Bombs: Cinematic and Otherwise

***WarGames;* Written by Lawrence Lasker and Walter F. Parkes; Directed by John Badham; MGM/UA.**

Conservatives do not want to blow up large portions of real estate on this planet with thermonuclear devices. Conservatives do want to maintain traditional values, which they know is a well-nigh impossible task for people who are blinded, in constant pain, and who may glow in the dark. Similarly, liberals do not want to see the world turned into something resembling a charcoal briquette, if for no other reasons than the facts that they know (a) few, if any, would want to take a handout of scorched earth and (b) it would be hard to finance the infrastructure required to process the dole. However, liberals and those to their left fail to realize that while the American people can be convinced to freeze or otherwise refrigerate arms, their brothers and sisters in the Soviet Union can't even affect the official market price of pantyhose. To extrapolate from the status quo, it's easy to see that unilateral activities would result in a state wherein those Americans of a leftist persuasion would be as influential as a liquor salesman is in Salt Lake City today. These rather obvious observations are motivated by *WarGames.*

WarGames is presumably a message-movie about the current arms situation. *Presumably* because if I didn't know that it was accorded the influential wrap-up position at the Cannes Film Festival, I would simply dismiss it as an updated version of *Fail-Safe,* and not a very good one: a Grade B-minus movie. The film seizes upon the current rage among young people: home computers, their game-playing capabilities in particular. In the film, a high school student manages, through telephone lines, to hook up his home system with one that is in charge of firing all of the U.S. nuclear arsenal once the President gives the final command. Men used to turn the keys and push the buttons, but testing showed that 22% wouldn't. The machine would. What's more, the computer, which was previously used simply to play war games, is supposed to be able to target the bombs more effectively than Homo sapiens. A "glitch," to use computerese, develops: once the boy gets the big computer playing "Global Thermonuclear War," the machine starts playing for keeps. Eventually, the kid figures out what is happening while scientists and soldiers are unaware—naturally. Eventually, the world is saved—for a while.

Implausibilities—both technical and dramatic—mar the film. For the sake of argument, I'll accept that the teenager was able to get into line contact with the computer through his modem (modulator-demodulator, a device that permits computers to communicate with each other over phone lines). At one point, the Master Cylinder (to borrow an appropriate appellation from "Felix the Cat" cartoons, which have as much sociopolitical sense as *WarGames)* contacts the teen. On his video screen the boy can see two digital clocks: the Master Cylinder is providing data that show how long the "game" has been in process and how much time remains until The End. The frightened boy removes the telephone handset from the modem and rips the phone cord out of its socket for good measure. Still, the clocks remain on the screen—blip, blip, blip—which is something akin to taking a light bulb out of its socket and still getting lumens from it. There are undoubtedly more technical monstrosities in the film.

Characterization isn't much more deft. For example, Badham uses one of the oldest stereotypes: the wacky professor. The genius who programmed the Master Cylinder decided to drop out; he is first shown on an island in Oregon flying a radio-controlled pterodactyl. Technical geniuses that I've met progressed to more dull things—executive positions at Raytheon, for example—not to the edge of lunacy. Of course, those people are less dramatic and more plausible than
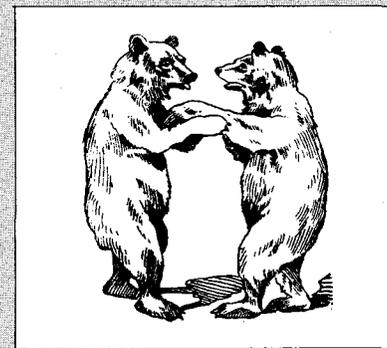

LIBERAL CULTURE

Andrei and Jane

Recently, the leader of a tour of American ranchers through the Soviet Union, a Dr. Gary Browning, returned to the United States to offer some fresh observations on our unfair prejudices against the Soviet system. In particular he complained that Americans have misjudged Soviet treatment of dissidents. Explained this expert on Russian culture:

> Most Soviet citizens view their approximately 1,000 active dissidents much the same way the majority of Americans viewed Jane Fonda and others who went to North Viet Nam in the early 1970's.

Why are there only 1,000 active dissidents amidst a quarter of a billion people? Dr. Browning did not say. But we presume that if informed of his analogy the millions of *inactive* ones would jazzercise in their Siberian graves. □

Badham's cartoon. The teen begs the man to come to the missile-command headquarters to, in a sense, pull the plug on the computer. The response is some sort of gibberish about the fate of the dinosaurs, which sounds as if it could have been written by Jonathan Schell. Finally, the man comes to what senses he has, etc.

So what is the point? The message presented on the screen—figuratively and literally (in computeresque alphanumeric characters)—is that there is no victor in a nuclear war. The implication for Badham is that some—politicians and military men, as opposed to teenage computer hackers and zany professors—think that victory is possible. That is nonsense. Certainly they—soldiers, in particular—know and understand what the consequences of nuclear war are. Many Americans, thanks to the vicious attacks on the military—some of which were presented on the screen—that occurred during the 60's, have forgotten that "peace-keeping soldier" is not an oxymoron. Fortunately, there are some in the present Administration who still understand that role, who are looking for sensible ways to keep thousands of deadly mushrooms from erupting. More fortunate is the fact that the ideas of Cannes-touted directors aren't reigning where it counts—but November 1984 is only months away. (SM) ☐

Cheap Trick

Trading Places; Written by Timothy Harris and Herschel Weingrod; Directed by John Landis; Paramount.

Of Mark Twain's works, *The Prince and the Pauper* is one of the few that isn't readily identified in the popular mind with Twain, even though it, with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* is more often portrayed in the cinema than, say, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.* The first filmed version of *The Prince and the Pauper* appeared in 1909.

Crossed Swords (1978) was, perhaps, the last. *Trading Places* can be added to the chronological list. In terms of a qualitative ranking—well, the lead in *Crossed Swords* was played by the young man who had the title role in *Oliver!* in 1968; he was semicute in '68; puberty wasn't good to him. *Crossed Swords,* trifle though it is, is a more palatable—and sensible—movie than *Trading Places.* Subtlety is something foreign to John Landis—which isn't a remarkable observation, given the fact that it was he who directed *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978), though one would hope that he would have undergone some adolescent development since then. Instead of twins, there are a white preppie and a black jivester who switch positions. That, presumably, is meant to be hilarious, the more so as the men playing the roles are widely touted as "comedic geniuses." There is a wide gulf between genius and an ability to tell jokes. The substitution of places is forced by two wealthy brothers, who are typical commodities brokers: uncharitable, unfeeling, tight, etc. This portrayal, I suspect, is supposed to be what now passes for some sort of Hollywood Brand of socialist realism, a suspicion bolstered by the fact that one of the brothers has a picture of Ronald Reagan at his side while the other has Richard Nixon, with Ike framed fuzzily in the background. Twain, skewer in hand, is undoubtedly waiting at whatever gate he's at for Messrs. Landis, Harris, and Weingrod. (SM) ☐