

Shaming

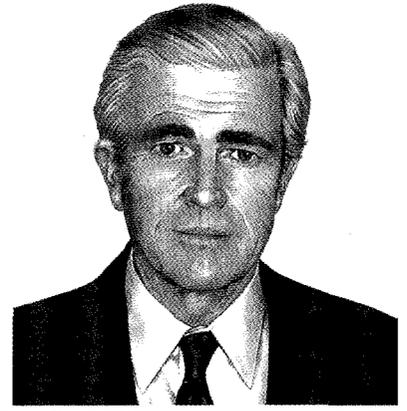
Thirty-five years ago, the Supreme Court discovered the constitutional right to abortion. Unbeknownst to earlier generations, it was hiding out in the 14th Amendment's implied right to privacy. Since its discovery, this right has been exercised over 50 million times. That's a lot of carnage in the name of privacy. Not surprisingly, Americans have come to question the moral cost of killing the unborn. The number of abortions performed in this country has been falling slowly but steadily. There's been a 25-percent drop since 1990.

Quick to capitalize on the public's change of heart, Hollywood has inaugurated what seems to be an anti-abortion boomlet this year. In director Judd Apatow's *Knocked Up*, a gorgeous TV newscaster played by Katherine Heigl foolishly—and, I might add, improbably—gets drunk one night and recklessly picks up a hapless schlub played by the undeniably typecast Seth Rogen. She then takes him home and allows him to impregnate her. Abortion would be the approved solution for such a hideous *faux pas*, but not for this babe. She doesn't once consider getting rid of the baby, even when she learns how feckless a loser Rogen is. He fancies himself an entrepreneur, having mounted a website that informs its subscribers which recent films display the breasts of popular actresses—surely a supererogatory exercise, given that today's movies are batting nearly a thousand on the mammary scoreboard. She is nevertheless determined to have her baby, although doing so will put her glamorous broadcast job at risk, to say nothing of her reputation for good judgment. Of course, this being a Hollywood story, the growing evidence of her condition actually boosts her ratings. Americans are so understanding.

In *Juno*, we have another pregnant young lady, this one only 16. She, too,

elects to have the baby she carelessly and quite unromantically conceived. Juno (spunky Ellen Page) was bored one afternoon and decided to lose her virginity courtesy of a very surprised classmate, a nerdy kid whom she likes but, she's quick to add, is *not* her boyfriend. Finding herself gravid two months later, she decides to “nip it in the bud” and heads for her local abortion clinic, Woman Now. But before she can get through the door, she meets a classmate picketing against infant slaughter and learns that, at two months, a child *in utero* already has fingernails. This bit of biological reality clutches her heart, and she flees the abortuary. She'll have her baby and give it up for adoption. This, of course, means telling her parents. Her father is nonplussed. “I always thought of you as a girl who knew when to say enough,” he sighs, adding that he'd prefer her to have been nabbed for hard drugs or driving while intoxicated.

Juno soon finds a childless couple advertising in the *Penny Saver*—where else?—for a girl in just her predicament. They turn out to be upscale yuppies living in a planned community where everyone has a three-car garage and four bathrooms. Perfect. In no time at all, Juno, her father, the couple, and their attorney are negotiating a contract. Does she want an open or closed adoption? Having no idea what the question means, Juno replies in teenspeak, “I'm just gonna, ya know, squeeze it out and hand it over to you.” She'd like to “kick this old school.” Her response is supposed to be winningly cute, but I'm afraid I found it quite charmless, not to mention unbelievable. The film wants us to accept Juno as an irrepressible life force who, in her own words, is “doing things way above my maturity level.” I can't help thinking that most responsible parents in the audience will find her an unbearably



Knocked Up

Produced and distributed
by Universal Pictures
Directed and written by Judd Apatow

Juno

Produced and distributed by
Fox Searchlight Pictures
Directed by Jason Reitman
Screenplay by Diablo Cody

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days

Produced by Mobra Films
Directed and written
by Cristian Mungiu
Distributed by IFC Films

spoiled brat in need of an old-school walloping.

