

Democrats, and self-mortification is a religious ritual in that particular sect. The rest of us may have wondered: If Jesse Jackson did not exist, would it be necessary to invent him? No law bears his imprint, no doctrine boasts his name. No institution endures because he laid the foundation. No cause but Jesse Jackson has his unqualified allegiance. The Democrats may have held him in unaccustomed esteem, but their electors avoided him in droves. Why read about him? Alas, the answer is found on every doorstep: the press.

From the moment Martin Luther King lay murdered, Jackson's career has been a whirlwind of airport connections, jerry-built alliances, proclamations, and press conferences—leadership by news release. If he is not *the* black leader, he is *a* black leader; and leadership, he seems to think, is something seized rather than earned. The authors are especially skillful in their examination of the Jackson mythology, his irresistible rise and unquestioned mastery—one might say intimidation—of the media.

The details are fascinating: He grew up in comparative comfort, not the Third World squalor he characteristically invokes. He was neither King's chosen deputy nor anointed successor; indeed, he was close to dismissal from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference when James Earl Ray intervened on his behalf. Self-promoting, double-crossing, scene-stealing, he seems to have learned the value of publicity from his putative mentor, but little else. And that is the heart of the matter.

It is often forgotten that Martin Luther King was nearly redundant at the time of his death, misconstrued by reactionaries but scorned by radicals. Success came quickly, perhaps unexpectedly, in social as well as legislative form. In the eighteen years since King died, the movement he personified has missed its crowned head. The problem, of course, is that now there is no movement; King's progress was not a cult of personality but a crusade of ideas. In this instance, the media—and, to be fair, academia, Congress, the social statisticians, and others who should know better—have never fully grasped what is otherwise so obvious: When ideas take root, they form the common mind. Civil rights is conventional wisdom, not an exclusive preserve, or the strategy of a private army.

It is convenient to divide ideas into personalities (liberalism: FDR, Hubert Humphrey; conservatism: Robert Taft, Ronald Reagan), but it is also misleading. The success of the civil rights movement has no more eloquent testimony than the elusiveness of

“black leadership.” It has transcended politics. The difference is between a tribune and a spokesman, between fighting for right and lobbying for advantage. Blacks don't need Jesse Jackson—no more, at least, than the Democrats—and the futility of concern about personal leadership is summed up in the incoherence of his journey since 1968. He has careened from one gimmick to another, the author of a series of false starts and broken pledges. What was once People United to Save Humanity is now People United to Serve Humanity. Save, serve—what's the difference? A rainbow coalition that is painfully monochrome—who would notice?

It is scarcely an accident that his language is so wild and imprecise, that exaggeration is his form of emphasis. Words mean for Jesse Jackson what he wants them to mean, no more and no less. Let's talk black talk, he said to a black reporter on one memorable occasion, and lapsed into the vocabulary of anti-Semitism. When he spoke some contrite syllables to an audience of Jews, he switched glossaries, and the expedient worked. He may not have satisfied his listeners in the room, but he spoke to a wider audience. The language of electronic celebrity is noise, and the currency of blab is emotion not meaning.

Which leads us to the real question, why? The authors are concerned that Jesse Jackson represents a disturbing phenomenon. They are distressed by his insincerity, startled by his company. They detect a pattern of deception and suspect unworthy motives. All of this is true, but little of it is important. Take away the marketing techniques, and what is left? Jackson is a kind of minor irritant, a boil in the social hind quarters. I would even argue that he is a symptom of national health. He must journey to Cuba to be treated as a head of state; only the Syrians would find him worthy to be manipulated. The press was mystified by his devotion to Louis Farrakhan, but only the press would entertain such expectations. The Democrats were alternately bullied and seduced, but Jesse Jackson is just another Balkan prince dividing their unhappy kingdom. The Democrats who make any difference—that is to say, those who vote—resolutely declined to take him seriously. For that, at least, we can be thankful. Contempt for democracy is often an article of faith among the sages and brokers of politics, but Jackson is important where it doesn't count.

