



## SCREEN

### Yawning in the Aisles

by Stephen Macaulay

*Stranger Than Paradise*; A film by Jim Jarmusch; Samuel Goldwyn.

*Stop Making Sense*; A film by Jonathan Demme and Talking Heads; Cinecom/Island Alive.

All the praise that has been heaped on these films might lead you to suppose that Jarmusch and Demme—and the assembled Talking Heads, under the direction and supervision of David Byrne—have created cinematic texts of the first order. But the best that *Stranger Than Paradise* and *Stop Making Sense* can say for themselves is that they are, to use a phrase that will identify the group to which I am referring, “talkin’ about my ge-ge-gen-generation.” If they are as good as it gets, then the Baby Boomers ought to stick to Trivial Pursuit.

*Stranger Than Paradise* is a cut above art movies—the type of thing the same people are now making with their VCR equipment. Here we have a collection of vignettes about two New York hipsters and a Hungarian immigrant, the cousin of one of the beboppers. As we watch the banality of life lived in a run-down, one-room apartment—sleeping, drinking beer, watching the Yankees play on the small black-and-white set—another title for the film begins to emerge: *Welcome to America?* The question mark is vital. The only thing that could be more yawn-inspiring would be a trip to Cleveland in the dead of winter—and sure enough, Jarmusch provides one. To be sure, *Stranger Than Paradise* is one of the most unpretentious films to make it beyond small college auditoriums and coffee-house backrooms, but so what?

*Stop Making Sense* is a concert film. It shows the once avant-garde

and now quasi-mainstream Talking Heads in action. Unlike *Gimme Shelter*, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*, *Concert for Bangladesh*, or any of the others, *Stop Making Sense* concentrates on the performers instead of the woman in the front row shakin’ it, or the paramedics carting out limp bodies. David Byrne, stumbling around like a spastic, is the thing. If *Stop Making Sense* is *cinema verité*, then it’s no longer a sin to tell a lie. cc

### Long Ride Home

by Herbert London

*Lost in America*; Produced by Marty Katz; Directed by Albert Brooks; Written by Albert Brooks and Monica Johnson.

Whatever happened to the “dropped out, turned on” Captain America of *Easy Rider*, who for a brief time captured the hearts of Hollywood moguls and the minds of hip urbanites longing for a life free of convention and restraints? In the age of Reagan, this mythological figure reappears as a yuppie in Albert Brooks’s *Lost in America*. This guileless tale of two urban professionals attempting to drop out of the proverbial rat race reveals another side of the *Easy Rider* experience.

Albert Brooks is an advertising executive with a major firm. He is responsible—a word perceived as a pejorative. He is imaginative, as his boss readily concedes. He is on a fast track, as his dreams of a Mercedes with dark brown exterior and tan interior suggest. But one day he finds himself derailed. Instead of getting the vice presidency he was almost sure of, he is asked to relocate to New York for a minor position. Incensed at the suggestion, he quits his job to relive the exploits in his *Easy Rider* fantasies.

But this is the 80’s, and Brooks is a yuppie, not a yippie. He buys an elegant motor home to cross the country (Harley Davidsons don’t have in-

door plumbing). He cashes in his assets for a “nest egg”—no need to live off the land or depend on his friends. But life on the road isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. At his stop in Las Vegas, his wife discovers a compulsion for gambling. By the time he awakens, she has blown their nest egg at the roulette table. This dream of carefree travel among the indigenes is shattered like the hippie vision of an unrestrained social paradise.

It quickly dawns on our hero that he and his wife had better find jobs. But opportunities in a small Arizona town are not what they are in Los Angeles. The \$100,000 a year executive is obliged to become a school crossing guard and his charming wife, who used to be a personnel director, is tickled pink to find employment at a fast-food stand. By now, husband and wife have begun to realize that their dream of discovering America is a fraud. Instead of driving out into the sunset, destination unknown, they speed as quickly as their motor home will permit to New York. The adventurer has had enough of adventure to know that if he must eat crow to regain his position, so be it. The grass isn’t greener on the other side of bourgeois America; those who have been there know.

Brooks’s comedy reveals more about contemporary life—I believe—than its writers may have intended. For one thing, the dream of wanderlust hasn’t vanished; it has been remodeled to suit ambitious, acquisitive executives. For another thing, the 60’s are now as alien as the 30’s. If anything, *Lost in America* is making fun of the *Big Chill* generation, who cling to their interred visions with all the passion of necrophiliacs.

