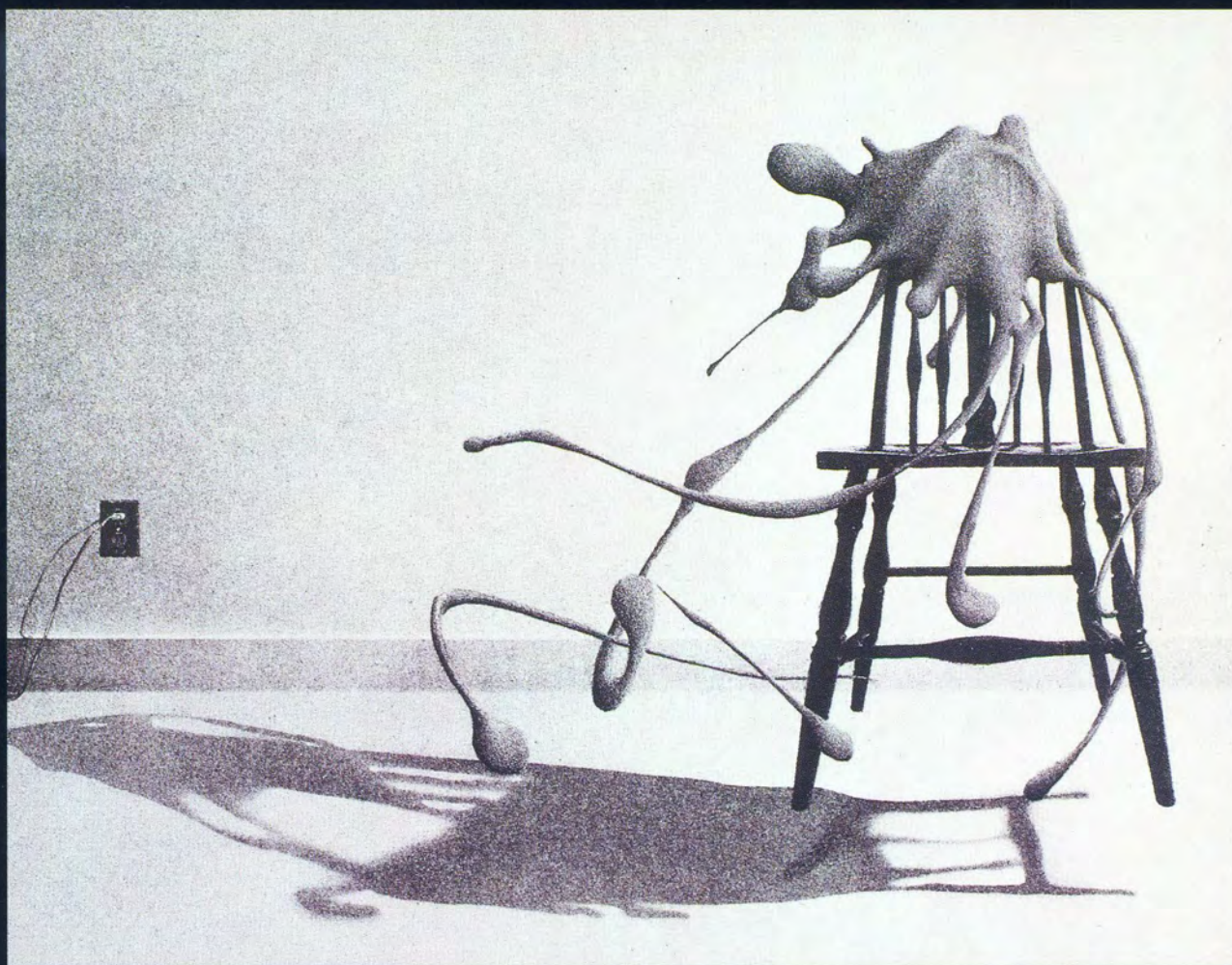


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EDNA PONTELLIER AND THE MYTH OF PASSION

[Doctor Mandelet] observed his hostess attentively from under his shaggy brows, and noted a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life. Her speech was warm and energetic. There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun.

It was the first kiss of her life to which her nature had really responded. It was a flaming torch that kindled desire. . . . Edna cried a little that night after Arobin left her. . . . But among the conflicting sensations which assailed her, there was neither shame nor remorse. There was a dull pang of regret because it was not the kiss of love which had inflamed her. . . .

"The trouble is," sighed the Doctor, grasping her meaning intuitively, "that youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race."

In passages such as these, *The Awakening*—its frank and deterministic view of human sexuality balanced by the understanding of the man of science and the repose of a seemingly non-judgmental narrator—clearly reveals Kate Chopin's tendency toward naturalism.¹ In recent decades much insightful criticism has explored the author's ironic portrayal of characters seeking to realize romantic destinies in a universe governed by forces beyond their control or comprehension, the universe of naturalism.² However, emphasizing Chopin's naturalism may fail to explain completely her vision of the romanticism of her characters as well as her frank view of human sexuality and

her persistent belief in the possibilities of love between man and woman. Admittedly, the novel offers only a mild affirmation of the possibility of such love in its glimpses into the understanding and friendship shared by the Ratignolles. However, *The Awakening* relentlessly illustrates how certain customs and conceptions of long standing in Western culture inhibit true understanding between men and women by misleading them about the nature of passion and its relation to love and marriage. Portraying in its story of frustrated lovers

²To Donald A. Ringe, "Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Literature* 43 (1972): 582-88, Chopin's heroine illustrates complications inherent in the romantic quest for selfhood, namely, loss of ability to love and a tendency toward perverse defiance. Suzanne Wolkenfeld argues that Edna Pontellier is lost because of "a romantic incapacity to accommodate herself to the limitations of reality"; see "Edna's Suicide: The Problem of the One and the Many," *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. Margaret Culley (New York: Norton, 1976) 218-24. James H. Justus, "The Unawakening of Edna Pontellier," *Southern Literary Journal* 10.2 (1978): 107-22, similarly views the novel as a study in the pathology of romanticism, particularly the tendency toward solipsism. Otis B. Wheeler's "The Five Awakenings of Edna Pontellier," *Southern Review* 11 (1975): 118-28, provides excellent analysis of Edna's realization, first, that sexuality may be independent of love and, second, that love may be delusion or a form of biological enslavement; Edna's final existential despair signals Chopin's rejection of the "Romantic dream of the unlimited outward expansion of the self" (128).

Kenneth Eble, "A Forgotten Novel: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (1956): 261-69, views Edna as a tragic heroine, comparable to Euripides' Phaedra in her inability to distinguish *eros* from sentimental love. In "Beyond Sex: The Dark Romanticism of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Ball State University Forum* 19.1 (1978): 76-80, Mark Casale treats Edna "sympathetically as a person rightfully testing the limits of self, as a justified seeker of a fuller life" perilously and tragically yearning for epiphany (77). Along similar lines, Sandra M. Gilbert casts the novel as a new "feminist and matriarchal myth of Aphrodite"; Chopin's effort is "to valorize and mythologize femaleness" which concludes not in suicide but in a return to the "imaginative openness of . . . childhood" ("The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire," *Kenyon Review* 5 [1983]: 42-66, rpt. *Kate Chopin*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1987] 91-93, 104).

¹*The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969) 2: 952, 967, 996.

virtually every aspect of the ages-old myth or cult of passion, *The Awakening* issues a subtle yet forceful warning against the pernicious effects of erotic yearning self-consciously pursued and pathetically confused with both love and transcendent fulfillment.

The cultivation of passion as pseudo-religious exercise, as "true love," and as a (primarily aristocratic) social activity and entertainment has persisted as a constantly developing phenomenon of Western civilization, with roots deep in such ancient and early medieval practices as Gnosticism and Manichaeism. In *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont explains the phenomenon as fundamentally an attempt to fulfill—through stimulation of passion or feeling—the vague erotic human yearning for complete self-realization through god-like union with the cosmos. The pernicious effects of such practice are manifold. To begin with, what is mere passion or feeling is confused with inspiration or love. Moreover, the cultivation of passion or feeling proves morbid, encouraging hatred for the world of created being viewed in contrast with some idealized vision of erotic harmony and simultaneously fostering preoccupation with death as the supposed gateway to union with "the All."

Medieval culture and succeeding eras have produced several additional features inconsistent with common sense. First, the so-called courts of love—reactions against arranged marriages and the Church's subordination of sexual passion to procreation—fostered belief that true love may exist only outside marriage and, though passionate, must remain essentially chaste or Platonic and thus free of the sexual servitude implied in socially sanctioned unions. Second, courtly love is essentially narcissistic; the participants do not truly give love or friendship but instead indulge in the expression of passion while also seeking the immense gratification of seeing themselves passionately admired and desired, their excitement intensified by the idealism and the social and moral strictures forbidding the consummation of their erotic yearnings. Third, the courtly lovers, avoiding such consummation though strongly tempted through their own practices, morbidly cultivate frustration and the pain of separation and loss; for self-indulgent passion, their true object, is enhanced through the beloved's absence or unattainability and would be mitigated in marriage. (Thus the romances produced in the courtly love tradition so often

portray the sacrifices of a knight who remains faithful to but separated from an equally devoted, unattainable lady in whose name he seeks trial and hardship.) Courtly love often proves adulterous despite its idealism, for, as the literature of medieval romance amply testifies, the lovers' own practices and conventions too often provide overwhelming temptations. (Thus Lancelot's courtly obligations to Arthur's queen ironically lead to the kingdom's dissolution, and Gawain's accustomed "courtesy" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* severely compromises his chastity.) Though the Enlightenment suppressed the practices and the literature of courtly love, passion and romance were revived as the eighteenth century drew to a close and the self-conscious cultivation of sentiment and sensibility increased. Romanticism, particularly the darkly passionate and willful Romanticism of Germany, resurrected for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a powerful and unsettling conception of love as essentially passionate, rebellious, and tempestuous. Especially in the *Sturm und Drang* of the German Romantics, who "without exception . . . revived the courtly theme . . . of unhappy mutual love," "the Western mind . . . [again] adopted the old heresy of passion and sought to achieve the ideal transgression of all limitations and the negation of the world through extreme desire."³

Though written in an era of developing Realism and Naturalism, Chopin's *The Awakening* depicts a culture yet given to medieval customs of courtship as well as to Romanticism—with even a German virtuoso in its periphery. Particularly in setting, in character portrayals, and in plot, Chopin, despite the seemingly non-judgmental tone of her narrator, portrays in her well-wrought tale of love and death the pernicious influence of the myth of passion.

The setting of *The Awakening* provides a particularly noteworthy initiation into Chopin's theme in that the Louisiana Creole culture preserves the customs of courtly love, with some safeguards.⁴ The Creole wife's chastity taken for granted, she may discuss love and sex freely and frankly in mixed company and she may even attract the devotion of trusted and honorable suitors (889). Thus "Robert each summer at

³Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, rev. ed., trans. Montgomery Belgion (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956) 218, 220.

Grande Isle had constituted himself the devoted attendant of some fair dame or damsel. Sometimes it was a young girl, again a widow; but as often as not it was some interesting married woman." Most recently, as Robert himself confesses in serio-comic tone, his "hopeless passion for Madame Ratignolle" transformed him into "an adoring dog" tormented by "sleepless nights" and "consuming flames" (890-91). Edna's Kentucky Presbyterian upbringing leaves her uncomfortable among her less prudish Creole companions even after years of marriage to Leonce Pontellier, and she becomes confused and vulnerable when, as all at Grande Isle anticipate, Robert begins to turn his courtly attentions toward her. Here it may be questioned whether Robert is ever as serious as Edna about his courtship and whether or not his sudden departure for Mexico is intended to allow her unduly aroused passions to subside, although his departure (typical of the practices of courtly love) produces quite the opposite effect. When Adele admonishes Robert—reminding him that Edna "might make the unfortunate blunder of taking [him] seriously"—he at first somewhat heatedly proclaims his seriousness. However, when she impatiently reminds him that were his attentions ever taken seriously he would be deemed "unfit to associate with the wives and daughters of the people who trust [him]," his acquiescence indicates only annoyance at her deflation of his romantic self-image: "'Oh well! That isn't it. . . . You ought to feel that such things are not flattering to say to a fellow'" (900). Thus Edna's social environment draws her unwittingly (initially, at least) into a mere game of courtship that in Robert's absence leaves her vulnerable both to the seductive approaches of far less honorable courtiers such as Alcée Arobin and to

the vague erotic yearnings embedded within her own human consciousness.

The social and cultural *milieu* of *The Awakening* preserves an influential degree of Romanticism beyond that represented in the Creoles' courtly practices. References to Romantic composers and authors are frequent, and Edna's Kentucky upbringing evokes the Southern aura of gallant and chivalrous manhood, particularly in her memories of a certain handsome cavalry officer and in her attentions to her own genteel father. But the most significant Romantic connection for Edna comes through the character of Mademoiselle Reisz, an evident embodiment of German Romanticism's false promise of a Promethean self-liberated and apotheosized through desire and will. A passionate and talented *virtuoso* upon the piano, Mademoiselle Reisz impresses Edna in her insistence upon the artist's intense and defiant commitment to expression. Her influence is subject to question, however, in that her genius and devotion are accompanied by an immense egotism and self-indulgence that make her both repulsive and ridiculous. Mademoiselle Reisz is "weazened," "disagreeable," "self-assertive," and "imperious," and she evinces "a disposition to trample upon the rights of others." She is first seen restlessly "dragging a chair in and out of her room, and at intervals objecting to the crying of a baby, which a nurse in the adjoining cottage was endeavoring to put to sleep" (905). Her airs suggest an effete and affected Romanticism rather than the vibrance to which Edna aspires. She possesses "absolutely no taste in dress," sporting "a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair" (905). Her "false hair" produces diffidence (not mastery), as her reluctance to join the bathers at Grande Isle becomes a general source of amusement. And she rather childishly excuses her habitual indulgence in chocolates, rationalizing their "sustaining quality; they contained much nutriment in small compass, she said" (930). Egotism and rudeness aside, Mademoiselle Reisz hardly seems herself to be the strong-winged, unfettered heroine she encourages Edna to become. And in the final analysis her attempts at romantic inspiration prove either ineffective or pernicious as far as Edna is concerned. As an artist Edna never really advances beyond her stereotypical paintings of Bavarian peasants and apple baskets because her advisor, while insisting that the artist must

"Several critics have discussed the influence of setting upon Chopin's heroine though not in the terms proposed here. John R. May's "Local Color in *The Awakening*," *Southern Review* 6 (1970): 1031-40, emphasizes the sensuousness of life among the Creoles at Grande Isle. Nancy Walker, "Feminist or Naturalist: The Social Context of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Southern Quarterly* 17.2 (1979): 95-103, argues that Edna falls victim to her environment, unfamiliar as she is with Creole customs allowing yet controlling flirtation. Similarly, Priscilla Leder (who refers to the vestiges of courtly love among the Creoles but mentions neither Rougemont nor the myth of passion) observes that Edna's story illustrates how the liberties granted by Creole culture tend to limit individual identity ("An American Dilemma: Cultural Conflict in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Southern Studies* 22 [1983]: 97-104).

"possess the courageous soul. . . . The soul that dares and defies," overlooks the need for authenticity, a subject out of life itself and one genuinely understood by the artist (946). Attempting to follow Mademoiselle Reisz's prescription of "devotion" to "some *grand esprit*; a man with lofty aims and ability to reach them," Edna merely founders in her own vague erotic yearnings, hubristically pursuing a solitary selfhood beyond the limits of existence (964).

Close examination of Edna Pontellier's character reveals a somewhat immature and self-centered personality driven by just such vague and misunderstood erotic yearnings compelling her not toward love but rather toward god-like identification of self and cosmos and ultimately toward the abyss of death. Throughout the novel the seemingly self-liberating urges that compel Edna to defy conventions are described as vague yearnings which she too little attempts to understand or control. At the outset of the story her husband's imperiousness arouses "a vague anguish" and feelings of "indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness. . . . It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood" (886). Although such feelings seem clearly linked to Edna's awakening "as an individual to the world within and about her," her sense of awakening is nevertheless "vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing" (893). Moreover, the essentially erotic nature of her feelings, their similarity to the erotic longing for oneness described by Freud as the "oceanic feeling," becomes increasingly evident.⁵ On Grande Isle, "the sight of the water stretching so far away" evokes a vivid and even haunting childhood memory: "a meadow that seemed as big as the ocean to the very little girl walking through the grass, which was higher than her waist." "I felt as if I must walk on forever," Edna recalls, "without coming to the end of it" (896). The erotic quality of the experience is strongly suggested by its connection within Edna's consciousness to her girlish attraction to a cavalry officer (897). After overcoming her fears of the ocean's seemingly infinite vastness by learning to swim, Edna enjoys the feeling of newfound freedom and independence as well as

the beginnings of desire for Robert, but still she exhibits little insight into the feelings that she is allowing to change her. Sleeping, she is "disturbed with dreams that were intangible, that eluded her, leaving only an impression upon her half-awakened senses of something unattainable" (913). Even after she has acknowledged an "infatuation" for Robert, her thoughts of him in his absence are, though obsessive, confused and indefinite, suggesting a greater concern for the passion of her experience than for the supposed beloved one himself. "It was not that she dwelt upon details of their acquaintance, or recalled in any special or peculiar way his personality; it was his being, his existence, which dominated her thought, fading sometimes as if it would melt into the mist of the forgotten, reviving again with an intensity which filled her with an incomprehensible longing" (936). Despite the illusion of awakening and freedom, Edna has merely become the slave of feelings of which she is only vaguely aware, happy or unhappy "without knowing why" (940). Overjoyed when she hears from Mademoiselle Reisz of Robert's imminent return she nevertheless has no plans, "except [to] feel glad and happy to be alive" (965). Her lack of a specific sense of relationship only alienates Robert. She does not take precautions to hide her liaison with Alcée Arobin, and though she declares her love for Robert, she disappoints him in her unwillingness to divorce Leonce. His second leave-taking leaves her under the influence of the strong yearnings re-awakened at Grande Isle, and she returns there hearkening to the erotic urges seemingly symbolized in the voice of the sea, "seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (999). And perhaps cognizant for the first time of the true nature of her feelings, Edna allows the sea to absorb her into its vastness, "thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end" (1000). Typical of the devotee of passion, Edna seems to embrace as her true goal the fulfillment of vague erotic yearnings not through love but rather through a linking of her own being with a god-like infinity and omnipresence (symbolized in her own mind by the sea) to which the final gateway is death.

Of course, the quest to fulfill such a yearning for a god-like bearing upon the cosmos implies a radical pursuit of selfhood. Appropriately

⁵See Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *American Quarterly* 25 (1973): 449-71.

Chopin has imbued her character's awakening with numerous suggestions of a radical and lonely selfishness despite its erotic manifestations. It should be remembered that Chopin originally entitled her novel *A Solitary Soul*, and Edna appropriately names a favorite piano piece "Solitude." More to the point, the yearnings stimulated by Edna's exposure to the sea invite her "soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation" (893). Her first swim in the ocean—although not without its erotic aspects—produces primarily self-centered responses. In her "exultation" she desires "to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. . . . She would not join the groups . . . but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone. . . . As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (908). Having completed her swim, Edna ignores the other bathers' calls and shouting invitations and returns alone to her cabin, where she lies in a hammock (an appropriately private bedding) in self-satisfied exhaustion, virtually unresponsive to Robert's attentions and later ignoring her husband's invitation to come to bed (912).

The solitary pursuit of self further explains Edna's actions as she begins to change her life in ensuing weeks and months. At nightfall in her New Orleans home she stares from a window into the garden, "seeking herself and finding herself in just such sweet, half-darkness which met her moods." In the daytime she appears at the front door gazing "straight before her with a self-absorbed expression on her face. She felt no interest in anything about her" (934-35). As her quest proceeds no compromise of self is permitted, even in her most intimate relationships. Moving out of her husband's house, Edna "resolved never again to belong to another than herself." She not only frees herself of Leonce's insensitive claims; she also ridicules Robert's suggestion of a second marriage, much to his disappointment as well as surprise. Even the children must share no part of the newly emergent self. "I would give my life for my children," Edna informs Adele, "but I wouldn't give myself" (929). Warned by Adele that her scandalous conduct will of necessity harm the children, Edna proves her determination to allow neither romance nor parental love to compromise her imperious selfhood: "There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the

day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them" (999).

The solitude and egotism of Edna's quest for magnificent self-hood should be suggestion enough of the quest's essential morbidity and falsehood as well as of its futility. But Chopin provides numerous additional suggestions of tone, despite the seeming objectivity of her narrator. Seeking personal splendor, Edna is indeed a magnificent woman in appearance, but the fact that nearly all descriptions focus upon her physical attractiveness and fashionable attire subtly suggests a deficiency of authentic being.⁶ The reader is more often asked to "look at" Edna than to understand her. "She held up her hands, strong, shapely hands" (882). "The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell into splendid poses; . . . the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd" (894). In New Orleans "[s]he looked handsome and distinguished in her street gown" (936), and when Edna and her visiting father tour the city, the reader is informed that they "looked very distinguished together, and excited a good deal of notice during their perambulations" (950). Even in such mundane affairs as house cleaning Edna retains the fashion model's splendid attractiveness. "She was splendid and robust, and had never appeared handsomer than in the old blue gown, with a red silk handkerchief knotted at random around her head to protect her hair from the dust" (968). But what sort of character does this splendidly attractive woman possess? And what sort of specific self-hood does she so willfully pursue? The narrator provides few suggestions for understanding Edna, whose feelings and motives are usually either vague or confused. Moreover, Edna finds little fulfillment in her new life. Her passion for Robert is transformed into an unloving liaison with the rakish Alcée Arabin, and once the excitement of her new

⁶Marco A. Portales, "The Characterization of Edna Pontellier and the Conclusion of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*," *Southern Studies* 20 (1981): 427-36; Portales comments at length upon Edna's impulsiveness and lack of reflection and self-understanding.

associations fades she "sometimes felt very tired of Mrs. Highcamp and Mrs. Merriman" (980). Rather far into her quest Edna confesses to a lack of self-knowledge: "One of these days . . . I'm going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of woman I am; for, candidly, I don't know" (966). Even as Edna returns to Grande Isle for her final and ultimately "liberating" swim, she has not progressed beyond the vagueness of her initial yearnings to give meaning or direction to her existence. "There was no one thing in the world that she desired" (999). She only knows what she does not desire: the confinement of personal relationships. True to the tradition of the cult of passion, she seeks death in its paradoxical promise of solitude and cosmic totality.

Further investigation reveals yet other aspects of the myth of passion surrounding Edna's quest, all suggestive of its basic falsehood and unhealthiness. For instance, the attitude persists among many characters, Edna included, that courtship and marriage are incompatible. Moreover, despite Platonic or courtly pretensions, the love pursued by such characters invariably proves passionate and is usually adulterous. Robert, when asked whether or not the caressing lovers at Grande Isle are married, replies, "Of course not" (915). The characters with whom Edna associates as she begins to pursue a new life independent of Leonce display in various ways an ironic, hedonistic cynicism regarding marriage. Victor affects the impetuosity of an ingenuous child as he pursues intrigues with young married girls such as Mariequita. Alcée affects the traditional courtly role of the adoring slave of passion in order to gain the company and, of course, the favors of women such as Edna. Mrs. Highcamp uses her own daughter's accessibility to suitors "as a pretext for cultivating the society of young men of fashion" (956). Even Mariequita observes that it is "the fashion to be in love with married people," and she herself is glad to think that she "could run away any time she liked to New Orleans with Céline's husband" (997). For her part, Edna never seems to have pursued love in marriage, her "infatuation" for Leonce Pontellier having subsided as soon as the wedding concluded the romance of courtship and the excitement of defying her father's objection to a Catholic suitor. Edna reveals distaste for the marital friendship displayed by the Ratignolles, and she avoids her sister's wedding. Despite Robert's willingness to defy for her sake his

faith's injunction against divorce and remarriage, she insists upon an extramarital relationship. Nursing her passion for Robert in his absence, she cultivates stimulation within a clique of decadent aristocratic pleasure-seekers until her desires can no longer be focused and she falls prey to courtly seduction. Thus what begins as a quest for love and fulfillment beyond the restraints of marriage ends as an empty affair with Alcée, a result which distinctly emphasizes the merely passionate nature of her supposed awakening.

Further suggestive of the realities underlying the myth of passion, Edna's transformation also evinces a strong element of narcissism in her character. At twenty-eight and twenty-six years of age respectively, Edna and Robert resemble self-absorbed adolescents caught up in the love of love—immature indulgence in an infatuation that is mutually flattering. In the opening scenes, they laugh ridiculously together over adventures in the surf, adventures whose amusing quality defies explanation, much to Leonce's annoyance. Their conversation reveals less love than desire for admiration: "Robert talked a good deal about himself. He was very young and did not know any better. Mrs. Pontellier talked a little about herself for the same reason" (884). And most of the complications of their "love affair" are caused (as will later be shown) by their own impetuous attempts at stimulating each other's desires as well as by their fear of the loss of passion through its consummation. The visit of Edna's father, who exhibits vanity in the seriousness with which he selects clothing and poses for a portrait, stimulates Edna's own vain desire to be admired. She is not only aware but also highly pleased that going about town in the presence of this tall, slim, white-haired, and tan Southern Colonel, she appears "distinguished" and attracts the attention of many unknown men, "and she was glad when a lull . . . gave them an opportunity to meet her and talk with her. Often on the street the glance of strange eyes had lingered in her memory" (951).

The most revealing aspect of the essential narcissism of Edna's awakening is suggested in the way auto-eroticism accompanies her passion for Robert.⁷ With desire awakened by her initial

⁷ I am indebted to Harold Bloom for his observation that Edna's character is essentially auto-erotic; see his Introduction to *Kate Chopin*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987) 1-6.

swim under Robert's guidance, she commands him on the next day to accompany her to Mass on the Chênrière Caminada. However, Robert, as it turns out, merely plays the role of attendant in Edna's consecration of self-love. Stifled by the atmosphere of the church, Edna leaves before the communion ceremony and is accompanied by Robert to the cottage of Madame Antoine. While Robert waits outside, she enters the small bedchamber alone, bathes, and then luxuriates upon the bed in the sensuality of her own body: "She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other, observing closely, as if it were something she saw for the first time, the fine, firm quality and texture of her flesh. She clasped her hands easily above her head, and it was thus she fell asleep" (917-18). Upon awakening she enjoys a private meal of bread and wine, a solitary consecration of her newfound sensuality. Although Robert humorously compares the venture to the story of Sleeping Beauty, Edna's "awakening" in reality awaits no Prince's kiss, and Robert's chivalric attentions have merely served to disguise self-love as romance. Edna's final swim, more than her first, reveals the close connection between her auto-erotic tendencies and her vague romantic yearning for death with its supposed promise of an awakening into a sensuous cosmic self-hood:

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out. The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. . . . She did not look back now, but went on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow that she had traversed when a little child, believing that it had no beginning and no end.

(1000)

In death Edna turns her back on husband, lovers, and children as, nude, she yields herself to the only lover who promises her herself, the only true object of her passionate awakening.

The Awakening evinces the influence of the myth of passion in its plot also, for its conflicts consist of a series of obstacles to the consummation of the lovers' desires, obstacles

which both prolong and intensify passion. Suggestively, Chopin arranges events so that most of the obstacles are created by Robert and Edna themselves, indicating the preference of each not for the supposed beloved but rather for the experience of passion—tortuous though it may be. The liberality of Creole culture and the Creole husband's customary trust afford Edna numerous opportunities for initiating an affair with Robert. And her affair with Alcée proceeds for some time without irreparable damage to her marriage or social standing, as the tone of Adele's climactic admonition suggests. It is thus evident that Robert and Edna ignore or avoid opportunities (perhaps unconsciously) because they wish to avoid the diminution of passion which its consummation entails. Clearly, each takes pleasure in the other's tortuous state of unsatiated admiration and longing. Listening to the piano, Edna savors the mental image of a naked, disconsolate man on the seashore, casting his eyes downward, as a bird (symbolizing her own pleasure in being desired) flies away from him toward freedom and solitude. Skilled "courtier" that he is, Robert often avoids Edna "for an entire day, redoubling his devotion upon the next and the next. She missed him the days when some pretext served to take him away from her, just as one misses the sun on a cloudy day" (907).

A rehearsal of the novel's chief events illustrates the nearly ridiculous measures to which Edna and Robert resort to avoid or alienate one another once their passions are stirred. Edna's ambivalent desire for Robert and solitude, as has already been mentioned, characterizes the early stage of this relationship. Stimulated by Robert's invitation to go to Grande Terre to see "the slimy lizards writhe in and out among the ruins of the old fort," Edna nevertheless pursues the auto-erotic self-discovery of Chênrière Caminada, ignoring Robert's offer to play Prince to her Sleeping Beauty (915). Suddenly, however, it is Robert who vexes Edna, neglecting to inform her himself of his imminent departure for Mexico—"Forever, perhaps" (926). Decimated, she refuses to attend his farewell celebration. He visits her briefly to bid farewell and, at her request, promises to write to her. He does not write to her, but does write to others—further wounding her and inspiring her jealousy. To Mademoiselle Reisz he has even sent a letter praising Edna, apparently with the expectation that Edna will read it. As if by design, the little German woman

allows Edna to plead for the letter and then performs Romantic interludes upon the piano as Edna reads, finally reducing her to tears with a passionate rendering of Isolde's *Liebested* from Wagner's opera.⁸ Her passion further aroused by longing, Edna begins to succumb to the courtly attentions of Alcée Arobin (his "attitude . . . of good-humored subservience and tacit adoration" [961]), and she even feels endeared to her husband as he prepares to depart for New York. Suddenly informed that Robert will soon return, Edna is elated but remains curiously noncommittal. When Mademoiselle Reisz asks what she will do, she replies, "Do? Nothing, except feel glad and happy to be alive." Meanwhile, however, she does plenty, moving out of her home and yielding to Alcée so that when Robert returns her situation provokes disappointment and jealousy. For his part, Robert has avoided her during the first several days in New Orleans, he lamely excuses his failure to write, and he insists that he has come home only because business was poor and the Mexicans uncongenial, displaying nonetheless a tobacco pouch given to him by a "generous" Vera Cruz girl (985). Observing Arobin's familiarity with Edna, Robert avoids her for days until they meet, apparently by accident, in a small suburban restaurant. Here they frankly declare their passion and resolve to pursue the myth of passion's promise of radical transformation:

"We shall be everything to each other.
Nothing else in the world is of any
consequence."

(993)

But again both immediately act to prevent consummation. Edna insists upon leaving Robert to assist in Adele's delivery, despite his pleas that she remain with him and despite his offer to accompany her. Alone and perhaps disappointed by Edna's refusal of a second marriage, Robert again departs, leaving a message that epitomizes the self-contradictory charade that these two immature adults have enacted:

"I love you. Good-by—because I love you."

(997)

⁸The legend of Tristan and Iseult is the central literary expression of the myth of passion in the Middle Ages according to Rougemont, who makes numerous references to it throughout his book.

Love, according to the myth of passion, depends upon the separation and suffering of lovers, and Robert remains true to his role, abandoning Edna at the most intense moment of their relationship. Not to be outdone in this terribly pernicious charade of narcissism, Edna saves her *self* from further temptation through her self-isolating immersion in death.

It is interesting that the letters to Chopin from Lady Janet Scammon Young and Doctor Dunrobin Thomson perceive in *The Awakening* not only a warning against the confusion of passion and love but also a statement of the necessity of frankly acknowledging the former—in women as well as in men—as a means of channeling its power into a viable, sustained union of woman and man.⁹ That these letters may not be authentic (possibly written by a close supporter or even Chopin herself) only enhances their relevance, for they thus underscore Chopin's desire to move the reader beyond Edna's feminist and naturalist awakenings into a realm of possibility seemingly unrealized by her heroine at story's end. As a feminist Kate Chopin uses Edna to assure her audience of the reality of female sexuality. As a naturalist she refuses to rationalize or romanticize this sexuality. Woman's erotic yearnings are evidence of Nature's control over her and of her own subordination to survival of the species. However, Chopin's eye was not jaundiced by this understanding. She believed in love, the friendship of man and woman in a relationship that confirms life rather than denies it. Her own marriage was vital and productive, based upon understanding, respect, and friendship—like that of the Ratignolles, although Adele's character is no self-portrait (Ringe 203). Moreover, Chopin pursued art and literature, never in solitude (as Edna does), but writing with a lapboard in the company of her children. Her novel has thus been misunderstood not only by the puritanical socialites of her own era who (lacking the cosmopolitan insight of Lady Janet and Doctor Thomson) were shocked by its subject matter and angered over its narrator's seeming objectivity but also by many of her more approving readers who assume that her frankness concerning passion amounts to a statement of liberation, failing to see that the

⁹"Letters from 'Lady Janet Scammon Young' and 'Dr. Dunrobin Thomson,'" Kate Chopin Papers: Missouri Historical Society, in *The Awakening: An Authoritative Text* 155-58.

heroine's awakened eroticism exerts an influence over her more pernicious than the restraints of culture. For even as Edna seeks freedom through passion, she allows it to

deform her consciousness and to destroy her.□

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ANDRÉ BAZIN: THREE ORIGINAL REVIEWS

Translated by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo

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LA STRADA

The vitality of the Italian cinema is confirmed for us once again by this wonderful film of Federico Fellini's.¹ And it is doubly comforting to declare that the rest of the critics have been nearly unanimous in singing the praises of *La Strada* [1954]. Perhaps without this support, which hasn't hesitated to enlist snobbism on its side, the film would have had some difficulty in bringing itself to the attention of an inundated and undiscerning public.

Federico Fellini has made one of those very rare films about which it can be said, one forgets that they are movies and accepts them simply as works of art. One remembers the discovery of *La Strada* as an aesthetic experience of great emotion, as an unanticipated encounter with the world of imagination. I mean that this is less a case of a film's having known how to attain a certain intellectual or moral level than of its having made a personal statement for which the cinema is most surely the necessary and natural form, but which statement nevertheless possesses a virtual artistic existence of its own. It is not a film that is called *La Strada*; it is *La Strada* that is called a film. In connection with this idea, Chaplin's last film also comes to mind, although in many ways it is quite different from *La Strada*. One could just as well say of *Limelight* [1952] that its only adequate embodiment was the cinema, that it was inconceivable through any other means of expression, and that, nonetheless, everything in it transcended the elements of a particular art form. Thus *La Strada* confirms in its own way the following critical premise: to wit, that the cinema has arrived at a stage in its evolution where the form itself no

longer determines anything, where filmic language no longer calls attention to itself, but on the contrary suggests only as much as any stylistic device that an artist might employ. Doubtless it will be said that only the cinema could, for example, endow Zampanò's extraordinary motorcycle caravan with the significance of living myth that this simultaneously strange and commonplace object attains here. But one can just as clearly see that the film is in this case neither transforming nor interpreting anything for us. No lyricism of the image or of montage takes it upon itself to guide our perceptions; I will even say that the *mise en scène* does not attempt to do so—at least not the *mise en scène* from a technically cinematic point of view.² The screen restricts itself to showing us the caravan better and more objectively than could the painter or the novelist. I am not saying that the camera has photographed the caravan in a very plain manner—even the word "photographed" is too much here—but rather that the camera has simply *shown* the caravan to us, or even better, has enabled us to see it.

