

Jekyll and Hyde in a Box

Last month, the *Wall Street Journal* gleefully doted on billionaire wonderboy Stephen Schwarzman of the aptly named Blackstone Group, a firm dealing in private equities and leveraged buyouts. Schwarzman, George W. Bush's roommate at Yale and *Skull and Bones* brother, wished to inform all who cared that, when he pursues a deal, he wants to "inflict pain" and "kill off" his rivals. So there we have it. In American business today, it pays to have murder in your heart. Who can doubt the wisdom of Schwarzman's lethal intent? He's a billionaire seven times over. Can't argue with that.

There is some collateral damage, however: It's not just rivals who must go to the chopping block. The American public also must feel pain so that Schwarzman and his kind may enjoy the success they so richly deserve. American workers must watch their jobs disappear as they are replaced by illegal immigrants here or by slave labor in China. If this leaves Americans scrambling for enough to support their families, and strips them of health insurance and pensions—well, too bad. And so what if Chinese manufacturers use lead paint on the toys American children play with or sweeten cough medicine with toxins? These are the costs of doing business, and the business of business is giving the business to the weak so the rich can live safely within their gated communities.

In his new film, *Mr. Brooks*, Bruce A. Evans takes Schwarzman's business philosophy to its logical conclusion. The eponymous protagonist, Earl Brooks (Kevin Costner), is a self-made man who owns a fabulously profitable box factory in Portland. In one scene, we see him making a deal with Chinese executives. We are left to assume that he is undercutting the American workforce with cheap Asian labor, but nothing is said explicitly. (It wouldn't do to offend the Asian market.) Economic murder, however, doesn't fully satisfy Mr. Brooks' needs. It's not enough to inflict mortal misery on losers. He must step outside his corporate box (get it?) and kill them, literally. This he does with a CEO's meticulous care for neatness and efficiency, choosing strangers on whom he can impose his deadly

upper-class will. At one point, he has occasion to caution a pesky wannabe who has the nerve to try to get in on his action. This scruffy lower-class loser thinks he can blackmail Brooks into helping him kill one of his enemies. With the measured patience of an executive fully expert in dealing with underling upstarts, he quietly replies, "We could, but then we wouldn't be in control."

Evans seems to have wanted to invoke and perhaps satirize the dirty little secret of American movies: class warfare. As a mass medium, film has traditionally flattered the little people by portraying the swells as insufferable snobs, hopelessly inept buffoons, or sadistic bullies. As different as they were, the films of King Vidor, Charlie Chaplin, W.C. Fields, and Frank Capra had this in common: The wealthy were not to be trusted. The villain of the *Alien* franchise, to take another example, is not really the glistening monster with the famously metal chompers. After all, the poor creature can't really help itself. The real monster is the nameless company who keeps sending Sigourney Weaver into deep space so that—against her will, of course—she can bring back a live specimen of an organism that may prove beneficial to the arms industry. More recently, *Syriana* suggested that it's not the Islamists or even Al Qaeda who need killing but the honchos at Mobil and Exxon; after all, they're the ones who are economically murdering Americans at the gas pump while bloodily disposing of emirs who long to use their oil leverage to help their own people.

With *Mr. Brooks*, Evans tries to up the ante but then bluffs his hand either incompetently or cynically. Although the screenplay he wrote with Raynold Gideon seems to take sardonic aim at class conflict, it seems to have been blunted by several script conferences too many. One of its major subplots ties itself up in knots, trying to parallel the film's main line of action but without ever committing itself to reinforcing the film's suppressed theme. It concerns Brooks' personal Jekyll, the frozen-faced Demi Moore, playing Tracy Atwood, a homicide detective. (Is it possible to trust a story that features a woman named Tracy?) She indulges



Mr. Brooks

Produced and distributed by
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios
Directed by Bruce A. Evans
Screenplay by Bruce A. Evans
and Raynold Gideon

a passion that complements Mr. Brooks' tracking and, if possible, murdering lesser beings. And, wouldn't you know it, by virtue of her daddy's will, she's even richer than Mr. Brooks. You're wondering why a woman in possession of a fortune computed to be in excess of \$60 million would stalk Portland's mean streets, armed and ferociously dangerous? Please, get with the program. This woman enjoys taking down class-challenged killers, especially if they come pierced, tattooed, and brain-dead from their underclass slums. By having her pursue Mr. Brooks, the film indulges in irony. Tracy has no idea that her current prey is one of the entitled. She assumes that he is one of the impoverished goons. Fortunately, she still has time to push around some little people and, even better, blow away a couple of dirt-bag losers. But only twice, in muted asides, does Evans draw our attention to her class affinity with Mr. Brooks. And Moore never shares a frame with Costner. We do learn that he admires Tracy's decision to do what she's good at, despite having enough to live on perpetual holiday, jetting from St. Croix to Paris to New York. Sort of like himself, you see. They are committed to keeping the little people in their place—six feet under their own.