The moral, then, is in the subtitle: the politics of race. It is true that the differences that divide Americans provide a kind of grist for social upheaval

and evolution. But time passes, and the mills tend to turn out bread rather than more grist. Black nationalism is no more likely to endure than white nationalism, and while Jesse Jackson is alive and Martin Luther King is dead, it is Jackson who is the anachronism. The fact that he fascinates, or an appetite persists for his image and message, is the perverse side of human nature. Spectacle can be interesting, and curiosity is easily piqued. The demolished automobile will slow down traffic, but novelty wears off easily. Where will Jesse Jackson be tomorrow?

What rhetoric can maintain interest? What provocation will capture the six o'clock news?

Not long before his death, I made a pilgrimage to a strip joint in Washington to watch George Jessel perform. The uniform was unchanged, the voice was the same, and so were the jokes. It was an extraordinary, but not altogether unfitting, home port into which he had sailed. I like to think that Jesse Jackson will continue to entertain, rather than disturb. Where he will go and how he will subsist, I cannot say. But I think I know. □

STATE OF THE ART
Pauline Kael/E.P. Dutton/\$22.50

Bruce Bawer

For most of us, it's difficult at times to look at film critically. After all, we grew up on movies in a way we didn't grow up on serious art or music or literature: the genre is full of sentimental associations for us. There are old movies by the score that we remember fondly not because they are great examples of cinematic art but because we first saw them with people we loved, because we once had pubescent crushes on the stars, because our mothers loved them; there are recent films that move us to uncritical raptures with their beautiful scenery, beautiful faces, or all-Mozart scores. Indeed, if a bad book is only a bad book, a bad movie—if you're sitting in a theater that has a huge screen, an excellent sound system, and a first-rate, unscratched, color-perfect, 70-millimeter print—can nonetheless be a terrifically powerful visceral experience. It's all this that makes the job of movie reviewing—the job, that is, of getting beneath the subjective associations and the visceral experience and judging the film as a work of art—particularly challenging.

But not for Pauline Kael, who's been reviewing movies in the *New Yorker* since 1968. Kael's critical method is implicitly founded upon the hypothesis that the sort of distinction I've just made is a spurious one. To her mind, manifestly, her role as a film critic is not to attempt to transcend subjectivity but to exult in it, to exalt it; not to analyze films but (to draw a fine but fundamental distinction) to give us a

play-by-play account of her sensual engagement with them. It's less true, in other words, to say that Kael writes about movies than to say that she writes about *going* to the movies. And, as the whole world indubitably knows, Pauline Kael *loves* going to the movies. She lives them, she breathes them, she worships them, she is at once their high priestess, devoted spouse, and insatiably aroused mistress: such, at least, is her public image. Was there ever in all of history, one wonders, a critic as famous for his *love* of the genre under his scrutiny as is Pauline Kael? Is there any, for that matter, who has celebrated his hyper-impressionistic tendency to approach that genre as a well-nigh erotic object as blatantly as has Kael, with such titles as *I Lost It at the Movies*, *Reeling*, *Taking It All In*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, *Deeper into Movies*, and *When the Lights Go Down*?

This is not to deny, of course, that Kael is an unusually engaging writer—a *fun* writer—and, in many ways, a highly gifted critic. She's perceptive, she's sensitive, she knows a great deal about film technique, she's intelligent (though, it must be said, she invariably applies her critical intelligence more generously to the articulation than to the formulation of her critical opinions). In her tenth book, *State of the Art*, in which she has gathered her reviews of 117 movies released in 1983, 1984, and 1985, both her considerable strengths and her lamentable weaknesses are in full flower.

So, too, are her characteristic prejudices. To name one: being a critic who

Bruce Bawer writes on writers and fiction for the *New Criterion*.

(as she has acknowledged in many an interview) performs the critical act spontaneously, without premeditation, she tends to admire excessively the work of directors and actors who work the same way—or seem to. Her famous, embarrassing veneration of Robert Altman's now terribly dated film *Nashville* ("the funniest epic vision of America ever to reach the screen") is a case in point: she worshipped the movie *not* principally because of its political message (though that was part of it), but mainly because the whole thing had such a spur-of-the-moment feel to it, because the script wasn't taken too seriously, because "the actors [were] encouraged to work up material for their roles." She admires movies like *Melvin and Howard* and Altman's *Come Back to the 5 & Dime*, *Jimmy Dean*, *Jimmy Dean* for the same reason: they have an off-the-cuff, unrehearsed, "natural" feel. Likewise, she considers Nick Nolte "an ideal screen actor" because of his "rough edges" (he "seems unfinished"), admires the rock star Prince because he's a wild, impulsive "passionflower imp," and adores Matt Dillon, to whom she devoted a heartfelt panegyric in her last book, *Taking It All In*:

