



Heroes of Our Time

by James Bowman

Probably the only people in the world who loved it when Sinead O'Connor tore up a photograph of the Pope on "Saturday Night Live" were a few florid-faced, bowler-hatted sots in the back rows of Orange Lodges in Belfast and me. This is not because I am such a very bad Catholic but because her gesture was a perfect example of the way in which the Hollywood mind works.

As Michael Medved says in his new book *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*¹:

The old struggle between art and commerce has tilted decisively in the direction of art as the movie business takes itself more seriously with each passing year; today, even the heads of major studios assert that making significant statements—not crafting entertainment—is the essence of what they do.

It's enough to make a cat laugh, this pretension to intellectual seriousness on the part of a bunch of people who regularly confuse images and gestures and bogus professions of compassion with thought. That's why I found it wonderfully appropriate when this no-talent baldie with even less inside her head than on top of it tried to form her infant lips into a protest against—what was it? child abuse, I think—by blaming it all on the Pope.

Sam Goldwyn used to say, if you want to send a message, go see Western Union. Nowadays popular culture is shot through with messages, most of them worthless even as morality or politics, let

alone as art. You can even have a message, like Miss O'Connor's tuneless ditty, from which all possibility of entertainment has been purged, so long as it is passionate and sincere enough.

Her badge of authenticity in Hollywood is that, like most of the other rich people there, she claims to have suffered at the hands of some authority figure. But she also gets bonus points because, as an Irish colleen and thus one of the world's few bona fide white oppressees, she can claim the Pope (or the Queen, if the mood strikes her) as her nemesis instead of having to make do with George Bush and Ronald Reagan like everyone else.

Michael Medved's book goes some way toward explaining where Hollywood's self-importance and moral earnestness come from, and I want to return to what is right and wrong with his explanation in a moment. But first let us look at a couple of recent pictures that illustrate Hollywood's transformation into America's biggest Western Union office.

Stephen Frears's film, *Hero*, has several messages. The three most important are:

- (1) Everybody's a hero if you can catch him at the right moment.
- (2) Don't believe what you see on television.
- (3) We should all be nicer to one another.

If that sounds to you like serious thought, you'd better stop reading now before your brain overheats. Number one is an illustration of Medved's point that Hollywood loves to trash heroes: if everybody's a hero then nobody is one. It doesn't really matter that it was the petty thief, Bernie LaPlante (Dustin Hoffman), rather than the charismatic John Bubber (Andy Garcia) who pulled the survivors

out of a crashed airplane. The hero business is all a charade, got up by the media, anyway—though some kind of putative hero to deliver Message No. 3 may be useful.

Here is where Western Union suddenly becomes very knowing and sophisticated. It is to the credit of the great image factories on the Pacific that they are occasionally willing to take on the fakery of images—on television if not in the movies themselves. Like *Network* a few years ago, *Hero* shows us unscrupulous and heartless image-makers willing to do anything to bump up the ratings. But it is really less self-criticism than self-congratulation for these *artistes* who sit atop the big Hollywood studios to look down with scorn upon the ratings-ridden television executives as if to say that *they* are too refined for such crass commercialism.

Moreover, such films represent the people as really pathetic dupes, deceived with ease into believing the most incredible nonsense. In *Hero*, the deception about the identity of the hero is as nothing compared to the preposterousness of the sheep-like following he obtains for proclaiming Message No. 3. This banality only goes to show how quickly the motorbikes of these highly refined and artistic messenger boys run out of gas. If, when you get to the payoff, that's all you've got left, you really ought to get out of the message business altogether.

The *Public Eye*, by Howard Franklin, is a bit more successful as a film. Joe Pesci plays a tabloid photographer called "The Great Bernzini" (or Bernzi) in New York in 1942 who is caught between the two halves of the artist's schizoid personality, between being a participant and an observer. Bernzi is at first so completely the observ-

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er that there is almost nothing of the participant in life left in him. He doesn't take sides, he says, in the conflicts he records with his camera, but lives a monk-like existence in which nothing matters but getting the pictures. The only thing left of his common humanity is pride in his craft and a crush on Barbara Hershey, who plays a glamorous night-club owner in need of his help.

