

In The Dark

by George McCartney

Fearful Symmetry

One of my favorite films is Carol Reed's 1960 adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *Our Man in Havana*, which tells the tale of James Wormold, an ordinary Englishman somehow marooned in pre-Castro Havana, where he manages a vacuum shop.

This most unadventurous of fellows suddenly finds himself seduced into spying for British military intelligence by the promise of big money. Wholly unsuited to the task, he decides to invent the "intelligence" his spymasters crave. This way, he convinces himself, he will be able to take their money and, at the same time, do no harm. What he doesn't foresee is that his fantasies will be taken seriously not only by the credulous Brits but by an equally benighted "other side." To his horror, the professional spies begin to endanger a swelling number of innocents on the basis of his supposedly harmless imaginings.

As he had done with *The Third Man*, Reed collaborated with Greene both on the script and the filming—with marvelous results. Who could resist a movie that puts Alec Guinness, Noël Coward, and Ernie Kovacs in the same frame?

Forty years later, director John Boorman has followed in Reed's footsteps. He has collaborated with today's foremost espionage novelist, John le Carré, to film his 1996 narrative *The Tailor of Panama*, a 330-page homage to Greene's *Havana*. As le Carré himself points out in the afterword: "Without Graham Greene this book would never have come about. [His] notion of an intelligence fabricator would not leave me alone." So it's not surprising that Boorman's adaptation reworks Reed's film almost point-for-point and includes some unlikely—but ultimately brilliant—casting. Although not as broadly comic as *Our Man in Havana*, *The Tailor of Panama* is just as deft and devastating. There's plenty of humor, much of it angry and edged with disgust, but the fun is never allowed to detract from the all-too-convincing portrayal of the human waste that international intrigue leaves in its wake.

Like many of le Carré's works, *Panama* revolves around a character doubling. This is announced early in the film when

The Tailor of Panama

Produced by John le Carré,
John Boorman, and Kevan Barker
with Columbia Pictures
Directed by John Boorman
Screenplay by John le Carré,
John Boorman, and Andrew Davies
Released by Columbia Pictures

Harry Pendel, the eponymous tailor, tenderly helps his ten-year-old daughter rehearse William Blake's "Tyger, Tyger" while taking her to school. When she comes to the last lines, "What immortal hand or eye / dare frame thy fearful symmetry," she mispronounces "symmetry." As he patiently corrects her, a skulking figure emerges from the background almost as if summoned by Blake's words. This is British intelligence agent Andy Osnard, who has designs on Pendel and will shortly become his sinister secret-sharer. Together, they constitute a "fearful symmetry" indeed. Osnard has long wallowed in ruthless, squalid experience, while Pendel has gingerly nurtured a deliberate (if somewhat soiled) innocence. Once Osnard corners Pendel, it will be a battle to the finish.

Panama is one of those rare action films that insists that deeds have consequences for which people must take responsibility. Further, it expects its audience to listen to its dialogue. Worse, it has no special effects. Well, that's not quite true: There is one special effect—Pierce Brosnan's remarkably fierce performance as Osnard, the shrewd, bullying field agent determined to recruit Pendel for spy work. He sees real opportunity in Pendel, the British expat with a compromising secret in his background, and he means to exploit him for all he's worth.

Until now, Brosnan has always seemed entirely innocent of acting. He has been little more than a glamorous cipher at the center of the James Bond films. His talent has been to look heroically debonair as the action swirls around him—a sort of feathery echo of Cary Grant, floating through his roles with weightless elegance. But here, astonishingly, Brosnan has real heft and force. He's taken his Bond persona and twisted it a few signifi-

cant degrees toward the sinister. What emerges is the *real* James Bond—the man behind the series' cartoon, a thug barely disguised by a patina of pseudo-upper-class British manners.

