The Cresset

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What must life have been like when there were no movies? People must have seen themselves differently when there was no way to see themselves literally. In a famous chapter of *Adam Bede*, nineteenth century novelist George Eliot wrote of her novel as holding up a mirror so that readers could see in it themselves and their forebears, faithfully reflected in prose. And she then moves the image another step to say that she is attempting to make prose do what the seventeenth century Dutch painters did—create a picture of real life, in all its specific earthy detail, recognizable and familiar as everyday dishes. On this evidence, and a few others lingering in my memory, I would guess that humans have long possessed the desire to see moving images of themselves in action, and that the presence in our lives of movies simply gives actuality to a deep wish within the human spirit for the ability not only to live life but to stand aside and observe it as well. Do movies allow us to do this, or is that just another of the illusions to which they subject us? It is hardly a new question to ask whether the reality we watch on the screen bears any resemblance to the truths about life that we have learned through other means.

One indisputable truth about life is that the making of things—even beautiful and visionary things—consumes enormous amounts of human energy. Look at the cover photograph again, and study, for example, the dancer's back. Robert Potter's brilliant photograph captures less than one brief second in the making of a movie, as the director points something into happening, his finger transformed from mere flesh into a glowing flash of light, a signifier of imagination or creativity, an embodiment of the emblematic light bulb. But the dancer's back—that is anything but mere flesh. The essential bones, the structure with which it begins is just that—the beginning, the design, a framework on which the mechanics of motion will operate. Over the bones, the muscled flesh, capable of pulling the bones into new configurations as the brain directs. The dancer at this moment simply stands at rest, waiting for the call of Action! In fact, the photographer has given us another image of a dancer, so that we can see just how the resting figure is both dance and potential dancer in the same moment. As the dancer brings energy and control and skill and force into play, what was mere flesh will become something other—the dance itself. And perhaps most wonderful of all, stranger than any fictional mirror or magic globe, we will see the dance because of that contraption of metal parts behind the director.

In some ways, the moving picture camera may be, more than any other invention of the century, the instrument of human making that has transformed the way we see ourselves as humans. (A technical aside: I would include with this the video camera, since, though it uses a wholly distinct technology, it also captures and preserves a moment of human action so that the moment can be seen again, and manipulated to form an image which, though it formerly resided only in one mind, is now available to countless minds throughout the world.) The camera's invention and development, and the skills connected with its use, are so miraculous that were we fully aware of them, we would think even the eight or nine bucks for a city movie ticket a paltry sum for such a spectacle.

And of course, most of this brilliance has been put to use for the degraded and ignoble ends familiar in our culture. That video pornography and commercials for gastric distress remedies cash in on this most elaborate demonstration of human genius seems a complex but fully recognizable
midrash on the Genesis story of the Fall. Sadly, again, what we touch turns to a curse in our hands.

But not irredeemably, of course. At least we got applesauce from the forbidden fruit. Film too gives us rich moments, sometimes bringing us closer to truth than we have reason to expect. The exercise of human art persists, against all odds, in bringing us over and over again to the moment of pure joy that the experience of beauty and truth creates in us. The dancer’s back, the camera, the director’s finger, the waiting patience of the cameraman, the coils of cable, the money and effort and anger and hope and boredom will make a film. We will see the dancer flash across the screen, and out of the darkness a light will make our hearts soar.

In this issue, then, The Cresset presents some varied reflections and commentary on film from a variety of perspectives. Martha Bergland leads off, seeing something about films and something about human making from the unusual perspective we might expect from someone whose beautiful novel A Farm Under a Lake gave her readers a new way of seeing Midwestern sky. Veteran teacher Richard Lee reviews a significant book by a contemporary theologian on film, and beginning teacher Steven Engler describes a problem in documentary filmmaking, using a famous example to illustrate the perils of falling in love with your subject. Our film reviewers both contribute to this issue, Jennifer Voigt with a list of ten films no person interested in religious questions should miss, and Fredrick Barton on the dilemmas of the film critic in an era of increasing racial mistrust. Gary Fincke’s poem about movie-going in 60s Pittsburgh, and Tom Willadsen’s call to take our faith to the movies further personalize the topic. These, with other columns and poems should give you good things to think about—perhaps when none of the ten screens at the Cineplex offers anything very compelling.

Peace,

GME

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LEARNING THE LIFESPAN

Methuselah, the Genesis years.
Tithonus, the short-sighted, who
Forgot to ask against aging.
The fountain of youth. Its secret
Location via coded map.
The ferris wheel, reversed, which spun
Adults to children in my cousin’s
Comic book. His mother, months later,
Bringing a dove to his sickroom
Because the soul of the dying
So much loves the company of doves
It will linger. His transfusions.
His temporary color. The wingspan
Of the dove unsettled by
The momentary movement of his hands.

Gary Fincke
Twenty Sitings:
a meditation on the location of wilderness and art, inside and outside

Martha Bergland

1. As my husband, Larry, and I eat dinner one evening, I watch the sky behind him change from a pale salmon wash to an intense tropical tangerine. Then high and fast steely clouds arrive out of the northwest, their messy blotches headed in the opposite direction of the sun. I say to my husband, "Look at that sunset and those clouds." He turns and looks behind him. "Looks fake," he says. This is always Larry's highest compliment for what is natural and beautiful.

2. After dinner I sit down in the living room to read. A movie is on the television. In the movie a very tiny scientist in a very tiny submarine travels around inside the body of a grocery clerk. Both the very tiny man and the grocery clerk are upset about this. The little scientist in the little sub says things like, "There she is, Jack. I see her out of the corner of your eye."

3. I read the mail. In the mail is a flier for an art show. On the flier is a quotation from Wendell Berry: "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are."

4. Larry, who is reading the paper and watching the movie out of the corner of his eye, gets up to leave the room. "Where are you going?" I say. "I'm going inside," he says, "to get a warmer sweater." Whenever he goes to another part of the house, he is going "inside." Does this mean that wherever he is is outside? Am I outside too?

5. It is dusk and the male cardinal is coming to our little house-shaped birdfeeder for his last eats before turning in for the night. I can't see her but the female is probably beyond him in the crabapple tree. Outside of outside.

6. Now the grocery store clerk with the tiny man inside of him is kidnapped by some people with a meat truck. The grocery clerk is falling for this blond reporter, but she turns out to be the girlfriend of the scientist who is inside the grocery clerk's eye. Somebody says, "Miniaturization, Jack, that's the ticket."

7. I read this poem by Lorine Niedecker:

   The radio talk this morning
   was of obliterating
   the world

   I notice fruit flies rise
   from the rind
   of the recommended melon

8. "Let's go out for a walk," I say to Larry. "This is a stupid movie." "No," says Larry. "It's cold
outside and warm in here. This is why we go to the trouble to build houses—to keep weather and nature out.” He doesn’t say this in so many words, but we don’t go out for a walk.

9. I begin to like the movie. It’s witty and it makes fun of itself. You can tell the people who made it were having a good time. But it doesn’t hold all of my attention.

10. I read this in a magazine article by William Cronon called “Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”: “In the wilderness the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, have always seemed less certain than elsewhere.”

11. It’s dark outside now. A wind has come up. I can barely make out the black, still-leafless trees sweeping back and forth against the blue-black sky. Larry gets up and turns on the lamps. In this moment in this suburb, the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between inside and outside, seem very clear.

12. In the movie, a Russian, I think, or maybe he’s a cowboy or a spy, says this to the blond reporter in a nightclub: “Let’s blow this scene, Buffalo Girl.”

13. I read more of the article by Cronon: he is saying that the idea of wilderness is a human invention, a “creation of very particular creatures at very particular moments in human history.” He says, “Go back 250 years in American and European history, and you do not find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we would call ‘the wilderness experience.’ Wilderness in the 18th century was ‘deserted,’ ‘savage,’ ‘desolate,’ ‘barren,’ . . . The emotion one . . . [felt] in its presence was ‘bewilderment.’”

14. Now the bad guy in the movie has been miniaturized too. I missed the part about how he got into the grocery clerk, but the good guy and the bad guy are now chasing each other around through the clerk’s trachea and lungs, and then his stomach. It turns out that the inside of a grocery clerk is a vision of hell—savage, desolate, bewildering.

15. Cronon is saying that our modern idea of wilderness means that as soon as we human beings or signs of us exist in the wild then the wilderness ceases to exist. And because we think that our salvation is in wilderness, wherever we human beings and our effects are, there is our damnation. If we and our effects go to the “Big Outside,” then we think the outside is pushed farther away. Wherever we are is outside of paradise. Wherever we are is like the insides of grocery clerks.

16. If we think nature—the outside—is spoiled by our being there, then all of culture and art is “inside” and against nature. In the “Big Outside,” there is no Mozart, no Bach. No Billy Holliday or John Coltrane or Count Basie or Joe Williams. No Degas or Manet or Winslow Homer or Charles Burchfield. No Basho or Mark Twain or Willa Cather or William Faulkner. No artists. No Larry and no me. No grocery clerks with tiny scientists looking out through their eyes.

17. The movie is just about over. There are some crucial things I’ve missed because now the miniature scientist is wandering around inside the body of the blond reporter, and I don’t know how he got there. This is a place he’s been before. We find this out when he in his tiny sub comes upon a fetus like a Macy’s parade float which he realizes he is the father of. While the bewildered scientist is roaming around inside his girlfriend’s insides, the grocery clerk tells the guy’s girlfriend he loves her or something and he kisses her. Kissing, interestingly enough, is the way you get tiny scientists to transfer from one person to another. So the scientist and the sub are sloshed back into the grocery clerk.
18. I'm thinking this movie would make a great opera. It's not any weirder than Wagner. And maybe not any weirder than many current ideas of the wilderness. The wilderness is fake. Nature is real, of course, but the idea of wilderness is something manmade. We designed it—perhaps wrongly—so we would know where we aren't. It's everything that isn't us and that we can't see our hand in. Our insides are so bewildering, we think we need the idea of wilderness, of outside, to hold ourselves in a state of wonder.

19. But don't we also have Mozart for wonder. And Coltrane. And all the poets and all the painters. We have Lorine Niedecker. I read this:

   In every part of every living thing
   is stuff that once was rock

   In blood the minerals
   of the rock

   Iron the common element of earth
   in rocks and freighters

   Sault Saint Marie—big boats
   coal-black and iron-ore-red
   topped with what white castlework

   The waters working together
   internationally
   Gulls playing both sides

The artist plays both sides—inside and outside. The artist makes her life and his life sloshing back and forth between inside and outside, nature and culture, order and disorder, drawing things together with lines of paint and pen, making the maps we carry with us that show us where we are. It is the great human work. It is the great day job and night job—this job of looking—from above Lake Superior or above the rind of a melon or from the eye of the grocery clerk. It is the great work—the work of designing and making—out of what is inside and what is outside and out of unmapped and unnamed space. What a piece of work is a man and woman. What a piece of work has man and woman.

20. And what a guy is my husband. "Looks fake," he says. This is a man who believes above all in the artist. "Looks fake," he says and what he means is that something is so beautiful and perfect in its design that it could be the effects of human making, human design. What a guy, I think, and I kiss him, thereby transferring the tiny artist back into his body—the artist who maps the great saving wilderness here inside us.
Buddhism and the West in *Song of Ceylon*

*Steven Engler*

*S* *ong of Ceylon* is a forty-minute film made by British filmmaker Basil Wright in 1934. On its release, it won accolades at the London Film Society, Best Film honours at the Brussels film festival, and attracted worldwide attention. It is still considered one of the classics of documentary film. Most universities and colleges with substantial film holdings will have a copy, if only on video. In *Song of Ceylon*, Wright succeeded in combining a very personal vision with a portrayal of the culture of Sri Lanka. Discussions of the film generally suggest that it documents a Buddhist culture and the effects of colonial trade on that culture. Others have suggested that the film holds Sri Lanka’s culture up as the model of an ‘art of life’ lacking in the West.

By considering Wright’s portrayal of Buddhism, we can see that his film does indeed suggest that western society suffers from a lack of spiritual values. It does so less by showing us a Buddhist alternative than by projecting onto Sri Lankan culture an idealized image of what Wright saw as missing in the West. However, despite this critical stance, the film is also an optimistic record of a personal and spiritual encounter with a non-Christian culture. Clarifying these aspects of *Song of Ceylon* will both support its status as a classic and raise intriguing questions about the role of objectivity in documentary film.

**background**

Wright’s initial motivation for making *Song of Ceylon* was very prosaic. The film reflects a tension between two agendas. On the one hand, it was sponsored by the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board. Wright was charged with the task of producing four one-reel ‘travelogues.’ As he later put it, “They thought that by doing this the British public might become conscious of this beautiful island and therefore buy the tea which was its principal product” (Starr 1975, 17).

