

Review

Jim Neilson

Saving Private Ryan. Directed by Stephen Spielberg. Starring Tom Hanks.

You've Got Mail. Directed by Nora Ephron. Starring Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan.

Stephen Spielberg and the Lost Crusade



From the psychosexual terror of *Jaws* to the spiritual yearning of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Stephen Spielberg has responded to the anxieties and aspirations of Americans. Recently, he's begun to address more serious issues, such as slavery and the Holocaust. His latest serious film, *Saving Private Ryan*, marks the seventh time he's dealt with World War II (the others are *1941*, the three Indiana Jones movies, *Empire of the Sun*, and *Schindler's List*; even in *Jaws* Spielberg has Robert Shaw recount the sinking of the U.S.S. Indianapolis by the Japanese). This interest in the second world war is not surprising for someone born in 1946--it's easy enough to imagine the young Spielberg watching Audie Murphy and John Wayne movies, when not being captivated by 50s scifi.

What's surprising, though, is that Spielberg has never made a film about, or even mentioned, Vietnam. While documenting the fears, hopes, and joys of Baby Boomers, Spielberg thus has overlooked one of the shaping experiences of his generation--the Vietnam War.

This avoidance, I suspect, is due to discomfort. Spielberg's a conservative filmmaker--his films ultimately reinforce a familiar status quo: American common sense in the form of a decent, white, suburban middle class. When he has dealt with serious issues, Spielberg has looked to the past--racism in *Amistad*, racism and sexism in *The Color Purple*, anti-semitism and genocide in *Schindler's List*, war in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Empire of the Sun*. On the other hand, the contemporary world, for Spielberg, seems not to be threatened by such serious social and political issues but by an imaginary bestiary: aliens, a precocious shark, resurrected dinosaurs. While he's critical of certain aspects of contemporary life (anonymous scientists and military officials who want to take our aliens away, self-serving civic leaders who want to keep our beaches open, showmen

who cut corners on theme-park safety), there's little sense of history or place in these films. The legacies of slavery and the Holocaust are absent. The contemporary world, according to Spielberg, is a flat landscape of suburban tracts, amusement parks, and seaside resorts. In Spielberg's contemporary films, good triumphs, order is restored, families are united, and the malls open on time. Vietnam is too unwieldy and divisive to exist within this orderly and traditional world--and it may raise unsettling questions, asking, for instance, if the suburban comfort of Spielbergland inevitably rests on third world poverty, asking if U.S. militarism merely serves the interests of capital, asking, finally, if the idea of America as a noble experiment--as a nation guided by benevolence--is no more than self-delusion.

But, try as he might, Spielberg cannot avoid the war. Inevitably, American filmmakers of his generation understand war through the template of Vietnam. Thus, although *Saving Private Ryan* is not overtly about Vietnam (and sets out to be the definitive, realistic portrayal of World War II), the war in Indochina shadows this film, shaping its narrative, encouraging its graphic realism, and provoking its nationalist sentiment. *Saving Private Ryan* is a World War II film that, for all its humanist compassion, is in many ways a reactionary commentary upon Vietnam and the sixties.

The film opens and closes with a screen-wide shot of a faded American flag. This flag is associated with another framing device: a grandfather visiting a military cemetery with his wife, children and grandchildren. The connection here is obvious: the flag and the veteran--one faded yet proudly waving, the other aged yet proudly standing--are identical. This World War II veteran (and all of his generation, Spielberg implies) are inseparable from the nation. Humble, simple, brave, and stoic, they are the best of America. There's an elegaic quality to these opening and closing scenes; Spielberg offers a last grateful nod to that heroic generation who vanquished Hitler and Tojo. More than a grateful nod to the past, though, the film points an accusatory finger at the present, at the children of the World War II generation: the Baby Boomers. The faded flag suggests not only the passing of time but the weakening of the nation. *Saving Private Ryan* shows us, in the sacrifice of U.S. GIs in World War II, the spirit and sense of purpose the country's lost. When at the movie's concluding battle scene a dying Captain John Miller (played by Tom Hanks) implores Private James Ryan to "earn this," to earn the sacrifice of those who have saved him, he's also addressing the film's audience, we Boomers and Gen-Xers in our comfortable suburban multiplexes: we must earn the sacrifices of this dying generation who saved Private Ryan, who saved the American way of life itself, those simple suburban pleasures and middle class values Spielberg has repeatedly championed.

