

F I L M



Anna Micek-Wiadlecki

## Biggies

by David R. Slavitt

### Bram Stoker's Dracula

Produced by Francis Ford Coppola,  
Fred Fuchs, and Charles Mulvehill

Written by James V. Hart

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
Distributed by Columbia Pictures

### A Few Good Men

Produced by David Brown, Rob Reiner,  
and Andrew Scheinman

Written by Aaron Sorkin

Directed by Rob Reiner  
Distributed by Columbia Pictures

There are advantages to doing these movie pieces at a leisurely (bi-monthly) pace, prime among which is that I don't have to go to too many movies. What got to me the last time around, when I was working for a weekly magazine, was that I was getting up, dressing, shaving, and going into New York . . . to see *Beach Blanket Bingo* or some such thing, and, worse than that, that I was rather liking it, seeing new and richer aspects of Annette Funicello's performance. I am older now, more self-protective, perhaps lazier, and I contrive to avoid such psychic stress.

But aside from that obvious benefit, there is the further lagniappe that the mere passage of time can sometimes offer. A film opens, and there is a critical consensus—as with *Dracula* for in-

stance. Mostly the critics didn't like it, or didn't like Coppola because they felt intimidated by him. (How else to protect the calibration of the delicate critical instrument against the rough embraces of the man whom most of us would have to admit is the greatest living American filmmaker?) So they dumped on his movie and talked about how long it seems, how excessive, how over-the-top—and how disappointed they were. Indeed, there is such niggardliness to the ordinarily fulsome slatherings of hyperbolic praise that the advertisements in the national newspapers had to resort to a blurb from Eleanor O'Sullivan of the *Asbury Park Press* ("A hip, scary, sexy ride"), which stratagem is a generally reliable indication of disaster. It was only when I read last December in the *New York Times* a Frank Rich "think piece" about how the film was actually about AIDS that I was reminded how dumb these reviewers can be. I had assumed that it would be about AIDS, couldn't imagine anyone making such a movie—about blood, sex, guilt, and Christ—without some such novel suggestion. I was not supposing that Coppola would be making any particular social or political point, but just that he would be tapping into the energy that comes of the fears the new plague has occasioned. This is not a story that has been sitting around on some shelf waiting to be told, after all. What other prompting could there have been for someone like Coppola to redo this material?

I thought the picture was just fine, a superior piece of work that seems only richer in retrospect. Coppola is clearly having fun, taking the architecture of the original material in Stoker's novel and the numerous film versions of the story—many of them remarkable examples of excellent movie-making in styles ranging from more or less straight, through various degrees of expressionism, up to and including sheer and exuberant camp. Coppola exploits these stylistic choices with great zest, and one sees echoes here not only of F. W. Murnau, who made the 1922 *Nosferatu*, or of Tod Browning, who did *Dracula* in 1930, or of Werner Herzog, who made a *Nosferatu* in 1979, but also of Ken Rus-

sell (*The Devils*) and William Friedkin (in his *Exorcist* mode). The film also contains sequences that are unmistakable reprises of Akira Kurosawa's battlefield tableaux and even, in one elaborate wedding scene, a cheerful piece of self-referential allusion to *The Godfather*.

The tone of the film is extravagant, complicated, and excessive, and the comments I have heard and read about how the pace is too slow just don't make any sense to me whatever. We are expected, after all, to know the story. We are hardly on tenterhooks about what the mysterious Count has in mind, or what Lucy and Mina are going to do, or even how it will all come out. The text is established and we are interested primarily in the riffs and descants Coppola brings to it. What can he add beyond impressive, effective, and expensive special effects (by Roman Coppola) that would be interesting, shocking, appealing, or would expand and extend the material as we already know it?

The claim of the title—that this is *Bram Stoker's Dracula*—is not that this is closer to the 96-year-old novel than other versions but, on the contrary, that Stoker had seen through to possibilities of fear that no one could have reasonably anticipated in 1897. The novel's underlying equations of sex and blood and death were clever enough back then. But the AIDS epidemic has turned the generalized ambivalent charge of these subjects into a specific and powerful series of suggestions which may be politically incorrect but which none of us can altogether avoid entertaining. The notion inevitably arises that if Dracula is the anti-Christ, and if the crucifix and the Church are enemies of vampirism, then, in a contrary way, sexual experimentation carries an obvious blood risk that is likely to destroy not only the experimenter but those with whom he or she is sexually intimate. It is true for Dracula and his vampires, and it is true and more pointedly frightening for us today. Dr. Van Helsing (Anthony Hopkins plays the pioneer of hematology pretty much the way he played the maniac of *Silence of the Lambs*—and it works just as well) remarks that civilization and syphilitis-

tion are not unrelated phenomena. He shows us a microscopic view of red blood cells—perfectly normal red cells, my hematologist wife assures me—and we are worried in a way that would have delighted Stoker and that he would certainly have exploited. What Coppola is faithful to is not the text of the novel but its subtext. We become sophisticated and are proud of ourselves for having done so, but we have to acknowledge that we have lost our primitive faith and feel we have been diminished from time past when we were purer and more devout. We are vulnerable now, less well protected for all our social and scientific progress, and we ought not be surprised if the taint of some ancient sin comes back to haunt us.

