

by George McCartney

Moral Impressionism

In *Vanilla Sky*, director Cameron Crowe and producer/actor Tom Cruise have created an American version of Spanish director Alejandro Amenabar's 1997 feature, *Abre los Ojos* (*Open Your Eyes*). I have not seen the original, but I am told that Crowe has followed it quite closely, even asking Penélope Cruz to reprise her role—a decision at once dramatically apt and pleasingly decorative.

Crowe begins his film with a bravura set piece. We watch David Aames (Tom Cruise), billionaire Manhattan man-boy, awake to the words, "Open your eyes." He rises and grooms himself in front of his bathroom mirror, studiously hunting down a single gray hair in his tousled locks and plucking it from his scalp. Having rid himself of time's offense, he slips into his Mustang and smugly drives down Broadway into Times Square, only to find the world's gaudiest, busiest crossroads inexplicably vacant. He grows disturbed, then panics. Leaving his car in the middle of the avenue, he runs through the ghostly thoroughfare while animated images of barely clad women beckon to him from neon billboards. It is an unnerving scene of consumerism's dead end: a world of advertised pleasures for him alone. Then he awakens with a start to find that he is still in bed dreaming. Rising, he once again drives to his office, this time in the "real" world, comfortably populated with anonymous masses.

With this over-the-top opening, Crowe announces his intentions. This will be a deep-dish film filled with surrealistic flourishes designed to warn us—in case we had not heard—of the perilous state of modern man. Crowe proceeds to deliver a splashy, intoxicating, zigzag narrative that rarely slows below warp speed. His film is not nearly as profound as he seems to think, and his inspiration may be a bit too *Twilight Zone* for the sophisticates in the audience, but it royally entertains us.

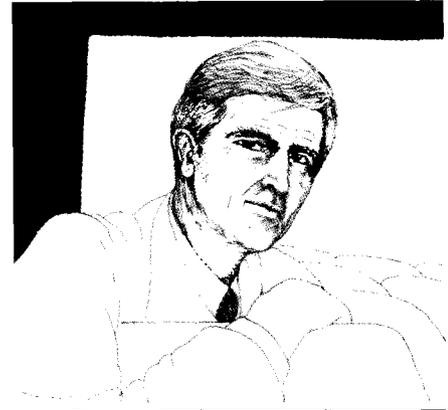
Following Amenabar's film, Crowe employs a narrative strategy dear to the Spanish heart ever since Miguel De Cervantes sent Don Quixote to tilt against the world. He has thoroughly blurred the line between dream and reality. As

David comes into focus, we find that he is living the American dream. At 33 years old, he runs a publishing empire; owns a zillion-dollar, umpteenth-room Manhattan apartment; beds babes by the bevy; and compels grudging respect—not to mention simmering envy—from all who know him. When he and his friend Brian (played by Jason Lee), an aspiring novelist, narrowly avoid a collision with a Mack truck, his sidekick ruefully remarks, "Death was right there, and your life flashed before me!" Hearing this, David just smiles indulgently as if to ask, "Are you surprised?"

In short, we meet Aames in the middle of his Caesar exam. Aldous Huxley believed that the best way to uncover a person's true character is to give him the wealth and power enjoyed by the rulers of imperial Rome. Freed from the restraints that 99.9 percent of humanity must endure, the Caesars were hard-pressed not to unleash their inner monsters. While Aames' resources may not be imperial, he has more than enough to let loose his own particular monster. Surprisingly enough, as ogres go, his is not entirely that repulsive—just vain, willful, and heedless of consequence. David even has enough vestigial conscience to want to do some good with his power. Along with the meretricious glamour magazines he publishes, he wants to promote genuine literature. That is why he keeps the soulful Brian around. He also wants to please the many women in his life—at least on a momentary basis. He's just not terribly concerned about their long-term interests.

