

In November, the state revenue advisory board estimated the state's budget deficit at \$700 million. It has climbed steadily, as Dukakis and his few remaining loyalists put forth package after package of spending

cuts, tax increases, and revenue raisers (including one measure designed to pull in uncollected bottle deposits), and the commonwealth's legislature bats them down.

The next battle for Massachusetts

will take place on the tax front, with the sides lining up predictably. The left is clamoring for tax increases rather than "human sacrifices," in the words of *Globe* columnist Bob Kuttner, while everyone else contends that taxes have

already been raised enough, and that instead tax credits should be used to encourage investment.

Either way, it will be a long time before we see Massachusetts at double-A-plus again. □

THE TALKIES



DOPES ON DOPE

by Bruce Bawer

Finally, a movie whose characters we can all identify with. Twenty-six-year-old Bob Hughes (Matt Dillon), the eponymous hero of *Drugstore Cowboy*, is a full-time dope fiend. So are his wife, Dianne (Kelly Lynch), his sidekick, Rick (James Le Gross), and Rick's girlfriend, Nadine (Heather Graham). It's 1971, and these four adorable kids live together in Portland, Oregon, where—since none of them holds down a job—they spend their days jabbing hypodermic needles into their arms and ripping off local pharmacies. A scene early in the movie illustrates their *modus operandi*: Nadine distracts the druggist and his customers by faking an epileptic seizure near the doorway; meanwhile, Bob slips nimbly behind the prescription counter and empties a drawer full of controlled substances; Dianne helps keep attention away from the counter, and on the way out steals a paperback copy of *Love Story* from a rack (she's the literary one); and Rick drives the getaway car. Bob's so eager to get his fix that he starts shooting up on the way home. As he explains in retrospective voice-over, dope delivered him from the unpredictability of life: "Most people don't know what's going to happen next. But a dope fiend's got a pretty good idea. All you have to do is read the labels on the little bottles." And what happened next, when he shot up, was invariably glorious: "Everything took on the rosy hue of unlimited success. As long as it lasted, life was beautiful."

And, for a while, to Bob and company, the beauty of this drug-engendered escape from reality seems well worth all the trouble of knocking over Rexall's and getting hassled by the fuzz. These kids have *fun* being junkies.

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They play games. For example, when two plainclothesmen stake out their second-floor pad from a ladder, Bob tells a neighbor that one of the cops is a peeping tom, and the neighbor—who, quite conveniently, proves to be the neighborhood maniac—blows the lawman away with a rifle. Cute, no? It's not till Bob and his friends leave Portland for a cross-country drive that things turn sour. Bob almost gets caught breaking into a hospital pharmacy; Nadine—who has deliberately flouted the extraordinarily superstitious Bob's injunction against putting a hat on a bed—dies of an overdose. Suddenly Bob does an about-face: he wants to stop doing drugs. Dianne and Rick think he's crazy, and won't have anything to do with it. So Bob returns alone to Portland, takes a monotonous

factory job, rents a grim little apartment, and goes on a 21-day methadone program.

Too bad. For up till Nadine's death the movie has a certain gritty, disturbing power. The characters feel real, the action darkly compelling; though director Gus Van Sant and his co-writer Dan Yost hardly overload the film with plot, they know something about dramatic shape and pacing, and they're gifted with a genuine—if aberrant—wit. (Well, *somebody* is; perhaps it's James Fogle, the Washington State jailbird from whose unpublished, largely autobiographical novel this picture was adapted.) But once Bob returns to Portland the whole contraption falls apart. His transformation doesn't convince for a second. Nor does his explanation help matters much: as he tells

Dianne, he was so freaked out by Nadine's death that he vowed he'd kick the habit if only God or the Devil or Whoever Was Up There helped him get safely through the ordeal of disposing of her body. He stuck to the vow, you see, because he's so superstitious; and he's so superstitious (it's implied) because he was brought up a pious Catholic. But this just doesn't work dramatically, for neither Bob's immoderate superstition nor his Catholicism is ever made to seem a truly integral part of his character; from the moment that it's introduced, the superstition comes off as a feeble joke on the part of the filmmakers, a wacky quirk of character that doesn't quite click into place, while the Catholicism is barely established at all.



Nor do the filmmakers seem to have a clear idea what they're doing in this latter part of the film; the scenes—Bob at work, Bob at an ex-junkie rap session, and so forth—follow each other in a meaningless jumble. And a *dull* jumble, for while the lawless, amoral, drug-addicted Bob of the earlier part of the film is at least interesting to watch, the drug-free Bob is downright boring. The movie flounders badly, then, until its dramatically unsatisfying conclusion—a conclusion whose impact derives entirely from a graphically depicted act of violence, and whose intended irony falls completely flat because it presumes a level of sympathy for Bob, on the part of the audience, that is utterly inconceivable.

