The Image of Friendship (1995)

Javier Marías

THERE'S A MOVIE out now that centers around two characters, and while such types are not uncommon in real life, they've merited very little attention from writers and movie-makers. I'm talking about the "failed artist" and the "has-been"; the former, in particular, is almost never depicted, described, or studied.

Edward D. Wood, Jr., was the full name of the man who, after Tim Burton's remarkable movie, is sure to be remembered as plain Ed Wood. Years ago, the Golden Turkey Awards chose him and his movie *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as worst director and worst movie of all time. This was quite an achievement in an art so firmly in the grip of the movie industry, and it's understandable that such accolades should have aroused a degree of curiosity about the winner in such a hard-fought contest, a curiosity that has found its ultimate expression in Burton's movie, *Ed Wood*. Wood managed to direct nine feature-length movies, despite the difficulty of getting financial backing, the minimal resources at his disposal, and the truly pathetic results. Fortunately, many of these movies can now be found on video, at least in England and France. They are, I suppose, both silly and appallingly badly made, but time has conferred on them a certain charm and even a considerable boldness and originality, given when they were made and—as we learn from Tim Burton's movie—how very precarious the whole process was.

The Ed Wood he presents to us, played by Johnny Depp, is the classic failed artist, but he's also an innocent brimming with enthusiasm both for his chosen medium and for his own ideas and projects. When you think about it (and although it's painful to admit this), ultimately the vast majority of artists of all kinds turn out to be failures or mediocrities. Very few artists, in any period of history, are remembered after their death, let alone in what used to be called "posterity." Some hugely successful writers of, say, fifty years ago are now forgotten and unread, and many Nobel Prizewinners are buried now in the most absolute of oblivions. Not that you can really worry about this while alive, still less about what is usually known as "immortality." None of us—artists, writers, or whatever—are so very different from Ed Wood, although while he was alive he received only brickbats and never a word of praise, not even in the form of one of those temporary flurries of success that most of us have enjoyed. As the movie shows with great subtlety and skill, Ed Wood is an enthusiast; he is entirely without pretensions, but becomes overly enamored of his own projects and his ramshackle productions; he only rarely acknowledges his failures, and while he is capable of admiration, he is incapable of resentment: he simply wants to do what he enjoys doing, and everything he does, according to him, is bound to be good. The movie shows us how wrong he was. The truth is that he had no talent and—as so often happens—"God had not called him to that path." The film also depicts an all-too-familiar tragedy, one not without a certain nobility, namely, the artist's complete inability to see himself and to judge his own work.

The other main character is that old Hungarian actor, Bela Lugosi, famous for his pioneering roles as Dracula, and who, in *Ed Wood*, appears to us at the end of his life, lonely, retired, forgotten, eccentric, and hooked on morphine, with no money and only his memories for company. Martin Landau gives a masterly performance and won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor, which, for once, was well and truly deserved. The young Ed Wood rediscovers Lugosi, befriends him, visits him, and recruits him for his own dreadful movies. This is a meeting of two losers who not only know that they themselves are losers, they know that they are *both* losers: one a has-been, the other a never-will-be. And yet both pretend ignorance, perhaps, in a touching act of friendship, to avoid wounding or contaminating the other, as if each were saying to himself: "I know what I am and what you are, but I'll pretend not to know so that you can pretend the same."

The movie contains some of the most delicate and melancholy scenes I've seen in a long time, but one particular scene has stayed with me. Short of money, Bela Lugosi desperately needs a part in a movie, it doesn't matter what. Ed Wood has just failed to get any backing for his latest project, but to reassure the old man, he says he'll take a few second-unit shots of him coming out of his house, and invents a fictitious role for him on the spot. These takes will be simultaneously fiction and reality, showing Bela Lugosi believing that he's acting as well as the real Bela Lugosi at the real end of his life, emerging from his own house in hat and cape, smelling a flower, and covering his face with one hand in a gesture of grief. I don't know if either of them will be anything more than that in posterity, but what they definitely are—perhaps *par excellence*—is the very image of friendship.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Ghost at the Hy-Vee

I'd seen him just two months before—
his brother's service, condolences
over orange juice—but when I shook Dan's hand

between aisles, my lips spoke *Jack*.
Or Jack spoke *Jack* through me, slipping back
by vowel rhyme, and scrambling to remain

among the glint and friction of the jumbo carts,
midday's automatic produce mists. Cheeks drained,
then flushed, believing too much at once

to speak, I glanced towards Dan, his eyes
fixed below on the ceiling fans' reflections—
each circulating blade leaking up

through the floor varnish. Returned to himself,
he laughed it off, clapping my back like a man,
like a Dan would, but more softly than that.

—*Nate Klug*