

## All dressed up with no place to go

STEPHEN HARVEY

AT THE MOMENT, NEARLY everyone seems to be satisfied with the current state of American movies—except, of course, those eternal malcontents, the critics. In Italy, film industryites bemoan the latest in a perpetual series of artistic and fiscal crises afflicting their national cinema, this one being widely perceived as the worst since the end of the war. Meanwhile, across the border in France, cinéphiles gloomily ponder the fact that the New Wave is now twenty years old, and has yet to be succeeded by even a ripple of comparable talent. No such doubts pester Hollywood, however, and it's little wonder. A relatively new generation of gifted film makers is highly visible, and in the present climate, after one or two high scores at the box office, these young Turks are getting virtually carte blanche. A glance at the financial tallies in *Variety* shows that audiences are apparently pleased with what they've been offered lately—and what makes the public happy brings cheer to the moguls as well, even before they start toting up all those proliferating rights from network TV sales, cable, video cassettes, and the rest of the lucrative package.

Certainly you don't have to look back very far to find a movie era that makes the present seem like Utopia. How about that dismal period in the early to mid-seventies when practically the only things projected on our movie screens were smirky boy-meets-boy buddy movies; sanguinary, self-righteous cop flicks; and Sensurround-laden cata-

clysms both natural and manmade—or, final horror, lethal combinations of all the above? The last few years have undeniably brought a much wider assortment, and 1979 produced a palatable sampling of worthwhile movies. So what explains the glazed stares one sees on the faces of one's fellow film reviewers as we shuffle from one screening to another, or the desultory chatter passing for debate at the annual Critics' Circle meetings?

I think the problem is that although there's no lack of pleasant, well-crafted movies around (on the order of *The China Syndrome*, *Breaking Away*, and *Kramer vs. Kramer*), they're hardly the sort that inspire really passionate feelings. Most people who care deeply about movies first came to do so out of a sense that film had an immediacy and ferment that no other art form could match—and on numerous occasions that's been true, both here and abroad. Post-World War II Italy, for example, and the late sixties in the United States, were eras that brought out the best in both critics and audiences, because one had the exhilarating feeling of witnessing movie boundaries being expanded and real chances being taken.

It's hard to recall the last film that managed to engender any authentic aura of fierce partisanship one way or the other. Certainly the achievement of the much-touted new German cinema is a moot point by now—the films of Fassbinder, Herzog, et. al. tend to be so oblique emotionally that the rather arid panegyrics they've inspired among their admirers are offset by little more than indifference on the part of the skeptical. Nor does what's been transpiring lately at home produce much electricity in the atmosphere; the controversies sparked by the likes of *Apocalypse Now* and, on a far baser level, *Cruising*, had a lot less to do with the finished products than the belligerent reports-from-the-front issued during production.

Although most directors and Hollywood organization men and women would probably deny it emphatically, from an outsider's perspective this seems to be a time of cozy consolidation for the movies, its illusion of innovation so crowned with laurels and profits that it can hardly be distinguished from the genuine article. There's something omi-

nous about any era when most of the excitement over the future of the movies seems to focus on the technological hardware involved, rather than whatever it's going to be used to express. (Remember the hubbub in the mid-fifties over Cinemascope, Cinerama, and stereophonic sound?)

Lately we've been greeted with a host of movies whose gleaming visual and aural surfaces offer the kind of sensual pleasure we were starved for in the rack-focus, zoom-lens, post-*Easy Rider* days a



decade ago, when any kind of technical gloss was scorned as archaic bourgeois artifice. Yet it's doubly frustrating to watch so many genuinely gifted younger directors lavishing all that cinematic legerdemain on material so piffling it shouldn't have survived a preliminary story conference—as if the movies were nothing more than a glorified *son et lumière* display. The pointless sadism of a movie like Ridley Scott's *Alien* was actually more contemptible because it was limned by such a skillful hand, and exposure to the untrammelled puerility of Steven Spielberg's *1941* should settle any arguments on the supremacy of form over content in a trice.

ALREADY, 1980 HAS OFFERED even more of the same; John Carpenter's *The Fog* contains enough beautiful image-making to furnish three films made on ten times the money, yet its premise is so silly and transparent that it can barely sustain the movie's first half-hour. And *American Gigolo* is the perfect time-capsule movie, a sleek artifact of up-to-the-second chic. Its commercial success indicates that audiences were so ravished by the trappings provided by Blondie and Giorgios Moroder and Armani that it didn't matter how solemnly fatuous the film they gilded turned out to be. Paramount's accountants, of course, have every reason to be delighted, but I wonder if Paul Schrader realizes or cares that the price of his increased proficiency as a director seems

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to have been the crude urgency that made his earlier projects so distinctive.