On the other hand, Wright was the senior member of an influential group of filmmakers working under John Grierson at the Empire Marketing Board Film Unit. Grierson’s unit produced critically conscious left-leaning films on issues including housing and labor conditions. According to Wright, “We were trying to extend the educational boundaries of Western democracies beyond the slightly narrow confines of academic education” (Thomas 1979, 470). Grierson, *Song of Ceylon*’s producer, was Wright’s close friend and had an important influence on the film in several ways: he gave the film its name and suggested the need for titling the four sub-sections; he formed the ethos of the film unit within which Wright worked, emphasizing the place of values in critically conscious filmmaking; in addition, apart from making rigorous critiques of the film on an often daily basis during editing, he allowed Wright the freedom to shoot and edit as he saw fit, unencumbered by external pressures (Starr 1975, 20-21; Grierson 1946, 131; Wright 1974, 113-14). Grierson later claimed that his film unit “in a sense created” Wright (among others) as a filmmaker (Grierson 1946, 100).

Wright’s stance toward these potentially conflicting agendas was important to the final result:
When I make a film, it's a statement by myself of something I've been paid to portray. In other words, somebody's sponsored the film and I've said what I think about the subject without caving in to any violent instructions from the sponsor . . . In a sense, the sponsor is your victim (Thomas 1979, 474-75).

This sense of freedom, fostered by Grierson, gave Wright scope for creativity and spontaneity in both shooting and editing.

The technical limitations of the time also set important parameters. Wright and his assistant shot with a silent camera and two spares, using tripods for the most part. Wright shot in black and white, of course, and was unable to screen the footage before returning to England. No sound was recorded on location. It was all added later in London, with the assistance of two dancers brought from Sri Lanka for the purpose.

When Wright arrived in Sri Lanka, a third and very personal influence subtly began to shape the film:

Song of Ceylon . . . is a tremendously personal film—a reaction of going to the Orient for the first time, falling in love with it, and becoming extremely influenced for the rest of my life by Buddhism (Thomas 1979, 476). It's the only film I've made that I really loved, and it was in fact a religious experience . . . While I was doing it, I had these extraordinary, inexplicable inner impulses, which made made shoot sequences and things that I couldn't have logically explained . . . [T]he thing built up to a tremendous amount of internal tension, breaking out into expression coming from one's subconscious very much (Levin 1971, 53-54). My inner consciousness had been set off by the fact that, although an irreligious person, I was tremendously moved and impressed by Buddhist religion which I had encountered and seen for the very first time in Ceylon (Starr 1975, 17).

the film

Song of Ceylon is a beautiful film. It has been favourably compared with the work of the Russian masters of montage, Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov. It broke new ground in the creative use of sound editing. Henri Storck, a respected documentarist of Wright's generation, described it as "above all the film of an artist with a sensibility; it is the work of a poet" (Levin 1971, 156).

Song of Ceylon develops its themes in four carefully constructed parts. The first part, "The Buddha," evokes the Buddhist culture and spirituality of Sri Lanka. The film opens with shots of the forest, then of whirling dancers. The narration, taken from the writings of Robert Knox, a captured seventeenth-century sailor, tells us that, in ancient times, the forests were dark dangerous places and that the natives danced to honour the devil before the Buddha came. Most of the rest of the first section shows a group of people in pilgrimage to the Buddhist shrine at the peak of the holy mountain, Sri Pada. The shots are cut in a measured rhythm to the sounds of bells, music, singing, and readings from Knox's book. Wright chose this text because "its 'period' flavor was just what I needed" (Starr 1975, 19).

At the end of the first section there is a crucial sequence: after the camera pans across the ruins of a Buddhist temple, we see a series of individual birds perched on branches, taking flight, and rising up against a cloudy sky. Reviewing the film soon after its release, Graham Greene called this sequence "one of the loveliest visual metaphors I have ever seen on any screen" (Starr 1975, 17). Don Fredericksen analyzes these birds as symbols of Buddhist arhats, 'enlightened sages,' freed through religious practice from worldly constraints (1980). Wright himself drew attention to the importance of this sequence to the film's development:

In . . . Song of Ceylon certain religious images (of Buddhist provenance) are shown only in brief flashes early in the film, not being explained as themselves but placed in an acceptable context involving the flight of birds at dawn; but their real significance is not known until the last reel (Wright 1974, 10; cf. Starr 1975, 17, 21).
The second part, “The Virgin Island,” documents Sri Lanka’s natural and human resources. It shows people going about their daily tasks: women draw and carry water; people build their houses, fish, and tend their rice paddies. The words of Knox tell us that “to work for hire with [the Sri Lankans] is reckoned for a great shame, and very few are here to be found who will work so.” We see children being taught the important art of dance. The section ends with more shots of work and play.

The third part, “The Voices of Commerce,” introduces the theme of colonial trade. The section begins with a travelling shot taken from a train descending slowly into a valley, passing trees, roads and buildings. It cuts to a medium shot of an elephant slowly pushing over a tree; the sound of a gong rings out; commerce has entered the stage. The pace of the editing quickens. A ship enters port. A man prays to a tree before climbing it to remove coconuts. The coconuts tumble; they are carted away and husked. The empty husks lie in huge mounds by the thousands.

In this section of the film the soundtrack, composed by Walter Leigh in coordination with Wright’s editing, plays an especially important role: a sound montage of morse code and monotone voices speaking price quotations and fragmented phrases of business letters in several languages builds over shots of radio towers, machines, tea pickers, dry deforested hillsides and loading docks. With sound and images, the film evokes a sense of broken calm, of peace lost.

The film’s final section, “The Apparel of a God,” begins with short thematic resume: we hear Sri Lankan-influenced music; we see an elephant driver, a woman carrying a child, a sailboat, a long line of pickers carrying baskets; morse code and western music reappear on the soundtrack. The film then returns to the theme of Buddhism as the shot of the pickers dissolves to a shot that establishes Wright’s final sequence: a statue of the Buddha towers in the foreground and, low in the background, a lone man carries a basket along a trail. This dissolve shows Wright’s genius for underlining thematic material filmically: it is exceptionally long, and it is held halfway through, where, for several seconds, the two images are merged inseparably. The sounds of morse code and western music fade away and are replaced by music evocative of Sri Lanka. In a long meditative sequence, we see the lone man stop, pray, make an offering of flowers and rice to the huge Buddha image, and then continue on his way. The film then ends with preparations for a dance, with the dancers whirling madly, echoing the opening sequence of the film, and with the sound of a gong that signals the final shot, an image of the Buddha.

“an art of life”

In Wright’s words, “Song of Ceylon is extraordinarily cyclic . . . It begins and ends with the same shot, It’s in a circle, a magic circle, the Buddhist mandala—which is a magic circle you make in four sections to protect yourself against various things” (Thomas 1979, 481; cf. Gombrich 1971, 192, 200). If Song of Ceylon is a mandala, what does it protect us from? The answer to this question can be found in Wright’s idealization of Sri Lanka’s Buddhist culture.

In 1934, while still editing the film, Wright wrote that “the intersection of . . . three high spots forms the controlling factor of all the material” (Wright 1934, 232). These three key elements are (1) the pilgrimage up the holy mountain, which emphasizes the centrality of Buddhism to Sri Lankan culture, (2) medieval ruins, which emphasize the deep historical roots of the culture, and (3) Kandyan dancing, which opens and closes the film, and which emphasizes the vitality that Wright saw as infusing the culture. Wright does not mention the colonial presence at all in these comments written during the editing process. He had a very specific sense of what his objective had been when shooting:

“to achieve a co-ordination of all the primary elements of Ceylon into a construction which should carry a conviction, not merely of what Ceylon now superficially is, but of what Ceylon stands for in the line of that vital history which is measured in terms of statues, monuments, religion, and of human activity. (Wright 1934, 232)
In attempting to realize this goal during the editing process, Wright made it clear that standard criteria for selecting documentary footage did not apply:

The film is now on the cutting bench, and it is interesting to note that material which, had we shot it last year in the West Indies [for previous films], would have been a first choice, goes now straight into the waste bin, rejected purely for its externality, its superficiality—in fact, for its documentary remoteness (Wright 1934, 232).

Wright was aiming to document an essential Sri Lanka beyond the “superficial.” He sought to portray “what Ceylon stands for.” Documentary footage which would have shown only a superficial Sri Lanka is discarded as “remote.” Instead, for example, the shots of birds taking flight come to play a key role in the film. Grierson held a similar view of filmmaking: “it is important to make the primary distinction between a method which describes only the surface values of a subject, and the method which more explosively reveals the reality of it” (1946, 81).

What, then, is the essence that Song of Ceylon attempts to document? Beyond portraying a Buddhist culture and the effects of colonial trade, Wright’s personal response to Buddhism led him to attempt to show a set of values lacking in the West. According to Grierson, “The theme is Buddhism and the art of life it has to offer set upon by a Western metropolitan civilization which, in spite of all our skills, has no art of life to offer” (Starr 1975, 17).

Grierson is explicit about the religious nature of this dimension of values and the power of creative filmmakers to inspire it:

If the churches want the greatest service from this art, it is not just cameras and pictures that it wants, but the power that makes pictures light up and talk. That is the artist’s power . . . I do not know why it is that the church people, like the advertising people, should make so much of the brand-mark on their product. They don’t need to. Inspire people in those values on which religion properly insists and you do religion’s job . . . You and I and the millions of others will take our Good Earth and Pasteur and Man of Aran and Song of Ceylon happily and know they are the real thing (Grierson 1946, 130-31).

Wright himself echoes these concerns:

I think Song of Ceylon is the work of a young man exposed for the first time to an oriental as opposed to occidental way of life, and to a very impressive and convincing oriental religion. The film is perhaps a naive way of saying, ‘Look, I have found this marvelous way of life and I want you to share it with me . . . (Starr 1975, 21).

Wright’s portrayal of Buddhism

In order to determine whether Song of Ceylon does in fact document an “art of life” that Sri Lankan Buddhism offers to the West, we need to ask whether its portrayal of that religion is accurate. Two problems of documentary accuracy arise.

First, the two key elements of the film that document Buddhist rituals, the pilgrimage up the holy mountain and the worship of the Buddha image, were both staged (Wright 1934, 231; Starr 1975, 18). On a similar note, the famous sequence of birds taking flight was made possible by Wright and his assistant throwing rocks to scare them into the air (Starr 1975, 17). Doesn’t this undermine the film’s claim to portray Buddhism objectively? Not really. This sort of criticism is too superficial. As Wright notes, “justifiable reconstruction” is an accepted aspect of documentary filmmaking (Thomas 1979, 467f). Most importantly, he checked explicitly with his subjects regarding the accuracy and typicality of the activities they were reenacting for the camera (Starr 1975, 18).

Second, and more significantly, Wright discarded footage which he regarded as superficially documentary in an attempt to capture an essential transhistorical Sri Lanka. He has since suggested that the “inexplicable inner impulses” that helped shape the film were expressions of the Jungian collective unconscious (Thomas 1979, 480; cf. Fredericksen 1980). Given this, how can we judge
the accuracy of this sort of documentary portrayal? And what elements of a more objective portrayal of Buddhism remain despite this approach?

*Song of Ceylon’s* portrayal of Sri Lankan culture is better characterized as idealized than as inaccurate. This is illustrated by Wright’s description of one of *Song of Ceylon*’s “highspots.” Regarding the village dances that he spent a week shooting, Wright said,

Kandyan dancing is an excellent example of primitive movements formalised and classicised by tradition and religion, yet retaining the vigour of prehistoric origin. Like good Orientals they dance with their whole bodies; and they take it seriously (Wright 1934, 232).

Wright is correct that many aspects of Sri Lankan religion and culture, including the Kandyan sub-culture which he refers to here, are pre-Buddhist and, hence, prehistoric in their origins. However, *Song of Ceylon* idealizes the country’s people and their “ancient vital history.” It does so both by romanticizing the ancient and by structuring the film around a contrast between the measured pace of vital Sri Lanka and the frantic pace of sterile colonial commerce. Although both these aspects of the film do succeed in representing something significant about the country and its relation with the British colonial presence, it would be a mistake to see the film as primarily a documentary about Sri Lankan culture and the British presence. There are three important reasons for making this claim.

First, *Song of Ceylon* seems to document Wright’s reaction to Sri Lanka more than it does the country itself. His reaction was a very specific one: an implicit recognition of a paucity of religious values in western society. His profound encounter with and portrayal of spiritual fullness must reflect a relative emptiness in his initial point of view, and this lack, mirrored in his portrayal of Sri Lankan culture, is the central theme of the film.