Stoker and Freud were working through the same kinds of mythic material at almost exactly the same time, although in rather different ways. Their conclusions allow for interesting harmonizations, and these harmonics are what Coppola and his screenwriter, James V. Hart, are celebrating. The perceived “pace” of the film, then, depends on the pace of the viewer’s thinking. If no thoughts are going on in your head while you watch the images on the screen, then it may seem draggy—but that’s altogether your fault.

In the politics of the picture lies a very careful balancing act. On the one hand, Count Dracula is not a nice fellow. We must disapprove of those who run around causing the kinds of general mayhem and suffering that he inflicts upon all but the very luckiest of those who cross his path. On the other hand, there is his bizarre love story, the fact that he is searching for the lovely Elisabeta, who threw herself off a parapet of his castle some 400 years ago and from whose loss the poor count has never recovered. All

the world loves a lover, and we can’t wholly dismiss his passion and his (after a fashion) fidelity. His rebellion against the Church’s condemnation of his dead wife as a suicide and therefore a damned soul is Coppola’s novelty, as is the peculiarly happy ending when the count and his countess are reunited in an apotheosis that is not theological but purely aesthetic—they appear together, after a quite handsome Liebestod, overhead in the Tintoretto-like ceiling painting with which the movie concludes. They are no longer undead (which is loathsome) but transmogrified into art and therefore, in an acceptable and attractive way, immortal.

So it isn’t *Dracula* that the movie is criticizing, or AIDS, but merely the awfulness of what can happen, the cruelty of things-as-they-are. And that’s not likely to engender a lot of controversy. If we have fears of AIDS victims, and if we have a nagging sense that they ought to have behaved differently and would not then have put themselves in harm’s way, that isn’t Coppola’s responsibility—although he and his movie do get the benefit of such not quite respectable thoughts. There is even the poignant moment in which some of the vampire ladies attack an infant, a newborn babe. And the horror of that—which neither Murnau nor Browning brought from the book to the screen—seems perfectly reasonable to us, given what we know is going on in those hospital wards in Newark and the Bronx. The horror on the screen seems altogether appropriate and even necessary, a correct and Senecan approximation of how things are in the world. A fine film, then, and very likely a great film, *Dracula* is surely worth seeing.

So is *A Few Good Men*, Rob Reiner’s big Christmas movie based on Aaron Sorkin’s recent play and starring Tom Cruise and Demi Moore, with an appearance by Jack Nicholson that is absolutely astonishing. We tend to take Nicholson for granted, perhaps because he does dumb things now and then like the Joker in *Batman* (for which he received something in excess of 50 million dollars, which is perhaps not so dumb). But here, as the tougher-than-nails Colonel Nathan R. Jessep, he has such impact that, in a few scenes, he makes the movie. Tom Cruise is a cocky lawyer, all charm and polish with a glitzy Harvard background, but so wet behind the ears that he has never seen the in-

side of a courtroom except once when he had his driving license suspended. His maturation, his development from the callowness of a sassy kid to real *Menschlichkeit* would not be interesting unless he had to face some actual danger. Nicholson is the danger, and his smiles are so terrifying that we anticipate with bated breath what it would be like if he should ever scowl. One can’t help comparing Nicholson’s work here with Bogart’s in *The Caine Mutiny*, and it is no minimization of Bogey to say that this is even better.

Here again, we have a court martial, a courtroom drama in which Nicholson comes on at the end to do the star turn. He has a kind of controlled fury, an energy that one sees only rarely on screen and hopes never to encounter in the real world. The consideration of what the limits of a Marine’s duty to obey the orders of a superior officer are is efficient enough. The acting of Cruise (doing himself) and Moore (doing a kind of updated Katharine Hepburn priss) is agreeably accomplished and mostly persuasive. Kiefer Sutherland and J. T. Walsh are particularly good in important supporting roles as more or less crazed, gung-ho gyrene officers. But it is Nicholson who shows us what the screen is capable of in conveying personal force and drama. Reiner’s efficient direction seems to have been in leaving Nicholson to do what he can do better than anyone else in the world—assenting to cinematographer Robert Richardson’s preferences for close-ups that make the most of Nicholson’s menace—and in having the confidence not to use too much of this great natural resource.

