

Horror Shows

National Lampoon's Vacation; Directed by Harold Ramis; Screenplay by John Hughes; Warner Brothers.

by Stephen Macaulay

National Lampoon's Animal House (1978) had effects far exceeding any inherent merit. For example, it solidified a number of individuals as "celebrities," such as the late John Belushi. The sophomore film about demented college students gave rise to innumerable, more tasteless movies of the same ilk that continue to appear with an inexorable regularity: college students, high school students, junior high school students—one awaits the first day-care center-based loony tune. The various commissions and reports about education should be a cause for loud cheering, not dismay, if these movies have any semblance to reality. The characters they portray do little more than belch and copulate, both instinctive processes. Learning or even semicivilized behavior have nothing to do with these "student" movies.

Vacation is *Animal House* all grown up—at least its characters are as adult as they can be expected to be, given their antecedents. It is a great argument against evolution and for devolution. Some movies are tasteless because they are

moronic; others are moronic because they are tasteless. The only thing interesting about *Vacation* is that it is both, simultaneously, though that level of interest is on par with poking around in a landfill.

The so-called students in *Animal House* celebrate destructiveness. It's not just college pranks: given a cruise missile, they would have aimed it at the dean's office. *Vacation* takes aim at the family. There's Dad, who seems capable of rudimentary motor functions and little else. Mom makes feints at keeping order, but before long, whatever once inhabited

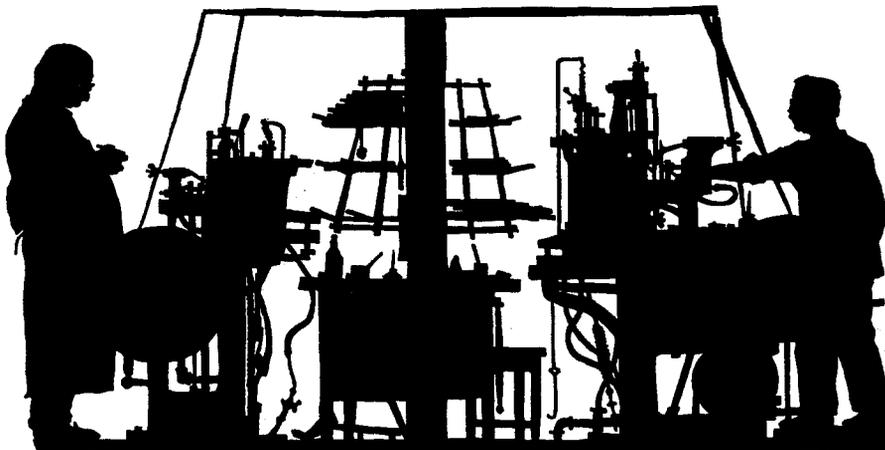
her skull is replaced by a vacuum. Daughter thinks that it's "neat" to have joints in her purse because they are somehow prohibited, though it seems that if they were discovered, the family, as it is, would simply have a smoke-in. Dad gives Son a sip of beer in order to initiate him into manhood; Son takes a 12-ounce sip—Animal House beckons. A great-aunt is treated like a stranger with scrofula and herpes simply because she has the abominable taste to be old. The whole package is disgusting. But what is more horrible is the prospect of what bastards it will engender. □

Movies Made Simpleminded

John Ellis: *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video*; Routledge & Kegan Paul; Boston.

Just when you thought that it was safe to go back into the movie theater, *Visible Fictions* emerges. From now on, seeing a movie—a plain, simple, entertainment—is no longer, well, seeing a movie. It never was *just* seeing a movie, but evil old bourgeois ideology acted as 3-D blinders, as it always does. According to Mr. Ellis, a person doesn't buy a ticket to simply watch a movie (which, he notes, is "generally constructed to be seen once and only once," which is curious, given not only the repetitions of

cult films like *The Rocky Picture Horror Show*, but Bogart films, Woody Allen productions, *Star Wars* and its offspring, etc., etc., etc.). No, a person buys a ticket for the movie *and*, more importantly, for "the relative privacy and anonymity of a darkened public space in which various kinds of activities can take place." What the "various kinds of activities" are is never made clear. Ellis perceptively points out that "the audience is seated in rows, separated from each other to some degree." Presumably, then, furtive hand-holding and kissing are ruled out. One activity is typically performed in the dark and in relative privacy: sleeping. Sure enough, Ellis comments, "Sitting still in the dark has overtones of sleep and dreaming; indeed, it is easier to fall asleep in a film than is often admitted." (Books about film are often soporific, too.) If Ellis is correct in his many assertions, then it is surprising that more snores aren't heard in cinemas, for movie viewing as he has it is hard work. The viewer identifies with the "hero and heroine, villain, bit-part player, active and passive character," and even the movie projector. Ellis claims that nothing presented on the screen is a matter of chance, so any canned goods shown must be identified with, as well. Moreover, not only does movie viewing in-



volve "the phantasy of self as a pure perceiving being," but the viewer must also draw a line between itself (more about the neuter form anon) and the object so that it can be a voyeur. On this subject Ellis says, "Voyeurism implies the power of the spectator over what is seen. Not the power to change it, but the knowledge that the actions being undertaken are played out for the spectator." Is this why slimy types use binoculars to peer into distant buildings and drill hard-to-spot holes into rest-room walls?

