

by George McCartney

Night Thoughts for the Middle-Aged

Bulletin: Hollywood scapegrace, Jack Nicholson, reads Chronicles.

Or so several of our readers reported after seeing Alexander Payne's adaptation of Louis Begley's novel, *About Schmidt*. Needless to say, these sightings propelled yours truly into action.

En route to perform my reconnaissance at the local multiplex, I calculated the probabilities. On reflection, what had seemed at first improbable began to seem quite plausible. Nicholson, after all, has a reputation for refusing to toe anyone's line, even that of his conventionally leftist Hollywood paymasters. I recalled the flap he raised a few years ago when he declared he was against abortion, having been spared by his unmarried mother, who chose the inconvenience of bringing him into the world, to our everlasting benefit. So, why wouldn't Hollywood's premiere maverick subscribe to a journal as politically out of step as he is?

Or was it writer/director Alexander Payne who decided to cast our magazine as an objective correlative to his wayward ideology, so evident in his first commercial film, *Citizen Ruth*? This penetrating account of the abortion wars took some mild jabs at pro-life activists, but it loosed its thunder on the pro-abortion party, dramatizing its members' unswerving dedication to killing the unborn. Payne revealed the pro-choicers to be at once loonily self-righteous and calculatingly ghoulish. Furthermore, there was the rave notice we gave Payne's delightfully ruthless satire, *Election*, two years ago. How could he not be one of our more devoted readers?

As I pulled into the parking lot, I had quite convinced myself that *Chronicles* had slipped through filmdom's leftward phalanx. Payne was our man in Hollywood, and we were, at last, helping to shape the hearts and minds of the thoughtful few behind the enemy's line. It is with some chagrin, then, that I must report my reconnaissance was inconclusive. Yes, there is a magazine on Nicholson's desk, and, yes, it looks mightily like one of our issues. But its fleeting appearance makes it impossible to be certain.

I can report this, however: If it is our magazine, it is on the wrong desk. Given

his character, the eponymous Schmidt could hardly be expected to read anything more demanding than the *Omaha World-Herald*.

About Schmidt is, at best, a mild satire of a late-middle-age man having his complacency bruised by some unpleasant inevitabilities: age, death, and willful offspring. While Payne dramatizes this well enough, his film lacks the nifty provocation of *Citizen Ruth* and the crackling boldness of *Election*. *Schmidt* is all too predictable. In fact, the only real surprise is how little it has to do with its source. Melding an unsold screenplay of his own with the novel, Payne has transformed Begley's Schmidt from a white-shoe New York lawyer to a dispirited actuary in Omaha. The result is an occasionally funny and sometimes moving actor's film. Whatever force there is in this account of a man awakening to his mortality comes from a cast of exceptional performers inhabiting the ordinariness of their unexceptional characters.

First, there's Nicholson himself, playing against type as Schmidt. Our Jack has called upon his current portliness to show us how Schmidt has padded himself from contact with others. At 66, he lurks within the fortress of his corpulence, peering out at the world through his fat-crenellated eyes. What he sees neither surprises nor delights him. In an hilarious pre-credit sequence, Nicholson sits at an office desk swept clean of paper, pens, and other business litter. He studies the wall clock as its minute hand creeps toward five, his face impassively gelid, his eyes lifeless, his motionless body swaddled by an ill-fitting suit that reveals every ripple of his flab. Nothing is said. Words are unnecessary. This joyless time-server is about to be released from his wage slavery. If you are over 40 and do not laugh ruefully at this scene, you are either independently wealthy or profoundly at peace with your mortal condition or, if you are obscenely lucky, both. Schmidt is fed up with it all. Of his wife, he tells us in voice-over that he often awakens at night and wonders how this pushy, foul-smelling old lady got into his house. The only time he comes alive is when his daughter, Jeanie (Hope Davis), calls. Answering



About Schmidt

Produced and distributed by
New Line Cinema
Directed by Alexander Payne
Screenplay by Alexander Payne and
Jim Taylor from Louis Begley's novel

The Quiet American

Produced by William Harberg
and Stefan Ahrenberg
Directed by Phillip Noyce
and Robert Schenkkan
Screenplay by Christopher Hampton
from Graham Greene's novel
Distributed by Miramax Films

the phone, he pulls his suit jacket into shape and fleetingly primps at his hair, his expression turning suddenly eager with his futile hope of pleasing the one person he still loves.

