



## MELPOMENE ON THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

About a month ago, April 2018, I wandered on Youtube looking, as usual, the film "Best Friends" by Comencini (1955), a film linked to memories, which were dear to me. I had gone to see it with my first friend (at that time we were thirteen), and we saw it twice. The film, which told the friendship of two kids, was gentle, dramatic, but not tragic. Many years later, but this is another story, I met one of the two protagonists in Sydney (Australia). He revealed to me that his success, achieved as he was at the age of twelve, had gone to his head, and his father had not allowed him to continue a promising career, at least until he graduated from high school. He told me that he would have been the first choice as a lead together with Claudia Cardinale in the "Girl with a Suitcase" by Zurlini, 1961, but his father had vetoed it. So the way was left wide open to the excellent actor Jacques Perrin.

I hardly ever go to the movies, nor do I buy DVDs, so the videos I found on YouTube were unknown to me. I saw a full film, whose title in Italian was "Best friends," in color. Hmm. The original, like the copy I had previously seen on YouTube, which had mysteriously disappeared, leaving only a few fragments, was in black and white. I thought: "Here is the usual color remake, which generally is way worse than the original, be it in BW or not! " Here I was thinking of an awful 1985 remake in color of the masterpiece "The Burmese Harp"(1956), with the same Director (!) and with Japanese soldiers who did nothing but singing and crying. These activities went so far that some critics from neighboring countries felt obliged to observe that the Japanese soldiers they remembered behaved quite differently when they invaded their respective countries.

On the column of proposals next to the video of the "Best friends" in color, I found a film that I did not know, "The Chorus" ("*Les Choristes*," 2003), produced, believe or not, by Jacques Perrin, who also had a small role in it. I found the film excellent, and I saw it again and again. The actors were good, not only the lead among the boys (Jean-Baptiste Maunier), who, besides being a good actor had a beautiful soprano voice, but also other minor characters, such as a boy Cyril Bernicot, who did not have a significant role, but acted in a way, which I could not imagine better (I think he stopped his acting career very soon). However, after viewing this film many times, especially certain scenes, I told myself that it was too easy to make such a movie: lively kids, a beautiful angel-face, angel-voice boy, a lot of new music, a kind story.

Let's look for something else. While explaining to a friend my problem, he advised me to watch another French (actually French-Russian): "The Concert" (2009). I was amazed to discover that in two attempts, I who never went to the movies, had found two good ones. For me, the central scene of "The Concert » is at about half-time, when the featured violin soloist gets upset because the dry run is going nowhere, but changes her mind after listening, initially in a terrible mood, to the

performance of Capriccio n.24 of Paganini by the former first violin of the fake-Bolshoi orchestra. He is a lightly minded self-taught gypsy, but suddenly turns solemn (detail to be noted), and performs the Capriccio masterfully, with unexpected effects that the violin soloist could not reproduce.

For me, that was the turning point of the film, the event, which the ancient Greeks would call "the catastrophe" (which did not mean "disaster," but only radical change). I also saw this film, in whole or in fragments, several times. And I discovered that my friend Piero had the same idea: the performance of Capriccio n.24 was the crucial scene in the whole film. Among other things, I was happy to see François Berléand, the perfect villain of "The Chorus" among the actors again. In any case, even this film, I thought, was too easy to put together. A beautiful violinist (even if not authentic), an excellent performance, played as a single movement, of the splendid Violin Concerto by Tchaikovsky for a good quarter of the time, Soviet gulags, racial discrimination, were all safe ingredients.

In the same column, next to the false "Best friends" there was another film: "Lessons of a Dream" ("*Der ganz grosse Traum*," 2011), luckily well dubbed from German. Before I took the plunge, I looked for some reviews. The American reviews were unanimous in considering that film as a sort of German version, therefore in minor tone, of the legendary film "Dead Poets Society," a film that I had immediately loathed for the thesis that I considered absurd. In any case, I know that the film for some reason had become a "cult" for the post-'68 generations, to which I do not belong. But I'm ready to bet that in about fifty years, when the post-'68 generations will be extinct, also the interest in this film will go with them.

The reviews of "Lessons of a Dream" ended by saying more or less: "If you liked the 'Dead Poets Society,' you will not fail to like this film," which was for me a not very encouraging recommendation. Thus, I decided to experience the reverse: "Even if you did not like the 'Dead Poets Society' you might nevertheless like this film." I was not disappointed. The film is a jewel, which had no circulation in Italy neither as a movie nor as a DVD. It gives a somewhat fictionalized version of real facts, the introduction of English football as a « supporting didactic activity » in German schools in 1874, that is, shortly after the proclamation of the German Empire. One should not forget that sport, in general, was born in the English Public Schools as a supporting didactic activity. Anachronisms, etc., abound in the film, but we do not go to the cinema to follow a history course or to practice nitpicking, which already is the task of second-rate reviewers when they are paid to watch a film that already a priori does not present any interest for them. The Director here had a harder task: no good-looking boys with a fine soprano voice, no famous classical music, and beautiful violin soloists, no gulags: only footballs, and boys with very normal faces. The film had a structure very similar to "The Chorus." The difference was that « The Chorus » took place in the restricted area of a reform school, while in the German movie the interests of an entire great country were at stake. And then there were no less than two different themes of underlying melancholy, or rather *Weltschmerz*, the "cosmic pain" of Jean Paul, the sorrow for the ills of the world. Even if the experiment to introduce English football (soccer) into German schools in Germany had succeeded, the world soccer had not evolved in the right direction in the following. Today we can say that among the anti-educative activities of humanity soccer is probably the worst, the most widespread, the most irremediable one. When the parents of the youth soccer teams forget the fair play, the respect for the other players and the referees, it is a sure sign that the English experiment has failed: not only soccer does not educate the boys but also has a harmful effect on their parents. And the second *Weltschmerz* theme was the thought of how Germany had evolved, despite soccer in schools, procuring two frightening tragedies to the world and herself. The *Weltschmerz* that weighed on the unsuspecting German students of 1874 was for me what gave a unique atmosphere to this film, which faithfully reconstructed that distant world. Besides, the performance of adults and children, without reaching insurmountable summits, was excellent.

