

organizations controlled by Likud supporters such as CAMERA (the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America), COMA (the Committee on Media Accountability), and FLAME (Facts and Logic About the Middle East) has been formed in recent years specifically to combat “anti-Israeli bias” in the American press. These and other groups inundate American news organizations with letters to the editor demanding “balanced” coverage and threatening boycotts of “hostile” media organizations and writers. Recently, when New York University professor Tony Judt proposed in the *New York Review of Books* a “one state” solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict that was not very different in its outlines from the one Benvenisti had discussed in *Ha’aretz*, he was branded as an enemy of the Jewish people by neoconservative writers, and the magazine received hundreds of angry letters from readers canceling their subscriptions. (The only sympathetic letter to the editor came from Amos Elon, a columnist for *Ha’aretz*.)

For many American Jewish and non-Jewish supporters of Israel, the problem is not really the existence of an “anti-Israeli” press in the United States. Comparing the daily coverage of the Middle East by leading European newspapers with that of the American press (say, the *Independent* versus the *New York Times*), it becomes quite obvious that American media outlets have been less inclined to focus on Israeli mistreatment of the Palestinians than their European counterparts have been — or, for that matter, than *Ha’aretz* and the rest of the Israeli press have been. Indeed, for many of the critics of the “anti-Israeli” press in the United States, it has all been a classic case of “killing the messenger.” As part of an effort to preserve a fantasy about how they want the Jewish state to be, they reject, discredit, or refuse to deal with depictions of an Israel whose policies contradict their own cherished political values.

Social scientists call the condition that results from perceiving discrepancies between the image and the reality of an admired figure “cognitive dissonance.” When a beloved political leader is accused of immoral personal behavior or political corruption, the immediate tendency of his admirer is not to withdraw his support but to question the reliability of the news medium or of the journalists who reported the story or the credibility of the report’s source. He may even avoid reading or listening to any information

that suggests the idol is less than perfect.

There are, of course, limits to such exercises in avoiding reality, as when, for example, the crimes of the leader become so obvious that they lead to his resignation. These developments can be very traumatic for the true believer, which explains why some supporters of the Communist Party in the West suffered mental breakdowns or committed suicide after the extent of Stalin’s horrors became obvious in the early 1950’s.

Israel has had the potential to produce serious cognitive dissonance in its supporters in this country. Members of the Jewish community in America have been in the forefront of such liberal causes as the struggle for civil and human rights, the separation of Church and state, and free immigration to the United States. They would have been the first to protest any move to impose Christianity as a state religion in America, to pass a “law of return” limiting immigration to white Christians, or to force citizens to carry identity cards indicating their religion or ethnic origin. Those same American Jews, however, support a state that applies these and other discriminatory policies in its treatment of Christian and Muslim Arab citizens. Similarly, many of the American Jews who led the fight against American intervention in Vietnam ignore or defend the long and bloody Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

How have most supporters of Israel in the United States avoided dealing with their own political inconsistencies? The answer lies in their image-maintenance methods designed to avoid the cognitive dissonance between their perceptions of Israel and its reality. That and an American media that, for many years, sympathized with the Israeli point of view have helped them to preserve the Israeli fantasy for a while. Until the 1967 Middle East war, memories of the European holocaust and an Israeli political elite steeped in the effective use of public relations produced “Exodus”-like images of the Jewish state in this country. Discrimination against the Arab population, the theocratic nature of the Israeli political system, and adventurist and militaristic Israeli policies received little attention from the American press, though they were the subject of lively public debate in Israel. As a result, American Jews did not have to reconcile their liberal personal agendas with the realization that Israel was not a progressive paradise in the Middle East. Contradictory facts were

not permitted to interfere with an idealized view of the Jewish state.

Developments since the 1967 war, however, and especially the policies pursued by the nationalistic and messianic leadership that came to power in 1977, posed major psychological problems for many supporters of Israel. Television-news images and print-media reports confronted them with the realities of Israeli suppression of Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and the increasing power of the Orthodox Israeli political parties. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the two Palestinian uprisings have aggravated the tensions between the liberal instincts of Israel’s Jewish-American supporters and their backing for an Israeli government pursuing nationalist and expansionist policies. Even the most ardent supporters of the Jewish state were shocked by the bloody scenes from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, a direct outcome of Likud policies.