Finally, although it is not my custom to review trailers for coming attractions, I must say that I saw a particularly engaging teaser for *Groundhog Day* with Bill Murray playing a weatherman who goes to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, for the annual February rite and gets stuck there, not only in Punxsutawney but in February 2nd. Each time the alarm goes off at 6 A.M., he is condemned to live through the same day until he gets it right. The conceit seems altogether delicious, Murray seems to be having fun with it, and I look forward to the movie with a pleasant combination of eagerness and trepidation that I invite readers to share.

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Anna Mirek-Wrodecki

## Dollars and Aesthetics

by Timothy Taubes

Substance in the art world is all a matter of illusion and facade. In the maxim of La Rochefoucauld, "To establish oneself in the world one does all one can to seem established there already." This illusion goes far beyond spending money on fancy advertising and lavish exhibitions to creating the appearance of popularity and worth. It entails the manufacturing of artificially high prices for artists' work on the open market. This is achieved through an unspoken collusion between art dealers and auctioneers, which involves bribery and price-fixing. Bribes are hidden behind the guise of commissions, and prices are fixed on the auction floor by several randomly placed "ringers" who bid works up to a predetermined level. Once this is accomplished dealers have a public record with which they can assure buyers of the safety and investment potential of their artists.

Investment potential and fashion gather together in an unholy communion. The investment potential of a work of art, in conjunction with the impetus it receives from invested interests, determines the rate of appreciation of that work of art. This is when fashion and market considerations come to dictate taste. An illustration, with the benefit of hindsight, will clarify this point.

The year is 1950, and you have five hundred dollars to spend on a work of

art. You could take a walk along 10th Street in New York City, wander through the studios of an emerging group of abstract painters, and take home a large oil painting. You could also walk into a gallery on Madison Avenue that specializes in painters of the 19th century and take home a fine specimen by an American Impressionist. Or you could cross Madison Avenue to an antique shop and buy an exquisite example of Roman Republican sculpture.

The year is now 1990, and you wish to sell the artwork that has been in your possession for 40 years. You take it to one of the auction houses to have it appraised. If the downtown studio you visited was de Kooning's or Rothko's, you are told that the painting is worth about one million dollars. If the American Impressionist you bought was a well-respected name, like Frederick Frieseke or Robert Reid, it could be worth one hundred thousand dollars. And if you bought an exceptionally fine antiquity whose provenance can be specifically determined, it might be worth ten thousand dollars. What accounts for these significant differences in appreciation and worth?

In 1950, the Abstract Expressionists were still the rebel outsiders. (It was only during the decade of the 1950's that they came into prominence.) The price of their work was at ground level, and they therefore offered the greatest potential for appreciation. The aesthetic justifications for the skyrocketing prices of these paintings would entail lengthy discourse on philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, even anthropology and other subjects. But at bottom is the existential notion that the creative act is value-generating, which is a premature qualification of subjectivity. Philosophical justifications notwithstanding, the work of the Abstract Expressionists would never have appreciated the way it did if the investment potential were not there and if these painters had not come under the wing of a very influential group of people, with a lot of money, who by virtue of their wealth were able to manipulate the art market, media, and promotional apparatus and who were vain enough to believe that they were the architects of culture.

The case of the American Impressionists is different. Many of these painters were successful during their lifetime, particularly between the years of 1890 and 1910. Most of them made the

obligatory trip to Paris to see the work of the innovators of their style and when they returned to America were generally looked upon as provincial counterparts to the Europeans. During the first half of the 20th century, while the works and reputations of the European Impressionists and Postimpressionists were ascending, the works of the American Impressionists were gathering in attics. However, after World War II, New York City became the capital of the art world. There was a new emphasis on America and things American, and the American Impressionists were rediscovered. Many of them were recognized for having brought a fresh and novel approach to Impressionism. A few have even rivaled the Europeans in market value. But the achievements or failures of Impressionism notwithstanding, the prices of these paintings would never have escalated had their investment potential not been recognized by dealers and collectors and had they not been available in abundance for speculation.

The 1990's have been labeled the technotronic age of information. Everything is at our command, at the touch of our fingertips. We want our information fast, and we want to comprehend it quickly. The result is a congenital laziness and impatience with things that take time, research, and education. We are becoming a computer-literate society, but we are losing many of our other abilities in the bargain. One of these is the ability to make intelligent judgments about art.

It takes no patience to understand dollar value. It is simple, calculable, and even provides a numerical scale. True aesthetic value takes a great deal of patience to understand. It is unfortunate, but not surprising, that dollar value has come to replace aesthetic value and that behind the high price paid for a work of art is the veiled implication of a correspondingly high aesthetic value.

The art market is now experiencing a terrible slump after the gangbuster decade of the 1980's. This is only partly due to the state of the economy. It is true that in a sour economy luxury items are the first to be cut from discretionary spending, but the root of the problem lies elsewhere.

Dealers are responsible for pumping the art market up beyond the level that the real situation indicates. Auction houses are particularly guilty of this. As long as paintings continued to sell they