



Feel So Bad

by James Bowman

Like most readers of this journal, I believe in free markets. And that goes for the movies too. In return for your six dollars, they will give you all the escapist comedy or inspirational drama or simulated sex and violence that you want, and this is as it should be. Yet all but the most dedicated philistines recognize that there is something more to it than that: there are great films that don't make money and there is meretricious trash that enjoys big commercial success. Sometimes people want things that are not good for them.

Maybe, indeed, they are not good for the rest of us either. We ban certain drugs because we believe that they have an effect upon the social fabric that goes well beyond an individual's taste for powdered suicide. *Rush*, a new film by Lili Fini Zanuck, offers a harrowing portrayal of what drugs can do by contagion, as it were—or, depending on how you look at it, of what happens when you ban them. I confess, however, that if I were dictator I would be much more tempted to ban movies like *Fried Green Tomatoes* and to lock up the sort of people who go to them in order to feel good about themselves and the world.

Boogus uplift is what I object to. It is a kind of drug, and in my darker moods I suspect that it is as dangerous to the social fabric as the kinds of drugs we lock people up for using and selling. In fact it may be more dangerous, because no shame attaches to it. People don't brand themselves as social misfits by shooting up pure sentiment, and the deforming effect it must

have upon their souls is not as obvious as the physical ravages of heroin or cocaine after long use. Yet if you take *Fried Green Tomatoes* in its concentrated, two-hour-and-twenty-minute dose, the spiritual devastation it can wreak makes heroin look like Turkish delight.

Pick your feel-good image and, chances are, *FGT* has got it. You want tough and funny women? You want the good people feeding the hungry poor and helping the disabled while they have a wonderful time fighting off racism, sexism, ageism, sizeism, ableism, menopause, false charges of murder and, at last and unsuccessfully, cancer? You want the bad guy to be a wife-beater? What the hell, make him a Ku Klux Klansman as well, just so that you can be sure that he's *really* bad. Add lots of submissive, 1930s-style black folks and cute children and lovable village eccentrics to give you that warm feeling of folksy Southern authenticity and you've got the Acapulco gold of sentimentality.

This is called laying it on with a trowel, and we should be grateful to Fannie Flagg, who wrote the story, and Jon Avnet, the director and co-author of the screenplay, for making it so easy to spot the fakery. Even such good actresses as Kathy Bates and Jessica Tandy look like fakes in this vehicle. All art is fakery, of course, but great art gives the illusion of reality. *Fried Green Tomatoes* is at the opposite extreme from great art. Let's admit, for the sake of argument, that the things it celebrates as good reality are good and that its message (about how "the most important thing in life is friendship") is a true message. If you then proceed, as this film does, to invent characters and a story merely to illustrate that message, you destroy an essential part of the artistic illusion.

In other words, characters before

meaning. If you start with the meaning and then work backwards to the characters which will demonstrate it you are creating sermons and not art. Fannie Flagg may be right about friendship and the empowerment of women and all the rest of the opinions she holds, but she cannot convince me of that just because she is able to invent characters who illustrate the thesis. I could invent characters to prove the thesis that friendship is worthless and that women ought to be chattels, but that does not produce any moral authority for my point of view.

What is true of *Fried Green Tomatoes* is also true of *Grand Canyon*, although the latter is much more subtle about it. By that I mean that its director, Lawrence Kasdan, at least does not feel that he has to persuade us that wife-beating and the KKK are bad and that self-confident women and feeding the starving are good. Instead, as he told the *New York Times*, he wants to raise questions about "what kind of personal values to adhere to in deteriorating cities, and how to cope with constant jeopardy, the fragility of relationships and, for that matter, life." He is defensive about the "pretentiousness" of such questions, but the problem is not that they are pretentious. It is that they are allowed to become more important than the dramatic situation or the characters.

Actually, he is quite successful in conveying a sense of the constant menace just below the surface of upper-middle-class urban life, and the portrait of the producer (supposedly based on Joel Silver) of films of exploitative violence, played by Steve Martin, is amusing. But even though you would certainly do no worse to take Lawrence Kasdan than

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Fannie Flagg as your guide to living, both are more concerned with producing such a guide than they are with the lives of their characters, whom a real artist would love for their own sake. By the end of the film, as they all gather at the Grand Canyon, that symbolic precipice on the edge of which they have been living for years, they decide that life is worth living after all: "I think it's not all bad," says the main puppet.

