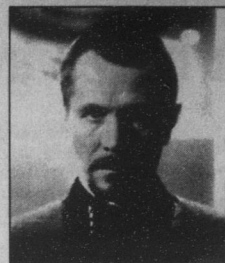


Div:ersions

Movies Page 11

WEEKLY ENTERTAINMENT SECTION ★ THE DAILY TAR HEEL

Thursday, April 9, 1998 ■ Page 5



Loss of navigation shows new movie
"Lost in Space" ranks up there with the likes of "The Pest" and "Mr. Wrong" with its bad direction, plot and other film accessories gone awry. Even with the evil Gary Oldman on board, the movie is not a compelling, watchable show.

NO uncertain terms

Not long ago, I saw the movie "Primary Colors." Yes, everything you've heard about it is true. John Travolta is straight out of Little Rock, Ark., and perfects the slick Clinton politician-type with seeming grace: the slightly tight polo shirt, lazy southern voice, charming smile, hand on the shoulder when shaking hands and womanizing smoothness. Who would have thought the disco dancer turned "Pulp Fiction" hitman would ever be imitating the powerful presence and scandalous shadows of Bill Clinton?

But interestingly enough, this is not just a case of a single movie imitating real-life events. In a broader sense, it raises the question of how art imitates life and how life imitates art. Both feed off one another and, often, the line between the two is blurred. No doubt this influences how we see the world.

Take the media for instance. Sit down, flip on the tube and guess what you'll probably see? You got it. A new allegation from someone named Lewinsky, Jones or Willey or practically any other female ever claiming to have met our president. Then, at the end of the story, you'll hear something that goes like this: "Despite so-and-so's latest allegation, President Clinton's approval rating remains at an extremely high level."

Reports like these are extremely powerful. True, they do inform us of American public opinion. But without doubt, they also help to shape that opinion. It's a vicious cycle. The media tells us what we think, and much of what we think is formed by what we hear and see in the media. In a sense, art has dictated to, and been dictated by, life.

And how about director Oliver Stone and his politically scathing depictions of the U.S. government in the films "JFK" and "Nixon"? While they portray Stone's beliefs and supposed findings about presidents, scandals and conspiracies, they also help breed negative sentiments that many people have about political leaders. Are militias, Freemen and the bombings of federal buildings and abortion clinics direct results of artistic expression? Not a chance. But they are related in that art not only reflects our attitudes, but also shapes the way we (Militia members and bombers included) perceive Washington and the entire world.

But again, the relationship between life and art is circular. Tupac Shakur's lyrics were obviously a product of his social environment. But they also feed back into society, painting a picture for us of places and circumstances not quite as scenic as life in the quad on a sunny spring day. Art has the ability to awaken us from our utopian collegiate slumber and show us the world from a different perspective than our own.

In addition to expressing his personal experiences with racism and violence, Tupac's music also helped shape a society increasingly prone to the types of violence described in his lyrics. Unfortunately, the societal evils depicted and partially created by Tupac's brutally realistic vision stabbed one of their most harshly honest storytellers in the back. Tupac's life imitated his art in the most tragic of forms: his own death.

The implications of this are huge. Every time we see a movie, listen to a CD, attend a play and read a novel, we are exposed to a certain artist's impressions.

The real question rests in our decision either to reject those impressions or accept them as our own. Either way, the actions we take in our lives, whether political, religious, social or what-have-you, imitate the artistic expressions hurled our way faster than allegations thrown at President Clinton. And that's pretty fast.



With his pudgy belly pushing out from under his shirt, John Travolta strikes his best Bill Clinton pose for Mike Nichols' "Primary Colors."

Life becomes canvas

BY JIM MARTIN
ARTS & DIVERSIONS EDITOR

The creators of "Primary Colors" at Universal Studios know what they have started with their fact-or-fiction motion picture. But as Entertainment Weekly magazine reported in its March 27 issue, the filmmakers and executives deny any chronicling of real life on their film reels.

So what happens when life starts to look indiscernible from art? As Entertainment Weekly found out, "Ask the makers of 'Primary Colors,' ... they'll say they don't know what you're talking about."

But "Primary Colors" is a drama focusing on a Southern presidential candidate who lies, eats a lot and has an even more insatiable appetite for sex. Throw in his strong wife and a couple other side plots and the film bears a striking resemblance to the life of President Clinton.

While people often expect art to imitate life, sometimes it can be very unnerving to see life start imitating art. When "Wag the Dog" was released late last year, critics and audiences raved it as witty and well-written. But when the events of the movie started happening in real life, things got sketchy.

