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# THE TALKIES

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## SUNNY AND CHER

by Bruce Bawer

Two current films, *Empire of the Sun* and *Hope and Glory*, invite us to see World War II through the eyes of an English boy. Of the two, Steven Spielberg's *Empire*, which was written by Tom Stoppard and based on J. G. Ballard's autobiographical novel, is a major disappointment. The film tells the story of Jim Graham (Christian Bale), a bratty eleven-year-old who is separated from his parents during the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and spends the war in an alien internment camp. It should be a compelling story, but no such luck; Spielberg, who is more in tune with the fantasy life of the typical lighthearted American boy than any other director, proves himself incapable of understanding the effect war might have upon a boy's psyche. In Ballard's novel, the war manipulates Jim's mind in ways that are complex, curious, even (superficially) contradictory, but ultimately comprehensible: he idolizes his Japanese captors, cherishes violence, cheers an American air raid; he learns "that kindness, which his parents and teachers had always urged upon him, counted for nothing" and feels lightheaded "not because his parents had rejected him but because he expected them to do so, and no longer cared."

But Spielberg's benign *Weltanschauung* simply can't accommodate such unwholesome states of mind; nor does he seem comfortable with the idea of aliens (of the non-extraterrestrial variety) who are vicious rather than friendly. Accordingly he does his best to treat war as if it were one of his usual escapist themes. While the film puts Jim through essentially the same paces as the novel does, it skirts the darker places in the boy's soul—the only places where his behavior makes sense—and thus gives us an incoherent, unconvincing protagonist whose director simply doesn't recognize the degree to which he is *not* the same as the in-

nocent California suburban kids in *E.T.* When the boy salutes a group of Japanese pilots about to take off on a bombing raid, for instance, there should be irony and pathos in the air, but instead there's just the usual Spielbergian joy and wonder; likewise, when Jim sneaks out of the camp to trap a pheasant, the tone is precisely the same as when Richard Dreyfuss sneaks onto the alien landing strip in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. We never feel as if we know this boy intimately; he moves through the film with an urgency that feels willed, and at various climactic points breaks into big phony eyepopping bursts of enthusiasm or sorrow—at which moments the music invariably swells up as if to tell us what to feel. Yet we *don't* feel.

A big part of the problem is the film's unsuitably lush visual style. With the help of his cinematographer (Allen Daviau), lighting director, and production designer (Norman Reynolds), Spielberg makes everything, from the war-torn streets of Shanghai to the hovels of the internment camp, look distractingly beautiful. Indeed, it hardly seems an exaggeration to say that the

real subject of the film is its own cinematography. Spielberg appears to be more interested in lighting surfaces in pretty ways than in exploring the ugly depths of the material; to him, the way the light reflects off of the suitcase that Jim throws into the water in the film's last shot would seem to be more important than his reason for throwing it. Another shot—of Jim standing behind the barbed wire of the camp—looks just like a Ralph Lauren ad in *GQ*. To look at these images is to recognize that Spielberg has absolutely no comprehension of the life they are supposed to represent. And the music doesn't help at all: John Williams has contributed one of his patented sappy-and-jaunty adventure-movie scores, which, while appropriate enough for a *Superman*, an *E.T.*, or an *Indiana Jones*, sounds particularly vacuous when coupled with images of a World War II internment camp.

*Hope and Glory* is another story entirely. Derived from writer-director John Boorman's own childhood, it depicts the Battle of Britain as experienced by eight-year-old Billy Rohan (Sebastian Rice Edwards) and his low-