Brosnan's performance is a revelation on several levels and will, I hope, upset his fans. From behind his enviable looks, he manages to project a moral ugliness of truly monstrous proportions. Gone are the arch *moues* and fussy primping at his perfectly tailored suits. He grins and snarls menacingly in his rumpled tropical linens, wearing a two-day beard and a 47-year-old stomach sagging from drink and indolence. His blue eyes have a deadly reptilian cast. As he lounges in a chair or slouches against a window frame, he tilts his head slightly forward and gazes from under the thick cover of his black eyebrows, probing every person he meets for weaknesses he can exploit. Any presentable woman under 50 becomes a target for his predatory come-ons garnished with sleazy double entendres. Meeting a pretty diplomat at the British legation in Panama City, he brazenly makes passes at her under the ambassador's nose. At one point, she remarks that, compared to London, their offices are "a little on the pokey side." A master of adolescent repartee, he lasciviously repeats her words: "A bit on the pokey side's all right for me." Although she rolls her eyes at his charmless banter, she winds up in his bed. Osnard assumes he need not respect others to get his way; he merely has to lean on them—and sadly, he's right more often than not. At one point, he notices another woman whose profile has been horribly scarred. Remarking on her comely body, he wonders aloud whether she would be willing to turn her face away while he availed himself of her yet-undamaged charms.

This is the real 007: irredeemably vulgar and unspeakably callous, a man who routinely intimidates and beats others into submission. Ian Fleming once said he conceived of Bond as a blunt instrument wielded by the state to defend its interests. Osnard shows us the consequences of being a blunt instrument both to others and to himself. He wears a permanent sneer, consumes pornography, and carries a hip flask from which he steadily nips. He's clearly determined to anes-

thetize himself against any vestiges of human feeling. For others, he can only afford to feel contempt. Yet, as repellent as he is, he's nonetheless fascinating. You cannot help wondering how he became this moral cretin. Is it his rottenness that draws a certain kind of woman to him? Does he somehow inspire a paradoxical desire both to enjoy and to tame his crude masculine heedlessness?

Osnard is a dangerous man and—to the inexperienced—that can be alluring. But he's become even more dangerous now that he's fallen into disgrace with his superiors for abusing his license to push others around. To get him out of their hair, they have fobbed him off on their "pokey" Panamanian embassy "to watch the canal." As Osnard cynically explains, London doesn't want the world's most famous man-made waterway to fall into "the wrong hands now that it's in the wrong [i.e., Panamanian] hands." Knowing his career has been jeopardized, perhaps terminally, he's like a wounded tiger, all the more feral for its pain and fear. He means to retrieve his fortunes and is more than usually ready to sacrifice others to do so.

Brosnan's performance is matched by Geoffrey Rush as Pendel, the tailor who came to Panama some 20 years before to bury a past that includes doing time for arson and insurance fraud in London. Having learned his trade in prison, he sets himself up as the respectable proprietor of Pendel and Braithwaite, a distinguished gentleman's clothier selling bespoke suits. Despite Panama City's tropical climate, he has decorated his shop to resemble the stuffiest of London's clubs, with leather furniture and oak-paneled walls. We find him proudly presenting a customer with a bolt of fine wool, pointing out in his muted cockney that its weight is "all a gentleman should have to endure in this diabolical climate." Harry, a natural storyteller, has invented a bogus history for himself. He prattles absurdly about carrying on a 400-year tradition of Savile Row tailoring and almost seems to believe his marketing malarkey. And why not? It has made him quite successful. Panama's 30 ruling families, along with their lawyers and bankers, all wear his \$2,500 suits. He even tailored their personal thug-in-chief Manuel Noriega before the little butcher was forced to retire by George Bush, Sr., whom one of the local Brits calls his ungrateful "Frankenstein."

Successful though he has been, all is

not well with Pendel. Desiring to join the upper class, he has bought a farm on usurious terms—two percent per month. Given the tardy payments of his uppity clientele, he finds himself falling behind on his mortgage. This, together with the fact that his proper wife knows nothing of his criminal past, makes Pendel ideally vulnerable to Osnard's methods. All Osnard has to do is offer him the carrot of big money and flourish the stick of exposure.

