

Cultural Revelation And Historical Obfuscation: the potentials and dangers in cinema as a tool of education

Fredrick Barton

My remarks today are spawned by several separate and divergent experiences. This past summer my wife Joyce and I traveled to Istanbul where we spent our first extensive period of time in an Islamic country. We realize, of course, that Istanbul is not typical of Turkey, as most Istanbulians are quick to tell you, and that Turkey is not typical of the Islamic world, as all Turks are quick to tell you. Turks are assertive about not being Arabic, and Istanbulians are adamant about being Europeans. And indeed, in its cacophony of rush-hour traffic, with late model European and Japanese cars stacked up at every stoplight, and every third pedestrian jamming the crosswalks between them talking on a cell phone, Istanbul elicits comparisons to Paris and London far more readily than to stereotyped notions of defeated Baghdad, desperate Kabul, or dusty Tripoli.

Still, Joyce and I found ourselves in Istanbul waking daily before dawn to the first of five city-wide calls to prayer and thereafter walking crowded avenues seldom far from the shadows of the ancient city's magnificent mosques, always in the company of countless women painfully indifferent to the summer heat with their scarved heads and long-sleeved, full-length overcoats covering all but their faces and hands, their attire identifying the degree of their religious orthodoxy. For a college professor fresh from classrooms at the University of New Orleans where crop-topped coeds routinely display more navel than a bushel of oranges, the physical modesty of so many Islamic women was an unavoidable culture shock. Many professional Istanbulian women dress in the business suits of a Manhattan lawyer, and many teenaged females walk the streets in jeans and T-shirts. But a majority continue to follow variations on the traditional religious dress code. In America Brandi Chastain celebrates World Cup victory by cavorting in her sports bra, while in Istanbul schoolgirls dart about a soccer field with scarved heads nodding over their sweat suits. And the visitor to Turkey is awash in ruminations about how different we human beings are from each other.

The second experience is two-fold and probably shared to greater and lesser degrees by most people in this room. We all remember the horrible bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, and most of us will recall the media speculation immediately afterwards that the devastating explosion was the work of Middle Eastern (read Islamic) terrorists. The Oklahoma City murders, of course, were committed by a small cadre of dangerously disaffected, extreme right-wing Americans. But many of us felt a strange relief in that fact, more comfortable with the evil in our own midst than with a culturally alien, foreign menace we did not understand. We should have learned a lesson from Oklahoma City, but most of us did not. Thus, when Trans World Airlines Flight 800 went down en route from New York to Paris, many of us once again joined the media in focusing initial suspicion on Middle Eastern (again read Islamic) terrorists. Exhaustive investigations eventually concluded that Flight 800 crashed as the result of an unprecedented accident, but in the continuing absence of definitive "proof," many are reluctant to surrender suppositions that the passengers on

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Flight 800 were homicide victims. Though such suspicions are infrequently any longer spoken aloud, for some, the enduring outrage of this tragedy is that shadowy Middle Eastern terrorists have actually gotten away with mass murder.

The third experience which has helped generate today's reflections arrives from popular culture, in the first instance from the recurring segment of *The Tonight Show* called "Jaywalking." For the uninitiated, host Jay Leno produces a regular comedy routine by walking out on the streets of Burbank and interviewing passersby about routine facts of history, geography, and contemporary politics. "Which came first, the Civil War or World War I?", "Where might we find the Eiffel Tower?", and "Slobodan Milosovic is president of what country?" are examples of questions he employs to elicit hilariously ignorant answers from college-educated respondents, a frightfully large pool of whom are primary and secondary school teachers. After laughing uproariously at segments of "Jaywalking," Joyce and I inevitably conclude, "but that's not really funny; it's terrifying."

