

have imposed a terrible literalism on what sociobiologists call "threat behavior," precipitating *Homo sapiens* into the role of killer when all he truly wants is to howl and pound his chest a bit. The problem has grown worse with each turn of the technological wheel, until finally it hardly matters whether we are filled with loving-kindness: We have simply grown too dangerous. After the Columbine massacre, someone said, "We have always had angry, crazy young men; the difference now is that they can get automatic weapons." In just the same way, the cataclysms of the 20th century can be parsed as fundamentally technological rather than nationalist or ideological. The heart of the dilemma is not how badly nations or creeds have hated one another but the efficiency with which weaponry has translated such feelings into mountains of corpses. Of course, it is hard to account for the full bestiality of Nazism and Stalinism in such terms; those creeds and others like them, however, stemmed in part from the trauma of "excess lethality" on the battlefield, and their butcher bureaucracies played a role analogous to that of modern weapons, facilitating murder while diffusing responsibility for it.

All of this is old hat. But since September 11, it seems that the principle must be broadened to include not just weapons but technology in general, our whole modern way of life. It was not nukes that brought down the Twin Towers but box-cutters, airplanes, and, above all, what looks less like religious fanaticism in the old sense than a new technology, perhaps more fearsome than all the rest: I mean that set of repeatable methods whereby various modern organizations (including our own military) can now produce efficient, reliable, high-quality killers. Nuclear weapons have played a paradoxically beneficent role since 1945, but no matter. Nineteen programmed psychotics can still inflict 3,000 deaths. Not much earlier, it took just two lunatics to kill 166 in Oklahoma City. The line on the graph still seems to end in the world of *Dr. Strangelove*, where the only thing required to end everything is one man's madness.

Forgive me my fears, my pettifogging.

MOVING?

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But it's cold in here, and I find too little comfort in echoes of Ike and Reagan, in an effort to isolate problems of enormous scope and complexity in specific countries. Teeing off on these quaint, hellish little regimes may not stave off the unimaginable and may even hasten its onset. What worries me worst, when the icy blast from the register really gets cranking, is not just that Bush and Cheney and Powell seem a bit stuck in the past, but that it may be the wrong past. In their sober, laconic, can-do, who's-next approach to global terror, they seem, at worst, to have gone all the way back to Clausewitz's mad dictum that war is only "the pursuit of policy by other means." That, of course, is exactly what war is not: a comprehensible process, a tool that can be rationally applied, a means to foreseeable ends, or anything but a last resort. Do they understand this? Have they remembered how often splendid little wars have been prologue to ghastly debacles? Do they know the devil they are dancing with?

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FILM

Reclaiming the American Story

by Clyde Wilson

Gods and Generals

*Produced and Directed by
Ronald F. Maxwell
Screenplay by Ronald F. Maxwell
from Jeff Shaara's book
Released by Warner Bros.*

The war of 1861-65 is still the pivotal event of American history, despite all that has passed since. In the extent of mobilization, casualties, and material destruction on American soil, in the number of world-class events and personalities, and in revolutionary consequences, nothing else can equal it.

That is why Ronald F. Maxwell's epic portrayal of the first two years of the conflict, a prequel to his 1993 *Gettysburg*, is more than just another film or a good recreation of history. It is an American

cultural event of major significance.

The cataclysmic bloodletting of the war left a gaping hole in the American psyche. Late in the 19th century, we began to achieve a kind of healing by rendering the tragedy as a common ordeal of North and South. The Great Reconciliation went something like this: The victorious North agreed to stop demonizing Southerners as an inexplicably and irredeemably evil people, to recognize the courage and sincerity of their effort at independence, and to adopt the Confederacy's heroes, such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, as American heroes.

This had been anticipated by Joshua Chamberlain's respectful salute to the defeated at Appomattox. His sentiment was shared by most fighting Union soldiers, though not by their political superiors and ideological masters. (Ambrose Bierce and other combat veterans said they never met an abolitionist in the Union Army.) Because of deliberately whipped-up political hysteria, it was not until late in the century that much of the Northern public overcame their Southern-devil idea of the war.

In return for respect finally granted, Southerners agreed to be thankful that the country had not been broken up and to be the most loyal of Americans in the future. In other words, the war, instead of being a morality play of the triumph of virtue over evil, was accepted as having had good and bad on both sides and as a necessary trauma out of which had arisen a new, more united, and more powerful nation. This is why Southerner D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, with its sympathetic recounting of Southern experience coupled with an admiring portrayal of Lincoln, was a great success.

The Great Reconciliation prevailed for half a century. *Gone With the Wind* was immensely popular. The Confederate Battle Flag was carried by American fighting men to the corners of the earth in World War II (which today would subject them to security investigation and court-martial). Harry S. Truman chose a romantic portrait of Jackson and Lee for the lobby of his presidential library, and Dwight D. Eisenhower and Winston Churchill chose Southern expert Douglas Southall Freeman to show them around the field of Gettysburg. That *Gods and Generals* has Stonewall Jackson as its central character would have been considered, not too many years ago, as American as apple pie. Today, it is a feat of insight and courage. What Max-

well has done in this stunningly crafted and epically expansive recreation of the first two years of the war is nothing less than to restore American history to the Americans.