But this "Best friends" in color always came back to me. Finally, I gave in and looked at a short take. Two ladies appeared there, and one was threatening the other to kill her if she ever dared to lay her hand again on a certain boy. Well, before looking at a movie like that, I looked for a review. One of my nephews once gave me a massive and handy volume of reviews (at which I look now with some diffidence after the four stars and the "little heart" given to the unpleasant "Dead Poets Society"). The review was terse: "*The Cure, Two Stars. Directed by Peter Horton, with Joseph Mazello, Brad Renfro, Diana Scarwid, Annabella Sciorra (all illustrious strangers to me): the tough life of a child who has AIDS. His marginalization is no different from what an adult would live in his condition. Fortunately, there is the exception: a true friend who will help the little patient to face his destiny with less despair. Correct product, even if it underlines known and conventional aspects of the story. Very good the two boys. Dramatic. Colors. 99 minutes, 1995.*"

With so many sad events in the world, the theme did not excite me at all, and yet little by little I was attracted to watch a scene here, a take there... like a moth that circles the candle that will kill it. Bloody film! Finally, I took the courage in both hands and started from the beginning, skipped the central part, and saw the ending.

There are two types of reviewers. First, we have those who feel they have to tell the public if the film they review has to be seen immediately, given the space-time circumstances in which it appears. Secondly, there are those who feel that they have to judge the movie as a potential work of art, which perhaps will not be appreciated at its appearance, but will overpoweringly outrun its competitors in the years to come – a rare occurrence indeed in movie-making. I'm not a professional reviewer, but my comment belongs to the second category, by necessity, because, almost twenty-five years after its appearance, the film has become a historical document, a fact which should never be forgotten.

The prevailing attitude towards AIDS and gays in 1995 was what it was, and it is useless to sweeten it or gloss over it. Of course, an 11-year-old boy who, because of a blood transfusion contracted AIDS as a baby, and had to live through pain and fear and discrimination, with the sole support of his desperately loving mommy, is a hard-to-beat ingredient if you want a recipe for a tear-jerker. So here the Director (or his excellent author and screenwriter, Robert Kuhn) had a different problem from the first two films I mentioned above: he/they risked falling into the obvious, which for many viewers is unbearable. Would the Director be able to make the theme bearable, at least to me? I must warn at the outset that, although I am convinced that the film is at a level well above the "industrial" tear-jerkers, if someone wants to watch "The Cure" (or "*Friends forever*," because this, and not "*Best friends*," is the Italian title), he should do it, and should prepare a good supply of tissues. He will need them.

But my general opinion for "The Cure" is that Melpomene (the ancient muse of the tragedy), left for once the top of Mount Parnassus and attempted to land on the banks of the Mississippi, intervening directly, and often leading by the hand the Director and screenwriter to the threshold of the sublime. She succeeded in this, but in the program to settle in the United States, Melpomene failed, at least for the moment. American professional reviewers, some with the snobbery of ignorance, mostly remained unresponsive and did not praise the film to its right value. Moreover, as we have seen, there are also those who treat the movie with a certain sufficiency, for example, the previously mentioned book of reviews in Italian in my possession. As for me, I cannot imagine that this film should end up in the attic of the hopelessly forgotten films. It is not worth living in a world where this could happen.

Here we are dealing with a real Tragedy, built according to the classical rules, which, I dare to think, the Director found by instinct. He added the river that symbolizes the destiny, a symbol, which never appears in the classical tragedy, but just because, I imagine, it was difficult to put a

river on the scene of a Greek theater. In Greek tragedies, destiny draws the hero, because of some error, but without moral fault, in his adventures (*Peripetias*), towards a conclusion that in many cases is already known. The Greeks knew it well and went to see the tragedies with another spirit than the reviewers of the first type: the public, in general, knew well the myth or the story (the deplorable "*known and conventional aspects of the story*" of the Italian review). Nevertheless, they let themselves be transported by the flow of destiny towards feelings of pity and terror, until the final purification, or catharsis.