This would have been a promising premise, had Evans and Gideon not decided to tart up the film with sordid graphics. I can just hear the script conferences, the voices of the producers (one of whom is Mr. Costner) alternate-

ly wheedling and threatening as they demand more action, more gore, more sex, and less—much less—of anything that could be deemed offensive to any interest group whatsoever. Of course, there is one acceptable target: the terminally scruffy, those who lack both the means to purchase the kind of clothing that Mr. Brooks wears and, probably, the ten bucks to get into a showing of the film. It's Filmmaking Economics 101: Ensure the box office, and damn the theme. So, after an intriguing opening, the film caves in to what American producers claim the public craves.

After receiving his man-of-the-year award, Brooks returns home with his lovely wife. On the way, Marshall (William Hurt) mysteriously appears in the back seat. He is Brooks' sinister hidden self. Marshall leans forward, a knowing smile spreading over his lugubriously pale face. "You deserve a treat," he murmurs. A treat? He means another murder. Brooks resists. He has been on the wagon from murder for two years, thanks to weekly Alcoholic Anonymous meetings where he proclaims himself an addict, prudently leaving out what he is addicted to. But the "thirst has returned," the narrator tells us, adding that "it never really left." So, when Marshall pleadingly insists, Brooks descends to his basement, where he opens a huge closet in which hang, Batman like, about a dozen identical black Gore-Tex suits. He dons one, slips on black army boots, and slinks into the night, as Marshall nudges him on seductively. Spotting a couple in a dance studio, he follows them home. With no trouble at all, he enters their apartment and catches them *in flagrante delicto*. Their lovemaking is at once enthusiastically athletic and yet carefully posed for the camera. Evans wants to make sure the men in the audience have a good view of the woman, whose body looks to be barely that of a teenager's. Curiously, we get no such shots of the fellow. Even when Brooks pulls out his big black gun and shoots the couple repeatedly, it's the young lady who is posed for maximum scrutiny. And afterward, to satisfy his obsession, Brooks himself arranges her limp limbs to ogling advantage. Marshall then counsels him to go home and make love to his beautiful wife. Does this make Evans a necrophiliac voyeur? Not necessarily. Far more likely, he's just a businessman protecting his investment by giving his customers an added incentive to part with their money.

This lurid scene comes early in the film, and, though nothing so explicit follows, it's enough to put paid to any pretense that Evans might have made to storytelling integrity. The sequence has no other purpose than to create remunerative sensation. As with all such pandering to prurient curiosity, it does not contribute to the film's theme. Instead, it throws us out of the story altogether, forcing us to wonder, among much else, how Costner and the naked actors felt about being in such sweaty proximity to one another. And why did Evans choose to use an actress with the body of a 14-year-old? Is popular culture exploring new limits? Is pedophilia headed for the big screen? A couple of months ago, I wrote about the Squirm Index. See this scene (I heartily recommend you do not) with the wrong relative, or with any relative at all, and you will not only squirm but churn with embarrassment—unless, of course, you've been entirely inured to such sights by daily doses of HBO's more mature offerings. For me, the film never recovered from this sordid spectacle.

Evans also indulges a sense of humor that can only be called odious.

When Brooks' daughter unexpectedly returns from college to tell her parents that she is pregnant, the CEO daddy summons all his executive gravitas to issue this directive: "There'll be no abortion." What a lark! This serial killer is pro-life! When daughter and wife stiffen in disapproval of his edict, he tacks like the seasoned executive he is. "A grandchild will be a wonderful gift," he explains by way of mollifying the wayward miss. Later, he discovers that she may be implicated in an ax murder in Palo Alto. Does she have the serial-killer gene? he wonders. Of course she does. Although we never find out whether she has slaughtered any-

one, it's dollars to doughnuts that, if she did, the victim would have owned a Corolla rather than a Porsche. Here again, the script's apparent original intention peeks out. The killer gene is a metaphor. It stands for economic privilege. Though carrying a child, the young lady tellingly urges dad to retire and let her run the company. She can't wait to push the lowly workers around.

The only thing interesting about this film is the interplay between Costner and Hurt. They make an intriguing Jekyll and Hyde pairing. Hurt, an actor I never cared for in the past, has become a compelling presence in his recent outings. In *A History of Violence*, he played an Irish-American crime boss with an unnerving mixture of charm and menace. Here, he comes across as a cajoling, insinuating Hyde intent on luring Costner's upright Jekyll back to the pleasures of taking life. "Why do you fight it, Earl?" he pleads with a needling, ironic whine. And when Brooks begins to come around, Marshall fairly sings out, "I love what you're thinking," sweeping away any lingering doubts about the wisdom of yielding to his overmastering passion. Costner seems to have responded to Hurt's sinuous energy with a particularly artful portrayal of a man hemmed but not suffocated by prudence. When this Hyde and Jekyll fully commit to their murderous intentions, they cannot help wallowing in the moment. Heads thrown back, they yield to fits of maniacal laughter. You'd think they had just hatched an especially profitable downsizing scheme in the board room.