We might be suspicious that Leno achieves his comedy by careful selection and skillful editing. And, of course, ignorance of individual facts proves nothing whatsoever. A recent Roper survey for the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, however, may provide a more scientific basis for concern. Senior students at the nation's fifty-five top-ranked colleges and universities, Stanford, Berkeley, UCLA, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton included, averaged only fifty-three percent on a multiple-choice test about American history and culture. A majority of the students picked someone other than George Washington as the commanding American general at Yorktown. The largest number of students picked Ulysses S. Grant. On slightly more sophisticated questions, the performance was even worse. Fifty-three percent of the students picked Thomas Jefferson as the principal author of the U.S. Constitution whereas only twenty-three percent correctly identified James Madison. Sixty-three percent of the seniors thought American slavery was everywhere abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation while only twenty-six percent knew that slavery was finally outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment.

So what are the connections among a vacationer's cultural observations, a citizen's uncomfortable reactions to news of sudden death on the soil of his homeland, and a late-night television viewer's response to a comedy series? I shall begin my answer to that question by invoking two other experiences. First, I recently read a *Non Sequitur* comic strip showing a group of adults partying in an office while behind them a line of children sit before a series of computer screens. The caption reads "Productivity has improved immensely since we adopted 'bring your child to work' as corporate strategy." Second, I recall vividly the horror Valparaiso University Christ College Dean Mark Schwehn felt when he discovered in application essays back in 1992 that a chilling plurality of the exceptionally well-qualified students who applied to his honors program that year accepted Oliver Stone's conspiracy theories in the movie "JFK" as straight historical truth. In short, today's young people are as natively capable as any generation before them and possessed of skills for gathering and manipulating electronic information decisively greater than any generation before them. We need recognize, however, that today's generation of young people rely far more heavily on visual media than on print for their informational input. To a no doubt problematic extent, as the "JFK" example illustrates, they learn their history from movies rather than from books. Thus, the cluttered mind of this teacher and film critic mixes all these divergent experiences to brew a reflection about the cinematic medium as a tool for education.

And to begin that process let me turn to an examination of a recent film about American history in a section of this presentation, with apologies to the estimable John Le Carré, I have subtitled:

farmer, soldier, butcher, dad

First, I need get the qualifications out of the way. Foremost, "The Patriot," which opened on the weekend of July fourth this past summer, is a crowd-pleaser all decked out in red, white, and blue righteousness. Producer Dean Devlin and director Roland Emmerich are masters at this rabble-raising, holiday kind of thing, having made a monster hit of "Independence Day" back in 1996. "The Patriot" has dazzling photography, dashing period costumes, impressive sets, and crackling

good battle scenes. It has gorgeous stars (Mel Gibson and Joely Richardson as his chaste and demure love interest) and a detestable villain. And dang if it doesn't stir you. So what's not to like? Well, start with yourself for being susceptible to the film's crude manipulation. "The Patriot" pretends to be an historical epic. But it's really just "Billy Jack"/"Death Wish" in Revolutionary War garb. And I readily grant that "The Patriot" only wants to entertain. But the picture is as insidious as crack cocaine. It may make you feel good, but it's definitely very bad for you.

Written by Robert Rodat, "The Patriot" is the story of Benjamin Martin (Gibson), a South Carolina plantation owner and a veteran of the bitter frontier fighting in the French and Indian War. Now in 1776, Benjamin is a widower with seven children and the fierce determination to protect his offspring from the horrors of war. Benjamin says he's opposed to taxation without representation and believes that the American colonies are fully capable of self-government, but at the same time, he believes that war with England is too high a price to pay for independence. When Benjamin makes his anti-war speech in the South Carolina colonial legislature, we thirst for the enunciation of a plan by which American liberty might be achieved without bloodshed. People held such attitudes in the era. They were widely referred to as Canadians.