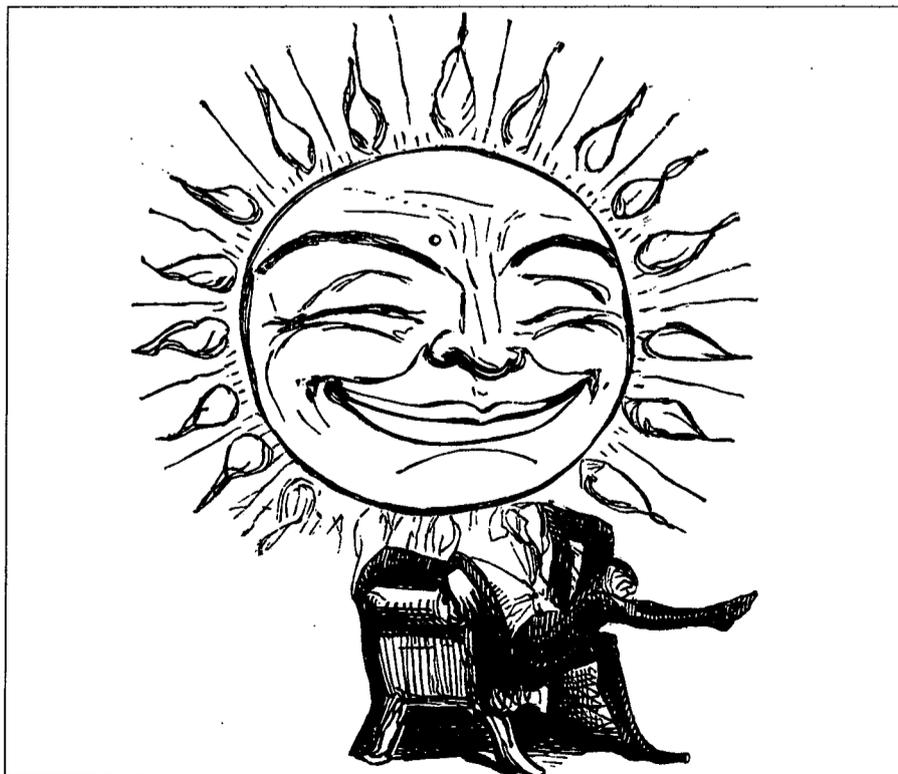
er-middle-class London suburban family (including Sarah Miles as Mum). Like *Empire of the Sun*, the film is episodic; but unlike Spielberg's movie, Boorman's is scaled to the perceptions of a child. It has an honesty, a modesty that *Empire* sorely lacks; Boorman doesn't strain after epic effects, doesn't engage in pointless displays of cinematographic brilliance. Most importantly, he coaxes from Edwards a performance of subtlety and coherence, with the result that we feel throughout the film as if we truly know and care about this boy. If the bombastic *Empire of the Sun* leaves one cold, one is surprised to find oneself being intensely moved by the simplest events and the smallest gestures in *Hope and Glory*.

In the author's note to his 1986 play *The Dreamer Examines His Pillow*, John Patrick Shanley muses as follows:

Who am I? This is a courageous question. . . . I have, at one time or another, denied everything. Every fact of my specific self. My parents, my Bronx origin, my Americanness, my Irishness, my appetites, my mortality, my need for love and acceptance, my jealousy, my violence, my anger. . . .

But he's not denying those things anymore. No sir, these days young Mr. Shanley is embracing himself wholeheartedly and, alas, is charging us up to seven dollars a head to watch. Yet if Shanley's screenplays in two current films, *Moonstruck* and *Five Corners*, prove anything, it is that to accept one's background and to be capable of writing about it with intelligence, sensitivity, and perception are two drastically different things; to see these films is to be astonished at the crudeness and superficiality—the sheer *falsity*—with which both the principal characters and their lower-middle-class ethnic Outer Boroughs milieux are drawn.

By far the better of the two films is *Moonstruck*, directed by Norman Jewison and starring Cher, wherein Shanley substitutes Brooklyn for the Bronx and Italians for Irishmen. The



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film sets us down in present-day Brooklyn Heights, which in real life is Brooklyn's most expensive, highfalutin neighborhood, full of Wall Street yuppies and Benetton stores, but which has been cast here as a lower-middle-class Italian ghetto. The story could hardly be simpler. Cher plays a widow in her mid-thirties who has no sooner agreed to marry her unappealing, inarticulate boyfriend (Danny Aiello) than she falls in love with his equally unappealing, inarticulate estranged brother (Nicolas Cage). Everything about the film is pure Shanley. In place of characterization, he gives us goofy grotesquerie; in place of plot development, roller-coaster reversals. As ever, he confuses weirdness with wit: things are offbeat here for the sake of being offbeat. Cher's job? Office manager in a funeral parlor. The reason for the brothers' estrangement? A freak bakery accident, caused by Aiello, in which Cage lost some fingers, and which is described in such a way as to make the audience roar with laughter.

Everything in this film is played for laughs—and cheap ones at that. Yet every so often Shanley shifts abruptly from absurdist comedy into his own special brand of treacherous sentiment: in one sequence, for instance, Cher, her mother, and her uncle all climb out of their beds in the middle of the night to stare at the moon and speak Great and Simple Truths to their respective bedpartners. Yawn. To enjoy the film on its own terms one must be willing to engage in Doublethink—to laugh, that is, at the cartoonlike qualities of Cher and Cage's romance, and yet to believe in (and to root for the triumph of) the romance; the soupy score—which draws on Puccini as well as the kitsch classic "That's Amore"—is there not only to amuse us with its schmaltzy excess but to touch our hearts. Aside from Cher's winning performance, though, what makes *Moonstruck* a palatable—and even, occasionally, a charming—entertainment is the fact that, for the most part, Shanley keeps it light.