Actors who have labored to learn the rudiments of their profession must want to kill the potential teen idol Matt Dillon, the open-faced young star of *Tex*. He's a "natural," who takes the camera with the baffling ease of a puppy. He doesn't apply any particular sexual heat in this movie, and he isn't crafty, like James Dean—there are no Method mannerisms, no affectations of any kind. From the way it looks, he just uses the sweet starry radiance that nature gave him, and smiles his relaxed, all-American-sweetheart smile. Even his gift for baby-macho comedy seems part of the package. What Dillon does in *Tex* may not be the result of studying technique, but it works better on camera than most trained acting does. Viewers can feel they're in direct contact with this luminous kid.

By the same token, Kael tends to denigrate movies, actors, and directors that give the impression of being polished and professional, of striving for excellence or seamlessness or a touch of class. "The smooth meticulousness of *Places in the Heart*—what some might call its craftsmanship—drives me a little crazy," she complains in *State of the Art*. If Altman and Brian De Palma (two of America's most self-indulgent directors) earn her praise for their movies' crude, quasi-naturalistic vitality, their more consistently competent (and, in my view, far more gifted) colleagues Robert Benton and George Roy Hill earn little from her except contempt for their "inauthenticity"; similarly, if she cherishes the Matt Dillons and Princes, she is particularly unenamored of Julie Andrews, whom she considers "infuriatingly

sane" and (one gets the impression) too prodigiously talented for comfort.

Morality rubs Kael the same way. She takes *Cross Creek* to task for its attempt at "radiant respectability," *The Right Stuff* for its "Victorian values," *The Natural* for its "sludge of moral uplift," and *Country* for its supposed resemblance to "old *Saturday Evening Post* covers" (a charge she leveled against *On Golden Pond*, too). *Terms*

of *Endearment* provokes a diatribe against "retro-forties virtue":

I think I hated *Terms of Endearment* the most when the grief-stricken Aurora embraces her longtime servant, Rosie (Betty R. King), who shares her misery. Greer Garson in her Mrs. Miniver drag was only a shade more noble. When Aurora and Rosie hug each other—sisters under the skin—the audience is alerted that Aurora is really a good person, and from then on she becomes useful and considerate. As the Sec-

ond World War movies taught us, the function of adversity is to build character.

Likewise, she revolts against the "old-movie make-believe" of *The Natural*, declaring that it "seems to be caught in a time warp. . . . The movie asks: Will Roy be spiritually strong enough to triumph?" It is against such obscene moral messages that Kael is on the warpath. I, for one, would readily

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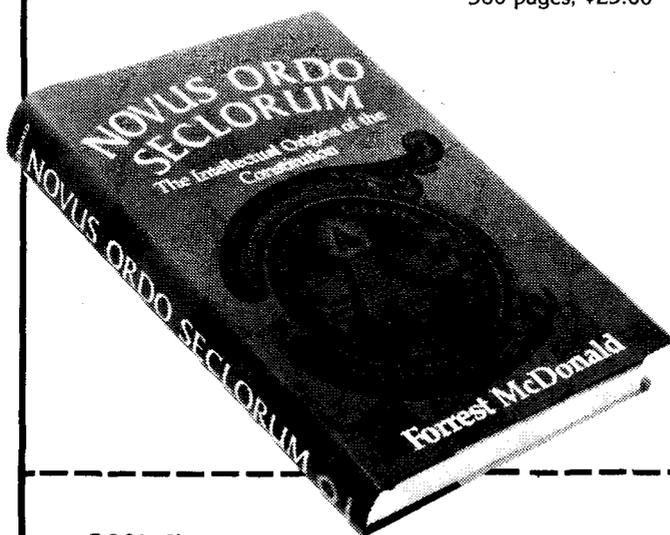
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agree with her statement that there is an atmosphere of "calculated humanity" in *Terms of Endearment* (just as I would join, though for somewhat different reasons, in her disesteem for many of these films), but her knee-jerk rejection of such movies frequently seems to have more to do with her antipathy towards their creators' fundamental assumptions about morality and human charac-

ter than with the movies themselves. Patriotism—of the American variety, anyway—disturbs Kael as well. She's so keenly on the lookout for pro-American messages that she finds them even where they do not exist. Toward the end of her review of *Terms of Endearment*, for instance, she declares sardonically that "Garrett is like those wastrel British aristocrats in the pukka-sahib pictures: when the crisis comes,