Second, *Song of Ceylon* omits important developments that were fundamentally altering Sri Lankan Buddhism at the time Wright was documenting it. Most significantly, Protestant Buddhism had been on the scene for over fifty years when Wright was shooting in 1934; the key figure of the movement, Anagarika Dharmapala, had died the year before (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 202 ff). Influenced by the model of Protestant Christian missionaries, Protestant Buddhism was a politicized and fundamentalist Buddhism for the literate Sinhalese bourgeoisie. Despite a certain admiration for western rationalism, it was nationalistic and anti-British. It reemphasized central tenets of traditional Buddhism among the laity, including meditation, religious education, and stricter vows, opening the quest for nirvana to all. This posed a challenge to the traditional Theravada view of the *sangha*, the order of monks, as the sole path to salvation.

In addition, a fundamentalist revival was taking place within the *sangha* itself in the early twentieth century. For example, two years before Wright arrived in Sri Lanka, a number of monks founded the important forest retreat Salgala in order to practice meditation in the traditional style of hermits (Gombrich 1971, 278).

The fact that *Song of Ceylon* neglects these developments is arguably consistent with Wright’s goal of capturing the essential rather than the superficial Sri Lanka. However, by emphasizing his personal sense of what was ancient or timeless in Sri Lanka, Wright contrasted a frantic and changeable West with a static East. The film represents change only as an outside colonial imposition standing over against the timeless spiritual vitality of Sri Lanka. This misrepresents the country, which was going through important economic, social, and religious changes which cannot be viewed simply as reactions to external forces. In this sense as well, Wright portrayed Sri Lanka not in its own terms but as the other of western society. It might be objected that such a short film with such general objectives cannot be expected to achieve this level of detail. The point remains, however, that Sri Lankan religion and society in the 1930s were very dynamic whereas Wright portrays them as essentially static.

Third, *Song of Ceylon* overemphasizes individualistic aspects of Buddhism both in what it shows and in what it does not show. This is evoked visually by the crucial sequence of birds in the first section, each shown individually taking flight. In addition, the key moment of the film, in terms
of portraying Buddhism, is the scene in the last section where a lone man stops at a huge image of
the Buddha, prays, makes an offering of flowers and rice, and then continues on his way. Such indi-
vidual offerings are common, though they are most usual in temples where the worshipper is
generally one of many people separately involved in similar rituals (Bareau 1957, 51-53; cf.
Gombrich 1971, 114f). It is misleading to show an isolated individual in worship at a point in the
film which suggests, both structurally and thematically, that the essence of Buddhism is being
portrayed. This is not to suggest that Buddhism has a communal rather than individual emphasis;
communal worship is, in fact, much rarer than in Christianity (Gombrich 1971, 74, 78). The point
is that this sort of ritual is not as central to Buddhism as Wright’s placement of it suggests.

The flip side of Wright’s emphasis of individual worship is his omission of the sangha. Bu-
dhist society is structured at the most fundamental level by the distinction between lay and
monastic communities. In looking for a ritual to end his film, a ritual that expressed something
essential about Buddhism, Wright would have found a more appropriate, though less picturesque,
example in the daily feeding of begging monks. In this ritual, the laity provides worldly sustenance
for the sangha, and the sangha provides the laity an opportunity to earn merit (Gombrich 1971, 227
ff). The members of the sangha, in turn, transfer merit to all living beings. This ritual transaction is
paradigmatic to a number of gifting relations that are, to an important degree, constitutive of Sri
Lankan society (Ames 1966).

By emphasizing this individualistic aspect of Buddhism and by omitting the relation
between laity and sangha, Wright seems to have imposed Christian preconceptions of the nature of
religion on his subject. This point is underlined by the narration he chose which, early in the film,
speaks of the evil spirits of Sri Lankan popular religion as “the devil” and misleadingly refers to the
Buddha as a god. For Theravada Buddhists the Buddha was a man, however extraordinary. Belief
in gods and spirits, an element of the popular religious tradition, is clearly distinguished from
Buddhism (Gombrich 1971, 49, 156-62, 175-76; Obeyesekere 1979). Protestant Buddhism went so
far as to hold that Buddhism was not a religion at all but, rather, a philosophy. Wright, describing
the culminating scene of individual Buddha veneration in a later interview, clearly revealed his
Christian presuppositions: “the little man comes in with his basket of rice and flowers and gives
them to God” (Starr 1975, 18). This is the moment he presents as the essence of Buddhism.

In a sense this is only to repeat that Song of Ceylon is a lyrical, poetic and, above all, personal
film, not an objective documentary. Yet, it is an acknowledged classic of the documentary tradition,
and its maker did attempt explicitly to capture something essential about its subject. The point is not
that Song of Ceylon misrepresents Buddhism. By noting the refractions caused by Wright’s agendas
and preconceptions, we turn our attention to something more important: the extent to which the
film was shaped by his personal encounter with a very different and profoundly religious culture.

Wright screened the film in Sri Lanka for an audience of young people in 1969 to favourable
reviews: according to Wright, “they said, ‘Yes, you have made a really true film about our country’”
(Thomas 1979, 476; cf. Levin 1971, 54). The film shows aspects of Theravada Buddhism and of the
corrosive effects of colonial commerce, and, to this extent, it is very true. It is also a very personal,
even spiritual, response to another culture and an extraordinary film in its openness to this response.
Wright achieved a special sort of balance. It is as if the film holds a long dissolve where an image of
its ostensible subject and a reflection of its own gaze overlap.

Wright described his film as a mandala, a design or amulet that is used to ward off dangerous
influences. The dangerous influence was not colonial commerce threatening Sri Lanka’s Buddhist
culture but the West’s lack of an “art of life.” I have tried to show that the film serves as a mandala
less by accurately portraying what Buddhism has to offer than by holding up to western audiences a
mirror image of spirituality lost.

Yet, Song of Ceylon does not simply lament a perceived lack of an art of life in the West; it
also captures a certain dimension of spirituality. In this sense, Buddhism was less the subject of the
film than its catalyst. Basil Wright, “an irreligious person,” had a “religious experience” in making
this film; for him, the art of life was the filmmaking process itself. He tried to show western
audiences what they lacked by showing what he had found. Whether or not his film accurately portrays a Buddhist spiritual fullness in contrast to the sterility of the West, it not only captures but embodies the wonder and excitement of an artist caught up in a moment of spiritual discovery. That is why *Song of Ceylon* is a great documentary and why it would not be one if it were more objective.

**works cited**


How, Then, Shall We Live As Good Characters in a Good Story?

A review essay

Richard Lee

A fiery, young Methodist missionary recently asked me if my subconscious believed in God. As a stolid, elderly Lutheran less inclined to such introspection, I replied that—while one can never be sure in these matters—it was possible that my subconscious believed in all the gods.

Luther thought mankind’s irrepressible faith was always creating divinities, and that our minds were, among other things, factories for making idols. With so much faith hankering to believe something, and with so many gods offering their services, Luther thought the chief task of theology was to cleanse our minds—at least our conscious minds—of their infinitely renewable supply of idols. Thereafter, with any grace, faith might be disentangled and set free for God.

In our hypermediated society, one source of our gods is the movies, and Margaret R. Miles’ Seeing is Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies offers some help for anyone who wants to sort out the ways movies function religiously and offer up the latest gods. Miles, the Bussey Professor of Historical Theology at Harvard Divinity School, contends that “religion has centrally to do with the articulation of a sense of relatedness—among individuals, within families, communities, and societies, and with the natural world.” The gods in the movies are all those particularly articulated ways of being in the world, and movies are religious in character insofar as they offer answers to the question “How, then, shall we live?”

It follows for Miles that if religion is centrally about human relationships, then religion is also about the values by which people conduct their relationships. Movies, she says, treat values whenever they concern “the material, relational, social and political ‘goods’ that a person or people identify as centrally constitutive of the ‘good’ life.” For Miles, values include “attitudes, opinions, institutional loyalties, and particular behaviors that people find indispensable, or at least worth working or struggling for.” The dazzling breadth of her definition of religion—and her even broader definition of values—is her book’s strength and, for a remaining few of us, also its weakness.

But, first to the book’s strengths. By approaching movies as a site of “imaginative possibility . . . to try new models, new roles, new theories, new combinations of behavior” for our relationships, Miles goes beyond the study of films as texts. She transcends various psychoanalytic, semiotic, Marxist, Freudian, auteur, and genre approaches to movies with a “cultural studies” approach which examines movies as “products of the culture’s social, sexual, religious, political, and institutional configurations” at particular moments in history. She offers remarkably “thick interpretations” of some movies that others might consider breezy ephemera.

Miles’ cultural studies approach means that a movie is “one voice in a complex social conversation, occurring in a particular historical moment,” and a movie may tell us about the “anxieties and longings of large audiences” in its time. To understand a film, Miles must reconstruct its contemporary social framework, especially the putative concerns of its producers, artists, and its audience. She examines films released between 1983 and 1993 which betray their audience’s concerns about
race and class conflict, ecological degradation, family breakdown, drug and pornography addiction, casual abortion, urban violence, gender inequities, the AIDS plague, censorious fundamentalist religion, international terrorism, various “Age of Reagan” political issues, and many other scars and stigmata of that time.

Miles’ cultural studies method of film analysis is not as portable as the methods which treat films as independent texts. The array of information about the social conditions of a film, not to mention a film’s own industrial history (who funded it? was the script “presold”? was the film shaped as a vehicle for a star? how widely was it distributed and advertised? how many tickets did it sell? what groups actually saw it? what portion of its income was earned from foreign sales and videos?, etc.) is simply not readily available to most film students. But not to worry. Much of the best of Miles’ criticism hardly depends upon her cultural studies method.

For example, in Miles’ incisive study of The Last Temptation of Christ (1988) and Jesus of Montreal (1989), she points out that “contemporary Hollywood films have not developed conventions to signal religious motivation” and wonders whether is possible to show religious commitment in a “medium in which things must be visible to be real.” This is, of course, a problem for religion itself before it is a problem for film; Jesus of Nazareth, for example, encouraged his followers not to be too showy about their religious commitments, nor to let their left hands know what their right hands were doing.

When Miles concludes her analysis by faulting Christ and Jesus for merely entertaining us with the usual dollops of sex and violence, her criticism is good, old-fashioned genre criticism and hardly needs the support of cultural studies. One could return Miles to an earlier Hollywood which had abundant “conventions to signal religious motivation” (Rembrandt lighting, eyes cast upward, heavenly choirs on the sound track, the voice of God from an echo chamber, etc.), but I doubt she would be much pleased. Nor would she find those hallowed, haloed, reverent spectacles devoid of titillating sex and tantalizing violence.

More useful in Miles’ study of Christ and Jesus is her distinction between religious images and film images. For Miles, religious images represent an invisible reality more real to us than the visible world, while film images are “only images” we “play” with, pretending they are “reality.” Because movies move, no one image can engage our concentrated imagination and become a “trap for devotion.” Miles probably overstates the incapacity of movies to be transparent to the eternal, though it is true movies are a lot less like icons and more like parables. Moving pictures do indeed move.

As I read Miles, the distinction between a religious image and a film image is the difference between believing and suspending disbelief. Thus a film at best can be about religion but it cannot, like an icon, act religiously, that is, inspire devotion or imitation. This distinction may make good semiotic sense, but it hardly needs the support of cultural studies. Besides, the difference between a religious image and a film image seriously depends upon the subjectivity of the viewer and the duration of the view.

For example, a star performer or a pin-up can act iconically if the images are engaged as repeatedly and as devotedly as a religious icon. A single John Wayne film is not an icon, but Wayne’s persona can be an icon when it is engaged film after film by a devoted following. A single Betty Grable film is not an icon, but her ubiquitous pin-up during World War II probably acted iconically for the GIs. Such icons do not open us to the deepest religious realities, but they do act religiously by inspiring imitation and arousing devotion. How to fight honorably (Wayne) and what is worth fighting for (Grable) were not insignificant religious questions for many American men in that time of ordinary heroism.

When Miles turns from films putatively about Jesus to films concerning Jesus’ followers—especially The Mission (1986) and Romero (1989) about Roman Catholics and The Handmaid’s Tale (1990) and The Rapture (1991) about Christian fundamentalists—we are again copiously advantaged by her criticism of film conventions. Her critique is somewhat weakened when she complains that these have not been good years for movie representations of religious people, who...
tend to be shown as devious and crazy. Unfortunately for her critique, enough religious people in real life recently have been devious and crazy, and she may be fecklessly faulting art for imitating life.

