

In defence of escapism

By Anwer Mooraj

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A READER wondered if there was really any point in columnists continuously badgering the Pakistan establishment, week after week, month after month, when people at the helm of affairs don't take the slightest notice of what is printed and carry on doing just what they please.

Writers have, in fact, been italicizing not just the gross misgovernment that takes place at various levels of administration, but also the orgy of extravagance and waste indulged in by men in and out of uniform. But it hasn't made the slightest difference. It is this total disregard for the views of columnists that makes some writers want to chuck away their political notebooks and sit before the idiot box, glass in hand and feet on the table.

A decade after television had been introduced in Pakistan, we still had only two channels on state controlled TV. Programmes, we were told, were selected for their social message and viewers who were not knocking back chasers or trying out the new Latin American dance at the club, gravitated once a week to the Ponderosa. This was the 600-acre ranch home of the Cartwright family, where Little Joe, Hoss, their father and the Chinese cook who produced hay wagon breakfasts, laid down the law in that part of Nevada.

Each episode was prefaced with the display of a map to provide some kind of cartographical focus and to remind viewers that *Bonanza*, which was a natural successor to *Rawhide*, was filmed near the shores of Lake Tahoe in the Sierras halfway between Squaw Valley and Carson City. The serial had a special appeal to people in this part of the world when they discovered that the head of the family played by Lorne Greene had been widowed thrice and had a son from each of his three wives.

Bonanza had become essential viewing, like *The Forsythe Saga* and *The Fugitive* before it. In those days timings of marriage ceremonies in Karachi had to be adjusted according to the screening time of these soaps. It just

programmes in which a suburban housewife suddenly discovers she can have a garden better than her mother-in-law's, or when somebody is telling an old codger that the dirty looking vase that he had brought to the auction was worth anything between a hundred and a hundred and twenty pounds.

The only problem with the films shown on TCM (Turner Classic Movies) is that they can hardly be called 'classics' in the sense generally understood by the word. They are just films that were made before the '40s, and before directors decided that a story wasn't complete until it had at least three car chases, a black captain of police and a Chinaman who learned his English in the flight from Hong Kong.

But once in a while they come up with delightful golden oldies like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Casablanca*. Nobody expected the latter in which Humphrey Bogart starred after two other actors had dropped out, and in which a totally disinterested Ingrid Bergman was killing time before acting in *For Whom The Bell Tolls* would be such a hit.

What emerged from the disarray was 98 minutes of quotable celluloid gold, a film that made screen legends of Bergman and Bogart. Who can ever forget that great line uttered by Claude Rains dressed in a black Vichy regime uniform complete with belt and boots - "Round up the usual suspects?" Its jaundiced protagonist Rick came to symbolize America's transition from isolationist to neutrality to heroic participation in the Second World War.

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erial had driven Roy Rogers and Gene Autrey, horse, guitar, spurs and all into the bottom of the Grand Canyon. These two cowboys haven't been heard of since. Nowadays viewers have over 90 channels provided by cable networks and often complain that in spite of the variety there is really nothing to watch or look forward to. Take for instance the Indian channels of which there are at least eight in one form or another.

One longs to see something by Satyajit Ray like *The World of Apu*, or by Shyam Benegal. Like *Manthan*. Instead one is inundated by heaps of candy floss nonsense in which a variety of skimpily dressed leading ladies who all look alike, with their blue-tinted contact lenses and long hair dyed the colour of rust, gyrate across the floor with one of the Khans or the Kapoor, united by the vague consciousness of a shared activity.

Two weeks ago this writer was in a particularly masochistic mood and decided to sit through one of these sagas. He was absolutely dazzled by the film's visual opulence expressed in the four-hour-long extravaganza. The brocaded costumes were quite resplendent as one took in the riot of colour — flaming orange, emerald green, copper sulphate blue, egg flip yellow and imperial purple. And the song-and-dance sequences, overflowing with performers, were beautifully choreographed.

One searched in vain for a story or a theme which would distinguish the production from a documentary, and was informed later by a neighbour that the motion picture was a tale of unrequited love. There was nothing to stop one from chuckling at the film's straight-faced excess, but when it finished one had no great desire to see a similar

More than 60 years later, its appeal remains undimmed.

Nevertheless one longs to see a channel devoted exclusively to the real classics, western and eastern, which shows films made by Rossellini, Pabst, Lubitsch, Fellini, Visconti, Ray, Wender, Resnais, Antonioni, Eisenstein and Pagnol. Since the likelihood of something like this emanating from the West is remote, perhaps a serious cinema buff in Pakistan or India could undertake such a project. Since most of these films are over 40 years old there ought not to be a problem with copyright.

Wouldn't it be nice to see during the first week films like *The Bicycle Thief* (Vittorio de Sica), *Wild Strawberries* (Ingmar Bergman), *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Marcel Carne), *Man of Marble* (Andres Wajda), *Rashoman* (Akira Kurosawa), *Sous les Toits de Paris* (Rene Clair), *Ballad of a Soldier* (Grigori Chukhrai), *The Music Room* (Satyajit Ray), *Brief Encounter* (David Lean) and *Los Olvidados* (Luis Bunuel)?

Since there is little else to choose from in the channels one has been sticking close to and not straying too far from UK TV (Granada) which demonstrated quite a while ago that eventually the cowboys were driven off the prairie by policemen with trouble at home. That was when the Karachi television public was introduced to a clutch of British sleuths led by John Thaw, who plays Detective Inspector Morse of the Thames Valley Police.

Morse, who doesn't appear to have a Christian name, is an orthodox, restless and headstrong middle-aged bachelor whose cases often bring him into contact with Oxford's academic community. A loner by nature he is