



Hit List

by James Bowman

It may not seem a significant coincidence to you, but the new *Dracula*'s coming along at the same time as *The American Spectator*'s Twenty-Fifth Anniversary got me to thinking. To amuse myself, I made a very personal choice of the ten best and the ten worst general-release American films of the past twenty-five years, and I found a curious asymmetry. For while egregiously bad movies were fairly evenly distributed throughout the period, the really great ones seemed to be concentrated in the earlier part of it. As I scratched my head over this, along came Francis Ford Coppola's version of the movies' most famous vampire to remind me of the reason for it.

My top ten, in roughly chronological order, were: *The Graduate*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *Patton*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Godfather* (Parts I and II counted as one but not Part III), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Star Wars* (but not the sequels), *The Deer Hunter*, *Batman* (but not the sequel), and *Miller's Crossing*. It will be noticed that not only is there a gap of more than a decade in this listing between *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Batman* (1989), but there is also a huge gap in style. For at some point during those years, Hollywood discovered post-modernism—that self-conscious, self-referential, ironic style which now seems to have entrenched itself in the American film industry forever.

Dracula, like *Batman Returns*, Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, and so many of the industry's top hits these days, is a good example of the post-modern style. It is one of those films that is more about other films than it is about the real world.

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All of them are filled with striking images and witty dialogue and clever ideas, but all of them are dramatically incomprehensible apart from the cinematic tradition to which they make continual reference. In other words, it is now impossible to make a movie about vampires without acknowledging that vampires exist only in the movies. Once that fact is established, anything is possible—anything except the kind of artistic greatness that in retrospect seems to have been comparatively common in the 1970s. This *Dracula* has given up trying to scare us, but still insists, "It's only a movie."

We can date the post-modernist revolution in Hollywood to the success of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* series. You can see what I mean if you compare Indy with Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*. Luke, for all his futuristic accoutrements, was an old-fashioned hero in an old-fashioned situation. The world he lived in may have been unfamiliar, even fantastical, but as a character he was as familiar as Gary Cooper's Sergeant York or Jimmy Stewart's Mr. Smith. Above all, he didn't know he was a hero. He may have been a simple kind of guy, as heroes often are, but he was recognizably human. Indiana Jones, on the other hand, knows nothing but his own heroism. He is in no way an ordinary guy but a kind of madman, obsessed with being a hero. Spielberg runs him through his hair-raising adventures and impossibly close shaves at such speed that he has no time to establish an existence independent of the self-consciously Hollywood-heroic framework set up to contain him.

It is this framework that is the real hero of all three films. Spielberg cares nothing for Indy himself but, with a nod

and a wink to the audience, dearly loves the heroic cinema that utterly defines him. The result is an almost balletic product that succeeds in amusing both as an homage to and as a send-up of the old-fashioned Hollywood action film. Proclaiming that "the hero is back," the Indiana Jones chronicles in fact replaced him for millions who didn't know he had been gone with a post-modernist simulacrum. From that time onward, heroes—at least heroes like Luke Skywalker rather than Batman—disappeared for good.

You've got to admire the skill with which *Batman* and *Miller's Crossing* both make use of their pop culture conventions—the comic book and the gangster film respectively—in order to help bring into focus what is really a very serious and humane view of the world. The trouble is that such a technique is inevitably tainted with the mockery out of which it rises. Both films were added to the top ten because they were great of their kind—the kind that Hollywood has been producing for the past ten years or more. But I am not altogether sure that they deserve their place at the expense of such great pre-post-modernist films of the seventies as *A Clockwork Orange*, *Deliverance*, or *Taxi Driver*.

What those films have in common with the first eight on the list is that they entered into the folk consciousness. Just as poetry gives us the language by which we define and bring into intellectual order the chaos of experience, so films at their best give us the images. The "generation gap," both its myth and its reality, was never better symbolized than in *The Graduate*, and the eternal tension between American innocence and experience never found a better embodiment than in *Midnight Cowboy*. A similar ten-

sion, between the elite and the popular, finds expression in both *Patton* and *Five Easy Pieces* and both in their very different ways will be long remembered for their images of the more or less unsatisfactory compromises that Americans have always been forced to make between these two opposites.

