

by George McCartney

Plymouth Rocked

Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* and Paul Schrader's *Auto Focus* would make a perfect double feature. They are two sides of the same dour coin. Each, in its own way, exhibits America's puritanical response to unruly sexual impulses. While *Far From Heaven* genteelly lectures us on the tortures of repressed libido in the 1950's, *Auto Focus* scolds the 1970's libertines who traded in their parents' inhibitions for a full-throttled pursuit of indiscriminate sex. Cole Porter got it right in "Anything Goes," when he blithely summed up the extremes of American moralism and licentiousness:

Times have changed
Since the Puritans got a shock
When they landed on Plymouth
Rock.
If today
Any shock they should try to stem
'Stead of landing on Plymouth
Rock,
Plymouth Rock would land on
them.

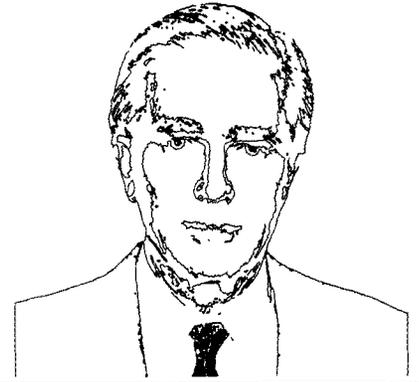
Though Porter wrote this in 1934, his words apply perfectly to the sexual sea change Americans navigated from the 50's to the 70's, a passage during which libertinism seemed to crush propriety. But here is the joke: The 70's were just as morally prescriptive concerning sex as were the 50's. If Ike's America demanded chastity and fidelity as the passports to success, Jimmy "I've-lusted-in-my-heart" Carter presided over an ethos equally hortatory: Thou shall not stifle impulse, however stray or fleeting.

Fashionable critics have gone gaga over *Far From Heaven*, a highly polished, thoroughly knowing soap opera about WASP mores in 1957 America. They have hailed it as an updated version of director Douglas Sirk's 50's sudgers, complete with what film exegetes claim was the German emigré's taste for subversive subtexts. As the line goes: Sirk carefully designed his "women's pictures" such as *All That Heaven Allows* to satisfy both America's naive masses and her discriminating intellectuals. The former could have a good cry; the latter could enjoy how he warped melodramatic conven-

tions to satirize America's sterile, inane culture. Haynes does the same thing in *Far From Heaven*. In some ways, he succeeds. There are moments that remind you of John Cheever's better satires on the hypocrisy that once underwrote WASP complacency.

Far From Heaven revolves around Cathy (Julianne Moore), wife of Frank Whitaker (Dennis Quaid), a successful executive in Hartford, Connecticut. In an early scene, we find her being interviewed by the local newspaperwoman, who plans to feature Cathy as an example of the successful American housewife. Cathy is too naive to see through the smarmy journalist, who would gladly tear her apart should she ever step out of line. And step out of line she does, propelled into another, unimaginable world by the discovery of her husband's homosexuality. Contrite, Frank tries to explain himself by referring to "problems in the past" that have come back. In the next scene, they visit a psychiatrist who tells Frank that there's "a scant five- to thirty-percent chance" of his ever achieving "full conversion to heterosexuality." Frank manfully responds, "I'm going to beat this thing." It's just another executive decision.

This would seem plot issue enough to carry the film; Haynes, however, has another round in his chamber: racism, 50's-style. When Raymond, the Whitakers' African-American gardener, finds Cathy crying among the shrubs, he offers her consolation. To her surprise, she finds she can talk to him easily. By chance, they meet again at a gallery showing of modern art. As they stand before a Miro canvas, she admits she does not know much about art, yet she feels a strong emotional response to the painting. Raymond gently corrects her mispronunciation by repeating Miro's name and says that her response confirms his opinion that "modern art has taken up where religious art left off," discarding all but the spiritual essentials. While it is perfectly plausible that a black in 1957 would have an interest in art and even have picked up such a canned appreciation of Miro, it hardly seems credible that he would be a gardener living in Hartford. Raymond's



Far From Heaven

Produced by Clear Blue Sky Productions
Written and Directed by Todd Haynes
Distributed by Focus Features
and USA Films

