

The sage of 'Telegraph Hill' says to stop and look at parrots

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As I left the theater after the critics' screening of "The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill," I thought of the old truism every student of Chinese History 101 learns early in class: In good times, the people observe Confucianism; in bad, Taoism.

It's a question of attitude, really — of focus. When politics, economy, and nature make life pleasurable, the Chinese populace observes rules of social responsibility with strict attention to manners, news reports, and all the trappings of daily human affairs.

But in times of war, revolution, famine and flood, the people turn to philosophical notions of nature's continuous change and the universal order behind it. If nothing else, it's an effective method of maintaining psychological and emotional stability in bad times.

And let's face it, friends, we're living in bad times, frightening times. Whether you're politically left, right, center, born again or borne along spiritually, the future looks bleak. Health care costs, disappearing jobs, runaway corporate control (and corruption), the rich getting richer and the poor poorer, a foreign policy that doesn't seem focused and has already killed almost 1,500 of our children, and the always present threat of terrorism.

Then along comes "The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill," and puts my life in perspective, just as Taoism does for the Chinese, by reminding me that I should look up from the newspaper and television newscast and glance out the window to get in touch with the rhythms of the natural world again—and remember my place in it.

If it was nothing else, "The Wild Parrots" is an outstanding documentary, textbook perfect in many ways (Michael Moore could learn a thing or two from it). The script, structure, editing and cinematography are top-notch (as Catherine Graham pointed out in these pages two weeks ago, director Judy Irving shot the film on 16-mm film stock rather than on video, and the difference in visual acuity is startling).

But "Parrots" is more than that. It is a documentary with a story, a main character and points of conflict. It is the chronicle of Mark Bittner who found the meaning of life as self-appointed caretaker of a flock of wild cherry-headed parrots who inhabit San Francisco's Telegraph Hill.

Mark narrates the film, and we watch him interact with individual members of the flock. It's his articulate description and insights into the parrots that impress, that first lead the viewer to the great gulf which separates the animal world and our own and then bridge it.

It is a narration that goes light years beyond the fluff and sentimental nonsense of Disney's "cute little creature" vision of the world. Bittner's voice over and filmmaker Irving's craftsmanship lead us back to a sense of what the world is beyond our usual perceptions of it, and make "Wild Parrots" the most spiritually evocative documentary about the natural world since "Rivers and Tides."

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Bittner has been called a St. Francis, but as I left the theater I thought of him more as a Chinese sage come out of a hidden hill in the middle of a troubled city to remind us metaphorically that the world is not for the birds but about them.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27, every Thursday and Sunday at 8:30 p.m.

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