In "Wag the Dog," weeks before a presidential election, the current president who seeks reelection becomes embroiled in a sex scandal, and so to divert attention from this unsavory view of him in the public eye, political strategists start up a fake war which sends the president's ratings skyrocketing. Interestingly enough, just a week later in real-life Washington, D.C., the Monica Lewinsky story broke; perhaps not coincidentally, at the same time Clinton stepped up his war rhetoric towards Iraq. Lo and behold, his ratings went up. Audiences, then, either raved or criticized the film.



Dustin Hoffman received an Oscar nomination for his role as the producer of "Wag the Dog's" fake war.

This phenomena of life's events mirroring those on the silver screen did not start at the end of last year, though. Orson Welles' classic "Citizen Kane" is notorious for its controversial ties to William Randolph Hearst. But, the two films of 1997 and 1998 happening so closely together have caused quite a fervor among critics and Hollywood insiders looking back into the roots of this dichotomy between art and life.

Look to 1993's "The Program," which had a controversial scene taken out after teenagers mimicked parts of the movie. In the scene, players laid down in the middle of the road while cars passed by on both sides. A teen died by actually duplicating what was onscreen.

Tim Sadenwasser, a Teaching Assistant in Movie Criticism in the English Department, said many famous parallels existed between life's events and onscreen events.

"One of the most famous of those cases is with 'Taxi Driver' when Hinkley stalked Jodie Foster," Sadenwasser said. "That was a clear case of when someone consciously acted that way."

This case is just one of many where people copycat events from movies and other media productions. For instance, the child who set his house on fire after viewing MTV's "Beavis and Butthead" or the accusations that teen suicides are connected to the music they listened to, like Marilyn Manson, prior to their deaths. However, these cases of liability are generally unsubstantiated. Sadenwasser said that life copying art could be pretty scary for the general

Art imitates Life imitates Art

public and movie producers as well.

"Obviously, there is a great fear of life imitating art, otherwise we wouldn't have decisions about responsibility in filmmaking," Sadenwasser said. "We are very concerned about portraying certain things on film because it could cause people to imitate them and also be desensitized to them."

The parallels go on, but one thing remains crystal clear — when art imitates life all is right in the world as writers write what they know, but when life imitates art, suddenly everyone starts believing Nostradamus' prophecies again.

Online movie critic Zak Weisfeld published on the "Weekly Wire" an article concerning how life's imitation of art in today's cinema causes cynicism, something he said was not found in other, earlier decades of cinema, but started on television.

"Television lowered its gates to the outsiders with shows like 'The Simpsons' and 'Seinfeld' (and 'The X-Files,' sort of)," Weisfeld wrote. "... Mainstream Hollywood manned the barricades, relentlessly producing heartwarming, uplifting, redemptive or vindictive fare for the masses."

The rise of these films into the mainstream does not mean that they will be on more than 2,000 screens every week because no planning can predict when a film will strike people to either duplicate the film's actions or whether or not the content coincides with something in the news.

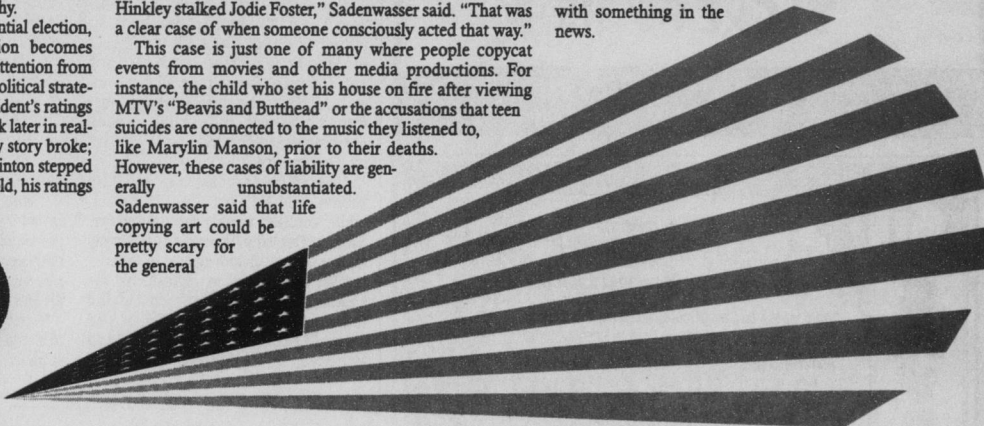
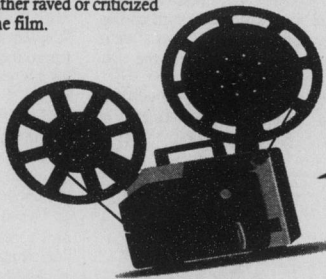


Illustration by Jake Zarnegar

Reality takes shape under mask of art

BY MATT MILLER
STAFF WRITER

Art imitates life. So the old adage tells us, anyway. But is this statement an oversimplification? Art comes in many forms, and while "Primary Colors" hopes to imitate the 1992 presidential campaign, it is hard to say how the new Van Halen album imitates anything. Even if art does imitate life in some way, what does that mean?

