



Politics & Culture

A Challenge to Hollywood: Back to the Real World

By Claes G. Ryn

Christianity and the classical heritage taught men and women to strive for a better life but to have modest hopes. The reason why we cannot look forward to a vastly improved worldly existence is that human beings—we ourselves in particular—are flawed creatures. We have to learn to deal with the consequences. We must not forget that this, not some imaginary utopian alternative, is the life we have to live. We should accept it and make the most of it.

But for over two centuries Western culture has generated the sentiment that the life in which we find ourselves is nothing compared to what might be. A longing for human existence to turn into something quite different and glorious has produced a tendency to disparage the possibilities of ordinary life. Instead of giving our actual lives our best effort, we moan because dreamt-of possibilities are out of reach. Novels, paintings, compositions, movies, and popular songs have depicted the depredation and pain of a narrow-

Claes G. Ryn, professor of politics at the Catholic University of America, is chairman of the National Humanities Institute and editor of *Humanitas*. He also is president of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters. Another version of this article appears in *Humanitas* 22:1-2.

minded, cramped, routinized, boring, oppressive society, and the thrill of a hoped-for liberation. The desire for sexual excitement and freedom has been pervasive.

The imagination has tended to wander from tasks and opportunities actually at hand to visions of the human condition transformed. Political ideologues have catered to and encouraged the daydreamer in Western man, offering a magnificent future in which present limitations have been overcome and human beings can realize their fondest hopes. A wonderful fulfillment would be possible, if only The culture of escape has left many grown-ups with the mind-set of children, addicted to fantastic stories with but a tenuous connection to real life.

The Hollywood dream machine has been perhaps the most powerful purveyor of the culture of escape. Romantic love stories involving beautiful men and women in spectacular, exotic surroundings have been merely the tip of the iceberg. That existing society is worth little and in need of drastic change has been the explicit or implicit message of countless movies. This has been as true of films with a dark, depressive flavor, including dystopias. These, too, have usually emanated from the mentality of daydreaming, expressing the disappointment and resentment of the chronic utopian

D. J. T. Sullivan, Editor
ds@nhinet.org

Epistulae (ə-pis-tū-lā), Latin (n., pl.): **letters or correspondence**. An occasional publication of the National Humanities Institute, *Epistulae* seeks to provide clarity and insight on significant issues of our time. While addressed to the educated public, it aspires to high scholarly standards.

dreamer who finds himself defeated by actual life and stuck in the same crummy old world. A manic-depressive imagination has strongly affected Western culture.

This type of sensibility has been an integral part of the outlook of the Western art establishment, including movie connoisseurs and reviewers. It is somewhat puzzling, therefore, that so much favorable attention should have been given to "An Education," a movie that, despite superficial appearances, would appear to challenge the dream of liberation from ordinary life. The film was even nominated for three Oscars, including the award for best movie of the year. Is the explanation the sheer artistry and charm of the movie? Or have the reviewers and connoisseurs simply missed a part of what the film has to say? Or have the prejudices and tastes of the arbiters of our culture started to yield to something different? Is there a stirring of dissatisfaction with cheap emotion and false liberation?

Lone Scherfig directed "An Education" on the basis of a script by Nick Hornby. Scherfig, a Dane, directed and wrote the original script for the delightful "Italian for Beginners." Like that earlier movie, "An Education" does not depict epic events or present some grandiose perspective. In comparison with the typical Hollywood film it might be described as low-key. It is the opposite of pretentious. It shows a slice of life not far outside of common human experience. Its characters, circumstances and events are—the movie leaves no doubt—from real life. And yet the viewer senses within moments that the story matters. The movie brings out the importance and mystery of seemingly simple, straightforward, unexceptional events. It holds the viewer's complete attention. Lone Scherfig brings everything in this film—the script, the acting, the editing, the photography, the music, the costumes—together in a remarkable manner. This is a big "little" movie.

To what genre does the film belong? It has a smiling, humorous dimension. Is it predominantly a comedy or a drama? Like real life, it is both—a drama with a comedic aspect. The movie's light touches are indistinguishable from its basic seriousness. The time is the early 1960s, and the setting is the solidly middle class London suburb of Twickenham. The movie captures perfectly the look and flavor of the period. It may speak with

special poignancy to people of the same generation as the movie's central character, Jenny. She is a pretty, vivacious, and very bright teenager—only sixteen when we first make her acquaintance—who will soon graduate from preparatory school. She is an only child. She is expected—not least by her father, who is struggling to bear the cost for her education—to qualify for Oxford.

