

Nobody's Perfect

WRITINGS FROM *THE NEW YORKER*

Anthony Lane



VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

NEW YORK

be Jean. ("We can't really call it a body at this point," the pathologist says.) The putrefaction, which we do not witness, means that Marie must strap a mask over her nose and mouth, and Rampling is forced to pack all her horror, the panic of disbelief, into her widening eyes. Throughout the film, she not only refuses to believe in her husband's death but continues, in the company of friends, to refer to him in the present tense. "Was this your husband's office?" asks a friend called Vincent (Jacques Nolot). "It is my husband's office," she says—not even stressing the "is," just correcting an error. Rampling makes you understand what it is to be beside yourself with grief; she is certainly not *inside* herself, and you feel that her soul has been shunted away to let her body go through the motions—the traditional French variety, such as shopping for ties and making love instead of lunch. The writer and director, François Ozon, is interested not so much in the trademark languor of the Rampling persona, the hawk-eyed chill with which she surveys her territory, as in what kind of woman would feel the need for such intense control in the first place.

The result of this inquiry—it amounts practically to an interrogation—is that *Under the Sand* may come to stand as Rampling's best work; the possibility that it may also be the sexiest, given that she is now fifty-six, strikes me as cause for intercontinental celebration. It should provoke a tremor of anxious unease in Hollywood, which, more than ever, seems rattled by the erotic requirements of anyone older than Kate Hudson. As Marie straddled a bemused Vincent and told him to stroke first her hips and then her breasts, I was almost too busy savoring the pathos of her instructions—the same ones, presumably, that Jean used to obey without even being asked—to fulfill my duty as a voyeur. At one point, the ghost of her husband, a hulking cuckold from beyond the grave, watches over her in bed with Vincent; she smiles at Jean as she comes. This is more tender than creepy, and, for all the formality of Ozon's approach, the film is wonderfully liquid; we see Marie dining behind an aquarium or standing before the iron-gray Atlantic, like a figure out of Casper David Friedrich, and she herself flows back and forth between youthfulness and the riptide of age, between what she dreams of and what she knows to be true. In the final shot, she swims hopefully toward a distant man on a beach. Some hope. Ozon, ruthless to the last, waits until she is almost there, then cuts her off.

MAY 21, 2001

PEARL HARBOR

The last Michael Bay film, *Armageddon*, was a handy guide to what you should do when an asteroid bumps into your planet. At the time, most critics scorned the picture as deafening and dumb; in retrospect, it feels like a mature, even witty, exercise in self-reference, considering that the effect of watching a Michael Bay film is indistinguishable from having a large, pointy lump of rock drop on your head. His new picture, *Pearl Harbor*, maintains the mood, pulsing with fervor as it tells a tale familiar to every child in America: how a great nation was attacked and humbled by the imperious pride of Ben Affleck.

He plays Rafe, a dyslexic Tennessee farmboy who has loved flying ever since he was old enough to crash. At least, I think he's from Tennessee; his accent takes a patriotic tour of several states, as if to indicate that the noble Rafe could have come from just about anywhere. His best buddy is Danny (Josh Hartnett); they join the Air Force together and play chicken in the skies over Long Island, much to the admiring wrath of Colonel Doolittle (Alec Baldwin), one of several real-life figures in the movie. Rafe is a young man of unusual courage. For one thing, he volunteers to be shipped to England to serve in the RAF. For another, he chooses the eve of his departure to inform his new girlfriend, an Air Force nurse named Evelyn (Kate Beckinsale), that he will not make love to her just now, on the ground that he wants to save something for later; this sacrifice, which leaves Evelyn looking a little huffy, makes Rafe unique in the annals of human warfare. She is posted to the heat of Pearl Harbor, where she sits and reads letters from a shivering Rafe. What a tribute to the forces of love: our hero's dyslexia, chronic though undiagnosed, cannot stop him writing to his beloved, or avidly reading the sheaves that come in return.

