

SPRING 1981 ISSUE

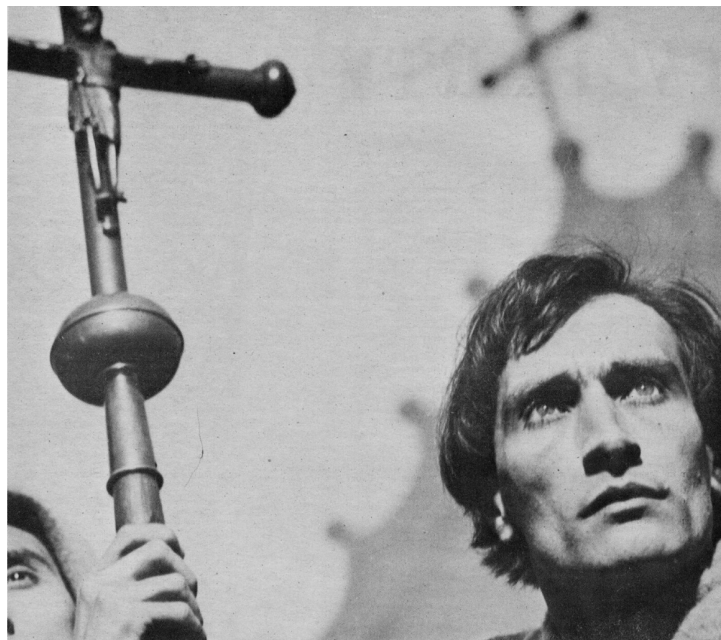
FICTION

Black Moon

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BY GARY INDIANA

APRIL 1, 1981



Artaud, in a detail from Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*.

"The Russians will swallow Europe," a visiting Californian asseverated at dinner, vigorously masticating a morsel of calamari. "First they'll seize the Persian Gulf. Then push into Pakistan. Then India, see? The Domino Theory was an underestimation, if anything."

It was the year of a black moon, a year when Mercury went retrograde on an average of once a week. The new one beginning had every appearance of kicking off with World War III. Have you ever tried debating with anyone whether or not the human race will be eradicated in the immediate future?

"I don't think they'll do it," one says. "I mean I just don't think it would happen."

"Yes," insists the other, sounding even more stupid, "But what if it DOES?"

The Californian reminded me of my father, whose impromptu glosses on History had suffused the late hours of my childhood when, after drinking most of a fifth of Chivas, he perceived the diabolical nature of World Communism with preternatural clarity.

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“This is the greatest country in the world,” he would say, his eyes burning as if they suddenly beheld the Antichrist. “Just go over to Russia and see what the Red Communists call freedom.”

Freedom, nuclear destruction, and the moral iconography of the Catholic Church were the principal ideological features of my childhood. The horrors of godless Communism were lavishly illustrated in the cautionary lectures of Sisters Mary Bonaventure and Timothea, the Kafkaesque brides of Christ who taught my second and third grade classes. In China, the yellow Reds drove spikes through the skulls of our missionaries, nailed slivers of bamboo under their fingernails, tied them to bonsai crosses and left them to rot in the rice paddies (“long fallow under Communist rule”). These, truly, were the martyrs of the modern world, “who will one day be recognized by the Holy Father.” That meant Canonization, which at that time I imagined involved firing first and second class relics of the departed Saint from a canon a la Ringling Brothers. (First Class Relics are actual bits of the body, Second Class Relics a shred of the saint’s apparel. A Third Class Relic is merely some object touched by him or her in the course of Good Works, hardly worth bothering with.)

For fifty cents—piously reserved from our allowances—we could redeem a pagan baby through the sacrament of Baptism. Each time you redeemed a pagan baby in China, you received a brightly colored picture of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin, Pius XII or some other favorite religious personality. Especially devout children in my school collected them and traded them like baseball cards.

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My father began building a cement bomb shelter in our basement in 1958. Your home shelter was supposed to be hermetically sealed off from the outside world, which would soon be completely destroyed by ballistic missiles. One day, three out-sized manila envelopes arrived from Civil Defense. These contained phials of water purifying tablets, khaki-green tins of dehydrated, radiation-proof food, booklets on decontamination and Defending Your Bomb Shelter—one indispensable ingredient was a shotgun. In a real nuclear “conflict,” it was thought, imprudent neighbors who had frivolously failed to build their own shelters were likely to drop by on the pretext of borrowing a cup of sugar. If they did, you were supposed to blow their heads off.