News in the 80s and early 90s included regular images of larcenous and libidinous TV evangelists, Branch Davidian and Christian militia violence, the rise of the religious right as a special interest seeking to privilege religion, and the proliferation of whacko religious radio talk shows. Perhaps it does not occur to some religious people that their genuinely and sincerely held beliefs may seem strange, even dangerous, to their neighbors. Some Americans, for example, find it difficult to live in equanimity with fellow citizens who believe they shall soon meet Jesus in the sky when his Second Coming will end the world as we know it. When folks take their religion into the public square, they should be prepared for honest incredulity.

When Miles examines films about Catholic and fundamentalist Christians, and also films about conservative and secular Jews—*The Chosen* (1982) and *Chariots of Fire* (1981)—she shrewdly recognizes that many film conventions intrinsically frustrate the presentation of genuine religion. Hollywood film conventions, for example, require a single heroic character, thus over-individu­alizing religion and obscuring its communal character. Religious figures in films, like the heroes of American westerns, tend to appear out of nowhere and disappear into nowhere. A showdown celebrating an isolated, muscular Christian is always easier to film than the long nurture of church, community, and tradition.

Other film conventions are also religiously hard to crack. For example, tragic violence in a religious film tends to become an act of heroic violence to entertain Hollywood’s majority audience of young males. It is as if God divides the Red Sea not so much to escort the people of Israel dry-shod toward the promised land—but to savage Pharaoh’s army. Or, if the religious character in a film is part of a religious minority, that figure—like Shylock—tends to become a foil to demonstrate the religious majority’s superiority. Miles’ ample study of the many film conventions which frustrate the representation of genuine religion in the movies is most praiseworthy. Indeed, her criticism of these film conventions is worth the price of the book—though little of it depends upon her cultural studies approach.

Miles’ cultural studies approach does, however, shine in her study of the “politically correct” issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation in recent movies. In an examination of *The Long Walk Home* (1990), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *The Piano* (1993), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Paris is Burning* (1991) and several other films, she shows how movies assuage many current political correctness anxieties with pleasing fictions. By focusing on the question of whose story is told in the films, and who is watching these films, Miles shows that the the lives of women and racial and sexual minorities in these films become mere “events” in the lives of young, white heterosexual males.

Her cultural studies analysis of these and other movies argues that their social constructions of “gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are not accidental or incidental to their religious perspectives.” Most of our movies’ “articulation of reality” remains too racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic to answer the question “How, then, shall we live?” with much promise of health and wholeness. We lack enough movies that picture religious, racial, sexual, and cultural diversity as irreducible and delightful. Much of the religion at the movies (with some gracious exceptions) is idolatrous insofar as the movies privilege the perspective of our currently over-privileged few and do not articulate a fully human relatedness for all of us.

Miles concludes her examination of religion and values in the movies by encouraging a vigorous discussion of the movies. Her cultural studies approach emphasizes that “meanings are not fixed” and “the viewer is not a consumer who swallows whatever meanings the film may try to communicate.” We need, thinks Miles, to multiply our perspectives on the movies lest we remain voyeurs content with their pleasing surfaces. (Indeed, some films may need to be read “against the grain,” at least by the savvy, to withstand their intended meanings.) Broad, multicultural discussion, Miles hopes, could help filmgoers work out how all of us might better “live as good characters in a good story.”

A few voices raised in the vigorous discussion of the movies Miles urges may be those who
Richard Lee recently retired from Valparaiso University where he taught film and the humanities for thirty years, and twice served as Editor of The Cresset.

Miles, of course, is not alone in her focus on the values “according to which people conduct their relationships” as a way of discussing, even advocating, religion in our day. (One may, for example, extol Christian virtues and, indeed, practice Christian values without being a Christian.) Such “values and virtues” talk about religion is probably useful if one remains aware that it is only a way people of different religious persuasions or no religious persuasion try to remain civil while seeking common ground. Miles’ worthy book takes us a good distance toward understanding religion and values in the movies. Others may have to go the rest of the way by themselves to cleanse their minds of the movies’ latest idols, not least many of those “material, relational, social and political ‘goods’ that . . . people identify as centrally constitutive of the ‘good’ life.”

Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies. Margaret R. Miles

WHERE WE MEET

A morning mist kneels before the Wasatch mountains combing out the white wool of winter carrying hot sun to tender shoots to clumsy grass unfolding fawn-like in the new meadow.

Within each fat bud there is a meeting place of remembrance and hope a swelling up of grace ready to be shot across tomorrow.

What will you become you greening thing? Some fragrance over the canyon grove. Some child among the lupine arrows.

Christopher J. Renz O.P.
WATCHING POE AT THE BELMAR

We weren't far from home, a few miles,
A bridge, both of us just licensed
So Homewood, like any strange part
Of Pittsburgh, was close enough for
His father's Peugeot. We knew French;
We could understand both halves
Of the owner's manual and parked
So close to the marquee I said,
"Dans rue grise des ruines"
And expected empty seats,
A janitor hobbling the aisle
With a broom while Vincent Price
Let loose a laugh during two
Of the three films we were seeing
For the cheapest price in town.
What liars we were. The truth is
We didn't know who was sitting
Around us, entering in the dark,
Mid-feature, two scenes before
The pendulum started swinging.
We murmured in English and
Slipped into the first empty row
To the right. We settled back
To watch rats rescue the hero,
The House of Usher fall, and last,
The face of Monsieur Valdemar
Melt to phantasmagoric gore.
We'd helped, with seventy cents each,
To hire a projectionist
Who turned the house lights up before
The credits rolled, and suddenly
We saw ourselves as white as
The blurred idea of Grace.
The aisle clotted, black and loud
With foreign language, all the dead
Or rescued white faces hammered dark
By a thumb. We didn't have names
In that aisle, but we were trying
To get the rhythm of the crowd
Perfectly in our shoes so we
Bumped nobody from behind
Or the side, or impeded the swirl
Of four hundred black patrons
Who never saw us, we believed,
Walking speechless into the gray
Midnight of cataracts, snow
Surviving among the tracks
All of us made toward the short row
Of cars and the doors of a hundred
Houses spreading into the dark.
The next summer, rows of those homes
Would fall to the fire of riots
Despite family or love,
And somebody in that crowd
Would kill or be killed for honor,
Pride, or insanity, though
We wouldn't know anything
But the film version, the two
Of us Poe experts who compared,
Scornful once we had driven
Four blocks from that shabby screen,
What we'd read to what we'd seen.

Gary Fincke
Films the Cresset reader shouldn't miss?
Reviewer Jennifer Voigt suggests these ten, all available in video.

*Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Woody Allen, 1989. This film’s resolution takes place against a backdrop—a wedding hosted by a blind rabbi—that becomes an emblem of the moral and spiritual uncertainty of the film’s first two hours. One of Allen’s most probing films, and a cinematic reworking of the book of Job, the movie ponders the moral weight of human action and asks, “Is God blind to his children’s suffering?” In English.

*Black Robe*, Bruce Beresford, 1991. Two questions, one posed by a young French Jesuit in eighteenth century Quebec, and the other raised by the Huron guide he is trying to convert, resonate through this remarkable film. The priest: “How can I reach people who believe that dreams are reality and this world only an illusion?” The guide: “Why would I want to go to the Christian afterlife when none of my family will be there?” In French with English subtitles.

*The Mission*, Roland Jaffe, 1986. The Church has been justly criticized for its silence, and even complicity, in unjust acts or movements when its power is at stake. The Church has tolerated, among other events, the Holocaust and the international slave trade. In this film, the fate of the Jesuit order, as well as that of would-be slaves, lies in a dispute between the Portuguese governors of Brazil and a group of Jesuit missionaries. In English.


*The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola, 1972. Take advantage of this movie’s re-release to see it on celluloid and in a theatre. The baptism/execution sequence and the wedding/court sequence are shocking because we in the audience recognize in their conflicting elements a moral ambiguity that the film’s characters accept as a moral certainty. In English.

*Groundhog Day*, Harold Ramis, 1993. Though it masquerades as a light comedy, this film nevertheless does a fine job of portraying one man’s search for a way to annihilate time. The initially spiritually dead protagonist struggles throughout the film to escape an existence in which each day appears identical to every other day, and to create beauty and meaning in his life. In English.

*Babette’s Feast*, Gabriel Axel, 1987. Isak Dinesen found Protestantism lacking in the vitality and sensuality necessary to fully realize one’s relationship with God. In this adaptation of one of her *Anecdotes of Destiny*, Papists and partiers alike help to revive a dying congregation whose theology is usually as bland as the Jutland peninsula itself. In Danish and French with English subtitles.

*The Seventh Seal*, Ingmar Bergman, 1956. While I’m betting that at some time or another everyone has seen this film, it is well worth watching again, perhaps in conjunction with *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *The Sacrifice* for both Allen and Tarkovsky owe a great deal to Bergman’s vision in this film, as well as to his favorite cinematographer, Swen Nykvist, whom they employed to work on their films. In Swedish with English subtitles.

*The Seventh Seal*, Andrei Tarkovsky, 1986. Perhaps communicating a shade of realism during the Cold War, today *The Sacrifice*, the events of which are spurred by the initiation of nuclear war, seems even more surreal than at first it may have been conceived. In an attempt to prevent the coming destruction, a man offers up a unique sacrifice. In Swedish with English subtitles.

*Raising Arizona*, Joel Cohen, 1987. Parenthood and the family have become a religion in our culture—they are the institutions to which politicians, talk show hosts, ministers, and *Redbook* all look to for the salvation of civilization as we know it. Indeed, this film could be substituted for any film directed by Joel Cohen and his brother Ethan. Their films consistently insist on terms like good and evil, guilty and innocent. In English.
idealism, narcissism and waning hope

Fredrick Barton

idealism or narcissism?

It was that tumultuous year of 1968, when Andy Warhol said, “In the future, everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes.” The year of this utterance is instructive. It was a time when people my age, people who were in college in the late 1960s and early 70s, dared to believe they could change the world, dared to believe they could become instrumental in eliminating poverty, racism and war. The idealistic spirit of the times was galvanized in the quixotic presidential campaign of Eugene McCarthy and only somewhat diluted by the hard-headed professionalism in the rival campaign of the immensely charismatic Robert Kennedy. But here’s what Warhol knew about us that we would have vehemently denied at the time. There was a profound narcissism mixed in with our idealism. We could change the world for the better, we believed, and we could become famous doing it.

Some years ago I did an interview with Woody Allen, long before the aura of disrepute had settled over him in the fallout over the Soon-Yi Previn affair, at a time when he was still my unalloyed hero. Among the questions I asked him that day was how he accounted for his success. This is a question I frequently ask celebrities, and I’m usually told one of two things: either God-given talent or hard work. Those who say the former are typically thought to be conceited, but sometimes they aren’t. They often tell me this with a shrug of apparently genuine humility, a separation of self from achievement. In direct contrast, those who say the latter think they’re being modest, but they usually aren’t; really they’re exhibiting their secret pride, awarding themselves the credit for their accomplishments by virtue of their supreme effort.

Allen could have given me either of these answers. He certainly has been blessed with astonishing, God-given talent. He was already publishing jokes and humor columns in daily newspapers when he was still in high school. He has made a handsome living from his instinctive and distinctive wit since he was a teenager. And certainly, few in the filmmaking industry have ever worked harder. Allen has written and directed nineteen features in the last twenty years, a productivity unrivaled by any other major American director. But Allen ascribed his success to neither talent nor effort. There were plenty of other people in this world as funny as he was, he assured me, plenty of other storytellers with tales to tell as good or better than his. And there were plenty of other people who worked every bit as hard as he did and came away with a lot less to show for it. So how did he account for his success? Luck. That was the answer. He’d had it. Other worthy people hadn’t. Allen may not be wise in the conduct of his private life, but in his humble understanding of his artistic achievement, wealth and fame, I think he is wise indeed.

Tiger Woods is another American who has been blessed with surpassing God-given talent honed on the wheel of ceaseless practice. At the Masters Golf Championship this April, at the tender age of twenty-one, he established himself as the game’s greatest current player. On his way to the title, the youngest champion in history by nearly two years, he broke the tournament record for lowest number of strokes and greatest margin of victory. He is handsome, charismatic, seemingly happy, fathomlessly rich (forty some odd million dollars and counting), and I find myself feeling sorry for him. I find myself feeling sorry for him because of the countless number of...
times our media felt the need to remind listeners and readers that Woods was the first black man ever to have won either this tournament or any of the other three so-called major golf championships.

