



## Are Bad Movies Good?

A LARGE-SCALE Western called *Major Dundee*, starring Charlton Heston, left me with the impression that I had seen a movie of no distinction whatsoever—crude in its action, composed of remnants and fragments of other Westerns, its plot meandering over a florid landscape of clichés. Yet I fully expect a case to be made out for it in serious quarterlies of movie opinion here and abroad. Consider first that its director is Sam Peckinpah, who was singled out by the sassily unorthodox reviewers for *Time* and *Newsweek* as having what they termed one of 1962's best films, *Ride the High Country*. He has a flair for violence, so I'm told, and any cineaste in good standing knows that violence handled by a currently fashionable director is "cinematic poetry." There's lots of violence in *Major Dundee*; gallons of bloodshed are caused by Indian arrows and U.S. Cavalry rifles, pistols, and knives when a troop of Yankee Civil War Cavalry, led by Major Heston, chases for no good reason after a bloodthirsty Apache, Sierra Charriba.

But just in case the various ineptitudes of the movie should disturb, there's another way of regarding it. Simply call it "camp." The *New York Times* recently informed us that the word "camp," formerly used mainly in homosexual circles, can now be used heterosexually and that it can mean practically anything you want it to mean. As far as I can see, it means something is just too much. Well, *Major Dundee* is just too much, and for that reason is probably wonderful. Any objective consideration of the film is therefore ruled out.

The movie begins with a massacre by the Apache chief, and his running off with three small white children. (You know what *that* means: they'll be brought up as Indians, they'll lose their whitehood.) Naturally Major Dundee has to get them back, even if it means killing dozens of his men. He hasn't enough of his own men at his post, but it also contains a prison camp holding murderous "rebs." He recruits some of these, including an old West Point comrade, Ben Tyreen, who is played by

Richard Harris doing yet another Marlon Brando emulation. (Bad acting, but good camp.) They chase the Apaches all the way to Mexico. (Can they trust their Indian guides? Yes and no.) They encounter the most beautiful girl you ever saw, whose breasts are big and white and almost fully exposed, in a woebegone Mexican Village, tyrannized by a troop of French soldiers. What's this beautiful girl doing there with all those starving Mexicans? She's for Major Dundee, during certain interludes in the chasing and fighting. There's more, much more, so much that practically everyone is dead at the end. Chalk up another one for Sam Peckinpah.

Could the application of similar criteria result in a favorable response to *Vadim's Circle of Love*? Harder, in this case, for the director's name as part of the title is enough to set anyone but an *auteur* theorist off. And one quickly discovers that the movie is a fairly straight rendering of Arthur Schnitzler's study of pre-World War I Viennese decadence, *La Ronde*, now set in France, of course, as was the Max Ophuls movie of some ten years ago. Also, I believe that neither *Time* nor *Newsweek*, nor even *Sight and Sound* has ever designated Roger Vadim as one of the best film-makers of any year. Not that he hasn't tried. No director has tried so remorselessly, so dedicatedly, to show sex on the screen. He made *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, and wrecked that French classic. He made *Chateau in Sweden*, from the Françoise Sagan play, and came a dreadful cropper. So far as I know, he has never made a good movie and owes what reputation he has to his discovery of Brigitte Bardot.

And not even the most avid of camp addicts could tolerate the unending boredom of *Vadim's Circle of Love*. Read the play and you'll find that it's not Schnitzler's fault. See the Ophuls version and note what a director of style and wit could make out of the material. No, it's Vadim. He's all thumbs. He attempts a round of sexual seductions, and proves only that sex can be dull. The Legion of Decency need fear no longer. A plethora of sex on the screen should have the result (if this film is indicative) of bringing back morality and inducing abstinence.

It should be mentioned that Jean Anouilh did the screen adaptation, but the dubbing of his dialogue into English precludes any judgment of *him*. Jane Fonda, on the other hand, is heard in her own language, and has had the temerity to match herself with Danielle Darrieux, who played the same role in the Ophuls version. She comes out a loser. So does Vadim. I doubt that even Susan Sontag, who opened up a whole new world of entertainment with her theories of camp, could rescue this one.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.