I suppose there is reason to rejoice that these films aimed at a young audience dramatize alternatives to abortion. How far we've come from 1973, when *Maude*, a popular sitcom of the day, could get a laugh by having its heroine quip that her scheduled abortion was of no more consequence than having a tooth extracted. Still, I'm not entirely reassured. Both young ladies are too sunny, too self-confident to be believable as first-time mothers with no reliable support to help them bring their children into the world. True, both start screaming when their respective labors begin, but their agonies are kept brief and audience-friendly. They serve as little more than comic relief, giving the women an opportunity finally to screech unbecomingly to their fear, anger, and humiliation unchecked by feminine politeness. This is odd, since

both films make a point of supporting the cause of women's dignity. But we're not to fret. Heigl has her baby and finds her schlub impregnator transformed into a dotting, eminently marriageable father. By Hollywood standards, *Juno* fares even better. Neither she nor her beau has to look at their progeny. The adoptive mother swoops in and whisks the kid away, leaving them free to pick up their adolescence once more without any aftereffects. No milk-engorged breasts, stretch marks, or postpartum depression for this spunky little girl. Pretending to take an honest look at the challenge of unwed pregnancy, both films lightly dismiss the physical and emotional inconveniences that inevitably accompany childbirth, especially of the unwed variety. The question of shame, for one glaring instance, barely raises its troubling head.

A few years ago, black journalist Stanley Crouch caught some flak for saying that, when he was growing up, unwed pregnancy was considered cause for shame in Harlem. One of the most potent barriers to black advancement, he went on, is that ghetto girls no longer feel this emotion when they swell with child. Liberals, of course, accused Crouch of being heartless, but, as usual, it was they who lacked both heart and understanding. Crouch was merely reaffirming what any reasonable adult should know: Shame is a powerful prophylactic against rash behaviors of all kinds and should be applied regularly to keep us all in check. True, it can be painful to bear, but better a few suffer its discomfort than many heedlessly obey their impulses, to their own and society's detriment. Crouch could have extended his jeremiad well beyond Harlem. With shame removed from the moral equation of unwed pregnancy, white America has been catching up with black bastardy. My fear is that movies such as *Knocked Up* and *Juno* will help promote the idea that pregnancy is an equal-opportunity sport to be pursued much as one might play lawn tennis without a net to ensure there will be no losers. The grim fact is that, by abandoning the

traditional rules of begetting, America has been breeding generations of innocent losers. They were once known as illegitimate children. This admittedly harsh designation for victims of adult irresponsibility once helped deter sexual carelessness.

For another consideration of unwed pregnancy, there's Rumanian director Cristian Mungiu's almost unbearably stark *4Months, 3Weeks and 2Days*. Here, we are well beyond shame. This film enters the realm of heart-freezing evil, refusing to gloss the consequences of sexual irresponsibility.

Mungiu tells his story with a minimum of fuss for a maximum of dismay. We are in Bucharest in the 1980's. Rumania is under the rule of Nicolae Ceausescu, who, reacting to his nation's declining birthrate, has made abortion not only illegal but punishable by up to ten years in jail. College student Gabita is willing to run the risk, albeit belatedly, now that she's been carrying her child for the duration announced so baldly by the film's title. At first, Mungiu seems to be encouraging us to take pity on the young lady, but, as the film proceeds, we learn that she is astonishingly adept at passive-aggressive manipulation. Behind her seeming doe-eyed innocence, she is a liar who thinks nothing of putting others at risk to save herself. She has enlisted her roommate, Otilia, to help her get rid of her inconvenient fetus. Otilia goes about the grim business, performing most of its incriminating tasks. When Gabita fails to reserve a hotel room for the abortion, Otilia must go herself, handing over her identity papers to the establishment's desk clerk while she is taped by a security camera. By the time Otilia has brought the abortionist to the hotel room, she has irretrievably implicated herself.

The abortionist turns out to be a ruthless predator. When he discovers Gabita's pregnancy is much more than two months along as she had originally claimed, he threatens to walk out.

Terminating a pregnancy beyond five months means he could be prosecuted for murder, he angrily explains, and he has no way of knowing how

advanced Gabita is. When the girls plead with him, he at first holds fast. Then, he reckons, "Everything has its price." The price, in this case, will be Otilia's honor.

In interviews, Mungiu has refused to reveal his position regarding abortion, but there is a good deal of internal evidence that strongly suggests that he is in favor of keeping the procedure legal in Rumania. At one point, Otilia reluctantly leaves Gabita in the hotel room awaiting the passing of her baby. Otilia's boyfriend has requested she make an appearance at his mother's birthday party. Mungiu films the event head on, with Otilia in the middle of a crowded frame as her boyfriend's family cheerfully celebrates the occasion. Although it is winter outside, the women begin talking about coloring Easter eggs. Otilia dully stares straight ahead. The mixture of home, religion, and fertility takes its toll on her. Alone with her boyfriend for a moment, she reveals what's troubling her and asks him what he would do if she became pregnant. He is dumbfounded at first and then tries to rescue himself and their relationship by saying that he would take care of her. When she presses him, he finally says with little enthusiasm that he would marry her. She gives him a withering look and leaves.