Surely it would be excessive to pretend that nothing can be created by virtue of cinematic language alone, of its abrasive intrusion on the real. Without even taking into account almost virgin territory such as color and the wide screen, one can say that the degree of relationship between technique and subject

¹First published in French in *Esprit* 23.226 (May 1955): 847-51. Reprinted in Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1962) 4 ("Une esthétique de la réalité: le néo-réalisme"): 122-128. Translated into English with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.

²*Mise en scène* literally means "putting on the stage." In a French theater program, the credit for "directed by" would read "*mise en scène de*." This term has been loosely adapted for use with reference to the cinema, and covers such areas as visual style, movement of the camera and/or the actors, disposition of the actors in relation to décor, uses of lighting and color, etc. When Bazin speaks of "the *mise en scène* from a technically cinematic point of view," he is referring to camera position (e.g., close-up), angle (e.g., low-angle shot), and movement (e.g., swish pan) that call some attention to themselves.

matter depends in part on the personality of the director. An Orson Welles, for instance, always creates by means of technique. But what one can say without question is that henceforth advances in the cinema will not necessarily be tied to the originality of the means of expression, to the formal composition of the image or of the images in relation to one another. More precisely, if there is a formal originality to *La Strada*, it consists in the film's always staying on this side of cinema. Nothing that Fellini shows us owes any supplementary meaning to the manner in which it is shown; nevertheless, what we see couldn't be seen anywhere but on the screen. It is in this way that the cinema achieves fruition as the art of the real. One knows, of course, that Fellini is a great director, but he is a great director who doesn't cheat on reality. If the camera doesn't see it, it isn't in his film. It wouldn't be in his film, in any case, if he hadn't first acknowledged the fullness of its being in the world.

In this sense *La Strada* doesn't depart at all from Italian neorealism. But there is a misunderstanding on this subject that requires clarification. *La Strada* has been received in Italy with some reservation by the critical guardians of neorealist orthodoxy. These critics are situated on the Left, which in France is called "Progressivist," although this term is misleading, since the Italian critics are both more Marxist and more independent than the French Progressivists. There are certainly Communist critics in France as well, and some of them are cultivated, intelligent, and well-informed, but their point of reference seems to me to be only marginally that of Marxism. The tactics and the watchwords of the Party do play a clearer role in their writing, however, when the work of art in question draws its substance from the political arena, for then Party ideology takes over in spite of everything in the work that resists it. The criticism consequently does no more than render a good or bad judgment on the work according to whether its author's political views are "correct" or "incorrect." As for Progressivist criticism, it is either equivalent to the worst Communist criticism in slavishness and intellectual emptiness, or else it isn't Marxist and in that case has some scope. In Italy, by contrast, it is Marxist criticism that occasionally gives evidence of a certain independence with regard to the interests of the Party, and without sacrificing the stringency of its aesthetic judgments. I am naturally thinking

of the group around Chiarini and Aristarco at *Cinema Nuovo*.³ In the last two years their criticism has, I dare say, rediscovered the concept of neorealism, which was held in so little regard at one time, and is attempting to define the term and give it an orientation. (Zavattini is the figure whose work most conforms to neorealism's ideal, which conceives of a film, not as a fixed and tame reality, but as a kind of work in progress, an inquiry that begins with certain givens and then proceeds in a particular direction.)⁴ I don't feel that I have the competence necessary to give a clear description of the evolution of neorealism as seen by these Marxist critics, but I also don't believe that I am distorting matters to call neorealism, as they define it, a substitute term for "socialist realism," the theoretical and practical sterility of which, unfortunately, no longer needs to be demonstrated. In fact, as far as one can trace it through the various tactical changes in the Party line on art that have occurred, socialist realism has never created anything very convincing in itself. In painting, where its influence is easy to determine because it stands in opposition to the whole course of modern art, we know that it hasn't produced any results. In literature and in cinema, the situation is confused, since we are dealing here with art forms from which realism has never been eliminated. But even if there are good films and good novels that don't contradict the precepts of socialist realism, it is still rather doubtful that these precepts had anything to do with the success of these works of art. On the other hand, one can well see the

³Guido Aristarco has long been the editor of the Italian film journal *Cinema Nuovo* (*New Cinema*). Among his books are *The Art of Film* (1950), *History of Film Theory* (1951), *Myth and Reality in the Italian Cinema* (1961), and *Marx, the Cinema, and Film Criticism* (1965). Luigi Chiarini (1900-1975) founded the famous Italian film school Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in 1935 and, in addition to contributing to *Cinema Nuovo*, he founded his own journal, *Bianco e Nero* (*Black and White*), in 1937, remaining its editor until 1951. Among his books on film theory are *Five Chapters on Film* (1941), *Problems of Film Art* (1949), *The Battle of Ideas in Film* (1954), and *The Art and Technique of Film* (1962). In his day Chiarini was considered by many to be the dean of the Italian cinema.

⁴Cesare Zavattini (b. 1902) emerged in the 1940s as a key figure of Italian neorealism with his theoretical writings and with his screenplays for some of the most important productions of the movement, notably the films of Vittorio De Sica (e.g., *Shoeshine* [1946], *Bicycle Thieves* [1948], *Miracle in Milan* [1950]).

extent to which such precepts have eviscerated many other works.

The truth is that theories have never produced masterpieces and that creative outpourings have a deeper source in History and in men. Italy had the good fortune, like Russia around 1925, to find itself in a situation where cinematic genius began to flourish, and this genius was moving in the direction of social progress, of human liberation. It is natural and legitimate that the most conscientious among the creators and judges of this important movement are anxious today to keep it from falling apart; they would like neorealism to continue along the revolutionary path it set out on around 1945. And surely neorealism can, at least in the cinema, be a valuable substitute for socialist realism. The number of successful neorealist films and their oneness in diversity supply the Marxist aesthete with food for productive thought, which is the way it should be. If the time comes, however, when such thought outstrips production itself, then neorealism will be in danger. Happily, we are not yet at that point. Nevertheless, I am worried about the intolerance that Marxist criticism is beginning to show toward those who dissent from, let us call it, socialist neorealism—namely, Rossellini and Fellini (who was Rossellini's assistant and in many ways remains his disciple).

"Italy is ever and adamantly the country of Catholicism: whoever is not on the side of Peppone must be in league with Don Camillo."⁵ In response to this criticism from the Left, Italian Catholics run to the defense of those neorealist films whose ambiguity lends itself to Catholic coloration. The Congress of Varese, it could be said, is doing battle here with the Congress of Parma.⁶ Needless to say, the results of this Catholic effort have been rather pitiful. But because of it, Rossellini and Fellini find themselves in a very difficult situation. It is true

that their recent films could not be perceived as socially oriented. These films are not concerned at all with the transformation of social institutions; they aren't even genuine social documents. Their makers, as Italian citizens, don't flirt with Communism, but neither do they let themselves be taken in by the Christian Democrats. The result for Rossellini is that he is denounced by both sides. As for Fellini, his case is still under litigation, although the success of *La Strada* gives him the benefit of a favorable reception from both sides at the same time—a reception marred, however, by uneasiness and pronounced reservations on the part of the Marxists. Of course, political bias is just one part of a critic's makeup, with greater or lesser weight attached to it depending on his personality. It may even occur that a critic will set aside his political bias: we have seen Chiarini, for example, defend Rossellini's *Flowers of St. Francis* [1950], whereas *Cinema*

⁵Bazin is referring to the various congresses held in the 1890s by the Catholics (in Varese, among other cities), on the one hand, and the Italian Socialist Party (in Parma, among other cities), on the other hand. The following is a description of Catholic politics of the period as it differs from Socialist politics:

Leo XIII's famous encyclical of 1891, *Rerum Novarum*, not only condemned the existing liberal capitalist society, it ordered devout Catholics to transform it, and this seemed particularly apposite at a time of agricultural crisis, industrial depression, and high emigration. Employers should pay a "just wage," enough to permit the worker to save and acquire property. The State might legitimately intervene to safeguard workers' rights and prevent blatant exploitation, but essentially reforms should come by mutual agreement, through a series of "private" associations. Mutual-aid societies, cooperatives, and mixed "corporations" of workers and employers were the most favored kinds of association, but workers' trade unions were also permissible provided they did not engage in the class struggle. One of the purposes of this "Papal Socialism" was to combat the ever-present threat of Red Socialism. To the Catholics, Socialism would be a disastrous replacement for liberal capitalism, denying God, family life, and the right to property; under the mask of emancipation it would prepare an even more cruel and universal servitude. The remedy was "Corporations"—i.e., guilds of employers and workers—profit-sharing in industry, small landownership, share-cropping or long leases in the countryside, cooperatives to organize commerce, and banking to be run as a public utility. Catholics looked forward to a Christian democracy of the twentieth century, in which all classes would work together in social harmony.

(Drawn from Martin Clark, *Modern Italy, 1871-1892* [London: Longman, 1984] 106.)

⁵Don Camillo, an eccentric Roman Catholic village priest, and Peppone, the village's militant Communist mayor, conduct a running war to gain the favor of the local populace in a series of novels by Giovannino Guareschi (1908-1968). The most famous of these novels, which satirize the politics of both the left and the right, was the first one: *The Little World of Don Camillo* (1948). This was made into a film in 1952 by the French director Julien Duvivier (1896-1967), with the French actor Fernandel (1903-1971) in the role of Don Camillo and the Italian actor Gino Cervi (1901-1974) in the role of Peppone. Duvivier also directed *The Return of Don Camillo* (1953), the sequel to *The Little World of Don Camillo*. Several other films followed in what became the internationally popular "Don Camillo" series.

Nuovo was divided over *Senso* [1954], which was directed by the Communist Visconti. But the precedent set by such instances certainly does not contribute to a softening of theoretical positions when these are synonymous with political distrust. Thus both the Marxists and the Christian Democrats threaten to evict Fellini from the neorealist pantheon as each defines it, and to hurl him out into the darkness already inhabited by Rossellini.

from social responsibility into the realm of spiritual destiny. What in this film and in *La Strada* nonetheless remains neorealist and can even be considered one of neorealism's genuine achievements, is the aesthetic that informs the action, an aesthetic that Abbé Amédée Ayfre has judiciously described as phenomenological.⁸

One can see very well, for example, that in *La Strada* nothing is ever revealed to us from inside the characters. Fellini's point of view is the exact



Obviously everything depends on the definition we give to neorealism from the start. Definition or no definition, however, it seems to me that *La Strada* doesn't contradict *Paisan* [1946] or *Open City* [1945] at all, any more than it does *Bicycle Thieves* [1948], for that matter. But it is true that Fellini has taken a route different from Zavattini's.⁷ Together with Rossellini, Fellini has opted for a neorealism of the person. To be sure, Rossellini's early films, *Paisan* and *Open City* among them, identified moral choice with social consequence, because these two spheres had been equated during the Resistance. But his *Europe 51* [1952] to some degree retreated

opposite of the one that would be taken by psychological realism, which claims to analyze character and finally to uncover feelings. Yet anything can happen in the quasi-Shakespearean world of *La Strada*. Gelsomina and the Fool have an air of the marvelous about them—which baffles and irritates Zampanò—but this quality is neither supernatural nor gratuitous, nor even “poetic”; instead, it comes across simply as another property of nature.⁹ Furthermore, to

⁷Fellini co-scripted *Paisan* and *Open City* for Rossellini; Zavattini wrote the screenplay for *Bicycle Thieves*, as I indicate in note 4 above.

return to psychology, the very being of these characters is precisely in their not having any, or at least in their possessing such a malformed and primitive psychology that a description of it would have nothing more than pathological interest. But they do have a soul. And *La Strada* is nothing but their experience of their souls and the revelation of this before our eyes. Gelsomina learns from the Fool that she has a place in the world. Gelsomina the idiot, homely and useless,

discovers one day through this tightrope walker that she is something other than a reject, an outcast, better, that she is irreplaceable and that she has a destiny, which is to be indispensable to Zampanò. The most powerful event in the film is, without question, Gelsomina's breakdown after Zampanò murders the Fool. From this point on she is beset by an agony situated in that instant in which the Fool, who had virtually conferred her being on her, ceased to exist. Little



⁸Amédée Ayfre is a French ecclesiastic and critic. He is the author or co-editor of the following books: *God in the Cinema: Aesthetic Problems of Religious Film* (1953); *Truth and Cinema* (1969); *Cinema and Mystery* (1969); and *The Films of Robert Bresson* (1969).

In describing neorealism as phenomenological, Ayfre means what Bazin says in the first sentence of the next paragraph: that "nothing is ever revealed to us from inside the characters" in the quintessential neorealist film. In philosophical terms, neorealism limits itself to a description of characters' interactions with one another ("neorealism of the person," according to Bazin) or with their environment ("socialist neorealism," according to Bazin). What neorealism does not do is emphasize characters' particular psychological problems or obsessions.

mouse-like cries escape uncontrollably from her lips at the sight of her dead friend: "The Fool is sick, the Fool is sick." The stupid, obstinate, and brutish Zampanò can't realize how much he needs Gelsomina, and above all he can't sense the eminently spiritual nature of the bond that unites the two of them. Terrified by the poor girl's suffering and at the end of his patience, he abandons her. But just as the death of the Fool had made life unbearable for Gelsomina, so too

⁹The Fool is an *artiste*—violinist, high-wire performer, clown—who is known only by his stage name in the film.

will Zampanò's abandonment of her and then her death make life unbearable for him. Little by little this mass of muscles is reduced to its spiritual core, and Zampanò ends up being crushed by the absence of Gelsomina from his life. He's not crushed by remorse over what he did, or even by his love for her, but rather by overwhelming and incomprehensible anguish, which can only be the response of his soul to being deprived of Gelsomina.

Thus one can look at *La Strada* as a phenomenology of the soul, perhaps even of the communion of saints, and at the very least as a phenomenology of the reciprocal nature of salvation.¹⁰ Where these slow-witted individuals are concerned, it is impossible to confuse ultimate spiritual realities with those of

intelligence, passion, pleasure, or beauty. The soul reveals itself here beyond psychological or aesthetic categories, and it reveals itself all the more, precisely because one can't bedeck it with the trappings of conscience. The salt of the tears that Zampanò sheds for the first time in his sorry life, on the beach that Gelsomina loved, is the same salt as that of the infinite sea, which will never again be able to relieve its own anguish at the sufferings of men.

¹⁰The communion of saints is, in the Roman Catholic Church, the union between the faithful on earth, the souls in Purgatory, and the saints in Heaven, by which all are members of the same mystical body under Christ its head and partakers in a community of spiritual works and gifts.

THE STYLE IS THE GENRE

Les Diaboliques [1954] will probably rank among the minor creations of Henri-Georges Clouzot as a mere entertainment.¹ But at the same time it is without question his only perfect film. That its perfection comes at the expense of an ambitious subject is not necessarily a shortcoming, if it is true that aesthetic pleasure derives from the exact appropriateness of means to ends. Compared with *Les Diaboliques*, *The Wages of Fear* [1953] was a monumental work, but one in which Clouzot could be faulted for not having fulfilled the epic dimension implicit in the story from the start. An irritating lack of dramatic necessity presided, if not over the choice of episodes, then at least over their length, and the ending, which was supposed to be tragic, obeyed the dictates of conventional storytelling. With *Les Diaboliques*, however, Clouzot seems eager to prove that he can build a solid narrative if he wants to.

You already know that this is a classic murder story—I mean, one whose essential interest is in the police investigation: the depiction of character and milieu is subordinated to the functioning of the plot. So *Les Diaboliques* is

neither *The Raven* [1943] nor *Quai des Orfèvres* [Jenny Lamour, 1947], although the background for the action is a private school not far from Paris. Clouzot has a weakness for such cloistered settings, but here the realistic elements are sketchy. What detail there is, is intended to trick the viewer, to be the bait that lures him onto the investigatory trail. The prospective viewer will eventually thank me for not revealing anything that might help him to solve the puzzle; for my part, I started to figure it out only thirty seconds before the end. The mystery is essential here. Allow me all the same to supply at least the givens of the situation. The headmaster of a private school that is at once middle-class and seedy terrorizes his wife and his mistress. These two end up becoming co-conspirators. The mistress, who is the more aggressive one, persuades the wife to set them both free by murdering their torturer. The crime will be camouflaged as the perfect accident. Everything seems to happen according to plan . . . but I realize that by going any further I would already be depriving you of several nice surprises, so let's stop here.

What is certain is that Clouzot has achieved one hundred percent of his goal and that the viewer cannot help but experience all the emotions the director has prepared for him, as if

¹First published in French in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 8.43 (Jan. 1955): 42-43. Translated into English with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.

along a scenic highway. Of course, we all know that Clouzot is a master at playing with our nerves. You leave the movie theater broken, quartered, and battered, but also relieved and happy—evidence of the film's success. The catharsis is total because the art with which the film is invested neither outstrips its subject nor falls short of it. The genre is realized to perfection, and it is this perfection, the complete

film is immoral, but this would be as silly as saying that the Clouzot film is pernicious: the content of these works is completely transfigured by their form. The famous Aristotelian conception is not true only for tragedy. Each genre, even the most humble, such as the crime film or farce, has its nobility and produces catharsis as long as it is a true genre, i.e., as long as it has its own style and as



absence of any dramatic residue, that mollifies the soul after having shaken it so violently. A short time after seeing *Les Diaboliques*, I saw Feydeau's *How to Get Rid of Your Mistress* [1955], with Noël-Noël, and these two films that are so different left me in fact in the same state of inner jubilation, because both execute the precise unwinding of an impeccable dramatic mechanism.² Some might say that the Feydeau

long as this style is properly fulfilled.

From all that is admirable in *Les Diaboliques*, I'll pick out only two examples. The first pertains to the film's dramatic construction. The solution that is given to us in the last few seconds of the film could very well have been a little twist whose faulty logic or feeble psychology would quickly be covered over by the detective's comments and by the words "The End," as is often the case in crime films, where the director tries to fool the viewer right up to the finish before hastily tying things up. At that point, the viewer is no longer very demanding. In Clouzot's film, by contrast, one can marvel at the simplicity and retroactive soundness of the solution to the criminal puzzle. I mean that Clouzot doesn't limit himself to unraveling the mystery: he gives it a new meaning in addition; it is as if another film grows out of this one's resolution.

²Georges Feydeau (1862-1921), French writer of over sixty stage farces, a number of which have been filmed. Regarded in his lifetime as nothing more than an adroit purveyor of light entertainment, Feydeau has come to be regarded as an outstanding writer of classic farce.

Noël-Noël was born Lucien Noël in Paris on 9 Aug. 1897. A leading comic and character actor of French films, he is best known for his characterization of the befuddled soldier Ademaï in films of the 1930s and for his portrayal of petit bourgeois types in the 1940s and 1950s. Noël-Noël wrote many of his own screenplays and directed one film, *La Vie chantée* (1951).

I have suggested that it is useless to look for a psychological drama or a social portrait in *Les Diaboliques*. The characters here are as deliberately typed as if they were pieces on a chessboard. But naturally Clouzot has not deprived himself of all realistic support; if his

well as his dramatic function, or perhaps more accurately, and in keeping with the algebraic metaphor, how the director has given this character the minus sign in the police equation: Maigret multiplied by -1 equals the solution to the film's puzzle.³



characters are conventional, they are so within a convention grounded in this director's particular world. There is in the film, however, one quite remarkable character whose creation seems to me to deserve praise: that of the police inspector, played by Charles Vanel. It was hardly an easy matter to revitalize this role. Since I won't give away the conclusion to *Les Diaboliques*, the viewer will have to see for himself how Clouzot has managed to carry to the next factor, as it were, the traditional figure of the inspector as

³Georges Simenon (b. 1903), prolific novelist of Belgian birth who writes in French, created the imperturbable Commissaire Maigret, who relies on psychological intuition rather than scientific methods in his detective work. Simenon's output ranges from straight detective fiction to purely psychological novels, which depend for plot and interest on the workings of the characters' minds and their reaction to the outside world. For the most part his characters belong to a violent, corrupt underworld, seldom described but evoked with a remarkable sense of sinister atmosphere.

HIGH INFIDELITY

I saw *The Bridge on the River Kwai* [1957] after some delay, so I had plenty of time to get preconceived notions, first from the massive publicity that preceded its commercial release, second from a careful reading of the reviews, and third from the reading of Pierre Boulle's book.¹ In short, I finally went to the Normandie Theater somewhat resigned, for I was convinced that I knew everything in advance about the film and its action. This review will first of all be an analysis and explanation of my relative surprise. Within the artistic limits that I shall try to define, David Lean's film, all things considered, seemed to me to be far more worthy than I had been able to gather from the orgasmic praise of some and the guarded reservations of others.

First, I must observe that the film is far superior to the book. This, by the way, is not meant to take anything away from the author, since Pierre Boulle wrote the screenplay as well. But we clearly find ourselves here in a very peculiar situation, where the usual relationship between novel and film is reversed. It is well-known that the aesthetic length of a film corresponds somewhat to that of a short story. Even when the filmic adaptation has no desire to flatten the novel's characters emotionally and to reduce its world intellectually—and most adaptations *do* have such a desire—the temporal contingencies of cinematic spectacle condemn the adaptation to be a simplification, if not a devaluation, of the original. Yet, for once, what was fated to occur has not occurred: no doubt due to the courage and determination of the people in charge—the producer and the director—but also and above all because the aesthetic relationship between the novel and the film is reversed. Of the two, the novel is the one that is in fact a short story and the film the one that is a novel. However long and sweeping the narrative created by Pierre Boulle may be, it is so in a perfunctory and minimally descriptive way. It is merely the logical development, in almost abstract terms, of a situation set within a historical and geographical framework. As for the characters, their personal psychology is almost limited simply to what's needed for the full working out of the initial situation. Colonel

Nicholson is nothing but a stick-in-the-mud draped in British dignity, only he's a little more stubborn and stupid than most of his fellow officers; he is also a little more courageous, but the former traits do not necessarily preclude the latter one. In any case, he leaves in one's memory merely the schematic image of a sociological and moral type, and not the rich image of an intimate and familiar acquaintance that is proper to the protagonist of a novel.

Because of its very simplicity and monotony, the action of the novel had to be thickened and diversified for the film adaptation; but above all, the characters could not be left in their semi-anonymous state. The act of giving them a face forced the director to give them in addition a psychology, which the book did not do. He had to give one to Nicholson first, naturally, and then to the crowd of English soldiers, whose attachment to their colonel had to be justified, explained, and given some nuance. Next there were the saboteurs, whose role almost inevitably had to be expanded, not only for the purpose of dramatic symmetry, but also to take advantage of the opportunity they presented to vary location and action, which, again, was not done in the novel. One could not deny here the intelligence of the creation of the American character, whose personality gives us through contrast perspective on and relief from the personalities of the English. This is a screenwriter's trick, but it is justified by the success of the result.

So *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which is taken from a 150-page novel, seems to whoever hasn't read the book to be the adaptation of a work that is three times longer. Of course, length is not automatically synonymous with quality, and the result could have been bad, even in these circumstances. I don't think it is, because this elaboration, this thickening of the initial plot, was for once accomplished with the intent of respecting, not the conventional lines of commercial filmmaking, but rather the logic of the story and of the characters, and, wherever possible, the writer's freedom. I know that this particular adaptation has been challenged by many, and that Pierre Boulle himself has discreetly expressed some regrets about the ending of the film; but, upon reflection, it doesn't seem to me that the criticisms are completely justified. I shall examine only the two principal grounds for complaint: the love affairs with the native girls and, above all, the final destruction of the bridge, which is caused

¹First published in French in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 14.80 (Feb. 1958): 50-53. Translated into English with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.

when Nicholson, who has just been shot to death, falls on the device that triggers the explosives.

Certainly I shan't deny for a moment that there is something a bit conventional in the sentimental relationship between the girls, who are being used as porters in the building of the bridge, and two of the soldiers of the sabotage unit (William Holden and the young Canadian). This little business clearly allows the director to



introduce an erotic note, for which this otherwise virile script did not leave much room. I shall also concede that the physical beauty of the two village girls is so exotic that it may seem needlessly provocative. But the requisition by the Japanese of able-bodied men for the construction of the bridge is a clever justification for the use of these women, who had to be young in order to resist the hardships of the heavy work. Finally, I have to admit that *all* the Burmese young women in the film are very pretty, which is after all credible. In any event, and even if David Lean is stretching things here a bit, this stylization is justified by the psychological and dramatic usefulness of an erotic aura, which serves as a prelude to the heroes' death. The idea is not simply to satisfy the viewer's libido, but to give him relief from the sacrifice of the two young fellows, as if the shadow of this sacrifice were being projected on

this side of life. I think, then, that not only was the screenwriter not wrong to sketch in these love affairs, but he also would have been mistaken not to do so.

The question of the ending is subtler, but it is even more indicative of the inherent requirements of the cinematic image. First, how could you blame a director for identifying with his viewers in deeming it impossible not to destroy a bridge that has cost so much to build? The physical realization of the famous bridge by the filmmakers puts the viewer in a state of mind that is different from the situation that has been created in the imagination of the reader. At the end of the film, the bridge really spans the River Kwai; it is not a studio model. Can it survive the film without thus creating a second absurdity that both rules out the one intended by the script—the blowing up of the bridge—and engulfs the entire work, in the same way that two negative charges cancel each other and in the process destroy electrical current? A choice had to be made: the absurdity either had to be *in* the film or it had, finally, to be the film *itself*. Acting out of instinct, and for reasons that are less than intellectual, the director was right to deem necessary the destruction of the bridge.

I'd even say that he hasn't gone far enough in his infidelity to the book. It is obvious that the screenwriter, the director, or the producer—whoever—has agreed to a concession that his conscience had told him was unworthy of the audacity of this undertaking. In Boulle's novel, Nicholson dies without self-knowledge and the bridge is not blown up. Even in hell, the colonel will be oblivious to the foolishness of his behavior. I think that this ontological perseverance in the absurdity of his being would have been unbearable in the cinema—that is to say, implausible. Alec Guinness's remarkable acting in the long final scene underlines this palpable truth. It is possible for a *writer* to elude psychology for the sake of writing a moral tale: all he has to do is proceed by ellipsis and refrain from describing too precisely the realities that he wants to put into play. But writing about Colonel Nicholson in a novel is one thing; embodying him on film is quite another. One cannot at the same time impose his existence on us, bring us face to face with him, and deny the conclusions that this visible existence finally implies. I myself experienced as a necessity—a physical as well as a psychological one—Nicholson's final flash of lucidity, and I don't at all think that it cancels in

retrospect the absurdity of his actions. At any rate, Nicholson is incorrigible: he can but understand too late, for himself and for the others.

At this point, however, David Lean found himself stuck in a contradiction. As long as (1) the bridge had to be blown up and (2) Nicholson finally realized his foolishness, the only logical conclusion was that the colonel himself had to press the detonator. But this *dénouement* evidently appeared to Lean to be a kind of commercial happy ending, which contradicted

and second, because they are in fact demanded by the additional psychological realism supplied by the image, even though they may appear to soften the impact of Boullé's novel.

* * * * *

Must we therefore conclude that *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is a masterpiece and consider it the ideal in filmmaking? This is not at all the view that my defense of it is intended to foster. But being fair and defining exactly the



the emotional austerity and intellectual rigor of the adaptation at the same time that it increased the infidelity to the novel. This is why he opted in the end for a compromise that adds up to the disadvantages of both concession and implausibility: Nicholson will blow up his bridge, but involuntarily, by dropping dead on the detonator.

I don't believe, then, that one can seriously criticize David Lean's film on the basis of the changes he has made in the book. First, because these changes generally enhance the original,

shortcomings as well as the virtues of such a film is indeed difficult. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is in fact of extraordinarily high quality for the film industry—there are very few examples each year of cinematic enterprises that are carried out with such intelligence and above all with such care. But the quality of this film must ultimately be put in its artistic place, and that place is not the highest.

It has been said that this is an "adult" film, and the adjective is valid if one means by it the rejection of certain conventions in the script or in

David Lean's direction. To judge by its manifest themes, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is simultaneously an adventure film and a war movie. Certainly the latter genre has produced some thoughtful works deserving of praise, but I don't think that any of these contains fewer dramatic conventions than Lean's film. I can especially see an illustration of this point in the final slaughter, which dispatches most of the characters in whom the viewer has taken an interest during the film. Of course, having the hero die is not startlingly original, but such a

sympathy released by the death of the other saboteur, according to a law of emotional compensation that is always respected. Here, to the contrary, we are deprived of each of the two most appealing characters, after their lives have been made even more precious to us by a sentimental love story; and we are left in the sole company of a survivor to whom we are emotionally indifferent: the Englishman in charge of the expedition. To cut a long story short, and to explain the phenomenon in different terms, the script possesses from



death generally occurs only after some preparation, which at the same time foretells it and makes it dramatically necessary. Nothing of the kind here: the death of two of the three saboteurs is simply the logical outgrowth of the immediate situation. These protagonists are made to die without regard for the moral relationships that have been created between them and the audience. It is undeniable that, in any traditional script, at least one of the two saboteurs would have survived, so as to allow the transfer to the survivor of the potential for

beginning to end the same freedom from convention and internal rigor as Boullé's novel.

The rigor of the script is matched and strengthened by the equally rigorous *mise en scène*. By this I mean not that the directing is anything more than precise and conscientious, but that, being shot almost entirely on location, the film rejects the ease and obviousness of the studio: instead, it embraces the complexity and richness of the natural world. This solely photographic attribute gives *The Bridge on the River Kwai* an exceptional tonality. In the end, if

one compares David Lean's intent with his execution, one has to admit, first, that it is indeed unusual when the ambition of a film reaches such a level, but beyond this, that it is even more unusual when there is so little difference between the quality of this ambition and the quality of its realization. In other words, I am happy to report that we have here the best conceivable film that could be made from a certain type of script.

But, then, it is just this script that we must judge. And my judgment tells me that I value far more the artistry of other kinds of film, even if they unfortunately offer few examples of such a perfect equation between ambition and execution. And since this has all been about the adaptation of a novel to film, let me add that we

must naturally prefer Bernanos to Rudyard Kipling, let alone Pierre Boulle, just as we prefer Renoir or Fellini to David Lean.□

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Photos courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Lewis Turco

AN AMHERST PASTORAL

—from lines in Emily Dickinson's letters

Today is very beautiful—
just as bright, just as blue, just as green
and as white and as crimson

as the cherry trees full in bloom,
and the half-opening peach blossoms,
and the grass just as waving,

and the sky and hill and cloud can
make it, if they try. When the west
wind blows, the pines lift their light

leaves and make sweet music. You will
awaken in dust, in the ceaseless
din of the untiring

city. Wouldn't you change your dwelling
for my palace in the dew?

SNOW

I wonder how long he watched me sleeping. I still wonder about that. He sat and he did not wake me to ask about his carry-out order. Did he watch my eyes move as I dreamed? When I finally knew he was there and I turned to look at him I could not make out his whole face at once. His head was turned a little to the side. His beard was neatly trimmed, but the jaw it covered was long and its curve was like a sampan sail and it held my eyes the way a sail always did when I saw one on the sea. Then I raised my eyes and looked at his nose. I am Vietnamese, you know, and we have a different sense of these proportions. Our noses are small and his was long and it also curved, gently, a reminder of his jaw, which I looked at again. His beard was dark gray, like he'd crawled out of a charcoal kiln. I make these comparisons to things from my country and village, but it is only to clearly say what this face was like. It is not that he reminded me of home. That was the farthest thing from my mind when I first saw Mr. Cohen. And I must have stared at him in those first moments with a strange look because when his face turned full to me and I could finally lift my gaze to his eyes, his eyebrows made a little jump like he was asking me, What is it? What's wrong?

I was at this same table before the big window at the front of the restaurant. The "Plantation Hunan" does not look like a restaurant, though. No one would give it a name like that unless it really was an old plantation house. It's very large and full of antiques. It's quiet right now. Not even five, and I can hear the big clock—I had never seen one till I came here. No one in Vietnam has a clock as tall as a man. Time isn't as important as that in Vietnam. But the clock here is very tall and they call it grandfather, which I like, and grandfather is ticking very slowly right now, and he wants me to fall asleep again. But I won't.

This plantation house must feel like a refugee. It is full of foreign smells, ginger and chinese pepper and fried shells for wonton, and there's a motel on one side and a gas station on the other, not like the life the house once knew, though there are very large oak trees surrounding it,

trees that must have been here when this was still a plantation. The house sits on a busy street and the Chinese family who owns it changed it from "Plantation Seafood" into a place that could hire a Vietnamese woman like me to be a waitress. They are very kind, this family, though we know we are different from each other. They are Chinese and I am Vietnamese and they are very kind, but we are both here in Louisiana and they go somewhere with the other Chinese in town—there are four restaurants and two laundries and some people, I think, who work as engineers at the oil refinery. They go off to themselves and they don't seem to even notice where they are.

I was sleeping that day he came in here. It was late afternoon of the day before Christmas. Almost Christmas Eve. I am not a Christian. My mother and I are Buddhist. I live with my mother and she is very sad for me because I am thirty-four years old and I am not married. There are other Vietnamese here in Lake Charles, Louisiana, but we are not a community. We are all too sad, perhaps, or too tired. But maybe not. Maybe that's just me saying that. Maybe the others are real Americans already. My mother has two Vietnamese friends, old women like her, and her two friends look at me with the same sadness in their faces because of what they see as my life. They know that once I might have been married, but the fiancé I had in my town in Vietnam went away in the army and though he is still alive in Vietnam, the last I heard, he is driving a cab in Ho Chi Minh City and he is married to someone else. I never really knew him, and I don't feel any loss. It's just he's the only boy that my mother ever speaks of when she gets frightened for me.

I get frightened for me, too, sometimes, but it's not because I have no husband. That Christmas Eve afternoon I woke slowly. The front tables are for cocktails and for waiting for carry-out, so the chairs are large and stuffed so that they are soft. My head was very comfortable against one of the high wings of the chair and I opened my eyes without moving. The rest of me was still sleeping, but my eyes opened and the sky was still blue, though the

shreds of cloud were turning pink. It looked like a warm sky. And it was. I felt sweat on my throat and I let my eyes move just a little and the live oak in front of the restaurant was quivering—all its leaves were shaking and you might think that it would look cold doing that, but it was a warm wind, I knew. The air was thick and wet, and cutting through the ginger and pepper smell was the fuzzy smell of mildew.

Perhaps it was from my dream but I remembered my first Christmas Eve in America. I slept and woke just like this, in a Chinese restaurant. I was working there. But it was in a distant place, in St. Louis. And I woke to snow. The first snow I had ever seen. It scared me. Many Vietnamese love to see their first snow, but it frightened me in some very deep way that I could not explain, and even remembering that moment—especially as I woke from sleep at the front of another restaurant—frightened me. So I turned my face sharply from the window in the Plantation Hunan and that's when I saw Mr. Cohen.

I stared at those parts of his face, like I said, and maybe this was a way for me to hide from the snow, maybe the strangeness that he saw in my face had to do with the snow. But when his eyebrows jumped and I did not say anything to explain what was going on inside me, I could see him wondering what to do. I could feel him thinking: should I ask her what is wrong or should I just ask her for my carry-out? I am not an especially shy person, but I hoped he would choose to ask for the carry-out. I came to myself with a little jolt and I stood up and faced him—he was sitting in one of the stuffed chairs at the next table. "I'm sorry," I said, trying to turn us both from my dreaming. "Do you have an order?"