And that's a big problem with *Drugstore Cowboy*: Bob is completely, undividedly, and utterly unsympathetic. This young man who doesn't give a moment's thought to anyone else (including the members of his make-

shift "family"), and for whose perfect insensitivity the filmmakers don't even try to hint at a coherent motivation, is impossible to care about. Not only does he lack a single redeeming feature; aside from his superstition, his encyclopedic knowledge of narcotics, and his apparent indifference to sex (quoth Dianne: "Bob's just like a rabbit: in and out, and no nonsense—and that goes for a lot more than a hospital pharmacy"), there isn't much of a character here. Nor do we have any sense of what drove him to drugs in the first place, aside from the aforementioned fact that they made life beautiful. It's part of the implicit argument of this movie, indeed, that drugs *do* make life seem beautiful, that in order to treat the subject of drug addiction realistically a filmmaker must begin by owning up to this fact, and that if there *is* a reason why you can't stick with drugs forever it's surely not that they fail to live up to their rep or that the obligatory criminality might eventually make you

feel remorseful. Which is also part of the problem with this film: Bob doesn't quit drugs because he comes to realize that it's wrong for him to be robbing pharmacies, sponging off society, getting cops shot up, breaking his poor mother's heart, and so forth; nor does he quit because he wants to do himself a favor. Rather, he quits because of an asinine superstition. (As he puts it: "I like drugs. I like the whole life-style. But it just didn't work out.") His reversal is thus both dramatically inert and ethically meaningless.

The moral bankruptcy of the film is underlined by the presence in the later Portland sequences of the elderly Beat novelist William S. Burroughs (*Naked Lunch, Junky*). Burroughs plays Tom Murphy, a ruminative, soft-spoken expatriate who is "the most notorious dope fiend on the Coast" and whom Bob (a former altar boy) has known since his childhood. It's a disturbing bit of casting. What, one must ask, is Burroughs doing here? He's arguably the

most despicable creature in the history of American letters (if you don't know why, next time you're in a bookstore grab Ted Morgan's 1988 biography of him, *Literary Outlaw*, and open it to any page), and the filmmakers obviously expect us to recognize him and to identify him with his character. But why? Why place this vile, unscrupulous old monster in the role of a gentle sage to whom Bob says, "You should've been a philosopher"? Are Van Sant and company suggesting that they want their film to be seen as a cinematic counterpart to Burroughs's appalling, amoral, egocentric novels? Certainly some of the film's "wisdom" (e.g., "You can buck the system, but you can't buck the deep forces that lie beneath the surface") sounds suspiciously like the kind of fatuously anarchic and penny-ante mystical nonsense that Burroughs serves up in his books.

The movie has a weird tone, one that combines a TV movie-style earnestness about drug addiction with an irreverent, absurdist waggery about the subject. The film tries to get you to laugh at all sorts of things, at the wacky as well as the grisly—at, for instance, Rick's unremitting literal-mindedness; at Bob's perverse superstitiousness; at the way Bob's runaway dog (in one of several brief, goofy, extraneous flashbacks) leads the police to his door after a crime; at the sight of that undercover cop being shot by that rifle-toting neighbor; at the way Bob, walking into a room to find Nadine dead, barks, "Who left this hat on the bed?"; at Father Tom's pious gratitude for Bob's stash ("God bless you, my son, may you go to heaven") and his blunt dismissal of certain items contained therein ("This is for squares—never touch the stuff"). Sometimes you do find yourself laughing—and sometimes you find yourself a bit stunned at everyone else's amusement.

and why) and because their satire is given spirit and purpose by a keen, if highly idiosyncratic, moral faculty; in *Drugstore Cowboy*, by contrast, the gags pop up when least expected, and tend (in the "tradition" of Burroughs and his fellow Beats) to be pretentiously and pointlessly nihilistic. The Coens' well-aimed ridicule distances them morally from their characters; Van Sant's scattershot japey makes him seem a veritable accomplice in his characters' anarchic malfesance.

I don't mean to suggest that the film doesn't have some noteworthy assets. Whether because he has developed remarkably as an actor or because he has been allowed here to play a character who is shallow and inarticulate enough not to strain him beyond his limits, Matt Dillon is generally convincing as Bob. Le Gross likewise rings true as the dense and tractable Rick. James Remar, for his part, is very fine as a tenacious Portland cop named Gentry who takes a provocative but ultimately implausible interest in Bob. (Whether the attraction is sexual, or whether Gentry—the very embodiment of law and order—envies Bob's rebelliousness, remains ambiguous.) For the most part, moreover, Robert Yeoman's photography is at once exquisite and appropriately naturalistic—though his terse, surrealistic representations of Bob's drug-induced euphoria feel clumsy and curiously old-fashioned.

