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Neil Hurley, S.J.

JAMES CAGNEY: THE QUINTESSENTIAL REBEL

James Cagney wrote his memoirs, *Cagney on Cagney*, when a friend told him that if he didn't write his story, others would certainly do so. In the preface, he writes that it is a book about Cagney by the man who knew him best. No actor, I believe, can be in touch with his subconscious, that is, the wellsprings of spontaneous creative energy that bubble up to produce those kinds of inspired performances for which Cagney is a legend. Without a doubt, the memories contained in *Cagney on Cagney* are significant and we shall refer to them throughout this article, which is both a tribute to the actor and a critique of his work.

It was in the 1930s that Cagney carved his niche in the cinematic Hall of Fame. His later roles in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (winning him an Oscar), *13 Rue de Madeleine* and *White Heat* embellished those earlier accomplishments, but basically it was the tough guy with his own personal code of honor and that "Here I stand, take me as I am" attitude which has made each subsequent generation of moviegoers share that same electrifying experience that audiences felt when Cagney first won their hearts.

Cagney's reputation rests on the impressive list of non-conformist characters he played: the Prohibition gangster, Tom Powers, in *Public Enemy* (1931); the insurgent cab driver fighting for justice in *Taxi* (1932); the cocky ex-convict and redemptive victim, Rocky Sullivan, in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938); the bootlegger, Eddie Bartlett, in *The Roaring Twenties*. Then there is Cagney as Frank Ross, the hardened prisoner of *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), who is angry at being framed and forgotten; as the cynical and at first cowardly tough from Brooklyn, Jerry Plunkett, who turns hero in World War I France in *The Fighting 69th* (1940); and last, but certainly not least, Cody Jarrett, the unstable killer with the Oedipal mother complex in *White Heat* (1949).

Critic Judith Crist once wrote that back in the 1930s the gangster rebel hero began to creep into the hearts of the American movie-going audiences in strange, unorthodox ways. Edward G. Robinson's Rico in *Little Caesar*, Paul Muni's

Tony Camonte in *Scarface* and Cagney's Tom Powers in *Public Enemy* were the proto-gangster anti-heroes of Hollywood's early sound period. All three were from an immigrant Catholic background; all three were over-confident and aggressive; all three were compulsively bent on power, money and fame, the social symbols of success in Prohibition America; all three died violently—Rico and Camonte were machine-gunned by the police in the streets; Tom Powers was shot by a rival mob and his body was wrapped like a mummy and allowed to fall at his mother's feet when her front door was opened. The endings to these three classical films in the rigid crime genre were dictated by the logic of both melodramatic story convention and the political need to prove that crime does not pay. But the images and the bravura acting of Robinson, Muni, and Cagney subverted the official intent to uphold law and order and to stigmatize the offenders. The sympathies of audiences were emotionally enlisted on behalf of the gangster—not only because his cunning and brutal tactics personified much that was wrong with post World War I America but because all three motion pictures had subtle but unmistakable religious allusions.

In *Little Caesar*, Rico dies by a billboard showing two Hollywood-type stars looking affectionately at one another. It is a symbol of the advertising of false values that enticed Rico to "do it to the other fellow and to do it first." Dressed in flop-house clothes, his face unshaven, Rico lies on the ground by the foot of the billboard sign and says to the police inspector standing over him: "Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?" This is not the usual gangster's death; it is the awareness of mortality, of "crossing-over," of possible accountability. It is the ultimate blow to egoism and the question is framed as a petition to the Mother of God. In *Scarface*, the film opens with a shadowy cross over the name of the director, the well-known auteur Howard Hawks. Throughout the film there are recurring symbols of crosses. Can this be a reference to the criminalization of an innocent victim, Christ,

suggesting that Tony Camonte was enmeshed in the spurious values of an acquisitive and materialistic society? After all, the camera in *Scarface* pans from the bullet-stricken body of Camonte to a travel agency ad atop a tall Chicago building which proclaims that "the world is yours!" In this ironic and tragic final scene there is a social critique of the unintended consequences of acquisitive appeals to impressionable citizens incapable of seeing behind the puffery.

It was, however, Cagney's performance as Tom Powers in *Public Enemy* that created the definitive anti-hero, smouldering with anger, ambition, and brimming confidence, and with a magnetic charm that stayed in the audiences' memories after the final obligatory scene of retribution through a death by violence. Robinson's Rico was pathetic; Muni's Camonte was tragic. By contrast, Cagney's feisty hoodlum with the wavy hair and "straight-ahead" look, had an extra dimension. He so ingratiated himself into the hearts of the viewers that the rooting interest in his persona continued beyond the film, beyond the legal definition of criminality imposed by a civilization which was more permissive with indoor ("white collar") larceny than outdoor ("gun-in-hand") thievery.

In the 1930s millions of people were being denied the fruits of America's promise. The University of Chicago's sociologists were teaching that environment bred crime and that many felons were victims of circumstances in childhood and neighborhoods far beyond their control. Even more than Rico and Tony Camonte, Tom Powers symbolized that type of sociological redemption. Study that scene of his trussed-up body falling downward to the floor at the feet of his stunned mother. (Cagney had to prepare his own mother to understand this role as a piece of acting and not to take it too personally.) We have, I submit, a strong association, nonverbal to be sure, with the "Descent from the Cross," a veritable Pieta scene with the power of Michelangelo's immortal sculpture. Again we have a religious icon, recalling the words of Mircea Eliade that in today's world we have to find "the hidden sacreds," those religious experiences which seem profane but which are really not. I will try to show that Cagney was, in artistically oblique ways, such a "hidden sacred."

Between 1931 and 1981, Cagney made 51 films, covering such diverse genres as prison, war, musicals, comedies, westerns biographies, and costume period romances (e.g., *The Strawberry*

Blonde). As Jack Lemmon testified in his tribute to the plucky actor, he imprinted every frame of every picture with sincerity. So searing was the sincerity that Frank Capra told me that Cagney was the most electrifying performer he had ever seen on the screen—and that from a director who supervised stars such as Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart, Ronald Colman, Lionel Barrymore, Cary Grant, and Spenser Tracy.

There was a disarming directness that stamped Cagney as an original. The believability that Cagney brought to each picture, even the potboilers he made on an assembly-line basis for



The Roaring Twenties

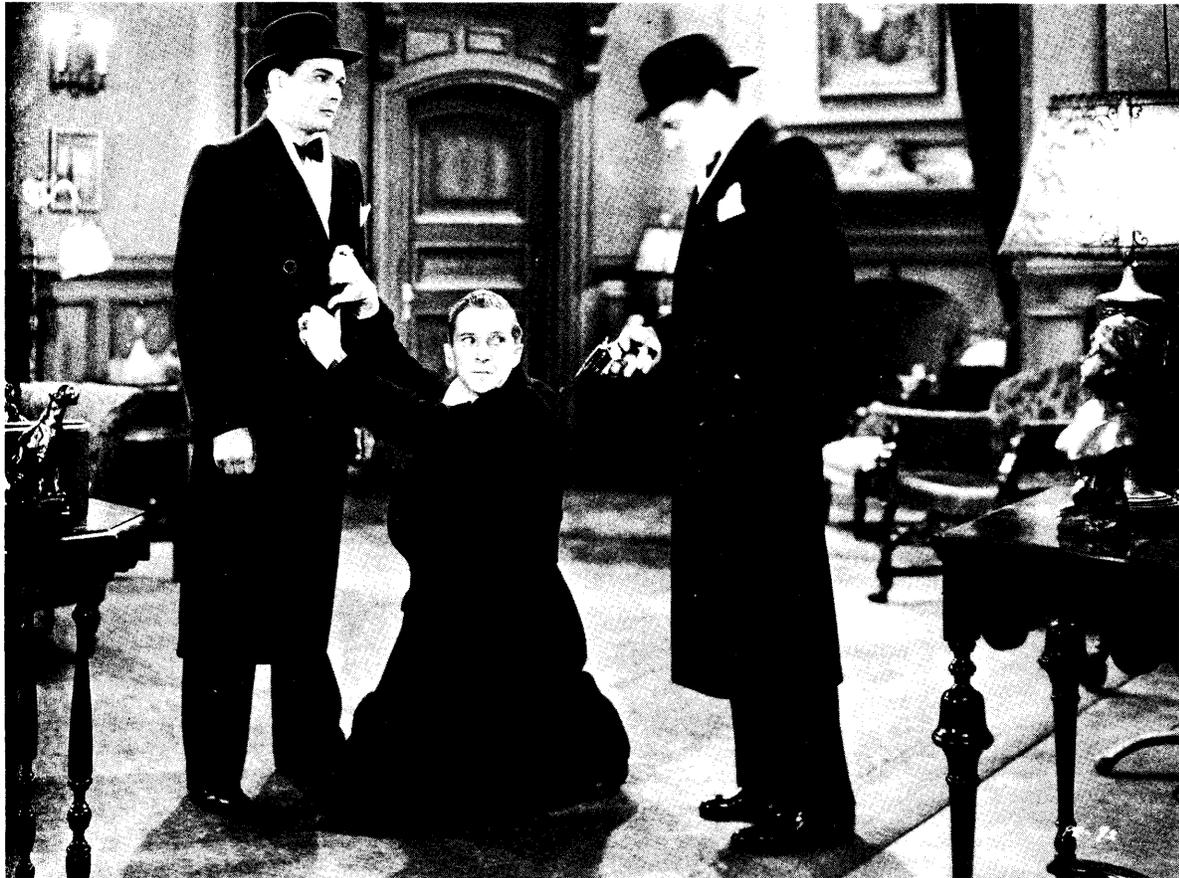
Warner Brothers, was something that cannot be explained merely from the actor's expected ability to dig down into the life of another person and capture their psycho-history, but came from deep within the actor's own history of pain, struggle and transcendence. I use these words because the Cagney that moves us most poignantly is the Cagney who is hurting, and who tries to remove the hurt by using his fists, his snarling staccato of verbal ripostes, his gun, and, yes, even as in that unforgettable scene from *Public Enemy*, a grapefruit in the face of a woman he loves. He feels under-represented by the protocols of law and order, of polite society, that same culture which proclaims the Horatio Alger myth, the rosy hope of rags-to-riches and the credo "The world is yours!" The sincerity expressed against shallow