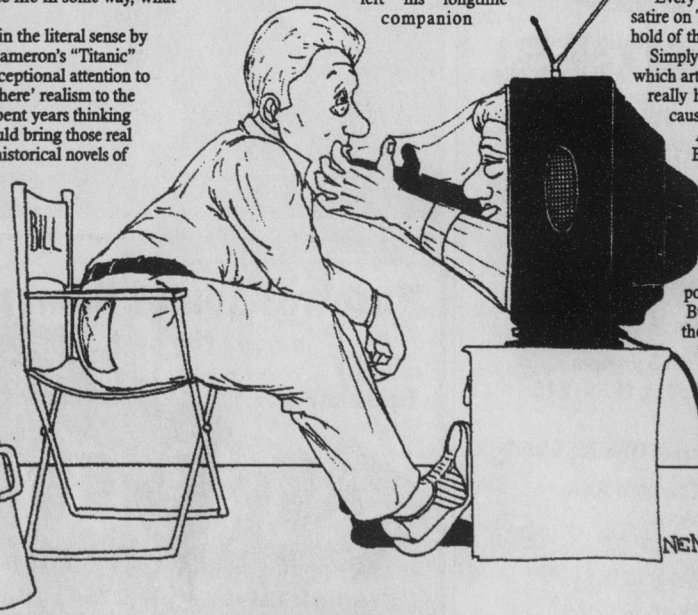
Some art hopes to imitate life in the literal sense by recreating actual events. James Cameron's "Titanic" comes to mind. The director's exceptional attention to detail brings a sense of 'you are there' realism to the film. Cameron has said that he spent years thinking about the Titanic and how he could bring those real events to life on the screen. The historical novels of Gore Vidal are also evidence of this concept of history-as-art.

An artist can also incorporate elements from his or her own life into his or her art. This is done in many ways. Kevin Williamson, creator of the television show "Dawson's Creek," used the town he grew up in as the setting for his coming-of-age drama. The mood and atmosphere of the town as he remembers it permeates the series.

Larry David, co-creator of "Seinfeld," wrote elements of his own life into the show. Cosmo Kramer is based on his real-life best friend Kenny Kramer, and the

Soup Nazi episode stemmed from a real-life encounter with Al Yeganeh, owner of Soup Kitchen International, where one could really hear, "No soup for you!"

Woody Allen is a master of this technique. His films often incorporate situations and events from his own life. His 1992 film "Husbands and Wives" is the most striking example of this. Woody plays an aging intellectual who considers leaving his wife for a 20-year-old woman. Allen left his longtime companion



Mia Farrow (who, ironically, plays his wife in the film) for a younger woman

Sometimes, artists do this without even being conscious of it. Stephen King, for example, saw a childhood playmate get hit by a train when he was very young. Though he claims to have no memory of the event, his novella "The Body" (the basis for "Stand by Me") is based around the idea of a child who is hit by a train.

Some artists attempt to imitate life through satirizing it. Orson Welles critically examined the rise to power of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst in his masterpiece "Citizen Kane."

Every week, "The Simpsons" provides some of the best satire on TV by holding up a mirror to the stereotypes we hold of the nuclear family, ethnic groups and politicians.

Simply presenting a realistic story can be another way in which art imitates life. Although the events may not have really happened, the realistic nature of the story can cause an audience to relate it to their own lives.

Award-winning author Doris Betts, professor of English said, "If you are writing from what you know, the ring of truth gets into the prose." "Writing from what you know" need not mean creating art purely from your own physical experiences. If that were true, no fantasy, sci-fi or horror stories would be made, nor abstract art, surrealist films or other valid and powerful art forms that are not inherently realistic. But in order to be effective, art must incorporate the artist's emotional experiences. This is why fantastic and unreal art forms are often able to touch people. They forge a connection to the audience by appealing to universal emotions, art imitating the inner life.

The statement 'art imitates life' is an oversimplification, for there are many different ways in which art can imitate life. But, one can't deny the truth behind the adage, for art is inherently linked to life through the artist, and the artist's life cannot help but color his or her art.

The Weekly Barometer

'Titanic' loses spot

The 15 weeks of domination ended, as "Lost in Space" claimed the position of top grosser, previously held by "Titanic."

Movie	Gross in millions
Lost in Space	\$20.2
Titanic	\$11.5
Mercury Rising	\$10.1
Grease	\$5.5
Primary Colors	\$4.7

SOURCE: ENTERTAINMENT DATA