But Benjamin isn't really either a British apologist or a proponent of non-violence. Quite the contrary: he's just an unrefined storyteller's pretext for blood lust. By making him a man of peace at the outset, the filmmakers can so much more easily justify the violence he will perpetrate in the name of family and nation. No matter Benjamin's initial high-mindedness, the War for Independence ensues, and soon the colonials are in a bad way. Idiotically, as if battle were a chess game with shredded flesh and severed body parts, the colonials don their blue jackets and form precise lines across from their red-coated enemy, mostly to be routed by the Brits' superior training and discipline. On the southern front General Cornwallis (Tom Wilkinson) threatens to make short work of the rebels. When the war comes to Benjamin's own property, he makes one last stab at neutrality, providing refuge and medical attention to the wounded of both sides. But among the casualties is Benjamin's oldest son Gabriel (Heath Ledger) who has joined the colonial army in defiance of his father's wishes. And so with this set up comes the rat-a-tat-tat of moral justification for unstinting retributive violence.

Cornwallis is a vain and stuffy twit, his gentleman's bearing and polished manners hiding a conniving spirit and a haughty contempt for his enemy. But as depicted here, Cornwallis is just an occasion for naughty jokes and an appropriate comeuppance. The piece's real fiend is his field commander Colonel William Tavington (Jason Isaacs) who arrives at Benjamin's porch to begin a campaign of cold-blooded murder that makes Rusty Calley look like a man of moderation and mercy. Tavington orders all the colonial wounded to be shot immediately. Then, because Gabriel is carrying dispatches, Tavington arrests the young soldier and marches him off to be hanged as a traitor. The filmmakers seem to forget that as a wounded man, Gabe should be shot, but then how else to a) have Gabe in the house to be arrested and b) left alive to be saved by anguished, valiant Dad? When 15-year-old Thomas Martin (Gregory Smith) foolishly tries to rescue his brother as he's being tied to the back of a wagon, the younger boy gets a fatal bullet to the chest for his troubles. And if that's not enough to make Benjamin good and mad, Tavington burns down the Martin plantation for good measure. A while later Tavington locks the entire citizenry of a colonial village inside a church and burns the building to the ground. Since he obviously has no qualms about mass murder, why he doesn't dispatch the entire Martin family at the outset remains a thorny mystery. To be sure, though, he will be grievously sorry he passed the chance to erase Martins from the planet.

And shortly. Tavington and his dragoons have barely paraded out of sight when Benjamin dashes into the flames of his home and comes out with enough weapons to start his own battalion. And so much for this lining up business. In the cover of forest shade, behind the shield of cypress and oak, as every Yank has known for more than 200 years, one American is worth an entire company of prissy Brits. With the intrepid assistance of two younger sons barely strong enough to raise rifle to shoulder, Benjamin gets some serious payback. Benjamin has to take out the last of the redcoats with knife and tomahawk. And so much the better for that challenge. For nothing makes a man feel better about the

death of a son than the opportunity to give an enemy a couple dozen whacks in the face with the business end of a hatchet. So Gabe is rescued, and father and son join forces to raise a militia and ambush Comwallis' army with withering success until further tragedies make Benjamin so mad he abandons the strategy which has made him a legend and lines up to fight the Brits on their own terms. What this movie lacks in logic, it certainly makes up for in macho breast-beating. The whole film comes down, of course, to a mano-a-mano between a heartbroken Benjamin and a sneering Tavington, Wilkinson sword versus tomahawk chop. Guess who wins, Braves fans?

In sum "The Patriot" quite consciously determines to appeal to that most distressing of human traits: a hunger for revenge. Producer Devlin conceded in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* writer Fred Schruers that his picture was "always a revenge story." In the early going, when Benjamin returns to the embrace of his children, his face a mask of blood and gore in the aftermath of his having butchered a British soldier, we think for a fleeting second this picture might intend to deliver the message that war makes monsters, even wars generally conceded to be righteous. In "The Searchers," director John Ford and writer Frank Nugent made John Wayne pay a pivotal price for his vengeful martial prowess by excluding him from the hearth of civilization. "The Patriot" lacks any such sophistication or thematic complexity as the battlefield butcher and the caring, gentle father are one and the same.