Auto Focus

Produced by Propaganda Films
Directed by Paul Schrader
Screenplay by Michael Gerbosi
from Robert Graysmith's book
Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics

character reveals the film's fatal condescension. He is the noble Negro so dear to mid-20th-century white sentimentality. Even when the disconsolate Cathy goes with him to a black bar, he never once makes a pass at her. When she asks him to dance, he holds her at a chaste distance. More jarring still is Raymond's lack of circumspection. Would a black laborer, especially one as bright as Raymond, believe that he could publicly escort a WASP matron about 1950's Hartford with impunity? As one of the black patrons in the bar cries out, "What you think you doing, boy?"

Haynes' determination to satirize America is laughably contrived. Of course, some would say he is paying homage to Sirk, going over the top to underscore his criticism. At least he does not settle for sniggering caricatures. Despite the script's missteps, Cathy's awakening is credible. Moore makes you understand how a woman of her position could be so derailed from her certain certainties that she might well look for solace wherever she could find it, however socially unapproved.

As the miserable closet case, Dennis

Quaid gives a strong—if one-note—performance. He plays Frank with an unrelievedly clenched face, its every muscle dedicated to holding back his self-loathing. But when he goes on to say that homosexuality “must be a sickness because I feel so despicable afterward,” many in the Manhattan theater in which I saw the film snickered. Haynes does not mock Frank’s sentiment in any obvious way, but given the current wisdom concerning homosexuality, the knowing could hardly be expected to restrain themselves. After all, didn’t the American Psychiatric Association declare that homosexuality ceased to be abnormal in 1973? I make no claim to understand homosexuality, but wouldn’t it be better for a man in Frank’s position—a husband and father of two children—to outgrow his homoerotic obsession? Homosexuality has always been a small part of the human condition. Other societies, however, have managed to contrive matters so that it is possible to pass through a homosexual phase and graduate, so to speak, to an interest in the opposite sex. But this requires a frank acknowledgment that sex can easily make fools of us all, especially when we lose sight of its procreative purpose. The humorless puritanical strain in America freezes individuals into one sexual category, instead of allowing for growth. Homosexuals used to be perverts; today, they are saints and martyrs. Either dispensation stifles true self-recognition and, with it, the possibility of change.

The Whitakers’ problem is certainly a fit subject for dramatization, but it is too complex to be dealt with so single-mindedly. Even D.H. Lawrence faltered when he gave Lady Chatterly a manly gardener to compensate for her impotent husband. Like Lawrence, Haynes wants to engineer our emotions with clichés. It didn’t work then, and it doesn’t work now.

Auto Focus shows us what happened when Cole Porter’s rock smashed our inhibitions. By 1970, it was cool to be openly promiscuous. Recreational sex was the order of the day among would-be sophisticates. Those unwilling to sacrifice their dignity and responsibilities to the new hedonism were openly mocked for being uptight, the hip term for “repressed.” The focus was auto, indeed.

Schrader uses the story of Bob Crane, the third-rate actor who starred in TV’s *Hogan’s Heroes*, to render the 70’s moment. Crane, played by Greg Kinnear, had the misfortune of achieving his mod-

icum of celebrity just as the Playboy philosophy reached its apogee. He turned his shabby glamour to account by following Hugh Hefner’s advice: *There is an endless supply of stupid women out there, and there’s no reason you shouldn’t have your share.* Crane’s share was inordinate even by Hollywood standards, and he was dumb enough to videotape his encounters. (They could hardly be called “amours”; his women were little more than sexual props.) As Schrader has it, Crane was more interested in his homemade videos than in the encounters themselves. His compulsion lost him two wives and left his children thoroughly unmoored. Yet he rarely looked back. When he did, he spent less time on remorse than on self-justification. In one scene, he surprises his teenage son by picking him up after school. As the boy takes leave of his girlfriend to join his long-absent father, Crane embarrasses him by remarking on how “well built” she is. He then waxes Socratic, asking the boy what *orange* is. Perplexed, the boy says he doesn’t know. The ever-chipper Crane replies, “That’s it. You just take it for granted.”