conventions and social sham was true, if his conduct was not.

At Warner Brothers Cagney experimented with a range of characters, largely in low-budget stock features—wearing fedoras, sailor's hats, prison stripes, cab driver's peaked caps, and the ass's head of Bottom in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was, nevertheless, in the roles of the sacrificial victim that Cagney won the highest plaudits of the critics and the enduring

sentence to become the idol of gutter-bred rowdies ("The Dead End Kids"). The boy who escaped is now a priest, Fr. Jerry Connelly (Pat O'Brien), who resents the adulation given to Rocky Sullivan (Cagney), even though he still admires, even loves him.

When Rocky is sentenced to the electric chair for killing a crooked lawyer (Humphrey Bogart) in order to protect the priest and society from a selfish scheme, the priest visits him in Death Row



Public Enemy

affection of fans. Even in *G-Men*, on the side of the law, Cagney demonstrated his slum origins as one who had first-hand knowledge of racketeering and who could redress the balance of a higher justice his way, that is to say, against odds and at the risk of his life.

But it was in *Angels with Dirty Faces* that Cagney exalted the gangster picture to a complex level of spiritual meaning never attained in those proto-gangster films discussed above. The film begins as two boys flee the police for pilfering. One trips and is caught; the other escapes. Fade to black: years pass. The boy who was sent to a reform school is a hoodlum who returns from a prison

to plead with him to end the destructive worship of the parish gang for Rocky. He indignantly declines, saying, "I never had a heart." On the way to the chair, however, he breaks down, screaming and struggling. In *Cagney on Cagney*, the late actor wrote that, to avoid violating the Motion Picture Code, the scene was deliberately made ambiguous. But to those teen-agers like myself who saw the film, we knew that Rocky Sullivan's character was such that he would take the advice of the priest and do the noble thing.

Rarely had Hollywood presented such an ironic portrait of left-handed martyrdom, of auto-victimhood. *Angels with Dirty Faces* is a prime

example of Mircea Eliade's statement that the sacred lies hidden under profane surfaces. And it was Cagney's convincing transparency that created this authentic type of deviation which gave the hard shell/soft core Cagney performances their enduring charm. There was something of the look of Christ hiding beneath the facade of criminality. Why? Because Jimmy Cagney had a personal code which often shamed the conventional, at times shallow, preachments of political, legal and moral authorities in the community. Audiences, especially youth, unfailingly identified with Cagney and not with the priest, though attractive and a devoted servant of the Church. Cagney's behavior spoke louder than the words of those on the side of law and order.

The Cagney belligerence camouflaged an insecure, unloved and hurt child. If moviegoers related to his directness, it was because they sensed that the world was shaved by a drunken barber, that the appearances of law and order hid hypocrisy, deal-making and sanctimonious slogans that never effected deep change in the citizenry. What Cagney was playing was the archetypal New Yorker from a background of deprivation, struggling against odds. Cagney was acting himself. In the films which star him in a New York setting one sees how Cagney made the artifice of movie-making vanish in his own incandescent sincerity—*Taxi*, *Jimmy the Gent*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *The Fighting 69th*, and *City for Conquest*. These films feature vintage Cagney and it is noteworthy that in the last thirty years of his career, the locales were not New York based.

I do not think it too pretentious or arty to speak of the symbolic archetype of the early Cagney with his core persona embodied in the above-mentioned roles, resonating with something very deep in the psyche of the mass audience. Cagney is the great nay-sayer and the film rebels whom we shall mention later owe him an incalculable debt of gratitude for his paradigmatic influence on them. Cagney had a vulnerability which appealed to women (despite the grapefruit pushed into Mae Clarke's face); he had a strange unpredictable sense of timely compassion that moved the sanctimonious; his indignation was true if not legally sanctioned (for Cagney worked, as did John Wayne later, on his own idiosyncratic ethic); Cagney represented for the oppressed and the minorities everywhere (not only in the USA) the incarnation of impatient, immediate retribution. Is it irreverent to see him as a faint

symbol of the reversal of values which one finds throughout Scriptures and in the four Gospels? If Jesus died a felon's death outside the walls, so too it is not pietistic exaggeration or a critic's fevered zeal to point out this mysterious symbolic kinship.

Compare Chaplin and Cagney, both now universally loved for defying the fallibilities of the law, the hypocrisies of religion, the hollowness of institutional role-playing, and the calculated self-interest to which most of us cautious citizens fall prey. Cagney's persona is the more complex and ironic one. Let us see how and why. It may strike the reader as a surprise but Cagney and Chaplin share the same rage for personal freedom and integrity as well as a scorn for social conventions and the inherited unexamined platitudes by which the past holds the present hostage to itself.

Both were social deviants but with a difference. Charlie Chaplin's "little tramp" was a horizontal deviant, ever walking away from society with quiet but resolute indifference, even mute disdain for its values. James Cagney, by contrast, was a vertical deviant; he did not walk away from society down some open road to a different destination and a hopefully brighter tomorrow, but challenged the system directly and would have been content to have gained a significant share of its status and rewards. (How often do we see Cagney in formal dress, tuxedo and stiff shirt, and with glamorously dressed women?) Cagney wanted success on his terms but within society as it was constituted. If Chaplin awakened comedic sympathy and could move to tears, Cagney touched a different emotional chord in the audience, intensely dramatic, even at times tragic, empathy.

Cagney stands up better with the passage of time than Chaplin, whose pathos and sentimentality today look somewhat contrived and, on occasion, artificial. To be sure, both actors cut deeply into the deepest zones of feeling of the spectator, but, to my mind, Cagney brings a burning sincerity that is wanting in the little tramp, who is a dedicated survivor living from his cunning, his wits, and his resourcefulness. If one reflects on the overall tenor of the classic roles of each of the two Hollywood immortals, it becomes obvious that Chaplin rarely courted the role of auto-victim. He would take risks only for the love of a woman, for self-satisfaction, or to redress a grievance. Cagney, on the other hand, could die for a person or his commitment. He is in no way a survivor. Chaplin seems to be more interest-

motivated, whereas Cagney could show concern for values and generosity.

Both exercised a type of prophetic witness but Chaplin's tended to be more negative, whereas Cagney would witness both negatively and positively, that is, he could die for a cause, for a person. Both were sign-celebrities, actors who could entertain at one level and communicate a profound statement about life and its dialectic mystery at another, more subtle, level. In a literal sense, the best Chaplin and Cagney films are hymns to the Scriptural principle that "the last shall be first." In short, each actor has a mystical aura which irresistibly draws people to them across all the limiting differentials of gender, race,

a total giver, whereas Chaplin, a comic for all ages and a multi-faceted talent, was a conditional giver, but a giver nevertheless.