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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Poet of the Recent Past

FOR A college student in the early Twenties a great source of excitement was the discovery of contemporary American poetry. For myself, I was aided in that discovery by the 1921 edition of Louis Untermeyer's *Modern American Poetry*. Here were Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edgar Lee Masters, Amy Lowell, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Conrad Aiken, and Edna Millay, along with many others whose names have pretty much been forgotten.

Although at the time I was stirred by both Sandburg and Lindsay, the poets for whom I had the highest admiration were Frost and Robinson. I remember saying this to one of my teachers, and, when he agreed, I asked him which of the two was the greater poet. He replied, "Robinson. What he tries to do is harder." I wasn't sure then that I could subscribe to this judgment, and I'm not sure now; but if, in my mind, Robinson was second, he was a close second.

Robinson was miserably slow in winning recognition, but after the publication of *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916, there was little doubt of his eminence. He went on to begin his Arthurian trilogy with *Merlin* and *Lancelot*, which enhanced his reputation, and then interrupted the trilogy to write *The Man Who Died Twice*, perhaps the finest of his long poems. In 1927 came the third poem on Arthurian material, *Tristram*, which had an almost inexplicable popular success and made him for the first time a public figure. He wrote steadily for the remaining eight years of his life, but not always well.

Even before his death, Robinson's critical reputation had begun to decline, and not merely in reaction to the false success of *Tristram*. To the left-wing critics of the Thirties, Robinson seemed irrelevant. In *The Great Tradition* (1933) I deplored the way in which Robinson's people were abstracted from what I regarded as real life, though I

had not wholly lost my admiration for his work. "Robinson's fine dignity," I wrote, "the nobility of much of his blank verse, the subtlety of such poems as 'A Poor Relation' and 'Eros Turannos,' the wisdom of some passages in *Captain Craig*, the interpretation of history in 'Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford' and 'Rembrandt to Rembrandt,' and the lyric beauty of the beginning of *Tristram* have enriched American literature." I went on, however, to mention some poems, particularly recent ones, that I didn't like, and I concluded with a question: "Is it possible for the poet to touch the enduring strands of humanity's thought and emotion and endeavor, unless he finds them, as in daily experience we ourselves do, inextricably part of the warp and woof of man's concrete struggle with a particular environment in a particular age?" In short, I was demanding what in those days was called "social significance." I was wrong in my premises, but I believed what I was saying, and there were many people on my side.

IF Robinson displeased the Marxists, he was not much more congenial to the New Critics, who have done so much to shape opinion in the postwar period. It is true that Allen Tate gave Robinson a reasonably generous amount of space in *Modern Verse in English* (1958), which he edited with David Cecil; but Robinson simply isn't one of the select group of poets to whom the New Critics devote their analytical attention.

He has by no means been wholly neglected. Hermann Hagedorn did a semi-official biography, cautious but perceptive, in 1938, and ten years later Emery Neff wrote about Robinson for the American Men of Letters series. In 1952 Ellsworth Barnard published an excellent critical study, and there have been many shorter discussions. No one would attempt to write an essay on American poetry in the twentieth century without taking Robinson into ac-

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count, and yet it is generally felt that he is in limbo.

Chard Powers Smith's *Where the Light Falls* (Macmillan, \$7.50) might be regarded as a sort of rescue operation, and even if it weren't as good a book as it is, I should wish it well. In a way it is three books: a personal memoir, an analysis of Robinson's life in relation to his work, and an interpretation of his attitudes towards the great problems of existence. It is, as the subtitle states, an attempt to paint his portrait, and at the same time it is a revaluation of his poetry. (Smith, it may be pointed out, since the book does not list his previous publications, is the author of several volumes of verse, three novels, including *Artillery of Time*, and various studies of the New England mind, notably *Yankees and God*.)

The epigraph for Part I is an apt