The inessential details did not matter to the Greeks, and in general, were omitted. The actors performed on high buskins and wearing masks with a fixed expression, in verses. After all, the Opera fans do not care if a 200-pound soprano interprets Mimì, who dies of consumption in the last act of the *Bohème*. What the ancient spectator was looking for was how and how much the tragedian managed to arouse those feelings, above all of pity and terror, if possible with sublime language, to rise to the final catharsis. So Aristotle taught.

Now, the ease with which the Director Horton-Kuhn, at his first cinematographic work, reaches the sublime is fascinating. The main help comes, I say it once and for all, from the two 11 to 13 -year-olds (Brad Renfro, Erik, and Joseph Mazzello, Dexter), who often reach as easily the sublime in their acting. I am well aware that one can find classic manuals about what the "sublime" is. I give here my practical definition: for me, the « sublime » is something of which one cannot imagine anything better. It is something much higher than the "*Very good, the two boys*" of my reviewer, who, from this and other clues, which are evident in his few words, does not seem to have even seen the film!

And then there is the chorus. Oh, yes! The Greek tragedy also had the chorus. And here the Director has another formidable intuition: also in his Tragedy there is the chorus, and how! *But we do not hear it*. The chorus is the subdued choir of the ordinary people, based on disinformation, fear, indifference, the choir who marginalizes the "kid with AIDS." It is an off-stage chorus, of which we perceive only some reflection, less than an echo. The chorus, subdued and not very understandable, by chance (or by a trick of Melpomene ?), thus becomes almost a copy of the chorus of the ancient Attic tragedy, which was also poorly understood, as it sang in Doric dialect, which was not entirely clear to the Athenians.

And in this first part, I stop here. Then I will start with my analysis, and, inevitably, with the "Spoilers."

## II

### SPOILERS

So, if anyone has come this far, and intends to continue reading, it means that either he has already seen the film or will never see it. Therefore, let's start the exam.

#### PARODOS (THE ENTRANCE OF THE CHORUS).

I wonder if Horton-Kuhn noticed: in this tragedy that, I think, Euripides would have been happy to have written (alas, not even Euripides was the favorite of the Athenians), the prologue is missing. However, there is the entrance of the chorus (again an echo of the general choir of misunderstanding and marginalization) when the bullies insult Erik, calling him Erika. Erik is an isolated loner, not indeed of the effeminate kind. His peers do not get along with him for other reasons, perhaps because of his southern accent or of his character. They ask him how is his boyfriend, implying that there is a gay relationship between him and his new neighbor, "the kid with AIDS," whom we will discover is called Dexter. Erik is annoyed, responds that he has never seen the boy, and returns home under a drizzle.

#### I HAVE TO LIVE SOMEWHERE.

First dialogue, first sublime step. The two boys play on the opposite sides of a tall fence. We will see only Erik in full until the end of the scene, while of Dexter we will get only glimpses through the badly joined boards of a fence. The two play on their own. Then Erik hears somebody coughing. Erik is hostile. He asks the neighbor, of whom he can only get brief looks, if he is spying on him. Then, after a first exchange, he tells him sarcastically: "*Thanks for moving in here. Now the kids at school call me "faggot" and walk on the other side of the hall.*" The answer is quiet and heartbreaking: "*I have to live somewhere.*" Erik asks the neighbor to withdraw into his house not to contaminate him because he does not want to die. Dexter refuses. His disease, which he calls «*it*,» is not transmitted through the air, and, besides, he is building his mud fort and will continue to do so. Now Erik becomes threatening. He walks toward the fence: "*Hey! What would you do if I come over there and whooped your ass?*" A few seconds and another answer comes, quiet and surprising: "*How long would that take?*" "*About ten seconds.*" The answer is calm and patient again: "*I would wait until you were finished and then I'd continue working on my mud fort.*" "*You mean you'd just let me beat you up?*" "*I'd try to stop you, but I probably wouldn't be able to. I'm not very big.*" A disarming answer. "*Well, in that case, it would only take five seconds.*" But Erik does not move. He can no longer take action. "*So, is that what you are gonna do?*" asks Dexter quietly. "*Maybe later.*" And Erik goes away. Dexter appears to have understood that Erik is not like the other bullies, and asks twice if Erik is still there, but there is no answer. Then Dexter gets up, and we see him for the first time. He is small, no doubt, but in his eyes, there is the strength that has helped him to live through his eleven difficult years. Besides, as we will soon know, frail as he is, he has already won the battle. The seed of friendship is sprouting in Erik, who has no way to ignore it. It is coming straight from the heart of this difficult boy, who, as we shall see soon, carries inside himself an unexplored treasure of love, whom nobody has ever understood, not even Erik himself. Thus, Erik has gone quickly home, I think, also because he feels that he has found the source of tender friendship, and his discovery is so sweet that it scares him.

There are so many things to think about, concentrated in this short dialogue, that one risks overdoing it, and ending up seeing what may not be there. In that "*somewhere I have to live*" there is perhaps a story of moving more than once away from the marginalization (or worse) from hostile neighborhoods. Even more poignant is the question: "*How long would that take?*" Probably the child has already suffered painful medical treatments in which pain was inevitable, and therefore

the only defense was to hope that it would last just a short time. And when he asks "*So, is that what you are gonna do?*" We have the impression that he has already had similar experiences, in which the adversary, however, took action directly. If Erik did not do it, it is because in Erik's life, as in the life of Dexter, someone else is entering overpoweringly.

