender or sexual preference" in keeping with a "fully co-educational" environment. Chi Psi president Brian C. Hawkin draws the line at admitting women and plans to fight the ban on "same-sex fraternities" that goes into effect September 1993.

Landmark study of liberalism

*Where it comes from.
The many faces it wears.
And why it is still
the menace*

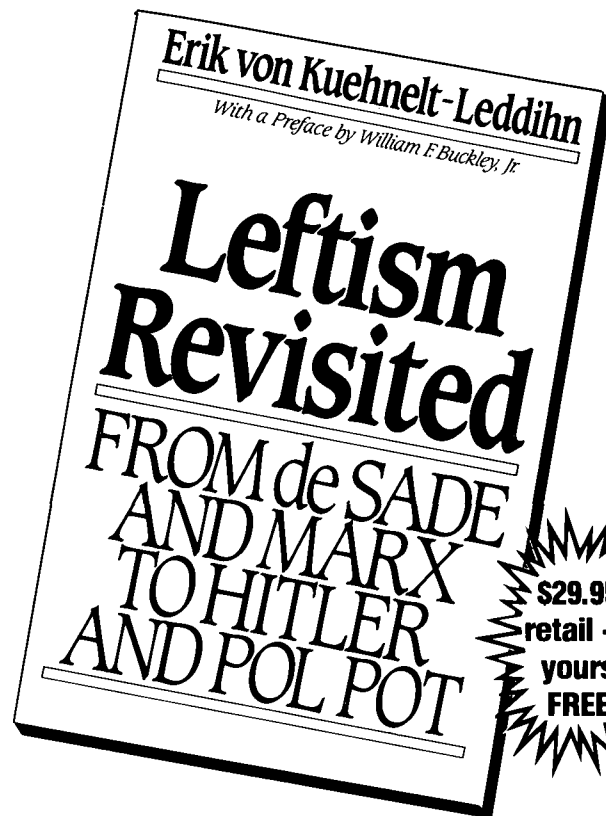
"Communism isn't the enemy," observed Malcolm Muggeridge. "Liberalism is the enemy."

When Muggeridge said that, Communism was riding high. Now Communism is in crisis, while liberalism continues to choke religion and civilization. Muggeridge saw the heart of the problem. Communism was an external threat; liberalism not only corrupts from within, but also masquerades as something good.

Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn is of the same mind. He sets his sights on the Left *in all its manifestations*. He's been doing that for 60 years. The range of his reading, his travel, his vision carries him across the globe, and across the centuries. The world is truly his oyster.

And now, the new book that William Buckley rightly calls "his masterpiece." Adds conservative columnist Joseph Sobran: "I despair of doing justice to the book's wealth of oddly enlightening fact, the harvest of long experience, reading, and travel."

Precisely. Kuehnelt-Leddihn's view of the Left, in all its guises, is at once so particular and detailed, and at the same time so sweeping, that reading him is a unique experience, mind-opening. Max Eastman captured the feeling perfectly after reading one of his earlier books: "Amazing! Reading it is like going to college and graduate school all over again."



Except that college was never so exhilarating. What textbook, what professor gives you insights like these, *page after fascinating page*?

- Totalitarianism and benign liberalism: where they join hands
- "Equal in the eyes of God": why this notion is a heresy. Are "equality before the law" and "equality of opportunity" possible — or desirable?
- Democracy and totalitarianism: why they are not mutually exclusive
- The Communist Manifesto: 10 points that are now part of our thinking
- Aristotle and the scholastics: three good and three bad forms of government
- America's most left-wing presidents, and the damage they wrought — worldwide
- The socialist origins of fascism. What *is* socialism? Fascism?

Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn belongs on the short list of major conservative thinkers of our century. And he stands alone as the most interesting, the most challenging.

