Phony business: At the movies

by James M. Wall in the July 1, 1998 issue

Several entertainment and media conglomerates recently selected the top 100 films of the first century of the U.S. motion picture industry. You could hardly miss the news--the list was announced in a three-hour CBS special and in a special edition of *Newsweek*, and videos of the 100 films were made available at Blockbusters. The selection was quite arbitrary; the whole event was a sales gimmick at worst, and at best a way to garner public debate over the premier art form developed in this century. Columnists jumped at the chance to deplore the oversights. I have my own complaints: the omission of Buster Keaton's *The General*, the Marx Brothers' *A Day at the Races*, and *The Blues Brothers*. Also missing the cut was *Cool Hand Luke*, one of the few Hollywood products that was really serious about depicting a Christ figure.

My favorite column of the many that were provoked by the list was by a woman who said that a "favorite" film depends on the age of the viewer--the very young want thrills and excitement, young adults want romance, and the older folk are into nostalgia. All of which is to suggest that film viewing is a highly subjective experience. Artistic standards are relevant, of course, but personal perspective finally determines which pictures command our attention.

Three releases from late spring and early summer have made my early list of the year's best films and might figure in the next century's top 100 list. *The Truman Show*, *Bulworth* and *He Got Game* loosely share a common theme: the struggle to survive against the debilitating power of the entertainment industry and media-driven politics.

He Got Game is Spike Lee's look at the lure of basketball as an escape route from the ghetto. Lee is a didactic African-American filmmaker who uses his considerable talent (his best artistic effort thus far is *Do the Right Thing*) to preach to audiences, black and white. That gains him critical respect but not much popular acceptance, at least not by Hollywood standards. He eschews the black-white comedy and the excessive violence of films like *Lethal Weapon*, and he insists on making films that explore the black experience.

He Got Game is about a father (Denzel Washington) filled with such rage that he alienates his son, a promising basketball star, whose help he later needs. The governor of a state offers the father a reduced prison term if he will persuade the son to take his basketball skills to the state university. The son's decision forms the heart of the story, which ends on a surprising note of grace, with a touch of magical realism rarely seen in American films.

Lee utilizes rap music to convey the anger and frustration of both the embittered son and the father who has failed him. The son is played by Ray Allen of the Detroit Pistons. Lee wisely opted to use an amateur actor who could really play the game rather than a film star who would have had to learn to handle a basketball. The suprising counterpoint to rap in the film is the music of Aaron Copeland, whose well-known themes underscore both the ballet-like grace of the athletes and the Americanness of the story, which is about winning being everything.

Black rage is also evident in Warren Beatty's *Bulworth*, a harsh satirical look at American political campaigns. Beatty set up a special screening of the film in Chicago for Jesse Jackson, hoping, no doubt, for some support for his picture from an influential African-American. Instead he got a negative response.

Jackson didn't like the narrow focus on one segment of the black community--drug dealers. (I don't know if Jackson noticed it, but *Bulworth* includes a scene that recalls the image from Martin Luther King's assassination, with several African-Americans, including Jackson, pointing to the window from which the fatal shot was fired.)

But black drug dealers are not the focus of the film; they are around to provide a plot device that plunges Beatty, in the role of Senator Bulworth, into the Los Angeles ghetto, from which he is temporarily rescued through the love of an African-American woman.

Beatty did not make a film "about" the black community. His picture is a harsh indictment of the phoniness of (predominantly white) political campaigns that only pretend to conduct public debate, that offer simplistic answers, and that are paid for by people who don't really want social problems to be solved.

Some critics have complained about the presence in the film of a mysterious older black man who periodically shows up to admonish Bulworth, who decides to be honest in his campaign, to choose the "spirit over the ghost"--a clear call for life over death. These critics must not have seen one of Beatty's first films as an actor,

Mickey One. This film was directed by Arthur Penn during his existentialist period in the early 1960s. In that picture, which concludes on a “God is silent” note, Mickey is on the run in Chicago, just as Bulworth is in Los Angeles. A mysterious spiritual figure also appears periodically in *Mickey One*, an Asian-American musician who continuously beckons Mickey to join him and leave his paranoia behind. Beatty appears to be drawing from that earlier film in *Bulworth*, though now he seems to have decided that God is not just silent but absent.

God may not be dead in *The Truman Show*; he just may have become a television director. That is one interpretation of Peter Weir’s surprisingly complex film about Truman, played by Jim Carrey. Much of the film’s subtle effectiveness comes from the slow recognition by Truman that his life has been, since birth, a live television program.

The film is a fantasy. Viewers must suspend disbelief long enough to accept the possibility that someone could be made to stay on an island (fear of water and of dogs prevents his escape) and could be kept from the knowledge that his family and friends are all performers and that a worldwide television audience is watching his every waking and sleeping moment. The satire is aimed at audiences that relish the invasion of privacy. It is also aimed at a commercial television industry that will air whatever sells, regardless of the pain inflicted on the performers or the grossness of the subject or the vacuity of the vision conveyed.

If you didn’t like Carrey’s earlier films, which were filled with adolescent humor, don’t let that keep you from *The Truman Show*. Carrey plays a sensitive man who must choose between a secure but lifeless TV-directed existence and a freedom that leads into the unknown. It’s sort of like choosing what to watch tonight, Jerry Springer or a repeat viewing of, well, a well-honed satire like The Truman Show.