

# The English Patient

## I Don't Care to Bargain

This writer's admiration for Anthony Minghella's screenplay was greatly enhanced when he found that a dozen or so of his favorite elements in the film were absent from Michael Ondaatje's novel. In an appreciation in the *Los Angeles Times*, 3/28/08, Charles Frazier reports having a similar experience when his novel *Cold Mountain* was adapted by Minghella, writing, "During the editing process, as scenes were being cut, the ones I argued most strongly to keep were always the ones not in the book, the ones Anthony had imagined. The ones I wish I'd imagined." In the *Los Angeles Times*, 12/21/07, Ian McEwan, on the subject of adaptation, says that for the novelist it is "almost as if the movie is your grandchild . . . . You're not directly responsible." In the introduction to his screenplay for *The Hours*, David Hare writes, "The great mystery of adaptation is that true fidelity can only be achieved through lavish promiscuity." The screenplay for *The English Patient* is the result of much more than simple inert abridgment. The film, novel, and published screenplay are all different, making for some interesting comparisons.

Admittedly demonstrating a tendency to devolve into lists, this essay will offer only minimal and sporadic analysis of the narrative in favor of a more detailed discussion of certain metacritical issues.

A scene involving a Christmas party is specified as occurring on December 22, the date on which Ralph Fiennes was born in 1962. It is also the darkest day of the year in the northern hemisphere. A corresponding exploitation of the solstice is featured in *Heavenly Creatures*.

Kip seems unable to recognize the emotion that he feels when speaking of Hardy until Hana identifies it as love. This stands in contrast to Jan's free declaration of love moments before her death. Additionally, in the novel, Almásy calls Madox, "This man I loved more than any other man."

For Kip and Hana, the painted interior of the church is their version of Almásy and Katharine's Cave of Swimmers. Rupert Bear is the name of the Cliftons' airplane and Rupert Douglas is the name of a minor character in the film. The final image in the film is of cypresses, which are often planted in graveyards and symbolize endurance.

Near the end, the man known for using "so few adjectives" demands "the f\*\*\*ing car!" When he is subsequently driven in it, it proves to have been foreshadowed by the adjectives he applies to the word *car* when the Cliftons first arrive in the desert: "Big car, slow car, chauffeur-driven car." Prior to making this demand, Almásy refers to Katharine as "my wife." When Geoffrey speaks of "Excessive love of one's wife," Almásy, as if to claim that property for himself, says, "Now there you have me."

This film is not predominated by repeating events to as great an extent as some of the films examined in these essays. However, a few subtle rhymes may be inferred. Katharine twice has a critical encounter with Almásy immediately after dancing with someone else. It is after Kamal bumps his head that the vehicle on which he is riding overturns. It is not long after Katharine bumps her head that Almásy asks her, "How can you *ever* smile? As if your life hadn't capsized?" Likewise, Fouad incurs a wrist injury in that motor vehicle mishap that foreshadows Katharine's incurred when Geoffrey crashes their airplane. Almásy claims Katharine's shoulder

blade, but acknowledges the folly of trying to “own the desert!” He feels “obliged” to follow Katharine in the market, but does not want to “feel obliged” for her paintings. (In the novel, which will be cursorily discussed below, Kip “never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him. . . . to feel any obligation.”) Almásy declares his hatred for “ownership,” and Caravaggio later says, “No one should own music.” Caravaggio exclaims, “I’m leaking blood!” and later says, “You get to the morning and the poison leaks away, doesn’t it?” In the scene of 12/22/38, Almásy’s left thumb is tasted both by him and later by Katharine. Hana kisses her bedridden patient as she earlier does an anonymous soldier on a hospital train.

The video producers seem to have been too lazy to exploit certain resources available even to the general public. Consequently, what is printed as “Philippa” in the screenplay is captioned as “Fill up this” on the DVD (at an elapsed time of 1 hour 18 minutes).

As Katharine tells the story of Gyges and the queen of Lydia from *The Histories* of Herodotus, she and Almásy seem to reenact the story. After Almásy and Katharine actualize what had been a fictional story, Almásy fictionalizes reality when he fabricates the story of the Hungarian folksong on the record. Thus, they each tell a story that is fictional yet self-referential. The history provided by Herodotus becomes augmented by and physically fused with Almásy’s own personal history when the book becomes a repository for Almásy’s souvenirs.

Several other literary influences may be inferred. One episode in the film seems to echo the “Royal Hunt and Storm” from the opera *The Trojans* by Hector Berlioz, which depicts a story from book four of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Dido and Aeneas are on a hunting expedition in North Africa. A storm arises, they are separated from the rest of their party, take refuge in a cave and consummate their love. In an episode not featured in the novel, Katharine and Almásy are also on a sort of hunt (this one archaeological) in the same part of the world, just a few hundred miles to the east. Isolated first by the accident and then by segregation into two trucks, they advance their relationship as they take refuge from a sand storm. This develops very harmoniously from the novel, which features the formula of reenacting an ancient tale cited above, but also contains separate references to Dido, Aeneas, and “the Virgilian man.”

Hana says, “I don’t know anything” and “I don’t know what that means.” This recalls Parzival, the guileless fool who learns through compassion (“*durch Mitleid wissend der reine Tor*”). Hana cuts her hair, which could reflect her commitment to her patient. Following the example of Condwiramurs cited in a previous essay, the shortening of hair is associated with marriage.

Consonance also exists between this story and Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*. Tristan plays the Lay of Dido, who is mentioned more than once in Ondaatje’s novel. The Cave of Swimmers, the truck during the sand storm and the church all recall the Cave of Lovers occupied by Tristan and Isolde. Tristan’s situation seems to parallel Almásy’s when Gottfried writes of the former:

Honor and Loyalty harassed him powerfully, but Love harassed him more. Love tormented him to an extreme, she made him suffer more than did Honor and Loyalty combined. His heart smiled upon Isolde, but he turned his eyes away: yet his greatest grief was when he failed to see her. As is the way of captives, he fixed his mind on escape and how he might elude her, and returned many times to this thought: “Turn one way, or another! Change this desire! Love and like elsewhere!” But the noose was always there. He took his heart and soul and searched them for some change: but there was nothing there but Love – and Isolde.

The predominant symbolic references are to water. Geoffrey says that Katharine is in love with the hotel plumbing and calls her a fish. When asked to name the things she loves, Katharine begins with, “Water, fish in it, . . .” The cave that is discovered is called the Cave of Swimmers. Many more such references occur in the novel:

- “I was among water people.” (This could also be taken as an astrological reference, as could the following: “like a planet out of control”; “the planetary strangers” and “human constellations.” It is also specified that the cave is on the tropic of cancer.)
- The patient describes dust particles in the air as “swimming motes.” (This is a rather complex water reference because the word *mote* can be taken as a pun: motes are particles of dust, but moats are often bodies of water.)
- Cairo “had every nation swimming in it.”
- Hana’s patient was “a pool for her.”
- Of Hana’s blankets it is said, “She swims in their wool.”
- “the ship that crossed the ocean of ignorance.”
- “stone of history skipping over the water.”
- “what looks like a gill is where the thumb has been cut away.”
- The sheet that covers the piano is “a net of fish.”
- “She paused after each set of notes as if bringing her hands out of water.”
- “In Canada pianos needed water.”
- “The moon is on him like skin, a sheaf of water.”
- “Most of all she wished for a river they could swim in.”
- “She is a woman who misses moisture.”
- “Zerzura is named after the bathing woman.”
- There are new bidets in the hotel, sardine cans on Hana’s scarecrow and a fish pond in her mother’s garden.
- “I thought words bent emotions like sticks in water.”
- “A man shall be as rivers of water in a dry place.”
- The patient sees a “swimming figure.”
- Almásy bathes in a well and Kip hides in a well.
- It is said of Kip that “the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish.”

The novel also contains several references to birds, including owls, hawks, ravens, peacocks, and a street of parrots.

Several interesting puns may be found in the film. During a series of toasts, the word *present* switches from its spatial to its temporal sense in a manner reminiscent of chain verse, in which the end of a line is repeated in start of the next. Kip says, “The patient and Hardy . . . everything good about England.” The nouns “patient” and “Hardy” may be taken as adjectives. Hana implies a pun when she says, “He spends all day searching; at night he wants to be found.” A synonym of *search* is *seek*. Homophonically, then, Kip is the Sikh who seeks. Katharine tells Almásy, “You sing. All the time.” Hardy later says, “I was looking for Lieutenant Singh.” In the novel, Kip’s map is “Drawn by desire.” Similar explicit punning occurs in Minghella’s other films, as when the word *count* is notably punned in both *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *Cold Mountain*.

As the screenplay specifies, when Kip works on the bomb with the serial number KKIP 2600, he faces the ominous omen of being confronted, literally, with a bomb with his name on it. And not necessarily just his name, for the novel specifies his age as 26. Could the double zero following his age suggest that he has no future? Even so, as Hamlet says, “We defy augury.” Perhaps if all German bombs bore the inscription KKIP, then “Kip” might simply have been a natural and obvious nickname for any sapper. But the novel reveals that Kip got his nickname independently. Therefore, all credit goes to Minghella for creating this omen.

