

ON LOOKING AT, INTO, & THROUGH CHILDREN

You could count on one hand the number of films Loree & I go to in a year, but yesterday we saw this one because a few days ago our 54-year-old son (called, when a child, "Billy Elliott") phoned to tell us it's a gotta-see. It is that. Not just good but great. Horace's infotainment, education through entertainment. The reviewers have not exaggerated with such words as "rapture," "bracing," "charming," "artful," "uplifting" (combined with "crowd-pleasing": oxymoron, but it can be done!), "life-affirming," "optimistic."

1 Category? The first wd. to pop into my mind was the English-from-German "Bildungsroman," formation-novel, a coming-of-age drama (Billy is 11, then at the final episode 25). Here, as in Dickens' DAVID COPPERFIELD (an 1850 English Bildungsroman), a boy who culturally doesn't have a chance struggles up out into success. But the point is only outwardly the success of rising to the top of ballet in London (from a grubby, gritty, grimy north-of-English mining town): inwardly, the success is that a boy made it into manhood, maturity, through sufferings (of Jesus, Heb.2.9; 5.8). (LOCALE NOTE: The protagonist, real name Jamie Bell, was chosen [2,000 boys auditioned!] as one from the story's geographical area, with Newcastle upon Tyne the principal city [the area with the world's greatest concentration of Elliots, however spelled: it seemed to us that every other commercial vehicle bore our name].)

2 No explicit sex, no excessive (beyond storyline necessity) violence, very little bad language--so why the "R" rating? A few uses of the "f- - -" word can't explain it. Because, I think, of British terms for homosexuality: the gay community is severely Puritan about that. (Billy is not gay: he's attracted to girls, & brushes off a homo friend who makes a play for him. What if he'd been gay? Given gayness as today a hot-button issue, that would be the viewers' primary angle of vision.)

3 We are looking at an early adolescent, a time of life everybody beyond it has keen strong-feelings memory of (the actor was 14 when the film was made, though for pathos his brother says he is "only 11"). Inner & outer chaos, or at least turmoil. In the earliest English novel, Sam. Richardson's PAMELA, the protagonist is 15. Henry Fielding's TOM JONES is a bit older, not much. And what shall I say of the boy/girl romance in the film "Titanic"? That *that* storm, more than the elaborate violence of the ship's sinking, was the reason why millions of teens saw the movie *often*. Almost everybody is a voyeur of early-adolescents' hormonal storms, & not just for memory's sake: life-long, we are our own subject of study, & we never cease revisiting our own adolescence (hopefully, without falling into narcissism).

4 In this Thinksheet's title, what's the difference between "at" & "into"? We look "at" the farcical exterior carryings-on of TOM JONES, whose interior life is thin, having only two motives: survival & sex. But while "Billy Elliot" has its farcical moments during which we're looking "at" the action & Billy's role in it, the writer/producer/director want us to look into Billy, whose inner life is thick with a tangle of incentives. There, inside him, we are held fascinated; for all his feelings & thoughts resonate within each of us....

5& many viewers, caught in our "age of subjectivity," will stop there. The phrase is from Rich. Rohr's insightful "Why Does Psychology Always Win?" (12.91 SOJOURNERS 10-15). The "easy optimism" of the '50s & '60s, "the age of objectivity," when the God-home-mother fabric of life held for most Americans despite tearing forces, yielded to a late-'60s psychologization (psychology becoming the dominant hermeneutical [explicative] language). We entered (said eminent Jungian analyst James Hillman) "the therapy world, the self-help world, the talk-show world." The culture moved from self-forgetful self-transcendence to self-absorbed self-actualization (with self-acceptance as the goal: being "on my own journey," "I can be comfortable with that"). "The subjective self became objective truth.... Our search for the permanent, the transpersonal, the civic, and the global was no longer much of a search. We had discovered personal existence, and questions of essence seemed boring." Narcissus fell into the well, & we were told that "working on oneself" for the sake of "growth" was more serious than anything out there in the world--so it wasn't long before Oprah was raking in millions of fans & dollars. "Inner work" substitutes for the search for God, for (& this makes pop Buddhism attractive) the temple is within. Self-assertive wilfulness (as Gerald May puts it) replaces self-giving willingness (the

Cross). I add this: Politically, this narcissism is disastrous. Feelings being what's most serious (Keats' romantic "the holiness of the heart's affections," which our current US poet laureate Stanley Kunitz says is for him the most affective phrase), the supreme court, **the fear of hurt feelings** determines the whole range of PC, what's acceptable in culture & law--so the minority rules simply by stating that their feelings are (or will be) hurt! Tocqueville saw this early in us Americans: "They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands." "Romantic individualism" (back to RR) is now "the esperanto of the American people," "endless competing rights and bottomless competing feelings." "You must be true to yourself," which is what Billy's mother, as she was dying, wrote to Billy--a letter he cherished in lieu of scripture, & showed diffidently to his first dance-teacher: "Billy Elliot" is solidly within the current sick-healthy cultural paradigm, & it seems realistic to those captive to that (antibiblical) way of seeing & living in the world. "We have substituted personality for character, being for doing, celebrities for true heroes." Billy is a sort of hero, but his victory is in becoming a (ballet) celebrity.

6 Billy is a flatlander, with no (RR, again) "common/cosmic narrative," an isolato individualist despite all his relationships (father, brother, grandmother, boy-&-girl friends, ballet teacher). The story is, of course, without benefit of either deity or clergy: a secular requirement. Author RR is a Franciscan monk concentrating on "what matters, what lasts, what is....the meaning and values of ourselves *outside of ourselves!*" Life is "diminished" by "respecting no authority except private experience."

7 But though we can look **at** & peer **into** Billy, can we see **through** him? Kunitz says his hope in writing a poem is that readers will be able to "look through [it] and see the world." But the poem that made him a poet, "stirring me into poetry," was one that looks through the world & sees **God**: Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur." K. prostitutes H. to his own (though mystical) secularism. Yet, in "Billy" there are two **signals of transcendence**: His mother's dying letter promised (as Jesus at the end of Matthewe) "I will be with you always"; & time & again the story shows the redemptive power of love--chiefly through huggings among the central characters: we never outgrow our need for hugging, & "underneath are the everlasting Arms." The film veiledly preaches the gospel from an unexpected pulpit.

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 Lake Elizabeth Drive
Craigville MA 02632