1997 is the fiftieth anniversary of that stirring season the great Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in major league baseball. In the years since, so many of our sports heroes have been black, from Willie Mays to Henry Aaron, Wilma Rudolph, Jim Brown, Rafer Johnson, Bill Russell, Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic Johnson, Jackie Joyner-Kersee and Michael Jordan, each with a legitimate claim to have been the best in history at his or her sports event or sports position. Thus, it is profoundly sad to me this late in our history, a half century since Robinson disproved the ludicrously racist notion that blacks could not compete successfully against whites, that Tiger Woods has to be identified as a black champion. He shouldn't have to carry that burden, the burden of our nation's obsession with race and with firsts: the first black major league manager, the first black coach to win an NCAA basketball championship, the first black quarterback to win a Super Bowl.

And yet, I am not judging the media. I am aware of the importance the African-American community places on such firsts, each representing an opening to members of their race a place previously and undeservedly closed. African Americans understandably share an identity, born of the shared history of discrimination. In the 1930s black Americans felt each blow suffered by boxer Joe Louis, and savored each of his many triumphs. In the 1940s, African Americans had the same kind of investment in the basehits and stolen bases of Jackie Robinson.

I am, moreover, informed by the tearful testimony of talented black golfer Charles Sifford who won P.G.A. events in the 1960s but was excluded throughout his career from competing in the Masters. It means a lot to Sifford that a black man has finally won a major golf championship. He watched the tournament on television and cried as Tiger Woods strode up the eighteenth fairway, his victory already assured. And I am further informed by the actions of Lee Elder, the first black man allowed to compete in the Masters in 1975. At his own expense, Elder journeyed to the Augusta, Georgia, site of the Masters to walk the fairways of Augusta National in Woods' gallery, just to be present in case the young man won, in case this young man became the first black person to win.

dissing the critic

Odd as it may seem, I find myself thinking repeatedly of Andy Warhol, Woody Allen and Tiger Woods as I try to organize my thoughts about John Singleton's recent film Rosewood. I am used to stirring controversy with the columns I write for Gambit, the newsweekly in my hometown of New Orleans. There's a right-wing contingent in the area that likes to send me hate mail on a regular basis. And I've been attacked from the left as well. A group of feminist readers accused me of sexism for admitting that Woody Allen had been a hero of mine prior to 1992, even though the purpose of my Gambit essay, "Say It Ain't So," was to confess my belated understanding of the difference between the artist and his art. My column on Rosewood, however, was the first to elicit attacks from the right and the left simultaneously.

Singleton's Rosewood tells the horrific story of the wanton murder in 1923 of scores of African Americans by a band of marauding, central-Florida whites. The picture's most telling moment arrives, however, in a confrontation between two groups of white people. Drunk on the blood lust of what they consider righteous violence, the murderers try to pass out of the county where they live and where they have mercilessly killed their black neighbors, but they are kept from doing so by an armed contingent of whites from the next county over who don't want the violence spreading into their own area. The second group of whites obviously knows the heinous nature of what the first group is doing, and they act to restrict the atrocities to one region. Critically though, the second group pitilessly takes no action whatsoever to punish the murderers or to protect those surviving black people still hiding in the first county.

Scripted by Gregory Poirier and based on actual events, Rosewood is the story of two towns, two groups of human beings and the hideous face of racism in America. The more prosperous of the two towns is Rosewood. All its
residents are land owners. Some are teachers; others are musicians. They pride themselves on keeping their property well maintained. Not far from Rosewood is the town of Sumner where the homes are unpainted shanties and the residents are poor and indifferent to civic virtue. With the exception of one family, all the residents of Rosewood are black; Sumner is populated exclusively by white people.

Echoing the plot of To Kill a Mockingbird, trouble flames up between the residents of these two towns when a Sumner white woman named Fannie Taylor (Catherine Kellner) claims to have been beaten up by an unidentified black man. Within minutes, the whole town declares that she’s been raped, though that’s a claim she never makes. In fact, Fannie has been beaten by her white lover, and she’s made up the story of the black man to account for her bruises when her husband comes home. Sheriff Walker (Michael Rooker) suspects Fannie’s story from the outset, but he’s intimidated by all the local hotheads. And pretty soon blood is running in the streets of Rosewood. The first to die are not themselves suspects. They are accused by the mob merely of having information and refusing to divulge it.

Ving Rhames in John Singleton’s “Rosewood,” Warner Brothers’ drama based on an actual event, also starring Jon Voight. © 1996 Warner Bros. Photo by Eli Reed.
By happenstance, there is a black stranger in Rosewood at this time, a hardy World War I veteran named Mann (Ving Rhames). But he’s innocent of everything except wanting a place he can call home. Mann is visiting with the family of Sylvester Carrier (Don Cheadle) at the time Fannie makes her accusations, and this fact brings all of them into harm’s way. Sylvester’s mother Sarah (Esther Rolle) is gunned down by the mob, and the Carrier house is burned. At first Mann tries to run, but eventually he turns and fights, striving to save as many people as he can. Mann’s only local ally is Rosewood’s lone white adult male, John Wright (John Voight), the local store owner. Wright is hardly devoid of racist attitudes of his own. But he possesses genuine respect and affection for his black neighbors, and he can’t sit by and watch them slaughtered. Reluctantly at first, a Florida Oskar Schindler, Wright offers his neighbors sanctuary in his attic. Eventually, he joins with Mann in an attempt to spirit the survivors out of the county.

Poirier’s script isn’t everywhere as tight as it might be. We could use some accounting for how Mann earned the huge roll of cash he plans to use to buy land in Rosewood. And the story would benefit from an explanation for why no one knows the identity of Fannie’s white lover. In addition to these failings, I think the filmmakers made too many concessions to Hollywood convention. The romance that blooms literally overnight between Mann and Sylvester’s cousin Scrappie (Elise Neal) diminishes the core seriousness of this story. The adventure plotting of the rescue attempt at the end is weak and sometimes baldly manipulative. And Mann’s escape from a lynch mob is purely preposterous. In short, Singleton’s determination to make a conventionally entertaining movie probably kept him from making a film of enduring greatness.

But that’s not at all to say that this picture doesn’t possess a host of virtues. It most certainly does. Its character development is unusually complex. Sheriff Walker, for instance, is a man who knows better than he acts. He’s a racist, but his bigotry hasn’t blinded him as it has some of his townfolks. And in this regard he is even more culpable. He thinks more about his political career than he does about upholding justice. He abets the mob in running wild even when he suspects that Fannie is lying. John Wright is comparably complex. Ultimately, he does the right thing, but not without considerable flirtation with cowardice. Even Fannie is depicted as something other than a one-dimensional monster. She never intends for her lie to result in a river of blood. But once she unleashes the torrent, she cringes in self-pity rather than stepping forward and trying to stop this local holocaust.

And whatever Rosewood’s incidental flaws, Singleton reminds us, as we must remind ourselves ceaselessly, how horribly inhumanely human beings are capable of treating one another. The white mob’s butchering of the black corpses recalls comparably unspeakable acts by American soldiers in Vietnam. And as is so often true, the very institutions which are supposed to teach us to love one another fail at their most important responsibility. The mob leaders use the occasion of a baptismal service at the Sumner church to recruit and arm their fellow murderers.

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Race hatred is not a genetic trait. It is taught by one generation to the next. Thus, it is important to acknowledge Singleton’s theme that the way things are and have been are not the way they have to be. Most of the white characters in Rosewood are despicable villains. But crucially, not all are. John Wright isn’t. Neither are his wife and two children. Nor are the white owners of the train which Wright and Mann employ to spirit the survivors to safety. These two white men risk their livelihood and their lives solely in the interest of doing the right thing. And in his closing, Singleton offers a stubborn emblem of hope, a teenage white child who rejects the hatred and cruelty of his murderous father. It is bracing to behold that a young, angry black filmmaker still believes in the possibility of reconciliation. People can change. Things don’t have to be as they have so long been. But child of the sixties that I am, I find myself losing faith. My naive generation actually believed that racial distinction and discrimination would be banished in our lifetime. And now our children are older than we were then, and in so many ways things remain as they were; in certain terrifying ways, of course, they have even grown worse.
impasse

With only minor changes, I published the paragraphs in section II above as my *Gambit* column in the second week of March this year and on Friday that week used the column as the basis of my commentary for “Steppin' Out,” an arts and entertainment panel discussion that airs weekly on WYES-TV, New Orleans’ PBS affiliate. The first call came in Friday night and was received by my answering machine. Whether the call was a response to the printed column or the television broadcast, I couldn’t tell.

The caller, a male, presumably white, said, “It’s disgusting liberals like you who are at the root of the problems in this country. Have been for forty years. Propagating lies. You and I both know that only six to eight people died in Rosewood, two of them white, both of them defending their property against niggers with shotguns. Men like you are why the blacks run our city now, why no self-respecting white person lives in New Orleans anymore. Lies and lies and lies defending lies. Everything now has to show how the blacks are victims and the whites are murderers. Well your nigger-loving ass and I both know that it’s blacks killing whites in this world and people like you letting them get away with it.”

On Saturday night, a female caller, also presumably white, expressed a comparable opinion in comparable language. The next week, I received three letters about this movie, all typed, all unsigned. One read, “Well, you’ve done it again. You always get it exactly wrong, so I can hardly pretend to be surprised. But I do think your Rose Wood review is just about the worse. Fortunately, no one in this city (no white person that is) is stupid enough to believe anything you write.” Another revisited the claim that only six black people died at Rosewood, and the third said only, “What makes a white man take sides against his own race?”

Two comments: First, the claim that only six black people died at Rosewood derives from an official State of Florida report from the era, which Singleton acknowledges at the end of his film. That the death toll was much higher, however, possibly greater than 100 has been established by TV’s *Sixty Minutes* among other investigators. Second, I do not want to overestimate the outpouring of attack I received over this review. I suspect that the phone calls and letters all came from the same two people.

Still, the combination of venom and dismay in the words of my white critics speaks volumes about the contemporary state of race relations and the hardened attitudes some whites take. According to them, the problems in society are the result of black deception and criminality and the collaboration of white liberals like me. White racism plays no part. Insofar as it exists, it is justifiable as an analysis proceeding from ascertainable black inferiority. The people who hold to these views are akin to those who deny the historical fact of the Holocaust as a fabrication of Zionists. I am not comfortable, of course, that I have drawn the attention and elicited the anger of people who harbor such attitudes, but if you can judge a man by his enemies, these are the ones I would choose.

They are, alas, not the only ones whose ire I attracted with my commentary about *Rosewood*. On the Sunday after my column appeared in *Gambit* and my comments about the film were first aired on WYES, I was stopped coming out of a multiplex showing of the Clint Eastwood thriller, *Absolute Power*, by a burly, well-dressed black man with a shaved head. I judged him to be in his early-to-middle thirties. In size and appearance, he resembled *Rosewood* star Ving Rhames. This gentleman had just emerged from *Rosewood*, which was playing in an auditorium down the hall from the one where I’d seen *Absolute Power*.

“You’re Rick Barton, aren’t you?” he said to me.

“Yes,” I said, “How are you.” I slowed down so that we fell into step.


“Why didn’t you like it?” he wanted to know, his tone declarative, but as yet mild.

“But I did like it,” I protested. “I gave it a good review.”

“You said that it wasn’t great.”

“Well,” I said, “I don’t think it is. But few films are. I use the term *great* very sparingly.”

“Did you think *Schindler’s List* was great?”

“Yes,” I said, “I did.”

He responded to that with a snort. “Film about killing Jews was great,” he said, his tone
contemptuous now. “Not one about killing African Americans.”

“It’s not the subject matter,” I replied. “It’s how the filmmaker handles the subject matter.”

“So why, in your opinion, isn’t Rosewood great?” he wanted to know. We had stopped now in the lobby and stood facing each other.

I reviewed for him the places and ways that I thought the film fell short, placing particular emphasis on what I presumed were Singleton’s overriding commercial aspirations and on Ving Rhames’ preposterous escape from a lynchman’s noose near the film’s climax.

“Are you saying that an African-American director can’t have commercial aspirations?” he responded with a discernible edge in his voice.

“That an African-American director can’t become Steven Spielberg?”

“Well, of course not,” I replied. “I am not saying anything like that at all. Singleton made a choice; that’s all I’m saying. In commercial terms, the film may do better because of that choice for all I know.”

“Because, in your judgment, he sacrificed aspirations of greatness for box-office considerations.”

“Yes,” I said. “Because he chose to be manipulative and because he resorted to the fantastic.”

“So you’re saying African-American audiences are susceptible to manipulation and that they believe in fantasy?”

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” I responded. “I didn’t say anything of the kind.”

“Why I believe you did indeed,” he said.