Mungiu may believe that a policy of legal abortion frees women from their shameful dependence on men, but, as D.H. Lawrence once said, trust the tale, not the teller. Mungiu's film presents its story with such a clinically disinterested air that one would have to be ideologically benighted not to see abortion's horribly shaming truth—which the director shows us uncompromisingly, fingernails and all. This film is not for the faint-hearted. As such, it is a much-needed corrective to the willed blindness of our terminally cheery society. ◊



by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

In the Looking Glass

The holidays were fast approaching, and, for the first time in his life, Héctor could find no joy in the prospect of the Christmas season. Homesick, guilt-ridden, pinched in his wallet by his irregular business schedule, and worn down by the rigors of patrol with the Critter Company, he felt physically and mentally exhausted. The lack of privacy afforded by the ranch house rubbed his nerves raw, as did his wife's nagging and his daughter's incessant vocalizing. AveMaría was insistent that the family begin attending services at the Assemblies of God church in Lordsburg, which meant a 160-mile round trip every Sunday. (She persisted even after he'd explained to her, patiently, that church on Sunday morning conflicted with his sworn duties as an active Critter in good standing.) And Contracepción, bored to distraction on the ranch, had recently conceived a burning ambition to become the new Britney Spears. ("I mean," Héctor overheard her explaining to her mother, "she's like, you know, so fat and pregnant and divorced and everything—it's time for her to move her lard butt over and let someone else have a turn, for a change!") In pursuit of the dream, she'd ordered all the Spears CDs from *Amazon.com* and begun singing along with Britney for three or four hours a day. Though he was too good a father to say so, her voice sounded to Héctor—who was the first to admit that, with the exception of Mexican Civil War *corridos*, he knew nothing about music—like a cat strangling on a hair ball. The sound had much the same effect on Beatriz Juárez, only more so. When Contracepción suggested to him that the Pink House might be interested in having her stage a concert there some evening, Héctor understood that the sins of the father were being visited, in spades and squarely, on the father.

As little as he understood himself,

Héctor understood Jacinta Ruiz even less. How could a nice girl like her chase after a man with a wife and two children? And what, really, did she want from him? True, he'd never mentioned in so many words he was married, but he was (if he did say so himself) a reasonably attractive man in the prime of life and therefore presumably attached, while she had to have noticed his wedding band. Perhaps Jacinta was what was called a skivvy—a word he'd heard in a movie set in England in the days of Queen Elizabeth I. Or perhaps, she was one of those women who couldn't control herself, like AveMaría's younger sister Carlotta, a hot number if he'd ever met one. (Luckily for him, Héctor reflected, AveMaría had got there first.) It could also be that she was simply an outrageous flirt. Then again—he had to be fair about this—Jacinta might simply be in love! For Héctor, a soft-hearted man when it came to the opposite sex in particular, this thought was particularly distressing. As a young buck back in Mexico, he'd always hated having to disappoint a woman.

He would never, never (Héctor assured himself) have crossed the threshold of the Pink House again after that devastating event in the shadows around the corner from the bar, had the Critter Company not adopted the place as its unofficial watering hole. Every Sunday now after exercises, the Critters gathered at the Pink House for beer and war stories, under the bemused gaze of the local clientele. Emboldened by training and the confidence inspired in its individual members under General Mitternacht's drilling, the Company had formed squads of three and four men each, any five of which were on posted duty twenty-four hours a day along the border between the Cedar and Potrillo Mountains. Already, Héctor had served two graveyard shifts with



Jesús "Eddie," after slipping miserably out from under the warm covers at a little before midnight. "If you ever wanted to fool around on me, *mi amor*," AveMaría murmured sleepily on the second occasion, "this would be, like, the perfect excuse." The valley north of Columbus and west of the Florida Mountains had in the past two years become a major corridor for northward migration, so that the Critter units always saw plenty of action, no matter the time of day. As they were not allowed to shoot anyone, and the Border Patrol preferred to devote its investigative resources to sightings by the Minutemen on duty in the same sector, there was little the Critters could do but shake their fists, make faces, and yell at the wire jumpers, though this at least gave them a feeling of doing something.

For Héctor, visits to the Pink House were occasions of ecstatic agony—or agonized ecstasy, he couldn't have said which. Weighed down by guilt, he felt himself simultaneously lighter than air, at once older than the hills and younger than a new-birthing star. Over and again, he asked himself whence came this passion he had for Jacinta Ruiz and when, without discovering an answer. It seemed rather to have taken hold of him by degrees and imperceptibly, in response to . . . Héctor wondered what. Had she sent the first, perhaps unconscious, signals to which he'd responded, or was it the other way round? Or had they met each other halfway? Héctor inclined toward the third proposition, perhaps because, in allowing him to regard himself as something less than a cal-