And so the next day the two meet again. They finally see each other. Erik is amazed at how small and frail his new friend is. But friendship is born all the same: they play « battleship » and then other games quite cruel to the toys. But, once again, so are the children ("*Jeux Interdits*" was the title of a famous French movie of 1952). Fortunately, « The Cure » does not let us see how a small frog will end, as it is supposed to be burned alive.

## THE ROCK

Erik leads Dexter to the supermarket (Peterson's), where, apparently, Dexter has never been (I think that his mother knows that his presence would not be appreciated). The first leg of the trip is on one small raft. Erik paddles on a current of water (the hydrography of the town where the two kids live is incomprehensible, perhaps it is part of the geography of that golden country where you live between ten and fourteen. However, it is utterly irrelevant: the ancient Greeks would not have noticed it). There is another brilliant dialogue, which animal would win in a battle between a shark and a lion: such are the very important discourses that kids make at that age.

The return is with Dexter riding on a supermarket trolley pushed by Erik, who does not want his friend to get too tired.

And here reappears the chorus or its echo. Three bullies – whom we already know - attack the two, considering them gay (at that time « *faggots* » or, also, « *homos* »), but, before they move on to actions, Erik manages to make a passionate appeal. The leading bully has a younger brother who had to undergo a blood transfusion. What if the same disgrace happened to him that hit Dexter? (Dexter in the meantime hides behind Erik peeping occasionally the bullies, with wide eyes and very endearing moves). The three bullies deep down are not all that bad. It is the general environment of disinformation and fear that drives them, as often happens, to be cruel with the most unhappy. They leave. Their leader even apologizes to Dexter: "*Sorry you're sick ...*"

But here the Director has a stroke of genius, which leaves us stunned - and even Dexter. Erik had prepared a rock in his hand and now throws it from afar, hitting the leading bully on his head. Dexter shouts at him: "*What d you do that for?*". That is the question we all ask ourselves if we look at the film as if it were just a set of photographs that express no feeling. Here, however, the Director manages to show in this gesture all the passion that was in the soul of Erik. His discourse, which almost ended in tears of rage, was made with a tension that can be understood, thinking that he was preparing to fight alone against three bullies to defend his fragile friend. He would not escape, he would fight to the bitter end (have you ever been in such a predicament? I was once, and I remember that at the end, although no fight ensued, I was shaking violently). The tension is discharged by throwing the stone and hitting one of the three, almost without wanting it. Of course, a precipitous escape follows, pushing, fortunately downhill, the trolley with Dexter worried more than terrified, because he, as we shall see, is used to living with the thought of death, and does not fear it.

## THEY WERE NICE TO ME AT THE HOSPITAL

Here comes a significant point, that is the attitude of the movie towards gays. The Director sketches with a light hand the situation in 1995. As is known, there were also those who considered AIDS as

a sort of divine punishment for some enormous guilt. In fact, in the second dialogue between the two, just before crossing the fence and meeting Dexter, Erik had recounted his grandmother's opinion: *eternal torture from a billion flames hotter than the center of the sun* will await Dexter. But Erik concluded that his grandmother was an idiot. Clearly, during the night friendship had already grown to be indestructible, even before the two kids saw each other.

When the two friends are almost home, back from Peterson's, Erik tells Dexter: « If anybody insults you and call you "faggot," you, who are not one, should call them "faggots" in your turn." But Dexter tells him: "*Well, this wouldn't be the right thing,*" and explains to Erik that "at the hospital" the "faggots" were nice to him, and he played games with them. Erik is stunned: "*You played games with homos?*". "*Let's just talk about something else,*" says Dexter. Erik is still amazed: "*Sometimes I do not know about you.*" Dexter stops walking and asks: "*What's that supposed to mean?*". Erik realizes he has taken a bad step and says "*Well, nothing.*" But Dexter is hurt and leaves him. Only at the second invitation of Erik to go back to playing together the next day he accepts, albeit reluctantly, and runs away. But it is clear that friendship has become too important for Erik and Dexter. The two boys implicitly make peace, and neither "faggots" nor "homos" will be discussed again in the whole film, certainly not between the two friends. "*Let's just talk about something else,*" Dexter said, and Erik will obey.

Frankly, I do not understand how one could say that throughout this film one can perceive a homophobic background, etc. It's not true. It all ends here. The Director did the miracle, which escaped many commentators, who continue to see in the film what has finished with this masterly dialogue. The times, it is true, were what they were, and from this point of view, we are dealing with a historical document, which goes back to 1995. But from now on (scene 16 of 83), also the chorus will be silent about the subject: we will hear talks about AIDS, but never again the words "homo" or "faggot." That was the best, which could happen in a movie in 1995.

As noted by others, Dexter does not seem to be that ill. But AIDS, in children, is not always clearly visible. My impression is that in this case, the disease shows itself sufficiently and I would suggest to remember the story of the 200-pounds soprano dying of consumption. Besides, the non-specificity of Dexter's symptoms makes the story applicable to other kids who have long-term, or even terminal diseases.