From this elegaic ending, the film turns back to the Normandy invasion, to Captain Miller, his hands uncontrollably shaking, in a landing craft heading for Omaha Beach. The scenes here are truly harrowing and equal in graphic realism any previous war movie. Such realism is a requirement (for any serious filmmaker) in the wake of the televised carnage of Vietnam. Spielberg clearly intends to explode that old lie: that it is sweet and fitting to die for one's country. As conveyed through American popular culture, this lie has encouraged many young men to fight in Vietnam. In *Born on the Fourth of July*, for instance, Ron Kovic recalls watching John Wayne (as Sergeant Stryker in *The*

Sands of Iwo Jima) charge up a hill only to get killed just before reaching the top, the Marine Corps hymn all the while playing in the background. Kovic writes, "I loved the song so much, and every time I heard it I would think of John Wayne and the brave men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima that day. I would think of them and cry. Like Mickey Mantle . . . John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes" (55). Kovic soon enlisted in the Marines, was sent to Vietnam, was shot in the spine, was paralyzed from the waist down. In *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg clearly intends to correct such fatally romantic views of war.

Consequently, the heroism of Spielberg's Captain Miller is far different from the heroism of Sergeant Stryker. Miller is heroic precisely because he lacks heroism. His shaking hands reveal the psychic damage he's undergone in the year and a half since he and his men landed in North Africa. Miller must overcome this trauma, must suppress his fears, must show no sign of doubt, must act decisively while under fire. This is heroism of a different order than the macho death cult personified by John Wayne. Miller's is the heroism of an ordinary soldier following impossible orders. Like so many of his generation, Miller is merely doing his job. The casting of Hanks, our Jimmy Stewart or Henry Fonda--the unremarkable, yet uncommonly decent average Joe--reinforces this non-heroic heroism, as does what little we learn of his background: he's that least likely of heroes, an English teacher. Vietnam has taught us that real heroism isn't John Wayne taking out a machine gun nest; it's a man who can't keep his hands from shaking (a man who should be home marking comma splices and sentence fragments) yet who instead is bravely leading men into battle.

The film's central narrative focuses on an act of heroic self-sacrifice--the attempt by a squad of hand-picked commandos to find and escort to safety Private Ryan. Because Ryan's three brothers have died in combat, the military (specifically, Army chief staff General George C. Marshall) decides that he, the lone surviving brother, should be saved, even at the expense of his rescuers' lives. Although these soldiers gripe at this injustice, they nonetheless complete their mission--and all but two die. Spielberg's message seems to be: heroism consists of fulfilling one's soldierly duty, even if it means following questionable and ultimately fatal orders. For all its antiwar sentiment, *Saving Private Ryan* is in many ways a traditional war movie that glorifies the nobility of sacrifice. Of Captain Miller and his men one might quote Tennyson, "Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die." Or as Miller tells his men when refusing to help a French family trapped in a crossfire, "We're not here to do the decent thing. We're here to follow orders."

Curiously, for the creator of *Schindler's List*, Spielberg encourages soldiers to blindly follow orders. One of the most striking things about *Saving Private Ryan* is how utterly uncritical Spielberg is of the military's motivation in sacrificing a squad of soldiers to save one man. The movie argues that the military is motivated by its warm heart and deep feeling for Mrs. Ryan's loss. This is the same caring military, we should remember, that in less than a year fire-bombed Dresden--for no strategic purpose--killing 100,000 German civilians. It's revealing as well to compare *Saving Private Ryan*, in which the military responds humanely to one family's loss, to *Catch-22*. In Joseph Heller's novel,

Colonel Cathcart sends multiple choice death notices that read: "Dear Mrs., Mr., Miss, or Mr. And Mrs. . . . Words cannot express the deep personal grief I experienced when your husband, son, father or brother was killed, wounded or reported missing in action" (338). Spielberg cannot endorse such cynicism because it would undercut his portrayal of Miller and his men. Concentrating on the heroism of common soldiers, Spielberg cannot question the motivation of commanding officers and policy-makers. To do so would undercut the troops, would diminish their heroism, implying that theirs was not a wholly righteous crusade. This view has, unfortunately, prevailed in considerations of the Vietnam War--so much so that during Operation Desert Storm many of those who opposed the war went out of their way to say they supported the troops, thereby lessening the impact and limiting the scope of their critique. Spielberg also fails to consider the propaganda value of a mission like the saving of Private Ryan. Another filmmaker, Stanley Kubrick comes to mind, would have seized on the absurdity of this mission, would have pointedly acknowledged the propaganda motive behind the military's actions, and would have gleefully satirized the resulting newsreels, radio broadcasts, news conferences, bond-selling tours, etc. A filmmaker raised on the criminal duplicity of American armed forces in Vietnam, Spielberg blithely accepts the notion that in World War II the military's motives were noble and selfless. This, after all, was the good war, a war far different from Vietnam. But by so favorably depicting both the ordinary soldier and the military command in Washington, Spielberg is implicitly rebuking his generation for its protest and lack of patriotism.

