



## Can You Believe It?

by James Bowman

Is it just me, or is the stuff coming out of Hollywood getting more and more far-fetched and unbelievable? If art (and that means movies, too) has a conscience, its guiding principle is not morality but truth-to-life, which is all that prevents it from collapsing into a farrago of fantasy and nonsense like *Toys*, a flick so far removed from reality that it is hardly worth criticizing. And it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Hollywood is losing its artistic conscience (its moral conscience, of course, went long ago). Look at some of the movies that have, amazingly enough, attracted millions of viewers in recent weeks.

In *The Bodyguard*, with Kevin Costner and Whitney Houston, we are asked to believe that a self-absorbed, Madonna-like pop star (Miss Houston) could be the target of a contract killing meant to take place on the night of the Academy Awards ceremony just as she receives the Oscar for best actress. A heroic ex-Secret Service agent (Costner) stops the bullet intended for her. Hollywood may have forgotten how to make a thriller, but it certainly remembers its own self-importance—as if anyone sane enough to hire a killer would consider this chanteuse important enough to go to so much trouble to kill. Paradoxically, the film manages to demonstrate the untruth of a contention—“Politics and show business, it’s the same thing these days”—that we would otherwise be disposed to believe.

In *Passenger 57*, the original premise is that a “sophisticated British aristocrat” (Bruce Payne) goes around killing people and hijacking airliners because of an unhappy childhood (his life of crime start-

ed with the murder of his father) but for no discernible political reason, until he is stopped by a black street kid turned security agent (Wesley Snipes). And if this isn’t unbelievable enough, the sophisticated British aristocrat has managed to collect around himself a terrorist gang (have they all killed their fathers?) who are as ruthless and violent as he is. Hey! If one sophisticated British aristocrat/terrorist is a good idea, how about a *gang* of sophisticated British aristocrat/terrorists? Talk about decadence!

But if you think that idea strains credulity, you should try *A Few Good Men*, which manages to make the lawyers the good guys and the men of honor the bad guys. On top of that we have to believe that Tom Cruise is smart, Demi Moore is a tough career soldier, and Jack Nicholson is a right-wing nut. Tell it to the Marines! And we may add to the film’s sins against verisimilitude the dangerous, anti-military nonsense that it has in common with *Toys* and that also arises out of detachment from reality. Rob Reiner, the director, and Aaron Sorkin, the writer, are not leftists and pacifists; they only take a left-pacifist line because they don’t know any better. In the end we have to agree with Jack Nicholson’s crazy colonel that “You f---ing people have no idea how to defend a country.”

In two-and-a-half years of pretty industrious movie-watching, I have only once gone to an evening showing where I was the only person in the audience. That was during the second week of *Home Alone 2*, and it gave me the wild hope that the brat Macaulay Culkin may this time have fallen as flat on his face as the burglars played by Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern are constantly doing in this idiotic cartoon. Some hope! Yet even if you can believe that the

kid’s parents are stupid enough to have left him behind at the airport, I defy you to believe that they left their money and credit cards behind with him. Why does no one protest at such implausibility?

One answer, I suppose, is that it is supposed to be a kiddies’ fantasy—you might as well expect verisimilitude of Bugs Bunny or the Three Stooges, both of which it resembles. But I wonder if even children are quite indifferent to the matter of believability. Of course they are readier to accept things like the magic lamp and the genie in *Aladdin*, Disney’s latest homogenized and pasteurized fairy tale. Maybe they even like it before they are told by their parents that they are supposed to like it. But I’ll bet they would like it better if Aladdin were, as he was originally, a real thief instead of a goody-goody who shares with the poor the crust of bread that is the only thing we see him steal.

There is a good example of how the artistic conscience differs from the moral. Aladdin is a better person for sharing and for giving up his last wish to free the genie. He teaches morally improving lessons, but he’s too good to be true, as is Macaulay Culkin’s wisdom beyond his years in persuading an old bag lady to clean herself up. That kind of thing is even more unbelievable than sophisticated British aristocrats hijacking airliners, but the assumption is that kids will swallow anything.