Which is more than one can say for *Five Corners*. Directed by Tony Bill and set in a lower-middle-class Bronx neighborhood in 1964 (though it was actually shot in Queens), the movie covers two days in the lives of several local teenagers. Heinz (John Turturro) is a psychotic thug who's just returned home from prison; Linda (Jodie Foster) is the girl he tried to rape two years ago; James (Todd Graff) is her boyfriend; Harry (Tim Robbins) is the huge, tough Irish street kid who saved her from Heinz last time around, but who, in the wake of his dad's murder and thanks to the rhetoric of

Dr. Martin Luther King, has become—presto!—a convert to nonviolence.

Or so Shanley wants us to believe. Or maybe he doesn't; it's hard to say. There is so much that is unbelievable in this movie—so many extremely unlikely coincidences, decisions, lines of dialogue, and changes of character—that one gets the feeling that Shanley doesn't believe in believability, that he feels if we see something happening on screen, we should accept it and keep still, and not bother him with questions of motivation. After all, the more goofily erratic a character's behavior, the more interesting he is. The main plot itself—Heinz abducts Linda, and James and Harry give chase—gets underway as the result of a thoroughly unbelievable decision on Linda's part: Heinz phones her and tells her to meet him at midnight in the park, and she complies. Why? Who knows? The fundamental rules of dramatic construction don't appear to be relevant in these parts; indeed, one of Shanley's remarks in the aforementioned author's note would seem to indicate that he has little use for those rules: "I see no difference between writing a play and living my life. . . . It is all the same thing." Somebody who thinks this way has no business passing a playwriting course, let alone writing a film script.

There are related problems with the film. Its dialogue is frequently padded and stilted (a flaw more common among bad plays than bad movies), and its exposition generally clumsy ("Harry got so serious after his father died"). There's also a ridiculous subplot involving the shenanigans of two vapid gum-chewing girls who, waking up one morning in a strange flat, engage in typically sparkling Shanley dialogue: "I ain't wearin' no clothes." "I ain't wearin' no clothes either." Like *Moonstruck*, too, the film seems at times to be little more than a catalogue of tacky, eccentric, and/or grotesque details: the white sequined dress on a middle-aged woman in a bar, the awful picture of Jesus on Harry's mother's living room wall, the plastic flowers in Heinz's mother's hair, the cop with one foot twice as large as the other, the high-school teacher killed by an arrow. (Some of these details are particularly reminiscent of *Moonstruck*: for instance, in that film the heroine's lover is missing fingers; in this one he has a limp.)

This is not the only violent episode in *Five Corners*. By the end of the film, several people will be killed—most of them, naturally, in zany ways. Indeed, what makes *Five Corners* so much more intolerable than *Moonstruck*, in the end, is that Shanley here takes *Moonstruck's* already uncomfortable mixture of absurdist comedy and

shameless sentiment and adds two further ingredients: violence and serious political theme-mongering. Now, violence and absurdist comedy can be combined successfully: the Coen brothers did so in *Blood Simple*. But to combine these elements with the sort of simpleminded sentimentality and genial screwiness in which Shanley specializes is to court incoherence; and when Shanley throws in platitudes about civil rights and nonviolence, the

whole structure collapses under the weight of its own pretensions. The truth is that Shanley, for all the distinctiveness of his style, simply does not have a strong sense of tonal control. Yes, he may have stopped denying his Irish Catholic parents and the Bronx natives among whom he was raised. But he's not quite sure how he wants us to feel about such people—for he is still less than certain how *he* feels about them. □

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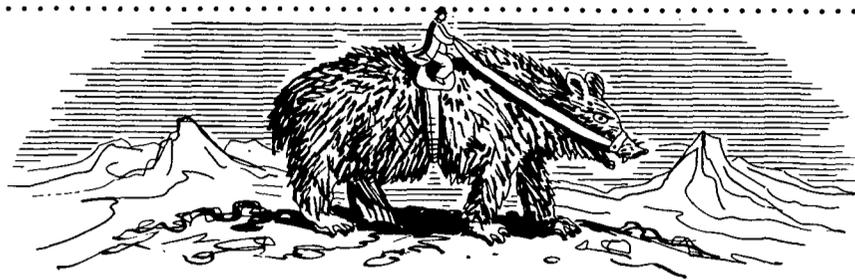
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# NOTES FROM THE SOVIET UNDERGROUND

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## GLASTROIKA AT WORK

by Arnold Beichman

The other day I read a news story headlined “Moscow’s Toilet Czar Loses Bonus over Mess.” The chief manager of Moscow toilets, V. Prasolov, was reprimanded and lost his bonus—but not his job—for allowing the city’s 343 public lavatories, serving a population of 12 million people, to fall into an “unspeakable” state. That exposé ran in *Moskovskaya Pravda*. And I began to think of what a gutsy thing Gorbachev’s *glasnost* plus *perestroika* really is.

