

two-sided entity, yielding a key or grid equally present in the signifying and the signified series. It maneuvers nomadically through the text, at once word and thing, name and object, sense and denotatus, expression and designation, exploring the semantic, phonetic, and morphological connections silently, laboriously, obsessively, compulsively; and with the stealth of a thief in the night it swells up with everything it had previously swallowed but is pregnant only with itself. It guarantees, therefore, the convergence of the two series which it traverses, an abject object, an occupant without a place, always supernumerary and displaced. Thus we disclose a text containing no unit of occurrence, fixed form, identifiable theme, or imaginary determinable as such. It contains no themes, but only anthems, scattered throughout and collecting everywhere.

The department is convinced that Grenouille-Chanson's program will enable every single individual in the North American population—regardless of race, sexual preference, gender, and location on the lower western slope of the Bell Curve—to output litcritological dissertations in printer's ream lots.

Prof. Harry Glibb, the subcommittee chairmammal, presented a chart which showed the department reaching an annual production of 65.3 Ph.D.lites by 2004 and then rising steadily to a peak of 1,311.5 by the year 2025. A second chart showed how the 35-year trend in "grade inflation" is being replicated by the galloping growth of "degree inflation," aided and abetted by large numbers of taxpayers determined to paper their young with academic credentials of every kind. This phenomenon will ensure increasing employment opportunities for the swelling flood of Ph.D.'s flowing from America's graduate schools.

A third chart, based on the assumption that all institutions of higher education in the country will, sooner or later, institute Ph.D.I degree programs of their own in every discipline, showed that by 2025 every single adult on the North American continent with an IQ and/or pulse rate registering at 33 and above will have a Ph.D.I in some discipline or another.

Harry's fourth chart showed that the

existing English faculty will all be retired well before the saturation point is reached.

The faculty congratulated the Re/Visioning Committee for a job well done. They congratulated Harry Glibb for his inspiring presentation. They congratulated Chairmammal Fish for initiating the process. They congratulated themselves for not being complicitous in hegemonic arrangements of power.

Lagado University's president, W. Wittering Bleatley, congratulated the English Department, predicting that Lagado University was destined to be the international pacesetter and pathfinder in the quest for equal educational access and egress for all. The president lyrically limned a visionary picture of an America populated with Doctors of Philosophy (lite). We quote from his peroration:

Our species will, at last, begin to harmonize itself in earnest. . . . The Featherless Biped will be empowered to master first the semi-conscious and then also the unconscious processes of hir own organism—breathing, the circulation of the blood, digestion, reproduction—and, within the necessary limits, will subordinate them to the common good. Even purely physiological life will become collectively experimental. The human species, the sluggish *Homo sapiens*, will once again enter the state of radical reconstruction and will become in its own hands the object of the most complex methods of multicultural-psychophysical training. . . . Passing out of graduate school, the Featherless Biped will make it hir goal to exalt hir own emotions, to elevate hir instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent. . . . to create a higher sociobiological type, a supermammal if you will. . . . Equipped with advanced degrees, the Featherless Biped will become incomparably stronger, wiser, subtler. Hir body will become more harmonious, hir movements more rhythmic, hir voice more melodious. The ordinary forms of mammalhood will rise to the heights of Ph.D.'s, J.D.'s, LL.D.'s. And beyond this ridge, other peaks will emerge: PostPh.D.'s, SuperJ.D.'s, Über-

LL.D.'s. The possibilities are glorious, the promise of expansion endless.

President Bleatley also predicted that his children would live to see the campus of Lagado University stretching from the Wyoming border to the Missouri River.

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## Letter From Florence

by Andrei Navrozov

### The Chic and the Psychic



I already sounded the alarm in last month's letter. This really is an impossible city to get out of. And so, having bid my farewells, I'm still here, despite the fact that the rent has been paid in advance on a perfectly adequate little aerie over the Grand Canal in Venice. The place even has a spacious terrace, overlooking the charred remains of the Fenice, where, once I grow tired of looking at those perennially idle, cheerfully chrome-yellow construction cranes paid for by the friends of opera everywhere, my future correspondence will originate. If ever I get myself onto this spacious terrace of mine, that is.

The hereditary proprietor of the Venetian palazzo, Baron F-, turned out to be a cousin of a friend of mine from Cambridge, which was discovered quite by chance while the estate agent was showing me around the vacant apartment. So we immediately sat down to some suitably amazing crystalline white from the Veneto, and by and by the conversation turned to Florence and her ways. When I told him where I was staying, an ominous shadow crossed his brow. "You will not be here before spring, my friend," he said. "I can take your money now if you like, but you will not be here in time for the carnival. I know Florence, and I know these people. They will not let you go when you want to leave. They want

to decide everything.”

I murmured something by way of polite disbelief. What exactly was he talking about? Voodoo? Brainwashing? Hypnotic influence? “More like telepathy,” he replied, unsmiling. “You’ll see. When the crunch comes, you’ll find out that they can read your mind.” Gradually the subject petered out, and by the time we sat down to lunch at the smallest and coziest of the five small cozy tables at Ernesto Ballarin’s “Da Arturo,” where my compatriot Nureyev had left a lasting cultural imprint by teaching the owner to fry potatoes and mushrooms together in the Russian manner, the conversation was about food, tax evasion, and the Venetian way of doing things.