Revenge is so commonly endorsed in American film that in his deplorable current "Get Carter," Sylvester Stallone can declare "revenge is good" and proceed without sanction to murder his enemies by throwing them off buildings and shooting them in the back. But beyond the objectionable revenge theme, why bother to wax so indignant about "The Patriot," a film that just wants to provide rousing entertainment for summer filmgoers? Why? Well, because it's so indecently cavalier about history. Wars breed atrocity like swamps breed mosquitoes. But the British didn't incinerate an entire village of colonial settlers, and I can fully well understand English newspaper editorials protesting this picture's accusation that they did. Elsewhere, the film's treatment of African-American characters and the African-American colonial circumstance is nothing short of an insulting lie. Though fictionalized and amalgamized, the Benjamin Martin character was extensively modeled on Francis Marion, the legendary "Swamp Fox," scathingly described by the London *Daily Express* as a "racist, proslavery misogynist who hunted Indians for sport and regularly raped his female slaves." Presumably to spare Benjamin the taint of being a slave holder, however, a trait he would have shared with the great revolutionary heroes George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, "The Patriot" goes to considerable pains to establish that all the black labor on Benjamin's plantation is performed by free people of color. There were free people of color in the 18th-century American South, of course, but their condition was the tiny exception to the vast rule of slavery.

Moreover, the film fudges the expansive degree to which black Americans were ultimately betrayed in the aftermath of a war fought for the "self-evident" principle that "all men are created equal" and that among their "inalienable rights" was that of "liberty." Jefferson himself knew that the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence demanded the end of slavery, but he was among those who lived out his life in the luxury provided by the sweat of men he owned as property. As "The Patriot" makes note, Washington did swell the ranks of the colonial army by promising freedom for those slaves who took up arms in the cause of independence. And many did, and some, like the one black soldier we encounter here, were freed as a result. But many others fought for freedom and were denied their own, were forced back into servitude on any technicality their former owners could concoct and lay before a new nation's collusive magistrates who were the agents of a betrayal that would ultimately cast our people into the great Civil War, which some have appropriately termed the Second American Revolution. African-Americans might rightly protest that for people of color, the first American Revolution never took place.

And one cannot defend this issue as being tangential to "The Patriot's" central concerns, for mysteriously the film returns to black-white issues repeatedly. One utterly perplexing sequence shows Benjamin, his comely sister-in-law Charlotte Selton (Richardson), and his six surviving children, including Gabriel with his newly betrothed (Lisa Brenner) and her family, all taking refuge

among the isolated Carolina island Gullah community. There, white and black live in an integrated harmony that oh so sadly hasn't come to a single American location in the whole 224 years of our history as a nation. Why perpetrate such gross misrepresentations?

On the other hand, as the filmmakers of "The Patriot" would no doubt assert, why wax so concerned about this matter? Responding to journalist Schruers, they point to the consultations they undertook with the Smithsonian Institution and the pains they took to depict black life accurately. Well, the period costumes are authentic, I presume, as are farming implements and other tools of the day. But getting physical details right and institutional and psychological details wrong is akin to confusing a mannequin for a human being.

Still, why be concerned about matters of historical accuracy at all? Feature filmmaking is an entertainment medium. Aren't Devlin and Emmerich being faulted for failings they never claimed to have concerned themselves with? Isn't a filmmaker's responsibility to the integrity of his or her story, and doesn't artistic license liberate the storyteller from the straightjacket of fact and empower the filmmaker with the solutions of narrative invention? To that I answer a resounding yes, of course, and a chastising no, not at all. A fiction writer, whether working in print or on celluloid, must be allowed the power of imagination. Narrative drive must be sustained, and incidental details of factual accuracy may fairly be sacrificed as a result. At the same time, in my view, sweeping historical themes ought to remain sacred. Alan Parker makes fatal errors, for instance, in his otherwise powerful "Mississippi Burning" when he depicts the same FBI who waged vicious psychological warfare on Martin Luther King as heroes of the civil rights movement, when he stages scenes of false arrest and physical intimidation as the tools of justice rather the tools of oppression. History ought not be turned inside out for the sake of any story.