Life in Hawaii is sweet for Evelyn, as indicated by the large number of pineapples that are randomly distributed around the set. She has time to

sit by the shore in natty little two-piece swimsuits, dreaming of Rafe and presumably trying not to notice Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr making out in the adjoining cove. Medical duties are light, composed mainly of soothing the scalded butts of zealous sunbathers and stitching the wounds of a young cook and boxer—another real-lifer, Dorie Miller (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), who becomes the first black sailor to be awarded the Navy Cross. (After his gotta-be-the-best diver in *Men of Honor*, Gooding is fast running out of water-based trailblazers.) This is one of those long but bitty movies in which actors get their characters handed out like parcels of rations—a nervous tic for you, a knot of frustration for him. Evelyn and the other nurses are delighted with a gang of fliers who are assigned to Pearl Harbor; we get Gooz (Michael Shannon), a fellow of few words and many bruises, Red (Ewen Bremner), who has a comedy stammer that you just know will kick in at a vital juncture, and, above all, Rafe's friend Danny. Uh-oh.

The moment he appeared, looking shy and sculpted, my radar picked up a large, aggressive plot twist steaming in from the northwest. When news arrived that Rafe was missing in action, presumed dead, after being shot down off the coast of England, I switched to full alert. Soon enough, Danny's attempts at consolation melt into drinks, illicit flights at dusk over the ocean, and the urge to do on a bed of parachutes what Rafe declined to do at a perfectly comfortable hotel in New York. And then, of course, Rafe turns up, back with his unit, alive and well and deeply pissed to see his friend and his girl going hula to hula. And then, to make matters worse, thousands of these Japanese guys turn up, although, as far as we know, few of them are driven by a specific wish to go out with Kate Beckinsale. In fact, observing this movie, I am not sure *what* they want; Michael Bay, whose passion for geopolitical history tends to be exceeded by his interest in fireballs, gives the enemy a dramatic shrift so short that even the most red-blooded American viewers may feel a trifle embarrassed. If your movie is three hours long, with minor characters packed like sardines into every nook, you should perhaps find space for a young Japanese pilot—a name to go with a face. And, if your budget is \$135 million, you might consider something more sophisticated than a shot of the Japanese high command huddled over a small swimming pool, watching models of American ships being poked around with a rod.

To be fair, Bay does pay elaborate homage to the niceties of Japanese weaponry. Long before I saw *Pearl Harbor*, I was told to look out for the in-bomb camera, but that's not quite how it works; we don't perch on the nose so much as trail tightly behind, so that we can feel the whirring air and watch the looming target. Bay makes a fetish of the tiny propeller at

the bomb's rear, gazing with kinky horror as it spins and then stops. He cuts away, holds for a microsecond, then delivers the bang and the boom. This blend of the minutely detailed and the enormously lurid is like the degraded fallout of a pop art sensibility; think of Lichtenstein and Rosenquist, of big pleading faces and fighter planes, then strip away the enamelling of irony, and you are left with the customized weirdness of the summer war movie, in which all strife is a blast.

Needless to say, *Pearl Harbor* works like a demon to pretend otherwise. We are offered regular sermons, notably from Alec Baldwin in his briefings and from Kate Beckinsale in a final voice-over, on the principles of combat and the lessons of loss; and our eyes are averted to Washington, D.C., where a staunch FDR (Jon Voight) urges his countrymen first to vigilance and then to arms. On the other hand, it must be said that a Washington in which Dan Aykroyd plays an expert in naval intelligence is not a Washington that would enjoy one's undivided confidence. Still, that is not Bay's field; his field is the buckling deck of the USS *Arizona*, her white-clad inhabitants blown through the air like exploding angels, and the vertiginous tilt when she groans over and starts to sink. As the men slid to the water, I realized that the model for *Pearl Harbor* was not other war films but James Cameron's *Titanic*: not the sober, battle-by-numbers approach of *Tora! Tora! Tora!* but the entwining of special effects and a love story that hopes, by sheer stamina, to grow special itself. To complain that the digital work in *Pearl Harbor* feels cold and gray is not saying much, given that the movie is about battleships; nevertheless, too much of the hardware—the toppling gantries, the Japanese Zeros that breed like rabbits in the air—is flattened by a matte dullness, like a kid's set of see-through stickers.