This Venetian way of doing things I like very much, by the way, because basically it involves not doing them. Every man here is a careful dresser, a dapper and exceedingly complex arrangement of tasteful checks, stripes, and dots that cannot but make the onlooker whistle, thinking something like boy oh boy, if this fellow has so much energy to spare before he leaves the house in the morning, think of how much he has left over for the rest of the day! In fact, this is almost entirely deceptive, because all of the fellow’s energy, all his life force as it were, has in fact gone into achieving that sartorially perfect equilibrium between corporeality and imagination, and what little is left is the strength to raise an *ombra* to the mouth without spilling some *grappa* on the tablecloth in a feeble and indecorous gesture. I know I’m going to do well in Venice. Being gloriously one-eyed in a land of the blind is my idea of belonging. And if they denounce me for being a grasping overachiever, so be it.

The other day, in a book about Voltaire, I found some references to a Venetian named Algarotti who came to stay at Cirey, the Champagne estate where the great controversialist spent half his life shacking up with Mme. du Châtelet. Carlyle once described him as “not supremely beautiful, though much the gentleman in manners as in ruffles and ingeniously logical; rather yellow in mind as in skin and with a taint of obsolete Venetian macassar,” which, after a day spent in male company in Venice, sounded just about right to me. Still, I was curious about Signor Algarotti’s contribution to the world of ideas, which must have served as his passkey to Cirey. It turned out that this was a book entitled

*Newtonianismo per le dame*, “a simplification of Newton’s theories intended for Italian women.”

Anyway, when I got back to Florence that evening, I had every intention of telling Princess C- that, wonderful as life had been in her famous city, in her historic house, and under her illustrious family’s protection, I could no longer afford to pay what it cost. And what it cost, incidentally, I no longer have any fear of revealing, for the simple reason that whenever a pretentious foreigner rents something fancy in Italy, it always costs the same number of millions. I need not convert this number into dollars, or explain what it includes, or even mention whether it is due weekly, monthly, or annually. The figure, predictable as a Henry James formula for romantic disillusionment, is a symbolic compact which represents the New World tenant’s naiveté on the one hand and, on the other, the Old World landlord’s legitimate desire to protect ancient relics from being overrun by hordes of visitors who are no less tightfisted for being so very naive. Hence, whether you rent a seaside villa in a fashionable resort, or the most architecturally important house in a provincial town, or a floor of a notable palazzo in a large city, the price will always be the same, and you will always have to pay it in cash.

The landlady was waiting up for me. If I were telling the story of a poor student lodging in a cheap boarding house, this would be the way to crank up the melodrama, but since mine is more the story of a rake’s progress, I will say instead that the Princess asked me to tea. “I *think* you are thinking of moving,” she said, doing absolutely nothing to obscure the emphasis of the remark, which fell rather more heavily on her own thinking than on mine. I gulped some tea, recalling Baron F-’s warning about psychic Florentines of just a few hours earlier. “I know we’ve agreed on a certain figure, which you’ve been paying,” she went on, knowing only too well that I was already three weeks late with the month’s rent, “but now that I realize you’re thinking of leaving Florence, how would it strike you if I told you that I only wanted half?”

Spooky, that’s how, is what I remember actually thinking, though at this juncture the Princess chose not to read my mind, and anyway the thought did not linger. “After all, when we first met I did not know you.” Convincing, per-

fectly convincing, I suddenly said to myself, as if waking from some ugly confrontational dream and now beginning to imagine all the good uses to which I could put the rubber-banded wad, called “cutlet” in New Russian parlance, when next one found its way into my pocket. These Florentines are nothing if not perfectly convincing. The Princess does have a charming smile. Now that she knows me 50 percent better than before, the rent is halved. Convincing! And the tea is quite good, incidentally. Assam?

“Ceylon. So that’s settled, then,” she summed up brightly. “You’re staying.”

It remains for me to add that during the two months that followed our conversation certain changes came into the tenant’s life at the Palazzo C-. The wood for the fireplaces was not as dry and no longer brought up with the same enthusiasm as before. The other chambermaid, not wonderfully obedient Lucia, came more often and inaugurated the noxious practice of presenting household bills for such trifling items as candles and cayenne pepper. The choir practice in the other wing became less tuneful, and seemed louder and more intrusive. Finally and most significantly, I was being charged for heating, electricity, gas, and the rest of life’s prose, with the result that now, after the sums have been done, I can only wince and tell myself the terrible truth, which is that as a matter of practical reality my rent never changed. The same symbolic number of millions as always was actually withdrawn from my pocket, this time by means of an accounting procedure that I can only describe as telekinetic.

But as Baron F- had foretold, the important thing as far as Princess C- was concerned was that she got us to change our plans. (“Plans?! What plans can a lazy Venetian make with a drunk Muscovite?! *Per piacere, sii serio!*”) is what I would probably hear if I could read her mind.) I am now leaving Florence not on my schedule, and less on his, but on the whim of a descendant of those shrewd merchant bankers who dealt in the absurd gullibility of mankind for so long that the manipulative cynicism in their blood can pass, in the sleepy, sleeper eyes of the rest of us frivolous and indolent Venetians, for a bit of spooky hypnosis.