The following specifications are found in the novel:

- The plant out of which Almásy speaks of cutting the heart “continues to flourish for a year before it dies.”
- “[T]he young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish.” Similarly, the patient becomes English.
- Hana’s sporadic reading self-referentially reflects the gaps in the plot structure of the novel in which she is a character.
- The Arthurian formula of individualism is stated: “each of us dispersing along our own paths.”
- “His hands within her clothing thrown onto chair backs, dropped upon the floor.” Hana’s dress hangs on a nail by the door. This rhymes with the story of the Lydian queen.
- “We disappeared into landscape.”; “this country she now enters and becomes part of.” This echoes Finnegans dissolving into the landscape in *Finnegans Wake*.
- “Rolling away the boulder they had placed between themselves” recalls both the resurrection of Christ and the sword that Tristan placed between himself and Isolde.
- The church fresco is in Arezzo, was painted by Piero della Francesca and depicts King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.
- Temporal and spatial transcendence is achieved not mystically but via morphine, which implodes time and geography to produce flashbacks.
- By charting the desert and turning it into a place of war, Almásy feels responsible (even if remotely) for WWII, as does Mr. Stevens in *The Remains of the Day*.
- After leaving Katharine in the cave, Almásy stops walking at noon and twilight because navigation is most difficult then. He has water but no food.
- “It is important to die in Holy places.” Madox kills himself in a church he felt had lost its holiness, and commits what he believes is a holy act. Katharine dies in a cave that was sacred to those who painted it. Almásy dies in a monastery.
- As Kip inspects the piano, an echo of the dust from “the giant white chalk horse of Westbury” is seen on his hands.

The following are some of the ways in which the film differs from the novel:

- Katharine’s role is expanded at the expense of Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio.
- The plane is shot down by the Germans instead of crashing due to an oil leak, compounding the irony.
- The trauma suffered by Hana due to her father’s death and her abortion are replaced with the trauma caused by Jan’s death.
- The plum gardens in Groppi Park and pre-chewed dates combine to become Hana’s plums.

- Instead of Hana writing in books, Katharine writes in Herodotus.
- A landmark named for a bathing woman is now described as having the shape of a woman's back.
- The Cliftons' plane Rupert Bear is changed from a Gypsy Moth to a Stearman.
- The Bir Messaha Country Club becomes The International Sand Club.
- Kip's thoughts about different kinds of love in the novel are transformed into Katharine's catalog of love. Hana demonstrates the varieties of love "as she sleeps beside him virtuous as a sister."
- Hana remembers how, in her youth in Canada, "Everyone had to stand and sing a song." This is transformed into the game of spin-the-bottle in the desert. Hana sang with her left hand to her heart, signifying the left-hand path.
- Katharine recounts from memory a story out of Herodotus without having to read it.
- In the novel, Carravaggio is seeking Hana, and doctors help get him a pass and a driver to get to the villa. In the film, Carravaggio seeks the patient and is told about Hana and her patient by Mary.
- The novel refers to the patient as Hana's ghost, and Hana's father as a "hungry ghost." In the film, both Hana and the patient are in love with ghosts, and Carravaggio is one of the patient's ghosts.
- Hana meets Kip before she goes into "retreat" so that when he stops her piano playing, he can say, "I've met you before."
- Hana jokes about being safe "as long as you only play Bach."
- Hana, in the novel, did not look at herself in mirrors. Seeing her reflection in the fragments of mirror hung to ward off birds is a bone thrown to readers of the novel. She is also reflected in a basin of water and in a pool.
- Katharine paints copies of the figures in the cave.
- Almásy says, "Yes. Yes. Absolutely."
- Instead of Hana reading about winds in Herodotus, Katharine is told about them by Almásy.
- Instead of the patient explaining to Hana that Kipling should be read slowly, he explains this to Kip, who then gives him a taste of his own medicine as the payoff. This allows the deletion of the story of Kip's brother, with its anticolonialism condensed (like the milk in that scene) and summarized in a few words. This also brings into closer association the names "Kip" and "Kipling."
- Hana scolds Carravaggio for looting, though in the novel she makes the suggestion to "scrounge a gramophone."
- The "anointing" of Almásy by the Bedouin is echoed by the olive oil for Kip's hair.
- Hana does not help Kip defuse a mine in the garden.
- Carravaggio's thumbs are taken by a German (Muller) instead of an Italian (Ranuccio Tommasoni), and Almásy is more directly responsible.
- Katharine bumps her head in the novel, but in the film this is foreshadowed by, and rhymes with, Kamal bumping his head in the Cave of Swimmers in an earlier scene.
- Kip hoists Hana in the church instead of an elderly male medievalist professor.
- Kip snips the wire in the bomb, but not on the patient's hearing aid.
- Kip responds immediately to the explosion that kills Hardy instead of waiting for the smell of cordite.

- In the novel, Kip is traumatized by news of the A-bomb and threatens the patient. In the film, Kip is traumatized by Hardy's death and it is Caravaggio who contemplates killing the patient.
- Instead of Almásy telling Hana, "Yes, Madox was a man who died because of nations," Almásy is told of Madox's death by Caravaggio.
- The novel contains a reference to a plant, a piece of which the size of a heart can be cut out and the next day will be filled with drink. Minghella takes this as a setup and furnishes a payoff: "Every night I cut out my heart, but in the morning it was full again."
- Almásy first recovers Madox's plane, then flies to the cave, then carried Katharine to the plane instead of recovering her before the plane is recovered.
- Kip is unable to say that he loved Hardy. In the novel Almásy calls Madox "this man I loved more than any other man." They part, "Our affection left unspoken."
- Hana euthanizes the patient.
- Almásy paints Katharine after she dies.
- "We die," is said by Katharine to Almásy, rather than vice versa.

Often, a word is reassigned to a different context or is altered within a structure that is maintained:

- "[A] very English Englishman" in the novel becomes "a very plum plum" in the film.
- "Let me tell you about plums" becomes "Let me tell you about winds."
- Almásy's "Was I a curse upon them?" becomes Hana's "I must be a curse . . . or I must be cursed."
- Almásy's "I believe this" becomes Hana's "I believe that."
- Pottery Road in Toronto is echoed by Pottery Hill in the desert.
- In the novel, a "truck exploded and I capsized." In the film, Almásy uses the word *capsized* with Katharine.
- "While for him this much greenery feels like a carnival" becomes Hardy's "bloody carnival?"
- Hana goes from being called "a child lost" by Kip to being called "a toddler" by Hardy.
- "Caravaggio's avuncular glance" is suggested when Kip addresses the patient as "uncle."

The use of puns in Minghella's films was noted above. The applicability of the auteur theory, which holds that a director's films tend to reveal certain preoccupations, is suggested by additional similarities between *The English Patient* and *Cold Mountain*:

- Almásy's observation that "the heart is an organ of fire" might benefit *Cold Mountain*'s Ada, who says, "All this while I've been packin' ice around my heart. How do I make it melt?"
- Almásy paints the dead Katharine with saffron from her thimble. Eileen Atkins's Maddy "paints" the skin of the similarly reclining Inman with material from a similarly shaped container.
- Hana tells the patient, "That's your morphine speaking." Maddy tells Inman, "That's the laudanum gettin' to ya."
- Both Jan and Ada declare their love, respectively, to Hana and Ruby.
- *The English Patient* ends with a shot of the sun. The last word of dialogue in *Cold Mountain* is "sun."

- While *The English Patient*, as noted earlier, imitates certain literary predecessors, *Cold Mountain* owes an obvious debt to *The Odyssey*.
- *The English Patient* is also not the only one of Minghella's films to feature the music of J.S. Bach.

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Turning now to the critics, in his review for *The Los Angeles Times*, Kenneth Turan attributes to the film more information than is there. He quotes a line not in the film: "Butter me and slip a poached egg on top." He mentions Katharine *reading* Herodotus at the campfire, which she does in the novel, but not the film. He specifies Kip's name as Kirpal, which is not given in the film. Perhaps he actually did see the film, but was proactively inhibited by the novel or the press kit, or saw a longer version of the film.

A particularly puzzling and disappointing class of adverse critical reaction to *The English Patient* is exemplified by some condemnatory remarks made by Michael Medved while hosting Rush Limbaugh's radio program. In spite of his many bold assertions about what may be called "*The English Patient's* New Clothes," the facts miserably fail to oblige him.

Medved said that the film advocates adultery because the message that it sends is: "Grab her!" He would apparently like to believe that the film depicts adulterers suffering no adverse consequences and living happily ever after. But in what film has there ever been a less pleasant inventory of consequences for adulterers? The title character experiences a plane crash, nonlethal immolation and a lingering death, spending half the film as "a piece of toast." He is even told that he is responsible for the suicide of his best friend. Katharine is subjected to a plane crash and is similarly denied the instant, merciful death granted to Geoffrey. Instead, she must linger to endure the effects of her injuries, with desolation and starvation thrown in for good measure. Then, as if death were not enough, she is involved in yet another plane crash postmortem. When Caravaggio is mutilated for committing espionage, his adultery influences his tormenter's choice of punishment.