Why do I worry about this? Because in an era when students evidently aren't being required to know if the Vietnam War was fought before or after World War II, the popular movie feature is perhaps the only place they're getting any historical information at all. But do I think indignation on the part of academics like me will conceivably result in Hollywood's mending its ahistorical ways? Not for the first fleeting second. So, therefore, do I conclude that feature films are and will remain unreliable at best, and insidiously misleading at worst? Yes. And are they then useless as tools of education? Not at all. For though we can't count on feature films to accurately deliver the facts, the cinematic medium is sometimes uniquely able to communicate the truth. Take, for example, the case of Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" (which was written by the same Robert Rodat who wrote "The Patriot"). Am I troubled that the mission to find and relieve a single soldier, which occupies the film's core narrative, was far too strategically frivolous for the Allied Command to have wasted its time on, much less to have authorized? Yes, to an extent I do. But has any more powerful depiction of war's horrors ever been staged than the Omaha Beach footage in this film's harrowing first half hour? Not to my knowledge. Could any other medium communicate this information as effectively? I don't think so.

Moreover, I think there are a vast array of feature films that teach lessons we need to learn, raise issues we need to contemplate. On a sample list, I would include Roland Joffe's "The Mission," which confronts us with injustice so vicious and pervasive that a bright light is shone upon mankind's hunger for an afterlife where justice is always done. Another such film is Hector Babenco's "The Kiss of the Spider Woman," which communicates that life can become so hopelessly horrible the only refuge lies in the magic of the human imagination. A third such film is Steven Spielberg's shattering "Schindler's List," which details a dauntingly vast evil but also powerfully illustrates the actual good brave and determined human beings can do, an illustration that survives justified complaint that the fictional Schindler is a better man than was his real life counterpart. Still another such film is Robert Benton's "Places in the Heart," which dares to suggest the redemption available in the fathomless bounty of grace.

For a more extensive discussion of two other examples, I want to return to my opening concerns about cultural differences between the Christian West and the Islamic Middle East and move on to a section of these remarks I've subtitled:

shoes for two

Along with the majority of habitual moviegoers, last spring I went to see William Friedkin's "Rules of Engagement," the story of a marine commander court-martialed for ordering his men to fire into a crowd of Islamic protesters in front of the U.S. embassy in Yemen. A pivotal passage in that lamentable film shows peace-keeping American soldiers under deliberately camouflaged but withering automatic weapons fire by old men, women, and children. The result, no doubt, of widely accepted stereotypes that Islamic people despise Americans, little public outcry was raised against this fictional development, despite, in my view, its constituting an act of cultural libel. It goes without saying that relations between the Islamic world and the Christian West are and have long been tense. But films like "Rules of Engagement" callously aggravate the situation. For an antidote, we need to apprehend the way in which Islamic people look at themselves, significantly, at the way they depict and analyze their own cultural situations separate and apart from any connection to or rivalry with the West. To that end, for the remainder of this presentation, I want to focus on two films by Iranian writer/director Majid Majidi, both dealing with comparable themes of childhood, economic struggle, familial connections, the mutual devotion of siblings, and religious faith. The more recent of these two pictures, released on the nation's art house circuit this year, is "The Color of Paradise," the story of Mohammad Ramezani (Mohsen Ramezani), an 8-year-old blind child who is schooled at a special training institution for the sightless in Teheran. Mohammad and his peers are taught to read and write in Braille, other regular lessons in arithmetic, geography and the like, as well as skills in dealing with their handicap.

Mohammad loves his school and his kind teacher (Mohammad Rahmany), but he's also anxious to return to his distant rural home for summer vacation where he will be reunited with his father, Hashem (Hossein Majub), his beloved grandmother (Salime Feizi), and his two cherished younger sisters Hanyeh (Elham Sharim) and Bahareh (Farahnaz Safari). Mohammad is therefore badly upset when his father is hours late arriving to escort him home.