We have been talking up to this point about the inside Cagney, the uncompromising nay-saying deviant who can be sharply differentiated from the Cagney who in his later career did musical comedy. It is interesting that Cagney later tended more toward biography. After enacting George Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), he played Lon Chaney and Fleet Admiral "Bull" Halsey, Jr. These roles I would consider very different from Cagney's autobiographical signature, i.e., the urban tough guy who asks no quarter and gives no quarter. This marginality defines him as much



Walking the last mile with Pat O'Brien in *Angels With Dirty Faces*

nationality, social class, age, religion, educational background, and occupational role. This is the trademark of universality. Cagney's stature is bound to grow. He is not Chaplin but he has been underrated in terms of his prophetic power and social witnessing. It must be remembered—and this is the heart of this essay—that Cagney was

as it did Chaplin. He needs no validation other than who he is. There is no middle ground for Cagney the arch-rebel. We accept him, sympathize with him and like him, despite the fact that he is either at the bottom of society or to the side of society. The Cagney persona, like the Chaplin character (and, I would add, Christ), is

certainly a social deviant.

After the huge success of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* Cagney formed his own production company with his brother William. This represented a departure in his career. Warner Brothers had worked him hard (three to five films per year in the 1930s). Cagney wanted to slacken this pace and he also was tired of the role of murderer, gangster, mobster, and hoodlum. He began to surrender the urban milieu that was the incubator for his classic roles. After *Yankee Doodle Dandy* he chose to play in patriotic films or melodramas such as *Johnny Come Lately* (1943) and *The Time of Your Life* (1943), based on the touching play by William Saroyan. Cagney was looking to spend more time away at his farm with his wife, "Billy," and their two adopted children, James, Jr. and Cathleen. He had never been a member of the Hollywood social pacemakers but merely one of the Irish pack, made up of such fine character actors as Pat O'Brien, Frank McHugh, Lynne Overman, Allen Jenkins, and others. Cagney, O'Brien and McHugh had all played together in *Here Comes the Navy* in 1934, a film which won an Academy Award nomination but which was easily by-passed by Frank Capra's marvellous hit *It Happened One Night*.

Pat O'Brien and Cagney became close and life-long friends after *Here Comes the Navy*, and it was O'Brien who aptly said of Jimmy Cagney that he was a "far-away fella." By that he meant, basically, three things: his loner status in his most memorable roles of the 1930s; his preferential distancing from moving in the fast lane within the Hollywood colony; his personal habits of generosity, reserve and self-effacement. Cagney was so self-effacing that he never saw his own films, once finished, or even looked at the rushes.

If we compared Cagney with Chaplin, let me be permitted to make another surprise comparison for the benefit of illuminating the Cagney personality—namely with Fred Astaire, whose towering respect for him was reciprocated: when Cagney was on the set when Astaire was doing the scene for the title number of *Top Hat* he told Astaire that the second take was the best and that was the one that was printed. As Astaire, Cagney too was an "imperfectionist," always looking for the best performance. In *Yankee Doodle Dandy* he practiced for months to master the steps of Cohan, and the picture proves that he succeeded. Both were matter-of-fact concerning their art, their achievements. When asked about acting, Cagney curtly retorted: "Stand up, say your lines and sit down." Astaire too was

impatient with over-analysis of his dancing and once asked with skepticism: "What's a calorie?" It was Cagney who, as a guest at the American Film Institute tribute to Astaire, said with muted indignation: "It's about time!" Both recoiled from hero-worshipping adulation and exploitative publicity.

One paradoxical point needs to be mentioned. As Cagney withdrew from the Hollywood community, studio activity and his classic nay-saying roles, he began to parody himself as in Billy Wilder's *One, Two, Three!* As his screen persona changed so did his social and political views. He no longer was the striver, the reacher, the instinctive rebel that he was in real life. To understand this one must study his origins. He was born and raised on the Lower East Side, in an ethnic melting pot environment where need was the motive force. Budd Schulberg described this drive toward upward mobility in his classic *What Makes Sammy Run?*, possibly the most famous novel about Hollywood.

Sammy Glick, the center of the plot, is unscrupulous and neurotic. Cagney was not, but there is a drivenness in his character that is reflected on the screen, even if tempered, happily, with a soft nature and a streak of sentimentality. The young Cagney knew different races and nationalities that resided between the East River and the Bowery. He even knew Yiddish and used it to comic effect in *Taxi* (1932). He admitted to having graduated from Stuyvesant High School where brilliant first and second generation immigrant pupils (a large number of them Jewish) received a formal education unsurpassed in the United States. Add to this the street wisdom that the informal surroundings provided.

All these experiences blended to make Cagney the democratic chip-on-the-shoulder Irishman he was. Many Irish tend to remain aloof from other races and to cling tenaciously to clan memories and customs. Not so Cagney. He was a product of the crucible that was New York from 1900 onwards. His personality was an open-system. Cagney knew the losers—the street chums and neighborhood pals that could not see the difference between bluff play-acting to survive now and one's later real-life character as a responsible productive citizen. In *Cagney on Cagney* he writes of the friends who went to Sing Sing and Dannemora, maximum custody prisons, and he kept in touch with them. His characteristic hitching up his pants with his elbows and his bantam rooster stance with arms

hanging down inert in front of his body, almost touching his knees—these distinctive mannerisms were due to imitating what he observed near Delancey Street or in Yorkville (the upper east side of Manhattan where the family moved as their circumstances improved). New York City and the mixing with varied types on the street, in school and in the legitimate theatre, contributed to a universal type very different from all the other actors of Irish ancestry.

Someone at Warner Brothers' studio remarked to Cagney that he was so different on the screen—angry and boisterous—as contrasted with his off-screen manner, so mild and unassuming. Cagney could not disagree with the perceptive observation. The man promptly responded firmly: "Now, when are you acting—on-screen or off?" The two were not very different, I believe, in the early career. Cagney was expressing a sincerity he deeply felt. We know that once when his father was ill, the family called for a Catholic priest to come from the nearby Catholic parish to attend the ailing man. He never came. That hurt stayed with Cagney for decades. He felt deeply, and this hypersensitivity (a quality of street people with their own codes of conduct) caused him to react strongly.

The later career of Cagney was more mellow and reflected the adjustments that age can induce even in feisty types. Perhaps the most revealing picture to indicate the change in Cagney is Raoul Walsh's *White Heat*, the plot of which lived up fully to the challenging promise of the title. The main character is named Cody Jarrett. It is provocative that his initials are the reverse of those of Cagney himself. It is as if this pathological killer was the darkest shadow side of what the Cagney anti-heroes, likeable and sympathetic, were. Let us examine the film and the extraordinary characterization in *White Heat* to trace the sharp outlines of a psychological cross-over between the earlier rebel-heroes like Tom Powers and the post *Yankee Doodle Dandy* Cagney, highly successful, with an Oscar to his credit, a farmer and, essentially, an absentee-actor commuting from the East Coast (Martha's Vineyard and upstate New York) to Los Angeles and Hollywood.

A cult film often shown on television, *White Heat* is a Freudian gangster film. (In the 1940s Hollywood discovered Freud and salted many genre films with his insights as in the musical *Dancing in the Dark* and the Western *Pursued*, starring Robert Mitchum.) The protagonist is a

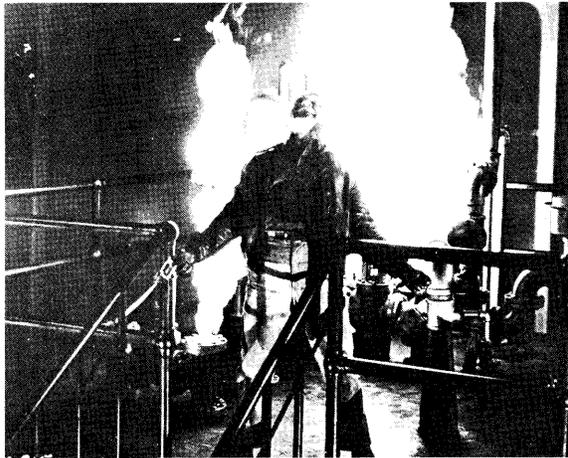
psychopathic killer, the most ambiguous criminal since Peter Lorre's self-conscious child molester in Fritz Lang's *M*. Jarrett leaves us stone-cold in his heartless attitudes. In one brutal scene, Cagney goes against the grain of his earlier criminal types by having a defenseless man locked up in a car trunk and eventually firing bullets through the locked door to dispatch the victim, saying with cynical glee that now he would have some air to breathe. This is perverse behavior at its purest and we reluctantly accept it because of the other scenes of bizarre but affecting mother-love.