After the onslaught of false textures, it comes as a relief to take refuge in the look of the living, not least in the face of Kate Beckinsale, who is filmed with rapturous care. She comes on the heels of Nicole Kidman in *Moulin Rouge*, another alabaster goddess who calms a hectic film; staring at the pair of them, I get a pleasant, goosebumpy feeling that, if nothing else, mid-2001 will go down as the summer of skin. There is no doubt, of course, which of the boys will wind up with Evelyn, a woman at once so sexy and so saintly that she removes a stocking in the middle of the bombing raid to make an emergency tourniquet, causing me to wonder whether the patient's blood pressure is supposed to go up or down; what surprised me was how long it took for the winning lover to emerge. As Pearl Harbor lay smoldering, and the triumphant Japanese admiral uttered the words "I

fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant," I got up to leave. After all, that was pretty much the line that brought *Tora! Tora! Tora!* to a close. Then I glanced at my watch, sighed, and sat down again; forty-five minutes still to go, and we're off into an entirely new narrative, with Alec Baldwin recruiting the boys for yet another mission. "Do you know what top secret is?" he asks—the second-best question of the film, topped only when Evelyn finds Rafe packing a suitcase, and, quick as a flash, says, "Packing?" She is understandably distraught by her sudden change of fortunes. One moment she is trying to cope with two grown men scrapping over her like a couple of roosters, and the next, as she says in some exasperation, "All *this* happened." I am not absolutely sure what she means by "this," but I imagine that she is referring to the trifling matter of an enraged United States being hauled into a global conflict. I guess we should thank Michael Bay for so bold a revisionist take on the Second World War: no longer the clash of virtuous freedom and a malevolent tyranny but a terrible bummer when a girl is trying to get her dates straight.

What Rafe is setting off for—complete with Danny, a Silver Star, and a fresh head of highlights—is the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo, in the spring of 1942, when bombers were launched off the deck of a carrier. It's a great saga, and I applaud movies that take the trouble to sing the unsung, but it doesn't belong here, and the audience started to rustle with impatience—something I never expected to hear at a movie directed by Michael Bay and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer. Why did they go with this plan? Maybe Jerry sidled up to Michael halfway through the shoot and whispered, "Bad news. I just learned that this Hawaiian thing—with the planes and the ships, right?—well, it wasn't so great for us. Apparently, the Japs won. We *lost*." So they tacked on another story, and went out on a high. *Pearl Harbor* may be stirring proof that right will prevail, but I hate to think what will happen when these guys get their hands on *King Lear*.

JUNE 4, 2001

APOCALYPSE NOW REDUX

So, the most hotly awaited movie of mid-2001 was made in the 1970s. Its only rival this summer is *Planet of the Apes*, the remake of a hairy hit from 1968. Is there nothing new under the sun? Where did all the ideas go? Whatever happened to the heroes? In the case of *Apocalypse Now*, you could argue that this one picture was so centripetal, that it sucked such a strange array of obsessions into its maw, that American movies took years to get over the shock. Think of a film like *Full Metal Jacket* and you start to wonder whether its mood—etiolated, vicious, vinegar-thin—flowed not from the coolness of Stanley Kubrick but from the plain, annoying fact that, eight years before, Francis Ford Coppola had called all the shots. Convention states that the primary lessons of Coppola's film were logistical: Do Not Waste Money. Finish Your Script Before You Start. Do Not Hire the Fat Man. And Don't Get Caught in the Storm. But the truth may be that other directors gazed at *Apocalypse Now* and quietly asked themselves, "Do I dare?" And, for the most part, they didn't. Instead, they took notes on *Star Wars*, with its nicely decorated vacuums, and proceeded from there.

Anyway, the horror is back, and this time it's even longer. A tantalizing recut entitled *Apocalypse Now Redux*, which Coppola showed to high acclaim at the Cannes Film Festival, in May, will shortly be screening across America. For the benefit of those lucky souls who are too young to know the movie, and who will thus be entering dark territory in a virginal state, it may be helpful to recap the twin, tangled stories of the original *Apocalypse Now*. The story inside the film, gingerly lifted from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, concerns a young intelligence officer, Captain Willard (Martin Sheen), who is ordered to take a boat upriver, into Cambodia, and terminate the command—and, while he's about it, the life—of Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), who has exceeded his military brief by becoming,