He hesitated, his eyes holding fast on my face. These were very dark eyes, as dark as the eyes of any Vietnamese, but turned up to me like this, his face seemed so large that I had trouble taking it in. Then he said, "Yes. For Cohen." His voice was deep, like a movie actor who is playing a grandfather, the kind of voice that if he asked what it was that I had been dreaming I would tell him at once.

But he did not ask anything more. I went off to the kitchen and the order was not ready. I wanted to complain to them. There was no one else in the restaurant, and everyone in the kitchen seemed like they were just hanging around. But I don't make any trouble for

anybody. So I just went back out to Mr. Cohen. He rose when he saw me, even though he surely also saw that I had no carry-out with me.

"It's not ready yet," I said. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay," he said, and he smiled at me, his gray beard opening and showing teeth that were very white.

"I wanted to scold them," I said. "You should not have to wait for a long time on Christmas Eve."

"It's okay," he said. "This is not my holiday."

I tilted my head, not understanding. He tilted his own head just like mine, like he wanted to keep looking straight into my eyes. Then he said, "I am Jewish."

I straightened my head again, and I felt a little pleasure at knowing that his straightening his own head was caused by me. I still didn't understand, exactly, and he clearly read that in my face. He said, "A Jew doesn't celebrate Christmas."

"I thought all Americans celebrated Christmas," I said.

"Not all. Not exactly." He did a little shrug with his shoulders, and his eyebrows rose like the shrug, as he tilted his head to the side once more, for just a second. It all seemed to say, What is there to do, it's the way the world is and I know it and it all makes me just a little bit weary. He said, "We all stay home, but we don't all celebrate."

He said no more, but he looked at me and I was surprised to find that I had no words either on my tongue or in my head. It felt a little strange to see this very American man who was not celebrating the holiday. In Vietnam we never miss a holiday and it did not make a difference if we were Buddhist or Cao Dai or Catholic. I thought of this Mr. Cohen sitting in his room tonight alone while all the other Americans celebrated Christmas Eve. But I had nothing to say and he didn't either and he kept looking at me and I glanced down at my hands twisting at my order book and I didn't even remember taking the book out. So I said, "I'll check on your order again," and I turned and went off to the kitchen and I waited there till the order was done, though I stood over next to the door away from the chatter of the cook and the head waiter and the mother of the owner.

Carrying the white paper bag out to the front I could not help but look inside to see how much food there was. There was enough for two people. So I did not look into Mr. Cohen's eyes as I gave him the food and rang up the order

and took his money. I was counting his change into his palm—his hand, too, was very large—and he said, “You’re not Chinese, are you?”

I said, “No. I am Vietnamese,” but I did not raise my face to him, and he went away.

Two days later, it was even earlier in the day when Mr. Cohen came in. About four-thirty. The grandfather had just chimed the half hour like a man who is really crazy about one subject and talks of it at any chance he gets. I was sitting in my chair at the front once again and my first thought when I saw Mr. Cohen coming through the door was that he would think I am a lazy girl. I started to jump up, but he saw me and he motioned with his hand for me to stay where I was, a single heavy pat in the air, like he’d just laid this large hand of his on the shoulder of an invisible child before him. He said, “I’m early again.”

“I am not a lazy girl,” I said.

“I know you’re not,” he said, and he sat down in the chair across from me.

“How do you know I’m not?” This question just jumped out of me. I can be a cheeky girl sometimes. My mother says that this was one reason I am not married, that this is why she always talks about the boy I was once going to marry in Vietnam, because he was a shy boy, a weak boy, who would take whatever his wife said and not complain. I myself think this is why he is driving a taxi in Ho Chi Minh City. But as soon as this cheeky thing came out of my mouth to Mr. Cohen, I found that I was afraid. I did not want Mr. Cohen to hate me.

But he was smiling. I could even see his white teeth in this smile. He said, “You’re right. I have no proof.”

“I am always sitting here when you come in,” I said, even as I asked myself, Why are you rubbing on this subject?

I saw still more teeth in his smile, then he said, “And the last time you were even sleeping.”

I think at this I must have looked upset, because his smile went away fast. He did not have to help me seem a fool before him. “It’s all right,” he said. “This is a slow time of day. I have trouble staying awake myself. Even in court.”

I looked at him more closely, leaving his face. He seemed very prosperous. He was wearing a suit as gray as his beard, and it had thin blue stripes, almost invisible, running through it. “You are a judge?”

“A lawyer,” he said.

“You will defend me when the owner fires me for sleeping.”

This made Mr. Cohen laugh, but when he stopped, his face was very solemn. He seemed to lean nearer to me, though I was sure he did not move. “You had a bad dream the last time,” he said.

How did I know he would finally come to ask about my dream? I had known it from the first time I’d heard his voice. “Yes,” I said. “I think I was dreaming about the first Christmas Eve I spent in America. I fell asleep before a window in a restaurant in St. Louis, Missouri. When I woke, there was snow on the ground. It was the first snow I’d ever seen. I went to sleep and there was still only a gray afternoon, a thin little rain, like a mist. I had no idea things could change like that. I woke and everything was covered and I was terrified.”

I suddenly sounded to myself like a crazy person. Not just for what I said, but for saying so *many* words about all of this. Mr. Cohen would think I was lazy and crazy both. I stopped speaking and I looked out the window. A jogger went by in the street, a man in shorts and a tee-shirt, and his body glistened with sweat. I felt beads of sweat on my own forehead like little insects crouching there and I kept my eyes outside, wishing now that Mr. Cohen would go away.

“Why did it terrify you?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said, though this wasn’t really true. I’d thought about it now and then, and though I’d never spoken them, I could imagine reasons.

Mr. Cohen said, “Snow frightened me, too, when I was a child. I’d seen it all my life, but it still frightened me.”

I turned to him and now he was looking out the window.

“Why did it frighten you?” I asked, expecting no answer.

But he turned from the window and looked at me and smiled just a little bit, like he was saying that since he had asked this question of me, I could ask him, too. He answered, “It’s rather a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

“Yes,” I said. Of course I did.

“It was far away from here,” he said. “My first home and my second one. Poland and then England. My father was a professor in Warsaw. It was early in 1939. I was eight years old and my father knew something was going wrong. All the talk about the corridor to the sea was just the beginning. He had ears. He knew. So he sent

me and my mother to England. He had good friends there. I left that February and there was snow everywhere and I had my own instincts, even at eight. I cried in the courtyard of our apartment building. I threw myself into the snow there and I would not move. I cried like he was sending us away from him forever. He and my mother said it was only for some months, but I didn't believe it. And I was right. They had to lift me bodily and carry me to the taxi. But the snow was in my clothes, and as we pulled away and I scrambled up to look out the back window at my father, the snow was melting against my skin and I began to shake. It was as much from my fear as from the cold. The snow was telling me he would die. And he did. He waved at me in the street and he grew smaller and we turned a corner and that was the last I saw of him."

Maybe it was foolish of me but I thought not so much of Mr. Cohen losing his father. I had lost a father, too, and I knew that it was something that a child lives through. In Vietnam we believe that our ancestors are always close to us, and I could tell that about Mr. Cohen, that his father was still close to him. But what I thought about was Mr. Cohen going to another place, another country, and living with his mother. I live with my mother, just like that. Even still.

He said, "So the snow was something I was afraid of. Every time it snowed in England I knew that my father was dead. It took a few years for us to learn this from others, but I knew it whenever it snowed."

"You lived with your mother?" I said.

"Yes. In England until after the war and then we came to America. The others from Poland and Hungary and Russia that we traveled with all came in through New York City and stayed there. My mother loved trains and she'd read a book once about New Orleans, and so we stayed on the train and we came to the south. I was glad to be in a place where it almost never snowed."

I was thinking how he was a foreigner, too. Not an American, really. But all the talk about the snow made this little chill behind my thoughts. Maybe I was ready to talk about that. Mr. Cohen had spoken many words to me about his childhood and I didn't want him to think I was a girl who takes things without giving something back. He was looking out the window again, and his lips pinched together so that his mouth disappeared in his beard. He seemed sad to me. So I said, "You know why the

snow scared me in St. Louis?"

He turned at once with a little humph sound and a crease on his forehead between his eyes and then a very strong voice saying, "Tell me," and it felt like he was scolding himself inside for not paying attention to me. I am not a vain girl, always thinking that men pay such serious attention to me that they get mad at themselves for ignoring me even for a few moments. This is what it really felt like and it surprised me. If I was a vain girl, it wouldn't have surprised me. He said it again: "Tell me why it scared you."

I said, "I think it's because the snow came so quietly and everything was underneath it, like this white surface was the real earth and everything had died—all the trees and the grass and the streets and the houses—everything had died and was buried. It was all lost. I knew there was snow above me, on the roof, and I was dead too."

"Your own country was very different," Mr. Cohen said.

It pleased me that he thought just the way I once did. You could tell that he wished there was an easy way to make me feel better, make the dream go away. But I said to him, "This is what I also thought. If I could just go to a warm climate, more like home. So I came down to New Orleans, with my mother, just like you, and then we came over to Lake Charles. And it is something like Vietnam here. The rice fields and the heat and the way the storms come in. But it makes no difference. There's no snow to scare me here, but I still sit alone in this chair in the middle of the afternoon and I sleep and I listen to the grandfather over there ticking."

I stopped talking and I felt like I was making no sense at all, so I said, "I should check on your order."

Mr. Cohen's hand came out over the table. "May I ask your name?"

"I'm Miss Giau," I said.

"Miss Giau?" he asked, and when he did that, he made a different word, since Vietnamese words change with the way your voice sings them.

I laughed. "My name is Giau, with the voice falling. It means 'wealthy' in Vietnamese. When you say the word like a question, you say something very different. You say I am Miss Pout."

Mr. Cohen laughed and there was something in the laugh that made me shiver just a little, like a nice little thing, like maybe stepping into the shower when you are covered with dust and

feeling the water expose you. But in the back of my mind was his carry-out and there was a bad little feeling there, something I wasn't thinking about, but it made me go off now with heavy feet to the kitchen. I got the bag and it was feeling different as I carried it back to the front of the restaurant. I went behind the counter and I put it down and I wished I'd done this a few moments before, but even with his eyes on me I looked into the bag. There was one main dish and one portion of soup.

Then Mr. Cohen said, "Is this a *giau* I see on your face?" And he pronounced the word exactly right, with the curling tone that made it "pout."

I looked up at him and I wanted to smile at how good he said the word, but even wanting to do that made the pout worse. I said, "I was just thinking that your wife must be sick. She is not eating tonight."

He could have laughed at this. But he did not.

He laid his hand for a moment on his beard; he smoothed it down. He said, "The second dinner on Christmas Eve was for my son passing through town. My wife died some years ago and I am not remarried."

I am not a hard-hearted girl because I knew that a child gets over the loss of a father and because I also knew that a man gets over the loss of a wife. I am a good girl, but I did not feel sad for Mr. Cohen. I felt very happy. Because he laid his hand on mine and he asked if he could call me. I said yes, and as it turns out, New Year's Eve seems to be a Jewish holiday. The Vietnamese New Year comes at a different time, but people in Vietnam know to celebrate whatever holiday comes along. So tonight Mr. Cohen and I will go to some restaurant that is not Chinese, and all I have to do now is sit here and listen very carefully to grandfather as he talks to me about time.□

Michael Burns

THE TEACHER

Whatever it was he thought he wanted,
whatever he thought he should have had coming
but had been denied, and all that he had
given up in anger, alcohol, and sighs
began to make a pile inside his door
and stink like the warm skin of a chicken.

He started to see nothing before his eyes.
He read the thin nothingness of pages,
or he considered himself dropping away:
chin, and belly, and knees, as if the ground,
his grave, suctioned, was pulling him down.

Sometimes he caught pale moths in his hand
and held them for a moment, and then let
them go, unable to make a fist.
In the sweat of his palm, they left dust.
He watched them rise, fluttering, and fall.

He talked enough to be overheard.
He fancied people gathered beyond the door
listening, peeking through the window,
and he turned his broad back to them, sat
like an animal at the zoo, refusing
to entertain, who out of spite crawls

further into his cave. Then he had moments
when what mattered most was that perhaps
there was some acting to it, he was doing
it for somebody's sake, and he would let
himself ready a shared smile, push off

a little with one foot, as if he were
a boy again, happy, and he would swivel
his chair around in view of a long hall:
square on square of polished tile, and there
would be no one, absolutely no one there.

THE FUNDAMENTAL UNFINALIZABILITY OF
ABSALOM, ABSALOM!

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin terms Dostoevsky's fiction the polyphonic novel and thus characterizes it:

The plurality of independent and unemerged voices and consciousnesses and the genuine polyphony of full-valued voices are in fact characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. It is not a multitude of characters and fates within a unified objective world, illuminated by the author's unified consciousness that unfolds in his works, but precisely the plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds, which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unemergedness.¹

The same can be said of many of William Faulkner's novels, especially of *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which, as in Dostoevsky's works, instead of "a multitude of characters" silenced by the overwhelming unified voice of the author, we find a group of, in Bakhtin's words, "thinking human consciousnesses," all speaking for themselves. The five narrators, including the anonymous third person narrator, are "equal consciousnesses." None is dominated by others, and none is superior to others in the sense that he discovers the truth of the Sutpen legend, as some critics believe that Quentin does, or that he has the truth all the time, as others hold the third person narrator to have.

In fact, the efforts made to establish the unique position of Quentin and the third person narrator are merely part of the enormous critical campaign to discover a single truth in the novel so as to close it up, to finalize it. This finalizing work is exactly what the Russian critics did to Dostoevsky, ignoring "the fundamental unfinalizability of the polyphonic novel"

(Bakhtin, *Problems* 34). This gigantic critical machinery, informed by the metaphysical tradition, attempts to grind all the contradictions, paradoxes, and conflicts into submission to an imposed unity.

Interestingly, in his essay "Oratory and the Dialogical in *Absalom, Absalom!*," Stephen M. Ross tries to finalize *Absalom, Absalom!* in the name of Bakhtin. While he acknowledges that the novel is polyphonic and dialogical, he says, "All voices are driven inexorably toward one voice."² His essay seems to show that he misunderstands what Bakhtin means by dialogue. Dialogue, for Bakhtin, is essentially the interaction between human consciousnesses. It defines the consciousness and, indeed, is the very condition of human existence. "To be," Bakhtin says, "means to communicate dialogically" (*Problems* 231). Bakhtin repeatedly emphasizes this basic nature of the dialogue in his writings. For Bakhtin any double-voiced word is involved in a dialogical act. A double-voiced word is one in which "another person's voice" is heard, or, in Bakhtin's words, "if the word is perceived . . . as the sign of another person's semantic position, as the representation of another person's utterance, i.e. if we hear in that word another person's voice" (152). Thus, with a double-voiced word, a dialogue takes place, revealing the character's conflict with himself or with his environment and defining his position in relation to other people and to the world. The word may be embedded within a monologue and the monologue may be either internal or external, so long as the word has been, even will be, accented by another consciousness. Bakhtin terms this type of dialogue within the speech the "microdialogue." But, for him, the dialogue is not limited to this

¹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. K. W. Rotsel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973) 4.

²Stephen M. Ross, "Oratory and the Dialogical in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *Intertextuality in Faulkner*, eds. Michel Gresset and Noel Polk (Jackson, Miss.: Univ. of Mississippi Press, 1985) 78.

type. It is also carried on between all "the internal and external parts and elements" of the polyphonic novel. He calls this type the "great dialogue" (34). The "great dialogue" is even "possible between images of various art forms" (153). In fact, it is also possible between points of view and narrations. So, though Bakhtin's critical analysis concentrates more on the "microdialogue," the study of the "great dialogue" may even more enable us to examine and judge at a larger scale the novel as an artistic work. This is particularly true in our study of *Absalom, Absalom!*, for the novel is really more a "great dialogue" between the narrators than a collection of stories they try to tell separately.

Bakhtin also defines what he calls the "double-directed" word: "it is directed both toward the object of speech . . . and toward another word, toward another person's speech" (153). His theory of the double-directed word is also very useful to our discussion of *Absalom, Absalom!*, for the word in each of the narratives in the novel is apparently double-directed: both toward the object of speech, the Sutpen family legend, and toward other narrators.

It is precisely this "double-directedness" of the word in *Absalom, Absalom!* that Ross fails to see. That is why he can assert confidently:

The text's narration, in other words, is always close to what Bakhtin identifies as the boundary between monological and dialogical discourse. Bakhtin describes the tendency, inherent in certain discourse such as stylization or narration by character, to become monological when "the objectification . . . is decreased." That is, when we have discourse such as stylization or character narration and when the differentiation between the stylizer and the stylized, or between the authorial and the character's voices, is blurred, then dialogical differences are reduced so that the speakers merged into one voice.

(81)

Bakhtin classifies stylization and the kind of character narration Ross refers to into the category of single-directed word. But as I have just mentioned, the word in *Absalom, Absalom!* is not single-directed, i.e., not toward the Sutpen story only, but double-directed, for the authorial voice and the narrators' voices are not at all "always close" to each other and the

differentiation between them is almost never blurred. Bakhtin clearly says about stylization: "Having penetrated into another person's word and having made itself at home in it, the author's idea does not collide with the other person's idea, but rather follows the direction of that idea, merely making that direction conditional" (*Problems* 160). It would be incorrect to allege that Faulkner's voice merely merges into, for example, Rosa Coldfield's voice, and does not collide with her idea but, instead, follows its direction!

At the heart of Bakhtin's dialogism is the speaking person. The world of the polyphonic novel is inhabited by the "full-fledged subjects, not objects" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 5). If the characters in a novel are merely objects played about by the author like the pieces on the chess board, the novel cannot be a polyphonic novel. It is not dialogical but monological. This is exactly how Ross takes the characters in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In fact Ross could merge all the voices in the novel into an "overvoice" only because he treats these voices merely as "masking voices." To finalize the novel, he has finalized its characters. He not only ignores the inner conflicts of the narrators and the contradictions between them but sacrifices their very right to be human beings and turns them into objects, into masks.

The attempt to finalize in this way the character in *Absalom, Absalom!* is carried to extreme by Nancy Blake in her essay "Creation and Procreation," when she tries to prove her "working hypothesis . . . that all these narrators are simply mouthpieces for a voice that is unique, singular, and indivisible."³

Another finalizing effort was fathered in part by Faulkner himself, not Faulkner the author of *Absalom, Absalom!*, but Faulkner the critic of the novel. This effort is to find the single truth of the novel. Faulkner says, "You look at it [truth] and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. . . . It would have taken perhaps a wiser or more tolerant or more sensitive or more thoughtful person to see him [Sutpen] as he was. It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird."⁴ This

³Nancy Blake, "Creation and Procreation: The Voice and the Name, or Biblical Intertextuality in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *Intertextuality in Faulkner* 130.

⁴William Faulkner, *Faulkner in the University*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, Va.: The Univ. of Virginia Press, 1959) 273-74.

statement has been frequently quoted to support this kind of finalization. At the bottom of this saying lies the key belief: truth is single. All the viewers are looking at the same truth and each sees only "one phase of it." Accordingly, what we have in this novel is "four gospels," all preaching the same Word.⁵ This belief in a single truth is actually a disguised form of metaphysics, which attempts to join all consciousnesses into a universal consciousness. It puts characters from "different worlds" "within one field of vision" (Bakhtin, *Problems* 12) and replaces the coexistence of these "full-fledged consciousnesses" with the "unity of consciousness." Bakhtin observes,

The unity of consciousness, which replaces the unity of existence, is inevitably transformed into the unity of a *single* consciousness; it makes no difference what metaphysical form it takes: "consciousness in general," "the absolute I," "the absolute spirit," "the normative consciousness," etc. . . . Everything that is essential and true in those consciousnesses becomes part of the unified context of "consciousness in general" and is deprived of its individuality.

(65)

In Bakhtin's criticism of metaphysics, we hear the voice of the post-structuralist.

The post-structuralist sets as his task to decenter the world, to deconstruct whatever claims to be the center that privileges itself to hold the world together, be it God, or "the absolute spirit," or in literature the prestigious organic unity that digests contradictions and conflicts a work may have. Nothing is absolute. Any presence in a literary work, as Derrida shows in his essay "Difference," is spatially different from what it is not and temporally deferred from what it aims to be. The difference is infinite and deferral endless. So absence and failure are the condition of presence; and contradictions inevitably appear in a work and should not be explained away or ignored but carefully studied, for meanings are often produced in such places. "The tactic of deconstructive criticism," Terry Eagleton summarizes, "is to show how texts come to embarrass their own ruling systems of logic; and

deconstruction shows this by fastening on the 'symptomatic' points, the *aporia* or impasses of meaning, where texts get into trouble, come unstuck, offer to contradict themselves."⁶

In spite of their differences, dialogism and post-structuralism are akin in spirit in their celebration of plurality. Working together they can reenforce each other. This paper is, to a certain extent, an attempt to combine the two approaches in discussing the "fundamental unfinalizability" of *Absalom, Absalom!*. As the discussion above may have shown, of the various ways of finalizing a novel two are the most common. The first is to finalize the characters, ignoring their complexities and conflicts and putting them in "the field of same vision." The other is thematic finalization, using a single idea or theme to embrace the entire book. In dealing with *Absalom, Absalom!*, the first strategy is concerned with the character-narrators, the second with their narratives, or the Sutpen legend as narrated by them. So it is from these two aspects that I am going to demonstrate that *Absalom, Absalom!* has made these attempts doomed to failure.

The Sutpen legend actually consists of no more than some fragments, some "mouth-to-mouth tales."⁷ On the foreground is a group of narrators busily weaving or reweaving the legend according to their own designs to interpret, to make sense of its fragments. They play a central role in the making of the novel. Like the baton in a relay race, the Sutpen story is passed from mouth to mouth. But unlike it in a relay, the succeeding narration is not at all a mere development upon its forerunner. It changes, contradicts, and adds to what has been said and even what will be said. Each of the narrators tries to establish himself as the "semantic authority" and, at the same time, tries to upset others' authority; thus they all enter into a dialogical cross-swords, which leaves none of them semantically authoritative and none of them entitled to have the final say.

Furthermore, in their narrating the legend, in their contradicting each other, the narrators often say more about themselves than about the Sutpen family. We may say that the fragments of

⁶Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983) 133-34.

⁷William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) 100. All page references to the novel are to this edition.

⁵Virginia V. Hlavsa, "The Vision of the Advocate in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *Novel* 8.1 (Fall 1974): 70.

the Sutpen legend are a set of signifiers without definite meanings in and by themselves. They only acquire meaning in the discourse of each particular narrator and in the dialogue between them. The narrator projects himself into the story and tries to give it a meaning. In doing so, he reveals his own ideas, emotions, and conflicts, which, as in Browning's dramatic monologue, turn out to be the signifiers. Reading their narratives, we strongly feel the complexities of these narrators. They are speaking subjects with ideas and feelings, joys and sorrows, loves and hatred distinctly of their own, different from each other.

However, exactly because they are "speaking subjects," they are the first group of people who attempt to finalize the Sutpen story, to impose on it their "decorous ordering." *Absalom, Absalom!* begins with what Olga Vickery calls Rosa's "Gothic thriller" in "a dim hot airless room with blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three years" (*Absalom* 7).⁸ In a Gothic romance, the characters tend to be types embodying the qualities either of the demon or the angel, and the dominant theme is always the eternal struggle between good and evil, which informs all the events in the novel. Rosa employs the Gothic machinery to demonize Sutpen. She never uses his name; instead she calls him "ogre," "demon," "fiend blackguard and devil," "evil's source and head," who "heaven cannot and hell dare not, have" (172).

However, in Rosa's Gothic thriller we find some factors work overly and covertly against her demonization. The first damage is done by her linguistic extravagance, of which her narration gives ample examples. Her poetic diction and sweeping syntax, charged with emotion, ironically turn out to distance Quentin, her listener, and caution the reader. What she says frequently undercuts what she means. This irony underlies her narration throughout.

Another factor that definalizes Rosa's narrative is Quentin's reaction to it. Quentin is an extremely complicated character. While pretending a superficial passivity by occasionally answering "Yessum" or "No'me," he is often either not listening or is carrying on a secret dialogue with Rosa or with himself, commenting on Rosa's narration and contradicting or retorting to it. Besides Quentin's

reaction, parts of Mr. Compson's narrative are taken across time and space to be sandwiched with Rosa's narrative so as to comment on it.

With these definalizing devices, Rosa's demonization is seriously damaged, but the most serious damage comes from the revelation of her own inner world, her own nature as an ideological and emotional complex. As a matter of fact, by demonizing Sutpen, ironically, Rosa is finalizing herself in outrage and hatred. To demonize Sutpen, she has to continuously repress her other side, which both admires and desires Sutpen. It is this repression that makes her demonization possible. On the other hand, the failure to silence the voice of her other side will inevitably bring the downfall of her demonization. In her long Browning-type monologue in Chapter Five, which reveals more her inner world than the "evil" nature of Sutpen, the voice of her repressed side becomes louder and louder and, for a time, drowns out the usually overwhelming voice of her consciousness dominated by conventions and her carefully nurtured forty-three year hatred for Sutpen. This monologue is by nature carnivalesque in that "carnival," in Bakhtin's words, "celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order."⁹ In the process of her monologue, her governing conventions, her established ideological order, and her dominant emotions are, step by step, "uncrowned" and her long repressed side is temporarily liberated like the oppressed people at a carnival feast.

In her narration Rosa reveals herself to be convention bound. One important charge she holds against Sutpen is that he has no "name," no "past." With contempt she repeatedly says, "He wasn't a gentleman. He wasn't even a gentleman. He came here with a horse and two pistols and a name which nobody ever heard before" (14). Throughout her narration we always hear in her the voice of convention or the public opinion either true or imagined by her. Her monologue begins with "they will have told you doubtlessly already" (134), and she uses this sentence over and over during the monologue, which finally ends with the long paragraph (168-72) that consists of a series of sentences mostly introduced by "they will have told you" or "they will tell you." This shows that, though she almost lives an isolated life, how greatly she

⁸Olga Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1964) 87.

⁹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984) 10.

cares about the public opinion. This conventional element is most dramatically revealed and, for a time, collapses in her confrontation at Sutpen's Hundred with Clytie, who calls her "Rosa."

"Rosa?" I cried. "To my face?" Then she touched me, and then I stooped dead. . . . I knew only that my entire being seemed to run at blind full tilt into something monstrous and immobile, with a shocking impact too often and too quick to be mere amazement and outrage at that black arresting and untimorous hand on my white woman's flesh.

(139)

Since her early childhood Rosa's mind has been poisoned by racism and class prejudices, which are the core of her conventionality. Now when Clytie touches her, she sees the "fall of all the eggshell shibboleth of caste and color" (139) and feels the threat to her essential being, her "central I-Am's private own" (139). She falls into a mental chaos, which produces a most poetic dreamy passage, revealing both her inner confusion and her pitiable state.

With her touch Clytie forces her humanity upon Rosa and compels her to recognize it. Rosa cries, "And you too? And you too, sister, sister?" (139). By recognizing her "kinship" to Clytie, Rosa also comes to feel her own humanity, thus momentarily toppling over her ideological hierarchy and paving the way for her to speak aloud her love for Bon and desire for Sutpen. Many critics, following Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve, have tried to finalize Rosa in the image of a bitter, outraged "old dame" filled with hatred. As Linda Kauffman points out, "Rosa is a text they all misread."¹⁰ They all ignore her human side, her complex feelings, her "root and urge" (*Absalom* 144).

However, the voice of her "root and urge" does not appear only after her confrontation with Clytie. Unconsciously she frequently lets the voice break loose. At the very beginning of her monologue, when she narrates her ride to Sutpen's Hundred, with one breath she uses the word "brute" six times to refer to Wash Jones, who kills Sutpen (134). In this passage, we hear two voices, one of her consciousness which

condemns Sutpen's "devil's fate," the other of her unconsciousness which hates Wash for killing Sutpen. While openly regarding Wash as the "instrument of that justice which presides over human events," she repeatedly calls him "brute" (134). Significantly we soon find Rosa betrays herself in depicting Wash not at all as a brute, for he even "could not permit himself to force the mule" that "aint had a decent bait of vittles since the corn give out in February" (135). In her repeated use of "brute," we can hear her unconscious voice of anger against Wash for killing the man she actually desires, the only man who could have possibly met the needs of her warped womanhood.

Rosa has never enjoyed love or family warmth. Instead she had "that warped and spartan solitude" as her childhood (140). She was "a small plain frightened creature whom neither man nor woman had ever looked at twice" (141). Even so, her human desire and longings still exist:

But root and urge I do insist and claim, for had I not heired too from all the unsistered Eves since the Snake? Yes, urge I do: warped chrysalis of what blind perfect seed: for who shall say what gnarled forgotten root might not bloom yet with some globed concentrate more globed and concentrate and heady-perfect because the neglected root was planted warped and lay out dead but merely slept forgot?

(144)

Here we hear the painful and open protest of the neglected and repressed voice. This voice is entirely different from that frenzied demonizing one. At the right time the "gnarled forgotten root" may bloom and the "blind perfect seed" may wake up. Charles Bon, Judith's lover, awakens her desire for love. But her vicarious love is doomed to frustration. Then in the most pathetic, most moving passages of her monologue, we hear two voices debate on whether she loves Bon or not. One voice tries to deny her love, and the other retorts and always has the final say. The first voice says that she "had learned nothing of love, not even parents' love" (146). The second protests: "Dont talk to me of love but let me tell you, who knows already more of love than you will ever know or need" (148). But the first one says that it was "not as woman's love. Because I asked nothing of him, you see. And more than that: I gave him

¹⁰Linda Kauffman, "Devious Channels of Decorous Ordering: A Lover's Discourse in *Absalom, Absalom!*," *MFS* 29.2 (Summer 1983): 186.

nothing, which is the sum of loving" (147). The other answers that she does give him love, secretly adding to Judith's love for him: "Here, take this too. You [Judith] cannot love him as he should be loved . . . when he will find this atom's particle . . . and pause and say, 'where did this come from?': you need only answer, 'I don't know'" (149). Thus she not only gives, but gives without letting the receiver know that she is the giver. The first voice says over and over that "I never saw him" to deny her love (146, 147, 150, 151). The second retorts, "There are some things which happen to us which the intelligence and the senses refuse just as the stomach sometimes refuses what the palate has accepted but which digestion cannot compass" (151). Love sometimes lies beyond rational explanation and needs no proof by the senses. After reading this inner monologue, it is a wonder that critics could still regard Rosa as a "bodiless image."

The revelation of Rosa's long repressed humanity prepares her for her open confession of her desire for Sutpen, in which she "slew" his "ogre" image. With Sutpen, for once in her life, she comes close to tasting love. However, Sutpen's outrageous proposal smashes her illusion, leaving her nothing but "the death of hope and love" (168). Significantly, after narrating the "proposal," Rosa does not pour out a torrent of anger and hatred against Sutpen. Instead the three-page paragraph is mostly a lengthy dialogue between two voices in her, one representing the public opinion and the other herself. Two points in this dialogue are worth special attention. One is the sudden silence of the voice of her desire for love, which has almost been dominant for some time. The silence may really symbolize "the death of hope and love." The other is that Rosa's mind is wholly engaged in arguing against the community represented by "they" and in justifying herself. The voice of the community repeatedly says, "Rosa Coldfield, lose him, weep him" (168, 170, 171). Rosa uses various reasons from her pitiable childhood to the War to defend herself. When she fails to dismiss the other voice, she tries to dismiss Sutpen and his insult with half-false, half-genuine contempt, in the following part of the dialogue:

Rosie Coldfield, lose him, weep him: caught a beau but couldn't keep him, . . . found a beau and was insulted, something heard and not forgiven. . . . But I forgave him, . . . I

did. Why shouldn't I? I had nothing to forgive, I had not lost him because I never owned him: a certain segment of rotten mud walked into my life, spoke that to me . . . and then walked out: that was all.
(171)

Until this moment, she has largely kept Sutpen outside her argument. This strange absence of Sutpen in her argument may demonstrate that her mind is more concerned with the public opinion than with Sutpen. But it also indicates that Rosa is bewildered by her confused feelings for Sutpen. She has just expressed her desire for him, slain his ogre image, and caught a glimpse of that "sudden over-burst of light" on his face (163). So she is confused and feels uncertain how to deal with him in her argument. In either case, the absence of Sutpen goes against her demonization. Her complicated attitude toward Sutpen is a product of a sophisticated mind manipulated by a mixture of feelings of admiration and contempt, desire and hatred, outrage and impotence, vanity and self-pity, longing and loss.

When Rosa finds that she cannot dismiss Sutpen with contempt, she utterly excludes him from this world, replacing his "fallible mortal" nature with a demonic one:

. . . he was not articulated in this world. He was a walking shadow. He was the light-blinded bat-like image of his own torment cast by the fierce demoniac lantern up from beneath: from abysmal and chaotic dark. . . .

(171)

Obviously, this mental state of Rosa is just like what she starts her narration with in Chapter One. Her debate with "they" at the end of her monologue is in fact a summary of her forty-three years of inner battles.

Thus Rosa's narration moves in a sort of circle. After a temporary liberation of her repressed self, she returns to her demonization of Sutpen. It is there that Mr. Compson picks up the baton. Obviously Mr. Compson has Rosa's narrative in mind when he tells the Sutpen story, just as Miss Rosa, in her narration, has the community, certainly including Mr. Compson, in her mind. His narration is double-directed: toward both the Sutpen story and Rosa. It is also potentially directed toward Quentin and Shreve. Mr. Compson carefully designs his strategy to

undermine Rosa's demonization. His narrative is engaged in what Bakhtin calls a "great dialogue" with Rosa. His strategy proceeds in four steps. First, instead of recapitulating the Sutpen story as Rosa tends to do, he allows us a direct look at Sutpen the person and, by doing so, depicts for us almost a hero rather than a demon. Second, he exposes the conventionality of the community which rejects Sutpen and of which Rosa is both a product and a victim. Third, he narrates Rosa's personal background which, he believes, has shaped her prejudice against Sutpen. Finally, when he thinks that he has finished with Rosa, he lets his imagination go free and creates events to fill up the gaps in the Sutpen legend to explain its tragic failure and to discover its meaning. Thus his narration, as Rosa's in a different way, reveals his sophisticated mind. His disillusion with the present world is mixed with his strong nostalgia for the past; his learning of Greek classics strengthens his fatalistic view of the Sutpen tragedy and of the destruction of the Old South.

While Rosa's narration begins in a Gothic setting, Mr. Compson's starts in a romantic scene:

It was a summer of wistaria. The twilight was full of it and of the smell of his [Quentin's] father's cigar as they sat on the front gallery after supper . . . while in the deep shaggy lawn below the veranda the fireflies blew and drifted in soft random—the odor, the scent. . .