Questioning the credibility of news reports from the Middle East has been one of the major tools of American Jews trying to cope with the continuing cognitive dissonance. I am amazed sometimes that, even in this age of the internet, with *Ha’aretz* and other Israeli newspapers maintaining English-language websites and cable news networks broadcasting around the clock, for many American Jews (and for many Christian evangelicals), Israel still remains a fantasy — and they would like to keep it that way.

Leon T. Hadar is the former New York correspondent for the Jerusalem Post and the author of Quagmire: America in the Middle East.

INTELLIGENCE

Who Was Watching the Watchers?

by Margie Burns

One cannot reasonably assume that the attacks of September 11, 2001, were a seamless conspiracy. Even a successful plot is not a well-oiled machine, and, whatever the plotting behind the scenes, as Shakespeareans say about *Romeo and Juliet*, the skyjackings of September 11 were, in some ways, tragedy snatched from the jaws of comedy.

Take, for example, the suspects' numerous plane and road trips before they convened aboard the vessels they used for their attacks. Alleged ringleader Muhammad Atta and Abdulaziz Al-Omari arrived at Boston's Logan International Airport, where two of the jumbo jets were hijacked, on a flight from Portland, Maine, the morning of September 11. For reasons unknown, Atta had driven from Boston to Portland the previous afternoon, before flying back, cutting his connection so close that his baggage missed the flight.

The skyjackers had already shuttled between Florida and Baltimore, California and Baltimore, Maryland and Florida, New Jersey and Maryland, Florida and New Jersey, *etc.*, within the previous 18 days. Why? As any old OSS hand would anticipate, their moving around made them visible.

Every move, every stop, increased their chances of being seen or accosted. According to the FBI, during their one evening in Portland, Atta and Al-Omari registered at a Comfort Inn; were seen at a Pizza Hut, a gas station, and a Wal-Mart; and were photographed by surveillance cameras at a restaurant and at least one ATM. Their Massachusetts rental car was also caught on camera, including its license plate. They checked out of the Comfort Inn about 5:30 the next morning and, within 30 minutes, were aboard a Colgan Air flight back to Boston, after being filmed again going through airport security in Portland. Short of waving their arms and yelling, "Here we are," they could hardly have presented more opportunities for vigilance. The hijackers did, however, manage to bypass security and avoid being photographed at Dulles.

What was the point of all this last-minute skipping around? If it makes any sense, it gave their watchers time and opportunity to note problems, to wave a hand frantically (so to speak), and to call the whole thing off.

In addition, it is worth considering the many international and domestic trips that the skyjackers took before summer 2001, particularly the numerous trips they took from May to August 2001, a period described by investigators as a "spike" in "chatter" and a rising "threat level" for those monitoring terrorism.

At least five of the September 11 suspects visited Las Vegas several times between May and August 2001. At least one suspect from each of the four hijacked planes stayed in Las Vegas. Suspected

ringleader Muhammad Atta checked in to a Vegas hotel on June 29, checked out on July 1, and returned on August 13. Marwan Al-Shehhi, Hani Hanjour, Nawaf Al-Hazmi, and Ziad Jarrah all traveled there at least once. Altogether, the hijackers made at least six trips to Vegas.

Yet, a few days after September 11, 31 passengers were allowed to fly out of Las Vegas, including one named Al-Hazmi. Four manifests from these flights have been released by Craig Unger, author of the best-seller *House of Bush, House of Saud*.

A September 13 flight from Lexington, Kentucky, to London carried 15 passengers, including 8 Saudis; a flight from Las Vegas to Switzerland the next day carried 7 Saudis; a "VIP flight" from New York to Paris on September 22 carried 12 passengers, including 4 Saudis; and another Las Vegas-to-Paris VIP flight on September 24 carried 24 passengers, including 11 Saudis. Some who jetted away would have been "persons of interest" in any traditional investigation, and others had round-the-clock knowledge of them.