When his wife dies shortly after he retires, Schmidt is moved to apply his actuarial skills. He calculates he has nine years to live. This concentrates his mind wonderfully—on himself. He tries to persuade his thirtysomething daughter to give up her ninny of a fiancé and return to his house to take care of him “until I’m settled.” She, of course, fumes at his suggestion. (Nobody fumes better than Davis.) But it is not just selfishness on his part. He simply cannot understand why she would want to marry Randall, a Denver waterbed salesman played to goofy perfection by Dermot Mulroney. You can see his point. This is a young man given to the spiritual balm of group hugging. After the funeral for Schmidt's wife, whom he met only once, Randall thoughtfully observes, “They broke the mold when they made her.” Then, looking heavenward, he bellows, “We’ll miss you, He-

len!”

What is best about Payne is his cold-eyed assessment of human nature. He lets no one off the hook. When the repressed Schmidt meets Randall’s effusive, aging hippie mother Roberta (the irrepressible Kathy Bates), the contrast is quite funny. In other hands, Bates would have been instructed to play her character as a touchstone of honesty and healthy nonconformity. Instead, she comes across as a monster of self-congratulation. Roberta informs Schmidt that she has always been a very sexual being whose needs have gone unsatisfied by several husbands. In no time at all, she has inveigled Schmidt into her backyard hot tub where, to his dismay, she disrobes and slips in with him, chortling, “A divorcée and a widower: I’d say that makes a good match.” (I don’t know about you, but I could have gone to my grave quite contentedly without having seen Bates in her altogether, nor was it ever my wish to gaze on Nicholson’s bare bum.)

As in his other films, Payne applies his satire with a refreshing evenhandedness. If Schmidt’s self-regarding prudence has frozen his soul, Roberta’s wanton career has transformed her into a gorgon of unsatisfied longings. The organization man and the would-be earth mother stew in their respective tubs of futility.

The Quiet American also tells us of middle-age futility, but in much darker tones. This beautifully shot film of love, war, and perfidy in French Indochina follows the scheme of the Graham Greene novel on which it is based, but it simplifies its emotions and politics. Doing so, director Phillip Noyce has altered Greene’s emphasis. The film suggests that there was a full moral equivalence between the deeds of the communist Vietminh and the CIA agents active in the region in the early 1950’s. While Greene had little sympathy for American intervention, he did not go this far. Still, at its best, Noyce’s film does justice to Greene’s sobering portrait of good intentions gone horribly wrong.

Greene used a love triangle to dramatize his views of Indochina. His narrator, the fiftysomething Thomas Fowler (Michael Caine), has ensconced himself in Saigon, where he is supposed to be covering the French war against the Vietminh. This he does in a desultory manner while pursuing his twin passions for Phuong (Do Thi Hai Yen), a beautiful 20-year-old Vietnamese girl, and for the opium she administers to him nightly.

Into his cozy arrangement stumbles Alden Pyle (Brendan Fraser), a Harvard-educated CIA operative pretending to be working for America’s medical-aid mission. (With his big eyes and easy smile, Fraser perfectly expresses his character’s innate niceness, which, paradoxically, enables him to pursue his ideals ruthlessly.) Pyle is instantly smitten with Fowler’s pillow girl and, in his earnest way, decides he must make an honest woman of her, an impulse analogous to his determination to liberate the Vietnamese from, well, anything that imperils their right to enjoy democracy, American-style.