How to get this \$29.95 giant FREE

How the Club Works

Every 4 weeks (13 times a year) you get a free copy of the Club Bulletin which offers you the Featured Selection plus a good choice of Alternates — all of interest to conservatives. ★ If you want the Featured Selection, do nothing; it will come automatically. ★ If you don't want the Featured Selection, or you do want an Alternate, indicate your wishes on the handy card enclosed with your Bulletin and return it by the deadline date. ★ The majority of Club books will be offered at 20-50% discounts, plus a charge for shipping and handling. ★ As soon as you buy and pay for 3 books at regular Club prices, your membership may be ended at any time, either by you or by the Club. ★ If you ever receive a Featured Selection without having had 10 days to decide if you want it, you may return it at Club expense for full credit. ★ Good service. No computers! ★ The Club will offer regular Superbargains, mostly at 70-90% discounts plus shipping and handling. Superbargains do NOT count toward fulfilling your Club obligation, but do enable you to buy fine books at giveaway prices. ★ Only one membership per household.

CONSERVATIVE BOOK CLUB

15 OAKLAND AVENUE • HARRISON, N.Y. 10528

Please accept my membership in the Club and send FREE my copy of Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's \$29.95 masterpiece, *Leftism Revisited*. I agree to buy 3 additional books at regular Club prices over the next 18 months. I also agree to the Club rules spelled out in this coupon. CCUL 82

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

FREE
Subscribe to
Continuity now and
receive a free copy
of Russell Kirk's classic book,
The Roots of American Order

CONTINUITY

**THE ONLY
CONSERVATIVE JOURNAL OF
HISTORY IN AMERICA**

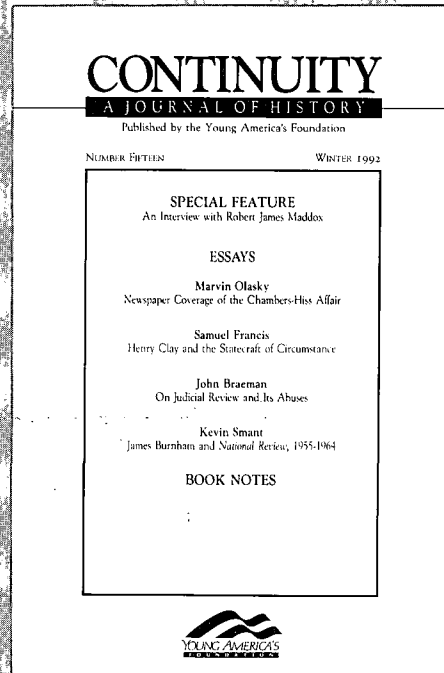
The history profession is dominated by the same forces that have turned the universities into re-education camps for a narrow ideology. This is especially true of the journals that scholars and students have traditionally relied upon to keep themselves current on the latest thinking in the discipline.

But, there is an alternative. *Continuity*, published twice yearly by the Young America's Foundation, is dedicated to the study of history as a search for the truth for its own sake. We believe in the superiority of our free society to any practicable alternative, legitimate

authority, and the presumptive value of tradition as the accumulated wisdom of the past.

In the pages of *Continuity* are essays and reviews by many of the leading historians in America. Authors of recent articles have included M.E. Bradford, Ronald Radosh, Wilcomb Washburn, Robert James Maddox, Aileen Kraditor, Paul Gottfried, Forrest McDonald, Grady McWhiney, Edward S. Shapiro, John Lukacs, Clyde Wilson, Stephen J. Tonsor, and many others.

To subscribe return the coupon below with payment.



Send this coupon to:

Continuity
c/o Young America's Foundation
The F.M. Kirby Freedom Center
110 Elden Street
Herndon, Virginia 22070

- ☐ Please enter my subscription to *Continuity* and send me a free copy of Russell Kirk's *The Roots of American Order*. (Subscription rate is \$12.00 for one year; \$20.00 for two years.)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

- ☐ I have enclosed a check for \$ _____ for my _____ year subscription to *Continuity*.

Please make checks payable to Young America's Foundation.