So, what is the problem? Where is the unpunished transgression? Where is the evasion of justice? Shaw's Miss Prism could certainly recognize that "[t]he good ended happily and the bad unhappily." What is stopping Medved from doing so? The punishment in the film not only fails to cause his satisfaction, it fails even to draw his attention. The patient's burns are no more grotesque than Medved's failure to notice them. Caravaggio decides that the patient has had enough and does not kill him, saying, "You get to the morning and the poison leaks away, doesn't it?" Medved would tell him to speak for himself. As one would have thought that even Thomas Torquimada would have been satisfied with such supererogation (*nemo bis punitur pro eodem delicto*), why is Medved not placated? What quantity of violence directed against sinners would appease him? What more does he want? What more does he deserve?

It might be assumed that the absolute absence of cinematic sin might satisfy Medved, were it not that conservatives are known to enjoy films in which villains are punished by heroes portrayed by such actors as Chuck Norris and John Wayne. As long as unacceptable behavior does not go unpunished, do conservatives necessarily have grounds for complaint about its mere presence? Does the presence of crime invalidate even stories of crime *and* punishment? Can the presence of crime not be compensated for by adverse consequences? Is Medved similarly offended by perceived happy endings of films like *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina* and *Jude*?

Does he believe that operatic characters like Don Giovanni, Siegmund and Salome get off too easily?

Parson Mason Locke Weems (1760-1825) realized great literary success with the story he invented about George Washington chopping down a cherry tree and saying, "I cannot tell a lie." His textual message may be "Tell the truth," but the transtextual message is "Lying pays!" Regardless of the message sent by *The English Patient*, the message received by any normal mind would seem to be "You reap what you sew, and crime does not pay." Perhaps Medved thinks the audience is not even susceptible to the *argumentum ad baculum* and is thus incapable of learning such a lesson, which, in fact, even dogs can. It could also be argued that the travails of these characters function merely to bestow upon them a reverential aura of martyrdom, though this is an argument that conservatives are not remembered for making in opposition to the execution of Saddam Hussein.

Uncharacteristically, Medved offered no objection to the act of euthanasia that occurs in the film. Either time did not permit such complaint, he had become soft on this issue or he simply could not be bothered to notice *this* either. Also, whether noticed or not, the fact is that Almásy and Katharine struggle with their relationship and are often in turmoil. Katharine speaks of being simultaneously most and least happy, while Almásy says, "Every night I cut out my heart." It is this ambivalence that elevates the work to the status of a *jeu parti* (a debate poem in which characters argue, usually about love) and connects it with the earlier quotation from Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*.

Medved also complained that the film presents the causes of the Allies and the Axis powers as morally equivalent. He did not claim that the film vilifies the British and glorifies the Germans. He merely sensed what he regarded as a dangerous ambivalence. Allowing that characters can personify their causes, does the film depict Brits behaving as badly as Germans?

A British officer imprisons Almásy. But why not? Almásy physically assaults him, thus earning his imprisonment fair and square. America interned thousands of Japanese-Americans on much flimsier grounds. So how is this inappropriate? What should the officer have done differently? Maybe it was just the bureaucratic delay that prompted Almásy's assault that Medved found defamatory of the British.

The British soldiers on the train are not judges, so they lack the prerogative to decide a prisoner's punishment. Their duty is expressed by Samuel Gerard in *The Fugitive* when he replies to Richard Kimble's declaration of innocence by saying, "I don't care." They are simply doing their job, as are the Germans who shoot down Almásy's plane. Neither set of soldiers is more or less entitled to the Nuremberg Defense than the other.

Maybe Medved did not like it when Madox says, "We didn't care about countries. Did we? Brits, Arabs, Hungarians, Germans. None of that mattered, did it?" Medved is certainly entitled to focus his disapproval on particular political regimes. Madox, however, mentions only nationalities and ethnicities with no reference to politics. Unless Medved wants to assert that Germans are ethnically and racially inferior and should be hated for this reason alone, Madox's words offer no support for his case.

Kip complains about the British Raj in India and tells of a canon being fired at "the natives," but never cites the cause nor says whether anyone was killed. History may record the circumstances and whether deaths occurred, but this film does not. Maybe Medved considers shooting at Indians justified just because they are Indians. Almásy says the Egyptians want to get rid of the colonials, but does not say why and offers no further indictment of the British, such as a list of atrocities. If Medved thinks Egyptian independence a bad thing, does he regret American



independence as well? If Medved sees this as unfair treatment of the British and wishes to defend British colonialism, not even the British themselves would side with him, for it was only a few years after the time depicted in this story that the British stopped defending that idea and withdrew from India and Egypt.

Almásy says, “Thousands of people did die, just different people.” This would seem to be a simple statement of empirical fact except for the word *just*. (As Tibby says in *Howards End*, “What an insidious ‘only.’”) Since the film does not specify exactly which people died, Medved is left with nothing except nationality on which to base his judgment. So, unless he wants to say that the British are always necessarily, inherently better than Germans regardless of politics or ideology, there is nothing there for him.

Perhaps Medved would like Almásy to direct his anger and, like Carravaggio, personally kill only particular soldiers rather than endanger whole populations. Yet Medved seems unwilling to give Almásy the praise that he would seem to be owed by such as Medved for being a “promise keeper.” A greater good might be served if Almásy were to break his promise to Katharine, but such differentiation constitutes the “situational ethics” that conservatives reject. Either a promise is a promise or there are greater and lesser goods.

Turning to the allegedly sympathetic treatment of the Nazi cause, the Germans are actually shown invading Tobruk, compared with the mere verbal references to British colonialism. Almásy is shot down by Germans, and Germans are presumably responsible for the deaths of Jan as well as Hana’s “sweetie” Captain McGann. The worst behavior in the film is reserved for Muller, the German interrogator who underscores his misbehavior by explicitly citing the Geneva Convention which he is violating. Nevertheless, Medved does not recognize this portrayal of Germans as aspersive, perhaps because the officer is not shown *eating* Carravaggio’s thumbs.

So, how is one supposed to extrapolate from the facts to an inference of ambivalence? Even if the filmmakers intended to communicate that message, the fool who believes that they succeeded is to be pitied.

Inattentiveness like Medved’s is not uncommon, and even the best critics have been known to doze. When Anthony Minghella used the word *uxoriousness* during his acceptance of an Academy Award for *The English Patient*, various commentators reported having to run for their dictionaries, even though the word had been used *and defined* in the film. A letter once appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* saying that the message of *Fargo* was that the realization of your dreams may require your wife’s death. It is a fascinating specimen indeed who can infer this message from a film in which none of Jerry’s dreams is realized, his wife’s death is never part of his plan and he is caught in the end. Whatever the message of *Fargo*, the message of this letter is that the writer is guessing at best. Similarly, Medved’s opinions, if interpreted anything like literally, mean that he either did not see the film at all, spent half the time at the snack bar, is lying, or needs not just a reality check but a check up. Stanley Kubrick said that watching a film is like taking part in a controlled dream. Medved’s thesis might be better saved for his dream journal. There comes a time to wake up, smell the coffee, and possibly change either one’s optical or pharmaceutical prescription. It would also be beneficial to reassess such tediously narrow preoccupations. In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 12/4/05, Laura Miller writes that even in the case of children’s literature, “Critics who do no more than tease out a book’s ‘messages’ fall short, for no one but the grimmest adult reads a story for its moral.”

As an antithetical alternative to *The English Patient*, Medved offered *Casablanca*, the message of which he said is “Do your duty.” The fact that the phrase is reminiscent of such

tautologies as “Morals Matter” or “Pain Hurts” will, for the moment, be overlooked. Instead, Medved’s cinematic paradigm of virtue will be examined to determine whether he made fewer trips to the snack bar during this one.

In *Casablanca* a pickpocket is presented comically and is never seen to pay for his crime. A Medvedian interpretation would have to be that the message here is that picking pockets is fun and profitable. Rick conducts gambling in his establishment in apparent violation of the law. He cheats at Roulette and has bribed Captain Renault in the past. Rick shoots, and presumably kills, Major Strasser. Medved relinquishes his right to excuse this as self-defense because he espouses absolute ethics and so cannot allow himself that luxury without making a mockery of the word *absolute*. Rick himself seems not to rely on the principle of self-defense, as he admits to be willing to shoot Strasser without qualification. Rick starts out saying, “I stick my neck out for nobody,” but eventually does his duty. It is revealed that he has not been completely passive up to now. Having fought in Spain in 1936, Rick would have been considered prematurely anti-Fascist, and by implication, Communist. In post-war America, he may have run afoul of HUAC. Is Medved now a crypto-liberal accepting of Communism? Medved is upset by Almásy’s neutrality. Rick is on the German’s blacklist, but is also a fugitive from responsibility and is unable to return to America. While Medved makes the dubious claim that *The English Patient* glamorizes adultery, he abstains from making the more sensible claim that *Casablanca* glamorizes alcohol and tobacco consumption.

Captain Renault practices sexual harassment in the issuing of exit visas. It may be inferred that he is involved in Ugarte’s death, at least as an accessory. He also fails to implicate Rick in the shooting of Major Strasser. For all this, Rick and Renault are rewarded at the end with “a beautiful friendship” and escape with impunity.