Cagney suggested to director Raoul Walsh that he should sit in the lap of his screen mother as if he were a small child. Walsh agreed and the scene is something out of an underground movie. Cagney made it work. Possibly Paul Muni might have pulled the scene off. (Recall his crazed incestuous love, sincere and touching, for his sister in *Scarface*.) But I personally cannot imagine an Edward G. Robinson, a Humphrey Bogart or a John Garfield even attempting the scene, never mind suggesting it. That Cagney suggested it surely has to give us pause. It is an utterly disarming scene and one that still surprises us after almost half a century.

The regressive nature of Cody Jarrett makes this film bizarre and fascinating but it also reveals the child-within-the-man inside Cagney himself. The film critic for *Life* described Cagney's Jarrett as a homicidal paranoiac with a mother fixation, saying that audiences screeched with joy when the hero appeared pummeling society with both hands and feet, a tigerish snarl on his lips. Why this crowd reaction? Perhaps it is due to an aspect of mob psychology, something regressive in a group whose personal inhibitions are lowered when identity is cloaked by the darkness of a theatre. But it is also the trust in the legacy of the Cagney persona that if a Cagney character does something, he is willing to pay the consequences, feeling that his deepest instincts are righter than the law or its enforcement officials.

At some strange level of murky motivation, Cody Jarrett is a conscientious objector. His mother-love is true. What happened in the socialization process to warp him? In Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* the antipathetic protagonist, Sammy Glick, steps on everybody in his climb to success in Hollywood. Halfway through the novel, Schulberg makes us see through a narrator that Glick had a badly compromised childhood on Rivington Street on the Lower East Side, that his soul grew twisted

like an ingrown hair turned in on itself. There is a kinship between Cody Jarrett and Sammy Glick. Both wanted to get to the top; both succeeded. We do not know what went wrong with Jarrett but we know he loved his mother. That is the source of the film's complexity and its impenetrable fascination, comparable, I maintain, to the unexpected humanity of King Kong. Let us return to the key scene of *White Heat*, the scene that definitively proves that the title is no exaggeration.



"Ma, I Made It!" *White Heat*

Cody has been arrested and sent to prison. He is shown in a huge mess hall, seated at table for a meal. Guards patrol the expanse from the floor and from the mezzanine. Each prisoner is a mere particle in an ocean of regimented atoms. Then we see the prisoners discreetly whispering to each other as they feign eating. Word is being passed down the line to Cody Jarrett that his mother has died. When he receives the news, his face changes and instead of sadness, a fit of rage overtakes him. It is the classic Cagney instinct at work; it is the personal gland of violated justice that has been activated.

Cody goes berserk in a scene of bravura acting that has no close parallel in the history of world cinema. He jumps up and begins running along the top of the mess tables, staggering forward blindly and inexorably, sending plates and metalware serving instruments flying in all directions. The guards converge to intercept his careening rampage. But his blind rage of grief causes him to swing at the guards. Finally he is subdued by several of them. This unconventional scene with its off-the-wall performance was effective because it was congruent with Cagney's penchant for unconditional loyalty to persons

and causes, something that is obviously missing in contract society with its limited quid pro quo obligations based on calculated give-and-take agreements. This touches audiences at some visceral level of felt need and relief, just raw remedial rebelliousness—pure and simple—and audiences accept it. Cagney can teach social psychologists something about the shadowy sources of so-called deviant behavior. There is little doubt that Cody Jarrett's monumental devotion to his mother exercises a semi-mystical



The Frisco Kid

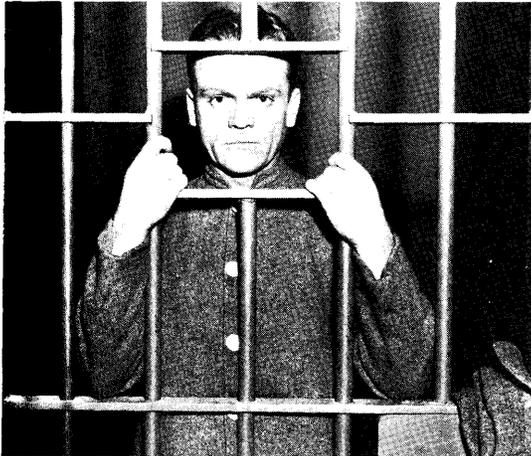
effect on audiences, irrespective of their language, income and religious backgrounds.

And who can forget the final scene, its logic rooted in the lap-sitting scene and the stunning running berserk sequence? Trapped by federal agents atop a gasoline tank of an industrial facility, he is shot. It is the end. But Cody will have the last statement. He will choose his exit and go out—quite literally—in a blaze of glory. He shoots a bullet into the mammoth fuel storage tank, and it ignites instantaneously. He throws his hands to the side and his head back. Looking above the night heavens illuminated by the soaring flames he suggests a cruciform figure. With an hysterical note of triumph and in crazed pride, he addresses his dead mother: "Made it, Ma. I'm on top of the world." Move over Sammy Glick, your over-achieving brother will join you.

The reader will suspect—and may freely disagree with me—that I see in Cody Jarrett (with the reverse initials also of Jesus Christ) a reverse transfiguration of the Christ figure much as Peter O'Toole's Christomaniac in *The Ruling Class* or Jack Nicholson's contentious hospital patient in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. All three characters bear an oblique if admittedly

unconventional resemblance to the central character of the four Gospels.

Another clue to understanding the inside Cagney that so appealed to audiences through the visible outside screen performances can be found in his starring role in *A Man of a Thousand Faces*. He readily accepted the offer to play the role of Lon Chaney, the silent screen star, the make-up wizard who played freaks, cripples and misshapen men with a sympathy that placed the portrayals beyond the mere category of



Each Dawn I Die

sensational horror and elevated the roles to the realm of art.

In real life, Chaney was a man who had suffered. (He knew sign language since his parents were deaf-mutes.) Cagney related readily to the hurt that made up much of Lon Chaney's life and his embodying of the immortal actor testified to deep identification with psychic suffering. A re-seeing of this film will alert the perceptive viewer to the personal investment that Cagney made in the part. One has the impression that both Chaney and Cagney used acting as a way of healing personal disappointments and pains, a sort of histrionic alchemy which transmuted the lead of life into the gold of art. Chaney's Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* truly loved Esmeralda and betrayed the humanity latent in a horrifying handicapped person. That was Chaney's genius, to make transparent the human capacity to feel beneath the grotesque appearances of the physically and psychologically abnormal. Similarly, Cagney could secure audience identification with those who were psychically twisted out of shape by events not in their control—family background, environment, chance occurrences, and fate. Thus

we see that Cagney could invariably convert a villain into a social witness with sympathetic traits and on some occasions even into a discernible, when unorthodox, Christ-figure in secular appearance.

Each time you look at a motion picture or television show that features an attractive anti-hero, a sympathetic gangster, killer, drifter, or loner, you are seeing the shadow of Jimmy Cagney. He lives on in such stars as John Garfield, Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando,



City For Conquest

James Dean, Paul Newman, Steve McQueen, and contemporary anti-heroes such as Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino and Robert De Niro. He is not visible, however, in the personae of Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson, and Sylvester Stallone, for these actors were incapable of shifting gears to do the noble unsuspected deed, to sacrifice themselves for a greater social good. They are products of an era, a culture, a national mood but not social and religious witnesses with a vulnerable nature that regenerates others or that looks sentimentally to mother-love. They are too self-sufficient for that, much too defensive, at times vindictive.

The individualist Bogart and the vigilante heroes such as Wayne, Eastwood, Bronson, and Sylvester Stallone (especially as John Rambo and Rocky, the cosmic champion) avoid being hurt seriously; rather they are intent on hurting. Cagney's characters always get hurt; true, they break the law, unjustly enrich themselves and, at times, kill. There is no doubt about that at all. The point is that deep down within the character is an ache as if the character was born hurt. The Cagney character operates out of a different kind



Shake Hands With The Devil

of compulsive need than the vigilante-type stars mentioned above. There is more of a social witness, a hitting out against a social order which is accepted blindly and not questioned in any serious public way. John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, Charles Bronson, and Stallone do not suggest any personal sense of prophetic indignation—nor does Cody Jarrett: the social environmental factor is not discernible at the sub-conscious level. We have a psychoanalytic intra-psychic impulse along the private axis. Here Cody manifests a

kinship to the heroes of *True Grit*, *Dirty Harry*, *Death Wish*, and *First Blood*. He buries the anti-hero type as much as Monsieur Verdoux buried Chaplin's loveable little tramp.