I knew by this point that we were on a failed mission of communication. But I slogged on. “Look,” I said. “American cinema is big business. Very big business. John Singleton has succeeded in that business, and I suspect he will continue to succeed. And I’m not about to tell him what factors to consider when he films and edits a movie. But it’s my job to judge the artistic merits of the film he puts on the screen. That’s it, there’s no hidden agenda.”

“There’s always a hidden agenda.”

“Obviously we disagree.”

“There’s always a hidden agenda when a white man writes about black issues.”

“Then you think that a white critic isn’t capable of reviewing a movie made by an African American?”

“I’d say that’s exactly what I think.”

“Then you don’t know what I wrote about Singleton’s Boyz N the Hood or Spike Lee’s Do the Right Thing or Clockers?”

“No,” he said. “Don’t care either. I’ll know everything I need to know about you with one question. Do you think O.J. was guilty?”

I didn’t answer automatically, as I searched for some way out of this obvious trap. But finally I said, “Yes I do.”

He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow, the hint of a smile playing across his lips. “See,” he said. Then he turned and walked away.

entitlement frenzy

Ours is an age of entitlement. Conservative politicians like to attack what they consider the entitlement mentality of minorities and the impoverished who they think have been damaged by the programs of the welfare state. But the entitlement mentality is rampant in contemporary American society. I know practically no one who thinks he or she has been fairly rewarded for his or her talents and hard work. In substantial part, I think this is because we are all so aware of the obscene riches bestowed on our nation’s celebrities. Movie stars Jim Carrey, Harrison Ford, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mel Gibson make $20 million per starring role. Michael Jordan makes $25 million per NBA season. Tiger Woods makes $40 million just for turning professional. Every week we read accounts of journeyman athletes rejecting million-dollar contracts, holding out for more. Every week we read of corporate executives who earn tens of millions per year, of a failed movie studio executive who received a severance package of nearly $100 million after only one year on the job.

A world of these sums, those of us in the middle class chafe about the restraints of our comfortable lifestyles. We compare ourselves routinely with those who have more, infrequently with those who have less. A friend of mine sells her novel for $750,000 and complains when her book doesn’t make the New York Times best seller list. Another friend wins a major national literary award and complains that his work still isn’t adequately appreciated.
And lest I seem to point only at the sins of others, let me confess my own. I enjoy a modest literary success and sink into a depression that I don’t enjoy a major literary success. All of us forget about those of our friends, every bit as talented as we, who can’t get their work published at all in a publication industry that has been captured by the blockbuster mentality of Hollywood. All of us live well, have good jobs, own homes and automobiles, enjoy luxuries unknown in the world of our own parents. And still we feel sorry for ourselves. For the middle-aged generation that was young in the 1960s, Warhol’s fifteen minutes of fame is not nearly long enough.

The problem for African Americans is compounded by the historical facts of slavery and segregation. These are not nearly so long in the past as to be easily forgotten. Moreover, as incidents at Denny’s and Texaco demonstrate, as the harassing phone calls on my answering machine prove, as Fuzzy Zoeller’s insensitive joking about Tiger Woods emphasizes, the cancer of racism persists. But that does not mean that every failure by a person of color is the result of discrimination. And nothing save the stubborn fact of racism itself has caused as much tension between the races as the charge of racism when it is unwarranted.

In the wake of the Masters, columnist William Raspberry reflected on Tiger Woods’ victory and wondered whether Tiger would eventually “transcend race.” Raspberry listed Colin Powell, Bryant Gumbel, Arthur Ashe, Bill Cosby and Ron Brown as prominent African Americans who are accepted by all their countrymen for themselves alone and not as representatives of their race. In the 1960s we dared to dream of a time when all men, whatever their color, would transcend race. And those of us who came of age in the 1960s dared to believe that we would experience such universal transcendence in our lifetimes. Such is the naiveté of youth, of course. But even as Jimmy Carter was about to surrender the White House to Ronald Reagan, I would not have believed that tension between the races would be as high as it is as we near the end of the century. I fervently believe that we all need to throw off Warhol’s narcissistic nonsense. And I fervently believe that we need to heed Woody Allen’s counsel about the role of luck in our lives. And I most fervently believe that the great majority of us need to count our blessings. And in gratitude for the vastness of our blessings, we need to rededicate ourselves to the ideals we embraced in our youth, that racism and poverty can both be defeated.

But I admit to a greater pessimism than I have ever before felt. The twin responses to my review of Rosewood make me heartsick and underscore for me just how divided and angry we are. Paranoia about race war is supposedly the preserve of the lunatic right-wing fringe. Like most Americans I don’t really fear such an eventuality. Our prosperity is too great a shield. But in a society as armed and angry as ours, I have actually come to have nightmares about such an unthinkable thing. Besides our prosperity, what makes us different from the people in Bosnia, in Rwanda, in Northern Ireland? There are certainly members of both races with enough hatred in their hearts to justify armed combat.

In my youth I believed that the someday we would overcome would arrive in my own lifetime. Today, I no longer have confidence it will ever arrive. Ours is a bloody planet and a heartless century. The residents of Sumner murder their neighbors in Rosewood. Turks murder Armenians. Germans murder Jews. Serbs murders Bosnians. Tutsis murder Hutus. And I admit, as my hair grays and my eyesight weakens, as the century of my birth draws to a close, my youthful faith in fundamental human decency drains away like water cupped in enfeebled hands.
The first really hot day of the summer makes me think of movies. We didn’t have air conditioning when I was little, so on the days when it was unbearably or “beastly” hot in mother’s terms, we went to the movies. It didn’t really matter what was playing, all we wanted was two or three hours of relief from the heat.

In the 70s going to a movie in Peoria, Illinois, meant going downtown, to a building with a name like The Palace or The Madison. They stood alone. Try to imagine a movie theatre that only shows one movie at a time! These buildings had things called “lobbies” which contained thick, thick red (always red) carpet, posters for coming attractions, a bored 17-year-old standing behind a glass case selling Raisinettes and popcorn, and a lone, desiccated hotdog making infinite orbits on its wire shelf. The Palace was torn down years ago to make way for The Twin Towers, but I suspect that somewhere that one hotdog is still spinning in space.

We never, ever bought anything except the largest possible tub of popcorn. Haitian families have floated to freedom in crafts smaller than Mom’s popcorn tub. Sometimes we brought our own popcorn from home, before they started to crack down on cheapskates like us. To this day buying candy at a movie feels like an act of rebellion to me.

One hot day stands out especially in my mind. Mom and I couldn’t stand the heat one Saturday afternoon and headed for a matinee of Bingo Long’s Travelling All-Stars and Motor Show, starring Peoria’s own Richard Pryor. (Richard Pryor and I went to the same high school. I graduated.) I recall the film now as a melodrama in which a barnstorming group of black ballplayers encounter all kinds of wacky adventures. It’s the kind of movie where you cheer and boo and clap. At least that’s what Mom and I did. The other eleven people in the audience thought we were crazy. Maybe the air conditioning made us giddy.

A year later Star Wars came out for the first time. I made three trips downtown with various friends to see it. Mom got me the soundtrack album for Christmas. The only other movie I ever saw three times, in the theater (a phrase that would have been redundant in 1977) was The Blues Brothers. I don’t know if I bought their “we’re on a mission from God,” business, but at sixteen I loved the action, the music, and the Chicago scenes.

My relationship with movies changed radically during my senior year in high school. My English teacher had us watch movies and then write essays about what we had seen. I began to think critically about what happened on the screen. Too critically. After taking a new girlfriend to see a movie in which some students take over their military academy and have a standoff against the Authorities, I wanted to write an essay.

Luckily, I was off to college the next year, and was then surrounded by people who also thought critically about movies. Too critically. More critically than I could pretend to. The campus film board was forever showing classics, foreign films, cult favorites, and of course, blockbusters from the previous summer every weekend. The movies were cheap (sometimes free) and there was always someone to talk about them with. And when discussions veered too deep I learned ways to get the Siskels and Eberts of my dorm to lighten up by saying things...
like:

"It was entertaining, but I enjoyed it,"
"That whole Das Boot thing? Claymation.
Same as the California Raisins!" and
"I wasn't really paying attention, I was simply mesmerized by the illusion of motion created by showing a series of still photographs in rapid succession."

Comments about other movies, ones that everyone has seen were always lively additions to movie conversations.

"Isn't it ironic that the theme song is 'There's Got to Be a Morning After,' seeing as how Shelly Winters died and all?"

"I don't know about you, but I don't believe a man can fly."

"Wasn't it cold-blooded to blow up Alderon, I mean, like Princess Leia said, it's peaceful." and

"I read somewhere that the munchkins were really just children dressed up to look like midgets."

I recommend trying these the next time someone gushes about the latest Jane Austen novel to be given a "film treatment."

One night the film board showed Midnight Cowboy, a film I'd wanted to see since 1969, when I was five. The theme, "Everybody's Talkin'" by Nilsson, was popular when I started kindergarten. I never forgot it and had wanted to see the movie since then. Strangely, it was never on TV, even late at night. Finally, during my senior year it was going to be shown on campus. I asked my girlfriend if she wanted to see a movie I'd wanted to see for a long time.

"What's it called?"
"Midnight Cowboy"
"I don't like westerns much, but OK."

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE I EVER WRITE HERE OR ANYWHERE ELSE REMEMBER THIS: "MIDNIGHT COWBOY" IS NOT A GOOD DATE MOVIE.

The week of graduation the film board showed The Graduate. I sat with my classmates on the grass behind the Student Center, drank a lot of beer, and watched the movie as it was projected onto the wall of the music building. We secretly hoped that the infamous one word advice "Plastics" was wrong. Like Midnight Cowboy, The Graduate stars Dustin Hoffman. Also like Midnight Cowboy, the film ends with Hoffman riding a bus.

I've started a film series at my church, "Faith Goes to the Movies." One Sunday night a month we watch a popular, Hollywood movie on video. More than anything else it is my hope that members of the church will watch movies critically and will literally take their faith with them when they go to a movie. One of my passions is to use popular arts, especially movies and rock music to help people grow in faith. (I've never quoted Shakespeare in a sermon, but I've quoted the Replacement(s) twice.) I hope that by watching well-made, thoughtful movies and discussing them together, people can start to build bridges between their life and faith.

Showing movies once a month has other advantages as well. It offers some badly needed adult education opportunities here. And so far, I've picked all the movies, so I get to watch again things that I know and love.

Last summer our church remodeled five Sunday school rooms. Each of these rooms is dedicated to a specific purpose. We have a computer room, an art room, a drama room and a movie room. The movie room has a big screen TV, tiered theatre seats and a popcorn machine. It's just like the movie palaces of yore, without the sticky floor and rotating hot dog. Showing movies gets adults up in the Sunday school wing. They can see that they benefit from the remodeling, same as the little ones.

So far our best discussions have been about A Trip to Bountiful, and Benny and Joon. Coming attractions are John Sayles's Matewan, Being There, starring Peter Sellers and What's Eating Gilbert Grape? starring Johnny Depp.

I would be surprised if the members of our church ever feel moved to write essays about what they've seen. But I do hope that when all our jokes are set aside, they will recognize the power that movies have to shape our lives and to inspire us.
Letters from Abroad

a namibian diary

James Kingsland

Namibia’s modern history begins when South Africa, at England’s request, invaded it in 1915, capturing the city of Windhoek from the resident German control. While most of Germany’s African colonies were divided between the French and British after WWI, Namibia became a League of Nations mandate to South Africa, as “sacred trust of civilization.” A long history of ensuing racial oppression came to a climax in August of 1965, when six guerrillas from the South West African Peoples Organization (SWAPO) infiltrated into Ovamboland (northern Namibia) from Angola. They established a base at Omgulumbashe and initiated what was to become a twenty-five year armed struggle for independence from South Africa.

In 1986 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s Division of Higher Education and Schools, Colleges and Universities began the Higher Education in Namibia Program. The program anticipated eventual Namibian independence and recognized the need for a skilled and educated vanguard to step into leadership positions. Between 1986 and 1991, one hundred Namibian students came to the United States to study at Lutheran colleges and universities. In what must be an unprecedented performance, ninety eight of the one hundred completed degrees and returned home. In July of 1996 the Center for Global Education at Augsburg College sponsored a tour of Namibia designed to reunite these graduates with teachers and administrators who had known them as students. Valparaiso University had not sponsored any of the one hundred but I was allowed to tag along anyway.

july 11, 1996: the flight to johannesburg

I hit the color wall before even arriving in South Africa. The cabin crew chief is moving down the aisle distributing immigration forms. She asks my two seat mates, “American?” then looks at me, hesitates, and asks “South African?” guessing that I am Colored (South Africa’s special category for people of mixed African and European ancestry). The one drop of blood theory is alive and well so I feel right at home. I should not complain: in Gambia little kids used to point at me and cry “Toubab, toubab” (white man, white man). Little do I suspect that I am destined to experience a color epiphany in three more days.

july 13: windhoek, namibia

Pandu Hailonga, a staff member at the Center for Global Education’s local facility, directs me to the downtown area. Am I in Africa where driving is a form of warfare? Where are the lorries overloaded with people and cargo, festooned with bright colors and slogans painted on the back and sides? Where are the manic taxi drivers honking every ten feet and weaving in and out like slalom skiers? I stare in disbelief as drivers actually stop at stop signs. I notice that signs are often trilingual—English, German and Afrikaans. This is a meticulously clean city that seems to have been built last Thursday.