More than noble, the military in *Saving Private Ryan*, is righteous. The movie is filled with Christian imagery, from the cross-bedecked cemetery at the beginning and end of the film to the church in which Miller's squad rests to the steeple from which sharpshooter Private Jackson snipes at Nazi troops in the climactic battle. Despite some references to Judaism (a Star of David is visible among the crosses and one soldier, Private Goldberg, taunts captured Nazis by pointing to himself and declaring, "Juden"), *Saving Private Ryan* depicts the war as a Christian crusade. Thus before shooting unsuspecting enemy soldiers Private Jackson prays, "Oh my God, I trust in thee; let not me be ashamed." The most notable instance of this Christian motif occurs when, told of the Ryans' tragic fate, General Marshall reads a letter Abraham Lincoln wrote to a mother whose five sons "died gloriously on the field of battle." Lincoln tells her that she may find "consolation . . . in the thanks of the Republic" and may take "solemn pride . . . to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom." It's hard to imagine any serious American filmmaker of the Vietnam generation quoting these lines without irony. But Spielberg does just that. General Marshall, an icon of liberal compassion thanks to the Marshall plan, is depicted as an avuncular sage--he embodies the government and military's benevolence, wisdom, and concern. Again Stanley Kubrick offers an instructive comparison. Whereas the officers and commanders in *Saving Private Ryan* are depicted in a consistently positive light (Miller and Marshall are caring and competent, even sensitive to history and literature), the authority figures in *Full Metal Jacket* are psychopaths, cynics, and buffoons. No one quotes Lincoln or Emerson. Instead, we hear insanely banal pep talks, as when a colonel says to the main character: "How about getting with the program? Why don't you jump on the team and come on in for the big win? . . . Son, all I've ever asked of my marines is that they obey my orders as they would

the word of God. We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every gook there is an American trying to get out. It's a hardball world, son. We've gotta keep our heads until this peace craze blows over."

Needless to say, there is nothing approaching this in *Saving Private Ryan*--certainly not in the reverential scene where Mrs. Ryan watches an olive drab sedan wend its way up a dirt road toward her Iowa farmhouse. Since a large family named Ryan is more likely to be associated with an urban street scene than with a midwestern cornfield, one can't help wonder--why Iowa? The answer to this question reveals a good deal about Spielberg's intent, about the politics of *Saving Private Ryan*. The idea of multiple brothers dying in combat derives from the true story of the five Sullivan brothers, all of whom died when their ship was sunk in the Pacific. The Sullivans hailed from Iowa--hence, Spielberg's choice of setting. But Spielberg changes the details. The Sullivans did not live in the countryside--they lived in the industrial town of Waterloo. And they were not farmers. Thomas Sullivan, Sr. worked for the Illinois Central railroad; most of the rest of the family worked in the Rath meat packing plant. Spielberg erases this background and paints instead a rural canvas. A shot of the broad midwestern landscape and a few strains of Coplandesque music and we've moved beyond the film's realism and into the realm of American cultural myth. By showing us the open plains and Ryan's plain but loving mother, Spielberg evokes an array of emotions. Ryan becomes associated with the simple verities of country life; he is the pure, modest, hardworking middle-American. He also is linked to the Revolutionary War tradition of citizen/soldier dropping ploughshares and picking up sword when nation calls. There's a suggestion as well of the frontier, a feeling that, in risking their lives, Ryan and his brothers are a contemporary version of those forebears who broke the plains and tamed a continent. This rural setting, then, suggests an earlier, simpler America. It's a Norman Rockwell/Frank Capra world awash with nostalgia and bathos, an elegiac vision of the American past that reinforces Spielberg's critique of the present generation. We have fallen from this garden, Spielberg implies, because, unlike the World War II generation, we have not had courage and conviction enough to protect it.