The point to be made and remembered is that the Cagney of the 1930s is a negative prophet, witness to a social construction of reality that is not only arbitrary but also evil in its distribution of status, income and opportunity. The proto-gangsters such as Tom Powers, Little Rico and Tony Camonte were sympathetic, not radical

loners but socially-twisted personalities that worked out of blind motivation as did Oedipus. By contrast, the law unto myself anti-heroes of the 1960s and the 1970s were self-conscious, determined protagonists out to redress the tilted balance of grievances created by other law-breakers or rivals.

Cagney is unique in his classic roles of rashly impetuous Napoleonic types, bent on leading, not on following. Cagney was a great Nay-Sayer, the engine of whose personality was powered by negative convictions. He was misguided or mistreated but not vindictive, nor selfish nor acquisitive, but essentially opposed to the way the world he knew was wired up. His style of toughness is a cover for repressed innocence in a ghetto setting where purity and vulnerability are considered signs of weakness, even of cowardice. The Cagney character both on and off screen is fascinatingly complex and indescribably believable. Indeed, Cagney has to be seen to be believed. The magnetism is there but it is not for evil, for egoism, for vested interests, for naked opportunism or over-weening ambition; it is for a higher principle that transcends the conformist, comprising and comfort-seeking roles that a highly specialized urban-industrial society provides for the greatest majority of its citizens.

In this sense Cagney is a social witness, negative perhaps, but nonetheless a witness to alternatives. His path is not the happy nor right one, obviously. The tragic endings confirm that, but the path of revolution—of Fidel Castro, of Che Guevara, of Ho Chi Minh—is not one that was in the public consciousness in the 1930s. In the Cagney persona on screen there was the seed of revolution, or armed resistance. In this regard it is interesting that he effectively played an Irish revolutionary during the time of the famous troubles in *Shake Hands with the Devil*, an intriguing film for the aging Cagney.

If the quintessential early Cagney roles displayed scorn for legal justification, they did show keen concern for a justification beyond the law. If the Cagney of the cocky stance, jutting jaw, defiant stare and wavy hair was irresistible

to mass audiences, it must be found in his quest for a higher validation, his imperious need to give witness to a reality closer to the heart's desire. We have sought to pay tribute to a pantheon actor, a true screen immortal. Yes, he was, as Pat O'Brien so aptly put it, that far-away fella who was aloof but involved, defiant but generous, grasping but altruistic, an apparent taker who was, as we often learned in the final scene, a total giver. He seemed to us on the surface a rugged individualist like the robber barons of the nineteenth century but with a gun instead of surplus wealth.

And yet he had a social dimension, if we but ponder Cagney's origins, his personal street ethos and the deviant roles he played. Deviant, yes, but unlike Chaplin, ready to take the system on directly and not to ignore it. In real life he was as unprepossessing as Fred Astaire, though his screen persona belied that quality. Cagney, as persona on the screen and as person in real life, I believe, changed after *Yankee Doodle Dandy* in 1942. He did play some substantive roles, but, as he became more settled, he often self-parodied the old Cagney. Film scholarship must distinguish the high performances of the great stars from those players of lesser altitude and intensity and try to identify the turning point. This study has attempted to achieve this goal. If Cagney is an auteur actor, stamping films with his presence and elevating them above the quality of the story line, then we must note when his authorship reached its peak. This incomparable actor died on Easter Sunday, 1986. Such a provocative coincidence adds a bit of mystical aura to his charismatic stature as the most memorable exemplar of that most rigid of film genres—the gangster motion picture. We miss you, Jimmy!□

Fr. Neil Hurley, S.J., also born and raised on the East Side of New York, where he went to Stuyvesant High School, is the author of numerous seminal works on the interplay of film and ideas, including The Reel Revolution.

Kim Bridgford

THIS LIGHT

Sitting here watching you
Ease your hands into the damp earth,
Dropping seed after seed,
I realize that we never tell
Each other anything,
Nothing like the way the sun
Catches your face in the light.
How is it that day after day,
Studying each other
Across the breakfast table,
We forget this light,
This opening of the world?
And even at night in the shape of love
We forget what brought us there after all,
Sharing the bed like a ritual
And turning away.

I want to remember
This moment like a face
Seen through a hole in the door.
Listen! The birds are waking up
The tree behind you,
One by one by one;
And I'm following the light
That causes you
To look up all of a sudden,
Brush the dirt from your hands,
And come in.

John Mosier

THE BELLY OF THE CINEMA
THE COMPETITION AT CANNES: 1987

After forty years, the Cannes film festival is not the oldest film festival in the world, an honor reserved to Venice, which was started in 1932. But over the decades Cannes has emerged as the largest and most prestigious. It has also become the most complicated to understand, and its fortieth birthday is a good moment for some brief explanations. Interestingly enough, most of its complexity is a function of the last two decades. During its first twenty years, Cannes became mostly known as a glamorous and commercial affair, the implication often being that its competitors, chiefly Venice and Berlin, were where one went in order to see attention lavished on the "art" of the cinema. The glamor part was certainly true. The festival is inseparable from the city of Cannes, the most exclusive city on the Riviera for a century, the most sophisticated French city after Paris, and one of the most glamorous in the world.

As far as glamor goes, Cannes as a film festival has no real competition, particularly given its date: even though it can be cold and rainy, the Riviera in May is a far better place than Berlin in February or Venice in late August (remember Dirk Bogarde holding his handkerchief to his nose in *Death in Venice*). The warm weather allows the goings on that glamor requires: there are few parties on yachts or the beach in Berlin in February, regardless of how sophisticated a city it is.

As far as the cinema goes, there is some truth to the old chestnut about Cannes being very commercial, although how much is hard to say. As best one can judge from looking at the lists of prizes, the charges are exaggerated: *The Third Man* (1949), *Miracle in Milan* (1951), *Black Orpheus* (1959), *La Dolce Vita* (1960), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Blow-up* (1967) are all serious films, and each won the main prize at Cannes. Lawrence Cohn, writing in *Variety* (6 May 1987: 15) summed it up with the paper's usual combination of the appalling and the perceptive: "the apex of glitter and hoopla by which films are launched internationally. The fest juries . . . read like a

who's who not merely of the motion picture industry but arts and letters as well, comprising everyone from Jean Cocteau through Henry Miller."

But the French themselves, in the aftermath of their mini-Civil War of 1968, changed Cannes, transforming it from simply a glamorous event with a serious nod towards the arts into the world's major film festival. In order to respond to the attacks on the commercial tilt of the festival, a series of separate, or parallel, events were inaugurated. Whether by design or no, these ensured that the various elites in the French film world would each get a share of the pie.

The Association of French Film Critics would have its own event, called the *Semaine internationale de la critique*, or Critics Week, usually shortened to *Semaine*. A committee formed by the Association would select half a dozen films from anywhere in the world and show them. There would be no prize given. Simple selection would be enough of an award. In order to ensure that the works of young directors would be seen, the Committee would restrict itself to first (or second) feature films. The *Semaine* would be the way that French critics ensured that the works of young artists from all over the world would reach an international audience.

One might ask, reasonably enough, why this would be so important, since at one screening in the *ancien palais* only a few hundred people at most would see a film. But the Cannes audience is one of the most influential and exclusive groups in the world, composed almost totally of people who buy, sell, merchandise, distribute, or make, films. The ultimate proof was that the *Semaine* worked. It was through this process that the world discovered Bernardo Bertolucci. And afterwards, it was through this channel that directors were able to sell their films to international markets, which would give them the opportunity to get the financing to make more films. It was—and is—a crude system, full of waste. But it was an attempt to do something meaningful, and by and large it has done exactly

that.

The *Semaine* was not the only parallel event. Across the way, intellectually speaking, were the filmmakers themselves, who had their own association, and after 1968 they too organized an event, called the *Quinzaine des Realisateurs*, or Directors Fortnight. The *Quinzaine* would show more films, and it would be, from the first, a much more ambitious affair than the *Semaine*. But it too would be an alternative route to glory.

Both of these events emulated the international orientation of the festival itself. One of the less publicized complaints in 1968 was the extent to which the festival had shut out French cinema. In response there came into existence a third parallel event, the *Perspectifs*, dedicated exclusively to French cinema, while the parallel or "information" section of the festival, which for over a decade has been called *Un certain regard*, became much larger and more ambitious. What developed during the next decade was a kind of limitless competition. In addition to the Competition, the "official" Cannes, there were these other, parallel events, and, regardless of their original purpose, they were in actual fact competitive—so much so that it is doubtful if anyone today could tell you what the differences are among the various components that make up "Cannes."¹

A genuinely uncommercial film like Syberberg's *Hitler* would be shown in *Un certain regard*, which made a fair amount of sense. But Olmi's *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*, a film with if anything fewer commercial prospects than Syberberg's, was shown in Competition. The works of unknown directors were shown in the *Semaine* and the *Quinzaine*, but Susan Seidelman's first film, *Smithereens*, was shown in competition. After 1978 or so, Cannes became four parallel film festivals all working simultaneously.