Suddenly there comes into her life an older man, a really smooth charmer. Already filling with the dreams of a gifted, imaginative teenager, Jenny is introduced to a life of new possibilities, excitement, and great fun—nothing like her previous existence. Her life takes a sharp turn. She is introduced to "liberation," though not of the political kind attempted a decade later by the Counter Culture and New Left. The moviegoer might think that the film will follow a familiar pattern: girl extricates herself from closed-minded, puritan, repressive "bourgeois" society. But no—nothing so pat and simple here.

The movie tells a tale whose surface "classical" simplicity hides the complexity of real life. The film has many facets and layers. No character or event is univocal. All but the most unimaginative viewers will perceive that, like all stories of any consequence and like life itself, this story is also metaphor and parable.

"An Education" is not a movie with a "message." Unlike so many Hollywood movies, it pushes no ideological agenda. Yet, in a non-didactic manner, it offers a lesson that our time badly needs to learn: that all is not gold that glimmers and that meaning and deep satisfaction do not have to await a radical transformation of human existence. The film draws the attention of a confused and superficial era to a truly humane dimension of existence that this era has managed to neglect. Ordinary life carries a kind of promise that is within reach of those with the patience and energy to realize it. The movie discloses the potential hollowness and danger of the thrill of escape. To the sickly, if enticing, imagination of daydreaming "An Education" opposes artistic imagination rooted in real life. It points to the less fleeting, more deeply rewarding quality of being that belongs to a more mature apprehension of what makes life worth living.

Did Scherfig, Hornby and the rest of the team set out to make a movie challenging the culture

of escape and liberation? It does not much matter, for the artistic imagination seized control of the material and created a compelling glimpse of what is what in real life. In art, the creator is only partly conscious of what she/he is expressing.

The depiction of the persons, the milieu and the attitudes of the time achieves great authenticity. The movie views its characters with a sharp eye but also with gentle empathy. These are real people, hence a mixture of many things, good and bad. Seldom has a movie been so richly blessed with superior acting. Scherfig has clearly worked some directorial magic. Young Kate Mulligan as Jenny has amazing subtlety and versatility. She must be destined for a celebrated career. But one hesitates to single out one or two actors for praise. There really are no weak links. Rosamund Pike as the beautiful and stylish young upper class do-do convincingly shows the emptiness and dullness of her breed but also that she deserves our pity. Peter Saarsgard, an American, makes David, the accomplished seducer, very believable.

The movie lets us see through Jenny's eyes the thrill of new, enchanting possibilities and makes what happens seem entirely plausible. It shows how, in a society long influenced and tempted by the imagination of escape, ultimately false and untenable dreams can exert a powerful pull, especially on the young and unformed. Jenny experiences the same great excitement as many others before her who have let their imaginations carry them off. Under the spell of David and what he represents, she says to him, "You have no idea how boring everything was before I met you." These words of an enraptured teenager are also those of an entire age ripe for seduction.

The movie captures well the shortcomings of the society of the time. It suffered from the moral, intellectual and cultural anomie of a civilization whose deeper roots had barely been watered for the last two hundred years. Its old tastes, standards and expectations had atrophied into stale formulas and routines. This society did not have enough to offer a girl of Jenny's gifts and smarts. People like her were bound to become susceptible to seduction in one form or another. It might be said that because there is no great disaster, only a threatening catastrophe, Jenny's story is trivial. So it is, in a way. But ordinary, "trivial" life contains drama, threat and meaning hidden only from the

superficial observer. That Jenny is greatly endangered and then saved—that she saves herself—is no insignificant matter. The reason why she does not succumb in some more disastrous way is that she is an unusually decent girl, very mature, perceptive and sensible for her years. It is because of Jenny's essentially admirable character that she is not finally lost to the new seemingly liberating existence placed before her.

Though Jenny is swept off her feet, she does in the end not stray very far. She soon senses that all is not as it should be and begins to resist. Talking to the three companions who have taken her into their charming but dubious little social set, she says, "It's a funny world you people live in." She almost walks away. Then, after the crash, she manages, with the help of others, to put herself straight. Unlike so many others depicted in the movies of today, she does not sink into the kind of depression that results from continuing to indulge the impossible dream.

The film makes you realize that had it not been for Jenny's strengths, which are attributable in no small part to the fading strengths of her family, school and society, she might have been irreparably damaged. The society that produced her was deeply flawed, but not hopeless. Even the smug, prim and narrow-minded headmistress, who might seem to be singled out by the movie for contempt, turns out not to be such a bad person and to have offered sound advice, however awkwardly and unimaginatively. And how much could have been expected of Jenny's parents? Given the limitations of the society that had shaped them, had they not done rather well? It was certainly no mean achievement to have brought up a girl like Jenny.