Besides its ode to Americana, this scene with Mrs. Ryan is consistent with the film's gender politics. The car carrying the three death notices is in sunlight, while we watch its ominous approach from within a shaded doorway where Private Ryan's mother appears in silhouette. We sense her growing anxiety, and we watch her nearly collapse in grief. But the whole time the mother is barely visible, is not individualized, is nearly mute. Visually connected to the home that frames her and the land she looks out upon, she is hearth and soil, earth mother and motherland. She represents the very land and nation that has bred and sacrificed young men like Ryan. There's no mention here or elsewhere in the film of a Mr. Ryan. Similarly, when the film's soldiers talk of home, they speak only of mothers. This absence of fathers makes the Tom Hanks character even more of a surrogate father--a feeling that's reinforced by his men's curiosity about his past. Like children, they are eager to learn about this taciturn, seemingly unknowable man who commands them. From home to military, from mother to surrogate father, these soldiers repeat the journey identified by Randall Jarrell in the opening line of "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner": "From my mother's sleep, I fell into the State." Jarrell suggests that soldiers leave their

innocent youthfulness--their mother's sleep--to enter the military with little sense of what they're getting themselves into: they fall into the State. In Jarrell's poem the military too is a kind of dream state; the gunner doesn't wake up until it's too late, until he's under fire from "black flak" and "Nightmare fighters." The last line of Jarrell's poem is the literary equivalent of Spielberg's Omaha beach scenes: "When I died," Jarrell writes, "they washed me out of the turret with a hose."

Although Private Ryan and the other soldiers leave their mother's sleep and fall into the State, they never wake up. They die before realizing, as the ball turret gunner seems to, that their youthful innocence has been murderously exploited by the military, that they are little more than interchangeable parts in a massive war machine, that their lives can be unceremoniously washed away. Spielberg's soldiers die with limbs severed but heroic myths intact. Ryan refuses to be rescued because he wants to help protect his comrades. Miller dies in traditional war movie fashion, bravely attempting to fight off a tank with a pistol. The two soldiers from Miller's squad who survive are the ones who probably least deserve to--one, a translator experiencing combat for the first time who shows too much sympathy for a captured German and is too cowardly to even attempt to save a fellow soldier in the midst of a deadly struggle with the enemy; and two, a regular soldier who, recognizing the absurdity of this mission, almost mutinies, almost leaves the squad. By the end of the film the former executes an unarmed German; the latter bravely fights to battle's conclusion side by side with the man he had almost mutinied against, Captain Miller. *Saving Private Ryan* thus concludes with a message that seems at odds with its supposed antiwar sentiment.

War, in *Saving Private Ryan*, is a masculinizing ritual. These two men were deficient in manly warrior virtues, the one cowardly and inexperienced, the other self-centered and disrespectful of authority. It took this mission--this teaching (Miller is, after all, a teacher) by the surrogate father and the military--to change them, to make them men. Characters who failed to live up to the warrior code survive while those who are successful warriors die. The lesson? that death in combat is a fitting end for brave warriors like Miller and his men, who are worthy of attaining the ultimate glory of a noble, patriotic sacrifice. Like Wilfred Owen, Spielberg sees that dying for one's country is not sweet. But unlike Owen, Spielberg seems to see such death as fitting. The problem with the baby-boom generation, Spielberg implies, is that they never appreciated such sacrifice, opposing rather than supporting a war, whining about rather than stoically accepting their fate, ridiculing rather than championing traditional American values. No wonder that the American Legion--an organization that strongly opposed and eventually helped thwart a Smithsonian exhibit on the Hiroshima bombing--wholeheartedly applauded *Saving Private Ryan*, even awarding Spielberg its new Legion honor, The Spirit of Normandy Award. It should come as no surprise that an antiwar film that begins and ends with the image of an American flag is praised by a veterans' organization who urges its members to "Show Your Support of the Constitutional Amendment to Protect the Flag From Physical Desecration by Participating in the Show Your Colors, America! Campaign." In its uncritical examination of military policy, its romanticizing of the American past, its belief in the masculinizing virtues of combat, and its implicit rebuke of the 60s generation, *Saving Private Ryan* likewise urges America to show its colors.

The Conglomerate around the Corner

In *You've Got Mail*, Tom Hanks exchanges fatigues for designer suits and leaves war-torn Europe for the corporate battlefield intent on saving Meg, not Private, Ryan. In this retouching of Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop around the Corner*, writer-director Nora Ephron



delivers a witty, cyberage romantic comedy. But it's a romance stamped with a cold heart, a valentine to corporate capital, a movie that wants to entertain us with Hanks and Ryan while teaching us to love Barnes & Noble.