There were both good and bad effects of this situation. As far as the French were concerned, the chief good was that no other film festival could hope to compete, because no one else could offer the multiplicity of events. This diversity meant a stable (and growing) audience of film professionals of every stripe, which meant more prestige for France and more money for the city. One could see more films from any one country

at Cannes than one could see at any one film festival inside the country itself. No one knows whether the people followed the films, or the films the people, but after 1968 increasingly all of both were in one place in May.

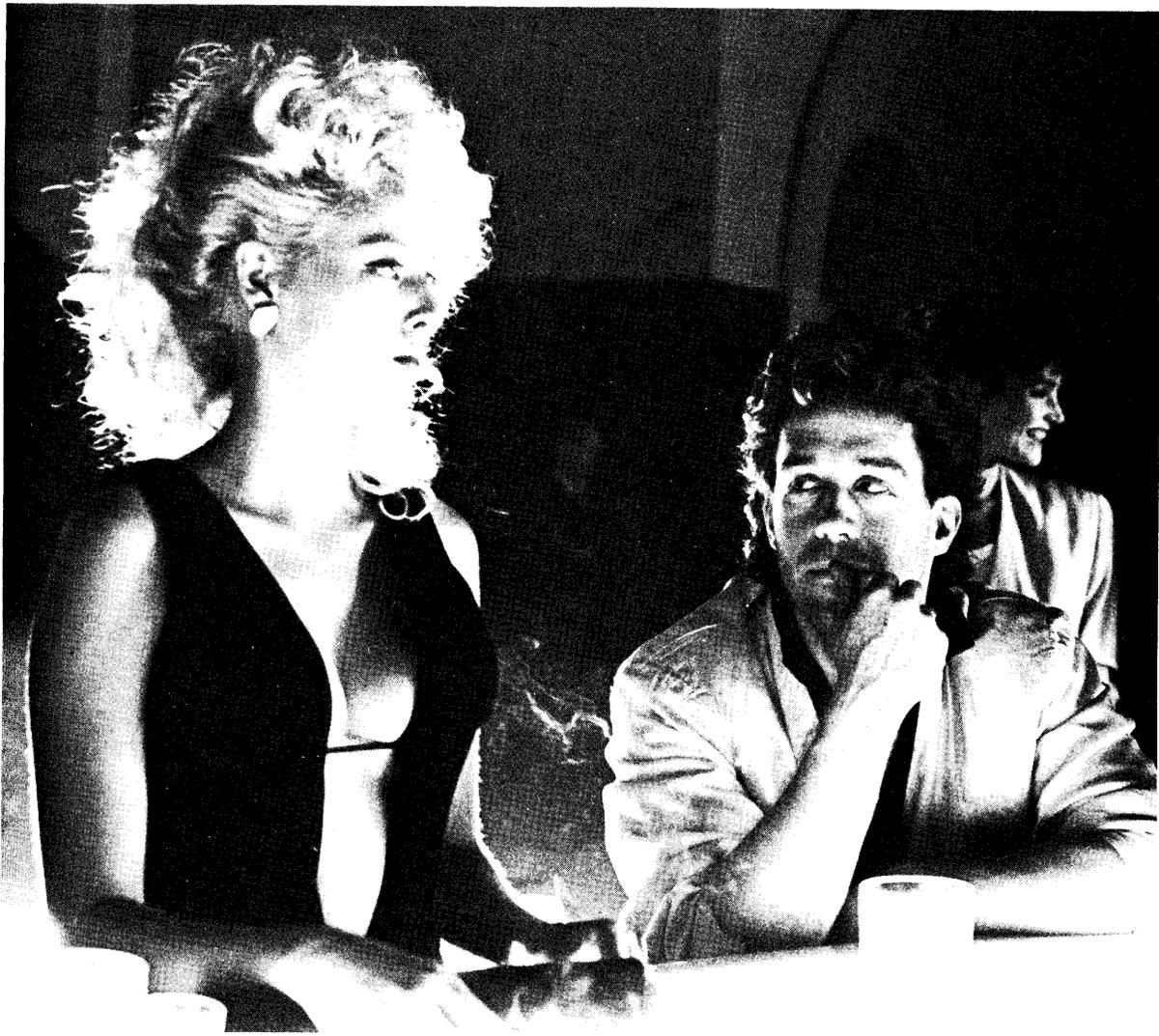
The bad effect was that Cannes became one of the great logistical nightmares of the film world. Some of this is a function of its size. Some of this is a function of its administrative decentralization into six separate events, each with its own procedures and quirks. Much of it is caused by it being spread all over the city. This complexity and reputation mean there is a great deal of criticism (any event which routinely invites three thousand journalists to cover it is going to get criticism), and this has increased in recent years, largely because the last few years have been disappointing ones at Cannes, particularly for the competition films. Of course they have been disappointing ones for film production in general, and this has been more noticeable in the competition than elsewhere, just as it has been more noticeable at Cannes.

So for the fortieth anniversary, the management of the festival went to elaborate lengths to counter this problem, mainly by flooding the venue with numerous special events. In addition to the usual confusion of having films shown in the "competition" section which were "out of competition," there were more special screenings than ever before, the whole producing an impressive list. In the "competition/non competitive part" there was Woody Allen's *Radio Days*, Lindsay Anderson's *The Whales of August*, the Taviani Brothers' *Good Morning Babilonia*, and Fellini's *Intervista*.²

In something described laconically as *scances speciales*, one could see: *Raising Arizona*, *Something Wild*, Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Peter Patzak's Wagner film, *Richard and Cosima*, and Claude d'Anna's Verdi film of *Macbeth*. There was an entire section of Film and Opera, with screenings of all sorts of curiosities. There were special screenings of films by Rossellini, Wilder, and Clement as part of a tribute to their work. In addition to *Un certain regard*, there was a cryptically labelled *Section Informative*, showing everything from Juris Podniek's controversial documentary film about Soviet youth (*Is It Easy*

¹This is a publicist's dream: many films are tagged as "official selections at Cannes," when in reality they were not entered into competition there at all, but shown in one of the other sections there, which although certainly important, is not quite the same thing as being selected for the competition for prizes.

²Confused? At the end of the festival the Jury awarded a special prize to Fellini, whose film had been shown *hors competition*, the excuse being that it was a prize given to him for his contributions to the cinema. He certainly deserves one, but the people who attend festivals like Cannes don't deserve this sort of confusion.



Tom Hulce forgets about Mozart. *Slam Dance*

To Be Young?) to Wayne Wang's *Slam Dance* and Mohamed Khan's Egyptian film, *Return of a Citizen*. Somewhere Godard had promised to show everyone the work that he had done on his version of *King Lear*, for which Norman Mailer had originally done the script.³ Obviously, even if the core of the festival, the twenty odd films shown in competition for prizes, was weak, there would be so much going on that the event itself would still be a success—even forgetting about

³See the hilarious report in *Variety* 20 May 1987: 4. "Godard also said, seriously or not, that he had never read *King Lear*. And, looking at the largely incomprehensible film, one could well believe it was true. . . ." Mailer had, in fact, written a first draft of the screenplay placing the action in a contemporary Mafia setting. Godard abandoned the idea and later parted company with Mailer. . . . Commenting on the difficulties of production as portrayed in *Lear*, Golan [the producer] said Godard is the kind of filmmaker who likes to "spit in his own soup."

the twenty-one films in *Un certain regard*, the eighteen films in the *Quinzaine*, the seven films in the *Semaine*, and the three hundred and forty films shown in the *marché*.

Given the general run of the cinema lately, this was probably a good idea. Since the move to the "bunker" in 1983, there seems to have been a curse on the competition films. Again and again one saw either deeply flawed films from major artists (Godard comes instantly to mind) or films which while impressive, were not really what one had hoped for (Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice*). It was not just that they were individually disappointing, but that they seemed to reveal a global cinema in the doldrums, which, when it produced anything, produced extremely conservative works that neither advanced our appreciation of the cinema nor excited us about it.