(If you have not seen the film yet, you might want to stop reading here. While I have not revealed any of the film's larger surprises in what follows, I have unavoidably sprung the locks of some of the smaller ones.)

David's current mistress, Julie (Cameron Diaz), adores him, but he considers her a friend, or, as he so eloquently puts it, "a f--k buddy." This is why, at his birthday party, he feels perfectly free to flirt with a new charmer named Sofia (the winsomely seductive Cruz) in front of Julie.



Vanilla Sky

*Produced by Cruise-Wagner Productions
Directed by Cameron Crowe
Screenplay by Cameron Crowe,
based on Abre Los Ojos
Released by Dreamworks
and Paramount Pictures*

The next morning, David leaves Sofia's apartment after a night of playful wooing, which he brought to the precipice of intimacy before strategically stepping back. As he does with everything else, David conducts his amours with cold calculation. He knows—or thinks he knows—that Sofia's surrender will be all the more abandoned for his delay. He has not foreseen what happens next, however. Julie confronts him as he leaves Sofia's. As they ride in her car, she tells him that he's ignored the consequences of his promises. He is flummoxed by the charge. The word "promise" is not in his romantic vocabulary. "Don't you know," Julie demands, "that when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise whether you do or not?" No, he had not considered that. To teach him about truth and consequences, Julie drives off a Central Park bridge, killing herself and horribly disfiguring him. When he emerges from a coma three weeks later, David finds himself with a shattered arm, excruciating headaches, and a hideously ruined face. Filled with rage and self-pity, he makes some efforts to start over again and even expects Sofia to continue their nascent romance. Although she is sorry for him, she understandably does not feel any obligation to build a relationship on what was, after all, nothing more than a few hours of flirting. She hurries away at the first opportunity, leaving him doubly devastated.

From this point, the narrative fractures into a confusing montage of seemingly disconnected scenes, each establishing a parallel storyline. In one, David is in prison talking to a court-appointed psychologist (Kurt Russell). It seems he has committed a murder but may be eligible for lenience on grounds of diminished mental capacity. In another scenario, Sofia changes her mind and takes him into her apartment. In some scenes, doctors succeed in restoring his face; in others, it remains disfigured. And, during intimate moments, Sofia disconcertingly turns into Julie, who laughs at him demonically. Crowe wants to puzzle us for a while before he lets the pieces fall into place in a denouement that relies on a rather tired science-fiction gimmick that I should not reveal.

In broad terms, the hocus pocus is not difficult to decipher. For all his privilege and torment, David turns out to be remarkably like most of us. His youthful life has been a solipsistic dream occasionally disturbed by the stubbornly obdurate reality of others. He assumes that people will see things his way and grows confused when they do not. In romance, his self-centeredness expresses itself in that all-too-familiar tendency to invest his lady friends with the attributes he expects them to have. This is made perfectly clear with Sofia. At their first meeting, he ecstatically chortles, "Somehow I've found the last semi-guileless girl in New York." Of course, there is no "somehow" about it: David sees what he wants to in his new prospect. Although he knows nothing more about her than what he sees, he immediately invests in her charming appearance the beatific qualities that he is seeking in his new romantic buddy. However, there is little doubt that, with time, she would eventually be demoted to just another sexual appliance.

This explains the scenes in which Sofia changes into Julie. Ultimately, both women are the same to David: They are the feminine clay he seeks to mold to his own specifications. For David, each new mistress has eyes that—contrary to Shakespeare's sonnet—are always like the sun, at least until they are dimmed by the clouds of her independent will. When that happens, he simply moves on to the next goddess.