Hanks plays Joe Fox, who runs Fox Books, an independent-smashing bookstore chain. Romantically involved with Patricia Eden (an elitist book editor played by Parker Posey), Fox is obsessed with an anonymous e-

mail correspondent: Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan), the owner of a children's bookstore on the Upper West Side. Fox and Kelly dislike one another in person (after all, he's trying to put her out of business) but are attracted to each other online. From this set-up, *You've Got Mail* follows the conventional route of romantic comedies: reversals, misunderstandings, coincidences, mistaken identities, etc.--a twisting narrative that leads inexorably to the blissful union of warring lovers. As an added touch, Ephron enfolded Jane Austen into her tale. *Pride and Prejudice* is Kelly's favorite book; she and Fox discuss it via e-mail; they are both seen reading it (Kelly with enthusiasm, Fox with exasperation). And their relationship must overcome Austenian flaws: Fox, repeatedly insulted by Kelly, has too much pride to open his heart to her; Kelly, upset by what she perceives to be the predatory nature of bookstore chains, is prejudiced against him.

Pride and Prejudice and *You've Got Mail* are similar, too, in their use of setting. Austen's fiction maps out the social codes of the English gentry. The rough world outside--the spread of the British empire and the rise of industrialism--rarely trespasses into her privileged enclave of country estates. Similarly, Ephron's New York is a golden-hued world of bistros and bookstores, a Gulianian calendar of edenic gentrification. There's no crime, no graffiti, no pollution, no poverty, no homelessness. Yet there's a significant difference between the Elizabeth Bennett-Mr. Darcy romance and the Joe Fox-Kathleen Kelly one. Bennett's prejudice against Darcy stems from misperception of his character, whereas Kelly's prejudice against Fox is shaped by the knowledge that his conglomerate is stamping out independent booksellers and is about to cancel her own store. A more direct parallel between Austen's novel and Ephron's film would require, first, that Mr. Darcy be working to bankrupt the Bennett family and, second, that Elizabeth's love transcend such petty considerations as the destruction of her family fortune.

Ideologically, one of the more striking aspects of this film, then, is how the competition between Kelly's tiny "Shop around the Corner" and Fox's mammoth store is resolved. Traditionally, a Hollywood movie would resolve the struggle between honest entrepreneur and predatory corporation with (a) the former achieving an improbable victory, or (b) the two reaching an agreement allowing profitable coexistence, or (c) the entrepreneur's practices humanizing the corporation. But in *You've Got Mail* there is no doubt that the corporate giant will triumph. Despite Kelly's hard work, knowledge of books, and concern for her customers, she's forced to close up the Shop. Ephron here is true to the fate of independent booksellers. According to *Standard & Poor's*, consumer purchases at independent and small chain bookstores made up 33% of the books bought in 1991, 20% in 1995, 18% in 1996. Superstores, on the other hand, increased their share of the market from 17% in 1994 to 23% in 1995 to 30% in 1996 ("Publishing" 16). According to Robert McChesney, "nearly one half of U.S. retail bookselling is accounted for by Barnes & Noble and Borders." Given this context, Ephron cannot realistically show Kelly vanquishing, or even slowing, the Fox Books juggernaut.

Ephron does not resort to a fairy-tale ending in which the little guy wins because it would seem unbelievable to audiences who have been witness to--and perhaps injured by--the steady triumph of big capital, the kind of audience who vents its subversive ire by posting Dilbert cartoons on cubicles or sending mega-dittos to Rush Limbaugh (the kind of audience amused by a posting on a popular listserv of the twenty signs of work in corporate America in the 90's, which included: "It's dark when you drive to and from work" and "Salaries of the members of the Executive Board are higher than all the Third World Countries' annual budgets combined"). Given this sense of exploitation and powerlessness, the film's other possible resolutions, a humanized conglomerate or profitable coexistence, would appear contrived. Yet romantic comedy requires that Fox and Kelly be happily united. Ephron's solution: romanticize big capital, celebrate the victory of the superstore, and rewrite marriage as merger. For all its airy substanceless, then, *You've Got Mail* suggests a change in American popular culture, recognition that a broad and disempowered audience, believing that individual effort is insignificant against the onslaught of corporate power, has become skeptical of the American myth of individual success. Even totemic tropes of American individualism, such as Kelly's boyfriend's praise of her "Jeffersonian purity" in standing up to Fox Books, are depicted as absurd and anachronistic. And so the makers of this culture face a dilemma: how can individual powerlessness be reconciled with traditional American myth, how, in other words, can individual powerlessness be made to appear just?

Kelly's sorrow over the closing of her bookstore and her rage against the chainstore that crushed her are washed away by a Hallmark moment in the children's section of Fox Books. She sees here that her mission--to convey the magic of reading to children--is more than ably filled by this warm and fuzzy conglomerate; she understands that what she had believed was corporate greed is in reality a passing of the torch. Capitalist expansion and human development, she now realizes, go hand in hand (as she does with Fox/Hanks). The corollary to this equation is equally true: to resist capitalist expansion is to thwart progress and its bountiful rewards.