Ah, but all that misbehavior was then and this is now. Rick has undergone a transformation and *now* sees the light. *Now* Rick will do his duty (as if the Production Code Administration under Joseph Ignatius Breen would have allowed much else). Thus is he forgiven for his past, though his continuing duty to truth demands that he should confess to the shooting of Major Strasser and face the consequences, which he does not. By contrast, Almásy does not repent and pays the price, which would seem to provide the justice that Medved seeks. As in *Don Giovanni*, “*Alla vita e sempre ugual.*” Perhaps Medved considers any duty to truth to be “situational.”

*Casablanca* provides Medved with a cast of ethnic caricatures from which he can derive the kind of *argumentum ad hominem* he apparently needs to support his thesis. It also features the singing of “*La Marseillaise*,” which includes lyrics (“*epargnez ces tristes victimes a regret s’armant contre vous!*”) that translate as “You should spare those sorry victims forced to take up arms against their will!” This assertion that nationality alone does not entail evil sounds inconveniently similar to what Medved denounces as moral ambivalence in *The English Patient*. Before Medved replies with any French surrender jokes, he should recall that France is on the side to which he is sympathetic in this film. Rick dislikes Ugarte’s killing of the two German couriers. But, if the Germans are the enemy, why should he mind? Medved asserts that portraying Germans as victims would be unforgivable, yet he withholds his condemnation when Rick does just that.

The ironic admiration of this film by conservatives has not gone unnoticed. In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 2/23/03, Tom Stempel writes of *Casablanca*, “It begins with corrupt police killing innocent civilians, then spends most of its time in a gambling den owned by an ex-gunner. The owner’s pal is a corrupt policeman who sexually blackmails young women. The

owner rekindles an old adulterous affair, kills a high-ranking army officer and does not get arrested for it.”

The message of *Casablanca* would seem not just to be “do your duty,” but to do it by any means necessary. Medved is obliged to complain about those means unless the end justifies them. But as long as it is conducive to the doing of one’s duty, Medved seems to sanction lying, cheating and killing in this film while selectively demanding legalistic compliance from *The English Patient*. Given all this, it is surprising that Medved managed to recognize that both films feature locations in North Africa.

Medved espouses absolute ethical standards. Absolutes might do for a start, but only until something better comes along. Had he not found superior alternatives to certain physical absolutes, most people would never have heard of Albert Einstein. As Daniel Dennett says in *Elbow Room*, ethical absolutes can only be imagined, not implemented. Deontology does not provide a neutral algorithm for the resolution of conflicting duties in concrete situations. Unless one is satisfied with coin flipping, duties must be ranked using some form of utilitarian triage. Approval of the ethics displayed in *Casablanca* would seem difficult without the help of a little hedonic calculus and perhaps some cultural relativism. So, if Medved is displaying anything here that is absolute, it is not his ethics, but the expedience of his rationalization. Similarly, the popularity of *The Passion of the Christ* among evangelicals reveals their professed categorical opposition to R-rated cinematic violence to be equally opportunistic and “situational.”

Tolerance of diverse impressions is desirable, provided they are sufficiently accommodated by the facts and logic, beyond which interpretive license does not extend. When commentators respond to a muse unfettered by these annoying strictures, their theses collapse on analysis. Even oblique, skewed and implausibly gerrymandered accounts may be assumed to be sincere, but the strain to the limits of epistemic charity shows. It might be uncharitable not to give Medved the benefit of the doubt, were there grounds for any doubt. But even the most indulgently generous interpretation of his observations involves painting the target around the arrow.

It is stipulated that crime should not pay, but this should also include the crime of fallacy. Suspension of disbelief should only be required for the appreciation of a film, not its review. The latter should be borne out by experience and underwritten by the facts, such that it may be sustained in close quarters. As Marcus Andronicus says in *Titus Andronicus* (III.i.), “O brother, speak with possibility.” Ludwig Wittgenstein puts it another way: “Don’t be afraid to talk nonsense. But you must pay attention to your nonsense. . . . Polemic, or the art of throwing eggs, is, as you well know, as highly skilled a job as, say, boxing . . . . I’d love you to throw eggs at Ryle - but keep your face straight and throw them well! The difficulty is: not to make superfluous noises or gestures, which don’t harm the other man but only yourself.”

Medved’s grotesquely redacted caricature of *The English Patient* could be explained as drastic but shameless and transparent Orwellian revisionism masquerading as journalism. Such fraud may be perpetrated on the culturally illiterate who have not seen the film, but what about the rest of us? One can neither unring a bell (*lupum auribus teneo*) nor fool all of the people all of the time (*naturam expellas furca tamen usque recurret*) because some of us, like Hamlet, “know a hawk from a hand saw.”

Of course, when it comes to insulting one’s intelligence, Michael Medved is a veteran. During an earlier stint substituting for Limbaugh, he complained that Democrats were defending their improper behavior by pointing out the same behavior among Republicans. Medved labeled this *tu quoque* fallacy the “so’s-your-old-man defense” and declared it an invalid form of

argument. Later in that same program, he reported that liberals were complaining about conservative intolerance. To this he replied, “What about liberal intolerance?” Well, since that was the same “so’s-your-old-man defense” that he himself had just invalidated, the proper response would have been, “What about it?” So much for “Do your duty,” unless one’s duty includes asking flippant rhetorical questions to deflect inquiry and excludes following one’s own rules. As has subsequently come to be expected, this was just another of his many glib, unargued, dialectically infertile dismissals, such as “Come on. Get real.” Indeed, Medved’s censorious but insubstantial (*fulmen brutum*) criticism recalls Ravel’s characterization of his own *Bolero*: “orchestral tissue without music.”

Observers can mentally rewrite a screenplay and see a different movie, creating an issue not only of referential opacity but of indexicality, if not incommensurability. It is again allowed that facts are in the mind of the beholder and that perception cannot be separated from subjective mental activity, such that the observer’s psyche, according to Jung, is reflected in the object. Various aspects of an ambiguous figure, such as a Rorschach ink plot, the schematic Necker cube or Jastrow’s duck-rabbit, can easily go unperceived because perceptual mechanisms normally disregard most stimuli and obliterate the irrelevant. But premonitory epistemic hunger demands that a blind spot be filled in, even by a forlorn figment. Noise can erroneously trigger perception of the anticipated or desired target, resulting in hallucination by false confirmation of the presumed. Uncritical, hair-trigger, kneejerk, snap judgments yield poised, stock responses that reveal predispositions and preoccupations. Certain manifest, referential facts appear to be beyond the scope of certain people’s expectations or are simply wished away when those expectations are disappointed. Being charmed and mesmerized by zeal may leave some people blind to alternatives, such that facts not congenial to their purposes may be beneath their interest and attention. Observations that are not merely tendentious but conspicuously unsound may be magnanimously attributed to agenda-driven wish fulfillment.

“The heart is an organ of fire,” writes Almásy in his diary. Michael Medved’s arresting obtuseness demonstrates that his opprobrious brain is an organ of something every bit as capricious. Given that perception is conditioned by social identity, political convictions and institutional affiliations, Medved’s judgment seems influenced, if not hobbled, by thinly veiled allegiances and commitments to precepts from outside the field of art. He is at liberty to view films through rose-colored glasses, but no one is obliged to adopt his force-filtered, prismatically refracted outlook. And those willing to purchase the Brooklyn bridge based on a mere assertion (*gratis dictum*) deserve what they get.

Conservatives espouse personal responsibility. In addition to being a nominal adult, a person with Medved’s credentials and vocation of punditry would seem to bear a further, professional responsibility to avoid misperception of the explicit. But this may be taking too much for granted. Wittgenstein writes, “If someone tells me he has bought the outfit of a tightrope walker I am not impressed until I see what is done with it.” In *Lust for Life*, Paul opines that Vincent paints too fast. Vincent then scolds Paul by saying, “You *look* too fast.” Reviews of hastily seen films are often plagued by unfocused metastatic oversimplification or worse. When criticism has a fanciful character out of keeping with objective aspirations, it calls into question the critic’s assumed fundamental spectatorial competence. But neither a prodigious psychological debility nor a desperate and poignant cry for help can necessarily be inferred from starkly limited perception, quickly exhausted curiosity, unrepentant lack of rigor or willful ignorance alone.

Thus, it is not being suggested that there is literal madness (*remisso animo*) in Medved's method. But rational is as rational does. It is as if his belief formation mechanisms were impaired by an interest-infested subjectivity, making him an innocent victim of systematic perspectival aberrations, confused nodes of saliency in his network of mnemonic associations and tenacious cognitive illusions that he manages to sustain even without an empirical causal ancestry. None of this is necessarily symptomatic of some clinically significant apathy, but one is nevertheless reminded of certain pathologies such as anosognosia, Anton's syndrome and the Capgras delusion, all of which involve the denial of a perceptual deficiency. Perhaps the whole thing is no more than bourgeois self-satisfaction with narrow and impoverished conventions of beauty. At the very least, the Shylockian question "Hath not a critic eyes?" cannot be answered categorically and must be considered case by case.