Crowe is reworking one of literature's oldest themes: the tug between the subjective and the objective, the pleasing ideal and the recalcitrant actual. From

Homer to Shakespeare to Yeats, the urgency of this struggle persists. This point is made when the film's title turns up in the script. Showing Sofia his possessions, David points to an original Claude Monet canvas on the wall and his skateboard on the floor. With an ironic show of modesty, he points out that, while Monet's "brush painted the vanilla sky, I painted the skateboard." It is as neat a leveling of value distinctions as one could imagine—and that is the point. David lives in a world without objective standards. His is the slick, postmodern scene in which the only criterion of value is what we saw in the film's first image: the individual at the lonely crossroads of infinite time. The good is what pleases; the bad, what displeases—hence, for him, the Monet and the skateboard exist on the same plane. In a phrase, he lives by an ethic of moral impressionism. Monet was committed to capturing the ideal of the evanescent moment, the fleeting shades of beauty located more in the perceiving mind than in the external world. His shimmering, unfocused landscapes and cathedrals register the collaboration of the beholding eye with the objects it looks upon—"all the mighty world of eye and ear, both what they half create and what perceive," as William Wordsworth put it. In other words, the primary value of objective reality is that it provides the clay which the self can shape into its desires. We have been living under the sway of this romantic exaltation of the self since the end of the 18th century. Liberating as it has been, it is a subjective worldview that—unchecked by life's harder facts, untempered by appeals to philosophically established principles—can lead to David Aames' baffled, blithering solipsism.

Along with his manifest talent for cinematic verve, what I admire about Crowe is his willingness to unmask the cultural assumptions that underwrite our crum-

my self-indulgence. As he did in *Almost Famous*, he is arguing here that we must awaken from our subjective haze and see things as they are. At one point in David's sessions with the prison psychologist, the doctor muscs about himself: "I awoke one day and found I was forty and I was happy." He attributes this epiphany to his two daughters. While his observation seems casual, its import certainly is not. Given our willfulness, it takes a while to appreciate the reality of others. It is telling that it took two daughters to awaken the psychologist. Clearly, they are meant to parallel the two current women in David's life. Intimacy with others—romantic, familial, or companionable—inevitably entails obligations and consequences. Other people are the ultimate wake-up call. Crowe is refreshingly explicit on this point. If we fail to answer the call, we remain exiled in a seductive but pointlessly solipsistic dream. Respond, and we take on the challenge of a difficult but ennobling reality.

Vanilla Sky has been met with derision from many reviewers and has suffered at the box office. This is a shame. I suspect it may have more to do with the film's unpalatable thesis than its limitations. This is an ambitious work, and, in its better moments, the film is wildly enjoyable. The performances are all nicely gauged. Cruise does his cock-of-the-walk routine, tempered here with glimmers of self-doubt, perfectly befitting his character. Cruz is lovely and as enigmatic as she should be. As the romantically obsessed Julie, Diaz blends beauty and horror with all the uncanny force of an Edgar Allan Poe *femme fatale*. And Russell's psychologist is the very soul of moral concern—which, come to think of it, may be what is troubling people. Crowe takes his moralizing so seriously that he never lets his characters—or us—off the hook, right down to his unresolved ending. Given what we are, why should he? c



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Love Thy Neighbor

Ben Lummis was not in a mood to write this morning. He wanted to be outdoors, and, because he was an outdoor writer, being outdoors was as legitimate a part of his job as writing about having been outdoors was after he'd been there. His work had two stages, outdoor and indoor, and in the case of the story he was presently involved with, the outdoor stage was completed and the indoor one only beginning. If, instead of writing, he left the house and did what he really wanted to do today, the result would be that, coming home, he would have two stories that needed writing rather than one. Ben sighed, leaned forward over his desk, and placed his elbows in the polished corners of the manual office typewriter he used to compose the first drafts of his stories.

With the swamp cooler shut down and the windows up around the small adobe house, the cross-breeze through the screens came pleasantly cool, carrying the scent of the false orange trees beside the driveway and the odor of the crimson bougainvillea growing along the Spanish-style iron fence. Before the heat of late June and the start of the monsoon season in early July was a good time to be camped on the desert in a sidewall tent, flying his falcons and enjoying the company of his dogs. Ben covered his face with his hands like a man who has just received devastating news and sat absolutely still in his chair, waiting for his first sentence to come.

