

Jeanne Berg

Crimes and Punishments

by David R. Slavitt

The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Produced by Kees Kasander

Written and directed by

Peter Greenaway

Released by Miramax Films

The Plot Against Harry

Produced by Michael Roemer and

Robert Young

Written and directed by

Michael Roemer

Released by King Screen

Lust, greed, betrayal, murder, and revenge are not at all unusual as the subjects of movies, but Peter Greenaway's extension of these typical concerns to include cannibalism is a half-joking, half-serious gesture that reminds us of the Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies of blood or even, before that, of the goriest excesses of Senecan theatrics. Who knows? Maybe we are ready for a revival of *Thyestes*.

Albert is the eponymous thief of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*. He is absolute appetite, pure impurity—which is, in itself, a fairly complicated piece of business. Greenaway's script calls for actor Michael Gambon to behave swinishly and thugishly of course, but that wouldn't be enough for us to despise him as keenly as we must if we are to be fully sympathetic to his wife's mannerist revenge. He is as gross and crude as

one could imagine, but what gives the behavior its singular odiousness is that his atrocious behavior is in the setting of a grand restaurant, Le Hollandais, the elaborate belle epoch decor of which is not only stunning but symbolic of that whole range of proprieties Gambon so blithely and unremittingly violates. His loud talk in a Cockney accent and his mispronunciations of French words on the menu are characteristic bits in a pattern of escalating desecrations. He belches. He makes crude remarks to and about his attractive and delicate wife, Georgina (Helen Mirren), observing to his band of thugs and cronies with him at the table that "the naughty bits and the dirty bits are so close together," and then looking at her as he demonstrates, holding his thumb and index finger an inch or so apart. There is no propriety or decency that he observes or respects—he even goes barging into the ladies' lavatory to look for Georgina when he thinks she is taking too long in there.

She is, as a matter of fact, taking a long time because she has contrived a way of getting back at Albert. With a rather delicate and soulful man whom she has seen across the restaurant sitting alone at his table and reading, she has engineered a chance meeting and then parlayed that into an abrupt affair that they consummate in one of the ladies' room stalls, as if to demonstrate that, for all of Albert's grossness, he and Yeats may be right after all about the proximity of the naughty bits and dirty bits.

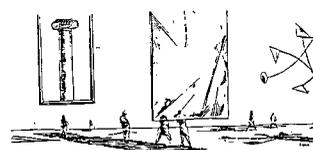
This simple enough set-up is presented with a great deal of panache—dark reds of the dining room give way, abruptly, to an eerie white of the lavatories, and Georgina's dress, a matching red in one shot, turns white and therefore remains matching in the next. There is no attempt at "realism," but indeed, a fairly strenuous effort to escape from its confines. The kitchen of the restaurant is a cavernous place, intimidatingly Hogarthian in its parody of overbearing 19th-century industrial architecture. And at one of the sinks of this grotesque and infernal workplace, one of the marmitons sings in an angelic boy-soprano: "Wash me / thoroughly / and cleanse me of my / iniquity . . ." while an invisible chorus of other voices (other souls? saved or damned?) provides lush harmony and

support. Meanwhile, there are corpses of dead animals hanging on racks, as intimidating and distressing as in any of those Dutch genre paintings' cozy and domestic versions of the *momento mori*.

Albert, the thief, owns the restaurant, whatever that means. At the least, it is a necessary condition for much of the action because if he weren't the owner, the chef (Richard Bohringer) would either throw him out or, more likely, prevent him from entering in the first place. But there is also some likelihood of a nudge toward allegory—appetite, let us suppose, is the proprietor of the graces.

The guignol zest of the picture is what makes it interesting and saves it from these allegorical tendencies that get heavier and murkier as the action unfolds. It turns out that Michael's reading is not simply a bit of business but vital to the structure of the piece. The solitary figure with whom Georgina is having it off in pantries and storage rooms in the kitchen is the proprietor of a book depository, whatever that's supposed to be. It isn't a book store or any conventional kind of library, but only a huge warehouse full of books piled up apparently at random, but all of them marked with bookplates. When the wife and her lover are betrayed—as was inevitable, after all—they flee together, stark naked in a truck full of garbage and

LIBERAL ARTS



THE LIST SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

Chairman John E. Frohnmayer, defending the National Endowment for the Arts from an attack by Bill Kauffman in the *Wall Street Journal* in May: "As for those who *have* received government support—authors such as Alice Walker, John Irving, Gloria Naylor and Raymond Carver—certainly they have returned our investment in them, both in the tax revenues generated by their works and, more important, through the enriching quality of their prose."

maggoty meat (Adam and Eve expelled from Paradise?), and head for the book depository because that's not a place that Albert is likely to frequent. What terrible degradations can anyone imagine performing with a book?