As noted earlier, some films are said to send potentially dangerous messages. Sending the wrong message can only harm those unable to recognize wrong. For mature minds, nothing given need ever be taken. If immature minds gain access to R-rated films, it is the fault of theater managements and parents, not filmmakers. The message sent by a film is irrelevant as long as the MPAA is there to regulate who receives it. Some may prefer regulation further upstream, perhaps at the level of the screenplay. But such regulation is hated by conservatives, who prefer to regulate users of potentially dangerous products at the point of sale rather than regulate the products themselves at the point of manufacture.

Conservatives say that if you cut yourself with a knife, you should not be able to sue the manufacturer for having made the knife sharp (*ex abusu non arguitur in usum*). In 2001, the U.S. Supreme court ruled that crimes involving guns are not the responsibility of the manufacturers of those guns, and the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, passed in 2005, shields gun manufacturers from civil liability. A case that alleged that McDonald's was responsible for children's obesity was dismissed by a federal court. In March 2004, the House of Representatives approved The Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act, which shields restaurants from responsibility for customer obesity. Pharmaceuticals too dangerous to be sold over the counter may still be manufactured even though their distribution is subject to regulation via prescription. Conservatives seek only to prohibit drunkenness, not alcohol. They oppose infringement of the rights of smokers, such as the prohibition of smoking in cars in which children are riding, preferring not to interfere with parental prerogative. They favor the existence of nuclear weapons, opposing only their proliferation. The creators of films that could in principle be seen by the wrong audience are no more culpable than the makers of sharp knives, guns, fast food, drugs, alcohol, tobacco or anything else.

If guns don't kill people, then neither do motion pictures. Gun control opponents like to say that the first thing that the Fascists did was to ban guns. It could also be said that the Fascists' second act was to denounce degenerate art. Anti-Fascism is as anti-Fascism does. To be as swift to regulate films as one is slow to regulate guns would spawn contradictions that do not seem surmountable without retreat from fundamental principles. Impartiality demands the rejection of production codes for both. Since conservatives defend the *production* of such things as alcohol, tobacco and firearms, the logically congruent safeguard for audiences is not a production code but an *admission* code. To do otherwise would be un-Republican, apostatic antinomy (*esto quod esse videris*).

Wassily Kandinsky writes, "From the point of view of the inner need, no limitation must be made. The artist may use any form which his expression demands; for his inner impulse must find suitable outward expression." Auden asserts, "Poetry makes nothing happen." Man Ray

observes that art can do no real harm, whereas a bad politician, doctor or cook can kill you. Even if art is dangerous, as Plato says it could be, the risks should not be exaggerated, especially compared to bathtubs, lawn mowers and chain saws. Though any such injurious effects of art would be regrettable even if unintentional, many urgently posit a liberal conspiracy, believing Hollywood's evil machinations to be necessary, if not sufficient, for its culpability (*actus non facit reum nisi mens sit rea*). The primary challenge remains the demonstration of the effects for which such explanations have been prepared.

Even when the specter of a practical problem seems to loom large, and moral panic has political valence and currency, the bugaboo often dissolves under cursory inspection. Pavlov's bell could not get saliva from untrained dogs any more than it could get blood from a turnip. Films cannot trigger violence in the absence of an appropriately reactive subject. Furthermore, in the presence of such psychopathology, specific predetermined responses may be triggered by nonspecific stimuli, which are simply occasions for the fulfillment of individual predispositions. A cylinder and a cone may be given similar initial pushes, but each shape determines its own way of rolling. A dog was the external determinant that triggered the Son of Sam murders by David Berkowitz in 1977, but the consistent elaboration of conservative doctrine would not lead to an indictment of dogs (*dictis facta suppetant*). Nor would it allow a few pathologically susceptible influencees to alter the definition of the relationship between filmmakers and their proper audience. In the *Los Angeles Times*, 3/14/04, Douglas R. Kmiec, claiming that childless heterosexual couples cannot serve as a model for same-sex marriage, writes, "Legislatures wisely don't write laws based on the exception." Responding to concern about the publication of unflattering photographs of Saddam Hussein, President George W. Bush said (5/20/05), "I don't think a photo inspires murderers." Maria DiBattista (*Los Angeles Times*, 2/5/06) writes that film "may be the least effective medium" for changing beliefs and opinions. In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* of 4/6/05, Jerry Parsons writes of Democrats who "continue to embrace the myth of gun control as crime control." Let neither Republicans nor Democrats perpetuate any such hoax with respect to the potency of film control.

Discussing video games, Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, writes in the *Los Angeles Times*, 7/27/05, "The last 10 years have seen the release of many popular violent games, including 'Quake' and 'Grand Theft Auto'; that period has also seen the most dramatic drop in violent crime in recent memory. According to Duke University's Child Well-Being Index, today's kids are less violent than kids have been at any time since the study began in 1975 [In 2006, The Department of Justice reported that juvenile violent crime arrests had dropped "to a level not seen since at least the 1970s."]. . . . The national carjacking rate has dropped substantially since 'Grand Theft Auto' came out." At the same time, Johnson continues, "Math SAT scores have never been higher, verbal scores have been climbing steadily for the last five years; nearly every indicator in the Department of Education study known as the Nation's Report Card is higher now than when the study was implemented in 1971." From the point of view of physicians, there was "insufficient evidence to suggest that video games cause long-term aggressive behavior," according to the U.S. surgeon general in 2001, and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported no consensus on the issue in 2004.

Though the fundamental soundness of the assumption that real violence logically derives from film violence is very far from being obvious, people continue to strain to connect the two, laying criticism at the door of filmmakers. It is said that a person sees an average of 40,000 depictions of murder by the age of 18. The average number of murders *committed* by such a

person by that age is rarely stated. Rush Limbaugh ridicules the inefficiency of atmospheric ozone depletion by human activity. To claim that media violence generates actual violence at a rate that would be any more troubling to him would seem to overstate the case. Limbaugh also once ridiculed Princess Diana for championing the cause of landmine deactivation because he said there were more important issues available. Movies are no more worthy of attention than landmines until it is demonstrated that they kill people at a comparable rate. The conservative media deny responsibility for the Oklahoma City bombing. The deniability of Hollywood seems every bit as plausible. As a facilitating institution, Hollywood bears no more responsibility than the NRA or "Big Tobacco." It is further noted in passing that Walter Olson, in the *Los Angeles Times*, 2/2/06, ridicules the legal crusade against "Big Cola." Before working themselves into a lather about liberal fearmongering, let conservatives join liberals in abstaining from it.

In the *Los Angeles Times*, 11/02/03, Kenneth Turan says that people defend film violence because they are "frightened of being labeled Not With It." The proper reason to refrain from the categorical denunciation of film violence is because one is frightened of being superficial and wrong, regardless of label. Similarly, in a commentary in the *Los Angeles Times*, 11/16/05, Brian C. Anderson partially attributes the paucity of Hollywood films espousing conservative values to a "wish for recognition as artistes by liberal elites." The wish should be for achievement as artistes, with or without recognition.

On the other hand, Catholic League president William Donohue considers an adequate acquittal of *The Passion of the Christ* to be the fact that the body count in its immediate aftermath was zero. Applying that same standard, the body count due to *The English Patient* would be no more impressive even to Chicken Little. (As Beatrice says unconcernedly of Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "I promised to eat all of his killing.") By way of comparison, Benjamin Barber, in his review (*Los Angeles Times*, 8/7/05) of Marc Siegel's book *False Alarm: The Truth About the Epidemic of Fear*, writes that the author "notes that obesity, alcohol, smoking and physical inactivity take millions of lives every year, and we hardly worry about them at all."

As to the protection of children from each other, Karen Sternheimer, in *It's Not the Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children*, claims that children are about 30 times more likely to be killed by their parents than by their classmates. Perhaps the teaching of presidential assassinations should be halted in order not to promote such behavior. The issues of glamorization by prohibition and the equation of exposition with celebration inevitably seem rather stale in an age when Freud's concept of suggestion has been debunked.

On the television program *20/20: Sex in America*, John Stossel, reporting on pervasive sexual content in media, says, "What's the real effect? Where's the damage? Sex is more prevalent than ever, yet rape rates, divorce rates and the percentage of teens having pre-marital sex have been declining over recent years."

Conservatives are not above trying to have it both ways. Bruce Tinsley's *Mallard Fillmore* cartoon of 9/25/04 ridicules the notion that personal misbehavior could be "society's" fault. As "society" includes Hollywood, no such blame accrues to the latter according to Tinsley. His 9/27/04 cartoon reads, "Researchers have discovered that teens who watch lots of sexually explicit T.V. shows are more likely than other teens to be sexually active (Rand Corporation study). A related study finds that 98.4 percent of the people for whom this is news are officially stupid." Tinsley fails to quantify "more likely," perhaps in a cowardly attempt to keep secret its statistical insignificance. The nature of the exemption for the remaining 1.6 percent also remains

mysterious. Neither is it clear why Tinsley would trust the findings of those whom he himself calls stupid.

