

likely to continue and to grow — as is the general obsession on the left with “offensive” language and with controlling our response to it and indeed to all things. We might try getting the Census to adopt one more category, one that surprisingly is actually operative in

the University of California system, namely the category “Decline to State.” Beyond that, we must strive to keep ourselves as unspotted from the verbal tyranny of the self-righteous as good Victorians sought to keep themselves from the temptations of the flesh. CPR

F I L M

Hollywood’s Great Work Continues, But Not In Hollywood

B Y J A M E S B E M I S

NOT LONG ago, my wife and I — both of us film lovers — thought we’d take in a movie. She glanced at the newspaper: “Here’s one about a meteor headed for Earth.”

“I know how it ends. What else?”

“Well, there’s a comedy about a sadomasochistic killer who lures teenagers to gruesome deaths via the Internet.”

“Doesn’t sound too funny to me.”

“Here’s one about a boy whose father’s an alcoholic, his mother commits suicide, and then he’s molested by a priest.”

We wound up listening to music.

James Bemis, a member of California Political Review’s editorial board, with this issue inaugurates his regular column as CPR’s film critic. Mr. Bemis, a columnist for e3mil.com’s “The Edge,” recently wrote “Through the Eyes of the Church,” a five-part series on the Vatican’s list of the 45 most important films of all-time, published in The Wanderer, the nation’s oldest Catholic weekly.

The following day, I wandered by the video section at my local library. A friend had recommended a foreign film so I checked their collection. It was there: a Danish movie called *Babette’s Feast*. It turned out to be a gem.

In the film, two sisters on the Danish seacoast help their father, the local pastor, tend his flock of aging villagers. Their housekeeper, Babette, celebrates winning the lottery by cooking the townspeople a lavish French meal. Somewhere between the cooking and eating, the celebration becomes a spiritual event, and a paean to the human heart. It had been a long time since I was that moved by a film, in which a profound story was so simply and superbly told. Few in Hollywood even attempt — let alone achieve — anything so noble nowadays, preferring to employ their talents wallowing in sex and gore. (And, unfortunately, money.) Watching *Babette’s Feast* was like being raised on rap music and then hearing Mozart or Bach for the first time. Realizing what a tremendous source of beauty I’d

missed by ignoring foreign movies, I began a quest to find more.

Luckily, my local library has a great video collection, including hundreds of foreign films. Starting with the French — for my money, the world’s best filmmakers — I was dazzled by *Children of Paradise*, among the best movies ever made, relating the story of a theater troupe working Paris’ “Boulevard of Crime” during the mid-1800s. Four men — all quite different — fall in love with the courtesan Garance, wonderfully played by Arletty, who is the essence of femininity. What raises the film to the level of great art is the extraordinary screenplay written by poet Jacques Prevert. More than merely a script, Prevert’s language sparkles (in translation, no less!), bringing freshness even to that most familiar of subjects: love.

Now I was hooked.

AFTER SOME research, I discovered the towering figure of French cinema, the great writer and di-

rector Marcel Pagnol. His 1934 classic, *The Baker's Wife*, defies classification — it's both funny and heartbreaking — and makes obvious that Pagnol loves not only his characters, but humanity itself.

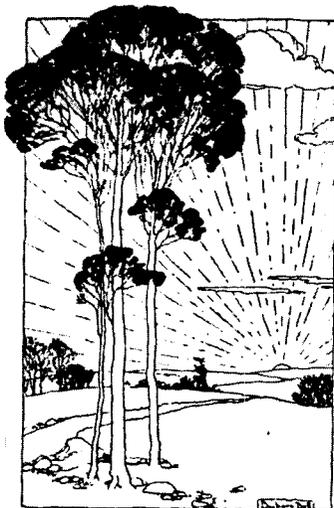
IN ADDITION to noteworthy films made by Pagnol are those made about him: *My Father's Glory* and *My Mother's Castle*, based on the director's autobiography. These are richly-told accounts of his upbringing in pre-WWI France. Finally, I recommend two based on novels by Pagnol: *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring*. Both are superb films.

But it is perhaps the work of Italian filmmakers that most poignantly reflects the cataclysm of World War II and its aftermath as played out in European society. Roberto Rossellini's rough but electric *Open City* takes place — and was filmed — during the Nazi occupation of Rome, portraying the suffering of the Italian Resistance as they await their Allied liberators. Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* — a staple of film classes — is a brilliant odyssey of poverty and determination in the war's wake; humanity observed with Dickensian compassion, yet completely without illusions.

Japan's cinema is dominated by the towering figure of Akira Kurosawa. His 1950 film, the uneven but ground breaking *Rashomon*, first brought international attention to Japanese filmmakers. Like many gifted artists, Kurosawa mellowed as he aged, his youthful cynicism ripening into a deep appreciation for the beauty of human relationships, culminating in his simple, poetic *Dersu Uzala*, a

work about manly friendship that ranks with the best of John Ford's great movies — as high a word of praise as I can give.

Kurosawa is by no means Japan's only noteworthy director: Kon Ichikawa's 1967 anti-war epic, *The Burmese Harp*, is one of the best of its kind, as moving a depiction of human brotherhood as has ever been filmed. It's a rich film about a man's spiritual jour-



ney, full of poetic imagery and paying beautiful homage to both Buddhism and Christianity.

