

# arts & letters

## MOVIES

Reviewed by John Hospers

### Diner

It took some courage to produce *Diner*, knowing that it would never attract a large audience. There isn't much action, but the characterizations are finely drawn and the acting superb.

From their high school years, the boys have congregated in the local diner (Baltimore) to reminisce about past escapades and plan new conquests with assorted girl friends. The years pass; it is now 1959; two of them marry, but even so they return regularly, spouseless, to the diner. Nothing has turned out as planned. "Before we got married, all we did was figure out where we could go to make out. After we were married, there wasn't that much to it any more. She was there for the taking any time. And we couldn't find five minutes' worth of things to talk about." And so they return to the diner, reminiscing about past events that didn't seem very extraordinary at the time, and wondering whether what they are experiencing now is all that life is ever going to offer them.

There are many funny moments, but the film is really very sad. Each person in his own way feels trapped, trying to hide it with gallows humor. What does the future hold for the less-talented working-class poor? the picture seems to ask. What is there worth going on for, when

promised bliss has turned to ashes? Life cheats you, and then it just goes on. The film is remarkable for its total honesty. It is a kind of unadorned slice of life, but it rings so true as to shame most other films (including its model, *American Graffiti*) by comparison. The tawdriness of the background, the spiritual poverty, the desperate inchoate search for what is never found—these are delineated with such a sense for fine detail that in the end watching the film becomes a curiously moving experience.

### Firefox

Imagine that you are Clint Eastwood, a known champion of individual rights and liberty. You realize that most Americans know nothing about conditions inside the Soviet Union; they haven't read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag* or John Barron's *KGB* or any of the numerous books written by Soviet defectors. The media are still blasting Nazi Germany, 35 years gone, meanwhile giving in to disinformation about the Soviet Union (see Robert Moss, *Death Beam* and *The Spike*). Most of Hollywood has a soft spot in its heart for any "people's republic"; anti-Soviet books are routinely rejected as material for films. So, how do you use the most powerful and pervasive of art media to get millions of viewers to see what life is like behind the Iron Curtain? You direct and star in a film—*Firefox*—in which, at long last, the Soviet Union is the target, knowing that it will be panned for that very reason.



Clint Eastwood as undercover agent in *Firefox*

You have reached the point in your career when you can afford to thumb your nose at the rest of the movie industry. Meanwhile, the critics respond as predicted. They pan it because it has "no love interest" (that would have been an utter superfluity in this film). They pan it because Eastwood doesn't speak Russian very well (he doesn't) and because some of the dialogue is a bit hard to understand (true). They pan it because it doesn't have the eye-splitting special effects of *Star Wars* (it has special effects aplenty, but happily, it's not another *Star Wars*).

On the whole, this is an informative and exciting film. The air-chase scenes at the end are superbly done, but though these are what draw most viewers into the theater, they are not the most distinctive feature of the film: its main virtue is that it gives us the feel of what it is to live in a police state. There is just one brief scene of torture, as a hint; the rest is done by implication. There is the ever-present KGB, always tailing you, stopping you unpredictably, instilling fear and terror; there is the numbing sense of helplessness in the face of the omnipresent surveillance; and there are the people who knowingly give their lives for the success of the mission, fully aware of what rides on it. "Aren't you angry at the men who sealed your death in this operation?" Eastwood asks an elderly Jew in the underground. "You live in a free country," the man says, "it's hard for you to understand. I am not angry at those who planned this operation; my whole anger is reserved for those who made the mission necessary, the KGB." To date, no one in America or abroad has had the courage to make a film on this subject half as hard-hitting as this one.

*John Hospers teaches philosophy at the University of Southern California. His recent books are Understanding the Arts and Human Conduct (2nd ed.).*



The old gang returns to the Diner to reminisce

## BOOKS

**Good Philosophy  
Made Simple****The Freedom Principle.***By Lansing Pollock.**New York: Prometheus Books.**1981. 130 pp. \$14.95.*

Reviewed by Douglas J. Den Uyl

I am always pleased to see books like *The Freedom Principle* by Lansing Pollock come on the market. I say this not simply because it advocates principles with which I generally agree, but because books on moral and political theory written for the intelligent lay reader are relatively rare. My delight is further intensified when I discover an effort that succeeds.