The film's most vocal opponent of Fox Books and what it stands for, however, is not Kelly but her boyfriend, Frank Navasky (Greg Kinnear). A smug and supposedly brainy columnist (he's breathlessly described as having read Heidegger and Foucault) for a *Village Voice*-like newspaper, Navasky is the film's straw leftist (he's also probably meant as a jab at the *Nation* and its publisher, Victor Navasky). Now why might such a person oppose the Barnes-and-enNobling of America (especially since these stores probably make it easier to find a copy of *Being and Time* and *Discipline and Punish*)? Because the spread of superstores is part of the consolidation of ownership of all forms of media. You don't need a conspiracy theorist to know which way the corporate wind's blowing or to understand that the concentrated ownership of media companies (along with the concentrated ownership of bookstores) means diminishing opportunities for leftist discourse. As Andre Schiffren, former editor of the former leftist-publishing Pantheon (now owned by Time-Warner), notes, "the political nature of books has changed drastically since the conglomerates acquired so many [publishing] houses. . . . the current output of U.S. publishing is markedly to the right" ("Corporatization" 31).

It's no surprise that a Hollywood movie fails to consider the implications of corporate oligarchy, of course, since the studios are themselves vital parts of media conglomerates. Warner Brothers, producer of *You've Got Mail*, is part of global media giant Time-Warner, owner of enterprises ranging from publishing houses to theme parks. Among Time-Warner's holdings are: Little, Brown, the Book-of-the-Month Club, the History Book Club, Warner Books, and Time-Life Books; Atlantic and Warner Brothers Records; *Time*, *Fortune*, *Life*, *Money*, *People*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Weight Watchers*, *DC Comics*, and *Mad Magazine*; HBO, the WB network, TBS, CNN, the Cartoon Network, Whittle Communications, Hanna Barbara Productions, MGM, New Line Cinema, and numerous cable systems across the country (*Directory*). All of this amounts to a narrowing of channels for popular discourse. According to Schiffren, "80 per cent of American titles now come from the five largest conglomerates. The alternative and university presses together account for barely 1 per cent" ("Publishers" B9) Likewise, "the movies released by six film distributors . . . typically account for at least 80% of box office revenues" ("Movies" 8).

Yet in *You've Got Mail*, there's no mention of media monopolies, no mention of the marginalization of leftist discourse. And there's no sense of what *Standard & Poor's*, in its analysis of the entertainment industry, describes as a "potent opportunity for cross-promotion. . . . increasing opportunities to leverage trademarks, copyright, and creative assets" ("Movies" 11). There's no sense of this, that is, in Navasky's criticism. On the other hand, the film itself takes full advantage of its potent opportunities. Its title is taken from America Online's e-mail notification. Indeed, the AOL homepage is seen and its email tagline heard from the film's opening credits. Almost as ubiquitous is Starbucks Coffee, where a busy Kelly frequently gears herself up for the work day and where Fox has a cup o' Joe. At one point, Navasky mocks its customers for having their self-identities determined by their choice of coffee. This off-the-cup remark is meant to demonstrate Navasky's elitism (and his inability to appreciate consumer pleasures like a good cup of skinny cappuccino). However facile, this comment is grounded in truth: corporations spend millions to encourage people to identify with consumer goods, be it a

bottle of Evian water or an Apple computer (both of which are promoted in *You've Got Mail*). Indeed, product placement has become so big a part of film-making that, as Robert McChesney reports, "there are over two dozen consultancies in Los Angeles . . . just to help link marketers with film and television producers" (29).

Thus entertainment conglomerates avail themselves of the seemingly endless cross-promotional opportunities provided by vertical integration, a phenomenon most recently demonstrated by the promotional blitz behind Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*, an obeisance to the WWII generation. Brokaw has twice been on NBC's *Today* show promoting his book (during one appearance host Matt Lauer gushed, "I mean only to pay tribute to you here and not to embarrass you" [Pope B1]), has appeared on MSNBC, CNBC, the Conan O'Brien show, and the online site MSNBC.com, and has seen *Dateline NBC* devote a full hour to his book. (Likewise, Peter Jennings's *The Century* was the basis for a twelve part series on ABC and a fifteen-part series on ABC co-owned The History Channel. One wonders what's next. Katie Couric's *Cold War Diaries*? Willard Scott's *Holocaust Pop-Up Book*?) This cross-promotion puts money not only into the pockets of Brokaw's tailored suits, but into the coffers of NBC, which owns 25% of the rights to *The Greatest Generation*. More important than generating immediate revenues for corporate owner General Electric, *The Greatest Generation* serves defense contractor G.E.'s long-term ideological and fiscal interests through its nostalgic militarism and nationalism. Such fertile cross-promotion, of course, is not likely to occur with a book that significantly challenges conventional belief. There's little chance that a book arguing against this glorious past, a book, say, that praised the Sixties generation for opposing U.S. imperialism, would be written by a news anchor, published by a media conglomerate, and trumpeted incessantly and incestuously on network and cable TV. Similarly, in the case of Time-Warner, it's unlikely that a book published by Little, Brown, chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club, reviewed in *Time* (with an author feature in *People*), made into a movie by Warner Brothers, and shown on HBO would mount a ruthless attack on capital.

