STEVE ALMOND'S

FREAKSHOW

John Hughes Goes Deep

The Unexpected Heaviosity of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*

I missed *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* on the first pass, so I never quite understood what all the hubbub was about. And, as generally happens when I miss out on all the hubbub, I took it personally and thus bore a senseless grudge against the film, which I would routinely malign whenever people tried to explain how terrific it was. More often than not, I am really just a very big asshole.

Notwithstanding this, last winter I got sick, so sick I was reduced to raiding my landlord's DVD collection. He had about forty movies, most of which were thrillers of the sort that feature a European secret agent babe who takes her shirt off and a picturesque decapitation. He also had *Ferris Bueller.*

I watched the film in a state of growing astonishment. It was, without a doubt, the most sophisticated teen movie I had ever seen. I wasn't entirely sure it qualified as a teen movie at all. It featured a number of techniques that I recognized from other, later films: direct addresses to the camera, on-screen graphics, the prominent use of background songs to create de facto music videos, the sudden exhilarating blur of fantasy and reality.

More than this, though, Hughes performed an astounding ontological feat. He lured viewers into embracing his film as an escapist farce, then hit them with a pitch-perfect exploration of teen angst. He snuck genuine art past the multiplex censors.

I needn't labor the basic plot—kid fakes being sick, outwits dopey grownups, gallivants around Chicago with pals. Hughes is, like any decent Aristotelian, more concerned with character.

Ferris himself (Matthew Broderick, unbearably young) comes across as a charming manipulator utterly devoted to his own enjoyments. We initially

encounter him playing sick on his bed. It is a pathetically stagy performance and he seems mildly disappointed when his doting parents fall for it. We get a few scenes of him mugging for the camera, and the introduction of his inept nemesis, the dean of students, Ed Rooney.

The scene shifts to a sleek, modern home, propped up on stilts and perched at the edge of a bluff. We cut to a dark, sarcophagus-like bedroom, littered with medicine bottles and crumpled Kleenex. A figure lies obscured under a blanket, like a mummy, while an electronic dirge plays in the background.

This is our introduction to Cameron Frye (Alan Ruck), Ferris's best friend. The phone by the bed rings and a hand appears and slowly clicks on the speakerphone. It is Ferris demanding that Cameron come over and spend the day with him. Meaning, essentially, chauffeur him around.

Cameron declines in a froggy voice. He is sick. Ferris repeats his demand and hangs up.

"I'm dying," Cameron whispers.

The phone rings again and Ferris mutters, "You're not dying. You just can't think of anything good to do."

We now see Cameron from above. His expression is one of resignation, giving unto despair. And then, fabulously, he begins to sing.

"When Cameron was in Egypt's land . . ."

A rich, somber chorus of voices joins him.

"Let my Cameron go!"

The invocation of the old spiritual is at once strange and revelatory. It has no business, really, in what has been—to this point—smarter-than-average teenybopper fare. But then, neither does Cameron Frye.

Hughes could have simply cast him as a straight man for Ferris. But he does something far more compelling: he renders the pair as a psychological dyad. Ferris is fearless, larger-than-life. He has internalized the unconditional love of his parents and skips through his days in a self-assured reverie. He is what every teenage guy dreams of being: a raging, narcissistic id who gets away with it. Cameron is an actual teenager: alienated from his parents, painfully insecure, angry, depressed.

It is the tension between these two that drives the action. Ferris dances around the house (accompanied by the theme from *I Dream of Jeannie*). Dad calls from work and Ferris plays him like a Stradivarius. Then he turns to the camera and, with a look of indignation, says: "I'm so disappointed in Cameron. Twenty bucks says he's sitting in his car debating about whether he should go out or not."

Cut to Cameron, at the wheel of a white junker, his long, rubbery face cast in a morbid posture. He sniffs. He stares ahead. He squinches up his eyes and

growls, "He'll keep *calling* and *calling* and *calling*. . . ." He puts the key in the ignition, starts the car. He shakes his head and yanks the key out of the ignition. Then, with no warning, he starts to pound the passenger seat. These are vicious blows. "Goddamn it," he screams. The camera backs off to a midrange shot. We hear the car start again and the engine revs and we hear a primal scream at the exact same pitch. Then the car goes dead. "Forget it," Cameron says. "That's it." He flings himself out of the car and stomps back to his empty house. We cut to a close-up of the empty driver's seat. Birds tweet. Suddenly, we hear the crunch of his penny loafers on gravel and a blurry image of Cameron's hockey jersey through the rear window. He is stomping back toward the car. We think: *Ah, he's given in.* Just then he stops and begins jumping up and down and throwing punches at some invisible adversary.

The sequence lasts barely a minute. It is an astonishing piece of physical humor, an emotional ballet worthy of Chaplin. Hell, it's one of the best pieces of acting I've ever seen, period. Because it's not just funny, it's heartbreaking. We are watching a kid utterly crippled by his own conflicted impulses, torn between outrage and obedience.

