

This doesn't quite add up. According to Lazare, when the General Will moved out to the suburbs it lost itself in yard work and PTA meetings. But by any measure, the postwar heyday of suburbanization was an unusually *active* period for popular democracy and the General Will, which managed to carry through the Great Society, the civil rights movement, the counterculture and feminism. Nor do left-right political divisions correlate neatly with the urban-suburban divide. Canada, for example, a largely suburban nation like the United States, is by comparison a social-democratic paradise. And Detroit, which is really a giant suburb built almost exclusively of single-family houses, was long a bastion of working-class militance. And why exactly did the working classes flock so eagerly to the suburbs?

Lazare's polemic is often intemperate and unfair, but the deeper problem is that it is tragically right. The General Will will not be denied, but if anything can be said to express the General Will, it's suburbia. I say this as a New Yorker very much in tune with Lazare. The suburb strikes me as an affront to nature and to common sense, one whose waste of land, building materials and fossil fuels grows more glaring in an era of global warming and resource depletion. As Lazare says, the suburban dream of urban amenities in bucolic surroundings is a dangerous one that will make the planet implode if the rest of the world follows America's lead. But there's no denying the power of this dream to capture the imagination.

Yes, it is heavily subsidized (the General Will usually is). But simply ending the gravy train, even if it were politically feasible, would not necessarily do in suburbia. Lazare proposes abolishing subsidies like mortgage interest and property tax deductions. But most taxpayers don't itemize, and so don't even bother taking these deductions—they go mostly to upper class homeowners who can afford their manses without them. Lazare also wants to hike the gas tax. By adding up all auto "externalities," including the costs of noise pollution and sending aircraft carriers to the Persian Gulf, Lazare arrives at a tax of \$10 per gallon. But the probable upshot of this would be to give a new lease on life to electric and fuel-cell cars; and

anyway, any politician who proposed it would be lynched. Somewhat desperately, Lazare looks to "the working class ... who have suffered the most from deurbanization" to launch the anti-suburban revolution, but let's be honest: The working class wants SUVs.

This is not false consciousness. Americans are aware of the costs of the suburb, even if they're not willing to pay them. We complain about traffic and fret over global warming, but we drive nonetheless. The dysfunctions of suburban family life are staples of popular culture, from *American Beauty* to *The Sopranos*. Nor are we immune to the alluring alternatives of city life. The word-association followup to "urban" is no longer "decay," it's "professional." From watching the comely sophisticates on *Friends* and *Sex and the City*, we know that the big city is the ideal place

to live out the romantic comedy of young adulthood, before we move to the suburbs to raise families.

America has not had suburbs foisted upon it against its will. America likes suburbs, warts and all. But maybe, slowly, the General Will is drifting back to the big cities. New York's population grew by 650,000 in the '90s, the first substantial growth in many decades. I hope more come. I remember walking over the Brooklyn Bridge into Manhattan my first morning in New York. I was swept away by the city, by its crowds, its stupendous vigor, the thrilling mixture of intimacy and grandeur in its streets. It seemed, as Lazare says, the supreme expression of human collective life, and I remember thinking *everyone should live here*. ■

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Seeing Red

By A.S. Hamrah

Nobody likes a medley. Nature abhors a medley, and so does Art. Spare us the medleys.

By last winter or maybe before, TV ads had repeatedly informed us that a

Moulin Rouge
Directed by Baz Luhrmann

new film "from visionary director Baz Luhrmann" was imminent. Again and again the voice that booms portentously from movie trailers let us know that the visionary film *Moulin Rouge* was on its way, it was coming, it was about to be released and there was nothing we could do about it. It began to sound threatening, this "visionary" chant, like a warning, like Luhrmann was a Nostradamus with news of our destruction, news which for some reason he'd decided to impart in the form of a can-can musical with Nicole Kidman.

Luhrmann's previous effort, a fledgling visionary work called *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, which came out five years ago, made it seem unlikely that his latest would be a revelation. Sure, it would probably be a self-consciously postmodern hash of other

people's leftovers, served with candy hearts instead of potatoes, but visionary? You hear "visionary," you picture William Blake, not one of those three-layer greeting cards that plays "Love Is a Many Splendored Thing" when you open it. To remind us that lost love conquers all if you turn it into art—especially when the movie's "all"

**Poet Ken in
Consumptive-
Prostitute Barbie's
Montmartre
Playhouse, with all
the accessories your
parents can wrap up
at Christmas.**

conquers whatever love it meant to evoke—isn't a revelation, even if it admits it's a cliché and is proud of it.