Eventually, we learn that Hashem has tried to arrange to leave Mohammad in the city permanently. And when that fails, Hashem wounds his son deeply by deciding to separate Mohammad from his own family and board him with another where the child is to serve as an apprentice to a blind carpenter (Morteza Fatemi) who will train Mohammad in woodcraft. In the custom of traditional agricultural people, Hashem believes that he must have a wife, and to that end he's been in negotiations to marry the daughter (Masoomeh Zeinati) of a man (Ahmad Aminian) from a neighboring town. For reasons that aren't entirely clear, Hashem feels that his prospective father-in-law and bride are less likely to follow through with the marriage if they learn that Hashem has a blind son. Thus, against a distraught Mohammad's wishes, Hashem delivers the child to the carpenter, a decision that so upsets Mohammad's grandmother she abandons her son's house in dismay, triggering a series of tragedies.

"The Color of Paradise" offers a number of wonderful elements, central among them the appeal of Majidi's protagonist and the striking work of Mohsen Ramezani, the young man who portrays him. Like most of the actors with whom Majidi works, young Mr. Ramezani is untrained as an actor, and he really is blind. But what an expressive face he has, and what a capable youngster he is. For a low budget production, moreover, Majidi achieves two startling visual effects. In one, representing the departure of a human soul, the filmmaker photographs a fog bank rolling up a hillside and into a forest. In a second, he captures two characters and a horse being swept away in a flood-swollen river. I've grown largely indifferent to the visual tricks Hollywood delivers so routinely, but this torrent of racing water affected me viscerally, and I found myself wondering as I haven't in an American movie in some time how Majidi managed to get this scary footage on film without risking life and limb of actors and crew. I presume the feat was controlled and safe, but it sure doesn't look that way, which is precisely in the film's service.

Still, the enduring power of "The Color of Paradise" lies not in its visual technique but in its themes and portrayal of universal human dynamics. Standing, I suspect we can conclude, for the old Iranian regime, the father is the villain of this piece. But the world is full of flawed people, and Majidi

is reluctant to assign blame. And even though the father is the villain, he becomes so as much because of harsh circumstances as from any inherently evil nature. Thus Majidi is sophisticated enough a filmmaker to give Hashem a sympathetic dimension. Hashem makes only a meager living and worries endlessly that he may not be able to provide for his family. He is a widower who still pines for the mother of his children. His decision to place Mohammad in another man's home is misguided and indeed even heartless. But all at once it isn't as cruel as we first presume. An American director would no doubt turn the carpenter into a sinister character, but in Majidi's hands he's a kind and sympathetic figure, one who will likely treat Mohammad with great patience and compassion.

The film's central metaphor, of course, deals with sight and sightlessness. With his acute senses of smell, hearing and feeling, Mohammad apprehends far more of the texture, complexity, and beauty of the world than does his sighted father. He is obviously not named after the prophet by chance. Mohammad treasures frail living things, and we obviously connect his own condition to his actions when he protects a fledgling bird from a foraging cat. Mohammad is also an industrious child, meeting the frustrations of his handicap with an amazing perseverance and a stout belief in himself. He's even a bit of a show off, clamoring to correct his sisters' classmates on lessons he's already mastered at the school for the blind. A pointed irony in Mohammad's story is our understanding that he could indeed become a fine and perhaps even prosperous carpenter someday but that he has the intellectual skills and the drive to accomplish more probing and complicated tasks. "The Color of Paradise" humbly submits that an emerging Iran is not content to be relegated to roles fashioned for it by a leadership whose backward sight is blind to future potential.

The second of Majidi's films I want to address is the absolutely magnificent "Children of Heaven," which debuted in the United States in 1999 and is now widely available on videotape. With time, I think, this is a film should stand with Vittorio de Sica's "The Bicycle Thief." Not insignificant among the attributes of "Children of Heaven" is the implicit demands it makes that so many residents of this great country bow in gratitude for the incredible extent of our blessings.

