

THE ART OF BEING BECKONED

By Michael Ventura

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Thirty years ago a friend of mine -- we'll call her Jane -- was living in Amarillo. The city had three, maybe four, single-screen movie theatres and four TV channels. Foreign cinema and "art films" were known to Jane only by excited rumors spread by friends who'd returned from the big coastal cities or Austin. But one fateful afternoon (fateful, as it turned out, for me as well) Jane chanced to hear that Federico Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* was to be screened at Texas Tech, in Lubbock, 150-ish miles to the south. In those days who knew when, if ever, the film would come that close to Amarillo again? So she and another woman got in her car, sped down US87, and found the auditorium at Texas Tech just in time. Jane had never seen a Fellini film before. His festive, chaotic rhythms; his seamless weave of grit and whimsy; his paradoxical vision of reality as a harsh environment that could be transcended but could not be escaped; his vast respect for the vulnerability of human beings; his sense of a secular sacredness that treated God respectfully but playfully -- Fellini created a romantic cinema that had no need for happy endings, yet felt uplifting; a heroic cinema that had no need of heroes. And no one had yet splashed color on a screen as audaciously as Fellini in *Juliet of the Spirits*, his first color film, where drastically contrasting colored forms created illusions of perspective that seemed almost 3-D. The aesthetic excitement of it all thrilled Jane and her companion so deeply that when they left the auditorium they couldn't bring themselves to head straight back to Amarillo. (This will not have to be explained to anyone who's spent any time in Amarillo.)

Jane's friend had met a man who lived near the Salt Fork of the Red River, about a two-hour drive from Lubbock. Something about the Fellini film made her want to visit that man.

Here was art fulfilling its deepest function: not inspiring a duplication or imitation of itself, and certainly not getting its significance from an analysis or critique, but giving these young women a sense that life itself had just upped the ante, that the stakes were suddenly higher, and that there was more possibility in the night and in their lives than they'd yet considered. The work of art itself gave them the energy to fulfill its expectations.

That is greatness in art, and it is the only greatness that counts. By comparison, most of what we call greatness is merely a form of cataloging. Art is a repository of intense energy -- "for USE," as the poet Charles Olson said in capital letters. In this sense art is "conservative" in that word's root use: Art conserves and condenses the most delicate and the strongest of life's energies in a form where those energies become available to any passing stranger.

So instead of going home, Jane and her friend drove the two-lanes northeast across the High Plains and off the Caprock to the rolling gullied country that spreads out around the Red River and its Salt Fork. The man they went to visit -- his name was (and is) George. A wild, wise, strange, paradoxical and quietly great man whom most people will never hear of, but who would make all the difference in Jane's life. Through Jane, I and others would meet him, and George would make all the difference in our lives too --

especially mine. To this day I call him my Teacher, and I owe much that I've become to him. But that is another story.

This story -- is merely to note that so much was changed in so many lives (George's life as well as ours) because two young women had the impulse to see a movie and, more importantly, because they had to meet that movie more than halfway. The movie couldn't come to them. Couldn't even come to their city, much less into their homes. However they heard about that screening in a city 150-ish miles away, they had to meet the desire that creates art with an intense desire of their own; and it was their enacted desire which opened them to the possibilities of that work of art -- opened them to art as no course of instruction ever could. And while the same thing might happen if they'd rented a video or had found the film on one of a hundred cable channels (neither of which was possible 30 years ago), the very convenience of these new technologies lessens the need of intensity in the seeker.

Which is a considerable danger. I cherish my video collection, and I love coming upon something unexpected as I zap through a hundred channels, but it is rarely recognized that these luxuries, like all luxuries, place a greater demand upon the seeker. We forget that convenience is a kind of confinement. We forget that to bring it all into our homes (instead of going out to meet it) is often to trap ourselves and put ourselves out of the reach of change. It is so much harder to release ourselves from the confinement of our habits while not having to move from the setting of that confinement. The convenience undermines the art: for art's purpose is precisely to break through our confinements.

Now I own virtually every film Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton ever made, and that collection is among the last things I'd hock. Yet I can't avoid the knowledge that something of the mystique and romance of those films has been drained by my easy ownership. For I remember the winter of 1971, in Boston, when Chaplin (still alive) released fresh prints of all his major works for the first time since their creation. At that time you could be, as I was, a film aficionado, hungry for the art; and you could have spent most of your life in New York City, as I had, where more great films were screened than anywhere else in the world -- and you could still never have seen, as I had never seen, *City Lights* or *Modern Times* or *The Kid* or *The Gold Rush* -- or if you had seen them, rarely was the print decent or even complete. So the re-release of fresh prints of Chaplin's complete work at a real theatre, one per week for weeks and weeks -- the news went like a shock wave through those to whom such things mattered.

They played at a small theatre in Brookline at the edge of Boston. I waited at a trolley station in the freezing New England cold, took the chilly trolley, and faced the prospect that when the film was done I might or might not be in time to catch the last trolley home -- might, and sometimes did, have to walk an hour and more in 20- and 10-degree weather. I, like the others in that theatre, didn't care. And because there was no way to predict when or even whether Chaplin would release these movies again, and there was as yet not even the dream that one might own these films, some of us would return to see our favorites two and three nights running all that winter.

In that setting, having to devote the evenings of the better part of two months to go the films, putting much else aside, and braving the cold -- the flaws of Chaplin's work didn't much matter. His sentimentality, his descents into mawkishness, his worship of the creature, the Little Tramp, that he'd created and become -- who cared? All that mattered was the enchantment of his grace and the stark, elemental nature of a comedy that always stepped over the edge of tragedy. For we had to leave our confinements and even our

social lives, had to come to Chaplin more than halfway, through the cold, and had to open ourselves to absorb his art, for it might be the only chance we'd get. Critiques were beside the point -- they might be valuable in other contexts, but not after you'd missed the last trolley and were walking home on freezing feet, feeling more than a little Chaplinesque yourself, the films having opened you to the precarious beauties of a wintry city at night. Once a fresh coat of snow had fallen during the movie. I could have caught the trolley but opted to walk in the almost unmarked whiteness. I was wearing thick galoshes over my shoes, and at the steps of my apartment building, fumbling with cold-numbed fingers for my keys, I looked back and it seemed that my galosh tracks might be those of Charlie's oversized boots and that invisibly the Tramp had walked me home.

Now with all this art at our fingertips we get lazy and forget what art is. We can purchase it, or zap it to us with a click. It gives us the illusion of possessing that which we can never truly possess without going a distance to meet it -- an inner distance or an enacted distance, it doesn't matter, but a distance must be traversed. For the video or the book of poems on the shelf is really very far away. It exists only to beckon us on a journey. And it can accompany us only as far as we've gone to meet it.

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