The film offers, then, a vivid close-up view of the world it surveys. Yet its perspective on that world is more than a bit cockeyed. You get the feeling that the filmmakers think there's something potent and honest and unsentimental about their morally neutral, self-centered vision of life, about the fact that Bob—for all he goes through—comes away with little in the way of moral insight ("It's this f---ing life," he says in his valedictory voice-over speech; "you never know what's going to happen next"), and about the irony that Bob's final downfall, after all his years of selfishness, is a direct consequence of the only two generous acts one sees him performing in the entire picture.

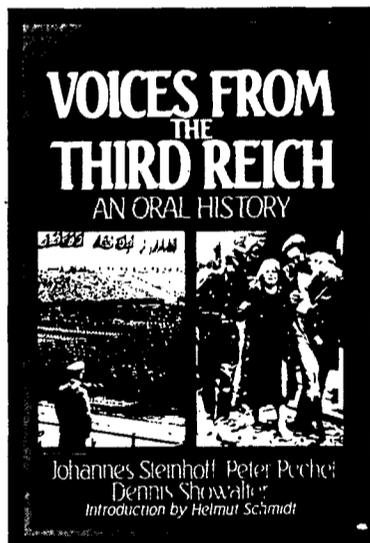
Yet, for all its toughness, the film is not free of a certain Beat-style sentimentality. For one thing, the movie opens with a tenderly nostalgic vocal arrangement of the wonderful standard "For All We Know," the romanticism of which may well be intended ironically, though it doesn't come off that way for another thing. Bob and Dianne, despite their heavy use of narcotics, are as nicey as can be, and look young for their age to boot. This film would've been a lot more respectable a work of art if it had been a straightforward, un-

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BOOK REVIEWS

Chile was once a country where nothing ever happened. It was known for its democratic tradition and the civility of its political culture, rather like Costa Rica today. But in 1970 it was thrust onto the world stage when Salvador Allende, a charming and literary physician, was unexpectedly elected president, the first time a people had freely opted for Marxism anywhere in the world. Allende upset the balance of the Cold War. Here was an alternative to Bolshevism. He claimed to offer a vision that combined Christian values and socialist institutions, a form of Eurocommunism that was likely to have huge appeal in Italy, France, Spain, and all of South America. Chile became the great hope of the left.

Allende's election was a blow to the United States. In the 1960s Chile had been the showcase of the Alliance for Progress. The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations spent \$2 billion, more per capita than on any other country in the Western Hemisphere, trying to make Chile a shining alternative to Castro's Cuba. It was hard to leave the place alone after investing so much money and enthusiasm. As is now well known, the Nixon Administration got entangled and left enough fingerprints in Chile as to render plausible the accusation that Allende was toppled by American intervention. Indeed, it is almost universally believed that the CIA was behind the military coup in 1973, and the world holds America responsible for the tragic dictatorship that succeeded.

Mark Falcoff argues that something much more interesting actually happened. A fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, he has a passion for Chile and has spent a good part of the last sixteen years mulling over the coup, both its causes and consequences. His brilliant book, somewhat misleadingly entitled *Modern Chile 1970-1989*, is perhaps the most authoritative analysis yet published on the Allende era. It is not an apologia for American foreign policy (and certainly not for Pinochet's police). Instead, after meticulous research Falcoff shows that the Nixon Administration did indeed try to get rid of Allende but did so half-heartedly, without getting anywhere, and soon gave up. When the coup came three years later it was an entirely Chilean affair. Allende brought about his own

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard writes on Latin America for the London Daily Telegraph.

MODERN CHILE 1970-1989: A CRITICAL HISTORY Mark Falcoff/Transaction Books/327 pp. \$32.50

