

## In the Dark

by George McCartney

### Bitten and Smitten

Where would we be without *eros*? Would Antony have thrown away an empire? Would Dante have written *The Divine Comedy*? Would Bill Clinton have scuttled his ambitions so shamefully? Would Peter Parker have become Spider-Man? Depending on our character, *eros* can lead us to greatness or reduce us to squalor, as this month's films amply illustrate.

In *Spider-Man*, director Sam Raimi understands the role *eros* can play even—maybe especially—in a comic-book fantasy. He proved this 12 years ago with his low-budget *Darkman*, a wonderfully stylish and inventive compendium of superhero tropes. In *Spider-Man*, he has been given a much larger budget and the special effects to go with it, but it's his comic-book hero sensibility that really carries the day. Take the scene in which the 17-year-old orphan Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) is about to be spider-bitten into a wholly new existence. Until this moment, he's been a dutiful ward of his loving Aunt May (Rosemary Harris) and Uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson), an honor student and a feckless nerd, mooning over Mary Jane or MJ (Kirsten Dunst), the girl next door for whom he's pined since the fourth grade. During a class trip to Columbia University's science lab, he manages to steer MJ into his camera range for a school-newspaper photo opportunity. She coyly begs him not to make her look ugly, and, for once, he's not too tongue-tied to risk a gallantry: "There's no chance of that with someone as beautiful as you." You know it's his first romantic line, and the expression on his face tells us he's as surprised as we are to have delivered it with such *savoir-faire*. As he does so, however, a genetically altered lab spider spins itself down onto his hand and sinks its pincers into his flesh, sealing his fate. He's smitten and bitten.

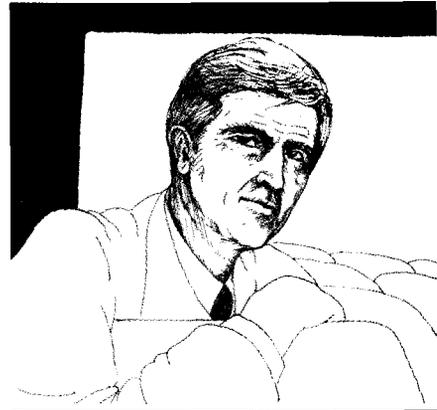
Two scenes later, we see him awakening in his uncle's modest house in working-class Queens. Standing in front of his mirror, he's astonished to see his formerly slight torso bulging with muscle. He's equally surprised to find he no longer needs his nerd glasses to see himself in the mirror or, for that matter, to see MJ through her bedroom window directly across from his own. He's so thrilled with

his changes, he runs downstairs and, with a perfectly timed handspring off the hall wall, leaps the banister and heads for the door. Uncle Ben urges him to have some breakfast, but this kid's got no time for flapjacks. Not with MJ within his super sight. Ben smiles at his wife. "Teen-agers," he says with mock exasperation. "Their raging hormones; it's always the same."

Here as elsewhere, Raimi is a master storyteller packing his scenes with visual shorthand that vividly connects all the dots. In this sequence, he gives us a scaled-down dissertation on comic-book appeal. The advent of superpowers has typically been the genre's metaphor for the passage from boy to man. That's why 12-year-olds are especially drawn to comic books. Their bodies are poised for great and unsettling changes, and they're understandably ambivalent about leaving the safety of childhood. In comics, they get to see guys have it both ways. In their civvies, they're quite ordinary, usually rather sheltered. When they don their spandex, however, they become fearless heroes capable of dealing with anything the world can throw at them. And, when they take off their costumes, they get to go home, safe and sound once more. Can you think of a more appealing fantasy for a kid facing the trials of puberty?

So Peter goes into the world with his uncle's admonition ringing in his ears: "With great power comes great responsibility." This is delivered, tellingly enough, outside the New York Public Library. On the other side of the street is an illegal extreme-fighting arena where Peter intends to put his new powers to use as a paid participant. He wants to raise enough money to buy a car so he can impress MJ. It's a cleverly staged moment. Standing between a hall of disciplined reason and a venue of brute force, Peter must make his choice. Will he be a man or a punk? This is the question all late adolescents must answer, usually more than once. Under MJ's spell, Peter will answer it heroically. It's *eros* ennobling.

