



SCREEN

Material Wealth and Spiritual Poverty

by Sam Karnick

Down and Out in Beverly Hills; Directed by Paul Mazursky; Screenplay by Paul Mazursky and Leon Capetanos; Touchstone Films.

Down and Out in Beverly Hills has a lot going for it. The film was directed and co-written by Paul Mazursky (*Moscow on the Hudson*). It has Richard Dreyfuss, Nick Nolte, and Bette Midler in the lead roles, as well as Tracy Nelson and "Little Richard" Penniman in supporting roles. The film was photographed in cheerful colors by Don McAlpine, and the sets, while deliberately tasteless, are still pleasant. Then why is this film so empty and depressing?

The story is based on Jean Renoir's 1932 film *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux*, which was taken from René Fauchois' play of the same name. This newest variation on the theme deals with the tribulations of a wealthy Beverly Hills clothes-hanger magnate (Richard Dreyfuss) who saves a bum named Jerry (Nick Nolte) from drowning and gives him a place to stay—for which the latter is oddly ungrateful. Most of the 1932 film's humor derives from the contrast between Jerry's grubbiness and the slick, spiritually poor Beverly Hills surroundings in which we find him. Mazursky, however, gets Jerry cleaned up a half-hour into the film, and thereafter the bum looks like everyone else.

Renoir made much more of the contrast by prolonging Boudu's transformation. Even when Boudu consents to wear bourgeois finery, he doesn't fit in: his posture, gestures, and manners clearly mark him as an outsider. Mazursky's Jerry, by contrast,

looks good enough to be mistaken for a Hollywood writer as he sits in a Beverly Hills cafe with his new mentor. Admittedly, this departure from the structure of Renoir's film sets up a promising case of class confusion and mistaken identity: What would happen if Jerry really tried to make it as a writer? But Mazursky fails to follow it up and drops the situation.

The real contrast is between Jerry's gruff ingratitude and his savior's kind attempts to help him. This is fertile ground for humor, and it worked well in Renoir's original. Mazursky, however, wants to have it both ways: he wants to show Jerry's good side as well. We see Jerry talking to a lonely Iranian boy, teaching Mrs. Whiteman how to relax, curing both the dog's and the daughter's anorexia, and helping the son to accept his transvestism and incipient homosexuality.

Renoir, by contrast, lets Boudu be Boudu. Michel Simon's title character remains genuinely ignorant of what is expected of him in his strange new surroundings and takes a puckish delight in seeing how far he can go in breaking the rules. Boudu is an outsider, but he can't help being the way he is. Nolte's Jerry, on the other hand, knows the rules but refuses to follow them. He is, we are to believe, not just different from this bourgeois family, but better. The message—that "money isn't everything"—is obvious only to those who have plenty of the stuff.

The main difference between *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* and Renoir's original lies in the directors: *Boudu* was made by a genial satirist and one of the best artists the cinema has probably ever known, while the author of the remake is merely clever and derivative. Mazursky has made a career of plundering ideas from more original directors. As writer-director, he ended his first film, *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), with an absurdly botched and out-of-place steal from

Fellini's *8½*: what seems to be the entire population of Las Vegas streams out of Caesar's Palace behind the title characters, while a group of sopranos sings "What the World Needs Now Is Love, Sweet Love" on the sound track. The scene was so clumsy and artificial that even favorable critics choked on it.

Mazursky's career provides numerous examples of this tendency. From the further riflings of Fellini in *Alex in Wonderland* (1970)—in which Fellini himself makes a guest appearance—and *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, through his "hip" updating of 30's remarriage comedies in *Blume in Love* (1973), to the present, Mazursky has continually taken from other films without managing to bring any fresh insights to the material. By contrast, when Woody Allen steals from Fellini's *8½* in *Stardust Memories* or Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* in *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, he brings in enough of his own ideas to rejuvenate the material and make it his. While Allen uses other people's films for inspiration, Mazursky uses them as a crutch. So in the present case, instead of rethinking Renoir's film, he merely combines it with Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey*, a 1936 screwball comedy in which a "forgotten man" (William Powell) moves in with a decadent rich family and helps them solve their problems while they help him solve his. Since the two original films had completely different attitudes toward wealth and middle-class values, it is small wonder if *Down and Out* ends up a confused affair indeed.