(31)

The image of wistaria in the novel is often associated with the characters' nostalgic feelings for the past. As Rosa's Gothic setting prepares the reader for a horror story, this scene promises a romance. These settings, elements of their own established genres, are engaged in a dialogical relationship, as Bakhtin says that literary elements and art genres generally are in the novel. The languages of different genres bring different artistic forces and values into the novel and make its language "heterogeneous." These centrifugal forces carry on a "great dialogue" and increase the "fundamental unfinalizability" of the polyphonic novel. In *Absalom, Absalom!* we have so great a variety of literary elements and genres, such as the Gothic, the lyric, the pastoral, the romance, the tragic, the comic, the melodramatic, the classic, and the epistolary, that they deserve a separate effort to do them

justice.

Contrary to Rosa's dark wrestling scene in which we first see Sutpen closely, Mr. Compson lets us watch Sutpen first in a comic event. With half of the town's people "accompanying" him headed by the committee intending to arrest him, Sutpen marches across the town with a bundle of flowers to make his engagement to Ellen Coldfield. This carnivalesque scene, as a carnival always does, familiarizes us with the hero and does serious damage to Rosa's demonization. Indeed, throughout the novel, any close look at Sutpen reveals him to be more human than the narrators intend to present him to be.

This scene, through its comic contrast between Sutpen's calmness and unwavering resoluteness and the committee's uncertainty and hesitation, dramatically adds to Sutpen's heroic stature. Sutpen is made a "crowed" hero and the committee and their large following are made buffoons of a carnival. In narrating the scene, Mr. Compson expresses his admiration for the hero of the old times which still possessed what he calls the "old virtues," such as courage, strength, and will power. At the same time, it also shows his contempt for the conventionality of the town, which provokes people to reject Sutpen when it fails to digest the "intruder."

Mr. Compson singles out the Coldfields, especially Rosa's aunt, as the representatives of conventions. They are filled with hatred, fear, and contempt for Sutpen. "Miss Rosa," he tells Quentin, "merely mirrored her parents' attitude toward the son-in-law (59). The aunt, "with the blind irrational fury of a shedding snake" (60), brings up Rosa to hate the "ogre" and "the entire male principle" (60). Mr. Compson's portrayal of the conventionality, bitterness, and hatred of the Coldfields is shrewdly designed to undercut Rosa's narration. Mr. Compson's intention to undo her is well implied in the following passage:

What she saw then was just the ogre-face of her childhood seen once and then repeated at intervals and on occasions which she would neither count nor recall, like the mask in Greek tragedy interchangeable not only from scene to scene, but from actor to actor and behind which the events and occasions took place without chronology or sequence . . . walking or sleeping, the aunt had taught her to see nothing else.

(62)

His use of "ogre" is what Bakhtin calls parody. In the word "ogre-face" we hear distinctly the voice of Rosa. Mr. Compson retorts against her by implying that the "ogre" image is in fact no more than "the mask in Greek tragedy," which really has nothing to do with the actor behind. Even this mask, Mr. Compson insists, is actually painted by years' tutoring from that "shedding snake."

Having thus dealt with Rosa, Mr. Compson proceeds to build his own version of the Sutpen legend. He centers his construction on Sutpen's innocence" and the Henry-Bon-Judith triangle. The former I will discuss later. The triangle is largely Mr. Compson's invention as part of his design to explain the Sutpen mystery. His interest in incest and homosexuality, his sympathy, and his sentimentality brought into his creation reveal the complicated nature of the contradiction between his puritanical obsession with sin and his humanistic attitude toward love and human feelings. In narrating the tragedy of the triangle he expresses to the full his fatalism and pessimism.

Between Henry and Bon, Mr. Compson's sympathy apparently leans toward the puritanical Henry. He calls Bon the "seducer," "dark tempter," and insists that Bon "was at least an intending bigamist even if not an out and out blackguard" (90). Consciously or unconsciously, he blames Bon for the fall of Sutpen's Hundred. For the emergence of the "dark tempter" virtually puts an end to Sutpen's dynastic dream, which appeals immensely to Mr. Compson with grandiosity and heroism. His critical attitude toward Bon is in part one more blow dealt at Rosa, for whom Bon is an idol of worship. But more importantly his putting down of Bon serves to explain Sutpen's rejection of him.

At the heart of the Henry-Bon-Judith triangle and, indeed, at the heart of the Sutpen mystery lies Sutpen's rejection of Bon. All the narrators attempt to solve the mystery except Rosa, who sees no "rhyme or reason or shadow of excuse" in it (18). Her very refusal to attempt any explanation is part of her demonization. By contrast, Mr. Compson's explanation is to "undemonize" Sutpen. Though he certainly knows that Sutpen is always concerned with his "design," readers may notice Mr. Compson's queer silence on the part that design may have played in rejecting Bon. Instead, he works over and again on Henry's puritanical mind and on the "unovercomeable" obstacle of Bon's

wedding ceremony with the octoroon, though he later admits that "even to the unworldly Henry, let alone the more travelled father, the existence of the eighth part negro mistress and the sixteenth part negro son . . . was as much a part of a wealthy young New Orleansian's social and fashionable equipment as his dancing sleepers" (100). By bringing in the ceremony as the reason for Sutpen's rejection of Bon and by remaining silent on the role the design plays in the rejection, he is virtually hiding the inhumanity of Sutpen's design, which is to use human beings as instruments to build a dynastic plantation comparable to the one from which Sutpen was turned away when he was a boy.

If Miss Rosa and Mr. Compson reveal their ideological and emotional complex in their narrations, Quentin does so even more in his. The overwhelming presence of the past with its innate contradiction between good and evil causes a split in his mind. From the very beginning of the novel, two voices are debating within him. Later when he comes to continue the relay, there is an open split. Some critics have noticed the doubling in *Absalom, Absalom!*. John T. Irwin gives a valuable exploration of doubling in Faulkner's novels in his influential work *Doubling and Incest*, in which he gives an insightful study of the doubling between Henry and Bon. But he does not, as does no other critic to my knowledge, see that the most significant doubling in the novel is between Quentin and Shreve.

Doubling is an important feature in modern literature. It is essentially a result from, and a clue to, the psychological aberration of the character, such as incest, extreme narcissism, homosexuality, and alienation. These factors cause a split between the dominant norm of the consciousness, or the ego, and its opposite, or what Bakhtin calls the "'man' in man," which is the double (*Problems* 213). The relationship between the ego and its double is ambivalent. Irwin points out that "ambivalence is central to the fully developed figure of the double in that the double in its final form is at once the image of the beloved ego and the image of the feared and hated dissolution of the ego. . . .¹¹ So doubling is a mixture of sameness and difference.

The sameness is obvious between Quentin

¹¹John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975) 66.

and Shreve. Many passages suggest that the two narrators may be actually one: "both thinking as one, the voice which happens to be speaking the thought only the thinking become audible, vocal" (303); and "it did not matter to either of them which one did the talking" (316). Besides, there are some more subtle ways that demonstrate the sameness between the two narrators. One is to depict a scene or event in their joined consciousness. The long section, in which Sutpen plays his "trump," is a good example (351-58).

More important than sameness in doubling is the difference, or the inner conflict, between the ego and its double. For without inner conflict, there would be no doubling at all. Bakhtin points out that "the inner conflict is dramatized" in doubling (*Problems* 179). Doubling is a dramatical way of portraying the complexity, pain, and mental conflict of the character.

Immediately after the novel begins, we see the split in Quentin:

two separate Quentins now—the Quentin Compson preparing for Harvard. . . . Listening, having to listen, to one of the ghosts . . . and Quentin Compson who was still too young to deserve yet to be a ghost, but nevertheless having to be one for all that, since he was born and bred in the deep South the same as she [Rosa] was—the two separate Quentins now talking to one another. . . .

(9)

The first Quentin is the dissolution of the second. He wants to detach himself, to run away, from the South. The second is a born ghost. Their dialogue dramatically reveals their different attitudes toward the southern past and the inner pains of Quentin.

Bakhtin says of the dialogue between Ivan and the devil (Ivan's double) in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*: "The difference between Ivan's words and the devil's replies is not one of content, but merely one of tone. But this change of accent alters their whole ultimate meaning" (*Problems* 185). The same is also true of the dialogue between the two Quentins. The Harvard Quentin's tone is detached and ironical and the ghost Quentin's emotional and painful. The ghost Quentin intuitively understands better Rosa's meaning and feelings. He corrects the other Quentin and points out that Rosa, in spite of her hatred of the "demon," actually

regrets Sutpen's death. This is proved by her monologue. More significantly, the ghost Quentin admits that he himself also regrets Sutpen's death, thus showing his emotional attachment to the past. Between the emotional and ironical voices obviously lies Quentin's dilemma: he is emotionally attached to the past but rationally unable to accept it for its inhuman qualities. The ghost Quentin is later Quentin the emotional narrator, who primarily narrates Sutpen's early life and gives "the most compassionate portrayal of Sutpen in the novel."¹² On the other hand, the Harvard Quentin turns into the ironical Shreve, who, through his creative narration, condemns the inhumanity of the Old South built upon slavery.

So it is not accidental that the first words Shreve ever says in the novel are actually to point out in an ironical tone Quentin's "kinship" to Rosa: "You mean she was no kin to you, no kin to you at all, that there was actually one Southern Bayard or Guinevere who was no kin to you? then what did she die for?" (174). Despite Quentin's protest he constantly alludes to this kinship, in fact Quentin's southern heritage, by insisting on using "Aunt Rosa" rather than "Miss Rosa." Their different attitude toward the southeast past is also displayed in their different ways of addressing Sutpen. When Quentin narrates the Sutpen story to Shreve, he never uses the word "demon," but "he," "Sutpen," even "Colonel Sutpen." On the other hand, Shreve uses "demon" and "ogre" almost throughout. Of course, Shreve does not mean the same as Rosa does in calling Sutpen a demon. Shreve's "demon" is a parody. It carries a rational criticism of the cruelty of the Old South. However, it is different from Mr. Compson's parody, which is a criticism of Rosa.

Shreve's criticism of the southern past is fully expressed in his creation of Bon the character. Just as Mr. Compson sets out to undermine Rosa's narration, Shreve now starts to undermine Mr. Compson's. Mr. Compson's portrayal of Bon as a corrupter is part of his design to better Sutpen's image, whereas Shreve's creation, in which Bon is endowed with full humanity, aims to ruin Mr. Compson's effort. Where Mr. Compson depicts Bon as a "seducer," "bigamist," and "blackguard," Shreve describes him as a "tragic Lancelot" pitifully seeking for parental recognition. Where

¹²Terrence Doody, *Confession and Community in the Novel* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980) 175.

Mr. Compson uses "the photograph of the other woman and the child" (*Absalom* 90) as the evidence of Bon's being "at least an intending bigamist," Shreve contradicts him and gives Bon's humane image a most moving stroke by imagining Bon to use the picture as a message to Judith, "I was no good, do not grieve for me" (359). Curiously, Shreve, the usually ironical narrator, becomes the most sentimental one in the novel when he comes to create Bon's story. To endow Bon with full humanity, he lets his imagination and sentimentality almost go wild. He imagines that when Henry thought Bon was waiting for Judith's letter, Bon was actually waiting for Sutpen's gesture of acknowledgement:

He would just have to write "I am your father. Burn this" and I would do it. Or if not that, a sheet, a scrap of paper with the one word "Charles" in his hand, I would know what he meant and he would not even have to ask me to burn it. Or a lock of his hair or a pairing from his finger nail and I would know them because I believe now that I have known what his hair and his finger nails would look like all my life, could choose that lock and that pairing out of a thousand.

(326)

Shreve thus goes on pages and pages to present Bon's longings for Sutpen's recognition and his despair for not getting it.

Apparently the moving figure of Bon thus created is in sharp contrast to the cold, cruel, and inhuman character of Sutpen. Sutpen's rejection of Bon in Shreve's version is by itself virtually a negation of Mr. Compson's tragic hero of Sutpen. Therefore Shreve's sentimentality, an artistic device in fact, is an ironical comment on Mr. Compson's genuine sentimentality for the past. What Shreve, the ironical double of Quentin, is doing here is to carry on a "great dialogue" with Mr. Compson and to expose the inhumanity of the Old South embodied in Sutpen and his design, a task Quentin himself cannot bear to perform.

The above discussion of the narrators has partly been intended to demonstrate their complexities as revealed in their life experiences, ideas, emotions, and inner conflicts. With their complexities as living human beings, it is impossible to finalize them. Besides, the "great dialogues" they are engaged in show that they

live in "different worlds" with different world views. They bring in their own views and feelings in their narrations and contradict each other. It is both impossible and harmful to finalize these narratives under a single meaning or theme. Can we finalize each of these narratives? Indeed I have suggested that each narrator has a design in his reconstruction of the Sutpen story. Miss Rosa demonizes Sutpen. Mr. Compson attempts to create a tragic hero of him. Quentin's case is more complicated because of his mind split. His narration in Chapter Seven is largely a retelling of Sutpen's life. On the other hand, the implication and significance of his discovery, or conjecture, of the crucial "facts" of Bon's parentage and black blood is fully explored by his double, Shreve, who accordingly creates an inhuman figure of Sutpen. However such finalization of each of the narratives is impossible too, for the contradictions within each narrative frequently undermines the narrator's efforts.

Miss Rosa's design is most self-evident: to demonize Sutpen. But she leaves along the path of her narration a series of "symptomatic spots" that embarrass her demonization. Often she cannot help showing her admiration for Sutpen. In her eyes he "possessed . . . the stature and shape of a hero . . . with nothing to face what the future held for the South but his bare hands and the sword which he at least had never surrendered" (19). More significantly, instead of presenting factual events to illustrate Sutpen's demonic nature, she is habitually inclined to summarize them with the tendency of abstraction, and seldom lets us get close enough to see him clearly. Her abstraction inevitably weakens her demonization. Besides, whenever she lets us get close to Sutpen, we find him not so demonic.

More significantly, when Rosa's long repressed humanity was temporarily liberated, she consciously "slew" Sutpen's ogre image: "I did more than just forgive: I slew it . . . villain true enough, but a mortal fallible one less to invoke fear than pity: but no ogre" (167). This is the most significant confession of Rosa about Sutpen. Perhaps this judgment—a "mortal fallible" man—comes closest to what Sutpen really is. The recognition of Sutpen as, though a villain, a mortal human being topples over her demonization. A bit earlier, just before Sutpen proposes to marry her, she catches a glimpse of his humanity in a flash of light in his face: Sutpen "standing there in the path looking at me

with something curious and strange in his face . . . it was not love; I do not say that, not gentleness or pity: just a sudden overburst of light, illumination. . . . But it was not love, I do not claim that" (163). Her repeated denial of the "light" as an expression of love sounds very much like her denial of her love for Bon. In her denial we hear the same kind of dialogue discussed above. That "light" may not be an expression of love, however it is certainly a revelation of his human feelings, of something close to "gentleness" and "pity."

Trivial as all these symptoms may appear, they are fatal to Rosa's demonizing efforts. But Rosa's demonization is not what most critics chiefly appeal to for finalizing Sutpen and his legend. They turn to the myth of Sutpen's "innocence." Sutpen's innocence lies at the heart of the novel, for Mr. Compson, Quentin, and Shreve to different degrees and for different purposes accept this myth and base on it their interpretations of the legend. Cleanth Brooks is the champion of these critics. For him Sutpen is a completely amoral figure. He alleges that "there is no question that he [Faulkner] sees in Sutpen's innocence what Yeats called the 'murderous innocence of the sea.'"¹³ He further explains what is meant by this "murderous innocence": "The storm-tossed Atlantic is murderous in its destructive power, but ironically, innocent too, for there is no moral implication, no choice, no sense of guilt, merely the play of natural forces" (196). So Sutpen is as innocent as nature, has no conscience, no moral insight, no sense of guilt, no human feelings, living completely beyond the bounds of morality. His amorality, his innocence, is what critics generally turn to for explanation of his callousness, cruelty, and inhumanity and for understanding of the novel. But this is a misinterpretation of both Sutpen and the book.

The myth of Sutpen's innocence is first created by General Compson, who builds this myth around Sutpen's "boy symbol." What he does is to keep the boy Sutpen innocent till that critical moment when he is rejected. The blow imprisons his innocence in him forever and the innocence prevents him from gaining any moral insight and freezes him in amorality.

But the fact is that Sutpen did not suddenly "fall" into the world. To begin with, the West Virginia mountains were not a paradise; for

instance, the Indians were not treated as equals, "you only looked down at them over your rifle sight" (*Absalom* 221). Secondly, the eastward travel of the Sutpens was "weeks or months or a year" (224), and on their way they saw the sharp contrast between the rich and poor, master and slave, and Sutpen "learned the difference not only between white men and black ones, but he was learning that there was a difference between white men and white men" (226). Besides, the family had been settled down for at least over a year before Sutpen left for good. During this time his family and himself lived in poverty and saw and experienced plenty of social injustice. He saw his sister knocked down by proud wheels and the carriage did not even stop (231). Also during this time he began to nurture his desire to become rich.

All this may show that Sutpen's recognition of the social difference is a gradual process. It is nothing but a myth that the front door rejection all of a sudden freezes his innocence in him forever. In fact, the rejection is only the last straw which drives him to act to materialize what has always been in his mind: to build up a "dynasty," to compete with the world. Since then he has completely devoted himself to bringing about his design with a single-mindedness that ignores whatever is unrelated to it and puts aside whatever is in the way. It is this single-minded devotion that General Compson and the narrators and critics after him mistake for innocence or amorality.

General Compson, Mr. Compson, and Quentin all have an emotional attachment to the Old South. Their disillusion with the present and their nostalgia for the past urge them to romanticize the Old South, of which Sutpen was a product, a hero, a defender, and a victim. Mr. Compson's admiration for the past can represent their feelings, when he says that the old time was "simpler and therefore, integer for integer, larger, more heroic and the figures therefore more heroic too, not dwarfed and involved but distinct, uncomplex who had the gift of loving once or dying once" (89). But this "simpler" and "heroic" age was apparently built upon the negation of the humanity of the black slaves and of the poor whites. To free it from moral judgment, the myth of innocence is created. To represent the age, instead of a "mad villain," we are then given an amoral figure like an embodiment of "the play of natural forces." However, by doing so, they also deprive Sutpen of his humanity and "the gift of loving once or

¹³Cleanth Brooks, *A Shaping Joy: Studies in the Writer's Craft* (London: Methuen, 1971) 197.

dying once." In this way, the past embodied in Sutpen is after all not so "romantic" as these narrators try to make us, or themselves, believe it to be, for it has been emptied of its human qualities. While most critics take Sutpen to be the embodiment of the past, Brooks quotes widely history books to prove that Sutpen, instead of a Southerner, is in fact an alien intruder.¹⁴ If so, then why are all these southern "ghosts" so obsessed with his story? And why should they narrate it with such strong emotion?

As a matter of fact, Sutpen is not an amoral, blind, bat-like figure, but a villain with both cruelty and humanity in him. We have seen the traces of his humanity in Rosa's narrative. Now, we will see them in other narratives. Mr. Compson tells Quentin that "perhaps the reason was that now since he [Sutpen] had got out of his father-in-law all that Mr. Coldfield possessed that Sutpen could have used or wanted, he had neither the courage to face his father-in-law nor the grace and decency to complete the ceremonial family group even four times a year" (63). But why did he not have the *courage* to face Mr. Coldfield, if it is not because he realized that he had done wrong to him? If this is the reason, then it certainly suggests that Sutpen did possess conscience and moral sense.

The most powerful evidence critics frequently quote to prove Sutpen's amorality is his own words: "You see, I had a design in my mind, whether it was a good or bad design is beside the point; the question is, Where did I make the mistake in it, what did I do or misdo in it, whom or what injure by it to the extent which this would indicate" (263). However, this is obviously not an amoral statement, but an immoral one. First, the statement clearly implies that Sutpen does know that there are good and bad in the world but he would not concern himself with them. Second, he knows that his design may *injure* others, but he would carry it out in spite of that. His abandoning of his first wife and child is a good example of his immorality. Although he admits that "there was injustice" in putting them aside, he did it all the same. He tries to justify himself: "I made to the fullest what atonement lay in my power for whatever injury I might have done" (273). But the very need to justify himself, the need to make atonement, betrays his sense of guilt; and he actually admits that "his conscience had

bothered him somewhat" (161).

Mr. Compson's explanation of Sutpen's rejection of Bon also contradicts the myth of amorality. Mr. Compson regards the "wedding ceremony" as the obstacle. But, if Sutpen is morally "innocent," why should that ceremony bother him at all? For the marriage to a woman with black blood in a slave society is legally nothing; it is no more than, as Mr. Compson himself admits, "dancing sleepers." If this "bigamy" is not a legal problem, it can only be a moral one.

While Quentin and especially Shreve differ much from Mr. Compson in their view of Sutpen, they both accept the myth of Sutpen's innocence. In his narrative, Shreve presents Sutpen as the most cold-blooded figure with "a rocklike face." On the one hand, he directly portrays Sutpen's cold-bloodedness; on the other, he attempts to negate Sutpen through creating a moving human character of Bon. In both efforts, as we will see, he contradicts himself. In the crucial scene in which Quentin and Shreve imagine how Sutpen plays his "trump," they let Sutpen show his emotions:

It is the old man who moves first, though they meet in the center of the tent, where they embrace and kiss before Henry is aware that he has moved, was going to move, moved by what of close blood which in the reflex instance abrogates and reconciles even though it does not yet (perhaps never will) forgive, who stands now while his father holds his face between both hands, looking at it.

—Henry, Sutpen says—My son.

(353)

Sutpen's emotions must be genuine, otherwise Henry would not be moved. Even if he pretends his emotions, his pretending would contradict his supposed "innocence," for a completely "innocent" person would not think of pretending at all. In either case, this crucial scene contradicts the narrators' efforts to create a completely cold-blooded amoral character.

Shreve's chief narrating feat is his creation of Bon as a moving human figure to undermine Sutpen's image. But it is in creating Bon that he creates the worst problem for himself. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld puts her finger on the right spot but comes to the wrong conclusion: "If Bon was merely using Judith to force recognition from his father, then all Judith's years of waiting,

¹⁴See Cleanth Brooks, "On *Absalom, Absalom!*," *Mosaic* 7.1 (Fall 1973): 159-83.

devotion, of care for his son offer a very dark commentary on faith and love."¹⁵ But this is exactly the case with Bon. Only the "dark commentary" is not on "faith and love" but on Bon. Shreve's narrative offers abundant evidence to show that Bon is using Judith's love and Henry's devotion primarily to "force recognition from his father," and he, according to Shreve, waits for four years with that single purpose and repeatedly expresses his willingness to renounce Judith and Henry and disappear for good if he can get the slightest recognition, or even the slightest hint of recognition, from Sutpen. No matter how much humanity Shreve may put in Bon, he cannot ignore the fact that Bon, in seeking for his parental recognition, finally destroys not only himself, but virtually Judith and Henry as well. Though his "design" is entirely different from Sutpen's, the same degree of obsession with which he strives for its realization turns him, as it has turned Sutpen, from a pitiable and rejected boy into a destructive force. In this respect he can hardly be a negation of Sutpen. On the contrary, his humanity and obsession both in a certain way mirror what is in his father.

One important way of the narrators, and critics, to mythify Sutpen's innocence is to smooth out the complexity of Sutpen's mind and turn it into a mechanical operator which works by simple "logic steps" or "recipe":

Grandfather not saying "Wait wait" now because it was that innocence again, that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out.

(263)

Of course this is not merely Quentin's voice, because in it we can hear both his grandfather's and father's voices. This is what Bakhtin calls stylization, in which the voices agree with each other. The recipe symbol is a subjective imposition of the narrator's upon Sutpen's

mind. Only by fixing Sutpen's mind into a mechanical process without the interference of conscience and human feelings can the narrator be free to create the myth of Sutpen's innocence. But the very section from which Quentin derives his recipe symbol shows the trace of the interference of Sutpen's human feelings. For here Sutpen virtually admitted that his action was not supported by conscience and told General Compson "how his conscience had bothered him somewhat" and how he had tried to make atonement.

It is precisely because he is bothered by his conscience, his sense of guilt, that Sutpen has to resort to his "logic" to repress it, just as Miss Rosa has to resort to her demonization to repress her desire of him. General Compson sees the working of Sutpen's logic, but ignores, or fails to see, why Sutpen needs the mechanic logic and what is suppressed beneath it. Because his conscience bothered him, Sutpen "argued calmly and logically with his conscience until it was settled" (262). But his conscience is never really settled. It often bothers him. That afternoon in General Compson's office he tells Compson his life story and his dilemma but does not say what it really is. Sutpen's silence on his real problem shows that he does not come to General Compson for advice. He is seized with the need to talk about himself. He is in pain; his conscience is bothering him again. He has to relieve part of his inner sufferings. Through talking, through "moralizing," he hopes to settle, to repress, his conscience.

Sutpen's trouble is not innocence, but largely his repression of his conscience. To realize his design, which is by nature inhuman and immoral, he must sweep aside all obstacles; but one obstacle that he cannot simply put aside is his conscience. Though he can logically argue with it, repress it, and temporarily settle it, he cannot eliminate it. It stubbornly raises its voice. So Sutpen has to constantly repress it; and it is this constant repression of his own conscience that pushes him downward from an innocent boy to a villainous man. However, this continuous repression, on the other hand, also reveals the endurance of humanity. For neither his complete devotion to his design nor his constant repression with logic can wipe it out. Like Rosa's "root and urge," it may be choked, but not killed. It cannot die and leave Sutpen an entirely amoral figure.

The subtle revelation of Sutpen's inner conflict inevitably brings to failure the various

¹⁵Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, "'We Have Waited Long Enough': Judith Sutpen and Charles Bon," *The Southern Review* 14.1 (Jan. 1978): 72.

finalizations of Sutpen by the narrators. This revelation is perhaps the most significant achievement of *Absalom, Absalom!*. And it agrees precisely with Faulkner's belief delivered in his Nobel Prize speech that a writer should write about "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing."¹⁶

As we have seen, in addition to the conflicts within the characters, the novel dramatically portrays the conflicts among them. It does not try to smooth out these conflicts; instead it presents them as they are. In this sense, a polyphonic novel, which embraces conflicts rather than solves them, is realistic at a higher level. It is rooted in the age and can represent

the diversity and conflicts of the world not in surface but in depth, not in appearance but in essence. "The age itself," Bakhtin says of Dostoevsky's works, "made the polyphonic novel possible. . . the objective contradictions of the age determined Dostoevsky's art not in that he was able to overcome them within the history of his own spirit, but in that he came to objectively view them as simultaneously co-existing forces" (*Problems* 23). This is precisely the case in Faulkner's art. The comparatively homogeneous world of the Old South had collapsed after the Civil War into a heterogeneous one. Instead of ignoring or overcoming the world's conflicts, he embraced them as "co-existing forces" in his writing.□

¹⁶William Faulkner, "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature," *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters by William Faulkner*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: Random House, 1965) 119.

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Jack Butler

GYRO GEARLOOSE

*O*nce invented a portable hole,
I seem to remember telling you,
as flexible as rubber. Fling that sucker against a wall,
and you could step through.
We were discussing our favorite comic books,
and that one, for me, was myth.
You liked the notion, sort of, although you both
preferred the X-men to the Junior Woodchucks.
Throw it against the ground and you could go to China.
But it was thin as paper. Thinner.

*This is the blue of a branch's shadow on muddy water,
the blue of morning before the sun,
the blue of evening after the sun. Stepson and daughter,
you are now grown,
or wouldn't be reading this. But as I write,
neither of you is six.
This is the cedar-shaded blue of the river Styx,
this is a blue circle slung at your feet,
the way in and the way out, a time between. Follow me
into the blue door, memory:*

Behind a house that was, there is an ash-pile circle.
As I would have it now, you rise
where fire once brightened, tattering to smoke and sparkle,
materialize
here in this past that is not past to me.
*Step from the fire, assume
yourselves before it. Marshmallows sag, then bloom
with sudden blue intensity—*
our glued-together family's hot-dog cook-out, complete
with the right blown-out tongue-scorching sweet.

And seeing you play with fire after your rare dessert,
poking the coals, whirling to scribble
bright lines on the dark, someone who knows too much of hurt,
too much of trouble,
rehearses your drill: *The window (don't try the stairs),
the roof, jump down. And then
the coals drowse and go out, and we go in.
Sleep widens, includes you. Dreams bloom. Drums, spears,
blue coals to burnt lips, steps in the earth that lead to flame.*
Tomorrow opens like a dream.

*You were a little green girl and a half-half-Indian boy,
to hear me tell it, your saga, later—
you set out for the woods with all your goods slung on a travois.*

*Fact of the matter,
she isn't, he is, the goods are books and blankets,
he shoulders a great bow
that tangles his feet: the complete camp-out to go.
Behind the glass doors, watching, I think it's
someone we know, I think it's your father, the witness, me.
I watch you go, tree by blue tree,*

*into the distance, until you disappear in growth,
a wilderness I cannot tell,
though I imagine you hiking the mossy cedar-path
below the hill,
paralleling the sunny and shaded creek
into a changeling spring.
In science fiction, a circlet portal's hung,
world and world between, oblique
and sudden translation: But there we will not follow you.
At home, instead, in shadow-dew,*

*two turtles clamber to stilly union under the privet,
beside the ashes of our fire.
—Like Lawrence's, like who and who else you know, who give it
their best desire,
yet cannot last, having begun their divorce
before the marriage: but this is
still hope, still hopeful: I am reading Ulysses,
not "Tortoise Shout," am crazy with doors,
with branches, veins, paths, with possibilities—
suppose I put the book down, and she's*

*available . . . And so we bridge to afternoon
and your return. I will be making
potato-cakes (hot, frangible, savory) soon,
I will be breaking
eggs into batter, spooning to sizzling griddle.
Do you remember now?
It darkens, and after supper we allow
a little television, a little
junk food for thought. An Indian on a phosphor screen
tells a white child, his father slain,*

I am your father now. I was your father then.
You made me re-invent your day,
describe in rhyme the marvelous cities, the giant men,
the magical clay
you'd found a vein of under a rock in the water—
shaped like a bird, it flew
out of the closing circle of fact to blue
infinities: *Stepson, daughter,*
I am dog-growling Cerberus, ticket-taker, gate-keeper.
Trust me. Walk in. Sleep deep. Deeper.

And when you reach bottom, drop through a manhole to your third
day in this poem, a day you spend
once more at the creek. Maybe you try the spirited bird
I sang you, and
it doesn't fly. You shape a cup that I
still keep, dry it in sun.
When you come home. We're on. The telephone.
To John. And Susan. And. Don't try.
Don't try the stairs: Oh there's a window away from here,
fly through it. A man sits writing. We're

avoiding something, fire? Not fire exactly, no.
We've skipped an afternoon, a night.
The writing man is me, of course. I sit, I go
outside, I write,
I sample morning, write. I seem obsessed,
as if I tried to solve
a heart in flames, find some correlative
fierce thrill to backburn Hell, arrest
blue Hades, as if I tried to scar my eyes with beauty
till they were proof for guilt and pity:

The chicken crooking, stalking hoppers, brought me joy,
white rooster jerking sun to shade,
I write. Warm hoppers rattle parabolic—deploy,
hop up, evade
the snake-strike beak. *Into cool shadow, then,*
smart cluck. Slow hoppers, cool,
night-lulled still, slughoppers downcrawl all
a-dying: as rich as your money-bin,
McDuck, the world this morning, piled with glittering sight.
It is the first draft of this I write:

*On the table I made from a power-spool and left out, a coil
of bicycle cable, frayed wire and a leader
at one end making a dragonfly, poised airfoil
trailing a meter
or so of snake. Uphill, a rooster-white
aluminum prefab shed
blasted with buckshot, rust-ulcer overlaid
with shrub-shadow. I write and write and write,
as if to heal a broken world, stitch it somehow
together. Do you remember now?*

*You were in words and not in words. You were not six.
This is a time confused with times.
You were in school, pre-school, you practiced your y, your x,
you wrote your names.
You read this now: You are just learning to read.
This is a time before
you thought of time. You practice your s, your r.
I write you this, for later, to lead
the two of you into yourselves, into a brief blue hell.
You practice your i, your u, your l.*

*I labored briefly with a shovel, began to write.
I wrote the present in the past,
would write the past in present tense: a Friday night,
a Saturday lost
in cedar-wood, Sunday beside the water,
an afternoon we skipped,
a Monday morning in school. Erratic script,
typewriters, and finally this computer,
and here it is, blue hole in your time, the phantom zone,
the father-creek. Go to that phone*

*that Stephen rang up Adam on. Susan will answer.
Yes, she will say. Yes, you did.
—And here's to Gyro, breaks in Gallstone Glancer:
You did it, kid.
You slung those holes and Scrooge got stuck,
the Beagle Boys robbed his bank—
and you have me, poor me, poem, to thank
for what you lose: no pick-up truck
had Gyro and Gladstone, children, but I did, and you jumped, in it
on a box, in which—just one prompt minute:*

*I hope you suffer memory in here, this blue
between, this slow cool Holy Ghost
white rooster father-stalking while. Walk in, walk through.
We're there at last,
the deepest circle of this dying fire.
Follow me now and live.
This is the only fire I'd have you have,
if you are who we hope you are:
in which a kitten, frail, broke. Oh this is all.
A tiny death. A slaughter small.*

Congratulations stacked like coin, like nourishment:
We had decided to live together
there by the woods, the creek, to be familiar, invent
mother and father
in spite of our failures. You brought the limp thing in,
unguiltily. We saw.
It strangled on a chest of broken straw.
We said goodbye, hung up, and then
there was an interim, there was a space, a spell.
All die. All kill. We did. We will.

You mourned a distillate small while, and let it go.
We let you let it go, we chose
no guilt for you. Nevertheless, you must now know
you were a cause:
*I would not have that kitten quite forgotten,
though sang a rooster's skill,
my heart, this day's blue start. An interval,
a thing unsaid, I wrote. I've written*
this fire to pray you safe from fire, from such slam-bam
as you occasioned. *Children, I am*

your father now. Now stand before me and make reply.
Did you not know the cat was there?
Or knowing, not know the unseen animal could die?
Were you aware
it was, it could, but innocent of death
except as tv show?
Do you remember now, oh do you know?
I question you in simple faith:
The body of all our time is where we make our souls.
In this blue truth I see no holes.

The less we see of what we are, the less we are.
If souls may blossom out of time,
they must be whole. Not pure, but whole. What we ignore
must weaken them.

What else is there to fear? If there is grace,
it is the grace of trial,
not perfect knowledge. Of study, not denial.
And kindness is an artifice,
a life-long choice, or willingness to learn to choose.
So much for the sermon. Take what you can use.

Now here's my ticket: I dropped a kitten in water once.
I thought I had to. We were broke,
the kitten panting with disease. That drowning haunts
my backward look,
and ever will, and should. Mercy I'd swear
was what I meant, but my eye
was hungry, curious: I watched it die,
cannot quit watching now that yawn for air
where no air was, that slow downfall and stretch of pain.
Oh I can drown in my own brain.