The Godfather is perhaps as near as we shall ever get to the great American movie, a terrifying and beautiful image of the immigrant experience, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a particularly moving and updated version of that declaration of independence which so much of American art, culture, and politics reduces to. And if *Star Wars* forges the classic American alliance between idealism and initiative, teens and technology, and redefines for us optimism and success, *The Deer Hunter* comes closer than any other film I know to an unusual but unflinching American stare into the black maw of defeat and failure. Nothing since has done anything like it, and very little since has made itself so much a part of our national consciousness in the way that movies used to do not infrequently. You can thank post-modernism for that, too.

Such films appeal to universal experience and, where they have a "message" beyond sympathy for their characters, it is at least a true one—which is what sets them apart from those on the ten worst list. For this it would have been easy to choose obvious dogs like *Ishtar* or *Hudson Hawk*, but I found it more interesting to focus on malicious, mendacious propaganda rather than mere incompetence. It is among the award-winners, the prestige projects, and the box-office hits that we may find those gems of awfulness whose claim to public attention and esteem is based on fantasy or falsehood. And it is more interesting to expose such meretricious trash, so often cried up by the cultural elite, than to pile on with the rest when some lame inanity like *Bonfire of the Vanities* is gang-tackled.

The ten worst films of the last twenty-five years, then, are *Easy Rider*, *Zabriskie Point*, *Capricorn One*,

Kramer vs. Kramer, *Apocalypse Now*, *E.T.*, *Field of Dreams*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *JFK*. Oliver Stone, you will not be surprised to see, made two of them. What all these films have in common is not that they are ill-made. On the contrary, they were all more or less successful at the box office and convinced a lot of people that they were deeply meaningful, even great films. But they all had something to sell, and what they were selling was completely bogus. The first two seem almost too easy a mark now. They were selling the counterculture of the late sixties, and watching such puerile moral fables today is all that it takes to explain why Yuppies eventually turned into yuppies.

One illustration of the way in which less changes among the bad than among



the good is the constancy of the left-wing conspiracy movie. From *Easy Rider* to *Capricorn One*, which was one of a spate of paranoid films made in the wake of Watergate, to *JFK*, which tied up into a neat little package every wacko theory about how evil right-wingers started with the assassination of Kennedy and then went on to screw up the rest of the world, for twenty years it has been possible to make a little money, at any rate, out of pretending to find someone in power who is responsible for everything that goes wrong. Vietnam, as the most convenient sym-

bol for things going wrong, has thus provided the natural setting for right-wing bad-guys like the evil Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* or the evil Sergeant Barnes in *Platoon*. These men symbolize those base human instincts which, but for the civilizing influence of progressive movie-makers, might drive all men to be conservatives.

But bad films do not have to be about right-wing villainy. They can also adopt the fashionable language of pop psychology to sell the bogus creed of self-fulfillment. *Kramer vs. Kramer* sets up a debate between responsible behavior and the creed of self-realization as if they were equals, as if Meryl Streep's ridiculous cant about "self-esteem" and having left her husband and child in order to "find" herself had to be taken seriously. As Dr. Johnson said with characteristic brutality, "the woman's a whore and there's an end on't." Likewise, *Born on the Fourth of July* is what comes of taking self-pity seriously and indulging it, for both political and psychological reasons, instead of calling it by its right name.

Beyond the political badness, beyond even the psychobabbling badness, there is the sentimental badness, which is the worst badness of all because it is not just based on falseness but is false all the way through. True, sentimentality has always been endemic in Hollywood, but the kind that seems to have come to the fore in recent years, especially in truly breathtakingly awful films like *E.T.*, *Field of Dreams*, and *Fried Green Tomatoes*,

seems to me to represent a particularly virulent strain of it—one that is the corollary of post-modernism's detachment from reality in favor of the movie dream-world where anything can happen and so nothing of any interest does.

What worries me most about the last twenty-five years is the apparent degradation of the critical faculty by which audiences should be able to recognize such political, psychological, or sentimental claptrap. That may be why, ultimately, if there are no more truly bad films than there used to be, there are so many fewer truly good ones. □

Gore Vidal's *Screening History* comprises three lectures in the field of American Civilization that the author delivered at Harvard. The ostensible subject is how the movies, by their way of interpreting history, affect our lives. The actual subject is how the movies have been affecting Gore Vidal. The actual

subject is Gore Vidal: his thoughts, feelings, and such parts of his life as he cares to divulge. The trouble is that megalomania is more fun as a participatory activity than, as for Vidal's readers, a spectator sport.