Not that there aren't film makers around with an evident vision to impart—it's just that their insights lately tend to be somewhat indigestible. In the old days, directors didn't know they were auteurs until they were informed of the fact—usually as they were approaching their dotage. Nowadays directors like Coppola and Fosse can hardly be blamed for confusing solipsism with genius when so many civilians line up eagerly to be clobbered with all that Complex Artistry. On the sociological front, it seems that there's only one contemporary phenomenon that interests a large body of moviemakers right now, and I don't (quite) mean disco. Is it mere coincidence that suddenly the homosexual has become the *Jew Süss* of Hollywood, or has familiarity with the gay movement led to fear and loathing on the sound stages as well as the streets (just as the rise of feminism seems unwittingly to have temporarily banished the female half of the species from our movie screens during the early seventies)? Whatever the motive, the message at least four current movies impart is luridly clear—gays are mean (*American Gigolo*, *Nijinsky*), crazy (*Windows*), or both (*Cruising*); the denouements of all of these cater to what must be a rather pervasive wish-fulfillment fantasy; namely, that homosexuals inevitably end up either dead before their time, or else in straitjackets.

Two and a half years ago, when I started covering film for *INQUIRY*, the movies seemed irremediably mired in a retrospective mood; practically every significant or popular movie, from *Close Encounters* to *The Goodbye Girl*, for all their evident contemporary accoutrements, appeared intent on harkening back to some halcyon film era long gone by. At present this Hollywood-as-recycling-center phase seems to have waned, but it's hard to figure out what if anything has succeeded it.

No director lives in a social vacuum (occasional evidence to the contrary notwithstanding); nor is unfettered self-expression the sole force that motivates the making of movies. Films have to reflect and amplify some aspect of the contemporary *Zeitgeist* if they're going to succeed in inducing all those potential diversion-seekers out there to buy tickets. If, for all their abundant craft and energy, the current spate of films is wanting in focus and impact, in the end this may be no less than we really want, and no more than we deserve. ■

## AMERICAN SCENE

### On sex and sexism

JOHN GORDON

**W**HEN WOMEN AGAINST Pornography sent a pair of representatives to Hamilton College, they had an audience that would have applauded them if they had played tunes on spoons. Hamilton had recently gone coed, and as one of the many conciliatory gestures to its new female constituency had instituted an annual binge of funded dumbness called "Women's Energy Weekend." This is an array of panels, consciousness-raising, and outside speakers demanding to know why the English Department offers no courses on Margaret Fuller, why the History Department spends so much time on the history of men, and the by-now familiar blah-blah-blah. At last year's Women's Energy Weekend, for instance, my fellow professor of English John O'Neill was typed as a fascist by a prominent feminist writer and founding mother of Women Against Pornography for arguing that women are not necessarily more sensitive readers of literature than men.

I always try to lie low during Women's Energy Weekend, precisely because it is the sort of occasion on which one is liable to hear perfectly nice people called names by speakers who are not thereupon rebuked; who are, rather, applauded by large numbers; who are in fact paid for their slanders and fatuities with money indirectly filched from my paycheck. Who needs more grief? But John O'Neill himself is tougher, and this year he wanted to go see the kickoff event of the weekend, a slide show and discussion presented by Women Against Pornography, "to hear what they had to say." And he convinced me, against my better judgment, to come along.

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Whence this report.

The two young women who give the show are altogether appealing, mainly because of the obvious depth of their sense of hurt and subdued outrage. They are convinced that they and their sisters are victims and that pornography is a way of legitimizing their victimization. Their presentation comprises slides of material purchased mainly in Times Square, alternating with pictures taken from billboards, album covers, and popularly available magazines. The slides are arranged according to two principles. First, escalation: they keep getting worse, and the last one is just horrible. Second, juxtaposition: a hard-core picture is followed by a magazine ad that is in some way similar, the idea being to make us see that one is a carriage-trade version, or at best subtle evocation, of the other.

The hard-core pictures are almost all of the subgenre called "bondage and

**A sound I can describe only as a wail filled the room, ending in one collective gasp at the final shocking slide.**

discipline." Tied-up women are shown being beaten or with clothespins attached to their nipples, or in tableaux of murder and mutilation. The final slide, introduced as from a "snuff" movie, shows a woman struggling to free herself while some instrument is applied to her breasts; there is blood everywhere, and the speaker assures us that it's not fake, that this woman is really being killed. A few of the slides feature children.

It is no fun, now, recalling these pictures, and the original experience is worse. The audience is outraged. At least one woman cries throughout. As the speakers work up to the climax by showing slides from a magazine devoted to the sexual humiliation of Oriental females while reading an account of a