*Motive matters less than you might think. Give over,
for Christ's sake, your long defense. Unless
you choose to think of it, to try, where will there ever
be gentleness?*

*White rooster stalking hoppers brought me joy,
and I was glad of all,
am glad, Gladstone, of this. I place my call,
green girl, half-half-Indian boy,
from a blue booth in the middle of a lake of flame.
The coin drops. There's not much time.*

*Hello? Linnika, Gideon? Listen, this is Jack.
If you are who we hope you are,
are y'all ok? You are? Well, we just wanted to check.
Remember fire?
Remember how it branches from then to now to when,
and what to do in case?
Good children. Guilt is fire, consumes your house.
Jumps on its ribs and cracks them in.
I have to go now. One last blue opening, sweet souls. See?
The window. Out on the roof. Jump free.*

FREEDOM AND ITS DISCONTENTS: VISUAL PLEASURE AND
NARRATIVE CINEMA IN JOHNATHAN DEMME'S
SOMETHING WILD

One of the most influential documents of feminist film criticism has been Laura Mulvey's trenchant 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."¹ Indeed, this essay has set the standards and many of the guidelines by which numerous feminist critics have appraised the products of a completely male-dominated and male aestheticized international film industry. Fifteen years later, Mulvey's essay remains an incisive, groundbreaking critical manifesto. Yet, one of the more striking impressions the essay generates as the eighties have become the nineties is how many films—particularly how many American films—while conforming to some of the stereotypes of sexual identity Mulvey critiques have managed to defy or to alter Mulvey's contentions. And these films are directed by men. If, as Mulvey convincingly asserts, the point of view expressed by a male director locks all spectators into compliance with male erotic pleasure, why have a number of excellent movies by American film directors as diverse as David Cronenberg, John Sayles, Alan Rudolph, and Johnathan Demme, to name a prominent few, seemed so dissatisfied with the easy triumph of the male erotic will? In this essay I want to take what I think is one of the best American films of the eighties, Johnathan Demme's road movie as psychic reawakening saga *Something Wild*, and show how its director and his characters, while conforming to some of Mulvey's strictures about male positioning of the female object in commercial film, invert and reshape many of her premises. Mulvey insists—and I think rightly—that in most commercial films "the active male is the bearer of the gaze and the passive woman is its object" (370). Unfortunately, this hypothesis rings almost as true for the bulk of films of 1989 as it did in 1975

when Mulvey's essay was published. Nonetheless, if one attends the movies diligently enough, a filmgoer currently can find good male directors who are perplexed about sexual politics, who are fairly even-handed in their treatment of women and feminine sexuality, and who even desire to use their films to correct the sexism and misogyny of previous, masculine visions of dominance and control.

No American director better fits this description than Johnathan Demme, the forty-five year-old maker of *Citizens Band*, alternately titled *Handle with Care*, *Melvin and Howard*, and more recently, in 1986, *Something Wild*, a sleeper that too few people have seen and fewer serious film critics have appreciated. The beauty of *Something Wild* is that the film is so off-center, at once so casual and yet so carefully constructed, that the movie at first viewing can appear far more facile and facetious than I believe it to be. Superficially, *Something Wild* chronicles the descent of Charley Drigges, a prototypic Yuppie and newly appointed corporation vice-president, into a hell of his own making when he picks up Lulu, a free-spirited, shape-changing vagabond. Lulu takes Charley for a several day joy ride into her own world, on her own terms.

Almost immediately, *Something Wild* would seem to invert the premises of Mulvey's argument. Here is a willful, even dominant woman who catches an upwardly mobile executive trying to sneak out of a lower Manhattan sandwich shop without paying for his lunch. Lulu next kidnaps Charley in her car, takes him to a New Jersey motel room, handcuffs him to the bedpost, and makes love to him as she impersonates a client who calls Charley's office, demanding to know why he has taken such an extended lunch hour. This description hardly coincides with Mulvey's belief that "men control the film fantasy and are representative of its power" (373). Clearly, Lulu

¹All references herein can be found in Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984) 370-92.

generates many of the fantasies of *Something Wild*, as well as its narrative evolution and its character relationships. For most theoretical purposes, Lulu is the empowering center of *Something Wild*.

Nonetheless, what tempers enthusiasm for these first few minutes of the movie is that the reversal of roles between Charley and Lulu seems a sexist reversal at best. Lulu appears to be a sado-masochistic nymphet complete with handcuffs and lacy black underwear whose breasts and buttocks are photographed from Charley's aroused, if fearful, perspective. We are still seeing woman as object of desire and anxiety from a male point of view. Even if Lulu, via Demme, has foisted this vision on the spectator, the viewer must become a man to appreciate the nervous joke or enjoy the erotic stimulation Lulu generates. Moreover, the great danger implicit in the masculine representation of a sexually uninhibited firebrand like Lulu is that, as *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman feels, Lulu becomes not an aesthetically realized woman at all, but a collection of male projective fantasies that allow the men who wrote, photographed, edited, and directed this film to envision Lulu, alternately, as whore, angel, victim, mother, prisoner, and enslaver.² Though Lulu frequently creates the film's narrative as well as her own highly self-conscious ability to change avatars, she does occasionally veer out of control in her schizophrenia. Furthermore, from an exclusively masculine viewpoint, Lulu's sexuality constitutes a threat to Charley, and thus Lulu, however forceful, represents what Mulvey feels women stereotypically signify in the movies: sexual difference, the male fear of being equalized or castrated by his attraction to the female (373). And yet, what finally is refreshing and liberating about *Something Wild* is that, after this initial tryst, Lulu never constitutes a sexual challenge or even sexual competition for Charley. Lulu's sexual difference quickly represents not castration fears for Charley, but social freedom for him. The reason Charley falls rapturously in love with Lulu's view of reality is that, for the first time in his regimented life, Charley finds his own identity in someone else's unbridled sense of release. What Demme has artfully and seamlessly constructed in *Something Wild* is an allegory as profound, and as obvious, as De

Toqueville's observations on American life a century and a half ago. Demme and his characters endlessly fantasize about highly American fixations with freedom, identity, and escape from personal responsibility.

Where *Something Wild* most quickly detours off Mulvey's map of masculine appropriation of the female image is in its willingness to let Lulu take control of the film. For Mulvey, "women are the bearer of the meaning of film, but men are the maker of its meaning; the man's role is the active one, making things happen, forwarding the story" (375). Yet in this movie, Lulu's seductive vamping not only frees Charley from his repressive, cost-accountant existence but takes him into Lulu's past for a visit with her mother and a side excursion to her ten-year high school reunion. Moreover, it is just the film's desire to go increasingly deeper into its characters' pasts and identities that gives *Something Wild* its ingenious, cleverly crafted structure. Part one of the film carries us from Lulu's accusation that Charley has stiffed the waitress at the sandwich shop, through his chained lovemaking with Lulu at the Jersey motel, to Charley's flight, on foot, from the owners of Mom and Pop's Italian Restaurant. With the conclusion of this sequence, Charley runs from Mom and Pop's forever, into Lulu's getaway car, and, by extension, into her vision of the world.

Charley's growing sense of freedom and his exhilaration with a corresponding loss of identity and responsibility are cannily demarcated by Demme's use of a twenty-second white screen dissolve as Charley and Lulu alight at their next motel stop. With this self-conscious authorial intrusion, Demme announces the second section of his film and a shift in point-of-view that I find central to a careful reading of the movie. In part two, when Lulu takes Charley into her past life with Mom and to her high school reunion, *Something Wild* is seen largely from Lulu's eyes. The ironies of Demme's technique abound. First, in one component of her past Lulu is no longer a flamboyant exhibitionist and sexual outlaw, but Audrey Hinkle who lived quietly, unobtrusively with her insipidly sweet mother, Peaches, in a vine-covered bungalow directly out of Norman Rockwell Americana. In these scenes, photographer Tak Fujimoto's dexterous color scheme shifts from the day-glow, wall mural colors of the lower Manhattan and Jersey of part one, to the limpid yellows, blues, and char-treuses of

²J. Hoberman, "The Call of the Wild," *The Village Voice* 11 Nov. 1986: 82.

Peaches' heavy syrup homestead in countryside Pennsylvania. Impossible discrepancies arise here from an audience's intended questioning of Demme's tone in this episode. Was home ever so soft, so water-color pastoral, so innocuous and cloying? And since Audrey/Lulu is now passing Charley off to Mom as her new husband, is this vision of a pre-lapsarian paradise meant to be exclusively Audrey's, partially Demme's, or some fusion of the two? Which-ever, this perspective fosters nonetheless an impossibly romantic social vision of the great American roadway that some Americans still idealize, and that *Something Wild* sardonically generates as it delves deeper into Audrey and Charley's collective consciousnesses.

From Mulvey's perspective, Demme has performed an unlikely feat with this episode: he has made a strong, sexual chameleon the central consciousness of his film and then suggests that this woman has achieved a kind of freedom in her fantasy life, in her yearning to reconstruct her past, and in the oscillation between the poles of her personality that a man like Charley Driggs envies and emulates. Mulvey's essay contends that commercial film usually creates a masculine, controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify and with whom the spectator shares success as this forceful male gains possession and control of the leading lady in the film (379). Yet, actually, isn't Charley's final goal to be possessed and controlled by Lulu's sense of freedom and her total lack of inhibition? In fact, Lulu, the unconquerably free, feminine principle of *Something Wild*, becomes, for Demme, the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that American masculinity feels it has invented but rarely can contain.

Perhaps where Mulvey's findings most ignore the aspirations of a movie like *Something Wild* are in the film's force as a quintessential road movie and a road movie for the gender self-conscious eighties at that. As Mulvey astutely realizes in her essay, women provide the spectacle for most genre films, particularly the musical comedy and the western, while man, the doer, the maker, the transformer of events, produces the narrative (377). Yet the Hollywood road movie as a cross-generic species appearing in an abundant variety of styles and incarnations from *It Happened One Night*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Stagecoach*, to *They Drive by Night*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*, *The Rain People*, and *Fools Like Us*, has a circular not a linear narrative shape that blurs the differences

between spectacle and narrative, diversion and event, and equalizes the roles of the sexes. Away from the board room, the kitchen, or the bedroom, and on the road, women and men are relatively equal in their ability to shape and transform situations, their lives, and one another. In its roustabout tour of interstates and country roads, motels and seven-elevens, parking lots, liquor stores, diners, grotesque chain restaurants, a high school reunion, and even Mom's house, *Something Wild* transcends road movie clichés to become a surreal dream of the cluttered American highway. This film takes its images from both the grotesque actuality of daily Americana, and from some pop art, dream vision of the nonexistent purity of American life.

Nowhere do Demme and his screenwriter, E. Max Frye, blur the distinctions between Mulvey's concepts of spectacle and narrative more than in the scenes at Audrey's high school reunion. In what is the exact midpoint of the film, and in some respects its centerpiece, Audrey and Charley pretend to be a radiantly happy husband and wife with two children. In what could be a moderately realistic rendering of the absurdity of all our high school reunions, Demme tenderly shows Audrey and Charley falling in love on the dance floor as Charley's freewheeling, wasp imitation of a black couple's moonwalking behind him seems, once more, to free this uptight preppie into becoming a human being. Still, even at his most realistic, Demme is a master parodist as he thoroughly lampoons this most ludicrous of all American coming-of-age rites. What could be more appropriate than for Audrey's class to be named the Spirit of '76, and for her and her classmates to celebrate ten years of freedom and independence with false identities, bogus relationships, and split personalities? As Audrey tells Charley when she drives him to her mother's doorstep earlier in part two, finally removing her seduction handcuffs from his arm, "I'm setting you free." "Maybe I don't want to be free," responds the bewildered Charley. "Maybe you aren't," returns Audrey.³ Despite Mulvey's contentions, *Something Wild* convincingly demonstrates that by centering a film from the perspective of a forceful woman, a male director can show how women have intuitively understood the limitations of American freedom while many American males have been deluded by it.

³All film references are to *Something Wild*, dir. Johnathan Demme, Columbia Pictures, 1986.

Audrey's Lulu mask of freedom comes crashing to the dance floor with the arrival of Ray Sinclair, a seedy hood, ex-con, and convenience store hold-up man whom she married before he last went to jail. Ray is rightfully suspicious that a wild, sensual animal like Audrey would marry a repressed wasp like Charley without so much as serving him divorce papers, and at the reunion, Ray learns the great lie of the film. He hears from the husband of a reunion classmate of his and Audrey's who, coincidentally, works with Charley in Manhattan, that nine months ago Charley's fragile dream of suburban tranquility was destroyed when Charley's wife ran off with the family dentist and took their two kids with her. Now it is Ray's turn to take Audrey and Charley on a joy ride of his own. Ditching his new girl friend at a convenience store, Ray drives Audrey and Charley to another quick mart. While Ray and Charley go in for cigarettes, Ray robs the clerk and drags Charley, his newest accomplice in crime, back to a horrified Audrey waiting in the car. With a kind of hyperrealism, Demme shows Ray take Audrey and Charley for a cruise on the wild side to a hellish, gutted-out motel with fires burning in the parking lot and motorcycle gangs careening the neighborhood. In their naugahyde motel room, Ray becomes, ironically, not only the demon he seems, but also a kind of avenging angel who forces Audrey to admit that she and Charley aren't married and who, in turn, extracts Charley's confession that his wife, two kids, and manicured suburban bliss in Stoneybrook are no more.

After Audrey and Ray decide to give Charley his freedom, we see Charley just as quickly reject it. Charley, like Ray, remains physically, and spiritually, tied to the handcuffs of Lulu, a persistent, imaginative woman who has taught Charley how partial all freedom really is. With Charley's growing fear that he may have to relinquish his dependence on Audrey, Demme flashes another white dissolve on the screen. Part three of the film begins, and what has been Audrey/Lulu's portion of the movie returns, once again, to Charley and Demme's wearily masculine vision, by all odds the most conventional and the most desperate segment of *Something Wild*. Physically released by this petty criminal and his moll, Charley nonetheless perceives that Audrey/Lulu is the only person who has given his life any energy, so he chivalrously attempts to rescue this only partially enslaved princess from her barbaric

captor. Donning a "Virginia is for Lovers" T-Shirt, sunglasses, and binoculars, which he buys at service stations along the road, Charley becomes a spy, a detective in this sunlit film noir, and, less romantically, a Peeping Tom voyeur in his efforts to follow Audrey and Ray across Virginia and to find the precise moment to spring his heroine from Ray's clutches. Meanwhile, the film descends deeper into American folkways, the South, and the strange, mirror-like relationship developing between Charley and Ray.

Hopelessly and broodingly smitten with his seductress, Charley is never completely free of her hold over him. Mulvey finds two avenues of escape from a dilemma like Charley's, both of which Demme utilizes in part three of the film, and both of which Mulvey identifies as the male movie camera's absurdly generalized approach to the conundrum of women. Charley can investigate Audrey, demystify her aura, which may finally take the form of devaluing her, punishing her, or saving her from those qualities that make her an agent of guilt for him (379). This approach explains the trailing and tracking that Charley and Demme's camera do with Audrey and Ray in this part of the film. Or, also following Mulvey, Charley can turn Audrey into a fetish, an object of complete adoration and obsession so that she eventually becomes reassuring rather than hypnotic before his eyes (380). With these hypotheses, Mulvey strikes very close to both mechanisms of narrative and spectacle at work within *Something Wild*. Yet the movie goes further and deeper than Mulvey's critique of commercial film does. As this third episode continues, Charley interrupts Ray and Audrey's dinner at a roadside burger emporium by telling Ray that the cop eating his meal at the table opposite them would like to know that Ray is a felon who has skipped parole. After demanding Ray's wallet, keys, car, and Audrey, Charley and Audrey escape. Charley drives Audrey north to a safe haven in his deserted Stoneybrook manor, and Ray follows in hot pursuit.

True, Charley has taken the Freudian option of every male compelled by a determined, alluring woman: he saves her from the masculine beast threatening her. But what Demme and his screenwriter so perceptively realize here is the reciprocity of the process of salvation between Audrey and Charley, Charley and Ray, and how brutish a beast affable Charley can be in his own right. After an

argument in the car headed for civilization, Audrey says to Charley, altogether knowingly: "I saved you and you saved me." Audrey wakes Charley from his dispirited life of executive torpor, and Charley returns the favor by freeing Audrey from Ray's grip and a life of crime. And yet Charley, Lulu, and Ray are all criminals: Charley, a white collar, vice-presidential caliber crook, petty thieving at the lunch counter and lying to the world about his idyllic family life; Ray, a thrill-seeking hoodlum who brags about his latest disguise after each convenience store heist; and far less viciously, Audrey, a woman who imagines and momentarily leads a double life so she can be fleetingly married to the kind of guy Mom and her high school classmates might desire for her. Not only does Audrey/Lulu assume completely different physical avatars for her roles as Audrey and Lulu, but Audrey/Lulu is more than just these two women. In part one, she has the bobbed, straight black hair of silent screen vamp Louise Brooks in G. W. Pabst's *Lulu*—hence her name—and the insinuating sexual strut of Claudette Colbert in *Cleopatra* and *It Happened One Night*. In part two, after washing her hair and dying it blonde at Mom's place, she resumes her innocence, her pixieish, sexually teasing, ready-for-the-prom style; she's Judy Holliday in *Born Yesterday*; and by the conclusion of the film, when Charley feverishly searches for her at the sandwich shop where he first discovered her, she's the ultimate platonic double as la belle dans sans merci: she's Kim Novak in *Vertigo*.

Here again, Mulvey's claims fit *Something Wild* snugly. Just as Jimmy Stewart spends the second half of *Vertigo* attempting to reconstruct Judy as Madeline, Charley plays gumshoe detective with Audrey and Ray in the third segment of *Something Wild* and attempts to mold the wild Lulu who seduced him into the gentle Audrey he's fallen in love with. Yet the fetishistic object of compulsive adoration he's made of Audrey/Lulu and her various avatars is as much self-conscious movie director Demme's conceit as it is his character's effort to distance this enticing women and eliminate the ambiguities she induces. Moreover, Lulu's personal freedom throughout *Something Wild* is her own complete lack of static identity, her ability to change her looks, style, and film persona at will, and thus elude Charley's desire to explain, reduce, or control her. Certainly Audrey is an actress, but she plays as much for her own salvation as she does to gain erotic

holds over Charley.

The real brilliance of *Something Wild* is this endless series of doublings, doublings within doublings, even triplings, the movie performs with its characters and its own principles of construction. Not only is Audrey easily two, three, or four personae, but Charley himself has a double, perhaps a triple life. As Ray observes in part two of *Something Wild*, talking to Charley about Lulu's sexual prowess and doubting Charley's ability to prove equal to it: "She looks like she could f--- you right in two." The irony of Ray's perception is that Lulu has, in fact, f---ed Charley right in two. Sex with Lulu and falling in love with Audrey have forever separated the dishonest, uptight corporate manager from the relaxed, spontaneous rebel who wants to turn his back on security, conformity, and success. Yet Charley contains more than just this obvious opposition between repression and freedom, starchiness and funk. Arriving home, Charley innocently tucks Audrey into his own bed, almost as a father would an adored eight year-old, and Audrey turns to him, posing the film's most provocative question:

"What are you going to do now that you've seen how the other half lives?" she wonders. "The other half of what?" Charley asks naively. "The other half of you," insists Audrey.

Audrey knows and Charley is beginning to understand that not only is his soul torn between unrestrained primitive and anal executive, but a good portion of his psyche is attracted to the dangerous hipster, the criminal rabble-rouser, Ray. Some essential element of Charley wants to cross the tracks and be as daredevil and hell-raising in his rescue of Audrey as Ray was in his return of Audrey to her truly wicked past.

Leaving Audrey in his bedroom, Charley is falling asleep on a chair in his living room when Ray comes crashing through a plate glass window. Using Audrey's handcuffs, Ray locks Charley to the bathroom sink. As Ray berates and beats Audrey, Charley manages to free himself. In one of the most vivid images in the film, Charley attempts to strangle Ray with these handcuffs—the symbol of both their bondage and their freedom—while both men struggle on top of Audrey. In these frames, Demme more than suggests that these men are as much locked in homoerotic embraces with

their egos, their sense of competition, and each other, as they are aroused by Audrey, the socially permissible object of their desire. Even more telling, Audrey manages to escape their masculine hold. She strikes Ray with a golf club and Ray drops the knife he holds poised for Charley. Charley retrieves this phallic weapon in a consciously male game of what Mulvey would call possession and control of the leading lady, the film's lady in distress (374). But Ray, like the character of Jerry in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, intentionally presses himself against the knife extending outward from Charley's grasp. Ray and Charley, total opposites in looks, build, class, education, and social aspiration, become one another in this eerily effective transformation scene. Charley willingly lets Ray run against the knife in his hand because he senses he must kill the hunter, the male predator, the brute in himself that desires to enslave Audrey just as much as Ray does. Ray willingly rushes against Charley's outstretched knife as phallus because in his inability to understand a society he finds so empty, typified by Charley and Audrey's fervent, ludicrous desire to make it to the suburbs, he wants to reach and penetrate another human being at all costs. *Something Wild* may be unique in American movies, a cross-over film that says in crossing the barriers that divide the sexes and the classes, the powerful from the powerless, you may discover that your opposite is really your double and that this double is your own fraudulent dream of freedom.

With his last wipe dissolve, Demme introduces a short final coda to his film which is the most problematic segment of all. Charley has dropped out of the corporate maze and, once again, is in lower Manhattan searching for Audrey/Lulu, his perfect feminine anima, the woman who has made his executive existence seem corrupt and enervating. In despair, Charley returns to the primal scene of their crimes, the lunch shop where Lulu originally caught Charley at the white collar cheating on which he was building his life. Even without Lulu, Charley is now a reformed man and he puts down the money for his check and a meager tip for the waitress. As he walks out of the eatery, he is stopped by the proprietress, who demands to know why he hasn't paid his bill. In all innocence, Charley swears he's left money on the table. From out of the luncheonette comes Audrey/Lulu, who shows the owner that she indeed has snatched

Charley's tab. Charley's original sin has now become Audrey/Lulu's, and they at last appreciate each other as the social outlaws they have always been. As Charley and Audrey/Lulu drive off into an undiscovered country, somewhere between Charley's vacuous heaven, Ray's degenerate hell, and Lulu's wildcat purgatory, a viewer can well wonder who has dreamed or imagined this concluding vignette. Does it represent Charley's male quest to appropriate Audrey/Lulu into the perfect madonna and whore in one body, Lulu's delight in Charley's ability to fuse—at least temporarily—two parts of her multiple personality, or Demme's understanding that neither male nor female finally wins the tug of war of sexual politics? Is this final episode meant to be real time, naturalistic dramatic action, or is it intended as imaginary, a dream of Demme's or of one or both of his characters? The ultimate grace of *Something Wild* is that this final movement, like much of the movie, is alternately funny and poignant, and seems the product of a highly restless, inventive, and androgynous imagination that sees the world from both Audrey's and Charley's eyes but refuses to let either gain a lasting victory.

The most audacious quality of *Something Wild* is just this quiet refusal, without trickery or self-consciousness of technique, to be a realistic film. With its muted, well-crafted defiance of naturalism, *Something Wild* anticipates and addresses the directives Mulvey proposes at the end of her essay for the means by which commercial film might release itself from the grip of patriarchal structure. Mulvey advocates that movie directors, male or female, should "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment" (382). In that *Something Wild* is a free-floating map of a grotesque, corrupt society, Demme has, as Mulvey advises, freed his camera of rigid concerns with time and space, past and present, dream and reality, and with whom Demme, Charley, or Lulu is at any time imagining the movie we watch. And because we can never completely admire, deny, or reject the dreams and delusions of Charley and Lulu, Demme and Ray, this movie seldom asks for unalloyed sympathy with its characters, but rather for a consistent, dialectical detachment from them. Qualified though our response to its vision and its people may be, *Something Wild* remains one of the most perfectly realized, sexually

subversive American comedies of the eighties. If "Lulu" is *Something Wild*'s constant visual pleasure as well as its source of narrative energy, even more importantly, Demme insists, women like Lulu understand that moral

freedom is both a necessity and a dream.□

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ASSIGNATION

The Temple of Venus is really just a broken-down affair, a ruined edifice beside a stagnant pool of water, though the guidebook states that in the eighteenth century the temple was considered the crowning glory of the whole well-ordered meadow (the meadow itself being just a small portion of the estate grounds, carefully designed to provide a natural or "rustic" contrast to the many French-style formal gardens elsewhere on the property), and furthermore, the stagnant pool at which he gazes was at one time a lovely lily pond, its calm waters reflecting the ten thick stone pillars and massive, badly cracked dome of the imitation temple, around which ladies and gentlemen would gather, in pairs or in small groups, before setting off on a decorous evening stroll through the meadows, gardens, and walkways of the sprawling estate, pausing on delicate bridges over channelled streams, passing quietly beneath the branches of exotic trees, each one planted and pruned with great care, though to look at them now one might think that they had been growing freely for the last five hundred years, their trunks gnarled, their formerly clipped boughs a chaos of shapes, and beside these meandering walkways there would have been rows and huge beds of bright flowers, a vast profusion of rich colours fanning out in all directions, seemingly wild and haphazard from up close, but forming obvious patterns when viewed from an elevated point in the distance, say from the rim of the meadow (the meadow having been sculpted by a famous landscape artist of the time to resemble an enormous deep bowl, with the Temple of Venus and the lily pond at its centre) so that if one were to have taken up a position on that rim two centuries ago, perhaps in the shade of one of the massive oak trees that ringed the bowl, one would have discerned the orderly geometric design of the different flower beds and walkways, there is even a pen-and-ink illustration on page ten of the guidebook showing exactly what the view

would have been from such a vantage point, the illustrator having taken pains to faithfully reproduce the landscape artist's original design, each flower bed in its proper location, each tree plotted and pruned in the correct manner, an impressive sight in its day, no doubt, what the guidebook calls "a natural monument to the aristocratic conception of an orderly universe," the outlines of which are now only vaguely discernible, at best—indeed, without the guidebook there would be no way of knowing that this unruly, overgrown place had ever been so meticulously planned and so scrupulously maintained—the guidebook is tireless in singing the praises of its former glory, and he has read more than he wanted to of it already, but there is nothing else to do, as he stands waiting for her in the deepening twilight, unable to fathom why she was so adamant about meeting him *here*, of all places, they could just as easily have arranged to meet each other at a less remote location, someplace nearer the main house and drive at least (where he had to leave his car), it would have saved a great deal of time, which he has wasted tramping about this desolate, abandoned estate in search of this particular spot, the chill September air numbing his fingers while he scrutinized the little maps and drawings in the guidebook (printed by the local historical society on tissue thin sheets of pale yellow paper), and now that he has finally deciphered the various detailed maps and made his way through the grounds, now that he has been waiting here for forty-five minutes, he is concerned that perhaps he got the instructions wrong, perhaps he misunderstood her and this is not the right place, there are many similar locations on the estate—ruined buildings beside great stone fountains (dormant, of course) and innumerable sculpture gardens and miniature scale replicas of temples (just like this one) all with names evoking classical antiquity—perhaps the instructions were for him to meet her at the Temple of Artemis, for instance,

instead of at the Temple of Venus, there is a similarity in the sound of the names, after all, and in his agitated state on the telephone he might have written down Venus instead of Artemis, an honest mistake, considering how excited he became when he heard her say that she was actually ready at long last, ready to meet him, they would be together in a matter of hours, anyone might mistake one word for another at a time like that, though he tried to remain composed, he did his best to treat the news in a casual sophisticated manner, though he can see how his hand was shaking at the time by the way he wrote *Temple of Venus-6 p.m.* on the cover of the guidebook, the letters cramped and scrawled, unreadable to anyone not familiar with his handwriting, yet to her ears his voice must have sounded calm, easy, reassuring, not the least bit flippant—or worse, indifferent—just firm and smooth, he had even paused and then slowly repeated the name of their meeting place, Temple of Venus, his tone in complete contrast to the panicky breathless sound of her voice, though she did not hear him repeat the name, since she had already hung up, and perhaps that is why his misunderstanding went uncorrected, there was no opportunity for her to say “Temple of Artemis, not Venus,” which would have startled him and made him listen more carefully (though he felt startled enough and thought he was listening as closely as anyone could possibly listen), at least it might have forced him to calm himself and pay extreme attention to each individual word, after all it had been difficult enough hearing her small voice above the loud voices of the other lodgers gathered in the common room adjoining the hall (where the phone was kept), he’d had to press the receiver tight against his ear, his body bent low over the little writing table, his trembling hand scribbling *Temple of Venus-6 p.m.* on the cover of the guidebook, it never occurring to him that he was in danger of misinterpreting her words, and now he is thoroughly disconcerted at the thought of having made such a mistake, as his numbed fingers leaf through the pages of the book, frantically searching for a description of the Temple of Artemis and the map that will show him the route to it, though of course after all this time, nearly an hour, she might have grown tired of waiting for him and have already left, thinking he wasn’t going to show, but then, surely she would see his car parked in the huge circular drive in front of the house and realize that he was in fact somewhere on the property,

and she would realize, too, that he had simply made a mistake, and since she knows the grounds so well (being a native of the county) she could then come looking for him, perhaps even calling out his name—this is really the only sensible way to view the matter—her voice would carry well on such a still evening, yet he has heard nothing, only the odd shriek of birds here and there among the oak trees or in the high beech hedges bordering some of the paths, no other sounds have reached his ears, at least none that he is aware of, and with dismay he discovers that the Temple of Artemis is a very long way off, if he intends to go there in search of her he will first have to find the Lucian Way, which the guidebook describes as a broad tree-lined avenue, with stone benches placed at intervals down its length and free-standing rostral columns at either end, beyond which is a small lake that reflects the Temple of Artemis itself, sitting impressively on a sloping hill above the water, it could take him a very long time to locate the Lucian Way, and perhaps it would be unwise to set out for it in the relentlessly deepening dusk, especially since the guidebook states that he will have to pass through the trees on the eastern flank of the main vista before reaching it, a simple matter in broad daylight, perhaps, but not now, he could easily get lost (which would only worsen the situation), so perhaps the best idea is to simply stay put, and if she has not appeared by the time it is dark then he’ll have no other choice than to return to his lodgings and wait for her to call him there—that’s only reasonable—but now he begins to wonder if she even showed up on the estate at all, it’s surprising he hasn’t already contemplated such a possibility, since after all anything can happen, something might have come up which detained her, and then she might have been forced to abandon her plans to meet him, anything could have gone wrong, or worse than that even, perhaps she *did* come here, perhaps she was standing right on the crumbling stone steps of this temple (or the Temple of Artemis) and then decided she couldn’t go through with it, feeling somehow that the whole thing just wouldn’t work, so she left quickly before he arrived, not wanting to explain anything to him, or perhaps just unable to face him—this, too, is a perfectly reasonable, though chilling, assumption—and as he turns to view the temple he imagines her there on its steps, where he himself stood waiting not long ago, her coat gathered tight around her waist,

her look full of sadness—how many other couples, he wonders, have met at this exact spot over the centuries?—perhaps that is why she chose it for their meeting, maybe it has some romantic significance, the site of passionate trysts lost in history, in death, a legend among the inhabitants of the locality (the guidebook makes no mention of such things, of course, it is futile to look there for any references to romance or tragedy, though he does learn that the temple was the favourite project of an architect named Stoveen, and was built between 1755 and 1765, the same period during which Stoveen was engaged in redesigning the colonnaded south front of the house, masterfully executed in the antiquarian manner then gaining popularity, an enormous undertaking), and it gives him a strange, almost haunted feeling to be standing alone in such a place, hoping she will suddenly appear and put an end to his growing fear and suspicion, even though he recognizes the danger inherent in leaping to conclusions, of assuming the worst without adequate evidence, it only makes waiting and hoping more difficult to endure, certainly, and after all there is nothing to suggest that she has already been here and gone, nor is there any proof that she will not turn up in the very near future, he might hear her calling his name any minute now, her voice high and clear, unlike the sound of her voice the last time he talked to her, then it was the rasping voice of a frightened woman, which he found difficult to understand (did she say Venus or Artemis?), not a very promising sound, to be sure, there was no joy or excitement in it, only fear and tension, a person with a voice like that could easily have second thoughts, could easily panic and back out of the whole thing altogether, and God only knows what he'd do

then, after waiting this long, all these months of patience for nothing, just so that she can stand there in front of him and tell him it's all off, her voice still full of tension, growing defensive and then argumentative as he tells her she must go through with it this time once and for all, he won't wait any longer, he's had enough of waiting, and yes he is getting angry, his anger is justified, this is the breaking point, she had no right to invite him all the way here—to the Temple of Venus, of all places on this desolate ruined estate—just to turn him down, he won't let her go, he'd rather she was dead, or he was dead, or the whole world was dead, as dead as these cold stone pillars, let the water take her body, let the water drown her voice so full of fear, so full of panic, a person with a voice like that invites suspicion from those around her, someone who overheard her on the telephone, someone who might decide to follow her all the way here, and as he looks up from the pond and anxiously peers into the surrounding gloom he notices that the distant trees and bushes are transformed by the encroaching darkness, they could be anything, buildings, or columns, or people, or a single person standing there watching him, waiting for total darkness to fall, and as he backs toward the temple he tells himself that a slight breeze has come up and that is the reason for movement in the distance, just wind stirring the branches of trees (or *one* tree in particular? no other tree? does that make sense?), and in the gathering darkness shapes seem to move through the trees (or is it just one shape?) as if crossing the meadow in the direction of the lily pond, a trick of the light, a figment of the imagination, evoking memories of animals gliding through the woods at night, eyes gleaming.□

THE WILD BUNCH: SCOURGES OR MINISTERS?

When *The Wild Bunch* first appeared in the summer of 1969, it created something of a scandal with its raw, unleavened violence and hyper-realistic treatment of the western subject matter. This treatment seemed to scorn deliberately the usual dictates of the western genre, a traditional repository of American values which called for idealized if not mythological handling. Americans used to finding genteel gunfights and unambiguous morality in their westerns were shocked by Peckinpah's depiction of the west as a squalid, messily bloody place, marked not by the confrontation of good and evil but by layers of badness. Where the traditional western offered, at the safe distance of legend, a morality corresponding to the perceived moral clarity of the Second World War, Peckinpah's western reflected the moral ambiguity and discomfort of the war in Vietnam.¹ Setting his film in the early twentieth century rather than the idealized post-Civil War period common in earlier westerns, Peckinpah suggested an incipient but recognizably modern world that is still very much with us.

All this, of course, along with the Vietnam War, is no longer news. Since then a flood of

such "modern" westerns has made graphic violence, moral ambiguity, and the twentieth-century setting the virtual coordinates of a new genre, if not the clichés of our time. Certainly, *The Wild Bunch* no longer shocks us as it once did, and if anything its flaws reveal themselves in a sentimentality not unlike that of the traditional western. Much more apparent today than any revolutionary breaking with the past is the film's evident nostalgia for the world of the nineteenth century, which, as historians are quick to point out, ended not with the turn of the century but with the beginning of the First World War.² The modern world depicted in the film is indeed brutal and seemingly godless, with the appropriate ethical trappings, but it is counterpoised by the simulacrum of an earlier, morally simpler world.

One of the rather odd things about *The Wild Bunch* is its distinctly theological cast, permeating the film in spite of its realistic presentation. The society it depicts is obviously a modern Sodom and Gomorrah, whose ultimate destruction is made to feel at least divinely ordained. The famous violence takes on indeed an aura of ritual destruction or vastation, which is dramatically satisfying if morally ambiguous. The film suggests the paradox of a godless world in which the divine nonetheless threatens to intercede. The form of this intercession, however, is not obvious—it is certainly not what the hapless fundamentalists at the beginning of the film expect.