Correction: Kasdan thinks it's not all bad, and you, chum, are just his pathetic little mouthpiece. Why should we care what either one of you has to say about a subject as big as this unless you have established through the drama your right to speak of it? It is the pernicious legacy of psychoanalysis that everybody's feelings about life are worth our listening to just because they exist—or don't exist, as the case may be. Fictional characters, unlike our loved ones or clients, have to earn their right to a hearing by being interesting in some other way—and being in therapy is not interesting enough.

That is the lesson of Barbra Streisand's *Prince of Tides*. The childhood trauma that lurks in the background of the Wingo family has hardly any dramatic weight at all except insofar as it is the provocation for the defense mechanisms that the family has developed over the years to cover it up. Miss Streisand herself, together with her legs, plays the caring psychoanalyst who breaks down the defenses of Tom Wingo (Nick Nolte) and then falls in love with him. "Feel your pain, Tom," she says, "It's OK to feel it. Just let it go. You have so much to cry about, don't you?"

No he doesn't, cries my irrepressible disbelief; he's only an actor pretending to have a lot to cry about. What Eliot called the "objective correlative"—the dramatic justification for that pain—is missing. Telling us what it is is not enough; we have to live it with him. Yet it seems that audiences are shirking their responsibility to demand that kind of artistic integrity because they want to feel themselves feel, and they accept even this schlock, factitious feeling as an excuse to pull out the old hankies. They don't recognize how spiritually dangerous that cheap high is.

Wim Wenders, in his extraordinary new film called *Until the End of the*

World, does. It goes on for too long and is too ambitious, it's true, but you've got to love his metaphors. Max von Sydow plays a fugitive scientist who has invented a wonderful machine that enables blind people to see by recording in a sighted person the biochemical act of seeing a particular videotaped image, which can then be "seen" by the blind person, in this case his wife (Jeanne Moreau), by reproducing that chemistry in her.

Most of the best part of the film, which is set in 1999, is taken up with an absurdist chase across the world as a nuclear satellite that may explode at any moment circles the globe. Von Sydow's son (William Hurt) has his fake vision machine and is using it to record interviews with relatives, most of whom his mother has never seen. He is being pursued by a couple of detectives who are bounty hunters for the U.S. government, which claims to own the machine be-



cause it was developed under its research auspices, and by a pretty woman (Solveig Dommartin) from whom he has stolen some stolen money that she was transporting and who proceeds to fall in love with him.

When all the characters end up in Australia with the scientist, his wife, and a bunch of aboriginal technicians, things bog down a little, but there is one very striking passage in which the scientist develops his machine a little further so that it can record dreams. Both Solveig Dommartin and William Hurt get hooked on watching their own dreams, and the extent to which this "disease of images" resembles an addiction is well brought out. In effect, that addiction is like addiction to sentiment or to heroin: it traps its victim inside himself. This terrible self-fascination has to be broken cold turkey by Miss Dommartin, who ends the film with the job of watching

the earth from a space station while Hurt takes to the hills with his dream recorder. We are left to wonder whether complete absorption within the self or complete physical detachment from the earth is the worse fate. Certainly the two are closely akin.

It is a terrific picture that I heartily recommend, but because its two halves really don't have very much to do with one another, I reserve the accolade of Film of the Month for Mike Leigh's *Life is Sweet*. The title suggests that we are dealing here with yet another feel-good movie and to an extent that is true. What sets it apart from the others, however, is the fact that the good feeling, when it comes, is a small one, justified by the situation; it bears an ironic relation to the grandiose title—which also recalls Fellini (*La Dolce Vita*) and one of the main characters' addiction to chocolate. For here it is the characters and not the feeling or the message that drive the film and produce all the dramatic energy.

This is all the more remarkable because there is virtually no plot. Andy (Jim Broadbent) buys a snack trailer for too much money from a drunken friend, and his wife, Wendy (Alison Steadman), helps another friend open a pseudo-French restaurant that serves such revolting dishes as prune quiche and pork cyst, king prawns in jam and duck *au chocolat*. Both of them have to cope with their grown twin daughters who still live at home: one (Claire Skinner) has become a plumber and the other (Jane Horrocks) has retreated from the world to shout radical and feminist slogans with comic inappropriateness and to gorge herself on chocolate while the rest of the family is asleep.