As tailor to the local rich and infamous, Pendel would seem a perfect candidate to be Osnard's man in Panama. There's just one problem: Despite his one brush with the law and his penchant for fabrication, Pendel is fundamentally decent. Yes, he knows his suits confer unearned respectability on some unsavory characters. Nevertheless, "an unrepentant innocence [shines] from his baby blue eyes," as le Carré puts it. In a land where most of the upper class is supported—directly or indirectly—by money laundering and the drug trade, Pendel has joyfully embraced domestic virtue, blissfully cultivating his garden. And well he should, for it is inhabited by Louisa (Jamie Lee Curtis), his beautiful wife to whom he is unswervingly devoted, and their two lovely children. Nothing gives him more pleasure than serving them. He daily rises to make them all breakfast and then drives the kids to school. He is emphatically unsuited for secret service. Although he has no compunction about flattering his customers to retain their trade, he has no stomach for manipulating them to gain the kind of information Osnard wants. So, like Greene's Wormold, he turns to invention. Among other things, he tells Osnard that the canal is to be sold to the Chinese. Although this is absurd on its face, his spymaster instantly believes him. As in *Havana*, the more preposterous and more dangerous the information, the more credulous the spies. (How true this

rings!) They are trained to suspect the very worst and are only too happy to have their suspicions confirmed. The worse things get, the more influence and money they can wield. In *Havana*, Wormold draws pictures of huge weapons being built in "the snow-covered mountains of Cuba," using his vacuum cleaners as models. When the head of military intelligence sees them, he grows ecstatic. "They'll make the H-bomb a conventional weapon," he chortles. Asked if this is desirable, he responds, "Of course. Nobody worries about conventional weapons anymore." The threat these devices may pose is less important to him than the career opportunity they represent. I won't discuss here how Osnard uses Pendel's fictions. Suffice it to say, they're eagerly embraced by the worst to the detriment of the best.

As the respective lamb and tiger of *The Tailor of Panama*, Pendel and Osnard perfectly express Blake's fearful symmetry. They are two poles of human behavior—devotion and betrayal—which God, in His mysterious way, has permitted to coexist. The question is: Which will prevail?

Panama is at once exceptionally entertaining and morally provocative, and it features strong performances by all, including the supporting players. An almost unrecognizable Brendan Gleeson plays a former anti-Noriega revolutionary with a touching mixture of gusto and pathos. As Pendel's wise and protective assistant (the woman whose face was irreparably scarred by Noriega's goons), Leonor Varela is forceful and convincing. Even Curtis does well as Pendel's wife, a woman entirely immune to Osnard's appeal because she has learned the inestimable value of her husband's decency and devotion.

I can give Boorman's movie no higher praise than to say it is a match for Reed's *Our Man in Havana*. <C>

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The Hundredth Meridian

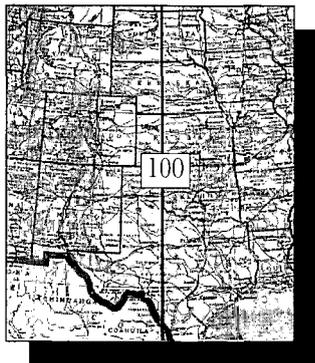
by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Getting Out of Dodge

The Founding Fathers intended the “Enumeration” (Article I, Section 2) not only as a means of assuring representational equality among the states but as a graph displaying the growth of the American nation in size and prosperity. For almost 200 years, the decennial census could plausibly be accepted as doing that. The last three censuses (those of 1980, 1990, and 2000), however, need to be seen for what they really are: The graph-paper plotting of a plot, the conspiracy of an evil and mendacious overclass to destroy both the nation and the society it controls. Census 2000 in particular is evidence that the members of the United States government no longer understand their custodial responsibility to be the welfare of their country and constituencies, but the realization of a plan so vast that the word “global” only begins to describe it.