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard

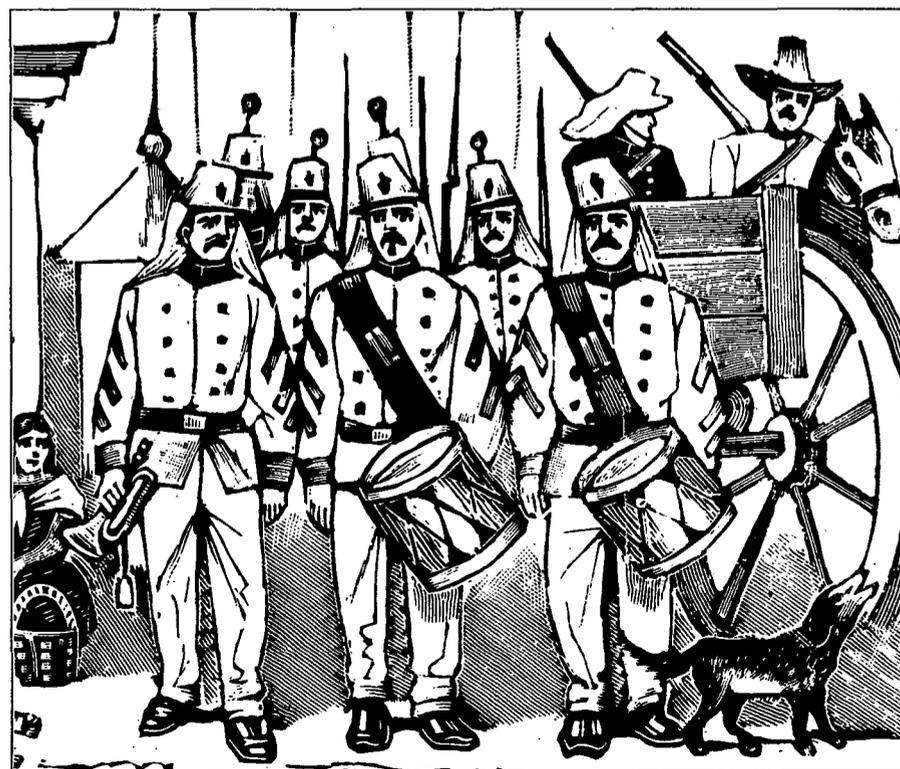
downfall (and arguably deserved it).

The Church Committee in 1975 made all kinds of insinuations but was forced to clear the Nixon Administration of involvement in the coup, admitting that there "was no evidence." Nevertheless, the committee did expose the American effort to prevent Allende from taking power in the first place. This was to be done by quasi-constitutional means. According to the Chilean constitution, the Congress was to elect the president if no candidate won an outright majority at the polls, and although it was customary to confirm the candidate with the most votes it was not mandatory. Allende's Popular Unity coalition won only 37 percent of the vote in a three-way race, and therefore needed the support of the (then) center-left Christian Democrats.

The International Telephone and Telegraph Company, which had investments of up to \$200 million in Chile, drew the CIA into a plan to bribe wavering Christian Democrats into joining a conservative coalition in the

Congress. It went nowhere, and the CIA money set aside was never spent. So ITT then came up with a plan to unleash economic chaos in order to frighten the Christian Democrats into voting against Allende. But none of the other American multinationals or banks would go along with it, and again the plan went nowhere. "Thus for all the cable time, telephone calls, meetings, and lunches," writes Falcoff, "... in an operational sense no joint ITT-CIA plan to bribe the Congress or unleash a financial crisis ever existed."

That was Track I. There was also Track II, Nixon's ultra-secret plan for a military coup (intended to install a civilian alternative to Popular Unity, possibly after fresh elections). The CIA was instructed to recruit Chilean officers thought to favor such action, and special weapons were smuggled in through the U.S. diplomatic pouch. It was a fiasco. The plotters accidentally killed the army chief in a kidnap at-



tempt, and the officer corps as a whole stayed loyal to its constitutional tradition.

The CIA was not involved in any further effort to overthrow Allende once he had taken office. Nixon may have threatened to "make the economy scream" but he never followed through. There was no "invisible boycott," even though this has become an article of faith on the left. Chile continued buying American spare parts and machinery, and continued borrowing from American banks. Credit lines were gradually cut as Chile became less and less creditworthy and ultimately defaulted on its foreign debt. The regime enjoyed the benefits of default (a saving of \$243 million in debt service for 1972 alone), without paying the penalty, since it was able to continue borrowing at a reckless level from the Soviet bloc and Western Europe.

The CIA funneled about \$6 million to the Chilean opposition, notably the Christian Democrats and the Santiago newspaper *El Mercurio*. But this was intended to keep pluralism alive at a time when Allende was already using totalitarian tricks to asphyxiate the opposition, and when Popular Unity was commingling the state treasury with its own. A tiny fraction of this American money seeped into the truckers' strike (July-September 1973), which paralyzed the country and set the stage for the coup, but that was in spite of CIA policy. And finally, the Nixon Administration ordered the CIA to keep its distance from the Chilean military in 1973, even to the point of sacrificing intelligence, so that the United States would not be blamed for any coup. A nice irony.

Falcoff makes it clear that whatever the intentions of the Nixon Administration, the effects were almost nil. The purpose of his book is not to exculpate Nixon, but to inculcate Allende; to clear away the fog and confusion that protect the legend, and show that the militant left bears much of the responsibility for the rape of Chile. Allende bankrupted the economy, ran roughshod over Chilean society, and seemed unable to resist pressures from his own party to subvert Chilean democracy and install a totalitarian system. He took the country to the brink of civil war and provoked the coup. He is the father of the messianic and demented General Pinochet.

With hindsight it seems inevitable that the armed forces would step in once Allende went beyond his mandate, but Falcoff makes the fascinating point