If Saudi royals and other Muslims feared reprisals and were allowed to leave for their personal safety, how could that rationale have applied to British citizens Jack Rusbridge and Anthony John Stafford, on the flight out of Lexington, or to U.S. citizen Dean Earl Knecht, on the Vegas-Paris flight? Assuming that diplomatic immunity covers the 20,000-member Saud family, does it also cover Saud family employees of other nationalities, including British and American? Why was a CEO of a Middle Eastern bank flown out, given the importance of the "money trail" in investigating terrorism? If allowing the Saudis' servants out of the country was an humanitarian gesture, why was an award-winning Egyptian physicist also aboard? Some family members of September 11 victims, through the Family Steering Committee, have also asked why Saudi royals and others were permitted to fly in commercial airspace, when victims' relatives were not given that permission.

What were the Saudi royals and the others doing in Las Vegas? When did they go to Las Vegas, and how long were they there? Given that any extra movement increased their chances of getting caught, what reason could the hijackers have had for trips to Vegas in the first place other than to rendezvous with authorities? Is it likely that five skyjackers, including the devout Atta, went to Vegas, separately and together at different times, only to fit in a little gambling?

Back to the morning of September 11: Having boarded their planes, the skyjackers faced flight delays on each aircraft. American Airlines Flight 11 took off 14 minutes late (7:59 A.M.); United Flight 175 took off 16 minutes late (8:14); American Airlines Flight 77 left Dulles 10 minutes late (8:20); and United Flight 93 left Newark 41 minutes late (8:42). Junctures for intervention continued to open up. Two flight attendants on Flight 11, Betty Ong and Amy Sweeney, independently phoned American Airlines (8:21) and said that the plane was being hijacked. Heroically, they continued to narrate the situation by phone for 25 minutes, until the plane crashed. From 8:24 to 8:38, pilot John Ogonowski periodically activated cockpit speakers, allowing Boston flight controllers to hear the hijacking. In fact, there was so much unscripted telephoning that passengers on Flight 93 deduced what was taking place and successfully downed their plane, directly or indirectly, before it reached its target.

Unfortunately, there were puzzling delays in notifying the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and flight-control centers about the hijackings. Once NORAD had been notified, further missteps slowed the scrambling of fighter jets. A "Vigilant Guardian exercise" on that date is credited for increasing air readiness, but other reports suggest that some personnel mistook alarm messages for part of the exercise.

The Pentagon has not stated how many people knew about the "Vigilant Guardian exercise" beforehand and still has not revealed the identities of hijackers who received flight training on U.S. military bases. Military service usually involves giving up a degree of privacy, including vital statistics—height, weight, blood type, *etc.* Surely any information collected on the suspects might help other investigators, but the White House is not forcing the Pentagon to disclose it. Instead, the investigations of nominally independent September 11 Commission are being impeded at every juncture by the White House.

This is not a politically astute move by the Bush administration, which is opening itself up to the most devastating of arguments: Why, Mr. President, are you covering up September 11, even while sending our young people out to die, ostensibly in response to it?

Margie Burns is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

Caution: Allegory Ahead

Allegory is a tricky undertaking. Its practitioners must conceal at first what they mean to reveal at last. If their story is too obvious, their audience is deprived of the pleasure of discovery. If too cryptic, its design may disappear beneath the surface of its plot. Striking the balance is everything, as demonstrated by the two films under review this month.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind was scripted by Charlie Kaufman, who is currently America's allegorist extraordinaire, a status he earned with *Being John Malkovich* in 1999. Conceived by Kaufman and directed by Spike Jonze, *Malkovich* is an exceedingly clever, if finally lightweight, meditation on the withering of personal identity in the age of celebrity worship. Teaming with Jonze once more in 2001, Kaufman wrote *Adaptation*, consolidating his fame among the cognoscenti with a skillfully deployed postmodern conceit. He inserted himself as a character into the film, which was supposed to be an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, Susan Orlean's study of the floral species' adaptive capabilities. Kaufman wittily fused horticultural with cinematic adaptation, producing a hybrid of adaptive self-indulgence.