Perhaps the best way to convey the essence of this short book (96 pages, but after you subtract ten for pictures, more like 86) is with a little *explication de texte*. Let's take a paragraph on page 17, from the first lecture, "The Prince and the Pauper," named after a movie that, in 1937, was a crucial influence on the 12-year-old Gore:

From the earliest days, the movies have been screening history, and if one saw enough movies, one learned quite a lot of simple-minded history. Stephen [sic] Runciman and I met on an equal basis not because of my book *Julian*, which he had written about, but because I knew *his* field, thanks to a profound study of Cecil B. De Mille's *The Crusades* (1935), in which Berengaria, as played by Loretta Young, turns to her Lionheart husband and pleads, "Richard, you *gotta* save Christianity." A sentiment that I applauded at the time but came later to deplore.

You will notice the characteristic Vidal tone: at best, ironic; at worst, snotty. Unlike some writers' irony, which, though subtle, is always unmistakable, Vidal's is of a more ambiguous nature: often one can't be sure whether he is kidding or whether he means what he's saying. In a writer as shrewd as Vidal—and given the frequency of the occurrence—this cannot be accidental: he wants us not to be sure. Why? Because he makes out-

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SCREENING HISTORY

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reviewed by JOHN SIMON

rageous statements that delight a certain type of reader, but strike another as ridiculous. Thanks to his ambiguity, Vidal can make Reader A believe that the author means it all, and Reader B (whatever he may suspect) not wish to risk being taken in by such an "obvious" irony. Not an unclever strategy.

"Quite a lot of simple-minded history." This could mean that, though oversimplified, history is still history in the movies. Or that it is balderdash, but what the world comes to believe, and so *becomes* history. Earlier, Vidal told us that "we perceive sex, say, not as it demonstrably is but as we think it ought to be as carefully distorted for us by the churches and the schools, by the press and by—triumphantly—the movies, which are, finally, the only validation to which that dull anterior world, reality, must submit." Note the ambiguity in this statement, too. Sex is a plain, good thing, demonstrable and undistorted. It is real. Along come religion, education, and journalism to distort it for us, make it bad. But now the movies "validate" sex for us; their "triumphant" distortion is better than "that dull anterior world, reality." So reality is dull, a bad thing? But, of course, we are meant to take that triumph of the movies as irony, right? So the movies are a terrible but wonderful thing that distorts the real; but, for making it, however mendaciously, wonderful, more power to them! We get lost in this hall of mirroring ironies.

Back, however, to our simple-minded movie-made history. It's distorted, but not *so* bad. Thus when Vidal encounters the eminent historian of the Crusades, Steven Runciman,

he meets him "on an equal basis." Reader A takes this at face value: someone as smart as Vidal can learn from movies seen as a boy about as much as a distinguished historian can from a lifetime of study. When Reader B demurs, Vidal retorts, "You fool, can't you hear the irony? Can't you see I'm joking?" Well, but Runciman has written about Vidal's historical

novel *Julian*. We don't know whether this means that he reviewed it, and, if so, how favorably, but the mere fact that the famed historian took notice implies that he took Vidal the historical fictionist seriously. Yet that is not the basis for the equal footing, says Vidal with charming self-depreciation; the real reason is that Vidal, at age ten, saw De Mille's *The Crusades*, and so knows all one needs to know about the Third Crusade when, however many years later, the two men meet. Among other accomplishments, Vidal clearly has a photographic memory.

But what are we to make of "thanks to a profound study" of De Mille's film? Vidal may have seen *The Crusades* since, perhaps even more than once. But no, the tone is manifestly ironic; the picture is silly, and Loretta Young doesn't even speak proper English: "You *gotta* save Christianity," she says. But ironies contain further ironies: the way movies screen history *becomes* history, for all of us, and so whatever Runciman may have unearthed through research pales beside Vidal's knowledge of screened history. That *gotta* is from the heart, and the heart has its reasons, which mere historical reason knows nothing of. I wonder, incidentally, whether the always ladylike Loretta Young really said *gotta*. And whether Vidal—if he saw the movie only in 1935, and if he doesn't have, on top of his photographic memory, a phonographic ear—can be sure of how she spoke that line. At age ten, not even Vidal would have thought ill enough of *gotta* to bother noticing it.

Now what about that last sentence? Vidal informs us that in his first decade he was still a believer in Christianity, but that, as he grew older and became an