In his opposition to Fox Books, Navasky also fails to consider labor conditions in chain bookstores. Retail work is notorious for its low pay, part-time employment, and little or no benefits. Although Borders has been considered a progressive firm, as of 1997 it hadn't raised wages for five years, with starting pay averaging \$6.25 an hour (a wage stagnation in keeping with the practices of its new corporate owner, K-Mart). When employees began to agitate in response to low wages and declining benefits (at a time when Borders was experiencing massive expansion and profit), executives appeared in individual stores to hold, in the words of Liza Featherstone and Emily Gordon, "small, mandatory 'open dialogues' where they insist[ed] that unions are 'out of date' and 'divisive' and [would] disrupt the 'Borders culture.'" Borders also hired Jackson, Lewis, who Featherstone and Gordon identify as "the number-one unionbusting law firm in the country." And when workers at a Borders in Philadelphia began a campaign to join the Industrial Workers of the World, one organizer, Miriam Fried, was fired. Featherstone and Gordon write, "Though Borders denies it, both Fried and the I.W.W. are certain it was for union activity. The City Council, by unanimous vote . . . urged the store to reinstate her" (7).

Although Ephron ignores such work conditions and labor relations, she can't overlook the fate of the employees of "The Shop around the Corner." What, after all, is to happen to Kelly and her three workers? How can the romanticizing of conglomerates be reconciled with the reality of un and under-employed workers? Kelly's two young assistants, we learn, work at "The Shop around the Corner" for convenience--they don't want full-time jobs. In this Friedmanesque fairy-tale, there's no exploitation; the market magically provides exactly what individuals want. The low wages, poor or no benefits, and lack of full-time employment at Fox Books meet the needs of its workers. And so these two easily move from one store to the other. The fate of Kelly's third worker, Birdie (Jean Stapleton), an elderly bookkeeper, is less easily wished away. Her age and profession will not allow her to be rescued by Fox Books. In the real world, she'd be, to say the least, upset over the loss of a job she's had for forty years. But in the trouble-free world of *You've Got Mail*, Birdie, as her name suggests, hasn't a care. She reassuringly tells Kelly there's nothing to worry about because she bought Intel at six. Again, we learn, the market will provide for all.

As for Kelly, she's initially upset by the loss of a neighborhood business that was begun by her mother and that has served several generations of Manhattan children. But her problems, too, quickly vanish: she may become children's book editor for a big publishing house, a fate that completely ignores the repeated downsizings and restructurings that have defined the publishing industry in the last decade or more. Under the best of circumstances, it would be difficult to acquire the kind of job that awaits Kelly; under current circumstances, it's just about impossible. But the logic of Ephron's tale requires this bit of fantasy, this belief that the right jobs are ever available for intelligent and good-hearted individuals. Of course, Kelly doesn't even need a job, since she'll be marrying multi-millionaire Joe Fox.

So if Navasky doesn't mention labor conditions, concentrated ownership, cross-promotion, commodification and commercialism, what are his objections to Fox Books? They're never really explained. By omitting virtually all real-world objections to corporate dominance, Ephron implies that Navasky's motivation is idiosyncratic, part of his character. He's temperamentally opposed to technological change. He hates computers (he owns two identical typewriters), decries videocassette recorders, and wishes someone would write about something important "like the Luddite movement." He objects to Fox Books and Starbucks not because of a Marxian understanding of capitalist exploitation but because they represent the forces of progress. Through Navasky, Ephron argues that opposition to corporate oligarchy amounts to little more than a capricious resistance to inevitable (and benign) change.