America, Love It Or Leave It. Finish your plate, there are kids starving in India. It’s the Russians that want a war, not us. I’m not saying Hitler was right but I’m not saying he was wrong either. They smell funny. Stevenson will hand the country over to the Reds. If Kennedy’s elected he’s going to build a secret tunnel to the Vatican. Next thing the Pope will be running the country. When the Pope opens the envelope the Virgin gave Bernadette, he’ll know the date of the end of the world. Death means nothing to them. That’s why they want a war.

And when he had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.

Motto in day-glo above the stairway of the Mudd Club:
NUKE EM TILL THEY GLOW!

I never believed in God. Never.

My mother “lost her faith” when her brother died, a horrible death from cancer of the thyroid.

My father says he gave up praying when he realized he only did it when he was afraid of death.

Perfect faith means doing good out of love of God and not from the fear of Hell.

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My stepbrother returned to the Church after a brief, half-hearted lapse, the faith of the convert being always more intractable than that of the Catholic-born. (A born Catholic knows there is no escape from the Church. A convert only suspects it.) Visiting him in St. Louis in 1977, I was amazed to find the walls of his modern house decorated with stylish icons and an iron crucifix acquired in Japan.

"The new Mass in English is something really relate to," he told me. "They have a Sunday folk mass we take the kids to. And the priest gives everybody the Kiss of Peace after Communion now, instead of just waving the cross in your face." On the TV, Martine Marratt's videotapes of gang war in the South Bronx were playing, part of a CBS Special on Violence. In my brother's house the South Bronx was an immense, spectral landscape, unimaginable except through the miracle of television. "You should go," he added skeptically.

Viva and I were sitting in the Greek Gardens on 8th Street when Danny Fields came in.

"The Pope just went by."

"Was that what all those umbrellas were? The Pope?" Viva said. "I can't believe we've been sitting here for an hour and the Pope went by less than ten feet away and we missed him."

"He was wearing a pink plastic slipcover," Danny Fields said. "In an open car."

"I just can't believe we missed the Pope."

"Yesterday he said a Mass for Young People at Shea Stadium, and at one point, you know, he began making this strange noise into the microphone, it was like, 'wuuu-wuuu, wuuu-wuuu.' And the TV commentators couldn't figure out what it meant, 'wuuu-wuuu, wuuu-wuuu,' like that, over and over, it was like a Polish mantra or something."

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“Wuuu-wuuu?”

“Yeah, Wuuu-wuuu. Wuuu-wuuu.”

“Maybe it means, ‘Peace Be With You’ in Polish.”

I trace the phases of the moon in the cover of Ted Berrigan’s *Red Wagon*, wait for you to call like an idiot. For a month I succumbed to the tender miseries of love, knowing the whole time that eventually it would be me or you staying in, turning down invitations, being rude to friends on the phone so they wouldn’t tie up the line.

This week I have a vivid oblong scar on my forehead, just above my right eye—one night, trying to go to my bedroom noiselessly, I walked into the air conditioner. Of course everyone thinks you hit me. I wish you had.

Florence Lambert and Michel Auder show me their video collage, *Jesus*, a ravishingly photographed survey of religious images and testimonials from former Catholics about the mystery of Jesus. (What I so much value in Michel’s work is its organic necessity, the way it arises naturally from his life—also his courtliness towards his material.)

In the tape, Tina L’Hotsky explains that Jesus was an alien from outer space, sent here to take over everyone’s mind. Diego Cortez describes how he and some friends made six hundred dollars swiping pocketbooks at a revival meeting. Taylor Mead, dressed as the Bishop of Tribeca, blesses the fire hydrants and the cars, is then attacked by a Devil brandishing an enormous rubber penis.

“Take and eat of this, for this is my body,” Alice Neel quotes. “To me, that’s pure cannibalism carried over.”

Every Tuesday, Father Hathaway gave religious instruction for the boys at St. Thomas Aquinas. You had to ask him what was a sin, what wasn’t, in an endless attempt to rid your soul of venial and mortal offenses.

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Was it a sin to masturbate, Gerard Papillon wanted to know.

"If you did it before you knew it was a sin, no," Father Hathaway assured everybody. "But now you know, it is."

