

Arts & Letters

FILM

[Cars]

Gentlemen, Start Your Computers

By Steve Sailer

"CARS," the G-rated computer-generated cartoon from the normally reliable John Lasseter of Pixar Animation Studios, takes place in an alternate universe: an America populated only by talking vehicles. Owen Wilson blandly voices Lightning McQueen, a rookie NASCAR racecar who, on his way to California for the climactic contest of the stock-car season, gets waylaid in the Arizona burgh of Radiator Springs, a once-hopping Route 66 stopping point that has been Nowheresville since the new interstate bypassed it in 1966. Its rusty but truehearted denizens, such as the town doctor, a 1951 Hudson Hornet voiced by Paul Newman, teach him important life lessons.

Although the Pixar animators do everything imaginable to infuse the cars with personalities, automobiles still prove ill-chosen agents for two hours of anthropomorphizing. In particular, Luigi and Guido, the Italian-stereotype Fiats working at the Pirelli tire shop, suffer from the autos' lack of hands with which to gesticulate vociferously. A more subtle deficiency of this kids' movie is that there are no kids in the factory-built world of "Cars."

And then there's the fanatically precise scenery. One of Jorge Luis Borges's funnier conceits was the fictional Chinese emperor so adamant about his imperial

cartographers providing more detail that he eventually had them draw a map of China exactly as large as China itself. "Cars" is similarly unclear on the concept of artistic abstraction. Back in 1995's "Toy Story," Lasseter's computer-graphic techniques were charming in their creative simplification and exaggeration of reality. Now the technology has evolved to where, through a prodigious expenditure of talent, time, and money, the CGI desert in "Cars" looks virtually as photo-realistically genuine as the actual desert in, say, the modestly budgeted "Road Warrior"—and, therefore, almost as pointless as the emperor's 1:1 scale map.

When enough billions are on the table, perhaps even Lasseter, one of the true heroes of American popular culture, can lose sight of what has made his art effective.

Pixar's history is famously heartwarming. Purchased by Apple founder Steve Jobs in 1986, Pixar first gained notice that year with Lasseter's 150-second short about mother and baby desk lamps, "Luxo Jr." Two decades ago, everybody knew that computer animation was the next big thing, but it was then skull-crushingly slow to create. Despite the tedium of waiting for 1980s processors, Lasseter infused human warmth into his computer images. Ultimately, Lasseter's 15 years of effort paid off with the superb blockbuster "Toy Story."

Pixar became the reincarnation of Walt Disney's old studio—a specialty shop crafting only high quality, non-edgy 3-D family films, such as "Finding Nemo" and "The Incredibles." Finally, last January, Jobs sold Pixar to Disney for \$7.4 billion, with Lasseter as the prize human asset.

Will the money ruin Pixar? It's disquieting that the Disney 2-D animation renaissance that began with "The Little Mermaid" in 1989 and hit its peak with

"Beauty and the Beast" sputtered out after "The Lion King" became a billion-dollar property in 1994. Animators who once had few cares besides wowing each other with imagination and comedy in their dingy warehouse in Glendale quickly aged into profit centers nearly paralyzed with fiscal responsibility in their new architectural showcase at Disney headquarters in Burbank.

Although Pixar films use the highest technology, the company sends numerous employees each year to Robert McKee's screenwriting seminars (which were parodied in Charlie Kaufman's "Adaptation"). McKee gets his traditionalist ideas about storytelling from Aristotle and Golden Age Hollywood films like "Casablanca." McKee's adages have served Pixar well in making their films focus on narrative and character rather than techno-nerdisms or one-liners.

Perhaps Pixar's McKee formula may be reaching diminishing returns, though, as "Cars" turns out to have the same plot as the 1991 Michael J. Fox romantic comedy "Doc Hollywood." Moreover, McKee's emphasis on drama has been taken too much to heart in "Cars," as the six screenwriters forgot to include any jokes until the hilarious end credits. Stock-car racing, which is a sort of covert ethnic-pride rally for people who aren't allowed to hold ethnic-pride rallies, is treated too reverently for a film that purports to be a comedy.

With luck, though, "Cars" will turn out to be a minor detour for Lasseter and Pixar. Although lacking inspiration, "Cars" remains an above-average film, delivering intelligent detailing—because it still takes 17 hours to render each frame, years are available for fine-tuning—patriotic nostalgia, and uplifting sentiments about teamwork and humility. ■

Rated G.

