

Bacchus in Chicago: Echoes of Dionysus in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*

John Hughes' cult classic 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* celebrates the idea of breaking from the mundane everyday world to embrace a temporary carnival. It may also be profitably read as a modern, comic reflection of the ancient ideas of Dionysiac worship, particularly as depicted in the *Bacchae* of Euripides. I argue not that Hughes has deliberately incorporated these elements, but that the archetypal themes and lasting influence of the ancient model have survived in his film project.

A survey of the film's major features reveals an organizing pattern of Dionysiac and Euripidean echoes. These elements center on the protagonist, Ferris Bueller, a popular and playful high school senior who becomes a modern Bacchus figure. Major factors include his repeated use of disguise, his leadership in a carnival escape from the mundane everyday world as exemplified by high school, and his wider role as acknowledged object of veneration. Ferris is specifically depicted as having a special rapport with a wide spectrum of people; his name is esteemed by students, teachers, and even the scoreboard at Wrigley Field, with the implication that all Chicago follows in his train. He becomes a sort of magical individual, playful yet powerful, capable of bringing carnival release, pleasure, and personal fulfillment to those who follow him (particular examples are Cameron Frye, Ferris' socially repressed friend, and Jeannie, his similarly constrained sister).

A further Euripidean echo appears in the character of Edward Rooney, the school administrator who becomes a Pentheus figure in his relentless determination to persecute Ferris, whom he sees as a threat to orderly society; he specifically voices his fear of students becoming "Ferris Bueller disciples." The inflexible Rooney, like Pentheus, refuses to acknowledge Ferris' position despite sound advice to do so, and he likewise comes to personal grief and humiliation in his single-minded attempt to crush his adversary. The tragic event of *sparagmos* when Pentheus intrudes into the sacred Bacchic rites even takes on a modern guise: Rooney's trespassing into the domestic sanctity of the Bueller family home and his ensuing encounter with a Rottweiler.

The capstone of the film, and the greatest echo of Dionysiac themes in it, is the climactic parade scene in downtown Chicago. In it, Ferris comes into his own as a modern Bacchus, creating a vast scene of carnival release that is both orgiastic and socially transcendent as he, accompanied by a troupe of modern maenads, leads crowds consisting of all different types of people in a Bacchic celebration of song and dance. In this is the film's purest expression of the role of occasional Dionysiac carnival as safety valve and necessary part of a functioning society. Ferris, after all, does not advocate mass anarchy, but rather a "day off" for the benefit of all.