“Researchers” somehow seem to Tinsley less silly than “professors,” whom Fillmore mocks in the cartoon of the previous day (9/26/04), creating a typical example of the pot calling the sugar black. (Those professors are ridiculed for several supposed faults, including not making value judgments. Here, then, is a person in a glass house soliciting the throwing of stones. It is hoped that this commentary qualifies as a proper, conservative-style value judgment with respect to Tinsley’s reasoning.) The possibility exists that Tinsley cites the Rand study approvingly, in which case he insults the researchers unknowingly by ignoring the tautological novelty of discovery that makes this finding “news” to its discoverers. Tinsley’s cartoon of 9/29/04 reads, in part, “Network executives reacted to the Rand study by saying that we can’t blame T.V. for influencing people’s behavior.” Whatever influences exist, Tinsley himself, just days earlier, places the responsibility for that influence on those who are influenced. Apparently, Hollywood is guilty, but its victims are wrong to claim victimhood.

For his part, Scott Stantis, in his *Prickly City* cartoon of 12/19/05, makes Winslow look silly by having him say, “TV made me do it!” The next day (12/20/05), Winslow cites the “Institute of Medicine” as reporting that “watching food commercials on TV makes kids obese.” He concludes, “You gotta love a government that ratifies that it’s not my fault!” Thus, according to conservatives, TV is not at fault. In the cartoon of 12/21/05, Carmen observes that banning food commercials would constitute a loss of “freedom of speech.” This would be equally true of feature films, even, according to Carmen, when advocacy is involved. In the cartoon of 1/19/06, Winslow repeatedly asks, “Why didn’t you stop me?!” Carmen variously replies, “I’m not your nanny. . . . You knew better. . . . Take responsibility for yourself.” She finally answers, “I wanted to see what would happen.” Conservatives also recognize that an insistence on personal responsibility can allow for amusing behavioral experiments.

Film critics, too, have limits to their paternalism, as exemplified by a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 1/29/06, in which Donna Broderick chides Geoff Boucher for “spoiling another great cinematic thriller for those who have yet to see it.” The film in question was *The Usual Suspects*, released 8/95, more than a decade before Boucher’s spoiler.

While on the subject, an outstanding sobriety test is provided by another mutually rebutting pair of Tinsley’s *Mallard Fillmore* cartoons. The 7/11/04 installment mocks a government that would “save you from yourself” by penalizing driving without seat belts, riding motorcycles without helmets and eating fast food. The cartoon of 7/14/04 reads, “Pop star Madonna, who freely exposes *other people’s* kids to gratuitous sex and vulgarity, admits that she doesn’t let *her* kids curse or watch T.V. . . . . She reportedly got the idea from watching congresspersons who won’t vote for *vouchers* for *us*, but send *their* kids to private school.”

Tinsley, or at least his surrogate, Mallard, asserts in the earlier cartoon that it is wrong for the government to save people from illness and injury. He then forgets this and instead imagines some magic by which the privilege of parental oversight is uniquely Madonna’s. If government (or Madonna herself) were to save people from Madonna, it would simply contribute to what Mallard himself calls “the nanny state.” For parents to demand that the government do their parenting for them is something-for-nothing liberalism. The conservative solution is not to have the state program everyone’s V-chips for them, but to stand aside and leave responsibility for parenting with neither the government nor Madonna, but with parents. Mallard performs yet another reversal of his opposition to “the nanny state” in the cartoon of 3/22/05, in which he suggests that the option to receive reports about the Michael Jackson trial should not necessarily



be available. Conservatives, though they also crusade for tort reform to limit the prerogative of juries, accuse liberals of not trusting people to decide for themselves. If Mallard really likes conservatism so much, then maybe he should try it more often. (Incidentally, in the cartoon of 4/2/05, Tinsley seeks relief from “trite” clichés such as the peace sign. Given his rejection of “the nanny state,” it looks as if he will just have to lump it.)

Conservatives abhor not only “the nanny state,” but the welfare state, to which school vouchers would contribute. Congresspersons do not send their kids to private school *with vouchers*. They do it the old-fashioned capitalist way: they earn it. This is a capitalist society, and capitalists get what they pay for. Capitalism entitles people to whatever school or mansion or yacht they choose *and can afford*. Paying taxes provides access only to the common facilities and utilities of the common culture. Buying one’s way out of them is permitted, but requires one’s own money. Ironically, watching Madonna on television and buying her recordings and videos is the more expensive option. Parents who cannot afford to supply their kids with these products need no vouchers in order to avoid Madonna.

Conservatism is perfectly respectable, but stupidity is of practical value only to the extent that it provides others with amusement and the thrill of victory. “Vulgarity” does not begin to describe the reasoning to which Tinsley exposes kids with his comic strip. Having already eaten his cake in one installment, he can no longer have it, however much he may pathetically pretend otherwise subsequently. If poor little Mallard is not to be saved from himself and if he adopts the conservative stance of opposing social promotion, then he must accept being flunked and left to eat civilization’s dust. If not, then he perpetuates his self-contradiction with a policy of leaving no duck behind, even those who deserve it. The latter would be more amusing, though the former would be more just.

Fittingly, in the cartoon of 3/8/05, Mallard cites with seeming approval a study suggesting “that a society that doesn’t challenge kids, or correct them when they’re wrong, or flunk them when they fail, because it might hurt their ‘self-esteem’ creates a generation of lazy, ignorant, thin-skinned, weak-willed weenies!” In accordance with Mallard’s own views, and with him having asked for it, the only response due him because of this critique is, “You’re welcome.” The cartoon of 3/27/05 derides those who “have issues with . . . criticism,” so Tinsley would not be expected to admit to being one of them. The trend continues the next day (3/28/05), with any reticence about criticizing Mallard being further dispelled as he tells college students “how to fight ‘speech codes’ and other violations of your first-amendment rights!” So be it.

Having earlier made fun of those who would not blame mass media for influencing people’s behavior, Tinsley nevertheless goes on to absolve society of blame for such effects. In his 4/24/05 cartoon, a child lists the wrongs that he is expected to commit in response to societal pressures. He then says, “All of which is pretty depressing. On the other hand, imagine how much worse I’d feel if any of this stuff was gonna be my fault!” So much for Tinsley passing the buck with respect to his own faults, for this would make him a part of what he, in his cartoon of 4/24/05, derisively refers to as the “victimhood industry.”

In Tinsley’s cartoon of 5/1/05, a parrot says, “Run for your lives!! Evil fast-food giants are forcing you to overeat! You have no common sense! Which is also why you can’t be trusted with your own retirement money!” If, according to conservatives, people are not to run for their lives from evil fast-food giants, then neither is there a need to run from evil filmmakers. And, according to Tinsley, people *can* be trusted with their own money, including that which they spend on entertainment.

Touching on the earlier matter of “body counts,” Tinsley’s cartoon of 6/12/05 has Dr. Julie Gerberding acknowledging the overestimation of deaths attributable to obesity, and saying, “Smoking is . . . still bad for you, . . . while convincing you that everything is an ‘epidemic’ that can only be cured with vast government resources is still good for us, here at the Centers for Disease Control.” If meddling bureaucratic supervision of this nature is indeed a mistake worthy of Tinsley’s derision, then let not a similar one be made with respect to the far-less-lethal cinema. Conservatives, as cited below, resist mandating the use of seat belts, even though the tens of thousands of annual automobile-related deaths are no less real than any dangers posed by media exposure. If government is to be small, then let it be consistently so.

Tinsley’s cartoon of 7/3/05 reads, “In other news, meteorologists are tracking yet another hurricane in the gulf, caused, no doubt, by the divisive rhetoric of right-wing talk radio.” As it stands, the sarcasm embodies an accent fallacy. If the conservative segment of the media does not cause such things, then does any segment? The burden of proof rests on those who seek to reject the null hypothesis that the liberal media are no more responsible than the conservative.

Along similar lines, Tinsley’s cartoon of 8/6/05 reads, “If network news departments did the weather reports:” as the audio from a television is given as “And it looks like the East Coast will be dealing with the Bush humidity again this week.” Compare this to the societal problem attributed to Hollywood by conservatives.

In the cartoon of 11/27/05, Mallard claims that “even the Centers for Disease Control’s research has found that gun laws haven’t brought violent-crime stats down!” Let it not be imagined that film laws would bring down violent-crime stats any more effectively.

In the cartoon of 2/13/06, Mallard satirically links Valentine’s Day to “‘Big Candy,’ ‘Big Flowers’ and ‘Big Naughty Undies.’” Even if similar conspiracy theories applied to “Big Celluloid” are any more plausible, the MPAA would seem to be as much nanny as Mallard can tolerate (or deserves).

In the cartoon of 3/17/06, a character says, “We in the mainstream media want to go on record that we *still* believe that guns go around chasing and shooting people all by themselves, except, of course, in Dick Cheney’s case.” Neither should exceptions be made when such absurd notions are applied to films. The idea that guns “shoot folks all by themselves” is again ridiculed in the cartoon of 4/2/06, which also derides the notion that “[t]he TV turns itself on.” (By contrast, FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin said in 2005, “You can always . . . block the channels you don’t want. . . . But why should you have to?” It is because “you” are not the only person to whom the universe is obliged to cater. There exist others, in whose entertainment “you” are not entitled to interfere.)

In the cartoon of 10/28/06, Mallard reports, “New York and Chicago are actually considering making it illegal for restaurants to serve certain fatty foods. No word yet on whether booths will have mandatory seat belts.” Actually, all foods whose fat is disclosed via truthful labeling would still be legal to serve, such that the laws would only apply to secret fats. If conservatives ridicule protection by the nanny state from fat, alcohol, tobacco, firearms and trauma, then let them apply their own principles impartially and ridicule the idea of protection from motion pictures.