Although Raimi knows how to set up his themes, he also knows what's expected of him. He gives us the all-out special-



#### *Spider-Man*

Produced and distributed by  
Columbia Pictures  
Directed by Sam Raimi  
Screenplay by David Koepp

#### *Y Tu Mamá También*

Produced by Besame  
Mucho Productions  
Directed by Alfonso Cuarón  
Screenplay by Alfonso  
and Carlos Cuarón  
Released by Twentieth Century Fox

effects treatment, but somehow he keeps it lighthearted. The pyrotechnics are almost human scale. As we follow Spider-Man's looping web swings through Manhattan's corridors of stone, we hear Maguire's voice yipping and yodeling with unaffected glee. He may consider his transformation as much a curse as a gift, but whenever he's in the air, he's all boy and entirely irrepressible.

Still, it's in the small moments that Raimi excels. Take a composition he repeats throughout the film: He places Maguire in the extreme foreground looking toward the camera as the background fills with one dire disturbance or another. We watch his face as he takes in his latest challenge and, with slow deliberation, decides how he'll deploy his powers to deal with it. Without a word spoken, we realize that Peter Parker hasn't changed after all. He's still the respectful, dutiful young man we first met. He's merely learning how to master his superpowers so that they will become an extension of the decency his guardians have instilled in him.

There's much to admire in this de-

lightful entertainment, not the least of which is a scene in which Peter's Aunt May is reciting the Lord's Prayer as the Green Goblin, Spider-Man's archvillain, bursts into her bedroom. "Deliver us from evil," she continues before confronting him. Indeed.

*Y Tu Mamá También*, the highly touted film by Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón, also deals with teenage confusion. Here, however, the kids are so thoroughly besotted by *eros* that they merely succumb to desire. They're far too self-absorbed and indolent to let its power enoble them. This is part of Cuarón's satiric intention. He wants to confront us with the moral vacuum of upper-class Mexican life. Satire, however, is supposed to leave us enlightened. Cuarón's merely left me depressed.

This film is the worst kind of pornography: the high-minded sort. I'm sure Cuarón would dispute this charge vehemently. He was on National Public Radio recently informing the admiring Terry Gross that his film is too important not to be seen by everyone aged 15 on up. Its full-press sex, he assured Terry, was merely incidental to his biting social commentary. And, sure enough, as the film bounces from one erotic escapade to another, we're treated to the ceaseless drone of its narrator's dour observations. You'll undoubtedly be surprised to learn that Mexico went to the chihuahuas during its 71-year experiment with one-party democracy under the lately defeated Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) regime and that the country is engulfed in class antagonism, sexism, police abuse, official corruption, and, of course, drugs galore. These "revelations," I suppose, explain why so many enlightened reviewers have hailed *Mamá* as Mexico's latest breakthrough movie. It fuses the moral fervor of *The Grapes of Wrath* with the lubricious fun of *Debbie Does Dallas*. Well, no, that's not correct. The sex Cuarón serves up is deliberately made to look dispiriting. This is another of his winning points. On top of everything else, he reveals men to be completely useless when it comes to pleasing women. You can hear the murmuring in the dark, "How true, how true!" We get to see plenty of sex scenes performed in the buff, much of it staged in a manner that makes it seem that the performers didn't stop at mere simulation. But through it all you can see Cuarón behind his camera, waving an admonishing finger at the way Latin *machismo* suffocates women's rights.

Our eyes are opened to all these issues and more as we follow the libidinous adventures of two teenage wastrels, Tenoch Iturbide (Diego Luna), the son of a wealthy businessman connected to the corrupt Zedillo government of the late 1990's, and Julio Zapata (Gael García Bernal) a lower-middle-class kid from a broken family. (Note the names: Iturbide comes from a ruling-class family, and Zapata, of course, is the failed peasant revolutionary. Accordingly, the boys' troubled friendship is supposed to mirror Mexican class misunderstandings.)