Erik becomes one of Dexter's family, partly because his mother (Gail) always works and does not seem to take care of him. A harsh, workaholic and unfriendly woman, she soon appears as the insensitive and mean woman of the story, very different from Dexter's loving mother (Linda), who immediately becomes fond of Erik. In the supermarket she even kisses his hair very lightly, leaving him astonished.

## THE SEARCH FOR THE CURE (PERIPETIAS)

Now begins the central part of the film, the search for the cure, because Erik, inspired by the movie « The Medicine Man »(1992), is convinced that all the medicines of serious diseases were found by experimenting randomly with herbs and fruits. It is an interval of quiet, optimism and hope, characteristic of many Greek tragedies, in which it seems that the grim fate we see or know might still change for the better. The search is in two parts: in the first the two friends look for the cure near home, experimenting on Dexter, first with a diet of sweets (in which Erik volunteers to be the "control group"), then with a herbal diet, which finally will send Dexter to the hospital. There are many valuable dialogues and jokes, including one that deserves mention. Erik convinces Dexter to

try a decoction, and Dexter decrees « *Oh, tastes like crap.* » Then Erik puts sugar in it, and Dexter comments: "*Sweetened crap.*"

But the search is suspended when Dexter ends up in the hospital for a gastric lavage, due to some decoction made with a poisonous plant. Here Erik's mother discovers the close friendship of her son with Dexter, which, according to his mother, puts Erik's life in danger. Erik will have to go camping to Colorado with healthy boys and girls and forget about Dexter. Erik and Dexter, the latter reluctantly, then decide to go secretly from their mothers to New Orleans, where, it seems, a Dr. Fishburn has found « the cure, » and Erik's father lives with a young partner.

But New Orleans is 1200 miles away on the Mississippi, and the two, on a larger raft, begin the descent of the river, as in the famous "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" by Mark Twain.

Horton is well aware that "*Le secret d'ennuyer est celui de tout dire*" (the art of boring lies in saying everything), and saves us the details of how the raft is found or built (details however demanded by the usual commentators that in Leonardo's Last Supper would wonder what cutlery there is on the table). In any case, the raft is just a wooden door somehow fastened to four inner tubes. And then there is a chest on it. Nothing more.

The boys, after a dreamy departure, soon find out that the raft is too slow, and get a paid passage on a pleasure boat heading to New Orleans.

One of the critics, who gives the impression of doing something else while the film unfolds and waking up occasionally to notice, if possible, the shortcomings, points out that the two boys could not have gone far on the river: "it would have been unleashed a manhunt "and so on. But would it? The author of the review ignores that between 1.6 and 2.8 million boys and girls, even 10-years-old, run away from their homes every year in the United States, according to statistics from the National Runaway Safeline (Formerly the National Runaway Switchboard). The vast majority (like our two heroes) come back after a few days. Thus, I cannot imagine that in the US about 5000 hunts a day are unleashed for kids who run away from home. Possibly, knowing that one kid has got AIDS might accelerate the manhunt, or might it slow it down?

However, be it as he says, it does not matter: if you want an exasperated realism (perhaps more realistic than reality) you watch the news, you do not go to the cinema. The beauty of the picaresque adventure first on the raft and then on a pleasure boat guided by two shifty characters who pick up on the way two girls of not brilliant intelligence, is independent of its realism, and offers us a series of pearls, like the one in which Dexter observes to Angel, one of the two girls, that her name is spelled ANGLE on her tattoo; or one in which the two kids critically examine a copy of Playboy (details are not shown) . Dexter: "*Are you sure these girls are real?*" "*Of course they're real!* » and Dexter says: « *I never seen anyone look like this before. My mom sure doesn't* ». « *These aren't moms, these are women!* » But perhaps the most cherished memory I have of this trip is Dexter's finally carefree joy while being towed on a dinghy, in the protective arms of his friend. It lasts one second, but it's a beautiful scene.

There had to be also the critic who noticed that this is not a film but a series of anecdotes suitable for a TV series. I think he referred above all to the journey down the river, as if the great model, "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," was not just a series of anecdotes, which the great river offered and still offers.

## BASKET SHOES

In this film, already full to the brim of poetry, without ever slipping into the corny stuff, we are about to climb another peak of the sublime. Again Melpomene must have whispered something in the Director/screenwriter's ear. In the evening of a day in which the traveling companions have expelled the two boys from their pleasure boat to make themselves comfortable with the two girls picked up on the banks of the Mississippi, the boys sleep under a tent. The food was disgusting, and