"Children of Heaven" tells the story of a third-grade Iranian boy named Ali (Amir Farrokh Hashemian, surely the saddest-eyed child I have ever seen in the movies). Ali lives with his impoverished family of four in a poor section of Teheran. Ali's father (Amir Naji) makes a meager living selling tea at a mosque. The boy's housewife mother (Fereshte Sarabandi) is ill and needs an operation that the family cannot afford. The four of them live together in a one-room apartment without furniture. They work, eat and sleep on the rug-covered floor. Ali and his first-grade sister Zahra (Bahare Sediql) often write each other notes so as to have something approaching private conversation. Brother and sister are obviously deeply attached to each other.

As the picture opens, Ali's mother sends him out to do three chores: visit the baker's for flats of hot bread, the cobbler's to fetch Zahra's shoes, which have been left for repair, and the grocer's for a bag of potatoes. Ali is a shy, respectful boy and obviously responsible, but he nonetheless falls victim to traumatic bad luck. When he puts down the bag containing his sister's shoes to paw through the potato bin, a blind peddler happens by and carries the shoes off, thinking they are refuse. Knowing that his family cannot afford new shoes and fearing the wrath of his father, Ali convinces Zahra that they can share his own pair of tattered sneakers. Zahra goes to school in the morning, Ali in the afternoon. Neither would be allowed at school barefoot or even in house slippers, but if they arrange to meet in the short time after her school ends and before his begins, they can make one pair of shoes do for both.

This plan leads to a series of mishaps. Zahra tries her best, but she is frequently late for the shoe exchange, and when Ali is scolded by the school principal for tardiness, he takes to running across town each day in a mad dash to squeeze into his seat before the bell. After school, Ali tries unsuccessfully to imagine ways to replace Zahra's shoes, dropping off the neighborhood soccer team for fear of damaging shoes that now must serve two. Finally, Ali discovers that a new pair of tennis shoes are being offered as third prize in a cross country road race for boys his age, and he knows that he's in top condition because of all the running he does to school each day. Ali can make his immediate problems go away if only he can run faster than hundreds of contestants but just

slower than two others. The boy's order of finish is essential, for Majidi has nicely structured the nature of the prizes such that a first or second place finish wouldn't easily facilitate a swap.

Majidi makes clear that not all Iranians must endure the kind of grinding poverty suffered by Ali's family. During a holiday period, Ali and his father look for gardening work in a section of Teheran where residents live amid obvious opulence. Still, Ali's family is hardly atypical, and the family of the blind peddler, whose daughter ends up wearing Zahra's shoes, would seem to be worse off still. So certainly "Children of Heaven" is concerned about economic deprivation. This is a world where a meaningful present for a school child is a shiny pen or even a pencil that has not been sharpened to a stub. But "Children of Heaven" is a film also concerned with things money can't buy: the power of love between siblings and the accomplishment that can be wrung from the determined heart. This film, moreover, is reluctant to identify villains. Just as Majidi strives to do with Hashem in "The Color of Paradise," Ali's volatile father, the gruff principal, and the rich man we meet are all given their redeeming qualities.

I can only imagine that the international language of cinema is one that has strongly influenced the filmmakers on this production. The road race at the end recalls scores of American movies that come down to an athletic contest in which the hero has to prevail against overwhelming odds. But that's a frequently successful formula, and it works here all the more because this isn't an American film, and we can't be sure that a boy as unlucky as Ali will actually succeed in his complicated goal of running just fast enough. As the throng of runners stride out the last 100 meters, we are the ones who find ourselves short of breath. And in the end, Majidi makes his point in a way we won't soon forget. Coming in first isn't nearly as important as keeping your promise to a loved one.