In a very real sense, he needs someone to take charge. Ferris is more than willing. Within a few minutes, he has kidnapped Cameron, along with the prize Ferrari convertible Cameron's father keeps in the garage. Next, he rescues his dishy girlfriend, Sloane, from school and the trio tear off toward downtown.

Ruck is tall, blue-eyed, big-jawed, movie-star handsome. Broderick looks like a nebbish by comparison. If the film had been made today, and by a lesser director, you can bet your Milk Duds that their roles would be reversed. (Such are the mandates of the beauty gradient.) But Hughes clearly had a feel for his actors. And they so inhabit their roles that you wind up focused on their affect, not their cheekbones.

Hughes has long been hailed as the clown prince of teen angst. Whether it's Molly Ringwald getting felt up by her grandpa (*Sixteen Candles*) or Ally Sheedy teasing her dandruff into a snowfall (*The Breakfast Club*), he knows how to put across the exquisite humiliation of adolescence. Still, most of his films play to formula. *Ferris Bueller* has its share. We know, for instance, that Ferris will prevail over Rooney in the end, and that he will make it home in time to fool his benighted parents.

But the film, as a whole, is a looser, more improvisatory affair. It has a dreamy, superannuated quality. There are all these odd, unexpected moments. A secretary pulls a pencil from her bouffant hairdo. Then a second. And a third. As a teacher drones on about the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, Hughes

shows us a series of stark close-ups of students. These are actual teens—zits, bad hair, gaping mouths—and their expressions convey actual teen imprisonment: boredom, bewilderment, homicidal intent.

Even a character like Ed Rooney (played with transcendent unction by Jeffrey Jones) is granted his own impregnable sense of logic. He knows Ferris Bueller is making a mockery of his authority, and the educational mission, and that Ferris's popularity makes him the ideal target for Rooney's jihad on truancy. "I did not achieve this position in life," he sneers, "by having some snot-nosed punk leave my cheese out in the wind."

There is no line in the universe that more succinctly conveys the Rooney gestalt.

Or consider what Hughes does with a visit by our heroes to the Art Institute of Chicago. Backed by a soft, symphonic score, he offers us lengthy shots of the most beautiful paintings in the world: Hoppers, Modiglianis, Pollocks. There is no ulterior plot motive; he is simply celebrating the majesty of the work. We see Cameron, Ferris, and his dishy girlfriend Sloane stand before a trio of Picassos, transfixed.

As the music crescendoes, we see Cameron standing before Georges Seurat's pointillist masterpiece, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte.* We cut to a shot of Ferris and Sloane, the happy couple, necking in the blue light of a stained-glass window, then back to Cameron, alone, staring at the Seurat. Another one of these magical things happens: the camera begins zooming in on the little girl in white at the center of the canvas. We cut back to Cameron, closer now. Then back to the little girl. We see his growing anguish as he realizes that her mouth is wide open, that, in fact, she is wailing.

Okay, good enough: Cameron recognizes himself in the figure of this little girl whose mother is holding her hand but making no effort to comfort her. Got it.

But then Hughes takes us even deeper. He gives us an extreme close-up of Cameron's eyes, then cuts back to the canvas, to the girl's face, then to her mouth, then to the specks of paint that make up her mouth, until we can no longer resolve those specks into an image; they are just splotches of color on coarse fabric. This is the true nature of Cameron's struggle: his anxieties have obliterated his sense of identity.

We then cut, somewhat abruptly, to a German street parade. Cameron is fretting. He needs to get his dad's Ferrari back to the house. Ferris objects. He wants to have more fun. But he also knows that his friend needs to loosen up, to conquer his fear and experience life.

The next time we see Cameron, he and Sloane are hurrying along the parade route. Ferris has ditched them. We cut to a float. Ferris has commandeered a microphone. "This is one of my personal favorites and I want to

dedicate it to a young man who doesn't think he's seen anything good today. Cameron Frye, this one's for you." He begins a campy lip-synch of the old torch song, "Danke Schoen." Then he launches into a raucous version of "Twist and Shout." The crowd goes nuts. Ferris has induced a mass hysteria in downtown Chicago. This could never happen in real life. It is a Walter Mitty–esque diversion. Which is precisely the point: Ferris has staged this adolescent fantasy of omnipotence expressly for his best friend.

By definition, the adults in a Hughes film are beyond hope of transformation. But it is his central and rescuing belief that teens are capable of change—even the ones who seem to be stock characters. I am thinking here of Jeanie Bueller (Jennifer Grey) who plays the overlooked younger sister and spends most of the film in a snit of sibling rivalry. She is so eager to bust her brother that she winds up in a police station, next to a spaced-out drug suspect (an excellent Charlie Sheen) who slowly chips away at her defenses to reveal the sweet, needy kid living beneath her bitterness.

The prime example, of course, is the relationship between Ferris and Cameron. It is without a doubt the most convincing *therapeutic narrative* in his oeuvre. After all, as much as we may want to suspend our disbelief, is there anyone out there who *really* believes that the Molly Ringwald character in *The Breakfast Club* is going to give Judd Nelson the time of day once they're back in school?

