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On

Fighting Words

Independent voices at the *L.A. Times* and real independent filmmaking
by John Powers

NOW THAT THE *WEEKLY'S* PARENT COMPANY HAS settled with the Department of Justice, all that remains of the story is our collective amusement at how it was handled by the *Los Angeles Times*. Tim Rutten's Regarding Media columns on the subject were not simply inflammatory (loose talk of prison terms and multimillion-dollar fines) but as bumbling as Homer Simpson. While it is only human to misspell the name of the *Weekly's* ex-publisher, Mike Sigman (in two separate stories), it is comically maladroit to write about this paper's supposed editorial policy (how it's being shaped out of New York, how it's deliberately cutting back on news) if one is going to quote a couple of disgruntled ex-employees but not talk to the editors themselves or, for that matter, ever seem to have read the paper. *Doh!*



(Illustration by Peter Bennett)

Last weekend, Rutten's coverage reached its unwitting climax. His Saturday column was the usual pudding of weird irrelevancies -- letting D.A. Steve Cooley free-associate about his impressions of the *L.A. Weekly* ("a valuable news organ") -- and factual mistakes, such as referring to Harold Meyerson as the *Weekly's* "executive editor." As the *Boston Phoenix* was quick to point out, Meyerson stopped being executive editor almost 18 months ago, becoming the paper's political editor when he moved to Washington, D.C. The masthead, dude, the masthead.

Still, Rutten's story had a happy ending -- for us anyway. On Monday, I opened *The New York Times* to see that it, not the *L.A. Times*, had broken the story about the consent decree between DOJ and the alternative-paper chains. Which means that at the very moment Rutten's Saturday column was amping the story up with Cooley's tough-guy maunderings -- the D.A. referred to the two media companies as "suspects" -- the case itself was actually being settled. And New Yorkbased reporter David Carr was busy scooping Rutten on his prize hometown story in the *N.Y. Times*, the very publication that his bosses crave to be.

To my surprise, I actually found myself feeling sorry for the poor bastard.

Over the years, the mainstream press has stolen many things from the alternative press -- writers, formats, attitudes, opinions. But there's one thing it always leaves behind -- belief in writers' freedom to express themselves.

Consider the case of *L.A. Times* art critic Christopher Knight. On January 15, Knight began a review of Track 16 Gallery's "The Anti-War Show: The Price of Intervention From Korea to Iraq" by calling plans for war with Iraq "imbecilic" and adding that President Bush has made no "coherent argument" for an invasion. Two weeks later on the 28th -- State of the Union day -- the paper took it all back. An Editor's Note in the *Times'* Page 2 For the Record section disavowed Knight's piece and its attack on Bush policy:

"It was, in our view, a gratuitous political statement and, as such, a distraction from the legitimate substance of the review. *It should not have been published* [my emphasis]."

Now, I'm not surprised that Knight's editors were unnerved by his review. His comments on the war *were* polemical, provocatively so, and I don't doubt that they elicited countless complaints. I can easily see why the *Times* might have seen fit to run a full page of letters to the editor. But that's far different from saying his words shouldn't have been published, the kind of claim that must put the chill in every *Times* critic who might venture to connect his or her work to the larger world.

Why would the editors sell out a writer in this way? For starters, nearly all daily papers in this country feel the precariousness of their existence and live in fear of alienating any significant part of their readership -- in this case, Bush supporters who favor invading Iraq. This timidity finds its ideological justification in time-honored bromides about "objective" journalism -- even if this presumed objectivity concerns the arts, which by definition grow from subjective experience and produce subjective response. Indeed, underwriting the claim that Knight's words are "gratuitous" is the sorry belief that full human engagement with paintings or movies or music or books is somehow inappropriate -- we're supposed to consume the stuff, not let it change us. By such a standard, a critic should finally act as a neutral observer whose passionate engagement with the arts should stop short of actually endorsing what they might be saying about the world. Unless, of course, the art is saying something safe and socially acceptable, in which case nobody will notice. Would the *Times'* editors now refuse to publish a review that begins with a flag-waving tribute to our brave soldiers and our heroic policy in Afghanistan?

This benighted vision of what's going too far offers yet one more example of why mainstream arts coverage has become so hopelessly dull. Insisting that there's really nothing at stake, today's editors and producers are willing, indeed eager, to silence those who try to shatter the aura of polite irrelevance that makes our cultural commissars feel safe: Thank God, art doesn't actually mean anything!

Beyond journalism, the *Times'* disavowal of Knight's words is another symptom of a political climate that keeps getting spookier. We already lived in a world in which the Super Bowl broadcast -- complete with zooming jets and Marines guarding a magic trick by Penn and Teller -- could serve as the militaristic prequel to Bush's State of the Union address. Now, our art critics have been put on a state of alert.

It has long been an article of faith that Sundance is the home of *independent* filmmaking. Indeed, during its televised awards show last Saturday night, the festival never stopped praising itself for precisely this virtue, reaching its peak when Tilda Swinton (rather charmingly, I thought) took a swipe at Late Capitalism.

To find the true independent spirit these days, you might do better to look to South Korea, one of the handful of countries that, as Jack Valenti would unhappily tell you, uses quotas to protect its homegrown cinema from being overrun by Hollywood "product" (to borrow the unseemly term Redford used the other night on the Sundance Channel). The Koreans are famously nationalistic -- they even have their own tiny version of Disneyland, Lotte World -- and they take as much in their own culture as do the French. As I discovered when I attended the Pusan Film Festival a couple of years ago, the country is creating one of the most exciting movie cultures anywhere -- everything from pop blockbusters like the action-picture *Shiri* to the graceful art films of the aging master Im Kwon-Taek.

Of course, American audiences -- even here in L.A. with our huge Korean-American population -- have yet to catch on to this South Korean boom, with such rising stars as the uncommonly gifted Hong Sang-Soo. So it comes as little surprise that virtually no one here has ever heard of one of its finest writer-directors, Lee Chang-Dong, a novelist-turned-filmmaker whose work straddles the multiplex and the art house in his home country. His latest film, *Oasis*, won five separate prizes at the Venice Film Festival (somehow, it wasn't at Sundance) and is the South Korean entry for the Best-Foreign-Film Oscar.

In a just world, the movie would certainly be one of the five nominees, but I fear Academy voters may find its subject matter too tough: It tells the story of the love affair between a feckless ex-con and a young woman with cerebral palsy who spends virtually the entire film having spastic convulsions, even during a startling, genuinely passionate sex scene. I know the premise sounds like the kind of phony pairing that artists often cook up, but Lee avoids the pitfalls of nastiness or easy sentimentality. Even as he evokes the lovers' dreamy romanticism amid all their adversity (in this, his directing recalls Hollywood legend Frank Borzage), he creates a wider sense of life that's novelistic in its richness. *Oasis* is at once a moving love story, a sharp social comedy and a fierce political commentary on how Korean society cruelly represses outsiders. It's also a triumph of artistic indirection: Not a single scene plays out the way you expect it to. This is the kind of film that gives humanism back its good name, and it speaks volumes about so-called independence that many minor Sundance pictures will get picked up, while Lee's internationally acclaimed film has found no American distributor.

Speaking of which, the screening I attended was held at CAA, and the place was eerily deserted -- apparently, all the hustling young agents were on the slopes in Park City. Certainly, none bothered to watch Lee's film. In fact, if you're ever trying to hide from an agent, there's no safer place on the planet than the CAA screening room when they're showing a really good foreign movie.