Although Southerners have kept and continue to keep their part of the bargain, the truce was broken around 30 years ago, and the Southern-devil theory re-emerged—and has been gathering force ever since. The average historian's explanation is that Americans have achieved a new realization of their heinous history regarding African-Americans and can never go back to the callous views of previous generations. This rests on the unquestioned assumption that the African-American experience—or, rather, the current interpretation of it—is the central or even the only important experience of American history.

The real explanation for the revival of Southern demonization as a national pastime is actually more complicated and has nothing to do with the discoveries of "expert" academic historians. It reflects, first of all, the triumph of Cultural Marxism—of history at the service of a fanatical agenda. The mainstream academic interpretation of the Civil War—and of much else in the American past—that prevails today institutionalizes views that, 50 years ago, were current nowhere except in the communist neighborhoods of New York City. Our history has been rewritten under the rubrics of Race, Class, and "Gender."

The worst thing about this is not, as countless neoconservative publicists have wailed, that it makes for divisive politics. The worst thing about it is that it cuts us off from our history, rendering our forebears alien and dead abstractions.

With regard to the Civil War, there is another element of distortion that relates not to leftist politics so much as to the penchant of too many Americans to assume their own unique righteousness, which has been a problem ever since the first Puritans stepped ashore at Boston. If Sherman burning his way through Georgia and Carolina was a righteous exercise against evil, then obviously the bombing of Christian Serbs and the starving of Iraqi children reflects the same unsulliable mission of American triumph.

The classic illustration of this is Ken Burns' celebrated documentary on the Civil War. Surrounding his thesis with intrinsically attractive materials, Burns revived the portrayal of the war as a morality play in a way that was widely ap-

pealing. In Burns' interpretation, the war was about the benevolence of the Union and emancipation and the evils of treason and slavery. At bottom, this rests upon a convenient fantasy—the fantasy of Northern racial benevolence. It is child's play to demonstrate that such benevolence never existed before, during, or after the war. This historical fabrication—that a war of conquest was gloriously, unselfishly benevolent—remains a seemingly ineradicable foundation of the American *amour-propre*.

By contrast, Maxwell has largely given us a dramatization of Americans, including African-Americans, as the real people in the real context in which they loved, perspired, wept, struggled, suffered, and died. That context truly was epic and, like all great historical events, morally complex. I could go on at length about the many marvelous aspects of Maxwell's creation: the battles, the well-drawn characters from history, the recognition of the importance of Christianity in the lives of our forebears, and much else. Though based generally on Jeff Shaara's novel of the same name, *Gods and Generals* follows the book less closely than *Gettysburg* did *The Killer Angels*, which is all to the good.

There can be no perfection on this earth, which brings me to the one small flaw in this dazzling gem. Southerners, generally—and, for all I know, Civil War students, too—found fault with Martin Sheen's portrayal of Lee in *Gettysburg*. I thought the condemnation excessive;

Sheen did a good job, given the impossibility of recreating Lee in a world where not even a model remains. Many happily greeted the news that Robert Duvall would portray Lee in *Gods and Generals*.

Now, I am risking being ridden out of town on a rail for this, but I would rather have Sheen or, even better, an unknown performer as Lee. Duvall is a fine actor who has portrayed many Southerners with verisimilitude. As Lee, he is a failure. At the beginning of the war, Lee was a vigorous, late-middle-aged man with an audacious military genius lurking just below a placid surface. Duvall plays Lee from the start as a worn-out old man—as Lee must have been after Appomattox—and with an overdone Deep South, rather than a Virginian, accent.

I was privileged to view a pre-release screening of *Gods and Generals*. It was way past my bedtime and a hundred miles from home, but I kept hoping the screen would never go blank. The film, I understand, has been cut considerably for theatrical release. I deliciously anticipate both the complete six-hour version that is to be released on DVD and the final installment of Maxwell's trilogy, *The Last Full Measure*, which is already in production. *Gods and Generals* is an arresting example of how a people's history should be told—which ought to have a healthy effect on Americans' idea of themselves.

Clyde Wilson is a descendant of Confederate privates on both sides.



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by George McCartney

The Sorrows of Solipsism

Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris* is the first film I have seen in decades that portrays the terrifying consequences of abortion. For this, Soderbergh deserves congratulations, although I am not sure why he has dragged us into space to sound the alarm. Perhaps it is too dangerous a thought to share on Earth these days.

