

SPOTLIGHT

Ecologist cum Economist

BY PATRICK COX

"Government monopolies and subsidies are the largest cause of ecological destruction"—a surprising statement coming from an official of an environmental-advocacy group that, like many others of its kind, has time and again called for government intervention to resolve environmental problems. The speaker is Zach Willey, senior economist at the Berkeley, California, office of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), a highly regarded organization with about 60,000 members nationwide.

On the surface, Willey seems to be the archetypal environmentalist. His greyish-blond windblown hair is six and a half feet above the ground. He wears hiking boots, jeans, and a perpetual smile. He built his own cabin on a tree-hidden rock ledge in Big Sur, carrying all the materials uphill through a canyon replete with redwoods, sage, and poison oak.

But Willey, who earned his Ph.D. in economics at the University of California at Berkeley, is more than he appears. He is part of a remarkable team of environmentalists at EDF in Berkeley, also composed of Harvard-trained attorney Thomas Graff, Yale-trained attorney David Roe, and Dan Kirshner, a physicist and computer whiz who programs models that give almost instantaneous information about the environmental effects of changes in public policy. "But we have all become economists," Willey says, for it is the "inefficient use of natural resources" that "leads to further development projects." And because government policies that encourage such economic inefficiency cause most ecological destruction, Willey explains, "we use economic analysis to attack them."

A recent example is EDF's analysis of a situation in southern California. According to Willey and other experts, almost a half-million acre-feet of the 3 million acre-feet of Colorado River water that the Imperial Irrigation District (IID)—the authority that controls the water supply to the Imperial Valley, a major growing area—uses could be saved through simple, cheap conservation efforts. But IID pays only \$6.50 per acre-foot of water that costs taxpayers at least 20 times that to deliver, so there is little incentive for either the growers or IID to conserve.

To inject such incentives into the situa-

tion, EDF came up with a scheme that would bring tears of joy to the most dedicated profit-monger. Willey and his colleagues proposed that the Metropolitan Water District (MWD), which serves the south coast of California, be allowed to make improvements on the IID system in return for the water thereby saved. At the end of a 10- to 20-year lease period,



ZACH WILLEY

IID would own the improvements and the additional water supply.

For years, the state of California has been trying to build an expensive and environmentally destructive canal from northern to southern California to provide water for MWD's customers. But Willey says that EDF's scheme would cost MWD only a fraction of what the proposed Peripheral Canal would cost, while reducing pressure for the canal.

Willey calls it "a no-loser situation," but he says that bureaucrats now controlling the tax-subsidized water and interests who use it (mostly growers) seem hesitant to allow any incursions onto their "turf." "I admit this is a kind of backdoor approach," Willey says, "but as long as we have water paid for by taxes and controlled by government agencies, it will be necessary. Ideally, we would just deregulate water allocation altogether. One of the lessons of this thing is that if we just let the market operate,

we wouldn't have to go through these mind-bending exercises just to cut a deal."

Willey's perspective comes from various sources. He credits his father, who often took him hiking and hunting in his native California, for instilling in him the appreciation of the outdoors that he still holds. In his Ph.D. thesis, Willey compared nonchemical agricultural pest control to the use of pesticides. Farmers who hired consulting entomologists to implement a variety of programs such as the use of predator insects and techniques of harvest, irrigation, and crop rotation, Willey found, spent less on pest control than those who used the tax-supported County Extension Agency services, which rely almost exclusively on chemicals. Thus, early in his career, Willey saw proof that uneconomic and unecological activities are often the same.

After getting his doctorate, Willey spent two years in Egypt building a mathematical model of the Nile River environment and how development projects (such as the Aswan Dam) would affect water quality. When he "got fed up with being an expatriate and diplomat between Egyptian economists and scientists," he took three months to walk through the Mt. Everest region of the Himalayas. The experience reaffirmed his commitment to the environment and people. "The irony of the stark poverty of the people next to the beauty of the mountains struck me," he says. "Ever since then, I have wanted to work at the interface of environmental majesty and people's needs." It is that willingness to face the reality of seemingly contradictory goals—conservation and development—that makes Willey stand out from the crowd of mainstream environmentalists.

Willey notes that the similarity between computer models of a diverse ecosystem and a true free market are remarkable. "But," he says, "free marketers have to develop workable plans instead of just theorizing about the way it could be. That is where the challenge is today."

Patrick Cox is a frequent guest columnist for USA Today and public affairs director of the Pacific Institute for Public Policy Research.

arts & letters

MOVIES

Reviewed by John Hospers

Terms of Endearment

First-time director James Brooks said of *Terms of Endearment*, "People are always trying to think of shortcuts on making the kinds of films people want to see. But that doesn't work. The only answer I know is to do the film you really want to do and just try to be good at it." He did, and he has succeeded well enough to create one of the most original and curiously touching films of the year.

