

Coming Home

Coming Home is a powerful but curiously unsatisfying film that never quite develops a coherent tone or point of view.

On the one hand, it is a vividly photographed (by Haskell Wexler), well-acted, genuinely moving chronicle of the traumas of life in the Vietnamized America of the late 1960s. On the other, it is a slick, facile, commercial package, calculatingly designed to exploit American cultural myths.

These contradictions are traceable to the film's director, Hal Ashby. Several of his films — *Harold and Maude*, *The Last Detail*, *Shampoo* — pandered in relentlessly cynical, superficial, and dishonest ways to stereotyped definitions of, respectively, "free spirits," macho sailors, and LA hipsters. But Ashby's most recent film, *Bound For Glory*, sought, with commendable integrity if only partial success, to confront folk hero Woody Guthrie without falsifying either his personal failings or his mythic stature.

Perhaps recalling the commercial failure of *Glory*, Ashby generally opts for easy superficiality in *Coming Home*. Even the opening credits, superimposed over alternating shots of a jogging marine and the crippled legs of war veterans, reflect Ashby's fondness for cheap shots, crude, dishonestly simplistic and manipulative images.

The film's characterizations are similarly marred by a penchant for the superficial and the obvious. The performances of the three leading players, Jane Fonda, Jon Voight, and the ever-underestimated Bruce Dern, are all masterful, but the roles themselves are dishearteningly stunted and one-dimensional. Each can be summarized in a glib phrase: Fonda is the straight housewife sensing new possibilities in her life; Voight is the embittered paraplegic vet, slowly rehabilitating himself into a truly beautiful human being; Dern is the career marine officer who can't handle what he saw in Nam. Period.

All three players work brilliantly within these narrow conceptions, without ever suggesting thoughts or feelings that might transcend or expand the stereotypes. The only character complex enough to resist such labels, Fonda's friend Vi, is given one scene where her conflicting emotions and values overwhelm her; thereafter, she is used as a prop, with almost no lines to speak.

In *Coming Home*, as in *Shampoo*, Ashby relies heavily on late 60s rock music to help establish a milieu. The songs here are generally well-chosen, though some of the choices — "Born to be Wild" in a strobe-lighted psychedelic nightclub — are embarrassingly obvious. Music can define an ambience, but it has other effects that Ashby apparently misunderstands. For example, the several minutes during which Dylan's "Just Like a Woman" sustains a single mood encompasses several changes of mood within the film, but the song plays to its conclusion, with no great attention given to its minute-by-minute appropriateness.

Not all the musical selections are, however, even ap-



By DAVID COURSEN

Coming Home The Serpent's Egg

'Nam pic slick flick; 'Egg' fails to hatch

appropriate. Surely the oddest song choice in the film is the mournful, brooding, end-of-a-love-affair Neil Young/Buffalo Springfield lament "Expecting to Fly," inexplicably played during the film's love scene. The whining despair of the song is so out of place it's hard to understand why it was used at all. Fortunately, the sensuousness of the camera caressing the flesh of the lovers and the intensity of Fonda's acting give the scene an erotic charge that not even an ill-chosen song can diminish.

This kind of inattention to detail is typical of the film's thoughtless superficiality. Thanks to the talents of its actors and the resonance of its subject, *Coming Home* manages to generate a good deal of emotional power, but too often it evades the troublesome questions it implicitly raises.

The Serpent's Egg

Ingmar Bergman may well be the most overrated film director of the last quarter century. So extravagantly has he been over-praised that not even his best work — fine as that can be — begins to reach the level of excellence the director's overheated admirers have invented for him.

At this level of critical overkill, artistic values can easily be inverted. Bergman's greatest strengths, a vivid — occasionally oppressively so — visual style, aided always by the cinematographic wizardry of Sven Nykvist, and a gift for coaxing overpowering performances from his casts, are sometimes denigrated as "merely" cinematic. Perversely, the director's greatest flaw, his stupefying pretentiousness, usually taking the form of a metaphysical discourse into something profound — the meaning of life and the nature of God were early favorites — is taken as evidence of intentions lofty enough to qualify him as "Serious Artist."

Somehow, the fact that his "insights" have often been sophomoric, and even slightly silly, has frequently been overlooked, possibly in deference to the fact that films in a foreign language — in this case Swedish — are inherently superior to English-language product.

Predictably, Bergman's first film in the Vulgate, the English-language *The Touch*, was generally reviled, with special emphasis on the contaminating presence of Hollywood's Elliott Gould. The most recent Bergman, *The Serpent's Egg*, also in English and financed by Mr. Vulgarly himself, Dino de Laurentiis, has also been poorly received, with special abuse reserved for the performance of ex-TV star David ("Kung Fu") Carradine.

Bergman has always been an obsessively self-absorbed film-maker, and *Egg*, his first film since his Kafkaesque quasi-expulsion from Sweden,

may be the bleakest film of his career. There is something about it that seems crazy; out of control, and agonizingly personal. In most of his previous work, Bergman has abstracted his subjects — characters and settings — in time and location, to universalize his material and generalize his personal anguish into a statement about the world at large. In *Egg*, though, he gives up the protective cloak of universality and acknowledges the singularity of his obsessions by dealing with a specific individual, Abel Rosenberg (Carradine), stranded in a specific-and-atypical social-historical context, Berlin in 1923.

Few settings could be more hallucinarily ugly. Cold, grey exteriors alternate with lurid interiors in a ghastly, film noirish nightmare of terror and death. Rosenberg's own actions, bizarre, irrational, almost unwilling, seem to take place beyond his power to control or explain, as he robs his sister-in-law, or terrorizes fellow Jews. He has, in fact, been swallowed up by his surroundings long before the film's final sequence.

Carradine gives a remarkable performance, alternating between numb self-possession and overt hysteria, with no gradations between. The effect this creates is of a man so close to the abyss that he can only maintain control of himself by completely stifling his emotions. The slightest trace of feeling becomes wild, uncontrollable, hysterical, and grotesque.

This brittle half-man seems to belong to his hellish environment as surely as if he had conjured it from his own alcoholic stupors. His fascinated, compulsive attraction to this world finally prevents him from escaping, even when he is offered a partial explanation for the chaos and a chance to leave Berlin for a job in Switzerland.

Manuela (Liv Ullman), the sister-in-law who offers Abel refuge, seems to trust her surroundings with a wide-eyed judgement that itself borders on the self-destructive. In the film's centerpiece, she visits a priest, and bets for consolation, for relief from her guilt and her pain at the suicide of her ex-husband.

The priest (James Whitmore, in a precise, understated performance), first tries to evade her, only grudgingly agreeing to pray for her. Finally, he offers her the forgiveness she cannot find within herself, and in return, asks her forgiveness for his own indifference.

The scene's tone of acceptance of human mortality and compassion for human weakness is the film's single moment of peace and lucidity. Fleeting contacts between lost souls may offer neither order nor redemption, but they can, at least, offer momentary sanctuary from a spiritual void that destroys those it cannot possess.



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