Khomasdal and Katatura

Windhoek, like most African capitals, became a magnet for rural migrants. Initially they settled in “locations”—areas designated for non-whites. In 1912 the Windhoek Town Council established the Main Location west of town and this became the largest of the African residential areas. By the 50s as Windhoek expanded westward, whites and non-whites
came into greater proximity and it was decided to move the African population further out of town to free more land for white development. The new location came to be called Katatura and its creation led to Namibia's Bunker Hill. On December 10, 1959 eleven individuals were killed resisting forced removal from the Main Location. By today's brutal standards eleven killed seems trivial, but it was a seminal event. It was the spark that ignited the beginnings of the earliest African political parties and the nationalist movement.

Katatura had unintended consequences. Ethnic groups were jumbled there and ethnic barriers lowered, so the government decided to enforce a stricter form of ethnic separation. Those of mixed racial ancestry were moved to a place named Khomasdal. It was separated from Katatura by a buffer zone in which no housing was permitted. Katatura was organized into rival ethnic neighborhoods where your house address advertised your ethnicity ("H235" painted on a home meant that a Herero lives in house 235). Today you can find a variety of people in Khomasdal but the pre-independence housing patterns still predominate.

the rehoboth basters

Namibia has germinated an exotic blossom. They call themselves Rehoboth Basters (I had to be sure about that because "Baster," which rhymes with "faster," means what you think it does). They are, predominantly, the descendants of Nama pastoralists from southern Namibia and Afrikaners who moved up from Cape Province in South Africa around 1869. Afrikaans is their first language and typical surnames are Diergaardt, Van Wijk and Mouton. Later, German blood entered the mix (Engelbrecht, Kruger and Bok) followed by a few English and Scots (Ford and McNab). They number about thirty nine thousand (2.5 percent of the population) and they have a distinct history and territory that distinguishes them from the generic Colored population. They have tan skins and Dutch noses.

sunday, july 14, 1996: martin luther kerk in khomasdal

Pastor Mouton’s congregation numbers one thousand, but this is winter and the throng that might normally spill out into the parking area is reduced to the five or six hundred who can fit into the warm building. The service is in Afrikaans and the singing is Germanic in style but for two short lapses into African rhythm. No communion is offered and we queue up to give collection at the front of the church in two separate lines, each terminating in a collection plate devoted to a different purpose. I am suddenly struck by an earthly revelation. This is the first time in my life I have ever been in a public gathering where everyone is my color (there is only a sprinkling of chocolate faces). Intellectually I know that shade is superficial, but I surrender to an atavistic joy in sameness. Like Alex Haley, I have found my people (never mind that my people speak a kind of Dutch). Pandu Hailonga shatters my fantasy a few days later when I ask her if I can pass for Rehoboth: "No, we can always tell a foreigner. I would guess you are Italian." No Italian would, but obviously if I want a "tribe" I will have to keep looking.

july 15, 1996: the government

We spend the morning with the Honorable Minister of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology Mr. Nahas Angula. He is lively, cordial and well-prepared with transparencies and a projector. We learn that Namibia spends 25 percent of its national budget on education and 7 percent on the military. Perhaps we need to rethink our definition of "underdeveloped nation." Because of Namibia’s low population density (1.5 million people in a nation the size of California), it is not feasible to put a secondary school in every town and so boarding schools are the norm, post-primary.

the “old man”

That is what the State House staff calls him behind his back. Like a traditional ruler he makes us wait about ten minutes (a President sees you when he is ready, not when you are ready). President Sam Nujoma comes bounding into the room almost at a trot, beaming and self-consciously energetic. For about thirty minutes he holds court, dissing apartheid and promoting ostrich raising. Ostrich husbandry makes sense in a semi-arid country. The ostrich needs much
less water than the cow and it produces a low cholesterol meat that is good for the consumer. The obstacle is cultural. A significant percentage of the indigenous population is pastoral and for such people cattle are more than a commodity, they are symbolic of a way of life. Imagine yourself in an old John Wayne movie. You lean up against the old ranch corral and with all your winsome charm you try to persuade the Duke to to sell his herd and raise ostriches. Imagine what the Duke would do. Imagine leaving the old ranch corral very quickly. President Sam Nujoma has a tough sell.

The next most impressive person in the room, the formidable Dr. Libertine Amathila, says nothing. She has the tough demeanor of woman who knows how to play hard ball with the boys. She was one of only three women on SWAPO’s Central Committee in 1982. The vice chancellor of the national university, our escort, makes the mistake of introducing her as the President’s “secretary.” She leans over, whispers in his ear and is reintroduced as “Chief of Staff.” This is a credit to the President. How many heads of state have a woman this strong this high in the power structure?

july 17, 1996: walvis bay

We meet Adele Ndzapo in Swakopmund and head for a hub of the fishing industry, Walvis Bay. Just before reaching the city, Adele points out the exclusive Langstrad housing development (homes in the $300,000 range) built by wealthy whites to insulate themselves. She gleefully identifies two palaces built by prominent blacks within the sanctuary.

Just as promised, the Namib desert comes right down to the edge of the sea. We visit the national aquarium and receive a lecture from David Boyer, the Chief of Fisheries. Mining is Namibia’s primary source of income but fisheries ranks second, just ahead of tourism. Ocean fishing was not a traditional activity among Namibia’s indigenous people, so there are no domestic lobbies to challenge environmental management policies. It is easier to make sardine policy than it is to make ostrich policy.

We stay in the municipal bungalows protected by an electrified fence and guard gate. South Africans like to holiday here and they need to feel safe from crime. Adele invites us to dinner and regales us with resistance stories. She had been a student at one of the two non-government secondary schools available to Africans, Martin Luther High School. When South Africa tried to impose its “Bantu Education” policy in 1976, the students rebelled. The policy mandated instruction in Afrikaans and when the national examination questions, written in Afrikaans, arrived at Martin Luther, the students poured acid on them. Anticipating the consequences of such defiance, the student body fled. This was no light decision since Martin Luther is a boarding school located in the middle of nowhere and students had to walk many kilometers to reach their villages. Upon reaching home, Adele was afraid to show herself in public during daylight hours, but she was still betrayed by an informer and arrested. Arrested five times in all, her worst experience was an interrogation concerning SWAPO infiltration routes (she had no clue). Placed in a large cloth sack sealed at the opening, she felt a huge scaly thing slither down her body and realized it was a monstrous snake just before she fainted.

july 18, 1996: martin luther high school

Martin Luther began as a church school for the children of pastors but it eventually broadened its base. It came under strong government pressure in the 60s and to maintain its autonomy it purchased land from a sympathetic farmer in 1969 and moved to its present location. Some of the “US 100” passed through here and some have returned to teach. Again, we hear stories of student resistance during the apartheid years and I wonder if I would have had that much courage at age sixteen.

the etosha game park

I am firmly resolved to be snotty. This place is for rich tourists. Malcolm would have sneered at Etosha. Serious people are about economic development and political reform. Animals are stupid and under no circumstances will I be seen with a camera in my hand.

The Etosha Pan is 120 kilometers at its longest and 72 kilometers at its widest but the game park is the size of Switzerland. During the summer rains, animals scatter all over southern Africa, so winter is the best season for viewing:
the dry season forces animals to the few water holes at Etosha.

Our water hole is immediately on the edge of the game park housing compound, less than a hundred yards from a three foot stone wall. A short wire fence slants towards the wall at a sharp angle but it looks too flimsy to stop a determined beast who really wants you. A story percolates through our group: a German tourist, foolishly, slept near the wall one night and was taken by a lion who found a gap that should not have been there. As with most horror stories that are frequently retold, I suspect that the details are all wrong, but even if some of it is true it is a good reason to trust in locks and doors. We arrive and nothing happens for a good fifteen minutes; you begin to wonder why any sensible animal would approach a spotlighted water hole partially encircled by fifty noisy humans. We have definitely lost our ancient hunting skills. The spectators try to be quiet but we are hopeless. There are the inevitable whispers, coughs and giggles. When silence is critical a footfall on rocky gravel can resemble clashing cymbals.

Despite these deterrents the animals come. A small jackal approaches with extreme caution, making fitful steps and spending more time frozen than moving. It finally drinks and leaves. Next are an equally cautious small rhino and a very young springbok. While they take quick gulps, two lions slink from the shadows. Are they here to drink or to eat? This drama is interrupted by the entry of a huge bull elephant. Forget about the Lion King—the lions make a quick exit stage right and settle in a clump of vegetation. The rhino is immediately apprehensive as the bull saunters closer (relax kid, elephants don’t eat meat). The two come within about fifteen yards and the elephant gives a low-key almost casual trumpeting sound and the rhino is history, moving quickly out of sight. Showing none of the hesitation of the others, the bull swaggers to the water, comes to the side of the water hole nearest the tourists and stares right at us. He is The Man. I cannot tell if he is carrying a .44 Magnum, but if he had hands he would be flashing his gang sign. He drinks a long time—so long that the rhino and springbok get impatient and return to a point directly opposite the bull. This activates the cats. They move like wraiths to a large bush that is closer to the water hole. The springbok lifts its head from the water to full extension. The lions creep across a twenty foot gap to another clump of vegetation even closer to the water hole. Someone in the crowd who is rooting for the lions whispers, “Come on, get him.” The tension is broken when the springbok decides not to spin the roulette wheel any more. It knows it is being stalked and scampers off in a blur of legs. The bull is finished now and as it moves away the lions retreat to the space between the last two hiding places and remain absolutely still as the elephant regards them casually and moves off. The lions show no interest in the rhino. Even a small one must be tough to kill and it looked like the little guy would finally get to drink, but next a whole clan of elephants appeared—four or five females and two children. The lions move back to their original hiding place and the rhino exits surprisingly close to them. We watch until the clan leaves and then go to bed.

The next morning we drive east through the game park. The first time you see an adult springbok you take forty pictures. An hour and a half later you are yawning at your five hundredth springbok. About one hour into the drive I am the first one in the van to see the herd approaching the road. “Elephants, elephants, slow down!” I scream. They cross the road not more than thirty yards behind us and I almost fall out the van window stretching for the best camera angle. Okay, so I took a few animal pictures. It was strictly for their relevance to environmental policy issues.

July 20, 1996: the Namibia Development Trust at Ongwadiva

This is the African story that is rarely told. It is elbowed out by the high drama of genocide and venality. It is the story of creativity and small victories. The Namibia Development Trust is a rural development center. Soon to become a training center designed to replicate its program elsewhere, the center designs and markets “appropriate technology.” That is economic development jargon for technology using local or recycled materials affordable for the average person. We see bread ovens cut from empty oil drums and aluminum and glass bottles set in concrete blocks to reduce the amount of
concrete required per block. The project director, Mr. Joseph Gudjala, has developed a way to heat a tank of water using solar panels and a system for compressing newsprint into high density plugs that burn as well as firewood. These things have all been welcomed by the surrounding communities. The Joseph Gudjalas of Africa will never receive the attention given to the Mobutus but they will have a more lasting impact.

the bottle shops
Since leaving Walvis Bay we have been traveling in the north, moving toward Rundu and the Angolan border. The highways are dotted with little mushrooms called bottle shops. Small concrete rectangles, some no larger than a grade school classroom, they are a way to go into business without a large capital investment. That is the good news. The bad news is that alcoholism has become a serious problem. But they do have delightful names and I begin a bottle shop name collection: Push Pull Liquors; Try Again Bar #2; Bar for Sure; and the enigmatic The Multiple Lake Choice.

oshigambo high school
Almost half of the “US 100” passed through this high school. It was founded in 1907 by a Finnish missionary society. Initially it taught women needlework and basket weaving. By the 50s the school had grades three to six and by 1960 it became a high school with grades eight to twelve. Today is has 280 “learners” (students) and twenty teachers. Up to now it has had a sliding tuition scale (from $330 to $3000) based on family income but financial pressures have forced consideration of a flat $3000 fee for all. It is a painful decision.

final thoughts
One important theme is missing. We have had no contact with the local white population. We can read the newspapers they favor but there has been no face-to-face conversation that would reveal the nuances of the new racial reality. Some have accommodated and even work with SWAPO, but there is much that we do not know.