This movie doesn't fit any preset categories. It begins as a comedy, with numerous crazily unpredictable comic touches; it ends as a tragedy, with the daughter dying of cancer and the burden of what to do with the children. Yet the transition from the one to the other—along with several subsidiary transitions in between—is never felt as awkward or straining credibility. The film flows, like life itself, with the interruption of one causal series of events by another, united into a whole by the well-drawn and memorable characterizations.

Central to the drama is the mother (Shirley MacLaine), whose pointed remarks set the tone of the film. "You aren't special enough to overcome a bad marriage," she tells her daughter. And when the mother refuses to attend the daughter's wedding, the daughter (Debra Winger) says, "It sure would be nice to have a mother somebody likes." The relation between mother and son-in-law (Jeff Daniels) is strained: when he takes a job in Des Moines, MacLaine says, "You can't even fail locally."

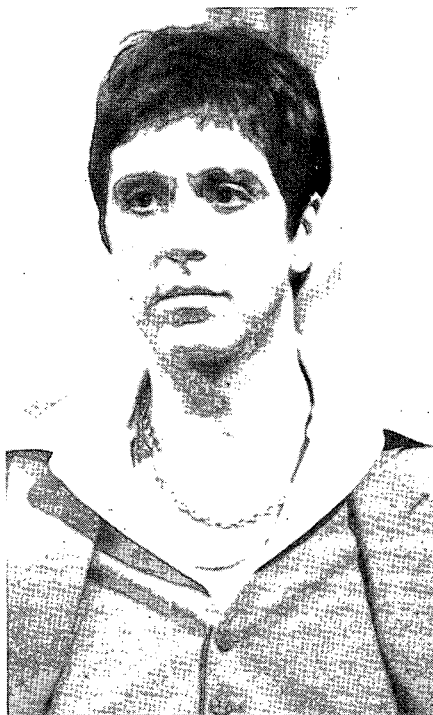
Yet this is not primarily a comedy of bitchery. The comedy is, as in all good films, a by-product of a characterization that has other goals in mind. There is pathos in the film, along with sadness, tension, frustration, and, with of all, a moving and abiding love between mother and daughter (who are more like sisters) that sustains themselves as well as the picture. No one else really counts, not even the next-door ex-astronaut-suitor (beautifully played by Jack Nicholson) or the frustrated banker who beds the daughter (a marvelous bit performance by John Lithgow).

What is most remarkable about this film is its freshness of insight into human

relations. One moves with its unexpected rhythms, empathizing totally at each juncture. "There is never," writes the director, "a moment in the picture that takes you to the next moment or the next place. You just arrive and it seems inevitable—I hope." It does—or even if it doesn't, the viewer is so caught up in the lives of the interacting characters, each vividly etched in deft strokes of characterization so as to leave an abiding impression, that things like inevitability or even careful plot structure don't seem to matter any more.

Scarface

Compared with director Brian De Palma's previous ventures in suspense, there is no suspense at all in *Scarface*—its outcome is predictable from the start. Yet every film he does, De Palma has



Morality play: Succumbing to evil, the title character (Al Pacino) rises and then is brought down in *SCARFACE*.

recently told the press, is "highly moral." This one could indeed be construed as a kind of morality play: a man with a strong penchant toward evil succumbs to it, rises in the world of crime, and is brought down. But most of the film consists of monotonously repeated violence—shooting, blood, gore, severed limbs, and endlessly repeated four-letter words. It lasts for almost three hours,

and most of it is a bore. It ends only when practically everybody is dead.

Al Pacino is very good as Scarface, presented here as a Cuban exported from Castro's prisons, but certainly no better than was Paul Muni in the original version of this film, directed many years ago by Howard Hawks. At least Hawks gave the protagonist some interesting character traits; Pacino is evil practically from the beginning to the end, and thus the main characteristic by which we identify with characters, sympathy, is lacking. Since the earlier *Scarface* is frequently presented on television, it's worth seeing at home and saving the price of a ticket to the new one—except, that is, by those viewers who prefer a hundred murders to a dozen.

White Dog

Director Sam Fuller, the master of violence (along with the other Sam, Peckinpah), has turned his talents to the depiction of animal violence, specifically, to a white dog—that is, a dog that has been trained in puppyhood to attack only black people. The film has been denied general circulation because of its supposed racist theme; this is unfortunate, for there has never been a less racist film.

A girl who lives alone finds a stray dog in her yard, to whom she develops a strong attachment, particularly after the dog saves her from an attacking rapist. But when the dog attacks an innocent person, she learns through a trainer that it is a "white dog," and the only thing to do is shoot it.

She refuses this option and exhausts every possible alternative in an attempt to retrain (uncondition) the dog. The black trainer is infinitely patient and takes great risks; the development of this aspect of the story is intense and dramatic. The outcome of any attempt at unconditioning is, however, chancy: should the dog be saved even at the subsequent risk of human life?

The scene in which the girl confronts the man who trained the dog as a puppy to be a "white dog" is emotionally involving enough by itself to be worth the price of admission. The rest of the film is a further bonus.

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