How, I began to wonder, how do the editors decide on what to expose on a given day? Who gets the assignment to investigate the Moscow toilet situation? Do they discuss the implications of such an exposé? Could such a story start a movement among the people? How were the toilets under Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko? And so I fell into a reverie in which the dialogue went something like this:

**SCENE:** Editorial offices, *Moskovskaya Pravda*, late morning. It’s like any other BOGSAT<sup>1</sup> setting anywhere. The well-dressed man at the head of the table is the deputy editor, Ivan Borisovich Stoolyan. He is reading from a teletype:

“Dear Comrades, you are doing fine work for *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Now we have another job for you to do. It may be messy and smelly but it is an assignment just like any other and it has the support of the Central Committee and the Politburo. The Moscow toilets must be cleaned up and the conditions exposed. That’s the order from Comrade Gorbachev. It’s part of the restructuring.

“Somebody is going to have to be dumped off the sled and it’s going to be Comrade Prasolov who should have been kicked out of his job years ago

<sup>1</sup>BOGSAT is a Washington acronym for “Bunch of Guys Sitting Around a Table.”

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because for years he’s been selling the toilet paper in the black market so that there’s no paper in the toilets and the masses have to use the Party press. We can’t have that . . .”

“But Comrade Stoolyan,” interjects one of the junior editors, Mikhail Antonovich Latrinev, “it seems to me there are more important matters for us to expose than the Moscow toilet situation. In the first place, who in his right mind would ever use those toilets except for drunks and peasants from places like Kazakhstan? Second, what’s the big deal—343 public toilets for 12 million people, that’s how much?”—Mikhail Antonovich manipulates his abacus—“that’s one toilet for 35,000 people. Why should we point out the lack of public toilets in Moscow? Who even knows where they are? It’s really a ridiculous idea. Let’s forget it.”

Now interposes the paper’s pipe-smoking political writer, Yosif Sergeevich Intestinov, who speaks in a low tone:

“Comrades, on the surface an expose of the Moscow toilet situation may sound like a poor idea. But I cannot believe that the Central Committee and the Politburo are doing something stupid. True, on the surface it looks dumb but I’m sure the organs like the Polit-

buro and the KGB and the Central Committee have something in mind that we haven’t been told about.”

At this point, the office door opens and in comes the paper’s editor-in-chief, Nikolai Tikhonovich Krapov. He sits down quietly at the head of the table and for a few moments listens to the discussion. He begins:

“Comrades, I heard about this assignment from the organs and I must tell you frankly that I didn’t think much of it at first. In fact I didn’t like it at all. So I went down to see some of my friends at the Central Committee to find out what it’s all about. When I heard their reasoning, I changed my mind. The Moscow toilet expose is on and I want our best reporters and writers to get involved. Let me tell you why.”

He pauses to take a drink of water from a carafe which everybody knows is pure vodka.

“Comrades,” he begins anew, “what we have to understand is that we have a problem about human rights with the United States. Whatever we do is never good enough. We’ve been letting out one family a week and do we get any credit? No.

“So we’re going to make such a case against the United States they’ll be sorry they ever started this human rights nonsense. Comrades, have you ever seen the New York subway toilets? Now there you have a human rights violation! Comrades, have you ever seen the public toilets in London? They make our Moscow toilets look like Raisa’s dacha. Our KGB resident has reported that the toilets in Piccadilly became so awful they had to be closed down, but there are still some in Leicester Square and everybody knows what goes on there.

“The Central Committee maintains that it is a human right to have a clean public toilet in a large city. You never can tell when you’ll have to use it. In New York, half the time, according to the KGB, the subway toilets are closed because of flooding. We’ve been investigating the toilets in New York, London and Paris and we’ve got the photographs.”

The carafe on the table was empty now, and Comrade Krapov rushed to conclude.

“Now, comrades, do you understand? We are going to expose the commissar of Moscow toilets, Prasolov, and tell him how lucky he is that Stalin isn’t around. Next, we’re going to get those toilets cleaned. And then we’re going to hold up the photographs and show videotapes of the subway toilets in New York and we’re going to demand that the millions and millions of workers who pay a dollar instead of a few kopecks for a single ride get clean toilets. What right, we’re going to say to the imperialists, do you have to condemn us for violations of human rights when your own citizens don’t dare use the toilets in your subways and public squares? As Jean-Paul Sartre used to tell the Americans when they attacked our Motherland, ‘What right do you Americans have to condemn Russia for slave labor in Siberia when the masses in the South have outhouses and pellagra?’ It was a good question then and today we have the New York subway toilets.”

Mayor Koch, you’ve been warned. □