If Ephron accused the left only of being cranks and luddites, *You've Got Mail* would be merely one more endorsement of centrist politics and status quo social relations. But there's something more offensive at work here. For Ephron decries politics of any kind. Thus she has Fox mock publishing industry liberals (or, in the words of Fox's father, "West Side pseudo-intellectual liberal nuts") who hold fundraisers for causes like Bosnian refugees. "What is it this week," Fox asks, "Free Albanian writers?" From a Marxist perspective, such criticism of the narcissistic inefficacy of liberal do-goodism

makes perfect sense. However, while mocking limousine liberals, Ephron offers no alternative. She dismisses political concerns generally. Politics, she suggests, is for self-deluded, self-important hypocrites. Instead, one should let progress, in the form of big capital, have its way, the better to follow one's heart. At one level, this kind of apolitical meliorism is a standard feature of romantic comedies. But Ephron so insistently sets her comedy in the contemporary world and so romanticizes mercenary capitalism that her apoliticism can't be dismissed as mere genre convention. Nowhere are the political consequences of such apoliticism more apparent than in the history of Kelly's bookkeeper, Birdie, who, we learn, had once had a passionate (and still fondly remembered) fling with Francisco Franco. This knowledge helps Kelly overcome her animus toward Fox. If sweet, old Birdie experienced romantic bliss with a fascist dictator, what could be wrong with an affair with a predatory capitalist like Fox?

In Ephron's world, nothing, not even the fight against fascism, is more important than following one's heart. For a woman, following one's heart--as Kelly does--means giving up your career in order to align yourself with a wealthier and more powerful man (the film might accurately be retitled, "You've Got a Male"). In keeping with a romantic comedy tradition stretching from Kate and Petruccio to Hepburn and Tracy, Ephron structures the movie as a battle between the sexes. On one side are Fox, his father, and grandfather; on the other are Kelly, her deceased mother (who founded the bookstore), and Birdie. It's no surprise, given this dynamic, that Kelly, fulfilling her maternal role, runs a children's bookstore. And it's no surprise that in this battle between male and female worlds, males triumph. They are more aggressive--both Fox and Navasky refer, in a gesture Kelly thinks must be common to all men--to *The Godfather* as a source of profound truth. Fox says it's the font of all knowledge, a modern-day *I Ching*. It's unnatural, therefore, for a woman to run a business and compete with men. Likewise, Kelly should not continue as a surrogate mother to the neighborhood kids. She needs to become a real mom. The movie also follows traditional gender roles in having Fox learn that Kelly is his anonymous e-mailer and having him, as sly as his animal namesake, manipulate his relationship with her, playing up his good sides, trying to get her to overcome her prejudices before announcing himself her correspondent. In this situation, the female is ignorant and the male has knowledge/power--he's the one who will decide, paternalistically, when to reveal the truth.

To accompany her romantic comedy, Ephron uses a soundtrack of offbeat love songs by the likes of Jimmy Durante, Louis Armstrong, Stevie Wonder, Roy Orbison, and Carole King. Most conspicuous, though, is Harry Nilsson, who sings "Over the Rainbow," as well as two of his own songs, "Remember" and "The Puppy Song," and whose "I Guess the Lord Must be in New York City" is performed by Sinead O'Connor. Appropriately enough, these songs are filled with wistful longing about a timeless place where bluebirds sing and romance blooms, a place "long ago [and] far away" ("Remember")--a dreamscape. "Dream," Nilsson sings, "love is only in a dream" ("Remember"), while "dreams are nothing more than wishes and a wish is just a dream you wish could come true" ("The Puppy Song"). These songs point to the film's central problem--the placing of a dreamy romantic comedy into the world of monopoly capital and the consequent romanticizing of exploitation and inequality. This problem can be

found in Ephron's use of Nilsson's "I Guess the Lord Must be in New York City," a song originally meant for the film *Midnight Cowboy*. Nilsson sings,

I'll say goodbye to all my sorrow
And by tomorrow I'll be on my way
I guess the Lord must be in New York City.
I'm so tired of gettin' nowhere
Seein' my prayers goin' unanswered
I guess the Lord must be in New York City
Well here I am Lord, knockin' on your back door
Ain't it wonderful to be where I've always wanted to be
For the first time I'll breath free here in New York City.

In the context of *Midnight Cowboy*, this song suggests the vain hope for better things, the naïve belief that dreams are to be answered in New York, and the refusal to accept hard, illusion-shattering truths. It's really a song about false consciousness, about deluding oneself into believing that New York, that centerpiece of the American dream, is the site of glorious reward. Nilsson emphasizes the futility of this desperate dream through the irony of breathing free amidst the fumes and congestion of New York. For Ephron, though, this song is unironic. In *You've Got Mail*, the Lord is in New York City--He lives on the Upper West Side and graces the lives of the fortunate few.

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