Ferris himself is, for the most part, a fabulous cartoon—half James Bond, half Holden Caulfield. But he understands the very real crisis Cameron is facing and takes it as his role to push his friend into emotional danger.

But Ferris, of course, leads a charmed life. His existentialism comes cheap. For Cameron (as for the rest of us) the experience of pleasure is an ongoing battle against anxiety. Ferris and Sloane can treat the day as just another glorious idyll. For Cameron, it comes to assume the weight of a reckoning.

Toward dusk, he, Ferris, and Sloane return to his house with the precious Ferrari intact. Ferris has a plan: they can run the accrued miles off the car's odometer by jacking the car's rear tires off the ground and running the car in reverse.

As they sit outside the garage, Cameron comes clean about his anxieties. "It's ridiculous," Cameron announces. "Being afraid, worrying about everything, wishing I was dead, all that shit. I'm tired of it." He looks at his friends. "That was the best day of my life," he says. "I'm going to miss you guys next year."

The standard teen film would probably end on his upbeat note. Hughes is just getting started. Cameron heads into the garage to check on the car. Ferris's plan is not working. For a moment, Cameron appears panic-stricken.

Ferris suggests they crack open the glass and adjust the odometer.

But Cameron shakes his head.

"No," he says. "Forget it. Forget it. I gotta take a stand." His tone takes a sudden detour into self-loathing. "I'm bullshit. I put up with everything. My old man pushes me around. I never say anything." He is shouting now. "Well, he's not the problem. I'm the problem. I gotta take a stand. I gotta take a stand against him." As he leans over the hood of the Ferrari, his voice drops to a menacing register: "I am not going to sit on my ass as the events that affect me unfold to determine the course of my life. I gotta take a stand and defend it, right or wrong."

He kicks the car. "I am so sick of his shit! Who do you love? You love the car, you son of a bitch!" He continues to kick at the car: the rear bumper, the trunk, the taillights. These are not gentle little movie kicks. They are charged with a real violence of intent. Thanks to some clever crosscutting, we can see that Cameron has nearly knocked the car off its jack. He is nearly in tears; his entire body is tossed by the savagery. And thus it becomes clear what he's really been afraid of all along: his own murderous rage.

"Shit," Cameron says, "I dented the shit out of it." He laughs, in a manner throttled by regret. Ferris and Sloane—like the viewer—are watching this meltdown in a state of shock. After all, this is supposed to be just a funny little teen movie. But something has happened on the way to the happy ending: a much darker, more authentic psychological event. A catharsis.

"Good," Cameron says finally, in a voice of forced assurance. "My father will come home and see what I did. I can't hide this. He'll have to deal with me. I don't care. I really don't. I'm just tired of being afraid. Hell with it. I can't wait to see the look on the bastard's face."

Cameron sets his foot on the beleaguered rear fender, which, of course, sends the car tumbling off the jack. The rear wheels hit the ground with a skid and the car crashes through a plate glass window and off the bluff.

There is a long, gruesome moment of silence, as the three kids try to grasp the magnitude of what's just happened.

"Woah," Cameron says. "Oh shiiiit."

Ferris immediately insists on taking the blame. This doesn't feel particularly momentous, given the state Cameron is in. But it does mark a profound transformation in the Bueller weltanschauung. He has risen above his happy-go-lucky solipsism—probably for the first time in his life—and offered to sacrifice himself.

Cameron has undergone an even more radical change. He has developed what my students often refer to, admiringly, as sack.

"No," he says. "I'll take it. I'll take it. I want it. If I didn't want it, I wouldn't have let you take out the car this morning . . . No, I want it. I'm gonna take it.

When Morris comes home he and I will just have a little chat. It's cool. No, it's gonna be good, thanks anyway."

I hate trying to convey the power of this scene by setting down the dialogue alone, because Ruck is doing so much as an actor the whole time, with his body, his eyes, his voice. It will seem an audacious comparison, but I was reminded of those long, wrenching soliloquies at the end of *Long Day's Journey into Night.*

I have no idea who won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 1986. It is painful—given the photographic evidence of my wardrobe—for me to even think about that grim era. But I can tell you that Alan Ruck deserved that statue. His performance is what elevates the film, allows it to assume the power of a modern parable.

Look: John Hughes made a lot of good movies. I've seen most of them and laughed in all the right spots and hoped for the right guy to the get the right girl and vice versa and for all the *troubled kids* to find *hope.* I've given myself over to the pleasant surrender of melodrama. But Hughes made only one film I would consider true art, only one that reaches toward the ecstatic power of teendom and, at the same time, exposes the true, piercing woe of that age.

People will tell you they love *Ferris Bueller* because of all the clever lines, the gags. That's what people need to think. They don't want to come out of the closet as drama queens. It's not a kind age for drama queens. The world is too full of absent parents and children gone mean. But the real reason keep returning to the film is because John Hughes loved those kids enough to lay them bare, and he transmitted that love to us.

Bless him.