In the cartoon of 11/1/06, Mallard asks, “Following news that the average Guantanamo-Bay detainee has gained 20 pounds during internment, and that one prisoner has put on 195 pounds and now weighs 410, how long before liberals accuse us of ‘inflicting cruel obesity’ on them?” If detainees are responsible for an obesity that is not being inflicting on them, then movie viewers, not Hollywood, are responsible for what Hollywood is not inflicting on them.

In the cartoon of 11/5/06, an old woman claiming to have a handgun confronts a hooded figure, as a caption reads, “The part of the handgun in this cartoon is, as always, played by a banana, due to newspaper editors’ reaction to previous depictions of handguns in this comic strip – Bruce.” Conservatives are no less ridiculous when opposing cinematic depictions of “mature themes” and “adult situations” in R-rated films while making fun of those who would exclude handguns from comic strips.

In the cartoon of 5/30/07, titled “Liberals, the Early Years . . . Moderate Mammoths,” the animal pictured has corks on the ends of its tusks. It would be no less absurd if films were to be similarly blunted. Examples could continue, but the point is made.

Nick Clooney, in his book *The Movies that Changed Us: Reflections on the Screen*, asks, “Should filmmakers ever be concerned about the consequences of their art on an audience?” In a complex society that features division of labor, an artist’s responsibility need not extend beyond art. As long as the MPAA exists to protect the vulnerable and to ensure truthful labeling, dramatists are responsible only to the demands of drama. Preemptive, prophylactic sociological concern on the part of filmmakers would tend to usurp the prerogative already delegated to the MPAA. Additionally, deregulation is a conservative value.

The Rev. Donald Wildmon said that Salman Rushdie, in his novel *The Satanic Verses*, and Martin Scorsese, in his film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, “failed to take into consideration the deeply felt religious convictions of the people offended.” This was actually more success than failure, it being the responsibility of the people offended to take themselves into consideration and to abstain from offensive material.

Conservatives demand parental prerogative. They say that parents and not government should decide what their children see. That being the case, the MPAA is all the regulation to which they are entitled (*pour tout potage*). Parental prerogative extends neither beyond the family nor to legal adults, who may either ignore such offered protection with impunity or reciprocally extend paternalistic protection against such hazardous things as those mentioned earlier. Even if two wrongs do not make a right, turnabout *is* fair play.

Recognizing the double-edged nature of this sword (and ironically fearing the effects of free choice and personal responsibility), Christian broadcasters such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell (according to Jube Shiver Jr., writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, 11/29/05) support the bundling of “mainstream and niche channels” by cable companies and have resisted the efforts of anti-indecency groups that seek to allow subscription to cable channels “on an a la carte basis.” Paul Crouch Jr. of Trinity Broadcast Network says that if that puts Evangelicals in league with the forces of indecency, “So be it.”

Controversy has also arisen regarding various efforts to sanitize (one might even say sterilize) videos. Buyers of postcards featuring an image of the *Mona Lisa* have the prerogative to do with them as they please. Drawing a mustache on such a reproduction (as did Marcel Duchamp in 1919) leaves the original intact, and so does not constitute vandalism. What matters is that the mustache not be falsely attributed to Leonardo and that the maker of the “unvandalized” cards acquire as much revenue as they otherwise would. The minimum conditions under which videos may be sanitized include aggressively full disclosure and full monetary compensation for the copyright holders. DVD players that filter objectionable material while leaving the original data intact are much preferable to redacted software. They may still present a film in a manner not intended by the filmmakers, but the same is true of the use of the fast forward and cueing functions.

In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, 9/3/05, Ken Artingstall writes of “*The Insider* and all the other anti-corporate/anti-capitalist drivel Hollywood routinely tries to stuff down our throats.” Whatever Hollywood “tries,” anyone who cannot withstand such attempts is a sorry excuse for an adult. For the rest of us: no harm, no foul. Safeguards against the subject-contingent influence of art legitimately apply only to those who are powerless to resist rhetoric. The Hays Code itself says, “No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those *who see it*.” No problem arises if a film is not seen by those whose moral standards would be lowered by seeing it. It is the prerogative of the MPAA and theater managements to protect the incompetent by denying them access. Even assuming that harm could result from cinema falling into the wrong hands (and minds), viewing restrictions should be sufficiently narrow so that only the insane and immature are deprived, just as insulin injections should be reserved for diabetics. Those fortunate enough to be capable of proper aesthetic experiences, who can distinguish art from life, and who do not construe expressives as directives, deserve to be entertained according to their preferences and should not be impeded. The artist’s freedom of expression is paralleled by the audience’s freedom of impression and freedom from the collateral damage arising from misdirected paternalism.

Even if certain films could be improved by the addition of an advisory not to “try this at home,” conservatives ridicule absurd warning labels and demand that the installation of automotive airbags and the wearing of seat belts be optional and subject to individual responsibility. The MPAA constitutes just such an optional system, the use of which is the responsibility of the audience (Galatians 6:5). Anything more restrictive would be liberal, coercive political correctness. Those whose standards are not in accord with those of the MPAA are free to defer to the guidance of the proprietary *index expurgatorius* of their own parochial, tribal authorities. Parents are also free to program their V-chips as they please. Beyond that, the petulant are entitled to their whining, but to little else. Quoting Viola in *Shakespeare in Love*, there is simply “nothing to be done.”

Michael Medved sweepingly says that the problem with society is the “follow-your-heart movement” that started in the ’60s. A broader perspective reveals that his problem is more fundamentally a product of the 1160s than the 1960s. The latter were merely an echo of the Troubadour tradition of the twelfth century, which helped bring European civilization out of the Dark Ages via a reassertion of native Indo-European individualism and anticollectivism, the same modern conservative values championed by Ayn Rand.

Arthurian romances were originally a rebuttal to what Joseph Campbell calls the “sacramentalized rape” that was medieval marriage (*non omne licitum honestum*). They reflect the subversive rebellion of the women who influenced the arts in the absence of all the men who were away fighting the Crusades. (It was not until four centuries later, in Elizabethan times, that Edmund Spenser was able to popularize marital romantic love in literature.) Disputing the valuing of constancy over love, this literary tradition depicts love as a breakthrough, not a mistake. Sacred and profane love are equated, with spiritual fulfillment being realized through nature, not instead of it. Mutual passion is considered a law unto itself, but not in the sense of simple self-indulgence. Following love’s commandments and yielding to the wisdom of the heart is regarded as ennobling. It also occasionally involves mortal danger, as discussed below. Ultimately, following one’s heart exemplifies the authenticity that is the remedy for the wasteland problem, and is certainly no worse than following one’s interpretive whims in an uninformed, unreflective manner. Following somebody else’s heart seems no more reasonable and is decidedly not the conservative way (*quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*).

Practical deontological and utilitarian considerations determine the ethical standards to which real people are accountable in real life. However, life and literature operate according to different proprietary institutional obligations and standards that are not applicable beyond their domain of validity. Fictional crimes do not involve factual loss, so standards of ethics do not encroach upon fiction anymore than do standards of journalistic rigor. Stories brought into the realm of drama must adapt to the overriding standards of that domain. Fictional characters have a compelling claim on our attention only in proportion to their dramaturgical utility. They are to be held to literary standards so as not to undermine the rationale for their existence. In Katharine's words, "This is a different world." (The fictionalization of history and the actual punishment of fictitious criminals are issues that have already been addressed in the essay concerning *Heavenly Creatures*.)

Medved says that doing one's duty has always been fundamental to civilization. No less fundamental to civilization is the catharsis provided by the challenging, disturbing, irrational drama of classical antiquity (*vita sine litteris mors est*). The duties of a civilized person include the duty to withstand attempts to perturb one's ethics and the duty to avoid misapplying ethical standards where they lack validity. When duties conflict, the highest duty is to be complied with at the expense of lesser duties. The dramatist's overriding duty is to drama.

During his DVD commentary for *The English Patient*, Anthony Minghella suggests that "fiction is a kind of gymnasium for the emotions." Shakespeare recognized the need for comic relief in his tragedies and dramatic relief in his comedies. Also to be recognized is the psychological value of relief from responsibility. In *Trash, Art, and the Movies*, Pauline Kael writes of "the liberation from duty and constraint" available in a movie theater. "Perhaps the most intense pleasure of moviegoing," she claims, "is this non-aesthetic one of escaping from the responsibilities of having the proper responses required of us in our official (school) culture."

Fiction demands that suspension of disapproval accompany suspension of disbelief. Fictional characters transgress in our place, allowing us to sin by proxy. Their transgressions substitute for ours, facilitating vicarious satisfaction and guiltless, conscience-free sublimation of potentially dangerous impulses. (This parallels the rationale for the existence of spectator sports.) Robert Donington explains that in myth, whether or not in life, it is the forbidden act that is needed and heroic. To demand of fictional characters that they never do anything we would not do is the height of absurdity and ingratitude. Fiction is the proper place for the improbable, the impossible and the improper. To the extent that it fails to differ from reality, fiction is superfluous. Incidentally, according to Wittgenstein, every action can be made to accord or conflict with a rule, even in reality. In particular, the many theists adept at resolving the Problem of (real) Evil with the rationalization that it illuminates good should have even less trouble dealing with its literary or theatrical counterfeit.