It is worth considering the story in the light of Fredson Bowers' discussion of the roles of "scourge" and "minister" as they pertain to *Hamlet*.³ One might object that a constituent of Elizabethan cosmology is inappropriately

¹The nature of this moral ambiguity was much debated at the time, and not always in the most helpful terms. A number of critics noted with some discomfort the aesthetic beauty of Peckinpah's violence. Comparisons were often made with *Bonnie and Clyde*, which made similar use of slow motion. Paul Schrader went so far as to argue that "in *The Wild Bunch* Sam Peckinpah stares into the heart of his own fascism. . . . The Westerners of *The Wild Bunch* have lost their code—only the fascism remains. The power of *The Wild Bunch* lies in the fact that this fascism is not peculiar to Peckinpah, but is American at heart." See Paul Schrader, "Sam Peckinpah Going to Mexico," *Cinema* 5.3 (1969): 22. This seems much too glib an argument, however. One is reminded of the reasons George Orwell tried to kick terms like "fascism" into the dustbin of "meaningless words." Paul Seydor is certainly right when he notes that such critics commit the rather naïve fallacy of "drawing a one-to-one relationship between the ideas that characters express and the artist's personal beliefs." See Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980) 102.

²It would not be surprising if future historians argue that the "bad century" ended spiritually during the past year.

³Fredson Bowers, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentiss-Hall Inc., 1968).

brought to bear upon a modern story, but we should remember that the traditional western ethic, which Peckinpah ranges to some extent against the modern world, suggests a cosmology as elaborate in its way as that of the Elizabethans, and in certain respects remarkably similar. Like the Elizabethans, nineteenth-century adherents of a "fire and brimstone" theology expected and looked for divine intervention in human affairs. Clint Eastwood's film *Pale Rider* is a more recent and more obvious dramatization of such thinking. That this intervention should make use of an ironic instrument is more typical of the Elizabethans perhaps than western Americans, but it sorts well with Peckinpah's twentieth-century perspective. Peckinpah's film at once satirizes western American religious belief in the form of the fundamentalist teetotallers and fulfills ironically its expectations with the fiery destruction of a clearly sinful society, brought on by the wild bunch as God's scourges and ministers. (We will consider later which of these terms is most appropriately applied here.)

Bowers points out that both scourges and ministers are agents of God's external, as opposed to internal, intervention in human affairs (85). Whereas internal intervention was appropriate for someone capable of being moved by conscience "to a state of grief and remorse," external intervention, in the form of natural or human revenge, was appropriate for those so deeply dyed in their sins that no inner redemption was possible (85). According to Bowers, Elizabethan belief held that when God did choose to punish crime with human agents, He

chose for his instruments those who were already so steeped in crime as to be past salvation. This was not only a principle of economy, but a means of freeing God from the impossible assumption that He would deliberately corrupt innocence . . . only a man already damned for his sins was selected, and he was called a scourge.

(85)

The position of the scourge, as Bowers notes, "was not an enviable one" (85); whether he realized his function or not—and as Hamlet's case suggests, this was not always possible—he was already condemned. The minister differs from the scourge in that he "is an agent who directly performs some good" which may

indeed involve "a direct retribution for evil by overthrowing it and setting up a positive good in its place" (Bowers 86). According to Bowers, "a retributive minister may visit God's wrath on sin but only as the necessary final act to the overthrow of evil, whereas a scourge visits wrath alone, the delayed good to rest in another's hands" (86). Bowers' paradigms are Richard III as the scourge of an England corrupted by the overthrow and murder of Richard II and Henry Richmond as the minister "exact[ing] public justice in battle on the tyrant Richard" (86). Hamlet's case, of course, is more difficult to determine, but we will return to it later in determining the status of the wild bunch themselves.

The first scene of the film leaves us in no doubt that the "bunch" are damned, and also that they are living in a world of the damned. We see them initially entering a small western town in Texas dressed as trail-worn soldiers. On their way to the bank, they pass a group of children seemingly engaged in innocent play, as well as a local temperance group holding a meeting, and their leader, in gentlemanly fashion, even offers assistance to a local woman. A sort of banal orderliness seems to reign in the town. Once inside the bank, however, they brandish their weapons with shocking suddenness. The seeming order breaks down into a vicious chaos. We realize also that the bandits have been led into a trap; bounty hunters lurk in readiness on the rooftops. The scene erupts now into one of incredible violence (balanced in the film only by the apocalyptic scene at the end) as the bandits try to shoot their way out of town. One bystander is shown being shot in the street from several directions at once. A bandit and his horse crash through a plate glass window. Ruthlessly, the bandits take women hostages, shoot innocent people, and escape with their "loot," which as it will turn out consists of washers planted by the bounty hunters. The lawmen, however, are shown to be equally vicious and destructive. And beyond this, they are possessed by *Schadenfreude*, gushing effusively at the evident sufferings of their victims. Even the children at the edge of town are seen now as vicious: they have been horribly enjoying themselves watching scorpions being overwhelmed and destroyed by red ants, and then burning them for sport. Indeed, women and children, the traditional innocents of westerns, do not fare well in this film. The chaos lingering beneath the surface of

order touches everyone here.

The sense of a violent and corrupt world, which this scene so vividly evokes with its striking realism, is what seems to break with the tradition of the idealized western, but in cunning ways the film comments on this tradition and actually carries it on. Certainly, the protagonists of most traditional westerns are not villains, but as the subtle allusion to *Jesse James* (the horse and rider crashing through a plate glass window) suggests, this was not invariably the case, even in the days of the Hollywood studios. A certain anarchic freedom from bourgeois constraints was always part of the tradition of the western, though rarely displayed in such a violent form. Actually, the wild bunch are likeable enough if we consider them personally and apart from their vocation. This paradox is also an inheritance from films like *Jesse James* and *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. The first scene of *The Wild Bunch* does not allow us, however, to sympathize completely with anyone. We must see the personal and likeable traits of the protagonists against the background of viciousness, and indeed only as they grow in contrast to the irredeemable viciousness and greed of many of those supposedly on the side of the law. Peckinpah intentionally muddies the moral waters, and in doing so he is able to disguise his continuance of the idealistic tradition. As failed bandits—the yardstick of the Puritan ethic is appropriate here—the wild bunch incur damnation; as *scourges*, they will ultimately effect God's will, the only way justice may prevail in a society that is thoroughly corrupt.

Enclosed by the apocalyptic violence of the first and last scenes, the middle scenes of the film, in their relatively peaceful way, introduce us to the protagonists, suggest a human dimension, and set up the more precise moral distinctions that come into play at the climax. The "bunch" embraces really two generations: the aging bandits Pike, Dutch, and Sykes, and a younger group composed of the Gorch brothers (Lyle and Tector) and the Mexican Indian Angel. A fourth younger bandit, the grandson of Sykes, received the death many of them might have envied, holding hostages in town to let the others escape, while a fourth older bandit, Deke Thornton, has been forced by an unscrupulous railroad man, Harrigan (perhaps a play on the notorious railroad financier, E.H. Harrison), to lead a scrofulous band of bounty hunters. The older characters appear to have lived too long,

while the younger ones have been born too late. For all of them, however, the American frontier, on which their way of life depended, has closed. Their one alternative, as Richard Schickel puts it, is to "attempt to ride right out of our history and into Mexico's, where they are not yet anachronisms."⁴

That Mexico will offer a real solution to their predicament, however, is open to doubt. As they cross the border into Mexico, Angel reverently exclaims: "Mexico lindo!" He is immediately countered by the Gorchs: "I don't see nothin' so lindo about it. It just looks like more of Texas." To this Angel retorts: "Ah, you have no eyes." As the product of a different culture, Angel is the only one with open possibilities. Where the others are politically indifferent, a condition of their situation as well as the anarchic western tradition, one part of Angel at least is politically committed to the still unsettled cause of his people. For Pike, loyalty does not go outside the family circle of the "bunch." As he puts it while trying to quell a rebellion of the younger men, "When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that, you're like some animal—you're finished . . . we're finished." His goal is "to make one good score and back off," and he will not allow political or moral considerations to affect him. To Mapache's German advisor, Commander Mohr, who would like to know "some Americans who did not share their government's naive sentiments," Pike comments: "We share very few sentiments with our government." To Pike, Mexico is a last frontier with the anarchic freedom where he may attempt his "score."

To Angel, who leads the bunch to the safety of his village, it is a homeland repressed by General Huerta and filled with political tensions he cannot resist. He insists that the bunch treat the villagers with respect, indicating a loyalty outside the group. Later, in Aqua Verde, the headquarters of the ruthless General Mapache, Angel refuses to help steal guns for the tyrant. When challenged by Sykes, who points out that there were no tears in his eyes for the ravaged American townsmen, he answers: "Ah, they were not my people. I care about my people, my village, Mexico." To Sykes' comment that when "you ride with us, your own business don't count," he responds: "Then I don't ride with

⁴Richard Schickel, "Mastery of the 'Dirty Western,'" *Film* 69/70, eds. Joseph Morgenstern and Stefan Kanfer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 151.

you." The others do not understand the positive force of Angel's political attitudes. Pike, for instance, considers him "a pain in the ass." When Angel challenges him ("Would you give guns to someone who kills your father? your mother?"), Pike answers simply: "Ten thousand cuts an awful lot of family ties." And yet Pike protects him (as a gang member) from the general, and Dutch even sympathizes as far as possible (that is, up to the point of risking his own skin) with Angel's cause. Indeed, it is Angel's inability to accept the anarchic "brotherhood among thieves" ethic in a Mexican context that propels the "bunch" into their final conflict. He cannot resist shooting his former girlfriend who has become the mistress of Mapache, an act which introduces a deadly disequilibrium into the relations of the "bunch" and the Mexicans. After this, a confrontation can be postponed but not avoided.

The society composed of the Mexican soldiers and their camp-followers, like that suggested by the bounty hunters and the railroad representative, is perhaps best described as loathsome. We first see Mapache, a Huerta lieutenant who is trying to set up an independent fiefdom in northern Mexico, riding in a bright red convertible, the color suggesting immediately the salaciousness that accompanies and characterizes him. We know already that he has seduced Angel's girlfriend after killing his parents. He is lecherous, murderous, and apparently in a constant state of drunkenness. Occupying himself with whores and champagne, Mapache evidently leaves the details of command to such obsequious advisors as his aide-de-camp, his "accountant" (a snake-like fellow who orders one of his own men shot in cold blood to impress the "gringos"), and two German army officers who are testing the possibility of extending German influence (this several years before the infamous Zimmermann telegram). Thus, the American bandits have moved from a corrupt "western" situation into what is clearly a colonial one, even more corrupt and marked by modern political tensions. When the "bunch" first sees Mapache, Dutch comments: "Generalissimo hell—he's just another bandit grabbing all he can for himself." Pike chips in cynically: "Like some others I could mention?" But Dutch refuses the comparison: "We ain't nothin' like him. We don't hang nobody." Mapache represents in an early form a type of petty tyrant all too familiar in the twentieth century, who may or may not

be, as Roosevelt once characterized Somoza, "our bastard." It is one of Peckinpah's most brilliant strokes to bring a typical modern devil into conflict with the outlaws of a vanishing era. Before seeing Mapache, the "bunch" has never seen an automobile. They are looking over the fence into our world. Later, the car will be used to drag the body of the tortured Angel around the village square. Indeed, Mapache's automobile is only one suggestion of the modern, industrial world which has closed the frontier and threatens violence on an industrial scale. The Maxim machine gun, which becomes the chief instrument of the apocalyptic finale, is another. The setting of *The Wild Bunch* touches the era of world wars, of mass torture, and of violent death as a commonplace.

As we mentioned before, women and children do not fare well in this film. In Starbuck, the scene of the first robbery attempt, the children delight in torturing scorpions and ants, while others imitate in their play the deadly violence of the adults. The Mexican children of Aqua Verde are also squalid and vicious. When the Americans first enter the town, Peckinpah has a close-up of a woman in military outfit suckling her baby under her bandolier. Virtually all the women, with children and without, are whores. Indeed, there is much joking about whores (the Gorches are comic boosters in this respect) throughout the film, but as the case of Angel's girlfriend suggests, the theme is also dealt with seriously. When Angel sees her making her way all gussied up to the general's table, he accosts her, but she rebuffs him, laughing in his face, claiming that she is "very happy" with Mapache. Seeing her with Mapache, Angel screams "puta" (whore) and shoots her through the heart. It is clear that she represents the rule and not an exception in Aqua Verde. Mapache replaces her effortlessly with one of many lookalike prostitutes. At first, the Americans try to avail themselves of the services of these girls (of course, Mapache gives them the leftovers from the group), but eventually the prostitutes ignite their disgust. Forced to hide from Thornton and the bounty hunters, the "bunch" returns to Aqua Verde, and despite the fact that Angel has been captured and tortured, Pike and the Gorches seek oblivion with some of the prostitutes. But the sight of a young whore with her baby crying in the next room turns Pike's stomach and confirms his decision to challenge Mapache. Even the Gorches are horrified by a girl who has apparently killed a small bird as

part of her "act," and they assent to Pike's "Let's go" with "why not?" In the end, Pike is killed by shots fired by a prostitute and a small boy.

Peckinpah goes to great lengths to present Aqua Verde in terms of Sodom and Gomorrah, a society so drenched in sin as to require violent retribution. The wild bunch, implicated in sin themselves, and with the exception of Angel uncommitted to any political cause, becomes ironically the instruments of retribution. As such, they clearly take on the roles of scourges. Not all the characters in the film are damned, however. The people of Angel's village, anxious to throw off the yoke of Mapache, are treated by Peckinpah with a reverence that many commentators have found overly sentimental. John Simon, for instance, calls the scene in Angel's village, where "everyone is singing a schmalzy Mexican song, . . . pure treacle."⁵ In his way Simon is right, of course, for Peckinpah does actually carry on the sentimentality of the traditional western, not only in this scene, but in the characters of Thornton, Sykes, Dutch, and even Pike himself to a degree.

Thornton, for instance, is the only one of the bounty hunters who can shoot straight, and we are left in no doubt that this is because, like his compatriots on the other side, he is of the old school and a real man. When Thornton and the bounty hunters find the bodies of the "bunch" after the slaughter, Thornton thoughtfully removes Pike's familiar old Colt 45, ironically still in its holster and unused in the modern, technological battle. Sensing the futility and corruption around him, Thornton finally quits the company of the ravenous bounty hunters and lets them ride off to their deaths at the hands of the revolutionaries from Angel's village. Sykes, who was left watching the horses during the Starbuck robbery because of his advanced age, quarrels frequently with the Gorches, but has the obvious respect of Pike and Thornton. "Dry gulched" by the bounty hunters, he does not participate in the bloody finale in Aqua Verde, but instead joins forces with the Mexican villagers, now in armed revolt because of the guns procured by Angel. The scene where they approach him with machetes drawn and Indian drums in the background is an obvious allusion to a similar scene in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*. Like Walter Huston in that film, he finds unexpectedly a new life by attaching himself to a foreign cause. As he tells Thornton

at the end of the film, inviting him to join also, "Me and the boys here got some work to do. It ain't like it used to be, but it'll do." Thornton's world weary laughter answers, in effect, "Why not?" As in *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, a wind storm blows up dustily over the efforts and illusions of the dead.

The revolutionary villagers, Sykes, and Thornton are the inheritors of the vastated society left behind by the wild bunch, and in so far as they too deliver retribution (to the bounty hunters, for instance) may be counted as the ministers of the story. Attached to the cause of revolution, their means of retribution "lie in some act of public justice, rather than in criminal private revenge" (Bowers 86). Whether or not the rest of the "bunch" may be similarly redeemed as ministers is open to question. As we have pointed out, their actions in the first scene, as well as their continued assertions of amoral values, seem clearly to have damned them to the role of scourges. The manner of their deaths, however, may offer some expiation of these sins. Leaving the whores, they go to Mapache and demand Angel's freedom. He responds by slitting Angel's throat before their eyes. At this point they finally act selflessly, turning their guns first on Mapache himself, and then interestingly on Commander Mohr, before beginning the general carnage. In the final gunfight, brilliant, beautiful, and devastating in its kind, the wild bunch and their enemies, the bad and the thoroughly evil, destroy each other. Stephen Farber, noting how this conclusion leaves us emotionally "drained" and arguing that Peckinpah "twists our response and forces us to pay a final tribute to [the wild bunch's] irreverence and their resilience," wonders what Peckinpah is saying here: "If he means to repel us by the life of violence, why that strangely sentimental finale?"⁶

Again, Bowers' discussion is illuminating. He points out that Hamlet, that ever difficult case, may be seen as both a scourge and a minister:

By stage doctrine [Hamlet] must die for the slaying of Polonius, and, . . . for that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern perhaps, the first in which he was inadvertently and the second consciously a scourge; and the penalty is being exacted. Since he cannot now ascend the throne over Claudius'

⁵John Simon, "Violent Idyll," *Film* 69/70 154.

⁶Stephen Farber, "Peckinpah's Return," *Film Quarterly* 23.1 (Fall 1969): 6.

body, all self-interest is removed. He has not plotted Claudius' death in cold blood, but seized an opportunity which under no circumstances he could have contrived by blood-revenge, to kill as a dying act of public justice a manifest and open murderer. . . . The restitution of right lies only in him.

(91)

Hamlet, through the final manner of his revenge and death, becomes, in Bowers' words, "a minister of providence who . . . like Samson, was never wholly cast off for his tragic fault and in the end was honored by fulfilling divine plan in expiatory death" (92). Taking all relevant

differences into consideration, we may still say something similar about the wild bunch. Their manifest faults condemn them as scourges, but they are at once redeemed by the selfless manner of their deaths and attain a tragic status. Indeed, the justice Peckinpah lets reign at the end of his film, bitter as it is in the best modern fashion, looks backward to a purposeful world where tragic sacrifice was possible rather than forward to the meaninglessness of a century where God has been little in evidence and everything has been permitted.□

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THE RETURN OF THE CINEMA: CANNES 1991

THE FESTIVAL AND THE MARKET

This year's festival opened in drizzle and confusion, some of which was a function of what has been happening in the cinema during the past year. The unique size and composition of Cannes (really five festivals at the same time) gives it a voracious appetite for current product; it needs at least seventy new films to showcase. Although this ended up being one of the stronger festivals since sometime in the 1980s, the road getting there was difficult. The collapse of Soc Camp, to use the term coined by Bulgarian director Georgi Dyulgerov, has given film festivals a new set of headaches. "Before," said Pierre-Henri Deleau, responsible for the *Quinzaine*, "they either showed us what they had produced or they didn't, and that was the end of that. Now, it's total confusion. In the old days censorship used to get in the way of the kind of talents we were looking for. Now, the talents are there, but finding them is like the quest for the holy grail."¹ For decades film festivals have relied on the consistent core of quality art films made by these artists. This lack of consistency had serious ramifications. Soc Camp films, whether co-productions or no, ranged from the outstanding to the truly appalling.

The problem isn't restricted to the East. The world is full of countries where a modified socialism rules national film production via national film institutes, umbrella funding agencies, ministries of culture, or the like. As the economies of countries like Sweden have foundered, so has the Swedish Film Institute's ability to support the cinema along traditional lines.² But those countries too had been dependable if often boring sources. Whenever audiences had the choice, they voted with box-office admissions to watch imported products

(as in ex-West Germany, where only two out of the national top twenty-five in 1990 were German, and these two were basically children's films).³

So in the long run the new look of forced competition may benefit moviegoers, who will see more and more films, particularly co-productions, from those countries, like France, where aggressive co-production strategies coupled with sophisticated economic legislation have as the end result the funding of more successful products. But the initial concern was that there were simply fewer films to go around.

In fact, there was probably more of interest this year, so much so that critics and writers had an enormously difficult time getting it all to make sense. Pierre Rival spoke of Cannes as being a "festival of transition," and being at a "crossroads," but it was hard to see exactly what this meant other than the continued dominance of the French and the Americans, the collapse of Soc Camp, and the inevitable aging of successive generations of artists.⁴ In referring to Cannes as

²See "Down But Not Out in Stockholm," *MPI*, Cannes Preview Issue, 14. The extent to which the state supports the cinema in countries like Italy is not well understood. Hank Werba sums up the situation aptly when he speaks of the Italian government's desire to "get Italian cinema off welfare subsidies," in "Looking for a Pizza the Action," *MPI* 16 May 1991: 11.

³These figures might be interpreted to imply that European audiences are being "colonized" by North American products, so it is worth noting that the two German films shown in competition were in the bottom five of the three trade paper juries (maintained by *Moving Pictures International*, *Screen International*, and *Le Film Français*, which publish daily magazines during the festival). For German box-office data, see "The German Market," *MPI*, Cannes Preview Issue, 158.

⁴In his wrap-up essay about the festival in the weekly issue of *Le Film Français* 17-24 May 1991: 1. Hereafter referred to as *LFF*.

¹As quoted in *Moving Pictures International*, Cannes Preview Issue, May 1991: 44. Hereafter referred to as *MPI*. Unless otherwise noted, all references to professional trade magazines are to the *daily* issues or special issues published at Cannes, not to regularly scheduled issues.

an Anglo-French affair, Rival echoed this year's current buzzword, "Frenchification," the idea that Cannes is too French, that "Cannes has become such a French/Anglo-Saxon affair. If you look at the French films that are included in the festival, it's evident they applied double standards."⁵

This is true as far as it goes, but the problem is that media coverage at Cannes tends to have no memory of itself and its own dire predictions. When the American Film Market opened up in 1980, it was widely predicted that this meant the end of the Cannes film market, since the AFM, "the organizers believed, would somehow diminish the value of the Cannes market or perhaps do away with it entirely."⁶ What actually happened, however, in a story that started breaking during the 1991 festival, was an out-and-out slugfest between the AFM and MIFED, as it is the Milan-based market that is faced with AFM competition, not Cannes.⁷

But there were some trends begun, and some trends continued, regardless of how unremarked by the media. One that was generally acknowledged, and will play the very devil with serious criticism, is the growing number of obviously unfinished films. The reason for this is economics. Fewer and fewer people can afford to let a film sit in the can until May. So on the one hand the festival finds itself

running up against unfinished projects. In 1991, for the first time in over a decade, there were changes in the official program after it had gone to the printer. When it became obvious that Peter Greenaway wasn't going to complete his latest film, *Farewell, Stranger*, a German film directed by the Turkish artist Tefvik Baser was moved from *Un Certain Regard* into the competition.

Although it was disappointing only to get to see one reel of the Greenaway film, the real problem is the film that is in shape to show, but hasn't gone through a final cut. Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* was shown in what was clearly not going to be the final cut, sans final credits, and with a press book that left the director's name off. Although this was the most extreme instance, there were many cases where it seemed quite probable that what was being screened for the press was not quite done. Now there have always been occasional problems like that: Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America* was shown at Cannes in a long version with scenes in a quite different order from the theatrical release. But everyone knew this was the case.

But what about the numerous small bloopers in Angelopoulos' *The Suspended Step of the Stork*? Are those the understandable accompaniment of a not quite finished film, or signs that this important director, like some of his colleagues, has just gotten sloppy? Whatever the reason, we can probably look forward to more and more preliminary versions of films being shown at festivals.

Another trend has even more important repercussions for criticism. Several years ago a good deal of attention was paid to international co-productions and what they might portend for the future. 1991 has proven that they are here to stay, so much so that it is almost impossible to "nationalize" many new films along familiar political boundaries. What provenance is a film like *Malina*, by a German director, but shot in Vienna from an Austrian work, in French with an all-French cast? If this trend continues it will fundamentally change the cinema, which will become a universal language in a way quite unintended by those who first invented the concept. Even at this stage some fascinating problems have emerged.

Consider the case of Chakhnazarov's *The Assassin of the Tsar*, for which there is a Russian dialogue and an English dialogue version. Now Italians have accepted dubbing for years, and don't seem troubled by the lack of lip

⁵Matthijs van Heijningen, as quoted in "Culture Shock," *Screen International* 10 May 1991: 16. Hereafter referred to as *SI*. The problem is that the French, with the "most structured film industry in Europe when it comes to financial aid and friendly legislation," are taking the European lead in co-productions, with stakes in Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronica*, von Trier's *Europa*, Angelopoulos' *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, and even Italian films like *Il Portaborse* and *Bix*, a film being touted as yet another RAI coup (quote from Gwen Douguet, "French, Franc, and Fighting," *MPI* 17 May 1991: 34).

⁶Hy Hollinger, "American Companies Flock to Cannes," *Variety* 6 May 1987: 13. Hollinger went on to argue that although "Cannes seems to be indestructible," the AFM had taken "quite a bit of the edge" off of Cannes. I was skeptical of this at the time, and argued that the real fight would be between AFM and Mifed.

⁷The reasons why this is so, and why AFM is in serious trouble as a result, are detailed in "AFM vs MIFED," *Variety* 12 May 1991: 9. See also James Ulmer, "Mifed Fires Marketing Salvo," *Hollywood Reporter* 14 May 1991: 1. Hereafter referred to as *HR*. At the end of the festival there was "No Clear Winner in the AFM-Mifed War," as *Variety* headlined (18 May 1991).

synchronization and the overall deadening of sound that results. But in this film Malcolm McDowell's work is central. He and co-star Oleg Yankovsky carry the film for long periods. Which is worse: McDowell's dubbed Russian or Yankovsky's dubbed English? The result is one of those unanticipated and inexplicable disasters for a film where we spend an enormous amount of the time looking at large talking heads.

Finally, a purely aesthetic trend: The main films this year, regardless of their lasting quality, were an interesting group whose commonality, asserted across all the major sections of the festival, was a return to the ambitious and anti-narrative film of the 1970s, and this can be seen in three distinct ways. Films like *Malina* and *Cold Moon* marked a return to the non-narrative and problematic films that first became fashionable with *Last Year at Marienbad*. Other, more traditional narratives like *Homicide*, *Assassin of the Tsar*, and *Guilty by Suspicion*, dealt with the old-fashioned big picture social action subjects which dominated the screen until their replacement by the more propagandistic cinema of the 1980s. A third group, films such as *Riff-Raff* and *A Little Bit of Soul*, were also a throwback, but to the documentarist and realist cinema that began to bring the marginalized or underdeveloped world to first world consciousness at about the same time.

Cannes's size and complexity, coupled with the explosion of media coverage, the graying of the world's film critics, and the perplexities outlined above, causes critical reactions as predictable as the perennial stories about the collapse of the film market. Once again the films were seen as an inferior lot, proof of the collapse of the art form. As John Harkness put it: "Returning to the apartment after the evening competition screening, I would hear the entertainment reporters on CNN—after discoursing on the parties and the latest Madonna tidbit—announce that the market was slow and that the selection wasn't very good this year. That is, they'd heard that the selection wasn't very good this year" (MPI 20 May 1991: 6).

That sounds more of a dig at reporters than it really is: Cannes is so large that people covering the celebrities and the parties aren't able to see many movies. Even people covering the movies don't have time to see them all, as Harkness admits, going on to list two reasons why this year was an excellent festival: the opening film

was actually good (Mamet's *Homicide*), and there was an enormous amount of critical disagreement about the best films, with the three trade paper juries being split among Kieslowski's *The Double Life of Veronica*, Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*, von Trier's *Europa*, Lee's *Jungle Fever*, with isolated enthusiasm for Luchetti's *Il Portaborse*, Bagdadi's *Hors la Vie*, and Angelopoulos' *The Suspended Step of the Stork*.⁸ Even in the lesser films, those everyone thought terrible, there were cinematic sparks that made them worth seeing, Werner Schroeter's *Malina* being a good case in point. This was the first time in a decade that one could find something notable about every film shown in the official section of the festival.

The official sidebar section, *Un Certain Regard*, has gotten steadily stronger over the years, and this year was no exception to the trend. John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* was an impressive debut film, far stronger than any of the first films that have traditionally been shown in the official section, and there was a surprisingly strong film from Poland, Wojciech Marczewski's *Evasion du Cinéma "Liberté."*

This year the *Quinzaine* attracted less attention than in past years, probably because the compression of its screenings into the strained *Salle Debussy* and the commercial cineplex *Les Arcades* (a horrific site) made it difficult to cover films shown there. 1985 and 1986 were the peaks of the *Quinzaine*, but it offered some very respectable work this year. Ken Loach's *Riff-Raff*, which, along with Jacquelyn Moorhouse's *Proof* and Sean Penn's *The Indian Runner*, got most of the attention, but there were two extremely fine films that showed Deleau's talents at running the *Quinzaine* at their peak: Ademir Kenovic's *A Little Bit of Soul* and Viatcheslav Krichtofovitch's *Adam's Rib*. Even the *Semaine*, which in recent years has fallen on very hard times, was better this year. Its opening film, Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels*, was the sort of unknown hit that has marked the *Semaine* at its best since it was started decades ago.

THE JURY AND THE LOSERS

Although jury awards always cause

⁸Agnes Varda's *Jacquot de Nantes*, another highly-rated film, was shown out of competition, as was Kurosawa's *Rhapsody in August*, Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, Mel Brooks' *Life Stinks*, and, of course, the Madonna film, which the official French schedule persisted in calling *In Bed with Madonna*, which about summed it up.

controversy, with the exception of *The Mission*, the jury's awards have historically been judicious choices conforming to a reasonable body of critical opinion. Recent years have seen an unfortunate shift whereby the president of the jury has appeared to have carte blanche with regard to the selection of the overall winner, usually selecting a film that fits his own image. Thus Bertolucci selected *Wild at Heart* and Wenders picked *sex, lies, and videotape*.

Roman Polanski, president of the 1991 jury, took this trend as far as it could go. In selecting the Coen brothers' *Barton Fink*, he went further afield from critical consensus than previous jury presidents, and managed to impose his will to the unprecedented degree that he awarded the prize for best *mise en scène* and best actor to the same film. This meant that only the briefest of nods was given to any of the inside choices, Jacques Rivette for *La Belle Noiseuse*, Lars von Trier for *Europa*, and Krzysztof Kieslowski for *The Double Life of Veronica*. In the only really sensible decision the jury made, Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, which Vincent Canby trumpeted in the *International Herald Tribune* as the "one clearly popular favorite for the Palme d'Or" (18-19 May 1991: 6), was completely left out, except for a hastily made-up award for best supporting actor.

French critical reaction, led by *Le Monde*, was justifiably sarcastic, although it was surprising to hear the usually placid Lars von Trier casting aspersions on Polanski's height and sending his award back. Whatever the merits of the jury's decision, it was a sorry end to the best festival in many years. There was a sizeable group of prize contenders, any one of which would have won a substantial prize in any other year.

The award is all the more strange in that *Barton Fink* is not a particularly good film, although clever and fitfully funny. In an interview, the Coen brothers characterized it as having "comic elements but not the racy mold of *Raising Arizona*. It's more a long and boring comedy. . . . We could start a whole new genre" (*SI* 18 May 1991: 17). Although those remarks were supposedly ironic, they sum up the film. *Fink* is a New York playwright who's just done a successful play. He has a chance to go to Hollywood and write scripts. He goes, holes up in a strange old hotel, meets an earnest insurance salesman and a drunken novelist turned scriptwriter, falls for his "secretary," Audrey, and gets himself into trouble. The film isn't really about Hollywood, although it's

always in the background, since most of the action is inside the hotel, which the Coens photograph with the same kind of sinister flair that they exhibited in *Blood Simple*.

But *Blood Simple* had a plot, and a sinister one at that. The visuals went with the story. Here they seem simply an end in themselves, as when we see the key of a typewriter striking the paper from the viewpoint of the paper. It's interesting. But this is basically a short student film done on a grand scale, with a hodgepodge of borrowed styles and very few sustaining ideas. About an hour through the film, it lurches off in a strange new direction, as though the Coens couldn't figure out where to take their story line and so they came up with a new one.

They do have one good joke, although it's a rather tasteless one. *Fink* meets a fellow *littérateur*, obviously supposed to be Faulkner, who spends his time completely and screamingly drunk with his "secretary" looking after him. It then emerges Audrey has written his novels as well. There are some good lines, and studio boss Jack Lipnick gets some very good speeches about running a studio of the kind that makes film buffs howl with condescending pleasure. There's a lot of condescension here. *Fink* condescends to almost everyone, but he himself is a repulsive and pathetic character. Although John Turturro, who nailed the award for best actor, gives him a wonderful sense of schizophrenia, as though the character is aware that he's weirdly repulsive, the script doesn't do much with this.

The Coens, like Madonna (at Cannes for *Truth or Dare*, which the festival laconically retitled *In Bed with Madonna*), have gotten very good at merchandising themselves. The Press Kit has an old style circular color picture of them done in the style one usually associates with coffee table magazines intended as a memento, and concludes with the following: "their star has never burned as brightly as it has done for the debut of their latest cinema collaboration." That captures the circularity of the film entirely: it's so busy trying to be both clever and condescending that everything else gets muddled.

The chief loser in this was Spike Lee. Two years ago the jury bypassed *Do the Right Thing* in favor of *sex, lies, and videotape*, much to the fury of Lee, and, to give him credit, to critics like Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, as well. In general Lee has done less well with the European critics, particularly the French, who seemed

unimpressed by *Jungle Fever*, which the *Film Français* press jury found to be only an average film. Lee isn't the first or the only director to find himself in the position of going to Cannes several years running and walking away empty-handed: there's Godard, and, descending to a much lower level, Alan Parker and Marco Ferreri. But Lee is a director whose self-proclaimed personal feuds with the press and other black media personalities have increasingly eclipsed his movie-making talents.⁹

This unfortunate contretemps obscures the explosion in black film this past year. By the end of 1991, nineteen feature films will have been released in the United States that are, one way or another, black films, and a reasonable sampling of these were shown at Cannes. *Boyz in the Hood* was the best of these.¹⁰ This was his first film, and it shows the youth of its director in ways both good and bad. On the bad side, Singleton has problems setting up his shots. Frequently the camera seems in the wrong place as the action inside the shot begins to develop, and he's not helped by his supporting actors, many of whom seem to move in yet a third direction as the camera and the action go their separate ways.

But Singleton has written a fine script. It takes a young boy in South Central Los Angeles and shows him first a boy, and then as a young man who's been propelled towards maturity and responsibility by his father (Larry Fishburne in a strong performance). It's a powerful film about the attempts to survive and grow up in a violent and crime-ridden society. Singleton can learn all he needs to learn about technique without too much trouble, because on the basis of this film he clearly has the talent in scriptwriting and directing that it takes to make movies.

He has some major competition both in Isaac Julien and Bill Duke. Julien is the young British director whose *Young Soul Rebels* was shown in the *Semaine*, which, after many years of

somnolence, finally seems to be getting some interesting films. This is a more violent film in some respects, and its characters are much more marginalized than those in Singleton's film, but the integration of story line and music is first-rate; Robert Osborne's comment that Julien is much better than Lee is a fair one. In terms of raw talent, there's not much comparison between his first Cannes entry, *She's Gotta Have It*, and the debut films of Julien and Singleton.

