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**I WAS A LUFTMENSCH
FOR THE KGB**

SEAN PENN, AN EDGY, HARD-DRIVING daredevil, and Timothy Hutton, still too earnest but at least a little better-looking now that he's older, make an odd, affecting pair of friends in *The Falcon and the Snowman*—the story of Daulton Lee (Penn) and Christopher Boyce (Hutton), the real-life American traitors who were convicted in 1977 for selling secrets to the Soviet Union. The movie has a lot else going for it—a good plot, a suavely mysterious look developed by cinematographer Allen Daviau (*E.T.*), and director John Schlesinger's precision with actors. Yet *The Falcon and the Snowman* is finally frustrating. Does Schlesinger know what his own movie is about? At times, I thought he couldn't. *Falcon* has too many loopholes, unanswered questions, moral muddles. By the end, I was unable to tell if we were supposed to think of the boys as American heroes or American buffoons.

Adapting the 1979 book by New York *Times* reporter Robert Lindsey, Steven Zaillian has written a kind of cryptic outline—plenty of action but no more than cramped, mysterious hints of character and motivation. As Zaillian and Schlesinger tell the story, Christopher and Daulton, former altar boys from upper-middle-class families in Southern California, had absorbed very different things from the counterculture atmosphere of the sixties and early seventies. Christopher, a dropout from studies for the priesthood, was an idealistic, morally serious kid, troubled by the war in Vietnam, Watergate, and CIA destabilization of the Allende regime in Chile. Daulton, on the other hand, had fallen right through the bottom. A hustling, conniving drug dealer, he was always in trouble, always lying, running away, resurfacing, running again, forever moving to the next deal. According to Lindsey, the boys liked to get stoned together, and they shared a passion for the aristocratic sport of falconry, training the sleek, predatory birds in the California hills.

Zaillian and Schlesinger have confined the falconry kick to Christopher; Daulton, we gather, doesn't have enough class for that sort of thing. In scene after scene, Christopher is out in the hills, embracing the mystic brotherhood of the bird (or something like that—the scenes are magisterial but opaque). And much

of the comradeship has been dropped out—it is now a very awkward and unlikely friendship between a high-minded rebel and a crass but rather lovable hustler.

Christopher's dad (Pat Hingle), a gruffly disapproving ex-FBI man, uses the old-boy network to get him a job at an electronics plant with a CIA contract. After only minimal security checks, Christopher Boyce, a college dropout, only 21 years old, winds up handling the coded messages coming in from the agency's spy satellites. (Is this possible? Apparent-

make any sense: Timothy Hutton plays him as an intelligent, morally righteous young man who draws power, despite some moments of panic, from his certitude. This is a highly honorable boy who makes a naïve mistake.

But how can Schlesinger and Zaillian set him up as a principled naïf when he trades secrets for money? The actual Christopher Boyce, serving time for his deeds, wrote huffy, bristling "intellectual" letters to the judge in his case; later on, he escaped and became a bank robber. If this complex and devious person-



Birds of a feather: Sean Penn and Timothy Hutton in John Schlesinger's film.

ly it was.) Shocked by what he sees—evidence that the CIA was involved, among other things, in defeating Gough Whitlam's Labour government in Australia—he decides to sell the satellite codes to the Soviet Union.

Or at least that's the way the movie tells it. He is outraged; he wants to rebel against his father and his country; he decides to take action. But what can possibly be in his head? That's what the movie *doesn't* tell us. If Christopher was repelled by CIA tricks, what did he imagine the KGB was up to? And if he was outraged by what the CIA had done in Australia, why didn't he just make the secrets available to the Australians? Was he stupid, uninformed, out of it? The character, as presented in the movie, doesn't

possibly a genuine outlaw type, like Jack Henry Abbott—was an idealist, he was the kind of idealist who throws bombs. The filmmakers took the easy way out by making him an innocent American victim—a boy who wanders in over his head.

The filmmakers don't answer any of our questions; they press ahead with their story, which is at least partly defensible, since it's a good story. Christopher may not make much sense, but Daulton Lee certainly does: Trapped by the police, he had to get out of the country, and so he became Christopher's courier—espionage is just a continuation of his career as a drug dealer. As Daulton, Sean Penn wears a tiny mustache that seems on the verge of sliding off his face (it sur-

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passes in awfulness Robert De Niro's pencil-line atrocity in *The King of Comedy*—it's truly the saddest mustache I've ever seen), and he speaks in the small, squeaky voice of an adolescent braving the rocks of puberty. When his Daulton makes contact in Mexico City with an extremely suave KGB agent (David Suchet), the movie breaks into comedy. This tiny little punk treats the Russians as if they were cheap hustlers just like himself. He doesn't have any ideas, any emotions about what he's doing—he's in it for the cash, and, pocketing the KGB's money, he's as excited as a teenager scoring for the first time.

Daulton is hilariously inadequate as a spy, yet the performance never comes near spoof—Penn stays inside the desperation of this cagey, sly, often foolish young man, who complains that the Russians won't pay for a decent hotel and wails with dismay when they drive off from a nighttime rendezvous, leaving him without a ride home. By doing the espionage scenes as comedy, Schlesinger gets us on the boys' side; their exploits feel like a triumph of youthful American ingenuity—like Bell and Watson inventing the telephone—and, laughing at ourselves, we root for them.

Undersize, desperate to impress, Daulton operates with an undercurrent of fear that his glory might all be taken away. So he keeps manipulating, maneuvering, trying things out, and, as Christopher abandons him, Penn's voice rises even higher and cracks. Daulton is Schles-

inger's richest character since Dustin Hoffman's Ratso Rizzo, in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), another self-propelled loser who won't give up. Like that film, *Falcon* is about the friendship between an attractive man and a lifetime misfit. There's something about that connection that brings out Schlesinger's humanity—a quality conspicuously lacking in such freezingly contemptuous films as *Marathon Man*, *The Day of the Locust*, and *Honky Tonk Freeway*.

Schlesinger moves along fast, cutting back and forth between Mexico and California, jerking characters around the map. The speed, the triumph over geography are cinematic all right; however, the sudden shifts make an exciting but not very convincing movie. How, for instance, does the fugitive Daulton cross the border so many times without trouble? *Falcon* is both fast and dreamy—suddenly it will stop dead for a falcon reverie. I confess I never really understood the point of these scenes; nor am I impressed by the menacing eye of a stuffed owl that Schlesinger keeps zeroing in on. Ah, the mysterious eye of a bird! What does it portend, that dark, glittering fire of bird consciousness? What indeed? Swathed in such empty, inexpressive flourishes, the movie finally suffocates from vagueness. ■