

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,

begrimed, yet shrouded in an aura of working-class dignity. Then the screen fills with what seems to be the folds of an iron-gray curtain. Only when these folds begin to move and the camera pulls back do we realize that it's a huge reel of steel cable hauling the mine elevator up from the depths, bringing one crew of miners to the surface before lowering the next into the pit.

The sequence tells us much about these men. Their lives are curtained by stygian work shifts. To make their living, they must toil long hours in darkness, crawling through narrow tunnels, breathing coal dust, and watching warily for cave-ins. Their reward comes in the brief respites they enjoy with their families. It's not surprising that Homer Hickam didn't want to follow his father into mining work.

The arrival of Sputnik in 1957 shows Homer (Jake Gyllenhaal) the way out. While his neighbors scan the evening sky for the Russian triumph, wondering whether it might drop bombs on them, Homer is inspired. He'll build rockets. By doing so, he hopes to construct his escape route to college and then a career in aerospace, far away from Coalwood.

After numerous misadventures, including errant rockets that narrowly miss his neighbors' homes, Homer and his friends begin to succeed. Soon, the rest of the town becomes involved, coming to see the midjet missiles launched.

As the boys passionately pursue their rocket experiments, the film's scenes alternate between oppressive mine interiors and expansive skylines, visually conveying the story's central struggle between a loving but dour father and his ambitious, visionary son. Homer Hickam, Sr. (Chris Cooper) wants his boy to stop dreaming and prepare himself for a life of work in the mine. But Junior won't listen. He's literally shooting for the stars.

To his credit, Joe Johnston neither exaggerates nor romanticizes Hickam's story. He depicts mining as a harsh occupation, but one that offers men opportunities to prove their ingenuity and valor. Hickam may bridle at what he takes to be his father's blinkered existence, but he respects his father and longs for his approval.

It's a true story and an old one, captured with photography that's all the more compelling for its seemingly unstaged compositions and natural lighting. This film shows us what the medi-

um can do in the right hands.

Analyze This, produced by Billy Crystal, who plays one of the leads, and directed by Harold Ramis, promised to be funny. Like *October Sky*, it begins with a reference to Sputnik. Here, the upstart satellite provides ironic counterpoint to the infamous Apalachin, New York, Mafia summit that took place in 1957. It's meant to establish that the story's Mafia boys are earthbound clods. At least, I think that's the point, but who can tell with a film so sloppily written?

I found this putative comedy as witless as they come. Try this on for size. Robert DeNiro, as a John Gotti-like thug, notices a 70-year-old man gawking at him. Exasperated by the geezer, he snarls, "Whaddya lookin' at? Get outa here before I break your [supply the all-purpose participial modifier] face." If this is your idea of a laugh line, you'll certainly enjoy the rest of the show. If not, this is one movie offer you can safely refuse.

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EDUCATION

Yes, California, There Is a Right Answer

by *Marian Kester Coombs*

They say you can't fight city hall—but a group of California parents calling itself Mathematically Correct (MC) has taken on the statehouse and won the right to restore a rigorous math curriculum to public education.

It is only just that the tide should begin turning in the former Golden State, which, because it boasts the biggest market for textbooks, has imparted to the rest of the states so many ghastly fads, from Whole Language to anti-American "history" to science-as-radical-environmentalism.

The "Whole Math" fad against which Mathematically Correct campaigned successfully is based on: a verbalizing and

visualizing approach rather than an abstract, numerical one; a reliance upon concrete "manipulatives" (marbles, straws, etc.) in lieu of abstract number concepts; a demotion of the classroom teacher from leader to "co-discoverer" who "facilitates" rather than instructs; an emphasis on teamwork rather than measurable individual achievement; the use of calculators even in the lower grades for routine computation; a fixation on everyday, "real world" applications for math (balancing your checkbook, buying groceries, selling lemonade); and much, much talk about "process" and "method" and "critical," "higher-order thinking" as opposed to memorization of facts and the specific content of the various domains of mathematics.

Whole Math represents a deep confusion of mathematics with arithmetic. It is a remedial math program for the innumerate masquerading as a reformed curriculum that will include those previously left out of the discipline.

The idea of "math without numbers" sounded dazzlingly innovative to many cutting-edge educators, but in attempting to convey any sort of mathematical proficiency to students, the miraculous new method broke down. Parents watched in horror as their children whipped out calculators to determine ten percent of 450. "Rainforest algebra" texts droned on multiculturally for 100 pages or so before getting around to presenting a single equation. Parents heard from their children how "fun and easy" math was now that they didn't have to memorize those pesky multiplication tables or get marked down for not getting the "so-called" right answer.

In California, and everywhere else Whole Math was introduced, state test scores nose-dived. One-half to two-thirds of freshmen admitted to the Cal State university system were found to need at least one year of remedial math, despite being drawn from the top third of graduating seniors.

Among the more horrified parents were those who founded MC, "dedicated to the proposition that $2+2=4$." Co-founder Martha Schwartz, a college geology professor, vividly recalls the night she and her husband "discovered we were not alone" in their reaction to the new New Math.

It was October 1995. Martha was despondent over "the damage done to good kids and the suffering of the best teachers" as Whole Math was forced through