So maybe "visionary" is not the right word. But it sounds nice, "visionary." Maybe it's in Luhrmann's contract. He

has a Visionary Clause. You say my name, you say "visionary" first. So officially anyway, he's a visionary. Why not? Doesn't cost the studio a dime.

Here's a news item from France, however, that cost the studio a pretty penny in promotions and party decorations. At the Cannes film festival, *Moulin Rouge* got a six-minute standing ovation. In their day they have booed Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, Dreyer's *Gertrud*, Bresson's *L'Argent* and Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, but in 2001 they rose to their feet for *Moulin Rouge* and stayed there for one-tenth of an hour. Doesn't that prove Luhrmann's bona fide? He's a visionary all right: He sees things you don't. He saw France, he saw Nicole Kidman's underpants, evidently he's also seen *Children of Paradise*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *One from the Heart*, *City of Lost Children* and *Hawaii Five-O*.

That's right, *Hawaii Five-O*. How's that for pomo pastiche? Stealing from those other movies, that's predictable; add *Hawaii Five-O*, you get a standing O. Thus in *Moulin Rouge*, Ewan McGregor poses on his writer's-garret balcony in 1899 Paris like he's Steve McGarrett in the credits to the beloved '70s cop show; the camera flies over the city right into his hairstyle. Was it the garret/McGarrett connection that inspired Luhrmann to swoop like that? McGregor, McGarrett? McGregor's character is named Christian, Steve McGarrett was played by Jack Lord. Both characters approach their work religiously. They loom over vice-ridden cities and look down, and only they can make order from the confusion below. In the end, love's not for them. They have a higher calling.

O.K., maybe this is an unproductive line of inquiry. You don't question a visionary, you just receive his vision and you luxuriate in it until you're puckered. Luhrmann's frenetic, over-stuffed approach is designed to thwart criticism or even reflection. He insists that his film's hollowness is beside the

point, or that without the emptiness at its core his film wouldn't be the celebration he intended. For all its undemanding visual opulence, *Moulin Rouge* demands that you never look away, for fear that you might miss something even more dazzling than what came before. But in the end it's not the kind of film you watch, it's the kind of film you have on. The feeling that it's



Les fleurs du mélange.

having you on is as inescapable as its oppressive production design, a claustrophobic scheme seemingly inspired by a board game Vincent Price used to advertise in the '70s.

Moulin Rouge is a musical without a complete musical number, a dance film without a dance sequence, a film about a writer that wasn't written. It was cobbled together by choosing only the most obvious post-Beatles song lyrics to animate its repetitive situations, and it tries to convince you that it's reinvigorating those song lyrics as it embraces pop cliché so it can bring you a higher love.

It owes a lot to Madonna, who's invoked in its music-video style and by quoting lyrics from her songs. When Nicole Kidman is introduced as Satine, principal dancer at the Moulin Rouge and noted courtesan, an ominous version of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" passes dubbed through her lips, and Luhrmann has her combine it with a line from "Material Girl." To fully appreciate how clever this is, you have to know that Madonna's video for that song recreated Marilyn Monroe's "Diamonds"

number from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Above Kidman's head, a sign at the top of the stage reads "Diamants," and the narration (of course there's narration) informs us of the dancers that the habitués of the nightclub "called them the diamond dogs." Digital diamond dust falls over the scene, diamond jewelry is proffered and snatched everywhere. We're unavoidably reminded that diamonds are forever, in case we forgot.

This kind of sensory overkill—where what is seen is said and what is said is seen—proves Luhrmann thinks his audience is both desperate and easily entertained; that it has an attention span shorter than John Leguizamo's throwaway dwarf character Toulouse; that it doesn't know how to read and would be offended if it were asked to. When McGregor types out "The End" as the film ends, he reads it on the soundtrack, too. Just to be sure the audience knows what to do at that point, the sound of applause accompanies a falling curtain.

Kidman, who also recalls Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (she can't help it), is all alone out there; Luhrmann, so busy splashing everything with the froth used to dye carnations and turn beer green, forgot to direct her. Her voice is disembodied, piped-in. McGregor offers no help. Their scenes together play like they were shot at the opposite ends of a tunnel. They're sexless and dull even when embracing naked.