Medved says that he considers the PG rating to stand for "Profanity Guaranteed," making it futile for him to feign surprise at the contents of R-rated films. Ironically, disqualification of a film based on superficial unpleasantness is a materialist view that fails to consider spiritual forces operating beneath a repellent surface. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes, "Virtue is but the pedagogical prelude to the culminating insight, which goes beyond all pairs of opposites." Even if a particular film is analogous to a sewer, repugnance provides no grounds for disqualification because "[excrement]'s got a job," as Maddy observes in *Cold Mountain*. Even if Hollywood is absolutely culpable, vengeance is *whose*, sayeth the lord? (*Permitte divis cetara* [Romans 12:19].)

A story that is pragmatically admonitory but thematically exhortatory can be held in aversion if the misbehavior depicted in it is allowed to assume some spurious significance such that the terms and dimensions of the issues to which the Arthurian paradigm is addressed are misconstrued. When dramatists implement Arthurian standards without envisaging their realistic application, some critics nevertheless become victims of romantic irony, to which many seem susceptible. In 1858, Henry Peach Robinson produced a staged photograph called “Fading Away,” which depicts a family at the deathbed of a loved one. Many took the situation to be real and saw the photograph as an invasion of privacy. The 1938 Mercury theater radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* was not universally recognized in real time as fictional. Nonetheless, the dramatic mandates of fictional characters must be distinguished from deontological prescriptions to which they are not bound.

In *Transformations of Myth Through Time*, Joseph Campbell speaks of the five magnitudes of love: slave for master, friend for friend, parent for child, spouse for spouse, and that absolute love that recognizes no impediment, brooks no obstacle, and is referred to as “ungovernable” in *Shakespeare in Love*. Transgression of some sort is needed to demonstrate this highest order of love. Adultery is a conventional literary mechanism for doing just this.

From as far back as Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* comes the idea that adultery is the only way to express love sincerely. (In *Cold Mountain*, Ada finds it hard to imagine a wedding, the war having made certain things “pointless.” She and Inman, like other couples featured in these essays, opt for consummation without clerical sanction.) Adultery may be a forbidden social evil in practice, but it is also a fundamental, integral literary staple. It is canonical rather than anomalous, and a time-honored touchstone, not simply a sidebar. It is a paradigm device within the courtly love tradition because it is necessary for compliance with Arthurian amatory doctrine, which is a *literary* standard, not a practical prescription. Whether or not adultery is proper practical behavior, it is proper drama. Its absence from Arthurian literature, as in the example of *Cligés* cited below, would be a nearly oxymoronic dramaturgical impropriety.

The Young America’s Foundation (yaf.org) “Dirty Dozen” list of college courses for 2006-2007 reflecting “leftist activism” includes one at the University of Pennsylvania titled “Adultery Novel,” in which, according to the university, “Students will apply various critical approaches in order to place adultery into its aesthetic, social and cultural context.” The adultery in question is fictional and no mention is made of any practical advocacy or approval, without which yaf.org can only bemoan the diversion of resources from remedial programs. Of the factors that qualify a theme as a reasonable object of literary criticism, ubiquity is certainly one. Themes are made ubiquitous by authors, not by the scholars who study them. Therefore, let not blame for literary themes wrongly fall on universities.

Gottfried von Strassburg affirms that literary love must be countercultural and is unsustainable in the absence of opposition. It is by way of tests and trials that love is earned. No pain, no gain. These trials act as a challenge for the benefit of both the fictional characters and the audience. Regardless of the nature of actual transgression, an ennobling experience is provided by a *story* of passion beyond the law. Borrowing the words of conservative Bruce Tinsley above, the practical reality is that drama “that doesn’t challenge” but merely flatters its audience “creates a generation of lazy, ignorant, thin-skinned, weak-willed” and insecure “weenies.” Robert Levin says that we watch movies to see things that we dare not do ourselves. Rather than tell fictional characters, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” mature minds engage with ethics recreationally to reap the psychological benefits of vicarious transgression.

Society deals with the consequences of free will by imposing justice. People can be made to pay for their thrills, but they cannot always be stopped from having those thrills in the first place. Society can only deter those it can and punish those it cannot. Immorality can be punished, but morality cannot be legislated.

Deterrence is especially finite (and often futile) in fiction. When Morgana in John Boorman's *Excalibur* is told by Merlin that acquiring the knowledge that she seeks would burn and blind her, she responds, "Then burn me." Keyser Soze in *The Usual Suspects* is not intimidated by threats to his family. Most Arthurian romances present love as an irresistible force (*La raison contre Amour à bien peu de puissance*). The law, which society complacently misapprehends as an immovable object, is no match for it (*Maior lex amor est sibi*). Eternal damnation is the best deterrent society has to offer, and even that is insufficient to impede the person whose imperturbable love supersedes the implacability of justice. When confronted with the prospect of damnation, Tristan agrees up front that it would be a bargain at twice the price. Since he is already burning with love, a little hellfire more or less would make little difference. Iseult says, "May my soul dwell with yours, whether in heaven or in hell." Being together is what counts, irrespective of location. Islam holds that Lucifer was God's truest, most ardent worshipper. He had nothing against man, but would bow to none other than God because he had earlier promised thus to behave. Rather than betray his beloved, he voluntarily chose consignment to hell. Huck Finn similarly resolves to go to hell. The last words of Mozart's Don Giovanni comment on the terrors of hell, which are for him, significantly, insufficient to induce contrition.

However few people are willing to pay such a high price for sin in real life, it is delegated to fictional characters to pay it on our behalf. A disservice is done to drama when this responsibility is shirked. Stories of deterrable love fail to achieve Arthurian status and are unfit for adult consumption. Fictional lovers who do not transgress are mythologically inadequate, and life is too short to bother with them. For instance, the resolute but impertinent morality of Chrétien's Cligès in the face of countervailing dramaturgical factors vitiates the Arthurian enterprise. A love that is subject to dissuasion may satisfy practical standards, but it squanders the opportunity to meet literary ones, thereby earning obscurity. Accordingly, the adulterous Lancelot has become an enduring literary figure, while Cligès has been eating the former's dust since the twelfth century. Recall also that the lovers in *Like Water for Chocolate* could similarly be subject to a charge of insufficient iconoclasm.

Fictional adultery is less a recent culture-war fad than a nonfungible ahistorical universal. Denouncing it is inexorably a perverse, unwarranted and gratuitous misapplication of a deontic modality meant for real, concrete situations, and thus categorically irrelevant (*honi soit qui mal y pense*). "Grab her" is thus the proper message to be sent to Almásy, being in perfect accord with the received traditional literary templates found in the courtly love of the Troubadours and the *hohe Mine* of the Minnesingers. Founded on perfectly good Arthurian precedent, adultery is indeed Almásy's duty as a fictional lover complying with the overriding demands of drama (*venia necessitati datur*). In such circumstances, anything less would be un-Arthurian and disappointing. As Maurice Bendrix in *The End of the Affair*, Ralph Fiennes will himself observe, "Jealous lovers are less ridiculous than jealous husbands. They're supported by the weight of literature." For her part, Katharine tries to rearrange the stars, as if trying to change her fate. Either effort would be futile. As a fictional character, she too is compelled to do her duty. (See the essay on *The Hours*.)

Since Geoffrey appears guiltless, some complain that he does not deserve betrayal. If the husband is too easily invalidated, then the decision to cheat on him is made too easily and provides no challenge and no satisfaction for the mature mind. If the husband's goodness suffices to deter adultery, then the love in question is inferior by literary standards. (See *Like Water for Chocolate* for examples of both challenging and easily resolved triangles.) As explained earlier, fictional love fails to pass muster unless it is so strong that it proceeds in spite of its practical ethical wrongness. Literary betrayal of the innocent husband is thus utterly routine. (See the discussion of *The Piano* for Gottfried's opinion of the innocence of deceived husbands.) To complicate matters, Geoffrey says that he and Katharine "were practically brother and sister before we were man and wife." Katharine's relationship with Almásy may thus be more adulterous but less incestuous.

Medved would seem to prefer that Katharine abstain. Would he ask the same of Juliet? He is unable to weasel out on the technicality that Juliet marries Romeo. According to the mores of her society, her relationship with Romeo is no less adulterous because, though she marries, she marries the wrong man. Nor would it be acceptable to replace Katharine with a character of greater moral stature but lesser intellect (*aut Caesar aut nullus*). Like his late partner Gene Siskel, Roger Ebert is always looking for cinematic characters as smart as the dumbest people he knows in real life. Katharine is to be admired for her knowledge of Herodotus. If her immorality disqualifies her, then so be it. But any woman offered as a substitute, however moral, would simply be eating Katharine's dust if she were not equally familiar with classical literature. Perhaps a moral person will not commit betrayal, but then neither will a shrub. Morality may be necessary, but it is not sufficient. It may be a virtue, but the sacrifice of intellect is too high a price to pay for it. Due to utilitarian asymmetry, the bathwater may be conceded, but not the baby. As Katharine herself says, "I don't care to bargain."