BOOKS

[*Conservatives Without Conscience*, John Dean, Viking, 288 pages]

Conformity Without Conscience

By Austin Bramwell

SOMETHING IS ROTTEN in the state of conservatism, says John Dean in *Conservatives Without Conscience*. Today's conservatives are "hostile and mean-spirited," "vengeful, pitiless, exploitive, manipulative, dishonest, cheaters, prejudiced, mean-spirited [again], militant, nationalistic, and two-faced," not to mention "enemies of freedom, antidemocratic, antiequality, highly prejudiced, mean-spirited [once more], power hungry, Machiavellian, and amoral." Mental handicaps such as "intolerance of ambiguity, need for certainty or structure in life, overreaction to threats, and a disposition to dominate others" turn them ineluctably into "authoritarians" and "social dominators." Unless stopped, Dean warns, conservatives "will take American democracy where no freedom-loving person would want it to go."

Those who buy the conclusion that Dean all but assumes—namely, that movement conservatives are destroying the Republic—will find all this wonderfully cathartic. No need to troll the internet for anti-Republican Party talking points: *Conservatives Without Conscience* hits them all. The GOP has shifted to the extreme right and imposed virtual one-party rule; evangelicals want to install a theocracy and tear down the wall of separation between church and state; the Bush administration has stripped citizens of their civil liberties and emasculated the other branches of

government; social conservatives hate women and gays and want to reduce them to second-class citizens; conservative legal scholars, merely by questioning the theory of judicial supremacy (which Dean confuses with the power of judicial review), threaten the independence of the courts. The right wing gets away with these and other crimes by being a bunch of hypocritical, sanctimonious jerks.

Humorlessly posing as a disinterested champion of the public weal, Dean defends his unkind words for conservatives by invoking the theory of the "authoritarian personality." First introduced by the neo-Freudian Theodor Adorno in the 1940s but largely discredited by the 1970s, the theory evidently still has its champions, who have carried on a small, if obscure, research industry in its name. Their work does not appear to have earned widespread acceptance among academic psychologists. No matter: in Dean's mind, as he spends the bulk of *Conservatives Without Conscience* arguing, the theory of the authoritarian personality establishes the malevolence of conservatives as scientific fact.

To anyone not blind with ideological rage, however, the theory has patent flaws. The whole thing turns out to be rather trivial, notwithstanding all the portentous claims made on the theory's behalf. Take, for example, the work of Dean's favorite guru, a University of Manitoba psychologist named Robert Altemeyer. Altemeyer has spent a career administering a questionnaire he calls the "Right Wing Authoritarianism Survey," in which he asks subjects to agree or disagree with statements such as "the old-fashioned ways and old-fashioned values still show the best way to live" or "there is nothing wrong with premarital sexual intercourse." After collecting the results, Altemeyer goes on to find that those who score high on the "RWA" scale also tend to be political conservatives. Well, yeah: the questions themselves do little more than elicit conservative or liberal attitudes in the first place. The RWA scale shows only that conservative beliefs correlate well with ... other conservative beliefs. Call it science if you will—Dean

does—but it certainly hasn't much in the way of explanatory power.

Furthermore, to the extent that the RWA survey measures anything at all, it measures nothing close to what Altemeyer thinks it does. Is it true, for example, that "Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us"? Maybe Altemeyer thinks that anyone who answers "yes" pines for a charismatic nationalist leader *a la*—who else?—Adolf Hitler. But, in fact, any effective political leader could fit the description. In the civil-rights era, for example, did not our country "desperately need" (to rectify injustice) a "mighty leader" (he certainly had a large following) such as the sainted Martin Luther King Jr. who was willing to "do what it takes" (organize marches and boycotts) to "stamp out" (end) "sinfulness" (segregation) and "radical new ways" (racist backlash)? Logical consistency would compel nearly everyone to agree with the statement, no matter how provocatively phrased. If it turns out that only conservatives say that they agree, this shows only that conservatives understand the meaning of words.

The RWA survey teems with other such statements, many of almost irredeemable silliness. Take, for example, "God's laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed." Well, who could disagree with that? If God's laws are by definition perfectly good, then by *modus ponens* one should follow them whether God exists or not. The statement is as self-evidently true as "All unicorns are horses." Curiously, however, Altemeyer finds that left-wingers tend to disagree with the statement. One may conclude, therefore, that leftist ideology tends to incapacitate logic—an important result, perhaps worthy of further research, but not the one Altemeyer was going for.

Meanwhile, the RWA survey seems specifically calculated to avoid identifying authoritarian attitudes on the Left. Altemeyer claims to have looked for left-wing authoritarians but failed to find them. If