Most of us in academia teach students of normal intelligence without much background in philosophy or political theory. We also often have friends and family members who are interested in philosophies promoting individual liberty, but who will not plow through scholarly works full of technical jargon. It is therefore helpful to have something to hand these people that is serious and readable while not presupposing any philosophical training. With these criteria in mind, I recommend this book without reservation, even though I may disagree with some of Pollock's arguments.

Pollock claims (unfortunately, at the end of the book rather than at the beginning, where it belongs) that he is writing a book "that can be understood by persons with no formal training in philosophy." Nevertheless, what philosophers *think* is intelligible to the lay reader and what actually *is* intelligible are not always the same. The only way to test Pollock's claim was to give it to some lay readers and see what they thought. I did just that with some of my students.

These were students who fit the picture described above and who were also "middle of the road" politically. Not only did these students have no trouble understanding and appreciating what was being said, but they were uniformly impressed by the logic of the argument. Pollock succeeds in showing how a moral principle ("the freedom principle") is something that many would accept on the face of it and yet not realize all its implications. I was thus happy to see the

book "open the eyes" of students about the logic of freedom. And I intend to continue recommending the book to my students.

The first chapter of the book offers an account of the freedom principle ("each person ought to grant other persons an equal right to be free") in terms of autonomy. Persons are autonomous in the sense that they are capable of acting according to their own conceptions of value and of making long-range plans. Our equal autonomy is the basis for our equal right to freedom. In connection with these basic concepts, Pollock discusses such related issues as duty, obligations to aid others, equality, and utilitarianism. In these discussions the

**Lansing Pollock**

freedom principle takes on the status of a categorical imperative, thus giving the right to freedom a deontological character.

For the most part I have no objections to the foundational discussions of this first chapter. Nevertheless, someone might object that Pollock does not spend time justifying the freedom principle itself. Rather, he simply begins with it and explores its meaning and implications. I am not bothered by this objection, since I think the book works much better without a lot of metaphysical or metaethical baggage. Given the purposes of this book, I therefore find the relative lack of metaethics a virtue rather than a vice.

After the first chapter there are six others concerning the topics of paternalism, punishment, property, government, utopia, and morality. I had numerous points of disagreement with specific proposals Pollock offers. For example, he asserts that it does not violate

the freedom principle for someone's wife to have the court commit him to an institution because of his heroin habit. Moreover, Pollock seems to suppose there will be public parks and public roads in a free society.

But I try to keep the purpose of the book continually in mind. Thus these kinds of objections seem minor to me. Indeed, what is valuable about the book, whether or not one likes all of Pollock's conclusions, is that most of the major areas of controversy are at least touched on in the various chapters. Not only do the discussions cause the unsophisticated reader to think about issues, but there is enough substance in the chapters to cause those of us who are "more sophisticated" to think again about these issues, especially if we find ourselves disagreeing.

Pollock's chapter on property was the least successful. Apart from the fact that he seems to believe there will be sizable holdings of public (government) property in a nonstatist, free society, his main problem stems from an unargued bias in favor of a Lockean conception of natural resources (things valuable for human beings but not produced by them)—that is, resources are conceived to be a common trust. This view leads Pollock to advocate a "resource tax" whereby those who have access to the resources will have to compensate those who do not and thus whose "freedom is diminished."

This modern-day version of Henry George's "single tax" may be more than a minor point of contention of the type mentioned above. When it comes to resources, I have never been much impressed by worries over "Lockean Provisos" and what will happen to others who did not have the entrepreneurial foresight to "get there first." But this is a large issue that cannot be debated here.

Another large issue is Pollock's claim that the government can justifiably take measures to protect the "rights" of future generations—rights that Pollock *asserts* are there rather than argues for. It is thus the weakest link in the logical chain emanating from the freedom principle.

The urge to talk about pollution, original acquisition, taxation, etc., in a chapter on property is quite understandable. Yet the chapter would have been more acceptable if Pollock had devoted his energies to discussing the objections to private property per se. This would have firmly established the logical connection between freedom and private property—which still seems to me to be