These films, considered as a gigantic loop of

celluloid, seemed to indicate that the real impact of television was beginning to be felt, for they seemed overly long and underly visual, the two distinctive features of European television. So they weren't just aesthetically conservative, they were anti-aesthetic, what the gloomier people had always predicted would be the heritage of television. They were films made for the panel discussion that would take place after the screening, not for the cinema.

In 1987 things were different. In the competition section it was a rare film in which there was not at least a flash of the cinematic. In the best films, there were impressive reminders that, with the advances in sound recording and playback, in the resolution of cameras, and in all of the associated technology, a contemporary director could dazzle an audience without much trouble, even a mass audience of cantankerous film critics whose last exciting moment in a theater was when they found a ten franc coin under their pew.

1. The Ambassadors

Peter Greenaway's *The Belly of an Architect* exemplified this trend towards the cinematic. My own feeling is that when Greenaway starts talking about his work he's too clever by half (which was true at the press conference here as well), and this was certainly true of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, where the cleverness ultimately got in the way of the film.⁴ But here, five years later, everything seems to work. The script might be a trifle pretentious, but the photography and music worked. In his shots of Rome Greenaway can almost make you believe that it is a beautiful city, or, more precisely, that it is a city of great architecture.

The great strength of this film lies in its careful blending of music and images, although the script is clever enough. Stourley Kracklite, a famous architect from Chicago, has spent years dreaming of mounting an exhibition of the great French architect Etienne-Louis Boullée, and now he has succeeded in persuading a bank in Rome to subsidize the exhibition, which he is to plan and direct. From the very first Kracklite has a rival, a young man named Caspasian Speckler (a

wooden Lambert Wilson), who covets his exhibit, his fame, and, almost incidentally, his spoiled and witless young wife. Stourley Kracklite is in his fifties and overweight: Brian Dennehy does a great job here of conveying an aging man's anxiety about his health, his career, and, above all, his attempts to realize his dreams. The remainder of the cast, however, is an indifferent group. Chloe Webb (of *Sid and Nancy*) looks perfect for his wife, but she acts—and her voice sounds—completely wrong for the part.

Along the way, Kracklite becomes obsessed with his stomach, convinced that he is dying. In fact, he is; or at least that's what the Italian doctor he goes to tells him. As his health fails, his obsessions mount, and he spends much of his time writing postcards to Boullée and running enlargements through the xerox machine of Andrea Doria's stomach. He loses his wife, the exhibit, and ultimately his life. This is a script where the actors really aren't called on to accomplish very much, since psychological realism is sacrificed to make the action come across as one of those Anglo-American parables about Americans abroad.



The Belly of *The Belly of an Architect*

Like Greenaway's previous feature film, this one has a great deal of cleverness in it which doesn't completely work, particularly since the more one thinks about the improbabilities, the more implausible everything becomes: why are the Romans mounting an exhibit to a French architect? What is the role of Speckler's sister? And on and on, until the action collapses under its own weight.

Probably Greenaway has this problem because he lacks any real experience at making feature films. In a curious way Greenaway brings to the cinema both the contempt and respect that someone from television might be presumed to have for it: respect, because he clearly realizes

⁴The *Variety* reviewer had some of the same reservations: "a visual treat . . . but doubts about the story and the skill of the acting linger" (6 May 1987: 12). The *Screen International* jury gave the film an extremely high score of 27, putting it right after *Black Eyes*, which had 28.

that the essence of the cinema is its ability to combine beautiful (or significant) sequences of images with sound; contempt, because he seems to feel that a script can be as implausible and vacuous as one wants, so long as it in some vague way strings those images together. But finally, one simply doesn't care about the defects because of the power of those images.

Although much about the film isn't realistic, the images are overpoweringly so. This is a considerable achievement in Rome, where any shot that doesn't embrace smog, cars, and millions of tourists is a miracle. So Greenaway's meticulously composed architectural shots are deeply effective: we see at once that they are real, that is, embedded in the actual city, but also that they are unreal, since the artist has composed them so as to reveal their significance.

Although Greenaway himself spoke of his admiration for Rome, and for things Italian in general, there is in the film itself a strong undercurrent of contempt for the natives and their products. He comes close to arguing that contemporary Italians, left to their own devices, are a cunning and malicious people whose claim



Studies in Composition 1. *Belly of an Architect*

to culture rests largely on the fact that they inhabit the ruins of a great civilization. In one scene Kracklite watches a Roman systematically go from statue to statue knocking off their noses, which we later see him selling as souvenirs. This is a scene one would expect to see in Fellini; but where Greenaway differs is that he manages to imply that this sort of corruption is easily learned, and easily mastered. Although Kracklite is disturbed, he learns very quickly that the only way one can get anything done in Italy is to bribe all and sundry. *The Belly of an Architect* differs from other parables about Anglos in Italy in its dismissive contempt for most things Italian.

Ironically, the Taviani brothers' *Good Morning*

Babilonia, a film about two Italian stonecutters who emigrate to America and end up making the elephants for D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, is the perfect articulation of why Kracklite is so contemptuous of the natives. *Babilonia* is a slowly paced film of great self-indulgence, disappointing not merely because it shows us so little about early movie making in Hollywood, nor because of the inept preposterousness of its ending, but because its images are so poorly crafted.

There has always been a strong undercurrent of this in the Italian cinema. Fellini has a fondness for painfully fake constructs, such as the great cardboard ocean liner in *Amarcord*, or the ludicrous waves in *Casanova*. But with Fellini one always has the feeling that there is a certain element of play at work here, as though he is reminding us that his films aren't realistic. And this sort of play is consistent with the deep ambivalence of both the characters and the actions of his films. His characters, going back to the hero of *La Strada*, are full of unresolved inner tensions which their creator makes no attempt to resolve.

But the Taviani film is blissfully free from any



Studies in Composition 2. *Belly of an Architect*

internal tensions, one long sentimental tribute to the unsung spirit of Italian craftsmen. The two brothers have been working in the family business of restoring churches and cathedrals, but their father is forced to close it down and turn it into a store. That he's forced to do this is one of those ironic facts about Italian culture and the store it sets on the care and restoration of its antiquities to which the directors seem completely oblivious.

So the two strike out for America, and have a miserable time of it until they get work at the San Francisco exposition and then hear that Griffith, who is revealed to have been deeply influenced by an Italian film, *Cabiria*, is looking for Italian

workers. They end up in Hollywood, meet two beautiful extras, and finally become successful. But one of the brother's wives dies in childbirth, and, embittered, he returns to Italy. War has broken out, and he ends up in the army. In a ludicrously implausible and sentimental ending, the two brothers die in each other's arms, having been bayoneted by a stray Austrian.

The plot is awful, but what is worse is the muddle to which the Tavianis reduce filmmaking. Although Charles Dance, the actor who plays Griffith, is tremendous (he's the only good thing here), it is startling to see Griffith's moviemaking reduced to a concern about sets and some vague feelings against war. *Intolerance* is a film about, well, it's a film about intolerance, and it's typical of how scrambled the Tavianis are that their film is itself full of intolerant people who don't have much use for each other, and there's no suggestion at all by the directors that this just might be somewhat ironic in itself.

Although they are supposed to be great craftsmen, we never see them do much, and their great achievement, constructing a giant elephant, is simply copying into three dimensions a figure on an Italian church that they were renovating. This makes their dramatically stated claim, "we are the heirs of Michelangelo and Leonardo," loony. The great artists of the Italian Renaissance were artists, not craftsmen. Leonardo and Michelangelo are famous, both inside and outside Italy, primarily for their work as artists, not as architects. Similarly, there's more to Griffith than his sets, and his importance to the cinema doesn't rest on his ability to construct large elephants or Babylonian temples.

Any direction one goes in, one runs into a fundamental contradiction, and, given the lugubrious pacing of the film, one has plenty of time to reflect on the contradictions while the film is going on. Most works of art contain contradictions, true enough, but the better the artist, the more he is able to keep things moving in such way that the audience doesn't really notice—or care when they do.

Just as the Tavianis seem blissfully unaware of the numerous contradictions and internal tensions in their characters, they seem unaware that their images are too artificial to have any great effect. You can't tell the difference between the church the brothers have been restoring at the beginning of the film and the set Griffith is using for the Babylonian section of his film, and you don't really know whether you should be able to or not, because too much of what should be real

in the film is all too obviously fake.⁵

The other purely Italian entry, Ettore Scola's *The Family*, was, on the contrary, far better than any of his recent work. In the last ten years, Scola has had four other films entered in competition at Cannes (*The Terrace*, *Passione d'amore*, and *Night in Varennes*; *A Very Special Day* was shown at the 1977 festival), and each one after the 1977 entry has been a major disappointment. Scola is a careful director whose films, unlike those of many of his fellow countrymen, are conspicuously free of the studio artifice that mars so much of the Italian cinema. They're also conspicuously free of anything exciting, and come across like a play. It's as though inside the movie director there was a play director trying to get out.