There is a problem with these and Kaufman's other films, however: They are amusing intellectual performances that leave you feeling conned. As you depart the theater, you cannot help suspecting Kaufman has been fooling with your sympathies for no better purpose than to plume his own sense of superiority. *Eternal Sunshine*, however, takes a new tack. Kaufman has checked his wise-guy gamesmanship in order to take on a theme of genuine consequence. Forced to guess, I would say that he has dropped his ironic postmodernism to develop some autobiographical concerns. The results are at once humorous and bracing.

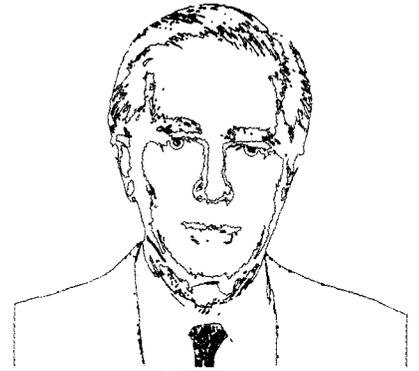
Directed by erstwhile commercial-maker Michel Gondry, the film flashily probes the central problem of all human relationships: our inability to break out of the prison of our self-infatuation, a circumstance dear to Kaufman's self-regarding heart. Each of us is locked inside his own mind, the story suggests, a penal state

that causes us to misread other people, often disastrously, especially when our romantic longings are engaged. Under the sway of Venus, the loved one too often becomes the slate on which we inscribe our short-winded fantasies, only to be disillusioned when they run out of breath.

Kaufman has taken his title from Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," a poem that recounts the tale of the famous 12th-century lovers who allowed their feckless passion to swamp their judgment. This allusion aptly fits Kaufman's story of a would-be remedy for love gone wrong. Pope's Eloisa is a tormented woman. At once remorseful and rebellious, she can neither escape her guilt nor forget the joy that caused it. This leads her to long for a state of perfect innocence:

How happy is the blameless vestal's lot!
The world forgetting, by the world forgot.
Eternal sunshine of the spotless mind!

This is the warrant for Kaufman's central conceit, an artful bit of science-fiction gimmickry. A small company, aptly named Lacuna and run by a Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), can erase the spots of unwanted memories from the suffering mind. Given our culture's inane determination to make so mercurial a state as romance life's *summum bonum*, Lacuna's trade is never so brisk as at the approach of Saint Valentine's Day. The more intensely romance is celebrated, the greater the need to forget it when the flowers wilt and the chocolate melts. This is a proposition with which Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet) brokenheartedly agrees. She is so fed up with her dear but drippy boyfriend, Joel Barish (Jim Carrey), that she has Lacuna rinse him from her mind. Unlike Pope's Eloisa, however, she is not exactly hankering for innocence; she just wants to forget the lackluster Barish, the sorry cause of her regrets, so she can move on to her next swain unencumbered. What better allegory for the modern insistence that relationships should be no-fault and hassle-free?



Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Directed by Michel Gondry
Screenplay by Charlie Kaufman
Distributed by Focus Features

The Return (Vozvrashcheniye)

Produced by Ren Film
Directed by Andrei Zvyagintsev
Screenplay by Vladimir Moiseyenko
and Aleksandr Novototsky
Distributed by Kino International

When Joel discovers Clementine's high-tech perfidy, he angrily elects to undergo the same procedure. Trouble arises, however, when the erasure of his memory is compromised by the curious forgetfulness of Dr. Mierzwiak's staff. The results of this malpractice give Kaufman an allegorical pass to explore how we routinely fail to understand one another, to our emotional and spiritual detriment.

All this is told in a fractured narrative that skittles back and forth across time and space as we enter into Joel's mind, prepared for erasure by Lacuna's patented medications. As Dr. Mierzwiak explores his memories, looking for traces of Clementine to eliminate, Joel begins to resist. He does not want to forget her after all. To fight the procedure, he hides himself in the most private precincts of his memory: an impulsive trip to Montauk Point on a frigid February morning; the time, as a four-year-old, he tried to hide under the kitchen table; the night his mother caught him in his adolescent bed with a naughty magazine. As he flees to these secret memories, he takes his imagined Clementine with him on an inner journey of discovery that may or may not change his life and his feelings for the real Clementine. The film is at its