That's about it. But each character is so perfectly realized that our interest never flags; the comedy of a just slightly heightened version of ordinary life is so beautifully rendered that even a little uplift in Wendy's climactic speech to her troglodytic daughter—about what love means, about getting on with and making the best of lives that are far from perfect—seems natural and appropriate. If you want to feel good about yourself, this is about as good as you should allow yourself to feel if you don't want to get hooked on the narcissistic rush. □

“Mindless” and “hopelessly naive” were the words used to describe the theories of Francis Fukuyama at a recent meeting of the Constitutional Club here in London. The characterizations were unfair, of course, but it has to be said that Fukuyama invited his fair share of invective when he published his seminal article “The End of History?” suggesting that democratic capitalism, as a motivating idea, had won a permanent victory over all forms of mass enthusiasm and organized evil. Such triumphalism, almost Marxist in character, was bound to offend conservatives, for it goes against the deepest instincts of Tory pessimism. The article was superb, in both senses of the word, but it was flawed because it did not explain convincingly why History should, necessarily, be going anywhere, why there should be progress, direction, or improvement of any kind, instead of the usual cyclical relapse into violence and nastiness.

Fukuyama’s great mentor, Hegel, also had difficulty answering this question, but supplemented argument with religious faith. Ultimately, Hegel always fell back on his metaphysical premise that History was the life of God, that God realized Himself through man’s journey from slave to self-conscious moral being. Fukuyama, by contrast, does not rely on God to carry him through. He uses hard empirical reasoning, without recourse to faith, to advance his claim that History is going somewhere. It is a more difficult challenge than Hegel’s theodicy, and Fukuyama did not quite pull it off in his 1989 article in the *National Interest*. He offered a snapshot of the world taken at a moment when the liberal idea was enjoying a second wind after an interlude of de-

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THE END OF HISTORY AND THE LAST MAN

Francis Fukuyama

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reviewed by AMBROSE EVANS-PRITCHARD

featism. He failed to supply a motive force of Universal History.

Two years later, Fukuyama has produced a work of magisterial breadth that cannot be dismissed so easily. I must confess that I suspected the book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, would be a padded amplification of his 1989 article, an attempt to cash in on celebrity. In fact, it is a whole new departure. His article merely asked the question whether or not History had come to an end. His book, on the other hand, includes no question mark in the title. It tries to explain why History has ended and why liberal democracy was ultimately destined to prevail. He does it with great skill. Indeed, to my Anglo-Saxon taste, he does it better than Hegel himself.

Above all, Fukuyama has identified the motive force of History. It is the ever-growing body of scientific knowledge, the product of Man’s irrepressible desire to fashion his natural surroundings to his advantage. Earlier civilizations, notably the Roman Empire, may have lost their science and technology, regressing to a more primitive state as a result of incursions and conquest by warlike tribes. But Fukuyama argues that this cannot happen again. The cyclical chain, if it ever really existed, has been broken forever. The knowledge accumulated without interruption over the last 600 years is now vast, easily accessible, and widely understood. Not even a cataclysmic war could destroy it permanently, unless all humanity were destroyed with it. Nor are there any barbarians at the gates in the late twentieth century. Virtually the entire world be-

longs to a single scientific community. Those that choose to reject it, perhaps for obscurantist religious reasons, necessarily forfeit the military capability required to annihilate it. History, therefore, cannot revert. Science has imposed a direction on Mankind.

The question is what direction. Fukuyama argues that the progress of science leads ineluctably to the free-market economy. Apart from the obvious point that Communism stifles innovation, saps the work ethic, invites corruption on a colossal scale, and drives everybody to drink and despair, the system cannot sustain a high-tech economy, which requires a large chunk of the population, as opposed to a tiny elite, to think for itself. Even if it could work culturally, it could not work economically because there is no price mechanism to send signals to producers and consumers. The state sets the price of everything, arbitrarily, without understanding the cost of anything, and twists itself into ever greater knots as production moves from a few dinosaur industries like iron and steel to the diversified production of consumer goods. Eventually, the whole system chokes in the tangled thicket of price distortion.

Fukuyama is surely correct in claiming, at this particular moment, that only a system of free prices is flexible enough to regulate the millions of different kinds of transactions of goods and services that take place daily in a modern, rich, high-tech society. But things can change with remarkable speed. In the middle of this century political scientists were still assuming that mass communications, which could be used for the purposes of propaganda and mind control, worked to the advantage of totalitarian regimes. At the time, perhaps, they were right. But events have since turned the argument upside down. It was the communications revolution that finished off the Stalinists. One wonders whether technology might not prove a fickle ally in the future as the