Most people finally realize that you don’t have to travel or undergo analysis or divest yourself of possessions to find yourself. The search is coming to an end because the Eden Express always returns home. There is no magic in the search; there is only the hard and sometimes unrewarding work of being

all you can be. Life's trials aren't always conquered, nor can they be avoided.

Our hero in *Lost in America* was lost for only a short time, long enough to realize that his fantasy wasn't compatible with the actual. The value of dreams is that they don't have to be tested. Albert Brooks, however, tried to make his fantasy into a life. But like all the refugees from the overheated

decade, his psyche crashed on the perilous rocks of empirical evidence. He, at least, has the good sense to reject his bogus fantasy and return to the world that provides him with rewards and satisfaction.

The 60's cultural convulsion has finally passed. The life of escape has been replaced by bourgeois verities. Clearly, the marketers have changed the bourgeois image so that the aspir-

ing middle class can now be yuppies. But it hardly matters. The yellow brick road to contentment is paved with hard work, imagination, and middle-class conventions. As the Buddha (especially the Buddha preached by Irving Babbitt) said, there is no easy way to nirvana, only unremitting effort. cc

*Herbert London is dean of the Gallatin Division of New York University.*

## CORRESPONDENCE



### Letter From Central America

by Michael Johns

World attention focused on Managua several months ago, as leaders of the Socialist world, led by Fidel Castro, converged on Nicaragua for the most stupendous Marxist levee since Ethiopia's \$100 million bash for Colonel Mengistu. Meanwhile, thousands of Nicaraguan *campesinos*, dubbed "contras" by their enemies, continued to risk their lives in a voluntary, patriotic, and very lonely struggle against totalitarianism.

Recently, these freedom fighters have continued their struggle in the face of literally scores of disparaging and inaccurate accusations being made by those who seek to legitimize another aggressive Soviet satellite in our hemisphere and turn public opinion against the thousands of Nicaraguans who are seeking the restoration of democracy to their homeland. As the recent ultimatum to the Sandinistas signed by leading members of the democratic resistance in San Jose, Costa Rica, makes clear, these are democratic leaders and fighters with Nicaragua's best interests at heart.

Try to tell 18-year-old Scorpion, a two-year veteran of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) resistance fighters, that his effort against the San-

dinistas is guided by the Central Intelligence Agency. He's never even heard of them. Or try to tell Brenda, a 17-year-old fighter, that she is a hold-over from Anastasio Somoza Debayle's National Guard. She was 11 years old when Somoza fell.

What these two teenagers could tell you about is life in Marxist Nicaragua. Brenda remembers when the Sandinistas blew up her church in 1981 for what the Sandinistas termed "counter-revolutionary" activities. Now Brenda proudly wears a Christian cross around her neck when she enters combat against them. Scorpion could tell you how his family's land was confiscated by the Sandinistas and he was issued ration coupons in return. The sugar his family produced for decades is now being sent to Communist Cuba, with no reimbursement, in exchange for arms, many of which, he claims, are being sent to Marxist guerrillas trying to topple the democratic government of El Salvador. Indeed, the May 13, 1983, report of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence seems to back up Scorpion's remarks. It concluded that there is "active promotion for revolution without frontiers throughout Central America by Cuba and Nicaragua." And by the admission of Sandinista Minister of the Interior Tomas Borge, Marxist revolution "will be exported to El Salvador, then Guatemala, then Honduras, then Mexico

... that is one historical prophecy of Ronald Reagan's that is absolutely true."

The situation for these two teenagers in Marxist Nicaragua was so oppressive that they each marched over 60 miles through some of the most mountainous terrain in Nicaragua to join the freedom fighters in their camps along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border. Each of them has gone two years without seeing or hearing from their families. They have risked their lives almost every day over the past two years in an effort to defeat the "piricuacos" (the FDN's term for the Sandinistas, meaning "rabid dogs"), whom they claim have betrayed their original revolution of 1979 and created a totalitarian climate centered around political indoctrination, a militarized society, control of its citizens, and a gradual suppression of all nonrevolutionary institutions.

The scenario of an anticommunist revolution waged by democrats is by no means uncommon. Despite the Reagan Administration's tough anti-Sandinista rhetoric and the media's talk of "CIA-backed rebels," most of these democratic patriots go virtually unassisted by the country they admire most—America. As aid to these *campesinos* comes before the Congress, America is at a critical point in its treatment of freedom-loving peoples and its official attitude toward aggres-