At the height of the Hostage Crisis, Iranians marched through Tehran whipping themselves with chains as part of an annual religious frenzy.

"See?" A cab driver told me excitedly. "They're totally insane. You don't know what they'll do next. They aren't brought up like us. They're not Christian."

James Nares invites me to his place on 37th Street to see *No Japs At My Funeral*, a video interview with an ex-IRA officer named Jackie. This is a very polished, precise work, with a minimum of shot changes and extraneous material. The thing that's striking about Jackie—besides his sincerity, his moral attractiveness, his good humor—is that his relationship to the source of his oppression is direct, visceral. The Left, here, was denied this relationship in the '60s. Sartre said in *Saint Genet*, "Evil is the systematic substitution of the abstract for the concrete." When the Left existed here—and it doesn't now, since Marxism itself has undergone a fatal crisis—it could only rally itself against a life full of color TV, Pontiacs, and McDonald's hamburgers, the very things the rest of the world ardently craves. And when the Left went bust, its leaders turned to one or another version of Jesus, transcended reality, dropped out of the moral universe to panhandle for ten-year-old Korean gurus.

I decide to take you at your word, that you don't want me to stay in just because you might call. So I linger after an editorial meeting, agree over the phone to join friends at a film. When I get home, there's an angry message that you called and I wasn't there.

MARTOS GALLERY

There's a direct relation between religion and nuclear war. Even some reasonable people believe that Nostradamus and the last chapters of the Bible foretell everything, that the mushroom cloud produced by an atomic explosion corresponds in all particulars to the fires in the Apocalypse. Even the Marxist religion, in the Gospel According to Engels, predicts a messy end for late capitalism on its regressive swing back to savagery.

For Catholics, at least, there's always Heaven after the last ICBMs and MIRVs have shot their wads. But Catholic Heaven isn't everybody's idea of a day at the beach—as a Chinese doctor at the 29th Street VD Clinic invariably tells his patients, “No sex, no alcohol, no spicy food for one week.” Catholic Heaven is a lot like Switzerland, but without Godard and Alain Tannier.

You tell me you're afraid to die, that we should “go to an island somewhere.” (We're already on an island, somewhere, but never mind.) I tell you I'll go with you, just to make you happy. You tell me you'd rather be alone. Sometimes, when you're particularly contrary and stubborn, I think there's a slight possibility that you secretly love me. Is that why you're usually accommodating, easy?

So I was working in this insurance office with this Lithuanian woman named Anna. She was really straight laced, uptight, very Puritan. She only spoke to me once, in the lunchroom, about how her family “escaped to freedom” during the last war. So I said, “How did you ever get to America in the middle of the war?” and she said, “We didn't go to America, we moved to Dusseldorf.”

I can't tell if everyone I encounter is afraid because the kind of people I'm friendly with are the kind likely to be afraid right now, or if people are, generally, truly afraid. The news makes my skin crawl, frankly. Whenever they start displaying maps you know something unpleasant is happening in the world.

MARTOS GALLERY

But something unpleasant is always happening in the world, and someone is always afraid. Florence Lambert and I take a large dose of MDA and go to the Bleecker to see *Alien*. The film: a small crew of space travellers lands on an ugly, mist-shrouded planet where they find a space ship resembling a large dead cockroach. Inside the cockroach they find an egg. The egg spurts open and something like egg foo yung shoots out, landing splat in the face of a hapless Space Explorer. The egg foo yung turns into this disgusting slime all over the guy's face, something like a soft-shell crab with the tail of a garter snake that wraps itself around his neck. Doctors on the space ship try to snip its legs off, but its blood is this gooey yellow acid that eats through five thousand tons of metal. Then the Alien disappears and this horrible thing with three rows of teeth pops out of the guy's stomach at space dinner time, ruining everyone's appetite.

The Alien grows inexorably and hides in dusky passages of the ship. The MDA transforms this creature into a fat drag queen. The women crew members find their lipsticks, face powders and heels missing. On their mission of extermination through the twilight guts of the space vehicle the astronauts are constantly encountering a blob-like form in a ratty blonde fright wig, its tentacles clapped provocatively to its hips, the sequins of its purple chemise sending laser like flakes of light down narrow, high-tech corridors. Its sinuous lips part suggestively, revealing the triple row of killer teeth. Surprise, the alien is Mae West in outer space. Is this how the world ends? Not with a bang, but with Mae West?

—NYC, January 1980