This departure from the restaurant's immediate precincts is the film's weakest section. The usual idea that movie-makers have of opening up their work from the confinement of the stage to show lots of exteriors can be effective in a naturalistic film, but here the strategy is a mistake. The world of the restaurant is special, with its own rules and its own bizarre logic, which is another way of saying that we accept its bizarre distortions of experience. Outside, in the universe we all share in common, we have a right to expect common sense to prevail, and it doesn't. We want to call out to the figures on the screen that they ought not lend books with identifying book plates to the pot boy who has brought them take-out food from the restaurant! Bad things will happen. Albert will find you. The pot boy will be tortured and forced to eat his own belly-button, and you will be killed—with your books stuffed into your mouth and up your bloody nostrils so you smother to death. It is, not to belabor the point, a very bad idea. But there they go, doing just that dumb thing we wanted to warn them against. Sometimes there's just no talking to people.

On the other hand, just as one has been about to give up on the movie for its sophomoric pretentiousness, it relaxes, returns to the restaurant, gives us a really fine scene between Georgina and the mysterious chef, and recoups much of what it has lost with a Jacobean revenge fantasy so gaudy and ghastly as to have earned the movie an X rating—which the distributor rejected, preferring to go into the marketplace unrated. What the allegorical significance may be of the cook's preparing of Michael's corpse *en croute* and wheeling it in for Albert to be forced at gunpoint actually to eat is not clear. Probably the allegory has been by this time abandoned (and a very good thing, too, say I) as the film gets caught up in its proper business of the exploitation of its dramatic and sensational possibilities. It isn't Marco Ferreri's *Le Grand Bouffe* that is in-

structive any more, but those old Roger Corman romps more or less based on stories or poems of Edgar Allan Poe that now enliven—or revive—the movie.

Michael Roemer's film, *The Plot Against Harry*, is a minor triumph of subversive charm with a spectacular performance by Martin Priest as Harry Plotnick, a small-time gangster whose turf has betrayed him. It isn't just that the Italians, blacks, and Puerto Ricans have been giving him trouble; the more serious fact is that the neighborhood has changed, that the Jews have moved out and moved up, and that, in this altered ecology, Harry is an endangered species. The fun of the film comes from the grotesque triumph of respectability over Harry's life as he is suckered into legitimate business deals and middle-class ceremonies. At weddings, bar mitzvahs, circumcisions, and funerals we see him nudged and badgered into conformity, and we watch him assume the posture of paterfamilias as eventually he lets them take him over. Through a mistake at the emergency ward of a hospital to which he has been taken, he believes he has a bad heart and may die at any moment, but it is his loneliness and his lack of any deep-seated meanness that make him vulnerable. One bizarre ritual follows another until we get a glimpse of his abject surrender to his sad-sack brother-in-law who puts him up as an initiate into some deranged and (very slightly) funnier version of the Shriners. Harry even finds himself contributing to worthy causes and, by the time Roemer has finished with him, we get to see him stagger across the set, having what looks like a coronary behind some dreadful tenor doing his number at a Heart Disease telethon.

Roemer shot this in 1969 but couldn't get it released. It was only in 1989 when he was having the film transferred to videotape for his children that the laughter of the man doing the videotape transfer suggested that the time might have arrived for another perfunctory effort or two on behalf of the abandoned work. Roemer submitted it both to the New York and Toronto film festivals and both accepted it the same week.

It is by no means a landmark achievement of modern cinema, but it has an elegant and intelligent charm as

well as a modesty and restraint some small French films used to have but that one seldom sees in American pictures. Priest is a kind of genius, a cross between Fernandel and Keaton, but Jewish. Or, one might say, Myron Cohen but with more appeal. The film depends on his languid charm as he represents Plotnick's desire to be liked and admired. If Harry can't get respect as a gambler and gangster, he will settle for the ceremonial respect that is shown to the father at weddings and to the grandfather at circumcisions. If he can't be a Godfather, he'll be a good father, and from that weakness comes his undoing.