Mazursky's films almost always pound out the same lifeless message: "Throw off your chains of bourgeois morality, America. You have nothing to lose but your inhibitions." This simplemindedness forces him to manipulate his characters all too obviously. In *Down and Out*, Tracy Nelson, as the anorexic college-age daughter,

goes to bed with Jerry. Her behavior is wildly out of character, and Mazursky makes no effort to explain it. It is apparently enough for the director if he can turn the screws a little tighter on his film's protagonist. The episodic story lines of his films are not forced upon him by the travels or picaresque adventures of his characters, but by a lack of insight into human character that compels him to invent new situations. Mazursky's films become a series of forced and ponderous paeans to freedom and spontaneity, in which the actors, but never the characters, improvise.

Freedom and spontaneity are barren virtues in the absence of other values. Mazursky's husbands *always* cheat on their wives; his wives *always* retaliate by cheating on their husbands and undertaking expensive psychoanalysis; his children smoke marijuana, wear punk fashions, and rebel against their parents (which is understandable);

while their friends stand around like a postmodern chorus commiserating about how tough it all is.

Perhaps what Mazursky needs most of all is to leave Los Angeles for a while and spend some time out here in the real world. When he takes his characters from the working classes, as in *Harry and Tonto* and last year's *Moscow on the Hudson*, the results are far superior. In *Moscow on the Hudson*, for example, the sleaziness of the New York slum in which Robin Williams' Russian defector lives is balanced by Williams' unshakable optimism and his certainty that he will find a better life if only he works hard enough. There is, however, no such balancing element in *Down and Out in Beverly Hills*.

Mazursky's problem is shared by many other comic filmmakers and novelists of this century. They have a vision of what's bad—it's easy to see; it's all around us—but they have no

vision of what is *good*. Directors like Mazursky, Blake Edwards (*Victor/Victoria*, *S.O.B.*, and "10"), and John Hughes (*The Breakfast Club*) can see what's wrong, but all they can offer in response is the same treacly secular humanism that left a middle-class family open to the blandishments of Beverly Hills and the tricks of unscrupulous bums like Jerry. At best, all Mazursky has to offer is a misplaced sense of charity: when someone has little, give him something; if he wants more, give him more. If that is all there is, the rest of the country will soon resemble Beverly Hills.

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MUSIC

Train of Fools

by Janet Scott Barlow

The First Rock & Roll Confidential Report by Dave Marsh, New York: Pantheon Books; \$12.95.

In the 30 years since it first gained broad popularity, rock 'n' roll has put on some show; it has been by turns entertaining, grotesque, energetic, absurd—and always "successful." There were even times when it had a good beat and you could dance to it.

But since the 60's, the decade of pervasive Relevance, an even better show has taken place off-stage, around the kids-turned-writers-turned-critics who early hitched a ride on the big Rock Train, struggling ever since to appear in control while hanging on for dear life. Within this group, no one has struggled harder than Dave Marsh, "America's Best-Known Rock Writer," as he is described on his own book covers. Marsh stands alone in this crowd of freeloaders for one reason: he has decided he owns the railroad.

Dave Marsh is a critic with an agenda propped up by a cause. The agenda calls for a political union of "rock star, steelworker, [music] industry professional, welfare mother, and just plain fan," all responding to rock 'n' roll "as a potent vehicle through which what's right and wrong about

REVISIONS

Woman's Place

In the 19th century, giants still roamed the earth. Even the sociologists were philosophers in those days—Comte, Weber, Toennies, Durkheim, to name only a few names celebrated in Nisbet's *The Sociological Tradition*—displayed a breadth and richness that is not much in evidence in this iron age of social thought. None of them, however, was as richly allusive and as possessed of brilliant insights as Georg Simmel. Not too long ago, Yale was kind enough to collect a volume of Simmel's writings on women (*Georg Simmel: On Women, Sexuality, and Love*, Yale University Press, New Haven), with a lucid and very helpful introduction by the translator, Guy Oakes.

In his essay "Female Culture" Simmel probed the delicate question of "the fundamental relations of the female nature" to what he calls "objective culture," i.e., the cultural processes and systems that have become *objective* by escaping from the subjective intent of the creatures. Our objective culture, it

goes without saying, "is thoroughly male." Simmel contends that women are uniquely blessed with a more integral nature. While the objective culture of Europe and America depends on division of labor, women's domestic work is both "more diversified and less specialized." Simmel relates this phenomenon to women's nature, which he characterizes in one word: fidelity. While males tend to dissolve themselves into a plurality of roles, women find it more difficult to divide their loyalties. Simmel goes on to suggest that woman's nature may be better suited to some professions than to others, but woman's greatest cultural achievement remains the home. However, the erosion of family functions in modern times has reduced woman's realm—once a vast empire—down to little more than a capital city and a few suburbs, something like Byzantium in the 15th century. In our own time, even the capital things, the birth and rearing of children, are threatened by a set of Turks far more savage than the armies of Mehmet II.