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FILM

**Under, Over, and  
Worlds Apart**

by George McCartney

***Eight Millimeter***

Produced by Columbia Pictures  
and Hofflund/Polone  
Directed by Joel Schumacher  
Screenplay by Andrew Kevin Walker  
Released by Columbia Pictures

***October Sky***

Produced by Charles Gordon  
and Larry Franco  
Directed by Joe Johnston  
Screenplay by Lewis Colick  
and Homer Hickam  
Released by Universal Pictures

***Analyze This***

Produced by Tribeca Productions  
Directed by Harold Ramis  
Screenplay by Ken Lonergan  
and Peter Tolan  
Released by Warner Bros.

Watching film today exercises your capacity for hope. You're always longing for the medium to realize its potential, knowing in advance it won't more times than it will. Three movies I saw recently prove the point: two disappointments, underworld in every sense, and one spirited reach for the sky.

Let's get the worst out of the way first.

Although St. Paul claimed the wages of sin were death, many of Hollywood's finest would beg to differ. For them, the wages of sin are, well, wages. And extravagantly bountiful wages at that.

Case in point: Joel Schumacher, the currently popular director who saw fit to sexualize a comic-book hero by redesigning Batman's bodysuit with nipples and a codpiece. Schumacher apparently has an aggravated talent for prurience, and

it's once again on display in *Eight Millimeter*.

There's only one reason to comment on this loathsome film. It perfectly illustrates Hollywood's tried-and-true version of bait and switch. Schumacher dresses up a degrading panorama of pornography and sadism as though it were a morally serious exploration of evil.

The film's dishonesty is apparent from the very first scenes. A wealthy woman discovers something disturbing in the safe of her recently deceased husband. It seems to be a snuff film—pornography featuring the murder of a woman. Does the dowager burn the film? Of course not. She enlists private detective Tom Welles (Nicholas Cage) to determine its authenticity. Plausible, right?

Soon we're glimpsing what Welles sees when he screens the grisly reel. A helpless-looking girl in a camisole sits on a bed as a burly man wearing leather and an S&M mask enters the frame. This alone is quite enough for our hero. Well before anything else happens, he's recoiling in horror at the possibility that this may be the prelude to an authentic snuff film. Would you want a detective this squeamish? Of course not. Schumacher does, however. He wants to establish his film's veneer of moral righteousness early and often. This, we're to understand, is unspeakable stuff; it's only being shown because the plot demands it.

With this license, Schumacher pursues his real objective: to send Welles—and us—on a tour of the porn world. As Welles scours the marketplace looking for evidence that will help him uncover the girl's fate, he must watch numerous videos of erotic sadism, and so must we if we insist on seeing this stinker out.

It's not surprising that a major studio would support a project of this kind. Mainstream films today are so steeped in pornography that a director really has to shred the envelope to shock an audience. One does what one can to earn one's wages.

Stripped of its veil of seriousness, *Eight Millimeter* is little different than the pornography it pretends to condemn. And like standard-issue pornography, it shows small regard for narrative plausibility and even less for moral distinc-

tions.

There is, however, one exception to its cynical commercialism. The connoisseur of erotic slaughter, we discover, is surnamed Christian. The ill-fated runaway who supplies his high-priced thrill travels with a rosary in her suitcase. A porno director keeps a seven-foot crucifix in his studio for crossbow practice. The S&M killer is shown helping his aged mother onto a private bus emblazoned with the words "Faithful Christian Fellowship." And just in case we missed the point, the camera lingers on a statue of the Blessed Virgin standing outside the miscreant's back door.

Get it? These vile, depraved people—saints preserve us!—they're all Christians! Now who would have thought it? Well, this will teach us Bible-thumping hypocrites to shut up and take what's coming to us.

Fortunately, films like *October Sky* come along just frequently enough to rinse away the foul aftertaste left by the likes of *Eight Millimeter*.

I saw *October Sky* with my nine-year-old son, Liam, who was enchanted by the movie despite its conspicuous lack of special effects. When I told him that it was based on *Rocket Boys*, retired NASA engineer Homer Hickam's memoir about growing up in a 1950's coal-mining town, Liam insisted we get the book. He's reading it as I write this. There may be higher accolades to pay a film, but I can't think of any.

Director Joe Johnston deserves congratulations for daring to take on this unlikely project. By today's standards, it's as far from mainstream as you can get. It even includes a scene in which a couple of 17-year-olds find themselves alone in a car at night and—get this—keep their clothes on. Though strongly attracted to one another, they're too shy and respectful to act on their inclinations. Rather than mock their reserve, Johnston celebrates its sweetness. One can only imagine what Joel Schumacher might have made of this episode.

The film opens with a ruminative evocation of Hickam's hometown of Coalwood, West Virginia. In an eerily quiet montage punctuated by brief blackouts, we watch coal miners come and go on their daily rounds, stooped, exhausted,