Solaris is an adaptation of an adaptation. Soderbergh has taken Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 film of the same title, which was itself an adaptation of a 1961 novel by Polish science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem. Soderbergh seems to have used Tarkovsky's film as his template and then cut its 169-minute metaphysical rumination to a 110-minute romance, rendering his *Solaris* an austere, cryptic meditation on love, its challenges and delusions. While beautifully shot and often moving, it is ultimately too elliptical for its own good. Although Soderbergh's love story has its basis in the novel, Lem's interests were much wider. Lem's novel of ideas considers the nearly hopeless self-infatuation of our species. Tarkovsky's film is a far-truer rendering of the text and, despite technical limitations, is, in some ways, more visually accomplished. Soderbergh's version, on the other hand, can boast of its darkly intense color schemes and relentless close-ups that work effectively to pull us inside the characters' torment.

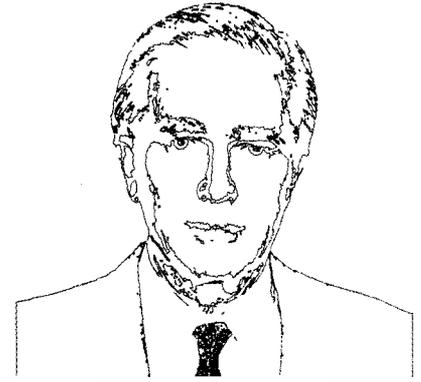
The new *Solaris* opens with psychologist Chris Kelvin waking from a troubled dream in which he hears a woman's voice saying, "I love you so much; don't you love me, Chris?" Upon rising, he stares morosely out his apartment's rain-spattered window. We can tell that he's inconsolable, because he is equipped with George Clooney's soulful eyes. He is still mourning his wife, Rheya (Natascha McElhone), who committed suicide years before. He had walked out on her after discovering that she had aborted their child for fear that the baby might inherit the madness that ran in her family. Falling into despair, she took her life, leaving him guilt-ridden.

When we first meet Kelvin in this future age, he is working as a psychologist specializing in grief management. The officials at Earth's space administration

want to send him to the space station that revolves around the distant planet of Solaris. For reasons unknown, the crew has become distraught. A security detail had been sent out some time ago, but it was never heard from again. Logically, there is no other recourse but to send a lone psychologist to solve the mystery. (It is comforting to learn psychologists will be so competent in the future.)

The trouble on the station stems from Solaris itself. It seems the oceanic planet is actually a thinking organism that has been tampering with the crew's minds. It has the power to rifle their memories, ferreting out their repressed thoughts and guilty secrets. It specializes in recreating betrayed loved ones. Thus, the first night aboard, Kelvin awakens to find Rheya sleeping next to him. At first unnerved, he realizes that she must be an alien manifestation, even though everything about her seems genuine, especially her feelings for him. She has no memory of the original Rheya's suicide and wants nothing more than to be his loving wife. Finally, not knowing what else to do, he persuades her to get into a small space shuttle and then jettisons her from the station. Kelvin turns to watch her contorted face silently screaming at him through the shuttle's porthole as she sails into frigid space. It is a deeply troubling scene—meant, I believe, to echo Rheya's abortion. It certainly feels like a cold, deliberate rejection of life. From this point, the narrative becomes even more bizarre in ways better left unsaid here.

As does Lem's novel, the film raises some difficult, if traditional, questions. Do we really know the people we care for? When we fall in love, do we devote ourselves to our partner on her own terms, or are we too solipsistic to go beyond our projection of what we want her to be? (The planet's name is not idly chosen.) These are fine questions to raise, but, unlike the novel and Tarkovsky's film, Soderbergh has decided not to go beyond them. For Lem, Kelvin's manufactured Rheya was just one more instance of our solipsism. As another character puts it, the astronauts are converting space itself into a mirror of their expectations. Leaving this out, Soderbergh also leaves out



Solaris

Produced by James Cameron
and 20th Century Fox
Directed by Steven Soderbergh
Screenplay by Steven Soderbergh
from Stanislaw Lem's novel
Distributed by 20th Century Fox

Adaptation

Produced by Propaganda Films
Directed by Spike Jonze
Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman
and Donald Kaufman from
The Orchid Thief by Susan Orlean
Distributed by Columbia Pictures

most of Lem's metaphysical meditation on our species' place in the universe. While philosophical speculation is not the most cinematic of subjects, it is, nevertheless, what gives the earlier works their heft. By comparison, Soderbergh's film seems thin. It resembles a slightly more sophisticated remake of *Between Two Worlds* (1944), in which John Garfield, Eleanor Parker, and Sydney Greenstreet found themselves unaccountably aboard a ship making calls at otherworldly ports, such as Heaven and Hell.

Solipsism is also at issue in *Adaptation*, the second movie by director Spike Jonze (née Steven Spiegle) and writer Charlie Kaufman, after achieving success with *Being John Malkovich*.

Watching *Adaptation*, I was reminded of Helen Vendler's caution regarding Yale's literary champ, Harold Bloom. Exasperated by Bloom's tireless self-promotion, she declared that he gave brilliance a bad name. Substitute *cleverness* for *brilliance*, and Vendler's jibe applies with equal warrant to Kaufman and Jonze. These two are endlessly clever in their