Attending a family wedding at the Iturbide estate, the boys come across Luisa (Maribel Verdú), the wife of Tenoch's cousin. She's 28, bored, and, for the moment, on her own. The boys draw the only conclusion their undisciplined hormones will permit: She wants to be seduced. They invite her to come with them to a nonexistent beach they snickeringly call the "Mouth of Heaven." It's their idea of clever sexual innuendo referring to oral sex. Whether or not Luisa gets the joke, she knows adolescent boors when she meets them and quickly brushes them off. A few days later, however, her husband drunkenly confesses that he's slept with another woman. Devastated, Luisa decides to leave and humiliate him. She calls the boys to say that she will accept their invitation. Flummoxed though they are, the lads eagerly prepare for the trip to their mythical beach. As it turns out, they do find a beach named the Boca del Cielo, a name that will have several ramifications by the time their adventure ends.

Before they arrive at their would-be erotic paradise, they drive into the countryside beyond Mexico City, encountering time and again impoverished Mexicans being pushed around by the police and exploited by the upper class. Our self-absorbed trio, however, glides by, unconcerned with the political plight of the less fortunate. They're far too intent on the sexual politics inside their car. In an attempt to assert herself, Luisa decides to seduce first one boy and then the other. To her rueful amusement, both turn out to be sexually inept. Dedicated masturbators, they're much better at solo performances than duos. Compounding their failure in technique, they become territorial about their companion, screaming at each other over who has rights to her. Only when Luisa threatens to dump them both does their outraged *machismo* settle down. Luisa rewards their newly

acquired docility by taking on both at once in a drunken mini-orgy that leaves the boys thoroughly dismayed at the polymorphous nature of their libido. It's feminism triumphant.

I recently criticized *Monster's Ball* for including sex scenes that disrupt the fictional contract between storyteller and audience. Here, too, the actors' nakedness undercuts their performances irremediably. Until Miss Verdú takes off her clothes, she's quite believable as the wronged woman going on an ill-advised spree to spite her loutish hubby. Her credibility disappears, however, with her blouse. Once it is discarded, we can't help noticing she's wearing a pair of silicon-pumped breasts. These biotech marvels hardly comport with her role. Until her husband's confession, she was supposed to be a chaste and loving wife, not a vain tart deploying a sexual arsenal to manipulate the more oafish sex. You just can't help thinking that beneath her stiffened breasts beats an equally unyielding heart.

Luna's and Bernal's nakedness raises a different question. I found myself wondering how old the boys were. The characters they're playing are supposed to be 17. Clothed or unclothed, the actors look no older, and Luna could easily pass for a year or two younger. So, as I watched the film, I couldn't help wondering whether I was witnessing a grown woman molesting minors on camera. (As it turns out, the boys were 20 and 22, respectively, when the film was shot. The spectacle, however, is no less troubling.)

Many mainstream critics have pointed out that *Mamá* handles its erotic material with an honesty and naturalness sadly missing from American teen sex comedies. Does this license kids playing kids having sex on screen? How will these young actors behave with women as they grow older? True, Cuarón gives them—and us—plenty of cautions. He pushes all the right political buttons regarding male insensitivity and women's rights and, further, makes sure we understand that sex without loving intimacy leaves its participants lonelier and more confused than they began. But if he's inviting 15-year-olds to his film, he's either a fraud or a fool. In the presence of a naked and willing babe, most young men are far too hormonally disturbed to heed his higher-minded messages. The only discipline they'll abide is that imposed by womanly chastity. Oddly, Cuarón has left this out of his catalog of advice. ©

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## The Man in the Black Hat

From where the boy's wagon was parked, Laramie Peak, which from every other perspective appeared in some degree or another triangular, had a rounded aspect suggesting the crown of a tall, black hat. The wagon stood braced on the summit of a low hill rising from a rolling plain dotted with pale stones and dark clumps of dwarf pine stunted by the thin soil and twisted by the unobstructed wind, with a view extending fully 360 degrees around the distant horizon within whose circle Old Man Redmond's cattle grazed with their heads pointing all in the same direction. On one side of the bunk wagon was a buckboard filled with hay to which a trailing snub rope was tied by one end, on the other, a stack of split pine and cedar wood with a bright-edged ax leaning against it and surrounded by a ring of fresh yellow woodchips. A path, scarcely more than a scratch on the unimpressible ground, wound out of nowhere from the direction of Laramie Peak, uphill between the rocks to the door of the wagon and past it, headed down again into a green swale where a scattering of the brilliant tiny prairie flowers was already fading.