Miss Hershey's character, who also has artistic longings, is able to manipulate him into taking sides for once by flattering his vanity as an artist. As the sordid and gritty little entertainer who aspires to a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Bernzi could be said to stand for Hollywood itself in its desire for intellectual respectability. Both he and the nightclub owner will do anything for it.

She sacrifices everything, including love, to keep her club—not because of a love for art but because of a love for the artists that gather there and allow her to bask in their reflected glory. He sacrifices everything, including decency and humanity, in order to get a picture of murder not just when the corpses are still warm—which is everyday stuff for him—but while it is actually happening. "I'm an artist," he says, "and I'm going to let people do what they're going to do; it's the only way they can do it right."

It's a good idea, but the ending spoils it. His photos of the murders break up a gang of black marketeers (led by a Republican, of course), turn Bernzi into a national hero, and give him his big break and, finally, recognition as an artist. Trust Hollywood to come up with the idea that being an artist, a hero, and a star are all really just the same thing!

But I am not all that happy with Michael Medved's conception of art either. He wants it to teach and "uplift" its audience. It is true that he claims he only wants the values of morality, family, and religion respected and not instilled and that he wants the popular culture to be less propagandistic rather than more. But the whole tone of his book and especially its last chapter suggests an enthusiasm for messages of a morally edifying sort not unlike that of the Hollywood producers who are fond of telling us that we should all be nicer to one another.

Nevertheless, he has written what is in many ways a good and a useful book. Especially impressive is his demolition of the argument that Hollywood produces offensive stuff only because the viewers want it; and I think he is right to identify an artistic *folie de grandeur* as the real reason. I know of no one else who has shown so conclusively that obscenity, indecency, and anti-family, anti-military, anti-religious messages are persisted in despite the fact that they are bad box office—though his analytical methods do not allow for a very clear idea about whether or not the same is true for pure violence.

What he does not do is go deeply enough into the connection between common perceptions of what "art" is and the offensiveness it gives rise to—what we might call the Sinead O'Connor factor. Medved is right to say that popular entertainers are simply copying the more



traditional and highbrow arts in their plunge into sordidness, sex, and violence, but he is wrong, I believe, in thinking that, among the NEA types, "the most respected work of the moment aims to upset us rather than uplift us, and producing pain is considered a more meaningful achievement than providing pleasure."

In fact it is a widespread misconception that the sort of art which produces controversy when it is funded by the NEA is meant to upset and cause pain to its audience. On the contrary, it is meant to upset and cause pain to those who are

not in its audience, to those who have no interest in looking at the kind of disgusting or blasphemous objects it trades in but who, like Medved, want to stop them from doing it. Such "artists" as Karen Finley or Shawn Eichman (she who made an *objet d'art* of the results of her own abortion) are really partisans, combatants in the culture wars. They have nothing to say to the likes of Medved or me but only to those who are already of their party—whom they do not shock but comfort and reassure.

For those who watch such stuff do so not because it is intrinsically interesting to them but in order to give a boost to their almost incredible self-righteousness, according to which they are being positively heroic in supporting their local artist against Jesse Helms or George Bush or the Pope or God—or Medved—who are supposed to object to what they do. Increasingly this kind of partisanship is to be found even among non-subsidized artists, such as Sinead O'Connor, who you would think would need a wider audience than the little band of the smug. How does this "bias for the bizarre," as Medved calls it, among the highbrows transmit itself to the lowliest of popular entertainers?

We might take a hint from *The Public Eye*. For what art does is to select and focus on the significant, like a good photographer. A scandal like that in the film, for instance, requires not just seeing but seeing *into*—the ability to discern the reality underneath appearances. Now it is because of the tradition of high art in this century that everyone knows what that word "reality" means: it means corruption, sordidness, greed, crime, and violent death. That is also the assumption on which Bernzi makes his living. People buy newspapers to look at pictures of corpses because it gives them a buzz: this is the *real* world because it is so appalling. And what makes Bernzi into an artist is that he deals in images of the appalling and therefore real.