If so, the trouble lies with entertainment overload. When reality for most people consists in large part of watching television and movies, then what standard of reality do they have by which to judge television and movies? Children, whose experience of reality outside such second-hand sources is even more limited, are particularly ill-equipped to judge, which

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When several years ago a publisher suggested to Robert Conquest that *The Great Terror*, his well-known book on the Stalin purges, be brought out again under a new title, the author offered as an alternative *I Told You So, You F---ing Fools*. Conquest, of course, was only one among many whose tales of Soviet atrocities found an unreceptive audience. When Victor Kravchenko published his autobiography in 1946, detailing the horrors of the labor camps in Stalin's *univers concentrationnaire*, he was roundly vilified. For many, Kravchenko's former party status and belated escape from the Soviet Union rendered his authenticity suspect. Small errors of fact were magnified into evidence of general misrepresentation. That the book was first published in America led to charges that the entire work was mere Washington-manufactured propaganda. And as late as 1953 Albert Camus, by then no apologist for Communism, denounced Kravchenko as a capitalist "profiteer." Camus was at least near a truth; in the decade after the book's first appearance in France, *I Chose Freedom* sold over 500,000 copies.

"After a couple of weeks," Jacob Burckhardt once remarked, "even the wittiest of books gets abandoned in Paris." But by any standard, French intellectuals' romance with Communism was preternaturally persistent. Tony Judt's remarkable new book, *Past Imperfect*, is a horrifying etiology of the moral blindness of a generation of French intellectuals who discoursed about justice in the abstract while ignoring it in practice, and who proclaimed themselves moralists even as they were sweeping Stalin's horror under the carpet.

It is easy to forget the strength of Stalin's claim on the French imagination. In the muddle of the Third Republic, intellectuals of every stripe were pro-

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foundly dissatisfied with life in democratic France. The editorial pages were rife with phrases like "capitalist tyranny," and it was common practice in the thirties to offer a critique of society in terms of Hobbesian chaos. The Moscow show trials became widely known from another ignored bestseller, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, yet so implausible were they in their horror that they had relatively little impact. "Just as the Inquisition did not affect the fundamental dignity of Christianity," wrote André Malraux, "so the Moscow trials have not diminished the fundamental dignity of Communism."

The rise of Vichy occasioned a wholesale discrediting of the intellectual right, which had shared with the left a yearning to see France reconstituted along radical, non-bourgeois lines. Pétain and the National Revolution were eventually seen to be shallow and hopeless, and as the anti-fascist movement gained in solidarity, criticism of the Soviets, such as there was, became suspect. Anti-anti-Communism was rabid in the *pas d'ennemis à gauche* vapors of the hour, and the left had begun to claim loudly for itself the moral force of evolution and progress. "For many," Judt writes, "Hitler's lightning victory constituted the verdict of history, a judgment upon the inadequacy and mediocrity of contemporary France, much as Stalingrad would later be seen as history's (positive) verdict upon Communism." Indeed, the Red Army's heroic performance at Stalingrad provided the Soviet Union with an almost unimpeachable moral currency. Even for

those who had seen the show trials of the thirties for what they were, Stalin's defeat of the Nazis seemed incontrovertible evidence that the Soviet Union was on the side of the correct and proper.

No such credit came to the Allies, alas, as Judt points out. Resentment toward the United States was virulent for the wartime bombing, its *de*

*facto* occupation during the Liberation, and the spectacle of wad-of-bills-carrying G.I.s gaily strolling the boulevards of a vanquished and destitute nation. In a culture where it was common enough to find editorials in the daily paper ruing the advent of the automobile and modern refrigeration, the mighty American machine was anathema. The vileness of fascism notwithstanding, liberalism and its material realization in American hegemony were widely perceived to be the real spiritual and political enemies of postwar France.

In this environment, Judt maintains, there were four possible intellectual responses to Stalinism. There was the simple rejection of those, like Raymond Aron, whose public force was and had been insubstantial; there was the simple acceptance of those, like Louis Aragon, who were Communist party members and flatly denied all reports of Stalinist terror; there were "Trotskyists, revolutionary syndicalists, and aging surrealists, who sought somehow to maintain a radical position compatible with opposition to communism"; and there was the most complicated and ultimately revolting response of all, that of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Mounier, and others who

devoted themselves not to condemning or defending the works of Stalin but to *explaining* them. What they sought was a plausible and convincing account of otherwise incomprehensible events, an account that could maintain the illusions of the postwar years and sustain the radical impetus supplied by the Resistance and its aftermath. . . . Theirs was the