At first, Fowler is bemused by the young man’s blundering brashness. But when, Pyle makes a point of discussing his intentions, he cannot help scorning the younger man’s naiveté. Later, when Pyle unhesitatingly saves Fowler from a Vietminh attack, the older man pointedly sneers at his decency. Fowler shares Greene’s well-known distrust of innocent goodness. At the same time, he grudgingly respects it, especially when he compares it to his own weary cynicism.

Greene, of course, meant his love triangle to mirror the struggle between competing styles of colonialism and how they deal with the colonized. The Europeans, he suggests, have no illusions about what their mission is: They have come among the Asians for their own benefit. By contrast, the American Pyle has come to save the Vietnamese from both communism and themselves. He carries around a book entitled *Dangers to Democracy* and prattles on about building a “third force” that will replace the French and supplant the communist Vietminh.

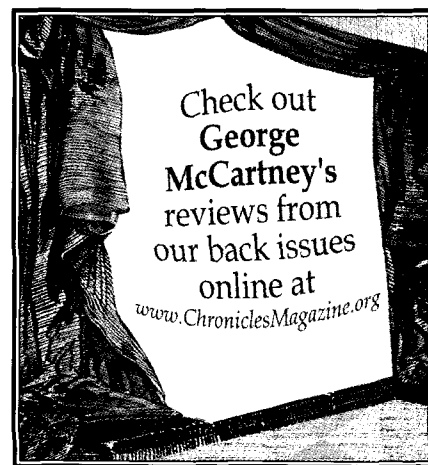
Promoting democracy, however, entails unintended hazards. Pyle retains a megalomaniacal Vietnamese general to head his third force. He supplies him with plastic explosives to combat the communists, and the vicious general promptly uses them in the streets of Saigon, maiming and killing scores of civilians. Although revolted by this unauthorized carnage, Pyle colludes in the cover story that lays the blame with the communists. He is determined to put the American plan into effect, regardless of how poorly it fits the Vietnamese.

In the aftermath of the attack, Fowler is approached by a Vietnamese friend who asks for his help. He wants the correspondent to lure Pyle into a trap so that some Vietminh agents can “talk” to him, promising they will “act as gently as the situation allows.” When Fowler hesitates

to betray the man who saved his life, his Vietnamese friend tries some moral suasion. “One has to take sides if one is to remain human,” he observes gravely. This is a strange remark from someone working for the communist Vietminh. They never had any compunction about using terror, not only on the French but on their fellow Vietnamese, torturing and slaughtering peasants who would not comply with their demands and murdering others for the crime of owning property. Fowler’s decision settles what kind of man he is. As for Pyle, Greene was uncannily prescient: His type represents the vanguard of the likes of Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and others in John F. Kennedy’s retinue. Greene was right: The ruthless innocence of America’s best and brightest unleashed havoc in Southeast Asia.

While Noyce has followed Greene in implicating the communists in various acts of terror and treachery, he has most of it offscreen. The attack carried out with American-supplied explosives is, on the other hand, depicted in bloody and prolonged close-ups. Many will leave the theater thinking the communists constituted a relatively decent indigenous movement forced to use extreme measures to ward off the inexcusably brutal French and Americans. To those, I would recommend the remedy that I have had occasion to apply: Talk to a few Vietnamese in America. Twenty-five years after fleeing Uncle Ho’s workers’ paradise, they still shudder at the horrors they witnessed in their homeland after we abandoned them.

My reservations notwithstanding, I strongly urge you to see this film. While you are at it, read the novel. Greene’s story serves as a potent vaccination against the contagion of war fever that is spreading in our land. c



by Humpty Dumpty

By Their Clichés, You Shall Know Them

At least since September 11, the buzzphrase for every investigation has been “connect the dots.” Republicans were highly imaginative in connecting the dots between Afghanistan and Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, while Democrats preferred connecting the dots between Enron executives and the Bush administration. Donald Rumsfeld, who has raised this kind of political gibberish to high art, told Bob Schieffer on *Face the Nation*:

I was musing over the fact that there are so many books that have been written — “Why England Slept,” Pearl Harbor, what happened, why didn’t we know? Right now on Capitol Hill, the members of the House and the Senate are trying to — are looking, having investigations on September 11th of last year, and trying to connect the dots, as they say, trying to piece together what might have been known, and why didn’t we know it, and why weren’t we able to connect the dots? What the president is saying very simply to the world is let’s look at the dots today. Our task is not to connect — connect the dots as to why England slept, or what happened with Pearl Harbor, or what happened on September 11th only. Our task is to connect the dots before the fact, and — and see if we can’t behave in a way that there won’t be books written about why we slept, or what happened.