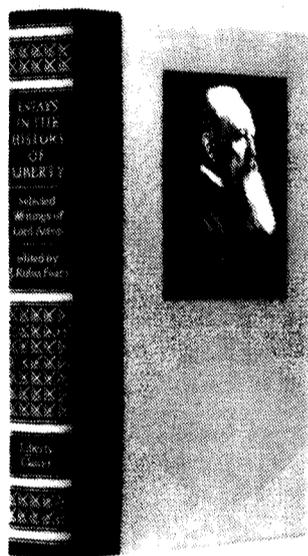
his fundamental decency rises to the surface; he straightens up and does the right thing. He and Aurora are good Americans." It is not, I think, altogether coincidental that the film Kael reviews most favorably in *State of the Art* is Roger Spottiswoode's pro-Sandinista *Under Fire*. Here, for once, the use of old-movie-type clichés seems perfectly okay by her; she writes that Spottiswoode's revolutionaries, "with

their poetic peasant faces, are presented in a grand, naive, idealized movie tradition"—and not only doesn't it bother her a bit, she seems to be rather touched by the romanticism of it all.

Fortunately, at times Kael is right on the money, and wittily so. She describes Sylvester Stallone, for instance, as "the stupidos' Orson Welles." She's got Arthur Hiller's number: he's "made more than twenty pictures, but he must keep his eyes closed on the set. There's no consistency of judgment or taste in a Hiller picture, and often they run downhill." She justly nails Sidney Lumet for the emotional manipulativeness and dishonesty of *Daniel*, Bob Fosse for the facile and arrogant nihilism of *Star 80*, and Paul Brickman for *Risky Business's* offensive view of prostitution as "a hot girl's practical and honest approach to business." Sometimes she uncannily echoes one's own reaction to a movie, down to the last detail: her verdict of *All of Me*, for instance, is identical to my own. She notices important things that other movie critics don't, like good lighting, bad framing, predominant color tones, and shots that have been held a beat too long. About *Daniel*, for instance, she complains: "The picture often looks plain ugly, as if there were barnacles on the lens; even when the action is outdoors, it has the gummy drabness of institutional life." (*Gummy* is one of her trademark adjectives; the others include *logy* and *cheesy*.) She notices interesting if trivial touches, like the fact that Kevin Kline's shoe-store chain in *The Big Chill* is called "Running Dogs" and that "Elliott," the name of the boy hero of *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*, begins with an "E" and ends with a "T."

Needless to say, however, you can take this sort of detail work too far. And so it is with Kael. Granted, her lengthy considerations of such fine movies as *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *A Passage to India* (both of which, thankfully—and, in the latter case, quite surprisingly—she smiles upon in *State of the Art*) are far from unwelcome; but her protracted disquisitions upon the thematic and cinematographic subtleties of such undistinguished fare as *Micki and Maude*, *Moscow on the Hudson*, and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (all of which receive glowing reviews in *State of the Art*) are grotesquely overdone. She means, patently, to give the impression that she is providing us with The Last Word on these movies—and, indeed, on the state of the art generally—but, alas, one's overriding impression is of a critical faculty that is ludicrously self-indulgent and bereft of a sense of proportion. □

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Reid Buckley

The beguiling Peruvian author, Mario Vargas, conspires in this work with a host of his contemporaries in dealing fiction death blows.

Oh, I don't think this is THE END. Fiction will survive so long as storytelling survives. But more and more of our leading novelists seem to bear a grudge against the form. They seem to be attempting to transcend the novel's connection to objective reality, in which attempt there is a kind of heroic, or hubristic, self-disdain at work scratching at the very mirrors of the imagination, until nothing remains, neither image nor its reflection.

This is the story of a minor Peruvian revolutionary of the 1950s. Well, no. This is the story of the narrator's search for the truth of the life of Alejandro Mayta, the protagonist. Wrong again. This is the unfolding of the creative process of a novelist as perceived through the investigation by his *alter ego* (the narrator) of the many faces of historical reality and what's the use of it anyhow. Still wrong! This is the novel writing itself, sort of.