According to Ellis, a *film* is commonly defined as being something like the Hollywood productions from 1915 to 1950. He is correct. But then he tries to define what these movies are. He claims that they are simply examinations performed by men who try to determine what women want. In his words, the whole genre of entertainment films "depends on the assumption of a masculine norm and the restless demand to know what the female counterpart to that norm is." Now, it might seem that Ellis has painted himself into a corner: if films only exist so that men can figure out what the female norm is, then why should women bother going to the movies, as they already know? He simply intones, the "processes of identification (narcissism) involve bisexual positions that are not the exclusive prerogative of either socially defined sex." In other words, women (which I always thought were biologically defined) forget that they are women when they go to the movies. Presumably, then, out-of-work androgynous persons have great opportunities in Hollywood: oh, how they would ease the identification processes.

According to Ellis, "Many people feel a profound sense of shame at watching a film alone." Given the psychosexual rigamarole that he applies to the activity, it's surprising that anyone has anything to do with movies, alone or in crowds. If he is correct, everybody might as well make a one-time investment in binoculars and trench coats and let themselves go wandering through parks in the dark. (SM) □

On the Motherhood Maze

by Kathy L. Werner

It was with a sinking feeling that I read Kathi Waite's laudatory review of *Through the Motherhood Maze* by Sanford J. Matthews and Maryann Bucknum Brinley in the February 1983 issue of the *Chronicles*. The piece is scarcely more than an apologia for absentee motherhood. Motherhood is treated in the piece as a malaise which often causes "near-total emotional collapse." Motherhood is not to be enjoyed and relished, but rather endured or escaped. Mrs. Waite implies that (1) only a rare and exceptional woman ("the wonder and envy of her peers") can tolerate the full-time mothering of her children; and (2) a mother's love of herself and pursuit of her own fulfillment will assure happiness for her children.

In answer to Mrs. Waite's first point, according to Rita Kramer (*In Defense of the Family*), Selma Fraiberg (*Every Child's Birthright*), the accepted wisdom of the centuries, and ordinary common sense, it is unlikely that anyone will love or care for children better than their own mother. (The exceptions to this rule are the abusive or neglectful parents—still a very small minority.) I would suggest that it is a peculiar phenomenon of post-Friedan America that so many young mothers opt for success on men's terms (money and careers) rather than staying home to care for their infants. In their stampede for self-actualization they often ignore, discount, or rationalize the needs of their children. And the "quality-time" argument used by so many women is essentially invalid during a child's first three years, according to Kramer.

The right response to Mrs. Waite's assertion that "[t]o attempt to become the be-all and end-all to a child is, for some, self-destructive" is Kramer's wise observation: "of course, no mother can be

there every single moment, nor can any mother provide constant and complete satisfaction, an expectation that is not only unrealistic but not even desirable. Little disappointments and minor frustrations are as much a part of experience as pleasures and fulfillment. They shouldn't be sought out on principle or used to rationalize arrangements clearly not a baby's advantage when they're avoidable, though, because nature and necessity do a good enough job of providing them for us."

Admittedly, there are many women who do not have the economic option of raising their own children. However, Mrs. Waite made no mention of financial considerations, but spoke of the woman who returned to work out of a perceived emotional need. Mothering one's own child full time is not something to be chosen impartially from a list of "Things I'd Like to Do." It is a challenging responsibility for every woman who wants her baby to develop to his full potential. To flourish, a baby needs his mother far more than he or she needs the latest learning toy or the costliest nursery schools.

Possibly Mrs. Waite's most misleading claim is that a "woman who before motherhood led an active life in a responsible job may not be able to find unconditional happiness in 24-hour mothering." Is mothering, therefore, an inactive, irresponsible task? What job could be more momentous than the rearing of competent and caring human beings? To her statement that unconditional happiness is not a given of motherhood, I must agree. But one is unlikely to find "Unfettered Bliss" listed on any job description. Motherhood, like other adult occupations, requires the postponement or sublimation of certain personal desires. And just as it takes patience, self-control, and hard work to love another human being on a continuing basis, so it requires an act of the will to learn how to mother one's offspring. But in learning to serve

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