Well, that's what Hollywood thinks too. Its images of sex and violence, however crude, are taken over from that larger intellectual culture which has set the standards of
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Most men of comparable intellectual and artistic gifts would be appalled at the thought of living a life like Albert Schweitzer's. Sainly self-abnegation is a tough row to hoe, especially under an equatorial sun, and the pleasures of civilization are splendid and many. It is impossible to fault anyone for failing to choose such a course; thus the greater the honor that accrues to so hard a vocation, the brighter the

nimbus that radiates from a life spent in the midst of suffering almost beyond imagining. One cannot be half-hearted about such a healing ministry. At the age of 30 Schweitzer wrote to the director of the Paris Mission Society, "Absorbed in my thoughts about Jesus, I have asked myself whether I could live without scholarship, without art, without the intellectual environment in which I now exist—and all my reflections have always ended with a joyous 'Yes.'" He applied himself to the study of medicine, in order to make himself more useful; he was already a philosopher, a teacher of theology, a preacher, one of the world's finest organists, and the author of a study of Bach that remains irreplaceable. The truly astonishing thing is how he managed to continue to develop the gifts that he was prepared to sacrifice. He remained a thinker and a musician. His powers came together in his life of service. To the Orféo Català Choir in Barcelona he wrote in 1913, "And while I am bandaging the abscesses, my ears can still hear the Bach mass coming from you, and I feel as if a few solemn words of this text were resounding in the midst of these wretched people, to whom good is being done in the name of Jesus: . . . *Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini* [Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord]. . . ."

To Lambarene on the Ogowe River in French Equatorial Africa (later Gabon), he came and built a hospital. The sick

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arrived from one hundred fifty miles away, by canoe. "At the end of the day you are amazed that you are still on your feet after all the misery you have seen." Leprosy, elephantiasis, scabies, sleeping sickness, heart disease, pneumonia, gangrene, malaria: the most fearful illnesses were common as a cold. When he was just getting started, he had to work in a windowless chicken coop, and wore his pith helmet indoors because the sun came blasting through the holes in the ceiling.

The hard life took its toll: ". . . you cannot imagine the physical fatigue one feels after almost three and a half years under the equator." His wife, Helen, her health broken, had to return to Europe, and spent much of the rest of her life in sanatoriums. "If it weren't for the thought of all the good one can do, then this life in Africa would be unendurable," he wrote after thirteen years as a missionary. He was to remain almost forty more.

"My only relaxation is practicing on the organ." It was actually a piano with organ pedals that he played on most every evening. Kept in a zinc-lined crate, to guard against the humidity, the pedal piano rolled out on rails. He never ceased to work on his beloved Bach. "Campaigning against superficial virtuosity and for a spiritualized playing," he wrote of his European career. "Anyone who deals with organs is transported beyond all that is human and all-too-human and purified to feel the sheer

delight in truth, and he venerates organs and the sound of organs as the great spiritual educators that teach us to experience a conviction of eternity." When he was interned by the French during the First World War, he drew an organ keyboard on a table top and pedals on the floor, and practiced thus. He corresponded with organ builders and restorers. Every few years he would go to Europe and play a concert tour, with

the proceeds benefiting the hospital. As a performing musician he felt himself in the service of the composer and of God: "Bach is a precious gift to our time, one of the lights that shine through the darkness in which mankind today must seek the road to a deeper spirituality."

The deeper spirituality he sought found theoretical utterance as well as practical use. The reverence for life (*Ehrfurcht von dem Leben*) is the center of his thought and feeling:

Oh, what confusion was caused by the poet when he sententiously said, "Life is not the supreme good." I can apply this aphorism to myself, but I cannot apply it to someone else's life, for his life is precisely the one thing through which I relate to him. I must regard his life as his supreme good.

He sees that he cannot consider his own life the supreme good, for to do so would lead him to nihilism, in which nothing but his life would have value or meaning. So it is only the lives of others that he considers of supreme value, and in thinking thus he evades the problematic Christian principle that a man's soul, not his life, is the greatest good.

"The ethics of reverence for life is nothing but Jesus' great commandment to love—a commandment that is reached by thinking; religion and thinking meet in the mysticism of belonging to God through love." For Schweitzer, the love God commands is the love of the living body, which houses the soul. It is a great doctor's compassion that underlies the reverence for life: a democratic virtue,