Christ’s several parables about good and bad stewards come to mind, though if you exclude the vineyard keepers who murdered the landowner’s son, the sins involved here tend to be more of omission rather than commission. Still, stewardship is a useful standard to apply to our contemporary ruling class, since it concerns something everyone understands in a visceral way—whether we are talking about the conditions of life on a wealthy Jewish estate in Roman-occupied Palestine or in one of the sprawling new Denver suburbs—and that is livability.

An overabundance of riches of any sort is possible, including the gifts of freedom and mobility. An absentee full-time employee for the past two decades, I’ve lived where I pleased and carried my house away on my back when it no longer pleased me to remain there. Everyone I know envies me this freedom (at least they *say* they do), yet much of the time I feel like the poor little rich girl in the story. Eighteen years there, 23 months in the next place, 20 here . . . Where next? I can live anywhere I want, but where do I *really* want to live? Western towns are few and far between, and Ryder’s rates aren’t coming down any, not even following the late unpleasantness in OK City.



I’m like the ass in the fable, unable to accept the law—inevitable as that of gravity—of trade-off. Wyoming has a small population, great hunting, and no income tax. Also, little social and intellectual sophistication, no restaurants, no springtime. Colorado has all three—along with an income tax, world-class traffic jams, and about a quarter of the white population of California, *circa* 1990. New Mexico is as beautiful as Wyoming—and warmer—but it’s essentially a Third World country where native poachers have nearly exterminated all the huntable game and once-pleasant towns have been swollen to sprawling cities by immigrants from north of the Rio Grande, armed with golf clubs and cell phones. Montana—with superb trout fishing—in the last 20 years has become Hollywood-on-the-Yellowstone; Utah, a slickrock paradise where outlaws can (and recently have) disappeared without a trace (apparently for good), is a theocracy dedicated to converting the peoples of the world and gathering them all in to Deseret (in container ships, if necessary), with a wink and a nod from the INS. Obviously, I’m finicky, indecisive . . . hard to please. Nobody to blame but myself.

Recently, though, I’ve begun to suspect the choice is not finally between warm or cold, high or dry, town or city, but between Not Enough and Too Much—between one type of unliveability and another. In this sense, America, touted by enthusiasts as the most diverse nation the world has ever seen, in fact is becoming more and more a No Exit society, even as the Entry door remains jammed wide open. There’s a connection between the two, I’m betting, that bodes ill for the future of the country,

even if I can find some assurance in the thought that my malaise is not, after all, my fault.

Two related stories landed, by coincidence, on my desk the other morning. The first, printed on the front page of the State section of the *Casper Star-Tribune*, was a melancholy piece datelined Lusk, a town of 1,500 people situated 22 miles west of the Nebraska border in east-central Wyoming, whose economy is based almost exclusively on ranching and railroading. Three years ago, Microsoft aired a series of prime-time TV commercials showing Lusk in its most photogenic aspect and ending with the question, “Where do you want to go today?” The ads brought plenty of inquiries to the local chamber of commerce, but no business relocations there. Instead, a small company printing telephone faceplates for phone booths and hotels picked up and left. “They moved to Colorado because they needed high-speed Internet, overnight shipping, and everything,” the past president of the chamber explained. (And just imagine being 41 miles from the closest interstate!) “This town is better than a lot of places,” one resident told the reporter for the *Salt Lake Tribune*. “It’s quiet. People kind of let people live.” There aren’t many places left in the socially mobilized U.S. of A. you can say *that* about.

The second story, clipped from the local paper in Concordia, Kansas, arrived later in the morning from Ed Detrixhe in the neighboring town of Clyde. Entitled “Dwindling Population Hard on Small Kansas Towns,” this article was datelined Utica, a town in the western end of the state where the population continues to decline—and to age. “Every time somebody dies, we never replace them,” a farmer in his mid-60’s (whose grandfather homesteaded in the vicinity in 1878) told the AP reporter. The Utica high school will close at the end of the school year; the elementary and high schools in nearby McCracken have been gone for years. “There will always be cattle out in this part of the country,” a young female veterinarian (married to another vet) said. “Maybe fewer farmers, but the same number of cattle.” Cows let people live and let live, too.

Most of the hangers-on do so from