Start again. The narrator, a novelist, whose a.k.a. is (I think) Pacho, but who is in reality (but then, *What is truth?*) Mario Vargas Llosa, was a childhood schoolmate of Alejandro Mayta, whose life story he is seeking to pin down. Pin down? Well. . . . He interviews Mayta's aunt, Mayta's Trotskyite associates, Mayta's friends, and Mayta's enemies—anyone and everyone who once knew the man. These interviews exhaustively dredge the few central dramatic salients of Mayta's life: his meeting and association with 2nd Lt. Vallejos, who suggests to Mayta the possibility of rising up against the government in the tippy-top Andean town of Jauja, his (alleged) homosexual relations with Anatolio, a young militant in the seven-member Revolutionary Workers' Party (T)—for Trotskyite—which has split from the plain (Stalinist) RWP; his alleged betrayal of his Party; his alleged dismissal from the Party; his alleged

Reid Buckley most recently founded the Buckley School of Public Speaking, which organizes seminars for professional executives.

resignation from the Party; and, finally the uprising itself, which lasts ten hours before failing ignominiously.

The interviews are not only in general dull; they are exasperating, because nothing in this process of discovery can truly be said to be verified. They are moreover irritating because the voices of Mayta and other characters keep breaking through the narrative, as though (possibly in fact) the subconscious of the narrator is in the act of composing the fiction that he seeks to spin off the problematical history of his unimportant subject. That is, he, the narrator, at any given moment on the page may be speaking with an acquaintance of Mayta about some incident in the past, when, in the succeeding sentence, or even in mid sentence, he becomes Mayta speaking in the present to that acquaintance, or that acquaintance answering Mayta in the present instead of answering the narrator about what happened in the past.

Does your understanding boggle just a bit? Let me illustrate. At one point the narrator is speaking to Blacquer, a Stalinist, an old foe of Mayta, who delivers his version of the split between Mayta and his RWP (T). A passage goes:

"At the beginning, I didn't get it either, but now I think I do," says Blacquer [in reply to a question from the narrator]. "He [Mayta] was a revolutionary, one hundred percent, don't forget that. The RWP (T) had just thrown him out. Perhaps he thought that would make us reconsider our refusal [to participate in Mayta's insurrection]. Maybe now we would take his plan seriously."

"As a matter of fact, we would have expelled him a long time ago," affirms Comrade Joaquin. He turned to look at Mayta in such a way that I thought: Why does he hate me? "I'm going to tell you what I think . . . I'm not surprised at what you have done, not about the plot, not about having secretly talked with that Stalinist policeman Blacquer . . ."

You note the abrupt shift from a conversation in the present about the past between the narrator and the Stalinist to the voice, in the past (become without notice present), of a Trotskyite

comrade of Mayta, turned enemy (Joaquin), whose voice the narrator (slipping into the past) suddenly assumes, himself becoming Mayta: "He turned to look at Mayta in such a way that I thought: Why does he hate me?"

Again:

I'd recovered my self-control, and they actually did let me speak. But even as he spoke, he knew inside that it wasn't going to be much use. They'd already decided, that's right, behind my back, to wash their hands of the insurrection, and no amount of talk was going to change their minds. As he spoke, he never revealed his pessimism. I forcefully repeated all the reasons I'd already given them . . .

There is a factitious excitement to this, as one is apparently being permitted into the intimate process of creation itself; but this is, we know, false, because we are repeatedly reminded by the author-narrator that the novel is being *written*, coldly and methodically, not spontaneously poured out. The

obsessiveness of the technique quickly nags nerve-ends; the ambiguities and ambivalences, instead of intriguing the reader, drive him out of patience because they are willful, capricious. (The hallmark of this contemporary literature is that they are quite arbitrary.) He asks and asks himself, What is the reason for all this? What is the excuse?

I submit that a formal nuttiness has infected the novel. In structural dislocations, in extravagances, arbitrary contradictions of character or circumstance, and an addiction to what has become a very conventional literature of the absurd, the fundamentals of the novel are subverted. Where is the anchor of reality—in written works that have been influenced by the fat flies on the walls of Grillet and other of the French *nouvelle vague*-ists? Against what is the imagination striving? Nothing. All dissolves in

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