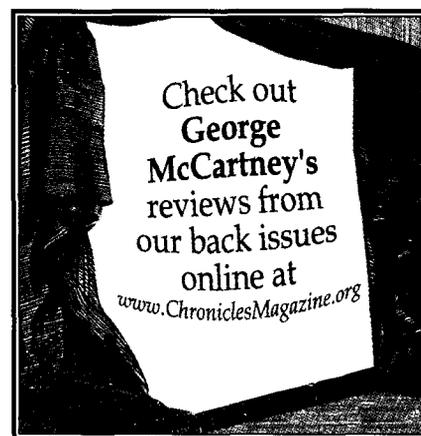
Crane certainly took his proclivities for granted. When warned that he has developed an image problem, he is nonplussed. Even the Hollywood industry that has tirelessly promoted sexual abandon as the *summum bonum* came to view Crane as unemployable. He had been photographed playing drums in a strip club, and he hadn’t kept his library of homemade porn a secret. Were this to be publicly exposed, there would be no telling what it would do to box-office receipts. Confronted by this issue, Crane looks puzzled. “I’m normal,” he declares. “Sex is healthy.”

If we can believe Schrader’s account, Crane was a moral imbecile wholly incapable of self-reflection. As such, he was easy prey for a variety of schemers, especially his supposed friend John Carpenter (Willem Dafoe), who played Svengali to Crane’s boy-in-babeland naiveté. Carpenter was a video technician whose expertise, in the days before VHS cameras and VCRs, was indispensable to fulfilling Crane’s need to see himself perform. The two men developed a symbiotic relationship. Crane was the bimbo bait; Carpenter, the visual diarist of their joint escapades. But there was more to it than that. Schrader’s Carpenter is as attracted to Crane as he is to their shared bimbos. Schrader plausibly interprets their mutu-

al womanizing as covert homosexuality. Unlike Carpenter, however, Crane was too self-obsessed to recognize their relationship for what it was.

Some have faulted *Auto Focus* for telling the story of a profoundly uninteresting person. This criticism misses the point. For Schrader, Crane is representative, not anomalous. There were legions of others as indiscriminately priapic—and not only in his industry, although Hollywood was and still is a powerful enabler of his kind of heedlessness. Of greater interest is how, since the 60’s, our popular culture has transformed what used to be called illicit sex into a nearly moral imperative. This has been the American way ever since the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock: If we’re doing it, it must be right, or we wouldn’t be doing it. That is the tautology of the self-righteous who cannot bear to think of themselves as the poor, besotted sinners they are—that we all are.

Schrader himself does not escape this charge, and that is why I cannot recommend his film. As in so many of his projects, he is once again fascinated by the ravages that sexual license can inflict on people. But his fascination leads him to become what he beholds—a prurient purveyor of sexual misconduct. So he makes us witness an endless stream of naked bodies simulating the permutations of sexual activity. Of course, Schrader self-righteously stages these sequences to make them seem as ungainly and joyless as possible; nevertheless, they are a species of the pornography he claims to be condemning. He has the equation wrong. A few suggestions would be enough to dramatize the sexual compulsion; it’s the psychological question underlying it that needs to be raised: Why have so many so easily surrendered to our commercial culture’s amoral and tawdry commodification of sex? <C>



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Elk Hunting in High Heels

"Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." Having slept on the hard ground in single-digit Fahrenheit temperatures, tramped all day through a snowstorm at 11,000 feet of elevation against a 40-mile-an-hour wind with a 20-pound survival pack and a seven-pound rifle on your back, and ridden horseback by night out of the mountains, saddle-stiff and numb with cold, behind a dying flashlight, it's easy to forget an underprivileged soul whose experience in life has been restricted to directing the publicity department of her father's New York publishing house and helping manage the Conservative Book Club for years.

Not that I'm ever tempted to criticize Maureen, who's been a brick all summer: allowing herself to be dragged—twice—to the bottom of Nine Mile Canyon over in Utah, up the slopes of Sheep Mountain west of Laramie, and boosted onto the back of the green-broke stallion I was nervous about mounting myself. Even so, I was astonished, as well as pleased, when Maureen announced that she wished to go along to elk camp in October.