Bill Duke is not exactly a newcomer. He's been directing in American television for some time, and he's been acting as well, notably in two Schwarzenegger films, *Predator* and *Commando*. So his background is solidly commercial, and *A Rage in Harlem*, shown in the official section in competition, is a solidly commercial film, a period piece set in Harlem of the 1950s, and based on the novel by Chester Himes. Although the film could stand some more editing, Duke has a major cast: Gregory Hines, Forrest Whittaker, Danny Glover, and Robin Givens.¹¹ Although the mixture of



An aggressive ministry. Rage in Harlem.

violence and humor may not be to everyone's taste, and the plot gets far too scrambled, this is definitely the best thing done about Harlem in the 1950s, the film that *Harlem Nights* should have been but wasn't. In a festival full of coincidental pairings, it is interesting that Singleton and Duke both deal with an exclusively black society, one in which whites have an only peripheral presence. For better or for worse, the black experience in America has created a rich cultural and artistic community most of whose past and much of whose present

⁹There is a surprisingly cogent summary of these in the interview with Lee in *Playboy* (July 1991: 51-68), which also refers to the origins of the Whoopi Goldberg quarrel, something that can't have been a great help to Lee, since she was on the jury.

¹⁰Duane Byrge called it a "booming, heartslam of a film" (*HR* 15 May 1991: 4), and *Variety* praised Singleton's direction as "thoroughly confident and well-paced, if straight forward" (15 May 1991: 4), while John Marriott predicted the film "is likely to become a global smash" (*SI* 16 May 1991: 18).

¹¹Kirk Honeycutt spoke of "tangled plot lines" and the sort of action where "blood often drowns out the laughs," but found it an "exhilarating" film (*HR* 14 May 1991: 5).

is the result of separateness from white society. Singleton and Duke seem interested in exploring the past and present of that society, and in differing ways present works that remind us of its inherent richness and dignity, one made no less powerful by being forced.

So the difference between these directors and Lee is not just a question of cinematic talent, but also a question of the choice of subject. Lee at this point seems to have staked out for himself a very narrow strip of territory, as once again his film is exclusively concerned with race relations. In *Jungle Fever* the protagonist is a successful architect who gets involved with his lower-class Italian secretary. His wife and her father aren't too happy about this. Their reactions are the film. Lee sets up the two lovers with a series of late office work sessions that practically dissolve into one another, as though he's trying to get through this as fast as possible to get to the



Wesley Snipes and Spike Lee. *Jungle Fever*.

nasty stuff, like a porno film in reverse, and he doesn't seem much interested in the other characters at all. The Italians, as usual, come across like a particularly obnoxious set of Neanderthals. But the blacks in the film don't fare much better. Flip's father is an implacably religious bigot whose response to his other son's drug problem is to kick him out of the house, while his mother treats both sons like little kids.

Lee doesn't seem to like people, regardless of their color (in this sense his feuds with other media personalities and the press are a fair indicator of his artistic interests). He needs

characters, and actors, because he has to have someone on camera to voice his ideas about race relations, and he gives them funny lines. But Lee can't resist setting his characters up for psychic pratfalls which he can feel smug about throughout the rest of the film.

In interviews and at the press conference, Lee expounded on his belief that blacks and whites were sexually attracted to one another, and that for blacks in particular, whites represented a kind of ultimate sexual goal. It is always difficult to tell with Lee whether he believes what he's saying or is simply trying to rouse his audience. But ironically, for all of Lee's ethnocentricity, his attempts to insert politically correct phrases into the mouths of his characters, he's starting to look more and more like a black Woody Allen. There's the same dislike of his characters, the same contempt for the niceties of the script, and the same inner confusion, which has increasingly led Allen to act like a philosopher rather than a filmmaker. There's also the same fixation with New York, as though Lee still has the ludicrous notion that it is a microcosm of American society. And there are the same cutesy attempts to be "cinematic" by doing something wildly distracting with the camera, as when, in *Jungle Fever*, he positions the camera below and in front of a couple walking down the street so that they seem to be floating rather than walking.

Most reviewers were impressed by Lee's technique, and none of them asked why or to what end it was being used. Probably because the answer would have been negative. Like the desire to have music tracks underlaid for every scene, it seems to represent an overriding emphasis on the more formalistic aspects of the cinema, the same problem which made *She's Gotta Have It* ultimately fall apart.¹²

Another way of putting it would be to say that Lee has become an American socialist-realist. The schematic plot, with every action

¹²The *Variety* reviewer liked the technical parts, but criticized the extreme views presented as well as the lack of "fever" (17 May 1991: 2). Robert Osborne confined himself to a mostly descriptive review which ended with an enigmatic comment: the film wasn't "likely to cause any box office stampedes, but it's an A-1 endeavor, and further proof that Spike Lee is continuing to grow as a persuasive filmmaker" (*HR* 17 May 1991: 5). Only the French seemed troubled by the racism problem. See the interview in *Studio*, a French daily published at the festival, which features an enormous amount of feedback from festival participants outside the media core (18 May 1991: 10).

inserted to advance a political point, so that the characters have no real self, is a giveaway. So is the development of the action in cartoon form. When Flip's brother comes into the kitchen to ask his mother for a hundred dollars, you know she will give it to him, that his father will break in on them, that he's lying. There's no depth, no sophistication, and no surprises.

Compare this with the opening of *Boyz in the Hood*, when the young hero is suspended from school for fighting. His mother is openly hostile on the phone to the idiotic teacher, but then turns on the boy, presents him with the signed promise he made that he wouldn't get in any fights, and ships him off to his father to raise. In this scene there are surprises within surprises, and Singleton keeps the scene going right on through to when the mother drops the son off, and you can see their pain at having to part.

Of the two other American entries, Irwin Winkler's *Guilty by Suspicion* was also a work of impeccably socialist-realist construction, with the attacks on the Hollywood film community by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee portrayed in static black and white fashion. The good guys are being persecuted by the bad guys, and Winkler's film makes the lines so clear that whatever drama there is collapses.¹³

In general, while criticizing the dramatic tensions in the film, critics tended to accept the portrayal of events as being historically correct. The idea of the moral innocence of the Hollywood film people who were persecuted has, like the innocence of the Rosenbergs, passed into liberal political folklore, where it is likely to remain firmly rooted. The problem is, that although in all of these cases—HUAC, McCarthy, Hiss and Chambers, the Rosenbergs—the prosecutors were either procedurally faulty, morally reprehensible, the worst sort of political slime, or all three, they had a point. As a new generation of more sober and objective scholars have taken over, and as more information has been declassified, or leaked (as in Peter Wright's *Spycatcher*), a much more troubling picture emerges.

It is an unhappy picture which mixes hardcore communists who were definitely working to destroy the American democracy with a much larger group of naive leftists, 1930's

style socialists, and the like. It is also a troubling picture, and Winkler simply leaves it all out, resurrecting the folkloric approach, in which everyone being persecuted was either factually or morally innocent, particularly his hero, played by Robert De Niro. In true socialist-realist fashion, De Niro is the apolitical Westerner who only gradually learns that the private life is controlled by political processes. One can't blame De Niro for this, either. In his interviews at the festival he showed a degree of insight absent from the film itself.¹⁴



De Niro and Scorsese as directors. *Guilty by Suspicion*.

Doubtless Winkler feels that he is purveying the truth—artists are often remarkably blind to facts—just as Spike Lee apparently has a set of sincere beliefs which come rather close to racism. But both directors have deliberately chosen to make films which are “realistic,” works which attempt to pass themselves off as slices of life served up on the screen in the “this is the way it really is” mode. As such, they have to be able to take this kind of criticism, and they can't. Of course socialist-realist art was dictated by a central authority. If you didn't conform, you lost your job, possibly your livelihood, and maybe even your life. What we have here therefore is socialist-realism by auto-suggestion, art on the cheap.

The other American film, *Homicide*, which Harkness correctly identified as the first serious opening film in recent memory, is a more intriguing sort of failure. In recent years Chicago playwright David Mamet has become more involved in the cinema, both as scriptwriter (for

¹³Duane Byrge called the film a “dramatically lack luster personal depiction” (*HR* 17 May 1991: 4), while a somewhat more favorably inclined *Variety* reviewer admitted the film lacks “dramatic tension” (18 May 1991: 3).

¹⁴See the interview in *Studio* (17 May 1991: 9), in which De Niro talks about working with Elia Kazan, who of course did turn over names to the committee. “I know that it was a very hard time for him. . . . It is easy to hate him [McCarthy] today.”

Brian De Palma's *The Untouchables*), and as a director with *House of Games* in 1987. Unlike most playwrights who get into scriptwriting, he comes up with good premises. Joe Mantegna, who has been in all three of Mamet's films, plays Bob Gold, a homicide inspector who finds himself in the midst of a heady racial mixture of black violence, Jewish conspiracy victims, and internal police tensions. The idea of Gold's discovery of his Jewishness as he investigates the killing of an old Jewish shopkeeper, and how this discovery destroys his only real identity, that of a cop, seems promising, as does Mamet's rather explicit handling of black anti-Semitism.

But Mamet as a scriptwriter has a surprisingly terrible ear for dialogue, and as director he can't seem to set the scenes up in such a way that the lines actually work. The film opens with a nice piece of action footage as the FBI storms an apartment, but then Mamet drops back into a kind of television police movie format with lots of closeups of men hurling obscenities at one another, and little other activity on the set. What we end up with is a *Miami Vice* sense of pacing, absent its visual style and the laid-back presence. Roger Deakins, who's photographed everything from *Sid and Nancy* to *Air America*, gives the film a certain visual flair, although he has a weirdly distracting habit of suddenly reversing the camera's point of view. But it's all too static, and too pretentiously portentous, as though Mamet has been reading too much Sartre.

It's certainly a far better effort than the other effort by a leading man of the theater. The most convincing proof that film is an art comes at Cannes when someone brings in a film that the artist is convinced is important, significant, major, and learns the unpalatable truth that it isn't. It's like sending a Trabant to the Paris-Dakar rally. This year's Trabant was Peter Sellars' *The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez*, the only film at Cannes to have media hype built into its Press Kit (which made the disaster somewhat comic). In making the film, Sellars had gotten a long and flattering piece from Peter Catalano in the *Los Angeles Times* (13 Dec. 1990: F1), the substance of which was how flattered the peons of the film world should be that the marvelous director of all of those great and important operas had deigned to the camera—not film, which had all that silly dialogue, but just the camera. He, Peter Sellars, was going to make a silent film! With only music! This medium was full of new

discoveries just waiting for him: "There are only three times in the film that the camera moves out of seven hundred shots." The result of all this was, what the *Variety* reviewer called, with the paper's usual charity, "a student film out of control" (16 May 1991: 4). Perhaps, although the Coen film merited the line better. At least the Coens are students with real talent.

As though to provide a large and sarcastic exclamation point to those judgments, *Un Certain Regard* also screened a short and mostly silent film, *Comrade Tchalkov Traverses the North Pole*, which illustrated exactly those virtues, such as control, mastery of the medium, rigorous self-discipline, that Sellars so abundantly lacks. *Tchalkov* is an outrageous satire directed at all of those old Soviet epics in which the communists discovered and invented everything, terrorized the bourgeoisie, and in general demonstrated their total superiority over the West, all done in a medium which, like the Trabant, could only flourish where there was no possibility of comparison.

In previous years at Cannes the works of older and more established directors have been the biggest single disappointment of the festival, with depressing regularity. This year was something of an exception, with only Marco Ferreri's *The Flesh* a sad monument to artistic falling off. The intellectual conceit of this film is that a man becomes so taken with a woman that he falls into anthropophagy. Intellectually the problem is that he seems to believe that this conceit is something new; it's been played around with throughout the century, and it is disconcerting to see Ferreri, who always pretends to be a terrifying intellectual, revealing how truly ignorant he is of the wilder trends in modernist thought.

What we get is a kind of sleazily vulgar attitude toward sexual behavior, in which the protagonist, Paolo, who plays in a nightclub, picks up Francesca, a lush bimbo with whom he becomes inexplicably infatuated. There are all sorts of scenes which the director obviously thinks are terrifically witty, but which the *Variety* reviewer correctly termed an "indulgent exercise" that is "only fitfully amusing," the whole thing filmed with an astonishing technical ineptitude. Ferreri has always tried to offend audiences, but the truth is that the decades have passed him by, and his "intentional tastelessness has lost much of its shock value" (*Variety* 14 May 1991: 3).

Such criticism might seem to be overly harsh

about what could be simply a rather vulgar little comedy, but it carries with it an overlay of pretentiousness: "The title is connected to the image of this girl, Francesca, who figures in a totemic way the image of the flesh. The title also has to be taken for its religious meaning, the Flesh of God, and within the idea of sin, the sin of flesh."¹⁵ When one hears all of this discourse, the actual film is quite a shock, because, as Robert Osborne points out, "most of it fails to communicate, because the most that splashes off the screen is a sort of tongue-in-cheek bedroom romp with a nasty finish."¹⁶

What appears to have happened with filmmakers of this generation is that they have not only become insulated from their audiences, but they have also lost respect for their craft. Ferreri has certainly become insulated from his audience. One of his more widely quoted remarks was that this film was intended for a new audience, "cinema's only audience," by which Ferreri meant twenty-year olds who only have sex on their minds.¹⁷ There's nothing erotic about this film, which Osborne describes as about as stimulating as "watching fingernails being clipped."

Twenty years ago, with films like *Touche Pas la Femme Blanche* and *La Grande Bouffée*, Ferreri had a sense of where his audience was. He also had some visual senses as well. *Touche Pas* was an interesting film because of the visual conceits employed: they alone made the film worth watching. But *Flesh* is so sloppy that when Paolo walks out on the beach, the day is cloudy or sunlit in some random pattern. Nobody cared enough about what was going to end up on the screen to notice the shifts in the sky. Perhaps Ferreri feels that the young don't notice. If so, he should try to watch what they're watching: he could learn some things both about cinematography and eroticism.

These comments reveal a false pride in one's intellectual accomplishments as an artist. What's at the bottom here is a kind of groundless sense

of artistic and cultural superiority which means the ruination of an entire generation of Europe's older directors. Their audiences, which were never numerous in the grand scheme of the cinema, were by definition composed of intellectuals. Why insult them by treating them as visual and cultural illiterates?

The truth seems more likely to be that artists like Ferreri, whose instruments had few strings to begin with, have been unable to keep up with the times. Agnes Varda's tribute to the late Jacques Demy, *Jacquot de Nantes*, provided an ironic reminder of this. Here was a marvelously sentimental film about the young Demy's childhood in Nantes, filmed on location, and using a wonderful trio of young boys to portray Demy himself. In places the film is sloppy, and the portrait of Demy is somewhat unconvincing, but when Varda turns to his early interest in making movies, the film is sensational. We see the young Demy scraping the emulsion off a reel of old 9.5 mm film stock, and then placing crude images in the frames by hand.

Here was this boy in Nantes, whose father ran a garage, and he managed to rediscover all of the component parts of the cinema on his own, to the point where he built his own miniature sets and learned how to give his small figures the illusion of movement. Not without struggle and sacrifice, either. We see his mistakes and marvel at his ingenious persistence as he mounts his tiny camera on a roller skate and pulls it along a track to get the effects he needs.

Less successful is Varda's attempt to show how scenes in Demy's childhood led him to similar scenes in his movies. It's not that they didn't, but the point seems gratuitous, which takes us back to the argument about Ferreri. At this point the only people interested in Demy are interested in the cinema, and know his films well, and in *Jacquot* they have to, because Varda never identifies the excerpts from his films when she makes the transition to them.

We know we're watching one of his films, even if we forget the title, because we move from black and white to color (and there's also the tip-off that Catherine Deneuve looks younger). So maybe we don't need the titles after all, although this will be a nasty problem for American audiences, because few of Demy's films are still in circulation. Most people have only seen the 1963 *Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, and this film is increasingly problematic because of print troubles. But if Varda presumes we know all this, why does she plaster the film with large

¹⁵From an interview with Ferreri reprinted in the Press Kit 4.

¹⁶Osborne opens his review with a brief commentary on the Press Kit, of which this is the conclusion (HR 14 May 1991: 6). Ferreri's film was toward the bottom of the jury choices of all three trade papers.

¹⁷In a widely quoted interview to which Osborne refers, as does Hank Werba (MPI 13 May 1991: 12).

arrows indicating the transitions? And, back to the original point, doesn't she realize that by now everyone knows just how complicated the relation between art and life is? We've only had two centuries of literary biographies to make the point.

The problem is not Jacques Demy, who's a wonderful artist clearly driven as a child to make films. The *Variety* reviewer observed that "Demy's style of cinema went out of fashion in the '70s and '80s" (13 May 1991: 4). I'm not so sure. The case could be made that the spirit of Demy lies behind all those spectacular films and experiments in animation which we see so regularly now, that he is in some global sense the true forerunner of Spielberg, Lucas, *et al.*, the current generation of cinema craftsmen, artists more interested in the technical means of telling beautiful stories than in the stories themselves.

The problem is the mindset of filmmakers like Varda and Ferreri, who have never really sorted out their audience, assume they lack the most basic kind of knowledge about art in general, and then reveal their own painful naiveté about those same matters. Jacques Rivette's four-hour lecture on the arts, *La Belle Noiseuse*, is the capstone of this argument. Unlike Ferreri, who's always been confused about the cinema, Rivette is a formidable intellect of the cinema. He was the editor in chief of *Cahiers* in 1963, and had contributed to it almost from the beginning (his works started appearing in 1952). His films were equally formidable, and never kind to audiences, whether it was *La Religieuse* (1966), *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1973), or the even more impenetrable *Noirot* (1978).

This time there's really not much of a point to make. The idea of the film centers around an unfinished painting. Frenhofer, played by Michel Piccoli, is a minor but sought after painter who has been stalled on one particular painting, the one in the title, for years. Nicolas, a young painter, and his girl, Marianne (played by Emmanuelle Béart), come to visit him in Languedoc, at the instigation of an art collector, and Frenhofer is reluctantly persuaded to try to complete the painting using Marianne as his model. There's also a Julienne, another significant link.

But this film creeps forward at a snail's pace, without anything of much visual or intellectual interest to redeem it. Rivette, in 1991, hasn't gotten past the world Somerset Maugham describes in the preface to *The Moon and Sixpence*, the presumption that artists have

twisted and tortured private lives in which words like madness and extremes figure constantly. At least Maugham saw the best artists were the worst talkers, and certainly had nothing very profound to say about their work.

But here we are back in the world of those old studio clinkers where great artists labored away in a creative frenzy, their dialogue filled with passionate declamations about the courage it takes to be a great artist, and the risks of failure. Thus we have Frenhofer's wife, played by Jane Birkin, giving us a treatise on how a painting can apprehend the actuality of one's life. Haven't we heard this before with Ken Russell?

Once past the derivative nonsense about the artist, what we have that is of some reasonable value is a step by step production of the actual painting, done by Bernard Dufour. The execution is good, although the idea isn't exactly new, since Picasso would do similar stuff in front of the camera. Then back to the torment, with a finale reminiscent of Chabrol. The whole thing is helplessly derivative, as though Rivette has become a kind of syncretic copier, or, still worse, like Ferreri, he lives in such a state of hermeneutics that he has missed all of this.¹⁸

REDISCOVERING THE THIRD WORLD

Cannes always has a bountiful offering of films from the third world, although exact national origins fluctuate with global economies. In 1991 the South American film boom finally went completely bust, and all the organizers confessed to grave difficulties in finding any films at all from a part of the world that has generally been quite significant in the development of post-war cinema. However, a bevy of African films were in evidence. And there was new trend: films from the second world whose artists now openly admitted their third world affinities—not the political affinities usually expressed by political slogans and fraternal socialist slogans, but a more practical kind based on a recognition of common economic, social, and political problems, underdevelopment, exploitation, and loss of ethnic identity.

The best example of this was *A Little Bit of Soul*, a Yugoslavian entry in the *Quinzaine* which

¹⁸The *Variety* reviewer pointed out even more parallels and similarities, calling it a "demanding film" whose "export possibilities are severely limited by the auteur's cold, humorless approach" (15 May 1991: 3).

followed the fortunes of a family of impoverished peasants living in a mountainous and Moslem region of Bosnia (the adjectives are not totally redundant). Socialism hasn't made much of an impact on their lives. Not only are they poor and backward, but the oldest son is married off at the request of his dying mother as part of an effort to preserve family fortunes. This is a leisurely film, originally shot for television and blown up to 35 millimeter, which comes across like a documentary, particularly in that nothing really happens. The hero, too young to know his own mind, is separated from his sweetheart, gets married, has a child, and becomes the postman. There's not much dialogue, very little story, no great climaxes or dramatic moments, but the film is curiously moving in its honest simplicity. One supposes that the most noteworthy thing about it is that it could be made at all, since it unabashedly portrays Yugoslavia as a country untouched either by socialist ideology or by modernization.

This may seem a curious observation, since the Yugoslavian cinema has always been freer than any of the other socialist cinemas, but there is censorship and then there is the censorship that comes from within. Directors working out of Belgrade or Slovenia or Zagreb have traditionally seen the underdeveloped face of their country as either an historic backdrop or a benchmark against which the achievements of socialism were to be measured, either positively or negatively. Ademir Kenovic is one of the first Yugoslavian directors to portray the third world reality of the second world without trying to make any particular point about political or economic systems.

This may be the long way around to any discussion of the true third world cinema, but, ironically, the nationally authentic films from Africa seemed rather inauthentic. Although in *Ta Dona* Adama Drabo made much of the celebration of an authentic African world of the sub Sahara, and how those values were being imperilled and cheapened by white colonialism and its aftereffects, as a film it moved from cliché to cliché about Africa.

Ta Dona begins by trotting out a procession of stereotypes: laughing men, colorfully garbed children, cheerful fat women, native administrators sleeping on the job, and so on. There are picturesque native dances, examples of native lore and craft, and much discussion about ancestral customs. There's even the obligatory shot of topless beauties playing in the

river. Since the plot is almost incoherent, it is tough to say much about the story line, but what does emerge is equally glib. The hero, Sidy, searches for a magical totem that will restore health to his people and cure his girlfriend's mother. There's a parallel plot about corruption, and we lurch from one to the other in a curiously schematic way.

Like most of the other recent African films, this one has an uneasy tension caused by the use of very standard Western means to tell a story that is explicitly anti-Western. This is one of the more hilariously ironic and little known consequences of Soviet film production, what a writer in *Actuacine* described as "Soviet adventure films, hilarious imitations of Rambo, destined exclusively for Indonesian moviegoers," or the wholesale adoption of the genre traits of B features despite the obvious ideological contradictions.¹⁹ In this regard the African films were a disappointment, rehashes of existing folkloric themes dealt with in masterly fashion earlier by other directors.

Laafi was an exception to this, done in the same low-key documentarist style as *A Little Bit of Soul*, although with a good many rough edges. The story concerns a young man in Burkina Faso who wants to become a doctor. Joe's struggle is a curious one: a fight against government bureaucracy so he can get the necessary permits enabling him to study abroad. There's no medical school in his country, and strict quotas are in effect on those who want to become doctors or scientists, while almost anyone can go to Europe to learn to become an administrator or a clerk (perhaps a nice jab at the French ideas about the importance of a liberal arts education). The film is doubly unfashionable: it is about city dwellers rather than country folk, and there are no attempts to idealize native customs or even to portray them. S. Pierre Yameogo, the director, simply lets his camera follow the course of the day, and he keeps the formal plot to the bare minimum.

Although unfashionable, films like this one mark out a successful path for a filmmaker working in tough conditions with limited resources. It is a path frequently trod by artists in developed countries as well. Ken Loach's most recent film, *Riff-Raff*, is a case in point of

¹⁹"Le Marché du Film" 107 (May 1991). Translation by John Mosier. War films made by the North Vietnamese are another eccentric example: they look like John Wayne movies turned inside out.

how this style can be made to work. If last year's *Hidden Agenda* revealed Loach at his absolute worst as a doctrinaire political director willing to sacrifice story line and reality to politics at every point, this year's film shows him at his best.

It's an intimate film, done very much like a documentary, about a young Scotsman in London who gets a job as a construction worker and falls in love with a neurotic and untalented young singer. The story finally gets a bit much, but the more or less straight on documentary parts about the construction industry are funny and revealing, in addition to coming across as honest footage, not a virtue we see much of in contemporary documentaries. The juxtaposition with the third world may seem peculiar, but it's just, as Loach's vision of London makes it very much a third world city. And it suggests just the kind of technique that can be used to make inexpensive quality films. It's unfortunate that the French and the Soc Campers, the two dominant influences on African cinema, make such awful documentaries, as anyone trying to learn about filmmaking on the cheap could do worse than study this marvelous little film.

Ironically, the competition section representative of the third world was Maroun Bagdadi's *Hors la Vie*, loosely based on the memoirs of the French journalist Roger Auque, who was kidnapped by some obscure Lebanese faction. Bagdadi is an absolutely incompetent storyteller because he always leaves out the obvious things. His French photo journalist is an unbelievable character, a suicidally brave photographer who turns into a complete coward of a hostage literally shaking and crying at the slightest approach. Or maybe at this point Bagdadi's anti-Gallicism got in the way, since this is a surprisingly anti-French film.

As a film, very poor, as a cinematographic eye into contemporary Beirut, absolutely unsurpassed, and thus the irony. The credit sequences are formidable, a fast-paced montage of photographic assignments, many of which seem done on location, packed with violence and desperation (there was a good deal of waffling as to how much was shot in Beirut). The real center of the film is the cinematographer's command of the steady-cam, here used to great advantage. In fact, this is the first time I've ever seen it where it wasn't a gimmick. The riddled and abandoned high-rise apartments of the city, the way it looks like the victim of a series of old-fashioned bombing raids, is remarkable. This is infinitely

better testimony to the collapse of Beirut than anything in Skolimowski or Schlöndorff, if for no other reason than it is used so casually as a backdrop to the story.

Bagdadi, like many real technicians, is surprisingly cold about his characters, leaving the impression that they could all die and he wouldn't be too broken up about it. Nor does he contribute much to an understanding of the whys and hows of the various factional wars. One might argue that this is part of his point, as when one of the weirder of his captives tells him that if he understands drugs, he understands Lebanon. But the pointlessness of it all seems accidental, as though in writing the script Bagdadi forgot about it. The journalist's captors range from the psychotic to the sinister: none of them seem particularly human, and no one has what the director regards as a real cause. But if Bagdadi had a real script, and some actors, he could make an impressive movie, because he has all of the technical parts of it down perfectly.

This is, on a lesser scale, the problem with Chen Kaige's *Life on a String*. On the basis of *The Yellow Earth* (1984) and *The King of Children* (1987) he's probably the eminent Chinese director, and certainly the best known in the West, where he has been working for some time. Like Kieslowski, he is a mature filmmaker, and *Life on a String* is a statement made by a director at the height of his powers. It is also an intriguing film because, since the funding came from a combination of Western sources, Chen Kaige was free to make the kind of film he wanted, but in China. This is an unprecedented combination, as though Skolimowski or Polanski had been allowed to shoot whatever they wanted on location in Poland for a film funded entirely in the West.

So there's an obvious interest in seeing what Chen Kaige has done. First off, he's picked an incredibly isolated part of China by Inner Mongolia to film in. It is the bleakest landscape imaginable, nothing but mountains and deserts and expanses of rock. Chu Changwei, who shot *Red Sorghum* and *Joudou*, is a good cinematographer, but he's done nothing this good before.

Once past the images, the story is an oddly problematic tale of an old blind musician and his young blind pupil. The old man, referred to as the "saint," is not simply a master musician who can sing and play the *sanxian*, a long-necked, three-stringed guitar. He's regarded by the people he meets as a holy man who has miraculous powers. He himself is sustained in

his lonely existence as a wandering blind man by the belief that after he breaks one thousand *sanxian* strings, he will have access to a magic prescription that will cure his blindness.

His pupil, Shitou, is not quite so aesthetically and magically minded, as he falls in love with the first pretty girl he meets, and Lanxiu reciprocates his feelings. So there's the mythical struggle between the high calling and love, between being elevated to a priesthood, and being a man. But the old man's inner belief in what will happen after he breaks the thousandth string, the belief that sustains him in his isolation and blindness, is not borne out by events. The younger man proves wiser.

Now while it's absolutely refreshing to see a film about China, especially about mythical and folkloric China, that hasn't been run through the aesthetic food processor of Chinese communist ideology, this film leaves one with a feeling of so? It's beautiful, and one sees all the various parables, many of which are peculiarly although not exclusively applicable to China. But it's a cold hearted and distant film.

In parts it has some of the same alien fascination that Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* has, but it seems entirely too facile, as though Marxism has been such a destructive influence on thought, allowing anybody to believe anything and shift over effortlessly to the opposite, that the director could have easily made a film in which things worked out quite differently.

THE WEST IN THE LAND OF BOLSHEVIK CO-PRODUCTIONS

The dominant tendency in Soc Camp this year was co-productions, all of which were unfortunately weak, which was sad, because in several cases there were artists getting their first chance to work in some time. But political purity is no guarantor of artistic ability. Rustam Khamdamov is the poor fellow who originally tried to make *Slaves of Love*, the film that Nikita Mikhalkov actually made after Mosfilm sacked Khamdamov for not following the pre-approved script. There were obvious political implications, and so Khamdamov went for the next twenty years without ever getting a chance to make a film.

One wants to be sympathetic, but *Anna Karamazova* is truly terrible. The most sympathetic comment made was Ron Holloway's that had the film been made a

decade ago it would "have been welcomed with open arms here."²⁰ Frankly, I'm not so sure. Maybe twenty years ago, but even then the film would have had problems. It is not simply too slow and stagey: the intellectual conceits are poor, while the acting is atrocious, even by the Soviet standards of any era past the early 1950s.

That the film was made at all was thanks to the efforts of Serge Silberman. In this, as in the other co-productions, Westerners seemed to be operating on the assumption that all Soviet filmmakers are great artists, and all they needed was freedom and a blank check of sorts to turn it out. This is far from true. Socialism destroyed talent like it destroyed everything else in these



Killing the Romanovs. Assassin of the Tsar.

countries, with precious few counter examples considering the number of films being made.

Karen Chakhnazarov's *Assassin of the Tsar* is a good example of this, as well as an example of new cooperative Soviet and Western film production efforts. Unlike *The Russia House* and *Taxi Blues*, however, it represents a genuine pooling of talents, with Malcolm McDowell and Oleg Yankovsky splitting the lead roles. The cinematography was done by Nikolai Nemolyaev and the editing by Anthony Newman, so the pooling continues on down the line. The fault however is purely the director's, since he also wrote the script.

It's one of those great ideas that doesn't actually work out very well. Dr. Smirnov (Yankovsky) is the incoming director of a mental hospital where Timofeyev (McDowell) is a patient. Timofeyev has a curious delusion. He believes that he is Yakov Yurovsky, the man who shot Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family

²⁰HR 18 May 1991: 4. The *Variety* reviewers called it "a tired exercise in avant-garde cinema . . . long, slow, and self-indulgent" (18 May 1991: 4).

in Ekaterinberg in 1918. Smirnov's predecessor let well enough alone, and was willing to pronounce Timofeyev "cured." But Smirnov, fascinated by his physical symptoms (he has a psychosomatic ulcer like Yurovsky and gets stigmata as well), delves more deeply into this. As Yurovsky regresses, so does Smirnov. He ends up being Tsar Nicholas, goes to Sverdlovsk (ex-Ekaterinberg), and, as the story shifts back completely into the past of 1918, dies in his room as we see the tsar dying from Yurovsky's shots.

The concept is formidable, and there's a good deal of historical research behind the film, which Chakhnazarov makes good use of in establishing the point that the October revolution, from the very first, aimed at bloodshed and the killing of innocent people, including children. The orders came, as we now know, from Lenin himself, which makes the old debating point of the 1980s—was Stalinism the inevitable outgrowth of Leninism or some sort of deformation of it—irrelevant.

Unfortunately, it's a long way from a concept to a movie, and Chakhnazarov hasn't gotten there yet. Although McDowell does the best he can (physically, he's an astonishingly good Russian), the film is static, relying on the same tired somnolent pace that has marked Soviet films for decades, while at every turn a golden opportunity is missed. But there's a certain interest in turning these into the movie that he didn't make but could have. At any rate it stands head and shoulders above the other British-Russian co-production, *Lost in Siberia*, directed by Alexander Mitta from a script done by Yuri Koroikov and Valery Fried.

For decades the parallel sections of Cannes have always let the filmmaker say a few words before the initial screening of his film. Personal observation since 1978 suggests a rule of thumb between the worth of the film and the shortness of the director's speech. If the director spends the time introducing friends and relatives, as well as people actually associated with the film, all the better. If he makes a serious speech, the film will be poor. The longer the speech the worse the film. The only exception to this has been Marcel Ophuls in introducing *Hotel Terminus*, but he redeemed himself by saying there would be an intermission so people could use the toilet.

So as the speeches and introductions progressed, it was obvious that the title *Lost in Siberia* was ironically appropriate. This was unfortunate because this too was a film

written by some admirable people with first-hand experiences of the Gulag. One wishes one could say nice things about the product, but the story turns the Kafkaesque story of an English archeologist kidnapped in Persia in 1945 and sent to Siberia into a strangely romantic soap opera with a romantic triangle involving the archeologist, the camp doctor, and an officer. There's even an orphaned child whose adolescent affection for and jealousy of the archeologist . . . it sounds like the kind of script that they keep rattling on about in *Barton Fink*. But the setting, the reality of the camps, is so awful, and so omnipresent, that the whole thing becomes strangely tasteless.

Lost in the middle of all these expensive co-productions was a terrific film wholly made in the Ukraine, the debut film of Viatcheslav Krichtofovitch. *Adam's Rib* is about three generations of women living in a three-room apartment. This is urban life, but the pressures of family are just as strong. The middle-aged daughter reproaches her bedridden mother with having run her in and out of two marriages, and with generally having ruined her life. But Nina Elizarovna is very much like the young hero of *A Little Bit of Soul*, even though she's old enough to be his mother, and does, in fact, have a daughter, Nastia, who's his age. She accepts the way life has treated her and tries to get on with the process of survival.

Adam's Rib has a nice documentary look to it, although the script requires a great deal of ensemble acting. For a big change, the acting is very good, infinitely better than the usual Soviet standard. Krichtofovitch has done a great deal of television work, which may explain why he is



The couch trip. Barton Fink.

able to work so well with the confines of a small apartment, keeping the dramatic pitch up, but not letting the scenes turn into the usual ranting

and orating that disfigures most Soviet film (a Western actress who had seen this film suggested the quality of the acting came about as Soviet actresses had a chance to see their Western counterparts work on film and television).

Again, there's no particular plot, and little in the way of dramatic climaxes, but one goes away with the feeling of having seen a perfectly framed window into the lives of some very admirable human beings. And there's the pleasure of seeing an art free of the kind of political straightjacket that substitutes phony cheeriness for more modest human values.

POLAND AFTER THE DECALOGUE

Poland had the largest and most successful film industry in Soc Camp, as well as the one with the most independent political line, so it is perhaps not surprising that it should react to the collapse of Soc Camp with surprising speed. But then again, as Vladimir Voinovich once said, "Art is slow." And, almost all artists have had trouble shifting over into a world where the controls of the state were absent, where one's art no longer had to be "against," but could be either truly objective or partisan.