Dexter feels cold. The poor kid is not well, although he does not complain. During the night Erik wakes up hearing his little friend moaning in his sleep. He wakes him up. Dexter opens his eyes wide. He has sweated enough to get wet all over, T-shirt and sleeping bag. But he is shivering. Erik has now forgotten the dangers of AIDS, for him the only important thing is to understand and calm his friend: they exchange sleeping bags (I think it's a hot summer night anyway, and Erik will not need his bag), gives him his shirt, buttons it tenderly. Then he listens to the story of Dexter. Dexter, when he wakes up in the dark, often has an open-eyed nightmare: he feels like he is walking alone in the cold and dark space, in remote regions, which even the faintest light of our entire universe does not reach. I understand that this is too much for the average American, trained since childhood to consider death a taboo subject. Many reviews reflect the horror of death, which turns into disgust for the film that dares to talk about it. Erik listens attentively with the piercing and bright eyes that kids have at that age. Then, this sturdy boy, undoubtedly not as profound as Dexter, has an idea ... sublime (OMG, I'm using this word too much), yes, sublime in its simplicity. He gives Dexter one of his shoes and tells him: "*Here...Hold on to this while you sleep, and if you wake up and you scared...You say wait a minute... I'm holding Erik's shoe. Why the hell would I be holding some smelly basketball shoe? A trillion light-years from the universe... I must be here on earth safe in my sleeping bag... Erik must be close by...*" Dexter smiles sadly, accepts the loan, turns to the other side, Erik gently accommodates the sleeping bag, and Dexter immediately falls asleep. I think that Melpomene herself had to make an effort to hold back her tears when Robert Kuhn stopped writing such a poem of friendship, which extends far beyond the universe.

## THE ABANDONED WAREHOUSE

The journey down the river ends with the kids who are in a hurry to continue, while their guests are in no hurry at all. Erik has his resources, he gets on the boat and steals the necessary money. And so, after some fatiguing (for Dexter) hitch-hiking, at the bus station, the two delinquents arrive to look for Erik and Dexter, and chase them in the "Abandoned Warehouse," defined by one of the critics: "*the desperate screenwriter's friend.*" One has the impression that the reviewer so far has been watching another movie if he has the impression that someone desperate for ideas wrote this script. One would rather have the impression that this part was staged precisely to respond to a challenge, and show us what can happen even on such a trite background as an abandoned warehouse. Again, in all of theatre and literature, the challenge is frequently taken again and again to repeat the same scene, the so-called « literary topos » (while in the movie industry we have « remakes »). The hunt ends with a heroic and noble act of Dexter, which saves both, but at what cost! "It is not realistic," says the critic, who would probably find fault with the final of "Romeo and Juliet," apart from the fact that the noblest and most heroic acts are frequently real, but cannot be realistic almost by definition. Having read the opinion of the illustrious and snobbish reviewer, and having given it all the consideration it deserves, I say that if all the "Abandoned Warehouses" offered us such scenes, I would like to see one in every movie.

## KATASTROPHE

As I said, the *Katastrophé* was not necessarily a catastrophic event in the ancient tragedy. It merely was a radical change, a turning point in the Tragedy - often, I have to admit - for the worst. And in « The Cure » the protagonist is a mute character, a telephone booth. Now, freed of the pursuers, the two kids are in the bus station. Erik watches on Dexter carefully, while he sleeps laboriously and shivering with fever on a bench. The two have now understood that their progress is too slow and they will not get to New Orleans before the supply of medicines, which Dexter has taken from home will be exhausted. Still, they do not want to admit defeat. Erik, however, knows that they

must make the fatal decision, even if it means the end of hope in a magical cure, or rather, the end of all hope. Erik stares at the lit booth but does not inform Dexter. The movie Director wastes no time explaining what Erik does. We see a bus leaving in the night and, during the journey, Erik, busy to make Dexter's travel comfortable. The coach, always at night, arrives at its destination, where Dexter's mother is waiting. Dexter sleeps heavily. Erik wakes him up, and Dexter asks drowsily if they are in New Orleans. Erik does not answer. Dexter sees his mother, and she picks him up in her arms. We see Dexter crying tearfully, a heartrending, desperate cry. He understood everything too. The search has failed, and now only the courage to wait for the end is needed. We'll see him again at the hospital.

## THE HOSPITAL

Here we find Dexter now in bed, fed with cannulas through his nose. To distract him, his friend goes to visit him. They chat naturally. They play together. They watch television. And then they make practical jokes, including the favorite one, in which Dexter pretends to be dead, Erik runs to call for help, and Dexter scares the nurses. The practical joke is made three times, with a great scandal of the nurses, and less reflective critics.

## HE KNOWS THAT HE'S DYING

The first joke might be stupid, as some commentators want, who do not understand how long-term diseased kids must survive somehow, knowing that outside the hospital the world is full of their peers playing, screaming, laughing, making jokes. In a hospital, the chances of making jokes are few, and it may well be that they are often in bad taste. Besides, in the most severe cases, the young patients must somehow exorcise the thought of death. I do not think that the three jokes made by Dexter and Erik are the only three cases in medical history, and to say that this film can encourage sick kids to make stupid jokes is not only silly but even counterproductive. There should be schools of stupid jokes in hospitals, and nursing and medical staff should be prepared to laugh together with the perpetrators (as the victim of the second joke seems to be).