To “connect the dots before the fact,” in case you have not been able to figure it out, means passing *a priori* judgments on the Iraq-Al Qaeda connection without supplying any facts whatsoever.

“Connect the dots” seems to have replaced “pieces of the puzzle” as the paranoid metaphor of choice and bids fair to supplant even “smoking gun.” What makes it so attractive is the tacit assumption that there must be a preset pattern, that the investigator’s only task is to go from point to point in the right sequence to come up with the predetermined picture.

After all, the search for “the smoking gun” may prove to be fruitless, if no crime has been committed. Putting together a puzzle of hundreds of pieces may require hours, and the picture, often quite complicated, will be incomplete if some of the pieces (as the cliché often suggests) are missing, but in the children’s game of Connect the Dots, there is no room for doubt. One person (in my day, it was usually another child) imagines an iconic image and outlines it in dots, and it is the child’s duty to connect them up to discover the outline of an elephant or the face of Abraham Lincoln.

This simplicity appeals to children. Adults are supposed to realize that reality is never so simple, that the divine Puzzle Master has created a richly textured universe that can rarely be explained in one-dimensional terms. Ike was probably not a commie; the Frankfurt School did not single-handedly destroy Western civilization; Bill Clinton was not planning a *coup d’état*; poverty cannot usually be explained by either the greed of plutocrats or the laziness of social inferiors.

To think that America’s problems in the Middle East can be explained by any simple connecting of dots is as infantile as the phrase itself, and the popularity of this expression is one more indication — as if we needed it — of the growing infantilism of the American people and their leaders.

The evidence is all around us, especially in the elite classes. Read or listen to speeches of American statesmen from before World War II, and you will hear forceful, articulate men, not afraid to speak plainly, who studded their speeches with references to the Scriptures and to American history. Listen to any senator, cabinet member, or president of the past ten years, and you will think you have entered into a school for learning-disabled children. The two Bushes may be excused on the grounds of hereditary dyslexia, but how do we explain away the rest of them?

The infantilism comes out very strongly in the choice of slang expressions and the use of allusions to pop culture. Where politicians once quoted Shakespeare, the Bible, Thomas Jefferson, and Mark Twain,

they now refer to Disney cartoons, game shows, movies, and sitcoms. Journalists are even worse. The only frame of reference for journalists under 40 seems to be pop music, sports, and TV shows. And if we descend the cultural scale, the situation gets even more desperate: If comic writers had to give up all references to Michael Jackson and Jennifer Lopez, they would go on unemployment.

Just in case you might be tempted to take the American pundit-class seriously, consider: This is the country where actresses who play farm wives in films are invited to testify in Congress on the farm crisis, where a p.r. hack like Lucianne Goldberg (to say nothing of her son) or a fashion-plate like Arianna Huffington can gain a respectful hearing, where political activists and speechwriters (James Carville, Paul Begala, Tony Snow, Cal Thomas) pretend to be “journalists” on talk shows. (“I’m not a journalist, but I play one on TV.”)

Uneducated people have always been, well, uneducated, but, in the old days, they did have a rich storehouse of proverbs, folktales, and traditional lore. A proletariat has nothing but consumer culture and Madison Avenue to fall back on. Unfortunately, that proletariat now includes the American ruling class, which can only express its thoughts in simple sentences, because all of its thoughts are simple, and which reveals, in its reliance upon infantile clichés, an entirely infantile view of the world. c

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