After her flirtation with disaster Jenny seeks the advice of the teacher whose advice and life she had scorned when under the spell of David. Coming for the first time to the teacher's simple but respectable and cozy apartment, she looks around, with new eyes, and says: "This is lovely!" In the movie those words are also a comment about the life that she almost abandoned and whose promise is greater than she knew.

Would not this story have been more plausible, if David, who seduces not just Jenny but her parents, had turned out to be less villainous? But here the movie sees more deeply than may be obvious

to most viewers. Intentionally or not, it says something very important about what has tempted the Western world into unreality: that there is a close connection between the modern imagination of escape and criminality. Yes, criminality.

Who are the master criminals, the monsters, of the modern world? They are the same as those who advocated grandiose benevolent-looking schemes for liberating mankind from an oppressive society. They are Lenin, Stalin, Mao and many others. Who are these mass murderers? Why, great "idealists" offering humanity a wonderful vision of the future. They are the supreme seducers. What needs to be understood is that their killing was not an example of a good, beautiful end being ruined by bad means. It was an example of a pernicious, ultimately diabolical "idealism" showing its real, ugly face in concrete action. Partly because so divorced from attainable reality, the dreams were themselves evil. That self-deception may have played a central role in the designs of these seducers did not make their "idealism" any less vile.

David is not Stalin or even Trotsky, but his using the allure of escape and liberation in a partly self-deceptive scheme connects him to what has been a profoundly destructive and often unimaginably cruel force in Western society. However far-fetched it may appear, the escapist, liberationist imagination is, at the extreme, closely akin to and expressive of unfettered criminality. In suggesting that David's seductive conduct is linked with his coldly manipulative, wicked personality, the movie is admirably perceptive.

At the very end, the movie seems to look back on Jenny's adventure and brush with disaster with something resembling nostalgia. Is it giving a kind of wistful approval to Jenny's youthful experiment? If so, is the movie sounding a false note? To repeat, nothing in this movie is simple and straightforward. A work of art is as ambiguous as life itself and never wholly transparent. But the ending seems to indicate chiefly that, much as we may strive to avoid it, we are all bound to go badly astray. When we do and we experience and cause sharp disappointment and suffering, we should not rail against life but learn from our mistake.

Nothing can be less fruitful than settling into that permanent whine that life is not what it

should be that has been a hallmark of modern Western culture. If we stop moping and try picking ourselves up, we may be able to salvage something even from disaster. "What does not kill me makes me stronger," Nietzsche said. We mature. In time we may, if we are lucky, look back on our failings not from the vantage of sour, chronic disappointment, but from the point of view of a stronger, richer, deeper, more fulfilling life. From the latter point of view, our old mistakes can be seen as part of the material out of which a better existence was forged and elicit from us a smile of almost benign tolerance.

"An Education" enthused audiences. It spread from the discriminating, "artsy" movie-theatres to theatres showing more popular movies. One has to wonder whether the film connoisseurs and reviewers saw quite the same movie as the one described in this article. Will they eventually discern more of its facets and start to resent its violation of prescribed beliefs and taboos? There has already been some grumbling.

Or is the perversity of the movie-crowd changing or being challenged? Even in Hollywood a change of heart seems to be underway, though possibly induced by little more than a desire to cash in on pent-up popular demand. It is not uncommon today for movies to be at least partially subversive of sexual liberation and other politically correct sentiments. One of several recently popular movies of that kind is "Up in the Air," whose protest against self-indulgent hedonism and callousness runs parallel to that of "An Education." The movie leaves no choice but to disdain and pity the putatively "self-sufficient" character played by George Clooney. Speaking of violations of political correctness, who could see "Blind Side" or "Precious," for example, without thinking that the standard view of how to explain or deal with the destruction of the black family is hopelessly superficial and that traditional Christian decency and charity have much to recommend them?

Moviegoers not in tune with the sensibilities and values predominant among moviemakers have learnt to be grateful for small favors. They are used to crossing their fingers, shaking their heads at the moviemakers' rather twisted view of the world, but finding some satisfaction in the artistry of the best films and in nuggets of gold culled from them. Take as one particularly frus-

trating example "No Country for Old Men." In its obsession and fascination with pitiless, brutal actions it presents a warped, perverse perspective on life. Its way of dwelling on blood and violence is largely pornographic. We should not be seeing this. But the film is not without its dark artistry, and some of those leaving the theatre may at least have awoken to the reality of evil. They might also conclude that a society that produces so many such villains would be well-advised to take a second look at the beliefs and practices of the society

that it is replacing.

The dimension of modern Western society with which "An Education" deals both subtly and incisively shows perhaps better than any other the precarious state of Western civilization. Escapism of one sort or another is behind virtually all of its travails, including those depicted in the other just-mentioned movies. Because "An Education" deals more comprehensively, penetratingly and artistically with its subject, it ranks considerably above them.