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**AMERICAN MOVIES
AND THEIR CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS
IN LITERARY TEXT**

Phebe Davidson

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**Preface:
Playing on the Other Side**

Josephine A. Koster

With my typewriter, the text is at a distance; it is visible and I can work with it. With the screen, it's different; one has to be inside; it is possible to play with it but only if one is on the other side, and immerses oneself in it.

—Jean Baudrillard

As I write this preface, Brian May's brilliant soundtrack to Alexandre Aja's debut feature-length film *Furia* is pulsing on the stereo; the screenplay to Kevin Smith's *Dogma* lies open on my table. The distance between these two films—one a passionate allegory of the silencing of postcolonial dissent in Algeria, the other the director's quirky "love letter to God" (00) and deconstruction of the nature of belief—is paralleled in *American Movies and Their Cultural Antecedents in Literary Text*, an eclectic and insightful look at the ways race, gender, and identity are handled (or mishandled) in American film. Aja, the French *enfant terrible* and son of famed French auteur Alexander Arkady, uses the story of two graffiti artists (Theo and Elia) and the government's persecution of them for writing and drawing anti-government themes on the walls of a conquered city to argue forcefully for the artist's right to total freedom of expression, despite the conventions and needs of the larger society. Smith, the Orson Welles of Red Bank New Jersey, equally as emphatically argues that

the ways we see our beliefs—whether they be about the forgiveness of sins or the gender and racial identities of God, Christ, and the original apostles—*must* be placed in a social frame and in the long track of history. That two films made by young, intelligent, talented directors in the same year can take such different stances tells us something of the conflicted and diverse views in modern cinema. Phebe Davidson in *Six Essays* probes deeper into that conflict.

Like Aja and Smith, Davidson's means of exploration are novel. This may be the first time in modern film criticism that *Calvin and Hobbes* has been used to interrogate Richard Donner's *Lethal Weapon* films and Fenimore Cooper's Chingachcook simultaneously. Davidson confesses that "I have been a voracious (if not always discriminating) reader from childhood to present" (73); and the range of her viewing reflected in this collection is encyclopedic. Here we have informed readings of works as old as *The Birth of a Nation* and as recent as *The Green Mile*, as well recognized as *American Beauty* or as little known as *Pinky and Limbo*. The juxtapositions can be startling, as in the case of Fenimore Cooper and *The Brother from Another Planet* or the Brothers Grimm and *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, yet always they seem familiar, well grounded in common sense and perceptive observation.

When Davidson digs deeper into what she calls the question of "good and guilty narratives" (19), her ability to separate the filmmakers' motives and the outcomes of their efforts shines lucidly through. In her reading of *Birth of a Nation*, for instance, she points us accurately to Dixon's and Griffith's use of title cards to reinforce belief, silence dissent, and create a monocular interpretation; as she says, "Prior to *The Birth of a Nation*, the world had not yet fully envisioned the power of feature length movies to sway the emotions or even their power to attract audiences" (55). Her reading points to both the good and guilty outcomes of such filmmaking. Likewise, when she connects Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* with the genre of captivity narratives, Davidson radically shifts our views of what might easily be dismissed as a male attempt to write a female "buddy movie" so that we see it as a

rejection, rather than reification, of the conventions of the genre. When she contends that "the literary underpinnings of a narrative may be almost invisible because they derive from textual material that has been metabolized by the culture at large to such an extent that it has become part of an invisible substratum of cultural knowledge" (75), we are inclined to agree because of the wide range of knowledge she herself brings to bear on the essays—everything from the 1812 edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to the most recent of Disney renderings.

At times, one is tempted to argue with some of Davidson's readings; for instance, she contends that "Butch and Sundance choose their mode of life largely out of a sense of boredom with civilization" (60), an assertion somewhat at odds with George Roy Hill and William Goldman's statements that the story is about two men knowing their world has changed but not knowing what to do about it (DVD); the comparison of the generation disillusioned by Vietnam and the generation after the Civil War would certainly politicize the erstwhile bank robbers' motives as much as it does those of *Thelma and Louise*. But it is hard to argue with either the confidence or the humor of a critic who can write that "Cinderella's elevation to royalty, however, makes it shinningly clear that certain behaviors, in the long run, are ruinous to young women" (102).

Throughout, Davidson's *Six Essays* make clear that she has, as Jean Baudrillard argues, learned to place herself on the other side of the screen from these texts. Seeing them as she does, from her oppositional perspective, she opens up these movies to us as both viewers and critics. Unlike Calvin's father, who thinks his son sees the world only in black and white, Davidson helps us see these movies in a much richer, more vibrant perspective. And she needs to: for as Calvin says, "SOMETIMES THAT'S THE WAY THINGS ARE!" (3)

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