Battle of the '60s Film Visionaries

"Dostoyevsky Behind a Camera" by Garry Wills, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (July 1997), 77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114; "Decency and Muck" by George Packer, in *Dissent* (Summer 1997), 521 Fifth Ave., Ste. 1700, New York, N.Y. 10017.

Ever since his *JFK* (1991), which presented a far-fetched, fact-challenged conspiracy theory about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, filmmaker Oliver Stone has increasingly come to seem an irresponsible Hollywood loon, obsessively turning out simple-minded, albeit cinematically exciting, political "message" movies. *Natural Born Killers* (1994) glamorized violence; *Nixon* (1995) trashed RN, even if not as badly as many had expected, and last year's *People vs. Larry Flynt*, which Stone produced but didn't direct, draped the First Amendment around a misogynistic porn merchant who was sanitized for the screen. "You have to recreate the climate of madness in the culture," says Stone.

Wills, author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), contends that the filmmaker is widely misunderstood and is actually writing "great novels . . . with the camera." Stone's work shows "a feel for timeless narrative patterns" (a mystery story, for instance, in the case of *JFK*), Wills says, into which he imports "not only newspapers from below but also a mysticism from above. He is constantly suggesting cosmic showdowns behind or beyond the newsy events and the genres. Improbable martyrs and gurus haunt the screen." *Just like Dostoyevsky!* Wills breathtakingly asserts. "Both men set this material ablaze with fierce energies."

Packer, author of *The Half-Man* (1991), is far less impressed. Stone is "an extremely talented filmmaker," whose early *Salvador* (1985), about El Salvador's slide into civil war and American culpability in the conflict, "is proof that he once had a strong gift for story and characterization." But Stone "has squandered his talents." (Not that it seems to have hurt him at the box office.)

In his nine subsequent films, Stone has come to depend so heavily on visual effect to generate excitement, Packer says, that he is unable to explore the "more complicated and more *truly* exciting" reality beneath the surface. "In Stone's climate of madness there's no room for human relationships—they are always static, and his women have no life on the screen except in the case of a strong performance, such as Joan Allen's as Pat Nixon. Nor is there room for real politics, which is to say, moral and historical complexity."

Packer contrasts Stone's films with the mature work of another left-wing writer-director from the baby boom generation, John Sayles. In *Matewan* (1987), *Eight Men Out* (1988), *City of Hope* (1991), and last year's *Lone Star*, the independent filmmaker details "the relationships, personal and social, among a range of characters, all concerned with justice. . . . The style is understated, the pace often slow, the cinematography simple. Three or four plots are woven together, suggesting a theme of mutual responsibility." The main characters are working people caught in mundane obligations to family, job, or town. "His vision of community isn't a dropout's utopia held together by love but a town divided by social class in which individuals are faced with old-fashioned moral choices."

Sayles is not as visually inventive as Stone, in Packer's view, nor even as good a screenwriter as Stone at his best. But his films draw on what was best in the 1960s ("reasonableness . . . collective hope . . . the Port Huron Statement"), instead of, as Stone's do, on what was worst ("paranoia, grandiosity, romantic primitivism"). That Sayles's career has been so overshadowed by Stone's, Packer concludes, shows "the attraction of glamorous muck over common decency, and the difficulty of saying something serious about politics through the vehicle of mass culture, which seems the only way left to be heard."

OTHER NATIONS

www.China.com

"The Great Firewall of China" by Geremie R. Barmé and Sang Ye, in *Wired* (June 1997), 520 3rd St., 4th floor, San Francisco, Calif. 94107–1815.

In China, the Net is hot. Breathless news reports claim that the traditional greeting *Ni chifanle ma?* (Have you eaten?) is being replaced by *Ni shangwangle ma?*

(Are you wired?). That's not really so, observe Barmé, a Senior Fellow at the Australian National University, and Ye, a Chinese journalist, but high technology has indeed arrived. "The question on everyone's mind—the Chinese government and its critics alike—is whether it will also be a cultural and political Trojan horse."

Chinese scientists put together the country's first extensive network of computers in 1993; two years later came the national university system, with e-mail connections to the outside world as well as within the country. However, Barmé and Ye point out, just a small number of graduate students and professors, mainly in science and engineering, actually have access to the Web.

Overall, only 150,000 Chinese are "wired"—not many in a land of 1.3 billion. According to a Beijing marketing firm, only 1.6 percent of Chinese families own a computer. Even so, the government is worried. The Public Security Bureau (PSB) in Beijing is attempting "to build a digital equivalent to China's Great Wall," Barmé and Ye write, by requiring Internet service providers to block access to "problem" sites abroad. Off-limits are most of the Western media, as well as the China News Digest, an on-line service run by Chinese exiles. "Eager for a slice of the action, the major global networking companies—Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems, and Bay Networks, among others—cheerfully compete to supply the gear that makes [blocking access] possible," the authors observe.

Individuals who are, or wish to get, wired are closely regulated. They also need to pay: "Figure a monthly net-plus-phone bill of Y350 (US$42)—roughly half a recent college graduate's monthly salary," say the authors.

The regime makes use of the information technology itself, of course, Barmé and Ye note. "The ever-vigilant PSB [is linked by a closed network] to every major hotel and guest house where foreigners stay. The minute you register at your five-star joint-venture hotel, Comrade X [at the PSB] and his associates know you're there."

Computer keyboards can't accommodate the 3,000 Chinese characters. One solution is software that recognizes written characters.

Ultimately, the regime may find the information revolution impossible to control. "The one certainty," say the authors, "given the headstrong Chinese bureaucracy and the Maoist mentality that spawned it, is that China's adaptations of the Net will be unique, and probably bizarre by Western standards."

Russia's Science Crisis

"Rough Times in Russia: Post-Soviet Science Faces a New Crisis" by Dan Vergano, in *Science News* (May 10, 1997), 1719 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

American scientists may bemoan the tighter research budgets of the post-Cold War era, but their plight is nothing next to that of their Russian counterparts. "Of all the people reeling from the collapse of the Soviet Union," writes Vergano, a science writer, "scientists rank among those who have fallen the furthest in terms of pay, prestige, and professional opportunity."

In 1991, the Soviet Union boasted a scientific work force of 1.5 million people, and a big research budget, as much as 80 percent of it for military projects. Since then, the number of working scientists, Vergano reports, has plummeted by an estimated 600,000, or 40 percent.

Western security analysts had feared an exodus of Russian scientists to other nations, he says, but "an internal brain drain" has taken place instead. Economist Irina