Meeting members of the “US 100” was inspiring. They are hydrologists, teachers, school principals, engineers and attorneys. They work in the President’s office and a variety of government ministries. Their impact has been enormous and the presidential audience was a measure of the nation’s gratitude.

This pleasant journey filled with reunions and cordiality should not obscure the serious challenges Namibia faces. The Lutheran church is split between north and south and the issue is explosive. During the war for independence SWAPO was infiltrated by agents working for South Africa. Countermeasures were taken and families were divided over accusations of disloyalty. Innocent people suffered and some of them are now demanding rehabilitation of their reputation. There is a question of what the church knew and whether it shares complicity in the injustices that were committed. The southern church wants to confront this openly, the northern church would rather discuss it in private. Some say this is only of interest to the political class. The issue with mass appeal is land reparations. Ethnic groups that lost land to white conquest are demanding its return (the San people lay claim to all of Etosha), and the government is caught between justice and economic reality.

Despite these and other problems, there is an air of optimism in Namibia that is absent elsewhere in Africa. Recently independent, it does not suffer from the political sclerosis that has infected much of the continent. Yes, there are accusations of favoritism and corruption, but I am reminded of the front page story in The Namibian reporting the arrest of a clerk in the Windhoek Magistrates Court for taking a $40.00 (sic) bribe. In most countries your editor would fire you on the spot, for naiveté, if you filed such a story. This is a country that can still be shocked by minor scandal. This is a country that still believes in itself. That is a rare and wonderful thing.
proper love

I begin with several important definitions and distinctions, which may seem abstract at first but which will, I trust, become more concrete as I proceed. First, a definition: patriotism is love of country. But this definition is faulty because it implies an unconditional love of country, which, as a Christian, I cannot endorse. Rather, the kind of patriotism I think we ought to affirm is a proper love of country.

For me proper breaks into two principles:

1. First, a proper love is critical. This means a discriminating, thoughtful, reflective, love, not a love of everything about our country, not just a blind love. This critical approach assumes that we hold the ideals of our country in high regard and want to hold it accountable to them. It also assumes a higher, larger frame of reference—in my case, a religious one—to hold our country accountable to.

2. Second, a proper love of country is limited, a quality that is at least partially assumed in the first principle. If one believes in the Christian God, one believes that God has created the whole world and all its peoples, not just the USA and its people. Therefore, all are valued before God and one must view our country—and its mission in the world—in the light of the sacrality of all created human beings. Such a limitation on patriotism is significant indeed, because it gives positive ethical content to our foreign policy. We cannot simply view foreign policy as an exercise of narrow national interest.

Further, a proper love of America is limited by the sharp realization that we cannot be redeemed by our country. America and its politics are definitely penultimate; they should be kept in their proper place so that we neither expect too much or too little of them. Indeed, when we humans expect too much of politics we produce nightmares of massive proportions, witness the movements that make this the bloodiest of all centuries.

So, we ought to have a proper love of our country, one that is critical and limited. But there is a further distinction, one that lurks in the word “country.” Our “country,” America or the USA, has at least two meanings. In fact the two different meanings are suggested by the very words “America” and “USA.” America refers to a people, a nation, an organic whole animated by a Dream, a mythos, a spirit or Geist. We say the American dream or story, not the USA dream or story. “USA” on the other hand, refers more to the government, the state, the formal political constitution that he have adopted in order to live together as a people.

Thus, we should have a proper love of our people and our government, of America and of the USA.

the dream

First, let’s look at the American Dream, the animating story of the American people. In the early 70s a colleague and I wrote a book called Defining America: A Christian Critique of the American Dream. In the midst of the worst part of the war in Viet Nam, we were immersed in the turbulent upheaval of the 60s, which, by the way, went from 1965 to 1975. Student unrest, revolutionary and counter-culture groups, peace marches, early feminist and gay liberation movements, the beginnings of militant ecological consciousness, Black Power, violence in the big cities, assassinations...you name it, it was going on. There was an apocalyptic tinge in the atmosphere.
Indeed, one of the symbols of that wrenching time was Amerika spelled with a “K.” This powerful and often-used symbol indicated a deep alienation from America. . . .as well as from the USA. It suggested that America was essentially fascist. When we wrote our book we came under severe attack from the left for seeing too much good in the American Dream. As one of our critics put it, “Benne and Hefner are simply washing some of the blood off the flag and running it up the flagpole again.”

The opposition to our appreciative but critical assessment of the American Dream was basically from the left, not from the right. A significant portion of the generation of the 60s was alienated from the American Dream. They had little love of country, little patriotism. They thought America was the source of most of the ills of the world.

As the 70s progressed, I distanced myself further and further from this dire judgment of America. In our book we had argued that the American Dream enjoins us to shake free from the limits of the past, engage in a struggling ascent and, if we did those things, we would be embraced by a gracious, open future.

And that Dream has been true for me, as I suspect it has been true for many of those reading this article. I came from a town of 2,000 in northeastern Nebraska. My grandparents on both sides homesteaded sandy land and eked out a living. But their many kids could not survive on the farm so the children went to the small towns of Nebraska and improved their lives somewhat. But it was Depression time. No college, early marriage, hard work for little pay. Nevertheless, they had kids and their kids, like they, shook free from the limits of their past, engaged in a struggling ascent, and in fact were embraced by a gracious, open future.

I have great love for America because it provided me—and millions upon millions like me—the freedom and opportunity to exercise my initiative...to pursue my Dream. The Dream is real for the generations of my family and is real for the vast majority of people in America. Life for me in this country has far exceeded my expectations. How can one not love such a country?

But it’s not that way for many people in America. We do not live up to these ideals universally. And we must find ways for those not in the Dream to find their opportunity to participate. What are the elements that will open this participation? In our book, Defining America, we noted that the American Dream is dependent on many values and practices that are not explicit in the Dream itself. For instance, each American needs a solid and wholesome family that forms the proper character we need for the Dream to work. Children must be given civilized manners, skills and tools, wholesome values, proper support and the desire to achieve in order to be able to shake free from the limits of the past and engage in a struggling ascent. They must be trained to play by the rules as they ascend. And once they make their efforts at ascent there must be real opportunities for them.

We called these necessary supports for the Dream “structures of belonging.” By that we meant families, churches, neighborhoods, schools, relatives, voluntary associations...all that what contemporary theorists call “civil society.” But I don’t have to tell you that these structures of belonging are under severe threat in America.

But I do want to point out the ironic relation of these pathologies to the American Dream itself. If you take the operation of the Dream in its unvarnished simplicity, it tends to destroy the very values and structures it needs to succeed. Unfettered freedom without care for the structures of belonging leads to an irresponsible individualism, social fragmentation, loneliness, and finally a murderous chaos. A struggling ascent without a sense that we are part of a larger whole to which we need to be responsibly connected, leads to a cult of celebrity which honors people who have risen to notoriety by achieving ignoble goals in the most vile ways.

So we Americans have learned something very profound. Individualism must be complemented by communal bonds. Freedom must be complemented by responsibility. “Freedom from” must be complemented by “freedom for.”

What do we need for a proper love of country? We need a renewed commitment to what Jews and Christians call “covenantal existence,” or what Robert Bellah calls “biblical virtue.” We need to take far more seriously our commitments to spouse and children, church
and neighborhood and country. These renewed commitments constitute patriotism at the end of the 20th century.

And, ultimately, I believe, these renewed commitments will not take place without a strong religious revival. Further, I suspect that this religious renewal will take place in surprising places among surprising people, places and people for whom a Christian vision of life is grasped with zeal and taken with utmost seriousness.

government

Now let me turn to the other dimension of a proper love of country, the loyalty we owe our government. It goes without saying that the system of constitutional democracy which characterizes the USA is a precious inheritance to which we owe high loyalty. The system of governance that embodies it is the most important political model in the world. Its guiding principles, its checks and balances and its guarantee of basic human rights are indeed priceless. One could say that this system guards and protects the operation of the American Dream.

But, like the American Dream, our system of governance is dependent upon habits and practices, on the virtuous character of the people. And this depends on living traditions carried by its families, churches, neighborhoods, ethnic groups, and voluntary associations. Ultimately, I believe these living traditions are expressions of our Judeo-Christian religious inheritance, shaping the substance of our culture; they stipulate what freedom is for. They provide normative visions of what it means to be alive, to be married, to provide for a family, to have a calling in the world, and to exercise constructive citizenship. Filtered through the democratic process, they provide direction for the nation. They give content to the American project.

With all that in mind, let me leap to a recent controversy that involves our proper love of country, especially of our government. The November issue of First Things, an influential journal devoted to issues of religion and public life, featured a symposium entitled: “The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics.” High profile writers such as Robert Bork, Charles Colson, Russell Hittinger and others sharply raised the question of the continued legitimacy of the American government.

The writers, members of what could be called the Christian Right, reacted to a series of court decisions that seemed to have blocked or even reversed the democratic will of the people. Beginning with the Supreme Court’s decision legitimating abortion-on-demand, the courts have seemed to challenge and then subvert the Judeo-Christian values embodied in American life. The courts have slowly driven all remnants of religious practice from the public schools, have overturned legislation that would prohibit physician-assisted suicide, that would prevent the bestowal of special “victim” status to homosexuals, that would prohibit the recognition of homosexual marriage, and that would end preferential treatment based on sex, race or ethnicity. On all these items the courts have reversed the affirmation of substantive values by the American people.

These writers charge the courts with “finding” or “inventing” new constitutional rights that lift up individual rights to freedom from democratically expressed communal norms. In short, the courts are busily excising the Judeo-Christian substance from our common law and culture, and they are doing this in the face of bona fide legislative expressions of the people’s will. For some of the writers, these judicial usurpations are so grievous that they are ready to withhold legitimacy from the American government. Some talk of open resistance. They believe our government has not only frustrated the democratic will of the people, but has also violated the Law of God which stands in judgment above all nations.

The symposium created quite a flap. Two distinguished members of the editorial board resigned, as well as several more of the editorial council. What seems to be happening is that the delegitimation of America—especially its government—seems in the 90s to be coming from the right rather than the left. If the 60s were characterized by widespread loss of patriotism by the insurgent radicals of the left, the late 90s might be characterized by such a loss of patriotism by those on the right. America
experienced widespread violence in the 60s by radicals on the left. I do not have to remind citizens of Oklahoma City that violence in the 90s may come from the right.

Now I am not for a moment suggesting that the conservative challenge to American patriotism leads directly to violence. The writers in the symposium, a number of whom I know, are responsible people. They are not calling for any sort of violent resistance. Besides, they would argue that they are exercising a proper love of country by calling the country back to a proper reading of the constitution and to a more limited role for the courts.

Serious conservative thinkers are suggesting that we can no longer love a country in which the courts subvert the will of the people and the Law of God. Moreover, these sentiments are not those of just a small number of elite. Vince Passaro, writing in *Theology Today*, comments on the growing genre of “Christian thrillers” being sold by the hundreds of thousands in Christian bookstores:

Having fully consumed eight of these books and seriously scanned a dozen more, I can put forward a number of speculative conclusions about current thinking among fiction-reading evangelical Protestants in America. First and foremost, there is rampant in this land a hatred and fear of government such as we have not seen since the days of the Weathermen, the Black Panthers, and the Symbionese Liberation Army. Today’s Christian authors...see the government and its related institutions as actively malevolent political forces seeking to control every aspect of American life and crush our personal freedoms. Thirty years ago, you had to be an atheist and a leftist to believe this; today, it appears, you have to be a right-wing Christian. (as reported in *Context*, Dec. 1, 1996, p.5)

So, what to make of all this? A proper love of country—a critical love of country—leads us to see flaws in both the American Dream and the current exercise of the judiciary in American life. Without attending to the “structures of belonging” that humanize the American Dream, our society will turn into a chaotic individualism that will destroy itself. Without limiting the role of the courts, those very “structures of belonging” will be subverted by the courts of the government itself. The Judeo-Christian substance of our common life is being squeezed from all sides.

But are these flaws gross enough to call into question the legitimacy of our country? Do they decisively corrode our love and loyalty to the American Dream and the American government? No, I do not think so. It is premature to talk of such radical responses. But the critics do have a point. I believe that a proper love of country addresses its flaws. Constructively speaking, I believe we have to renew the vitality of our structures of belonging—our covenantal existence, if you will, and also to restore democratic prerogatives of the people to shape their laws in accordance with the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Such an agenda will constitute authentic patriotism in these final years of the 20th century.
Notes on poets—

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