These movies — which barely begin the exploration of great foreign films — proved to be my beginning of a profoundly absorbing odyssey through international cinema's too rarely (by Americans, anyway) traveled waters. What's so attractive about the best foreign films — and nearly completely lacking in Hollywood now — is their plain humanity, subtlety, and maturity in exploring the human spirit: unjaded, natural, almost innocent. Despite their boasts of artistic freedom, most American movies today limit themselves to a quite narrow, childish shallow realm: bizarre sexual situations, extreme violence, a world peopled by

juvenile, comic-book characters. Watching these films, it's hard to recognize anything resembling truth or reality on the screen.

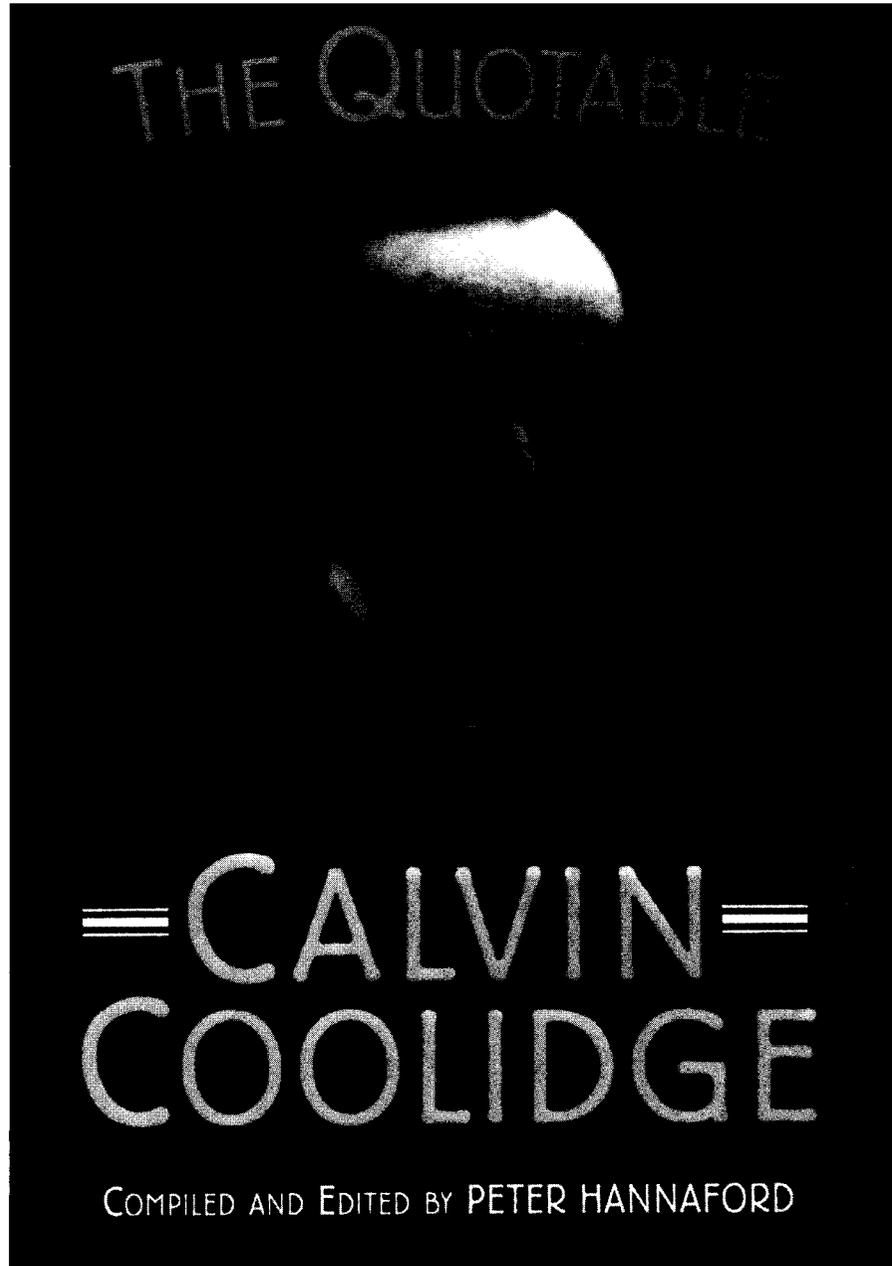
That's not to say there's no place for fantasy or fictionalized material in artistic creations. Who's more imaginative than, say, the great Italian director Federico Fellini? But modern filmmakers use violence and sex as a crutch, trying to disguise a lack of talent and creativity with gunpowder smoke and steamy mirrors.

The great work once done in Hollywood is still carried on — only not in Hollywood. It's done in Paris and Tokyo, Rome and Copenhagen, Warsaw and other international cities. But directors of most foreign films lack the technology and mammoth budgets of today's Tinseltown. Thus, these filmmakers concentrate on the basics of their trade, undistracted by special effects gadgetry, massive egos, and cutthroat competition.

THESE BASICS, though — plot, character, dialog — are the elements of great storytelling anyway, enabling these directors to turn their deficiencies into assets. What the wonderful movies mentioned here have — and Hollywood has, in large part, lost — might best be summed up in the word "soul": that inexplicable blend of spirit, mind, and heart encountered in great art, the trumpet call to our noblest emotions. The best films, like all profound creative endeavors, provide a penetrating glimpse into the real truth about God's greatest and most interesting creation — the human species.

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