I think that "Children of Heaven" is a film of abiding greatness, but that's not the central reason I chose to discuss it in this presentation. I am an American citizen with an almost obsessive habit of reading newspapers and news magazines and watching news programs on television. And I confess before this body today having been influenced by what I think is a fairly routinely negative portrayal of Islamic people in the American media. There are reasons for this, of course. Osama Bin Laden is a real person and his terrorist acts have shed American blood in Saudi Arabia and Kenya and perhaps elsewhere. Real Americans were held hostage by Islamic revolutionaries in the Iran of the Ayatollah Khomeini. The scenes of Islamic fundamentalists decrying our nation as the Great Satan were not staged by American television executives. Throughout the world, America is the target of persistent vilification by Islamic leaders and their followers, and these attacks are accurately reported by American news organizations.

But however factually accurate our news reports, I am nonetheless convinced that we are left with a sadly inaccurate impression of the people who call their God Allah. I know that the hostility I have seen aimed at our nation has at times nurtured in my heart a hostile response. But all at once I am ashamed for what I know is bias, pure and simple. And I know first hand that hatred is no default Islamic response to Americans. I know that Islamic parents do not automatically teach their children that Americans are their enemy. For I have walked the streets of Turkey and been welcomed by the brightest of smiles and warmest of efforts to greet me in English. I have been beckoned by literally hundreds of young arms raised out to me by giggling school children soliciting a slap of hands, a smack of friendly connection between middle-aged American and youthful Turk.

Still, we stand on either side of a significant cultural divide. I remain uncomfortable with widespread, if not universal, Islamic attitudes about and toward women. I worry greatly about the treatment of women by ruling Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan. And even in far more progressive Turkey, I find myself troubled by all those women who still feel required to keep their heads covered. Sexist attitudes persist in America too, of course, but few Americans would any longer exhibit in public the kind of oblivious delight our Istanbul guide took in telling crude jokes about women drivers and why women must pray at the rear of the mosque. Before I lapse into too much cultural superiority, however, I must emphasize that the movement for gender equality is well underway in Turkey and will someday, presumably, inexorably, triumph throughout the Islamic world. Moreover, I must hasten to acknowledge the presence in Western society of so called "Christian" extrem-

ists who denigrate women, practice racial exclusion, and even advocate violence in the name of Jesus. I would certainly protest the idea that such individuals and organizations in any way represent me, and I can only imagine that something comparable is true for the vast majority of Muslims.

When Americans feel threatened—and the world situation today may make this an understandable feeling—a lust to respond in kind is understandable. A film like “The Patriot” would encourage us to think in terms of revenge, to protect our own and give back to our enemies tenfold the suffering they cause us. But we must resist this temptation. We must be ever vigilant of the difference between the Islamic terrorist and the Islamic believer. Whatever their degree of orthodoxy, the focus of most Islamic faithful lies not on distant America but on nearby friend, neighbor, and family member. The people of Islam occupy an impoverished quadrant of our planet, and their bellies are too often empty. But the heart of the simple Islamic believer retains the full measure of human compassion and capacity for love and loving self-sacrifice. By illustrating this so effectively and convincingly, a film like “Children of Heaven” offers the opportunity for the most enduring kind of education. It stands as a powerful call to redemption for a man like me who ought to know better but has nonetheless allowed prejudice to percolate in *his* heart and thereby to threaten his soul. †

THE WORLD MAKES WHAT IT WILL

1.

I choose to trust I'm free to choose,
or why deliberate
on what I ought to do,
why sit at home and agonize
while my friends go their careless way?

2.

I could have lied,
said I was better for the job,
did not, and lost my place
in line. No one forced me
to say the deadly words; therefore,

3.

I'm free, my life
may be a model for
the young: No need to take
the selfish road when there are
roads enough and time.

4.

The complication comes with cause
(this happened because that)
in time (came first) and place (they touched).
If one could show
“this because that” for everything,

5.

I'd have to write what I write here.
Impossible as proving
all black birds are black.
Therefore, I feel I have no choice
but trust I choose.

Bill Buege