It was agony of a kind, like boring a tunnel into granite with his forehead. Five or seven minutes later, he took one hand away and, with the index finger, typed three words onto the rolled-in page. Then he picked up a stub pencil lying beside the machine and struck the words through with a single line. At the same moment, a car door slammed, and boisterous voices broke out in Spanish from beyond the front gate. Ben, looking, saw three Mexican men and, behind them, an ancient truck that had once been white but was now almost entirely black with dribbled tar. Ben pounded his knee with his fist and cursed. The roofers the landlord had promised to send from town had arrived, not more than three weeks late and only two after he'd forgotten

about their coming.

Two of the men swung the double iron gates open on the flagstone drive, and then the third got up on the truck seat again and backed in between the standing wings. It was a flatbed truck loaded with a furnace and cauldron, several wheelbarrows, and an arrangement of shovels and brooms, everything blackened and slightly misshapened by the heavy tar. As the truck rolled to a stop just short of the *portal*, the *jefe* turned away and started in the direction of the house. Ben met him at the front door, precisely as the bell chimed in the hallway.

The *jefe* was a plump, middle-aged Mexican, of average height and very cheerful looking with his broad face and full brown eyes, black hair combed over his balding brow, and long black mustaches hanging past the corners of his mouth. He had on a dark-blue snapbutton Western shirt under black canvas coveralls, stiff with tar, that struck Ben as uncomfortable dress for a man doing roofwork in southern New Mexico in June at any time past six or seven o'clock in the morning. The *jefe*, though, seemed enthusiastic about getting to work, grinning broadly as he introduced himself in excellent English as the contractor chosen by Century 21 to replace the portion of the roof that had blown away in a dust storm over the winter. Ben thanked the man and offered his assistance, should it be needed. Then he returned to his study and sat down again before the typewriter with his head in his hands. Before the dogs began an uproar from their run behind the house at the appearance of the Mexicans on the roof and the tearing sound of the old shingles coming off in strips and patches commenced, he'd finished writing the lead paragraph of his story and was beginning on the following one.

After two hours, Ben had finished a third of his quota of 3,000 words, the breeze through the open window behind his desk had ceased, and the air inside the house had become oppressively warm. He was on his way from his desk to the hall switch governing the swamp cooler when the doorbell rang again, and he observed through the screen door the bulky



shape of the Mexican boss darkly silhouetted against the midmorning glare. Half regretting his offer to help, Ben set the switch to the HIGH position and went on to the door. "Need anything?" he asked.

The man grinned more widely still and shook his head. "We're on lunch break," he explained. "Come have a beer with us!"

Ben didn't answer right away. Though the writing was going well, he worked without enthusiasm. Also, he'd reached a good stopping place from which to take up again in the next working session.

"Thanks," he told the boss. "I'd be happy to."

The two other men sat on the concrete apron against the house wall in the shade of the *portal* with a picnic cooler at their feet, drinking beer. They grinned and saluted Ben with the beers, while the boss reached a dripping cold can from the ice and handed it to him. His name was Adán Beltrán; the others, Pablo and Jesús, did not give their last names. Pablo was a small, bark-brown, wiry man with wild black hair going gray, gray mustaches, and a rough gray beard; Jesús was much younger, well-built and strong looking, with long raven-black hair and a smooth complexion. All three men were from Chihuahua City, though Adán rented a house in Las Cruces from which he operated his roofing business and where he boarded the help he brought up legally from Mexico. Though Adán's English was nearly perfect, Jesús and Pablo had only a few words, communicating mainly by hand signals accompanied by much grinning and winking. Surrounded by pieces of the ruined roof thrown down on the paving, the four men talked of the dog races and of bullfighting, until Adán looked at his watch and locked down the top of the cooler. "We have to go back to work, now," he