However, in this film the first joke does not pay, because Dexter pretends to be dead to scare the nurse, but meanwhile, entering his room, the nurse has already let slip the phrase "*I guess we all knew this was coming.*" At first, the two boys laugh at the success of their joke and even at the words of the nurse, but then the full meaning of those words reaches their heart, in another silent, brief and excruciating scene. And soon after, the Director approaches the sublime again, succeeding almost without words. While the good Doctor Jensen visits Dexter, the boy asks Erik, moving only his mouth, but without making a sound, to tell the doctor that he knows he's about to die. Erik, always just moving his lips, refuses, but Dexter, in the same way, says "Please!". And Erik takes the terrible task, saying, "He knows, he's dying." This sentence is delivered so well, that it froze me, an innocent viewer.

The Doctor stops his exam and tells a long, encouraging speech from the heart, but when he leaves, Dexter only says, very softly : "Mom!" And Erik goes to find her.

## RAINY MORNING

Here comes a sequence without unnecessary words – which means, without words. Erik lies sleepless in his bed on a rainy morning and suddenly feels that he has an urgent task to accomplish. The movie lets the spectator make hypotheses. I believe that he wants to run to put some water-

proof shelter on the mud-fort where he played with Dexter, just in case Dexter will have a chance to come back home. Dexter's favorite toys are there, supposedly waiting for their owner. Under the rain, Erik runs across his lawn carrying an oilcloth. He reaches the fence where the story of his friendship started. But he only looks at the fort from the top of the fence, without going to Dexter's side, because he realizes that he is too late: the rain has destroyed the mud-fort, the toys are all muddy, nothing is left waiting for Dexter anymore.

He stays on his side contemplating the fort ruins and muddy toys, and we see his thoughtful wet face, where the raindrops, heaven's tears, silently mix with his tears (and with ours), in another intense scene of admirable beauty.

## DEXTER DEATH

While the second joke is taken relatively lightly by the victim, who laughs, a little painfully, together with the boys, the third joke becomes a reality. Dexter pretends to be dead, to make yet another prank, but he will not wake up anymore. All this, to those who do not know the world of children, and those who do not know what beauty is, appears to be done in awful taste, the *«miscalculation so enormous that they destroy what should have been the most important scenes.»* Instead, it is the last step towards the sublime. Because the last time we see Dexter alive, he smiles, albeit very tiredly, thinking about the joke he is about to do. But perhaps it is not so much the thought of the joke, which prompts him to smile, as the thought that his smile probably is his last gift to Erik: the substance of the "deus ex machina" that is about to descend straight from heaven on the film and ourselves. Then his smile goes off in his sleep, unnoticed by Erik, and so, gently, he dies: sad smile which possibly will stick to our memory, a sequence of a few seconds, of superhuman beauty.

No attempt is made to re-animate the boy. Is it possible? Is it not? Chances, I believe, are fifty-fifty, but the scene is good as it is.

It reminds me of a single worthy comparison, Aase's death, in Ibsen's Peer Gynt. Peer, on the run, arrives suddenly at the miserable hut of his dying mother. Taking advantage of her half-delirium, Peer pretends to lead her on a sleigh ride through the fjords and forests to Paradise where there is a party to which she is invited, much to her incredulous joy. Then ...

Final Act III (Scene IV)

(PEER) Our journey is over. [He closes her eyes and bends over her].

Thank you, honey [sweetie! The name Linda used to call Dexter, much to the amusement of Erik],  
For all the good you gave me.

And now it's your turn to thank me (He presses his cheek against her lips)

That was the pay for the coachman.

[KARI, Aase's faithful servant, enters] What? Peer! Then her deepest pains And her pain will be forgotten! Lord God, how she sleeps deeply! Or ...?

PEER GYNT. Hush, she's dead.

Horton-Kuhn, as always, uses fewer words but has a sure hand. If they wanted to use words, they could be almost the same. Is it not the same final scene? And we are talking about a grand, recognized masterpiece, surviving all the "social dramas" of Ibsen himself. In the same way, may "The Cure" survive all the films that have earned undeserved Academy Awards in the last thirty years.

"YOU DID. YOU DID! "

We're coming back from the hospital, where Dexter just died. His mother, Linda, is driving, and Erik, with one tear in his eyes, says: "*I tried so hard.*" "*Tried what?*" Asks Dexter's mother, holding back her tears. "*To find the cure.*" The mother replies: "*Oh honey. Come here, sweetie (Sweetie)! You did. You did!*" **You found the cure!** And then the mother explains in what consisted the "cure" found by Erik, finally bringing on stage the real protagonist of the Tragedy, the "deus ex machina" of which I spoke, the divinity that sometimes descended from above to explain the meaning of the whole play and clear up the situations which had become inextricable in Greek tragedies.

In this Tragedy, the « deus ex machina » is Friendship, pure, disinterested, completely devoid (for a thousand reasons) of any hint of sex: the friendship that merely consists in the fact that each of the two friends has the sole purpose of seeing his friend happy. No cure could give healing forever: sooner or later one dies. But Friendship, capable of wiping out all that was sad, lonely in Dexter's life, even if only for a short time, is a priceless - and lasting treasure. As always with Horton/Kuhn, the deus ex machina is silent, she appears and soon disappears, but not without having flooded the whole film with light, as if we needed more of it. That is the meaning of the film, the catharsis foreseen by the old Aristotle.

## THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE MOTHERS

There follows a scene that in my opinion is usually misunderstood, at least in part. The two mothers, secondary characters, but actresses who in this film could not do better, have a confrontation, in which Erik's mother, Gail, plays her usual role as the villain of the film. We saw her little, and we have a terrible impression of her. She is insensitive to the pains of her son, not to mention the problems of Dexter; she is appalled by the danger of AIDS, more for herself than for her son; she is always away from home. Of her son, fed to TV-Dinners, she knows almost nothing. She has a general idea of how a child should be brought up, she wants Erik not to play too many video games, to meet other boys and girls, to go camping with them in Colorado and so on: all things right and proper, but that do not take into account the wishes of her boy and the particular situation in which he is. Frankly, I've met enough American ladies to know that mothers like this one are not at all rare, like some critic protest. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain the thousands of kids who run away from home every year in the US.

She has just tried to cuff Erik, who refuses to leave Dexter's mother, Linda, alone at that moment and so abruptly. Called by Linda, Gail enters reluctantly into Dexter's home. But now, you need to pay attention to her gaze. When Dexter's mother tells her that her son is dead and Erik will go to his funeral, she is immobile and stares at Linda with a perfect icy look. She says nothing; she does not even nod yes or no (Erik will eventually go to the funeral, with his best suit). Then Linda tells her painfully: « If you ever lay a hand on that boy again I will kill you! Understand? ».

But now Gail no longer looks at Linda. The focus of her gaze is on infinity and is always impenetrable. Almost. I do not think that she is really afraid of being killed by the desperate woman in front of her. Instead, I believe that she begins to see a new world. Does she feel compassion for Derek's mother? For her own misunderstood son, but understood so well by this other mother? Perhaps she realizes that her son has been hiding a treasure of affection and tenderness that she has never even attempted to discover? Or maybe the two twins, pity and terror, have entered her, and she feels pity and terror - of herself? When she comes out of the house, her look is still hard, but the voice has changed. She whispers to her son, without the usual stiffness: "Let's go." Again, the Director does not tell us if the two mothers had said anything else. I do not believe it, but it does not change anything. This Director reaches the sublime, as we have seen, without words, and letting us contribute the rest according to our abilities.

## THE FUNERAL.

The funeral is as it could be expected. Dexter has "his finest shirt and patent leather shoes" as predicted by a famous French « *chansonnier* » already in 1957 :

*Tu t'en vas pour le voyage  
Qui n'en finit pas,  
Tu passeras par la lune,  
Et demain matin  
Les étoiles une à une  
Te tendront la main.  
**Mets ta plus belle chemise,  
Tes souliers vernis,**  
Pour que tous les anges disent :  
Il est en habit !*

You are leaving for the journey  
Which has no end  
You will pass by the Moon  
And tomorrow morning  
The stars one by one  
Will give you their hand  
**Put on your finest shirt  
And patent leather shoes**  
So that all angels say  
How properly he is dressed!  
("Hallelujah" by Gilbert Bécaud, 1957)

Erik whispers "*Hey*," and stays alone with Dexter for a while. Then he leaves, accompanied by Dexter's mother, who notices with amazement, as he walks away, that Erik has only one of his two shoes, unsuitable for the ceremony because they are basketball shoes. She goes to see her son, and discovers that Erik has put his other basketball shoe in his hands, to accompany him, if necessary, into those dark, cold and desolate places that Dexter fears, but where he will be near him. Forever. And here we see that the Italian title, "*Friends Forever*," was after all a felicitous choice.

Linda also notices that Erik took one of his friend's tiny patent leather shoes away.

## THE RIVER OF DESTINY. EXODUS (THE EXIT).

We find Erik in the last scene. He still wears his best clothes, but he is among the reeds beside the current of water that we already know, which "*ends up in the Mississippi*," like "*every drop of water that lands in the water here*." Here, sitting with his legs in the water, almost religiously, he lets the small patent leather shoe go, drifting on the river of destiny.

We have two last shots of Erik's face. In the second there appears fleetingly on his face just the beginning of a radiant and thoughtful smile. And so Erik goes too because he has to accompany Dexter: the basketball shoe, which Dexter will take with himself, implies that Erik is next to him, wherever they are. I think that that place is the heaven of all the immortal characters of the history of cinema, who are now getting ready to welcome Dexter and Erik among them.

Once Erik was gone, on the bank of the river, there remained the 13-year-old Brad Renfro, born to be a superlative and promising actor, probably surrounded by the entire team needed to shoot the film, including the Director, Assistant Directors, technicians, machines, lights and so on. There may have been a party for the completion of the movie, and Brad did not have the time to look at the mud-brown waves of the river of fate, which was no longer Erik's fate, who was gone, but the destiny of Brad Renfro, who had been left behind, on the river bank.

Maybe, looking upstream, he had a glimpse of his unpromising infancy, abandoned by his parents, living in a camper, where his grandmother raised him. All was over now, and his innate gift for acting had propelled him to fame. Happy him, if he did not look downstream and could not see his future, with the end of his brilliant but short career, and then petty criminality, alcohol, drugs ... !  
*Weltschmerz.*

Brad Renfro died of an overdose at age twenty-five, in 2008. May he rest in peace, if only for the good he did, without even knowing it.