Such scenes give an indication of what this film could have been, had Evans and its producers not betrayed their audience as cynically as any rapacious outsourcer betrays American workers. ◊



The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Mexico Way

Though Héctor had lived all his life in a desert climate, he was a town kid whose closest experience of the desert itself had been to drive across it at 50 or 60 miles per hour. Now that he was actually living there, he found the reality of the experience daunting, even frightening. For Héctor, the Chihuahuan Desert was an expansive boredom relieved occasionally by some small but acute unpleasantness, like discovering a coiled rattlesnake beneath your chair after sitting down to a cup of coffee in the pale morning sun, in the intervals between onsets of winter wind and driving dust storms out of the west. As far as anyone could see, the Juárez ranch was surrounded by the sotol and creosote-bush desert, its nearly absolute flatness relieved only by the relatively negligible Tres Hermanas Mountains to the south and the much more impressive Florida Mountains, a massive barrier of pink and rust-colored rock rising between the ranch and the pleasures and excitements of Las Cruces and El Paso fifty miles as the crow flies to the east. Between Columbus to the south and Deming, north on Highway 11, the ranch was a fifteen-mile drive from either—a long way, it seemed to Héctor, to go for a “few” drinks, and an even longer way home.

At first, he'd kept himself entertained, more or less, at the Pancho Villa State Park between Columbus and the international border, but its exhibits were limited, easily surpassed by the Hijos de Pancho Villa collection in Namiquipa, most of what the park had to show him was old hat, and he lost interest after only a couple of weeks. AveMaría and Contracepción resented having to drive a hundred and thirty miles round-trip to shop at the Neiman Marcus in Cruces, and Contracepción, who missed her friends in Belen, professed to be dying of boredom as well. Even Dubya, who'd insisted on bringing his collection of two-dozen or more stuffed lions with him, was restless and fussy. Why, he demanded, several times a day, couldn't he visit the *leones* at the Lion Habitat? They were living in the desert, weren't they? Wasn't the desert where the *leones* lived? So why wouldn't Papá take him to the Habitat *now*? The worst of it, Héctor suspected, was that, for the

next five years at least, he'd be unable to enjoy Las Vegas the way he'd once been able to do.

The Juárezes did better, at first. For one thing, there were only two of them. For another, Beatriz, not being a party girl, was content to spend her days doing volunteer work at Holy Family Catholic Church in Deming, and her evenings watching reruns of *Seinfeld* and other syndicated sitcoms on TV. Then Jesús “Eddie” got a DUI on one of his solo trips to the bars, was lodged in the Deming jail overnight, and forfeited his driver's license for 90 days. Since Héctor spent many hours in his van each day, driving from one distant repair job to the next, he was not enthusiastic about chauffeuring his friend to the watering holes of Columbus. (The Columbus taverns were fewer and less agreeable than those in Deming, by comparison almost a big city, but Jesús “Eddie” had declared the town subject to economic sanctions until his license was returned to him.) With both men having to do their drinking at home, the house was unpleasantly crowded most evenings, everyone fighting over the TV while Jesús “Eddie” threw popcorn at the screen, a practice Beatriz seemed not to object to but which AveMaría (who disliked her husband's friend more with every passing day) deplored. (She definitely didn't care for the way he had of looking at Contracepción.)

In spite of Jesús “Eddie's” assurances that the ranch house was “plenty, plenty big” with “lots of room for everybody,” it was in fact very small and cramped, hardly more than a large cabin—unpainted and weathered to a grayish black streaked with brown, built of cottonwood planks hauled from the mountains and consisting of four square rooms with drop ceilings and small windows cut into the walls. The place was heated by a coal stove that doubled as a cooking one, water had to be hauled from the well where it was raised in scanty amounts by an ancient creaking windmill, and a four-seater outhouse fifty yards away beyond the satellite dish struck the girls especially as an inadequate substitute for indoor plumbing. Each morning, Héctor awoke with the sinking feeling that he was back in Mexico, and he went to bed every evening wondering if he'd be



able to return to his comfortable American home within the next six months. From what he could tell by watching the Albuquerque news, the authorities had had no success so far in apprehending Abdul Kahn and his associate. Héctor could not escape the uneasy suspicion that they were not even trying.

Still, living off in the desert as they were doing, away from crowds and foreigners drawn from all over the world to the flourishing communities along the Rio Grande, he felt relatively safe on the old Juárez ranch. There was some, but not much, traffic along Route 11, while the house was set back from the highway a good half-mile, at the end of a rough, unpaved drive. Apart from the antelope, hawks, eagles, and rabbits, a profusion of rattlesnakes that seemed always underfoot, and a few stray cattle, the only life he perceived among the brush and cactus were occasional groups of dark figures far out on the desert beside the sheltering Florida Mountains, trekking purposefully northward at a sustained pace. From his twenty years' experience of the United States, Héctor guessed they were hikers. Americans are prone, he'd discovered long ago, to a mania for backpacking, rock climbing, and similar strenuous pursuits. President Bush himself rode a mountain bike, which seemed to him as crazy, almost, as snowboarding or kayaking. Well, it was all harmless enough, except for his doctor urging him to take up some equally energetic sport as a means of keeping his blood pressure at acceptable levels without medication. Even so, Héctor marveled at these people's temerity. The Floridas were said to be infested with mountain lions, one of whom had killed an unwary rancher after he'd dismounted from his horse to search on foot for a lost calf up a brushy side canyon.