"You really want to go hunting with me? You're *sure*?"

"I'm sure."

"It's going to be cold at night."

"I know it. My nephew Danny offered to let me borrow his sleeping bag. He said the last time he went camping everyone was cold, except for him."

"We can only use the one horse this year, so you'll have to ride her. I'll be on foot, carrying my big pack."

"I don't mind, so long as you're also leading her."

"It's snowed hard in the mountains already. We're likely to get stuck pulling the trailer back in there."

"I can handle it. I've been fourwheeling before."

"You've been *fourwheeling*?"

"With some of the guys from the office. We went up in the hills behind Ft. Collins. They call it 'Fourwheeling in high heels.'"

"All right," I agreed, "you can come, if you really want to. I just have no idea why you want to."

"Because," Maureen said, "I want to learn why it is you enjoy it so much."

I spent three evenings lining out gear and supplies in the reloading room down cellar before Maureen arrived on the last night with her own equipment.

"There, that's all I'm taking," she said proudly, dropping everything on the concrete floor. "I can bring my pillow with me, can't I?"

"No. You can't take your pillow."

"But I can't *sleep* without a pillow!" Maureen cried.

"The sleeping bag has its own pillow. That frilly thing of yours would take up half the horse pack. What's in the glass jar? It must weigh two-and-a-half pounds if it weighs an ounce."

"It's strawberry jam, for our tea time," she explained.

"Well, put a few spoonsful into a zip-lock bag. I'll carry it in the top of my pack along with the crackers. And decant the wine from that magnum into those two Nalgene bottles, please."

"At least I get to take my makeup kit," Maureen sighed, tucking what looked like a small vanity case in among her clothes and the stowed tent.

The jeep trail wound through streaks and patches of windswept snow across Libby Flats, among stands of pine and rocky tors breaking from the tawny meadow. Plunging and bucking in the ruts and flooded potholes, the horse trailer fishtailed behind the truck as it plowed forward slowly in four-wheel drive through mud and rotting ice. Maureen, bracing herself against the door, looked serene. Instead of high heels, she had on the hiking shoes we'd bought her at the REI store in Ft. Collins the previous spring. Beyond the mud lay exposed rock, drag-on teeth of quartzite tearing at the rig's eight tires. Beside an evaporated alpine pond, I turned the truck from the stony track and parked on an expanse of pale soft grass.

"Better safe than sorry, with just the two spares along," I suggested. "It's only a mile on to camp, anyhow."

I pulled the mare from the trailer by her tail and snubbed her tight to saddle and load her. Maureen, looking less serene, helped.



"You can always walk, if you like," I told her. "But we do need someone up there to keep the saddle and pack from slipping."

"I'll ride," she said bravely, turning the stirrup as I'd showed her and taking hold of the horn and cantle to pull herself up. Astride the horse, looking out from under the brim of her leopard-skin cowboy hat, Maureen was unrecognizable by anyone from the *National Review* 40th Anniversary or New York Conservative Party dinners.

I strapped on my own pack and took hold of the lead rope, and we started down the rocky trail as it dropped off the flats into the South Fork of French Creek, the mare sliding a little in the mud between the stones and bobbing her head slightly, as if to say that this was none of her idea. Maureen, if she agreed, didn't show it.

We reached camp half an hour later, tied the horse to a young fir tree, and drew the saddle and pack off.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" I asked.

"Of everything we've done together this year," Maureen said, "riding a horse is the only one I don't think I'll ever get used to."

There was snow under the trees where I'd wanted to put the tent, out of sight of the high elk pasture across the drainage. Using the edge of my boot sole, I cleared away the stale droppings from the grass behind the trees, and we spread the ground cloth and raised the tent on it. (A woman needs to feel she has a home she can call her own.) When the tent was up, we looked round for a suitable spot to build a campfire and discovered a deep hole, surrounded by a low bank of earth, in the bottom of a small gulley: a natural kitchen and dining area Martha Stewart would have died for.

"And now it's time for the evening hunt," I said. "Do you want to stay here in camp