

Catch-22: what's right, humane, sane?

Film Comment
by GARY HILL

You've got to read the book to understand the flashbacks, someone said behind me.

What is the book, a manual? Or an airstrip like I thought?

An airstrip — Mike Nichols and Buck Henry and the cameraman Watkins lift the film *Catch-22* like a screaming desert bomber up into the heat on wings all its own.

The film is sensation.

And anyway, flash back to what and forward where?

Yossarian is caught in a system of sensory bankboards, the message-meaning being whamming air and flapping tarps, the blowing sand and pulsing color grain of film

stock fusing out to nothing but projector light.

This is a film. The medium is light.

Unfortunately, there still lingers as a side effect of shattering literature into particularized images and sounds, the urge to hunt for meaning in a chronological reshuffling of the pieces.

The urge is to decipher rather than respond.

And that is exactly where Yossarian is himself — trying to shuffle his own notions of what's right what's wrong, humane and inhumane, to make sane sense of the European Theater and the second world war.

He swims through dust past howling bombers, out through

open wounds of friends in a condition of total choicelessness.

The machinery is in motion, and as its gearing slips and its insanities expand, the only answer offered, reason given is *Catch-22*.

Catch-22 allows for the dismissal of crazy men from flying bombing missions but stipulates that the request for such a dismissal is certain proof of sanity and therefore grounds for refusal of the request. After all, you'd have to be crazy to want to fly the missions.

And just as Yossarian fulfills the number of missions required, requirements change and he's up again — fighting, kicking, middle-fingering whatever madness put him there.

His friends die off, are hacked in half, or suicide themselves.

One old new boy ("He's dead; that's as old as you can get.") spills guts all over him in repeated flashing cuts inside a gutted airplane, hot white light strobing like a pulsing head or rotor blades — enough to make Yossarian stick, but not enough to wrench him free of the machinery.

Within the bureaueed drawers of governmental madness, Yossarian is alternately classified sane and insane — whatever is currently calculated to perpetuate the system. Sane or insane according to the *Catch*, both labels working like inventory tags to keep him in the drawer.

No bureaucratic system ever provided the mechanism for escape from that system.

Yossarian pleads within the framework — with the doctor, the chaplain, the major, and the colonel to ground him from the ceaseless bombing runs. Their hands are tied, their motors going, but their minds shut off — *Catch-22*.

What right did the MPs have to gut an Italian whorehouse and re-cycle independent whores into Milo's black market enterprises? *Catch-22*.

Catch-22 is not only the name of the error, the snag keeping everyone enmeshed and mindless in the system, it is also the name of the regenerative force for duplication and expansion within the order.

Milo transforms himself from a hershey-hawking GI to the dictatorial top man of a black market mafia riding in a motorcade in hitlerian splendor.

He is the system's incarnation. A contract is a contract. That's what we're fighting for!

Ultimately, *Catch-22* is the name for whatever conditions exist when thousands of human beings relinquish their freedom of choice and hand over all their working parts to an Idea or a Nation or a Cause.

And the solution is not just sitting naked in the system's trees or flipping the bird to the colonel.

If you can't be human-breathing-real within, the only way is out.

"I've been fighting for my country for three years. I'm going to start fighting for myself," and Yossarian breaks and runs against the grain marching bands and airstrips off across the desert to the sea, Swedish girl scouts dancing in his head.

To live on your feet is better than to die on your knees.

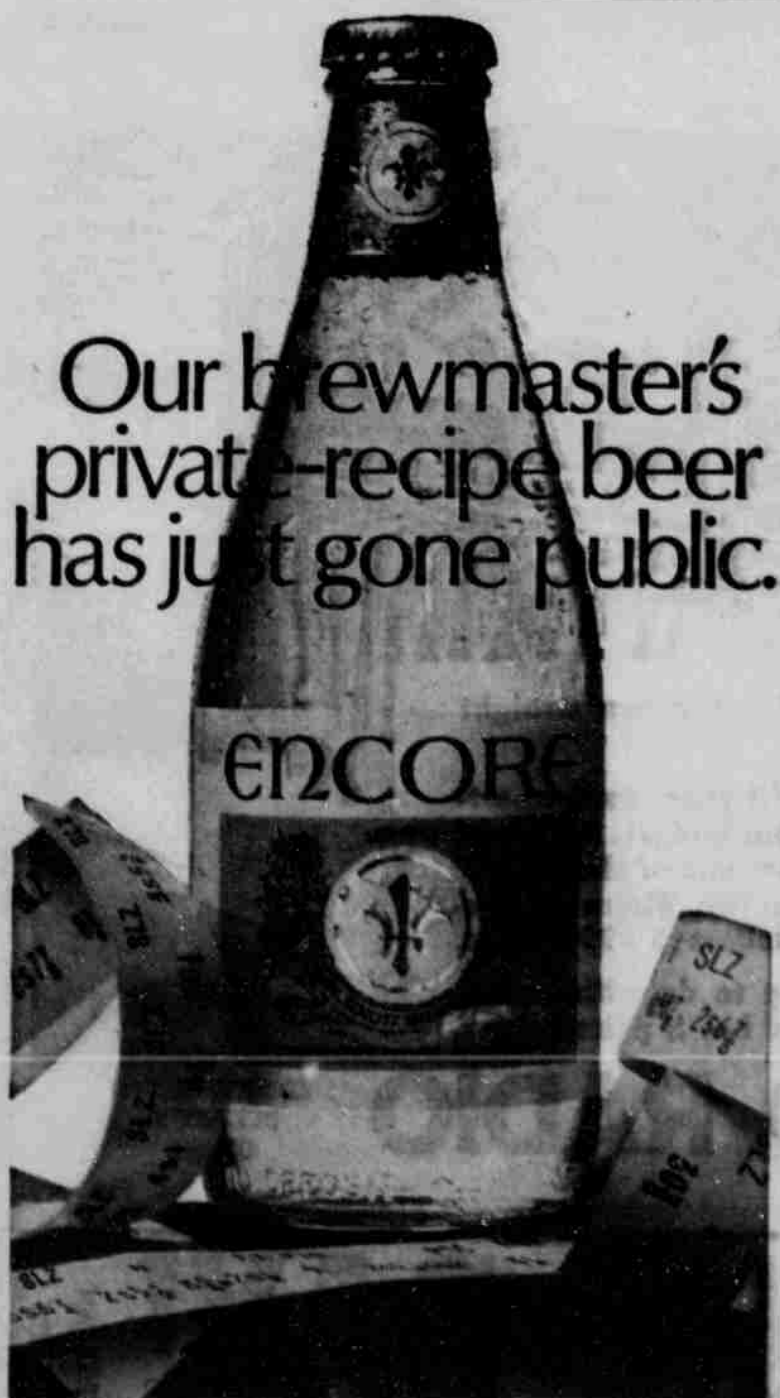
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Yossarian . . . "only crazy people sit-in trees."