Priest's career has been less than a resounding success. I couldn't help wondering about what it would have been like if this film had been shown twenty years ago and had been as successful then as it has been now. I wondered, indeed, if Priest was still alive. It took a couple of phone calls, but I found him—out in California, where he has been living for just over a year, during which time he has been up for seven different roles in pictures but hasn't landed any of them. "You go and you read, and you do your best, but somebody doesn't like the way your left ear lobe hangs." Before that, he said, he'd been doing theater back East. "In New York?" I asked. "In Vermont and Delaware," he said, but, knowing how that sounded, he tried to redeem it a little with a first magnitude name: "I did some Chekhov pieces in Delaware."

For those of us who go to the movies for diversion, this is a lovely little film that has had a peculiar history. For the moviemakers, though, the people whose livelihoods depend on such things, these little quirks are matters of life and death. Priest has been in 75 TV shows and has appeared in 15 films (including Roemer's *Nothing But a Man*, in which he played a redneck Southerner), but if things had been only a little different, who can say what he might have been able to do besides sitting out there in Palmdale, waiting for the phone to ring?

David R. Slavitt is a poet and novelist whose most recent book is Lives of the Saints. From 1963 to 1965 he was a film reviewer for Newsweek. He lives in Philadelphia.

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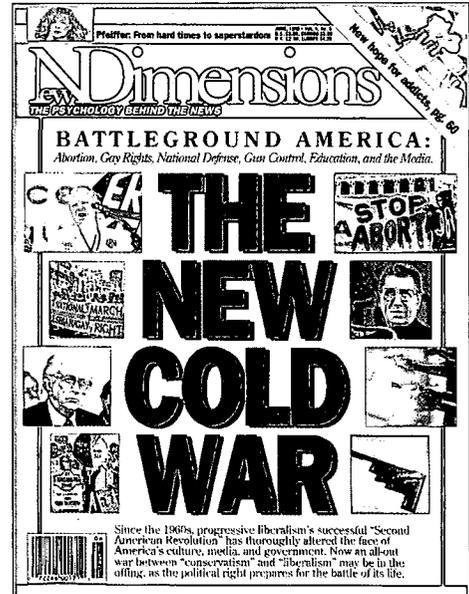
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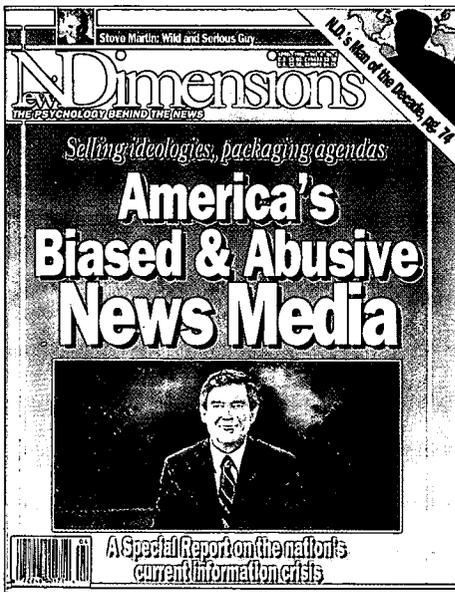


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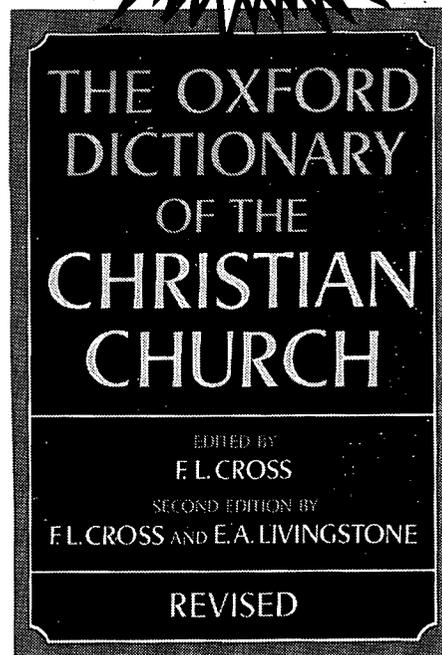
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