Poland's trio of films this year (the largest Soc Camp offering, and one of the largest national offerings), offered a fascinating look into what had happened, and what may well be the future of the other Soc Camp survivors, since artistic and intellectual developments in Poland since 1945 have invariably forecast what would happen later, elsewhere in the old bloc.

Regardless of how rubber the standards were in Poland, there were some subjects that never got discussed. In *Burial of a Potato*, Jan Jakub Kolski goes back to 1945 and drags some of them out. His hero is an old man, Mateusz Szewczyk. He's been in a concentration camp, and when he returns, the villagers have taken all of his belongings. So much for group solidarity. They've also let his son, who was an officer in the army, die because they didn't want to fetch the doctor and get reported to the newly installed communist government. Their motives are impeccable: they hear the government is going to share out the land in parcels, and they want their parcels.

In a marvelous display of anti-Semitism and lunacy, they accuse Mateusz of being Jewish. He can easily disprove the claim, and does so, but that too is a seamy underside of Poland which

the old communist government was careful to keep swept well under the rug. So much for the people. The real communists in the film are seen as a couple of unprincipled fellows only too willing to cash in on the bribes their fellow countrymen give them, even when these bribes involve rape. There aren't many admirable people in this film, which in some senses takes up where Wajda left off in *Ashes and Diamonds*, hinting that all that was good in Poland died at the end of the war with Maciek and his victim, and all that's left is scum.

Since Kolski refers to or copies outright the symbols of the Polish Film School, the comparison is certainly there, although only to people who know the other works. We see Mateusz's son in a field with a white horse, something straight out of *Ashes and Diamonds*, as is the image of the arrival of the first communist in his jeep.



Irène Jacob. *Double Life of Veronica*.

Or maybe not, because overall, the film collapses into incoherence. Kolski can't get past set speeches and some manipulations of symbols, and there's a sense in which this film also sums up the dead end of the Polish cinema: overly talky, an incoherent story line, laden with symbols, and devoid of dramatic climaxes. And except for Mateusz's wonderful deep voice, the acting is terrible.

Of course it's also very hard to explain what *The Double Life of Veronica*, the latest film by Kieslowski, and one of the most highly regarded films shown this year, is about, or even to summarize the story. Although Kieslowski's recent fame is mostly based on his *Decalogue*, films such as *A Short Film about Killing* and *A Short Film about Love* (1987-88), he's always had an interest in the possibilities of alternate lives, from the filming of *Blind Chance* in 1980 (the film

was released in 1987 with a date of 1981), when he entertained the possibility of different lives for his hero, Witek Dlugosz, based on whether or not he caught a train. All three versions of his life involve decisions to leave Poland, and in the final version, he actually gets on the plane, which blows up on takeoff.²¹

There was a dark moral here about Poland and the choices open to its citizens. In *Veronica* he's interested in a variant of the same theme, and starts off with a beautiful young woman, Weronika, in Poland, and we watch her as she launches her singing career in Krakow. She has a marvelous and disturbing voice, and Zbigniew Preisner, who did the original score, has written some haunting music which brings her talents out, as well as establishing a haunting theme for the film.

Weronika's a kind, dreamy, and somewhat placid character, of the kind who seems to be able to drift through life effortlessly, always sure of being loved. Despite her lack of formal voice training, she's given a solo part. At the concert, she sings beautifully, but then collapses. She's dead. As we're only thirty minutes into the film, and seeing dirt thrown on her coffin, there's a certain disorientation in the narrative.

And now we cut to another Veronica, this one a French Veronique, also played by Irène Jacob. She's a school teacher, and gradually, through all sorts of subtle and mysterious ways, she comes to feel that she is, has been, this other person, this other Veronica. In some ways she is: she rubs her lower eyelid with a gold wedding band, just like Weronika, and she's left-handed. They both look alike, they both have heart problems, and they both lead sexually passionate lives.

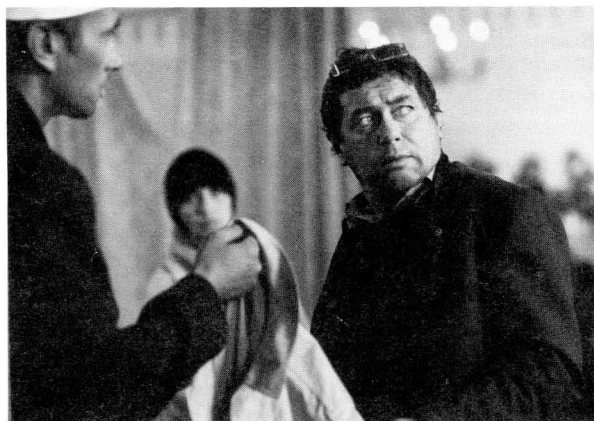
Kieslowski brings a certain sinister tone to the life of Veronique. The same actors appear in France, but acting different roles. It's an old trick, and he used it in *Blind Chance*, but here he keeps it well in the background, although it adds to the sinister flavor, as does almost everything else. It's a perfectly done film, beautifully edited, and chock-full of subtle trick shots involving mirrors and prisms.²²

²¹Kieslowski's film, which opened *Un Certain Regard* on Friday, 8 May 1987, was immediately followed by the crash of a plane of the Polish airline, LOT, immediately after takeoff from Warsaw on Saturday, 9 May, while on Sunday another Polish airliner made an emergency landing in Warsaw after takeoff. For Polish audiences, the ending of *Blind Chance* is neither as contrived or as dependent on terrorist bombs as some critics have thought.

But one might ask what the point is, although in Kieslowski there is, in this sense, never any real point. In *Blind Chance* Witek, in his final reincarnation, is blown up in midair trying to leave. Is the message you can only leave Poland when you die? If so, Kieslowski's films are quite consistent in developing the theme. Like Witek, Weronika can only escape by dying and merging her soul into someone else's. If that's the message, it seems a troublingly pointless one. There's a kind of darkly humorous side to this idea, of course, but Kieslowski seems not to have much of a sense of humor, so what we're left with is a beautiful and enigmatic work that finally seems lost in its own technical mastery of the medium, as though he put it all together just to give us one of those weird little stories of psychic transference of the kind that Charles Fort was always going on about.

Wojciech Marczewski's *Evasion du Cinéma "Liberté"* seems, like *Adam's Rib*, an almost perfect small masterpiece, although it's a much more ambitious film that moves us backward into the kind of Polish film that openly talked about society. But it is quite unusual in the cleverness of its plot, so much so that it is one of the relatively few recent Polish films that relies on plot instead of character revelations through dialogue.

The protagonist is the head censor in a



The censor's overcoat. Evasion du Cinéma "Liberté."

provincial Polish town, an intellectual who quietly sold out and works for the state. One day his secretary announces that the people from the cinema across the street have come

²²The *Variety* reviewer listed these in detail (16 May 1991: 2). Ron Holloway also picked up on the *Blind Chance* connection in his review in *The Hollywood Reporter* 16 May 1991: 4. My review was written simultaneously (and independently).

over to complain: the characters in one of the films are refusing to get on with the movie. At this point everyone thinks, aha! *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. But what Marczewski's about is much cleverer, and much more sophisticated. In fact, the story line gets wilder and wilder.

The authorities decide to buy all the tickets to the theater and let the film run as it is. Then a delegation from Warsaw arrives, complete with a film critic who lambastes the Polish cinema for being hopelessly derivative. Look how much better Woody Allen does it, he says, and suddenly we're all looking at *Purple Rose*. With both projectors running, they manage to transport the hero of Allen's film into the Polish film where the actors have been refusing to work.

Then there's the problem of the censor's raincoat. It has ended up in the other film. Inevitably, as the censor talks to the actors, he's drawn to them, and ends up inside their movie, then passes through that out onto the rooftops of a shabbier Poland, the world of all the censored bits that he's removed from films.

Marczewski subtitled his film "Homage to Studio Tor," and it's a neatly crafted tribute to the spirit of that studio and its role in Polish life in the past decades. What he's saying is, one supposes, fairly obvious. But he's devised an elegant metaphor for expressing the complex relationship between film and society, intellectuals and the state, the national and the foreign, in Poland. Decades from now, if someone asks what the Polish cinema 1945-1989 was all about, this film will pretty much tell them.

DIFFICULT CHOICES

Films like Marczewski's tend to get overshadowed at Cannes by the name films and the scandalous ones. This year we had a good group of scandalous ones of various kinds. Some of the scandal was legitimate, some spurious, some sexual, some intellectual. Patrick Bouchitey's *Cold Moon* was all of the above. The film, like Barbet Schroeder's *Barfly*, is based on the works of the American writer Charles Bukowski, although the resemblance stops there: Bouchitey's film captures the flavor of Bukowski, his sense of the outrageous, in a way that Schroeder's more traditional work didn't. A better comparison would be with Bertrand Blier's *Les Valseuses*, particularly since the film is dedicated to actor Patrick Dewaere, one of

Blier's two protagonists. In both movies there is a close male pair, both deal with the down and out, and both are full of profanity and vulgarity. Blier has turned this into a recipe for great success. So it is to Bouchitey's credit that *Cold*



The trip to the beach. Cold Moon.

Moon is a problematic work, done in black and white, whose commercial possibilities are pretty thin, even with aficionados of Blier and Bukowski.

The main reason for this lies in the story itself. One night Simon and Dédé, on their usual drunken rampage, steal a corpse from out of the back of an ambulance. They take it home, dump it on their bed, and discover that it is a beautiful young woman. Simon falls immediately in love with her, and consummates his love. Later, he carries her to the ocean and swims her out past the tide. Although this incident occurs in the last part of the film, it is actually an event that occurred before the film begins, since Dédé refers to it abortively in several places. This is an important point, which most reviewers either missed or glossed over, probably because once the film shifts back in time to the escapade, it remains there until the end.²³

Also important are the brief shots of the girl's body as it floats away: subtly but clearly we can see her legs kick up, just as though she is the mermaid that Bukowski alludes to in the story "The Copulating Mermaid of Venice," when he says, "She was just like a mermaid. Maybe she was a mermaid."²⁴ So Ron Holloway is right to call the burial at sea "a salvation ritual," a deeply sinful experience that ends in a vision of

²³The *Variety* reviewer calls it a flashback, but fails to point out that the film ends there, in the flashback (11 May 1991: 4), while Ron Holloway, writing in *The Hollywood Reporter*, glosses over the fact that there is a time shift at all (11 May 1991: 4).

²⁴Bouchitey quotes this passage in the Press Kit.

salvation which torments both of the men forever after, and explains both their emotional bond and their depression.

Once the time sequence is straightened out, and those few brief kicks of the leg noted, the film begins to possess the kind of logic that Blier's film lacked. At the same time, Bouchitey is careful to position the climax when he does so that this act, which certainly involves crossing a rather definitive behavioral line, is seen as the climax of the pair's increasingly asocial behavior, which includes getting locked up in church and drinking the communion wine out of the chalice.

Although necrophilia is a touchy subject, there were other films at the festival that crossed similar lines, most notably Ferreri's *The Flesh* and Kolski's *Burial of a Potato*, and the film deserves the relatively high ratings it got from various French critics. Bouchitey's down and outers aren't portrayed with the kind of upper class condescension that they get in, say, Blier. Nor are they given some kind of political consciousness. The two come across like children, and this seems very much Bukowski's point: that alcohol makes people better because it makes them children, able to risk and dream.

For a first film, it's a knockout, the sort of thing that only a French director can do. But there are some surprising affinities here with Buñuel. Bouchitey is the first director to come along in quite a while who has some of that crazy glee, an impish delight in crossing all the social boundaries. And of course Buñuel flirted with necrophilia and sacrilege, too. But it's in the little things as well—as in the encounter with the police, which resonates with a series of similar encounters, most notably the one in *The Milky Way*. If Bouchitey had shot this in color and dedicated it to Buñuel, he would have packed them in. As it is, it's a difficult work.

It was better received, however, than *Malina*, by the Fassbinder protégé Werner Schroeter, which drags us to the other end of Europe: a world of tormented intellectuals who talk interminably about terrible things of the spirit, none of which we're ever allowed to see because we might get entertained. The central character, played by a chain-smoking Isabelle Huppert, is one of those successful European intellectuals whose simultaneous affairs with two men (Ivan and Malina) is the catalyst for her psychological regression. In an extremely negative review, the *Variety* reviewer argued that it was very "hard to understand her turmoil" (12 May 1991: 3),

and there is some truth to this, particularly because the various material circulated about the film emphasized the *ménage à trois* aspects of the film, as though the center of interest was Malina, and that the woman's fatal attraction for him is the dramatic center of the story.

This is simply wrong, and it turns the novel into a rewrite of all those *fin de siècle* Viennese tales about how the woman, who loves all and gives all, is destroyed by the male's unresponsive selfishness. But the novel *Malina*, as written by Ingeborg Bachman, and as turned into the script by the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek (the author of *Lust*), is one of those completely internalized psychological works in which other people are important to the heroine only as symbols.

Seen as a kind of inner spiritual and mental regression by a woman who has to come to terms with, among other things, the extent to which her rejection by her father has psychically wounded her, everything in the film makes sense. Schroeter tells the story along the lines Godard staked out in *Nouvelle Vague*, but there's an inner consistency here, a sense of purpose, that is missing in Godard. In other words, Schroeter actually has a story, and he tells it using the kinds of symbolic props that give us insights into the workings of the mind.

The woman flees her relationship with Malina, who embodies a kind of cold, rational masculinity for a relationship with the more nurturing and passionate Ivan. But when he breaks off the affair, and she's thrown back into her relations with Malina, we begin to see that these two men are simply parts of her, reflections of her own needs, and that she's moved from one to the other in an attempt to keep from dealing with her own inner self.

As she confronts Malina, she confronts her own sense of rejection by her father, and her own desperate needs. It's a kind of classic Freudian working out of the various conflicts in the psyche, and Schroeter sets up the scenes to emphasize their symbolic and dreamlike nature: at the end, as the woman begins to deal with the reality of her powerful emotions, her apartment is literally in flames, as she begins to pour out her heart to the distant and sardonic Malina, who spends most of his time eating.

The anti-narrative here is curiously old-fashioned, as though the last film Schroeter saw was *Last Year at Marienbad*. Despite a perceptive review in *The Hollywood Reporter* by Ron Holloway, *Malina* was savaged by the critics (14

May 1991: 4). The moral here is that it's alright to be shamelessly derivative à la Rivette, just as long as the film is childishly easy to understand. The critics can then condescend to the author, which they would prefer to having to work at understanding. Or maybe, like Bouchitey, Schroeter should have labelled this a tribute to Fassbinder and made Malina's homosexuality more apparent . . . if that's what it was. There was perceptible critical twitch in evidence when Matthieu Carrière announced this. And after all, he was only the actor who played the character. As Spike Lee would say, those people don't know what the film is about.

If *Van Gogh* had been made by someone besides Maurice Pialat, it would probably have been greeted with respectful yawns, because there isn't much here which is offensive or peculiar. Quite the contrary, this is a beautifully solid retelling of the three last months of van Gogh's life. Pialat keeps the camera firmly on his central character, and he doesn't muck around with any of this tortured artist stuff, either. Vincent spends his spare moments eating, drinking, and being merry. We see him painting, and we see stacks of canvases that he's done. The real van Gogh was a prolific painter, and Pialat gives us a great sense of how this was the case: his van Gogh paints very rapidly, with little hesitation and no real preparation. Although one approaches such subjects gingerly, it seems that Pialat's ideas about this are reasonably authentic.

The main point is the artist as an insufferable character who although sociable, tended to shut people out when they got too close. Where Pialat excels is at showing the tenderness and concern of everyone around his artist. The ordinary people of this small town of Auvers sur Oise accept him, and when he is on his deathbed, they pay for a visit from the doctor, no small gesture in a provincial society where people dole coins out of their purses one at a time.

The bulk of the film is wound up in two very long scenes, done in a small number of takes. There's a marvelous Sunday in the country when Dr. Gachet invites Vincent and his brother Theo and his wife to dinner. Then there's the counterpart, a drunken night on the town when Theo and Marguerite, the good doctor's infatuated daughter, go searching for Vincent, only to find him amidst the whores and dancers.

The ensemble acting is very fine. In films like this the main characters—Jacques Dutronc's

Vincent, Gerard Sety's Dr. Gachet, and Bernard Lecoq's Theo—usually get all of the praise, but the supporting actors are good, and an unusually good set of faces, which is a necessity in a film that is about three hours long.

There's some ambiguity and disappointment here though. The print shown at Cannes was obviously not finished, but it is curious that the rudimentary Press Kit didn't even list a director, giving rise to much gossip about how much of the film was Pialat and how much Toscan du Plantier, the producer who was giving all of the initial interviews. Of course Pialat and the European press don't get on very well at all. When he received his palm for *Under the Sun of Satan*, he figuratively told them all where they could go and what they could take with them.

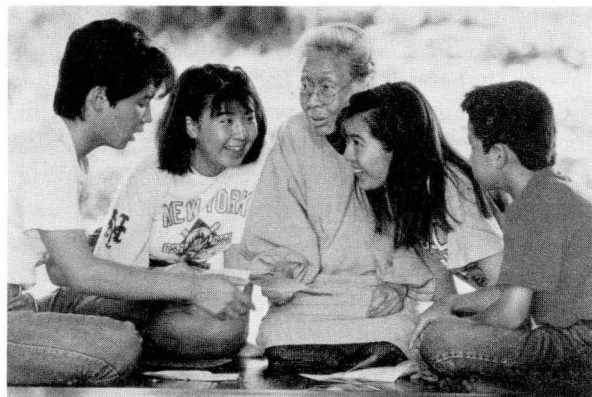
But there's more fundamental weirdness. Almost everyone knows that van Gogh deconstructed his own head. But not in this film. He lies on his deathbed with ears intact. And there are other, less dramatic ways in which Pialat seems to be deconstructing the artist's life, most notably in insisting that he dies not for art, but out of love.

The deconstruction, together with the sometimes jarringly mundane dialogue, is troubling. On the other hand Pialat is a painter himself. There is a sense in which this perverse sense of the man strikes home at the artist, if for no other reason than to remind us of how resolutely van Gogh distorted in his paintings. Unlike Caillebotte, or even Manet or Pissarro, his art sees differently, it points us toward Picasso and everything that is to come in a way that the earlier Impressionists don't. When you see Pialat's van Gogh at work, painting a lovely young girl so you can't really see her face, often appearing as though he's set up his easel backwards, ignoring the standard lovely view for one that his own internal logic dictates, you understand this in a fundamental way.

In that sense alone, it's a great work, although an exasperating one. One could argue there's a kind of authenticity here sadly lacking in Rivette, the kind of deep insight into the artist that we saw in *Jacquot of Nantes*. Or perhaps putting it better, *La Belle Noiseuse* shows us artists as critics want them to be; *Van Gogh* shows them as they probably are. One thing is certain: Pialat is getting better, not worse. There's a sense of composition here, a sense that even in the long scenes, he knows exactly what he's after and how to get it across on screen.

Like Pialat, Kurosawa knows exactly what he

wants to do, even when no one else likes what he's done, which pretty much sums up reactions to *Rhapsody in August*. With the showing of *Dreams* last year, Kurosawa has thus established some sort of record as one of the few octogenarians to have films shown in the official section back to back. With *Rhapsody in August*, he's managed finally to get a Japanese company to back his work, and, at the same time, managed to get himself in hot water. As Jeff Sipe has observed, the two are related: it was the chief executive of Shochiku, Toru Okuyama,



Discussing the Missing Generation. *Rhapsody in August*.

who began the flap by claiming he was going to send copies of the film to the presidents of the United States and the Soviet Union.²⁵ In so doing he managed to taint what is in many respects Kurosawa's best film in some time.

The film is seen as an extremely one-sided Japanese version of the dropping of the atomic bomb, which is far from the case. The problem is the film is rather too subtle in its dialogue and too direct in its emotions. It is easy to miss the point because the subject is controversial on several levels. There is the controversy as to whether the bombs should have been dropped. There is the controversy as to whether the Japanese have ever accepted any real responsibility for the war. On a more sophisticated level, when we turn to ordinary people, there is the problem of who knew what when.

In this film Kurosawa returns to his lifelong concern with ordinary people. The central character in the film, an octogenarian grandmother spending time with her four grandchildren during August vacations, is both an innocent and a victim. Her husband was a

schoolteacher in Nagasaki, and was incinerated when the bomb was dropped. She was exposed to radiation when she tried to find him, and her hair has thinned out as a result. Sachiko Murase, who plays the role, is in reality eighty-six and has no trouble in playing the part of an octogenarian. She must be one of the very few people active in the cinema who is older than Kurosawa.

The four grandchildren (two of whom are college age) have never thought very much about any of these things. They wear sweat shirts with American college logos and gripe about their grandmother's cooking and old-fashioned ways. Suddenly, during the course of their visit, it hits them that their grandfather was killed by the bomb, and they explore Nagasaki. Despite their American veneer, the kids don't know a thing about history. They're shocked at their realization, condemn the Hawaiian branch of their family, censure their parents for going there to see them, and in general act like the outraged idealists that the young often in fact are.

This sets up a three-part lesson in morality—not history, but morality. The point, which is the same one Kurosawa made in *Kagemusha*, is that we don't have to be intellectuals with great knowledge to be moral. The first lesson comes from their grandmother, who silences their cynicism by her observation that the war was forty-five years ago, and many people died, and the war was responsible. Not the bomb, but the war. War itself.

The second and most moving part of the lesson comes from the Hawaiian branch of the family. Grandmother was one of many children, so many she can't remember all her siblings. In 1920 one of her brothers went to Hawaii and became a wealthy and naturalized American. His children look very American, as well they might, since one of them is played by Richard Gere. Grandmother hasn't had any contact with this brother since he left, and her son is too polite to mention to his newfound uncle that his brother-in-law was incinerated at Nagasaki. It's a peculiar blend of *politesse* and cunning, which his children despise.

They all just assume that when, through an unfortunate telegram, the uncle finds out about this, he will be mortified and have nothing to do with them. The parents assume it out of embarrassment, their children out of cynicism about those Americans. Both are proven wrong. The uncle immediately sends his son, Clark, to

²⁵MPI 12 May 1991: 20.

Japan to express his sympathies.

Sympathy is a cold word to express the emotions in this scene. At Grandfather's school, the original jungle gym has been preserved, a twisted mass of pipes that memorializes the bomb much more authentically than the fraudulent statuary contributed by the usual group of sympathetic nations.²⁶ It is here that the family reunion takes place, while a group of elderly Japanese, comrades of the school children who were obliterated along with the grandfather, clean and redecorate the wreckage.

It's a deeply emotional scene, probably the most moving scene in contemporary cinema, no less effective for being so natural and unforced. Kurosawa has been criticized in this film for his static direction, but he carefully hoards his effects for the right moment, and then unleashes them in compelling testimony as to why his reputation among filmmakers is legendary. There were little bits and pieces of this in his last film, most notably in the first segment, "The Fox Wedding," but here he moves the film to his climaxes in such a way that he clearly sees it as all of one piece. Although a surprisingly different work from anything he's done in years, and ambiguously controversial, it is an impressive testament to his formidable powers as one of the world's great film artists.

EUROPA PIX

Despite the jury and the divergences of opinion among the two thousand film critics there and their juries, all of which testify to the unusual richness of this year's festival, there were, unusually, some good films that got nearly unanimous praise, even though in each one the director took some risks. These films weren't as problematic as the one discussed above, but neither were they the kind of safe Euro-film that were faultless, politically correct, and finally quite totally boring.

Since *Travelling Players* in 1974, Théo Angelopoulos has been a European cult director of the sort who has an enormous following based on surprisingly few films (only nine since *Reconstitution*, his first feature film, completed in 1970). Over the years it has been sometimes difficult for him to sustain his reputation, but

Landscape in the Fog, which did very well at the 1988 Venice Film Festival, has perhaps been a personal turning point, because *The Suspended Step of the Stork* is a mature work. A television reporter is covering the refugee problem in the small border town of Florina, which has been featured in his last two films as well. He makes friends with the army colonel commanding in the region, as well as a delicate young refugee woman. But he also sees a familiar face.

He's convinced that it is the face of a politician who disappeared some time earlier, and so he investigates this case, bringing his wife to the small town as well. Although Angelopoulos insists that the idea for the script and rewrites are his, Tonino Guerra, who also worked on it, has done an awful lot of similar scripts about metaphysical investigative reporting, including, most notably, *L'Avventura*, *Blow-Up*, and *Identification of a Woman*. Not incoincidentally, there's an awful lot of the things we see in Antonioni films here: long, slow takes, a mysterious investigation that never really answers the literal questions, and some artfully framed images.

Like his other films, it is far too slow, and after about an hour it collapses into a kind of technical exercise because everything is so incredibly artificial: you sense people moving on cue as the camera turns on them, and in one memorable scene an invisible hand closes the door to a passenger car as the reporter exits the open door on the other side of the track. The governing metaphor for the film is the idea of the border: right at the beginning the colonel takes the reporter to it and shows him the lines that separate Greece from Turkey, then stands there, one foot suspended, and says, "if I take one step, I am somewhere else, or I am dead." The ambiguity remains whatever language the utterance is in, and there lies the problem. The sustaining metaphor of the border is not something Angelopoulos sticks to. Like his camera, he seems happy to wander off into side incidents, some of which are illuminating and some of which aren't.

But it's a powerful work in spots, and for once he has the command of the camera that makes the slowness worthwhile. This is a very old-fashioned form of filmmaking. Except for what seems to be heavy reliance on steady-cam and some dark but still quite clear color processing, this could have been done about the time of *L'Avventura*, which may explain why it was received so well. Antonioni isn't making films

²⁶Interestingly enough, Kurosawa has the grandchildren visit these, and list them: China, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Brazil, the Soviet Union. But, in a telling comment, he centers the real action on the schoolyard.

like that, and someone ought to. Although the director's moralizing about the decline and fall of practically everything is tediously sophomoric, the film stands on its own, and it works well enough. And one has to admire a director who can have both Marcello Mastroianni and Jeanne Moreau in his film and wait for nearly an hour before getting around to them.

Il Portaborse, which was getting such English titles as *The Brown Nose*, *The Valet*, or *The Factotum*, is a neat little comedy about an impoverished literature teacher who is summoned by a cabinet minister to become his

magic touch; he enjoys the perks of seeing his girlfriend transferred to a new job, his ancient family house restored. He likes the BMW convertible that Botero gives him, and he enjoys consorting with Juliette, Botero's nominal assistant and secret mistress, in an innocent little flirtation. If Botero is at once cynical and sincere, Luciano is at once naive and all knowing. The film preserves these tensions, as well as a keen sense of comedy, without collapsing into the mannered silliness that has destroyed Italian cinema.

Luchetti gets in some good licks along the way. Although the politics are deliberately



Waiting for the train. Suspended Step of the Stork.

speech writer. Although Daniele Luchetti runs into trouble with his film as the story progresses, it has the kind of formidable strengths that one always associates with the Italian cinema but rarely ever sees. Nanni Moretti, who plays the minister, Botero, puts on one of those great performances that Wertmüller was occasionally able to get out of Giancarlo Giannini: he is, by turns, sincere, false, oratorical, and villainous. He makes the transitions so smoothly that one has no idea who the real Botero is, and so falls back on the old cliché of the consummate politician.

Luciano, the teacher, succumbs to Botero's

obscure, most Italians apparently identified Botero with several prominent socialists, and the satire was too much for Italian television entirely, which refused to support the film.²⁷ There's censorship and then there's censorship, although the proverbial straw in this case may be a wonderful scene in which Botero flies into a tantrum as he screens a campaign commercial made for him by someone recommended by RAI (played in the film by the director himself). The

²⁷See the comments by Ron Holloway, *HR* 12 May 1991: 4, as well as the discussion by Hank Werba in *MPI* 10 May 1991: 16.

footage is truly awful, but what makes it more awful is how nicely it imitates the sort of technical garbage one sees on real Italian television (and French and German as well).

There's an old political truism that socialists always believe there's a secret room in the government where one can control everything by pulling levers and pushing buttons. What Luchetti lets out of the bag is that their own interest in finding that room is to push buttons that will benefit their own interests. Botero espouses the cause of the working man, but sells him down the river at every opportunity. He refuses to help Italy's leading poet, but then seizes the pulpit at this funeral and turns this "failure" into a political cause célèbre.

The problem is that Luchetti can't follow the script to the logical conclusion of its initial premise: Luciano becomes disgusted by the hypocrisy and tries to do something about it. It is as though the director (or producer Moretti) doesn't trust the powers of his own cynicism. So as the film progresses the ideological noose tightens around the neck of the plot, which ultimately makes the story collapse into yet another chronicle of how morality begets isolation.

The more's the pity, since the first hour or so of this film is some of the best work that the Italian cinema has seen in quite a while (the version screened at Cannes, however, was a shortened version, which probably has more punch than the one shown in Italy). Compare it with the other Italian entry, *The Flesh*, to see just how bad this cinema has gotten. Look at its surprising box-office draw in Italy to see how wrongheaded RAI was, and how sophisticated the film-going public actually is.

Luchetti's film was as close to a surprise underground hit as the festival came (although for the next twelve months various unknown films will be given that dubious honor). Lars von Trier's *Europa* was the early choice for the prize. Although this was far from a universal feeling, it was consistent and continuous throughout the festival, and was never really eclipsed by the later entries (the films by Angelopoulos and Pialat were shown at the very end).

Visually, it is a memorable film. There are parts of *Europa* that are so fine they take one back to the earliest days of the cinema, when everything was new and untried, and the dividing lines between the real and the unreal, the artificial and technical, did not yet exist.

There's a wondrous frontal shot of a giant locomotive speeding through an endless tunnel; a marvelous Midnight Mass in a bombed-out cathedral with the snow falling thickly on the congregation.

These are all in black and white, but von Trier likes to impose a color image on black and white frame, and there are some fine moments there as well. When the owner of Zentropa, the great mythical German railway firm, commits suicide in his tub, we see the bloody water in color. At the same time, we see that the tiles of the tub are exactly like those used in the morgues attached to the crematoria in concentration camps. It's a powerful fusion of images. Nor is it accidental: part of von Trier's conceit in the film is to



Young lovers and others. *Europa*.

establish the continuity of the Third Reich that has just passed with the new Reich that will come. The black uniforms of the railroad personnel recall SS uniforms, and when the workmen pull the newly restored sleeping car onto the track the scene looks like one of those work camp scenes with human beings providing all the locomotive power.

But unfortunately, much of *Europa* does not work very well. The use of front shots to project color has been beaten into the ground in rock music videos, and compared to the best of those, the effects in *Europa* are crude and amateurish.²⁸ Like a good many European film artists, von Trier has simply missed out on the great video

²⁸The *Variety* reviewer discussed the "amateurish" use of front projection, calling the film "relentlessly artificial," but also listed some "amazing creations," citing some of the shots discussed here as well as some additional ones, particularly a *Citizen Kane*-like tracking shot (13 May 1991: 2).

revolution spearheaded by the major (and minor) rock musicians of the 1980s. So the effect is unintentionally comic: we've seen the effects before, and we've seen them done better. This may seem an unfair criticism, since when compared to feature-length motion pictures music videos typically expend enormous amounts of money for a few minutes of film. But von Trier's film is being billed as some work of great technical significance. It's another symptom of the same disease that has disfigured some of the older film artists: a total obliviousness to what's going on in the cinema.

Stripped of its techniques, the film has its problems. The script has a young German American, Leopold Kessler, coming to Germany right after the war to work on the railroad as a sleeping car conductor. His uncle is a grouchy and hypocritical old conductor who has secured a job for him, but Kessler quickly becomes involved with Katharina Hartmann, daughter of the owner of the railroad. Kessler is an idealist who has come to Germany to do good, but he ends up entangled in a complicated web of deceit and betrayal, falling in love with Katharina, only to find that she's a perfervid Nazi and that the Americans, in the form of Colonel Harris, have been encouraging him to get involved so they can spy on her.

It's an overblown and theatrical kind of plot, at once romantic and expressionistic, and it doesn't work, because while von Trier was struggling with his special effects, he forgot about the basics of acting and the script. The romantic leads are too old, and Barbara Sukowa (Katharina) looks positively ancient, a suitable romantic lead for a young man only if he is in love with his mother.²⁹ Jean-Marc Barr, who

plays Leopold, was one of the leads in *Big Blue*, and so he's used to delivering strange lines of dialogue in weird situations, but some of it even throws him off. The other actors, mostly from Danish theater, are totally at sea, and Eddie Constantine, who plays Colonel Harris, seems to be reading his lines off the back of props as he goes along.

Struggling with the confusion is an interesting and insightful story about the old Prussian spirit as exemplified by Uncle Kessler and the railroad staff. There's a love of order for its own sake, a militaristic view of the world that had little to do with the rise of National Socialism and which von Trier sees as rising back to the top again now that it is gone. The restoration of the sleeping car, and the journey of the train, with the young American aboard as sleeping car attendant, is a neat enough metaphor for everyone's worst fears about the Germans.

Von Trier scatters these things through the film in almost random fashion. In places this is one of the best films to come out of Europe, particularly Northern Europe, in decades. In places it's the worst film ever screened, and one has the impression that the director has no idea which is which. But there's still finally a deeply effective mastery of what the cinema is all about here. Alone of the current crop of Westerners, von Trier both has memories of the great symbolic days of Dreyer and von Sternberg and also knows how to make them happen.□

²⁹Keith Keller found her "neither sexy nor dramatically convincing" in *The Hollywood Reporter* 13 May 1991: 6.

John Mosier is the Editor of the New Orleans Review.

Kevin Evans

OFF PEYTON BRIDGE

A blonde child in a blue slicker
points at the dark water and cries.
A woman is thinking about damaged
credibility, foresight expressed
in carefully folding a note
in a plastic bag before leaping.
She adjusts her felt hat, rolling
in her mind the various degrees of sin.
A man flicks a lighter.
Another runs home, yellow jacket
flapping around his waist,
for a lantern, his importance assured.
I am wondering why no one
will just jump in the churning water.

Are they waiting for someone
who is skilled in this sort of thing?
Someone with special buckled and laced shoes
that will not get sucked off in the raw mud?
Who will know how to deal with the flotsam
smacking into ankles and calves
like fingers, belt buckles?

A man pokes a forked willow branch
into an eroded cranny, pulls out
a slimy beer can. The last reflected light
dissolves on the water.
A woman we did not notice before
begins to chant o god o god.
Suddenly, for the first time,
we are all family,
searching for the one we loved the most.

FEATURED ARTISTS

Michael Burns' poems have appeared most recently in *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, and *The Missouri Review*. He's editing *A Habitation and a Name: New and Selected Essays on the Poetry of Miller Williams*.

Jack Butler is Assistant Dean of the College, Hendrix College. He is the author of *The Kid Who Wanted to Be a Spaceman* and *Hawk Gumbo*.

Robert Olen Butler teaches creative writing at McNeese State University. He is the author of six novels.

Kenneth J. Emberly is a Canadian writer and freelance journalist. His short fiction has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Columbia: A Magazine of Poetry & Prose*, and elsewhere.

Kevin Evans' poems have appeared in *Blue Building*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and *Giving Voice*.

Lewis Turco's most recent books are *Dialogue* (Writer's Digest Books, 1989) and *The Shifting Web: New and Selected Poems* (University of Arkansas Press, 1989).