Iron hooves rang out in the trail as the boy rode up to the buckboard where he dismounted, attached the snap end of the rope to the halter, pulled down the saddle and double blankets, and threw them into the wagon box with the hay. Then he went on to the bunkwagon and pushed in the door, for which there was no key and probably never had been any. He removed his soiled, clay-colored Stetson with the hawk feather stuck into the band and the two bullet holes through the crown and dropped it on the bedroll spread on the bunk bed extending the width of the wagon below the slot window cut into the rear wall. Finally, he reached the whiskey bottle from the cupboard above the bed, unscrewed the top, and took a long drink. "I wish to hell I had me a dog, anyways," the boy said aloud. He had come up short five more animals today, two cow-calf pairs and a yearling heifer.

Over the past three-and-a-half weeks, more than a half-dozen cattle had vanished from the herd, always, so far as the

boy could ascertain, overnight. The evening following the first disappearance, he'd taken his horse, bedroll, and rifle and spent the night a couple of miles out from camp at the periphery of the herd, riding among the silent animals until past midnight and sleeping out on the ground with the hobbled horse close by him. Five days later, when Old Man Redmond drove out from McFadden to resupply the camp, the boy had told him about the missing cattle. He'd figured the rancher would be mad as hell, but instead, something strange had happened. Redmond had gone pale under his 60-odd-year-old tan. Then, in a voice unlike his natural one and shaking his withered arm in the boy's face, he'd given him a warning: "Forget about them cows now, if you know what's good for you." Finally, he'd dumped the supplies on the ground beside the foldaway steps at the front of the wagon and driven away in his beat-up Model A Ford pickup without saying another word, never stopping among the herd to have a look around for himself. The boy watched the truck disappear out of sight among the rocks and small trees. Then he shook his head, took a pinch of chew from the tin in his shirt pocket, and sat in the open door of the wagon, looking away across the prairie toward the black high-crowned bulk of Laramie Peak. "First I ever knew of a cattleman telling his rider to just forget about the damn cows," he told the horse, standing with its eyes shut and one hoof lifted alongside the buckboard.

Not a week later he was missing two more animals, and when, a couple of days after that, the range detective hired by the Grange rode into camp, he'd told him about it, ignoring Old Man Redmond's order, or advice—whichever it was. The boy had done this for two reasons. One, he felt his job demanded it. Two, Redmond was known to be ailing from a wasting disease the doctors seemed unable to cure and was not expected to live many years more. Aside from the shabby house and tilting outbuildings, plus the relatively little land he held in McFadden, the only property his daughter Andrea stood to inherit from her widowed father were the whiteface



cattle the boy had made a living herding the past two summers. Andrea Redmond was 15 years old, a year younger than himself, and very pretty, dark-haired with a high complexion and straight nose like an Indian (though her mother had been a white woman), green eyes with gold lights in them, and a figure like a drawing in the Ladies' Hosiery section of the Sears & Roebuck catalogue. Old Man Redmond, he felt, had no more use for him than he had for anyone else—he was widely suspected of having killed a man, some said an Indian, a dozen or so years before—but dead men aren't consulted in their daughter's choice of a husband. Thus the boy had no intention to let the Redmond herd waste down to nothing, along with its owner, at the hands of the kind of two-bit rustlers that still existed in the country. Just three nights after his conversation with the range detective, he received the first visit from the midnight horsebacker.

He was awakened from a deep sleep by the sound of hooves, which he took at first for the horse having untied itself from the snubbing rope. From the position of the moon, which was approaching the full, he judged the time at around one o'clock. The sound persisted, and he recognized it now for the guided purposeful gait of a horse under saddle coming along the trail toward camp, its hooves ringing out on the hard clay. Instantly, the boy rolled in the sleeping sack to grab the .30-30 lying on the floor beside the bunk bed. Then he sat up on the bed, with his legs still inside the bag and the rifle cocked, staring through the slotted window and listening as the hoof-falls drew closer until they seemed to be just beyond the door. "Why don't the horse nicker?" he wondered, thinking of the mare snubbed close to the buckboard not 20 feet away. The hooves quit, and the