

Two Movie Reviews

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

Hard Candy (2006)

Directed by David Slade

Written by Brian Nelson

Up in the Air (2009)

Directed by Jason Reitman

Written by Jason Reitman and Sheldon Turner

A WHILE BACK I was invited to contribute an article on clerical celibacy to a religious periodical. Sensing that my approach would be inimical to the editor, I wrote beforehand to inform her that I was in favour of celibacy on historical and theological grounds. In her reply, withdrawing the invitation, she pitied me for being a man in what had become a woman's world. Absurd and narrow as her comments were, they nevertheless had some validity in their assessment of certain elements of our society. In earlier, simpler times, the battle of the sexes was characterized by mutual exasperation and condescension: a man would speak indulgently of "the little woman," and she would express her amusement at the posturing of the male, the two attitudes illustrating an aspect of the complementarity of the sexes. The "battle," which Shakespeare called "a kind of merry war,"¹ was the subject of plays, books and films in which a larger-than-life male conquered something—nature, the enemy, a threat of disease or disaster—and then was reduced to size by a woman. Browsing through Father Owen Lee's book on movies, *The Best Films of Our Years*, I ran across his paragraph on *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, the quintessential instance of the traditional interaction between men and women: ". . . an explosively entertaining film that spread the seven brothers and their 'sobbin' women across a wide cinemascope screen and set them dancing with an athletic vigor such as movies had never, till 1954, seen."² Diminutive Milly Pontipee (Jane Powell), newly married to Adam (Howard Keel), sets about

¹ *Much Ado About Nothing*, act 1, scene 1.

² M. Owen Lee, *The Best Films of our Years* (Bloomington [IN]: Author House, 2007), 104.

domesticating her wild and wooly brothers-in-law and redirecting their overly aggressive courtship of the six other brides. 1954 may be ancient history now, as my would-be editor was well aware, but long before then Chesterton had already remarked on the first steps women had taken in descending from their position of eminence to the lower levels occupied by men:

Openly and to all appearance, this ancestral conflict has silently and abruptly ended; one of the two sexes has suddenly surrendered to the other. . . . the woman has in public surrendered to the man. She has seriously and officially owned that the man has been right all along; that the public house (or Parliament) is really more important than the private house; that politics are not (as woman had always maintained) an excuse for pots of beer, but are a sacred solemnity to which new female worshipers may kneel.³

Chesterton's insight, carried far beyond anything he could have imagined, is illustrated by *Hard Candy* in which the female tames the male not by courtship and marriage, but by an extremely brutal assault that has him whimpering for pity and, finally, hanging himself (*sic*). Its sordid plot merits no summary, beyond noting that the young teenaged "heroine" (Ellen Page) attacks her victim with a ferocity that would have made Jack the Ripper blink. He deserves everything he gets—of course—but it's worth noting that, however committed our culture may be to the equality of the sexes, there is no possibility of as violent a film being produced with the genders reversed. The extent of the alteration of our mores represented by *Hard Candy* can be illustrated from an old film, *Adam's Rib* (1949), in which the roles were actually reversed. A proto-feminist lawyer (Katherine Hepburn) illustrates the double standard, and wins the case, by having the jury picture the betrayed wife as a man and her philandering husband as a woman. The purpose of her doing so, however, is poles apart from *Hard Candy*, in that she convinces the jury that her client deserves sympathy for acting, however unconventionally, in the interests of her family. In other words, the role reversal is a comic illustration of the real difference between men and women, which finds its proper fulfilment in the home, while in *Hard Candy* we learn that a woman can be as tough and aggressive as a man,

³ G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, vol. 4 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 132

is in fact an *ersatz* man, and neither home nor family has anything to do with it.

In both the films under review the coarseness of the language and action would be shocking if we had not long become inured to it. The remote origins of this unprecedented shift in public sensibility can be found in a widespread rejection of children as normative for a family. The conscious exclusion of children leaves husband and wife in some ways little different from a couple of buddies sharing a room or two women living under the same roof. Independence, taking their pleasures where they may be found, and a few compromises in the practical order define the relationship. Confusingly it still claims the ancient and noble title “marriage,” which today has more and more been legally extended to include any old random twosome.

Chesterton noted that the new depravity would be sexual in nature: “The next great heresy is going to be simply an attack on morality; and especially on sexual morality.”⁴ The popular film *Up in the Air* seems to have been made to illustrate both facets of Chesterton’s commentary on modern life: first, that women have adopted the male mindset and, secondly—since all men are beasts—that a woman can be equally bestial. The protagonist (George Clooney) happily lives in airports and on airplanes, up in the air, unattached and unattachable. With a smirk he answers the inevitable question of his fellow traveller, “Where are you from?” with a shrug and a self-satisfied, “From here.” His travel techniques are as refined as his professional skills, which send him across America to fire long-term employees in firms where the boss does not have the courage to do the job himself. *En route* from somewhere to somewhere else, he meets his female counterpart (Vera Farmiga), who matches him credit card for credit card, (almost) air mile for air mile, job for job. Between flights they have time for a fling, which they repeat whenever their paths happen to cross. The plot consists of a series of events—a family crisis, his young co-worker’s failed romance, his increasingly precarious position in the firm—by which the male discovers what it means genuinely to care for someone. In the climatic scene, he breaks the rules of the game by going to her home. The surprise ending is provided by a glimpse through an open door of her young children and from the background her husband’s affectionate query about the identity of their visitor. She closes the door in his face, and later, by cell phone, coldly describes their relationship as what it is, leaving him humiliated, “up

⁴ *G. K.’s Weekly*, June 19, 1926, in A.L. Maycock, *The Man Who Was Orthodox* (London: Dobson, 1963), 123.

in the air.” By the end of the movie his jaunty “From here” is uttered with a groan.

Although the plot focuses on the man’s hesitantly moving towards something like authentic love, my interest was directed to the woman. In classic feminist terms, she can be said “to have it all”: a career, a stable marriage, children, wealth, at the same time as she spends most of her time on the job away from home and is continually unfaithful, at one point spending an entire weekend in pursuit of her current casual affair. All the female characters—the sister, the colleague, the paramour—point out the obvious immaturity of the man, but the film enters fantasy when it portrays the woman as unaffected by frequent and (by her own admission) perverse infidelities. Most distressing is the sympathy, even admiration, that we are implicitly invited to entertain for someone who not only bests the male at his own game but also, incredibly, is able to balance what she calls the real world of her family with the unreal world she inhabits “up in the air.”

In fact, this version of feminism has moved from cinema and television, from books and the web into people’s actual lives. Witness, the notorious photographs from the Iraqi prison Abu Ghraib, where female American soldiers equalled and sometimes outdid their fellows in degrading the (exclusively male) prisoners. Is it a wonder that anyone with a religious or simply a moral sensibility feels betrayed by the contemporary media in their smug assumption that they are representative of the whole range of human values and behaviour? The wildest conservative pundit—a Rush Limbaugh, e.g.—seems positively sane in comparison. Given that the arts may be said to capture the present and anticipate the future, “we have cause to be uneasy.”⁵ ❧

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952), 34. “We Have Cause to be Uneasy” is the title of the final chapter of book 1, in which Lewis draws a parallel between the laws of physical nature, which allow no exceptions, and the moral law, which we may confidently expect to be equally relentless.