The other actors are displayed in boxes and piled up. Crammed into small spaces the better to make funny faces in close-up, none of them seem like they were ever in the same room together. They're reduced to moustaches and lip-stick. A whole troupe of dancers is on hand; none of them is given a personality or dialogue. Luhrmann cuts every scene so there is no scene, just a series of music video fragments, and no emotion creeps in, although the characters weep and wail and kick.

Jim Broadbent, a likable actor cast as the nightclub's impresario, comes off as so desperate to escape Luhrmann's Captain Kangaroo conception of his character that he channels the prop-comic Rip Taylor to keep himself interested. Richard Roxburgh's Duke, a stock villain, would've been better portrayed by *Spinal Tap*'s Michael McKean. At least he knows that to be funny, you don't act funny. No one is funny in *Moulin Rouge*. When Luhrmann directs them, he directs them to be hilarious.

The words "amoral" and "bohemian" are constantly rolled around in this film's mouth, but *Moulin Rouge* is as amoral and bohemian as *My Little Pony*. Its art-vs.-commerce plot is designed to touch the heart of the 11-year-old girl inside the window dresser in all of us, and it has all the tragic romance of a date with Poet Ken in Consumptive-Prostitute Barbie's

Montmartre Playhouse, complete with all the accessories your parents could wrap up at Christmas.

By the film's end, you hope for the triumph of commerce over art, surely the film's subconscious message all along. *Moulin Rouge* seeks to convince us that, today, Elton John and Baudelaire amount to the same thing, and it makes you never want to hear the word "spectacular" again, much less see one. If its goal was to reveal the emptiness of postmodern bricolage at the blockbuster level, it has succeeded. By any other standard, it's a mess. Its cleverness is greasy. The medleys in a Shriner's parade are more thrilling. When you're a visionary, there's a lot of stuff you don't have to do. Baz Luhrmann has exercised his prerogative, and how. ■

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Early GBV was branded by Pollard's distinctive brew of nonsensical lyrics. Allusive to nothing, yet strangely evocative of something familiar, at their best Pollard's songs inspire a soft nostalgia or, more generally, a feeling of personal identification with an unspecified (or out-of-sight) object. Preoccupied with boy's things like UFOs, rock 'n' roll, atoms and airplanes, both Pollard and former sideman Tobin Sprout wrote 90-second songs that pulled your heart strings in the strangest directions.

The early tunes are filled alternately with apology and strength; most, unlike so much indie-schlock, are love songs of a sort. "I Am a Scientist" from *Bee Thousand* (1994) is a kind of explanation of shortcomings to a lover; the song delivers a sweet, twangy little pop melody (guitar and drums only) and lyrics teeming with the self-awareness and self-pity that marks so many indie-rockers ("I am a journalist / I write to you to show you / I am an incurable / and nothing else behaves like me"). On the flip side, "As We Go Up, We Go Down," a modernist masterpiece on *Alien Lanes* (1995), bursts with Hegelian lyrics, declaring: "And see the truth is just a lie / I speak in monotone 'leave my fucking life alone' / As we go up we go down." Always the singer is misunderstood; sometimes he wants help and sometimes he doesn't.

But all was not pop; on the early records, bouncy melodies were tucked between more sinister, distorted guitar-focused songs with lyrics muffled or yelled. Sometimes they were kind of good (*Bee Thousand*'s "Her Psychology Today") and others not. But as the spaces between tracks were limited to about a half-second, those records felt like one big song with different movements. This changed with 1996's *Under the Bushes, Under the Stars*, though not yet for the worse. Better pro-

Make the Voices Stop

By Hillary Frey

In college, I had a roommate who made personalized bumper stickers for his friends. Mine? "I want my GBV!" From the moment I first heard

sounds more like an over-confident, slightly bored Michael Stipe than the Bud-drinking, Brit-intoned genius from Dayton, Ohio of yore.

Isolation Drills
Guided By Voices
TVT

Guided By Voices—the strange, low-fi band headed by ex-fourth grade teacher and beer enthusiast Robert Pollard—I've wanted my GBV. Just one problem: I can't find it.

This isn't for a lack of records released appearing from a band called "Guided By Voices." As you can see by the little box just above this, there's a new record out from GBV. But the band of merry men that stuck with Pollard through the early years are long gone, replaced by others who have been replaced in turn. And Pollard? These days he



"Hey, have you seen where our tunes went?"