This time Scola has resolved the problem by keeping his whole film indoors in one house, and by eliminating any major event from it. The story is the story of a family, as the title implies, but there is a central character, Carlo, and this gives the film a unity that has been missing from all of Scola's films. He's always had this fondness for giving us a big interlocking cast of characters, and generally the result has been simply to make his works so diffuse that one lost interest in them. The consistency of the interior, and the emphasis on one character, gives *The Family* a tightness that's been missing from Scola's other works, and which he desperately needs, since he's one of these directors who can't possibly tell a story in less than a couple of hours. Even as it stands, this film is very slow, but mostly it works.

We follow Carlo from his christening in 1906 to his eightieth birthday party. His grandfather bought a house in Rome, and all the generations of the family have lived and died in it, although as the century passes there is a tendency for the younger members to move out. Carlo is in love with Adriana, a beautiful pianist, and her sister, Beatrice, is in love with him. He marries her because Adriana abandons him to pursue her career in Paris, but the two of them never really fall out of love, and finally, in 1956, they have a brief fling. Carlo also has to deal with his brother Giulio, a weak fellow who's never able to make it in life, with his three maiden aunts, and with his two children. He does so with reasonable

⁵There is a surprisingly thorough discussion of these technical problems in the *Variety* review of 13 May 1987, which includes remarks about the "glaring second-rate model work and glass shot special effects," which the reviewer argues make the film's "exaltation" of the powers of the cinema "merely an empty gesture" (137).

success, and his passage through life is quiet, subdued, and fundamentally happy.

Scola uses several different actors, generally three, to portray the chief characters at various points in their lives. This is an interesting experiment, not particularly new, but it is difficult to come up with a film where it is done to this extent, with thirty-two people playing only nine characters among them. The virtue is that it allows the kind of close-up photography that this kind of film, shot entirely in a series of closed rooms with the windows closed, demands. It is

Although people make love, give birth, and die, none of this is ever seen on camera. Even the quarrels are surprisingly subdued. But within this subdued frame (and even the colors are kept to monotones) the film has enormous subtlety, and in places Scola's mastery is almost at the same level as Bergman's in *Fanny and Alexander*.

The Family is a brilliant work, skillfully done, and surprisingly rewarding to watch. After years of seeing wretchedly boring Italian films in competition at Cannes, it is a real pleasure to see one that is actually up to the mark. It developed



Scola's *Family*: Carlo (arms folded) at 80

tough to make people up so that they can pass muster as older than they are in sustained interior work. Scola does an excellent job of this difficult task. It's only rarely that one is aware of any sort of lighting, and the film seems perfectly natural in its luminance, but his interiors are illuminated so that one can see the characters perfectly.

The difficulty with this approach is that it makes it hard for a character to come across with any real unity, and some of the transitions are handled more perfectly than others. Perhaps as a result, Scola has kept the action at a very low level of intensity, so that the characters don't have to do much in the way of emotional scenes.

early on as the critical favorite, and it was somewhat of a surprise that Scola was so completely ignored by the jury.

Scola's greatly admired colleague, however, didn't do nearly so well. Francesco Rosi's adaptation of the Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, is a complete mess. At first glance, Rosi is the one European director whose visual style seems most suited to an adaptation of the famous Colombian writer. The man who made *Three Brothers*, *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, and *Cadaveri Eccelenti* obviously has a command of the absurd and the violent, and a real sense of how to tell a story by working out

from a series of images—as the Colombian novelist himself has confessed he does in his own fiction. So what went wrong?

Unfortunately, almost everything. There are a few places where the real Rosi style comes through, most notably in the dream sequence at the beginning of the film, but in general the photography is awful, the same cliché-ridden frames we saw in *The Mission*, while the acting is even worse.⁶ As is common with Italian international productions, the dialogue was added in postproduction. The dubbing isn't any worse than the usual standard, but there are some inexplicable lapses. Dr. Cristo Bedoya, the narrator who returns to this small Colombian river town where decades earlier his best friend, Santiago Nasar, was stabbed to death by the two brothers of a young woman whose honor he had violated, speaks in a Spanish so wonderfully metropolitan that one is surprised he doesn't lisp.



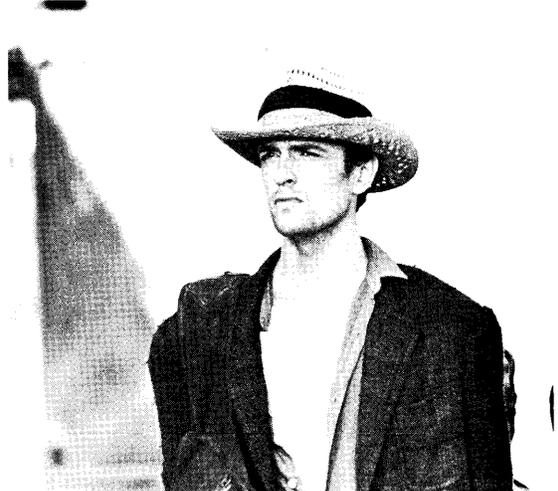
Ornella Mutti, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

The visual appearance of the cast matches this perfectly. They look like a bunch of refugees from an Italian movie, just as most of the footage looks

⁶Thomas Quinn Curtiss, writing in *International Herald Tribune*, called the film a "production of uncommon cinematic quality, ingenious and fertile" (9-10 May 1987: 6), an opinion by no means shared by the European press, although the *Variety* reviewer found the film to be "powerful," writing a generally favorable review (29 April 1987: 18). Gérard Lefort, writing in *Liberation*, was more to the point: "Riche (comme les pâtes) en casting et en budget (12 millions de dollars), *Chronique d'une mort annoncée*, de Francesco Rosi, rend hommage à la célèbre pub Nescafé: images spéciales filtre, acteurs lyophilisés, arôme colombien. Café bouillu, café foutu" (9-10 May 1987: 26). In the standard *Liberation* style, the headline for the review was "Chronique d'une merde annoncée." The *Screen International* Jury gave the film a rating of 18, putting it somewhere in the middle.

like outtakes from Wertmüller's *Blood Feud*. Caroline Lang, daughter of the present Minister of Culture, is the exception here, but only because she looks like a plump young French woman. Not only do the actors not look (or move or talk) like Colombians, their appearance isn't up to any sort of international standard at all. You can't simply add on years by dusting a woman's hair with gray and adding a few plastic wrinkles, which is why Scola went to the pains he did in his film. The problem is particularly noticeable because one of the characters, played by Gian Maria Volonté, actually is the older man he is supposed to be, and is played by a different actor in those scenes where one sees him as a young man; but the other actors are simply made up to look old. With Ornella Mutti the effect is comical. She looks like Barbara Hershey made up for her movie role in *The Stunt Man*.

Such criticisms are indicators of deeper



Lambert Wilson, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

confusions. The problem isn't just that the post-dubbing is mediocre, but that in several scenes we can see that the timing is off as a result. At the beginning of the film, when Dr. Bedoya visits the cemetery, he tells one of the grave keepers to clean off Santiago Nasar's grave. The poor fellow is kneeling beside a grave, and had obviously been told to count to a certain figure and then turn around, because he wheels as if to an invisible cue, not to the verbal command from Dr. Bedoya. So it goes throughout the movie.

Such flops will allow the usual chorus of literary critics to insist that it is impossible to make a film of a novel, because of all the vast metaphysical subtleties and differences. Whoever else this is true of, it isn't true of Garcia Marquez,

one of the most visual and cinematic of novelists. The problem is that Rosi simply did a poor job here. By contrast, Nikita Mikhalkov's *Black Eyes* was a remarkable melange of Chekhovian themes.

Except for *The Slave of Love* (1976), I must confess I've never been impressed by Mikhalkov's work, and there's nothing in Marcello Mastroianni of late to inspire much confidence either. It would seem that every year he's in a film shown at Cannes (one at least), and one watches him wander vaguely around the screen looking like he just woke up.

But *Black Eyes* is an absolutely first-rate piece of work, and it's the best acting job by Mastroianni in many years, one for which he certainly deserved the prize for best actor. The story is this. On a boat a Russian merchant meets an Italian, Romano (Mastroianni), who invites him to have a drink. They talk, and the merchant reveals that



The end of Santiago Nasar

he has recently married, and is now completely happy. Romano begins to talk about his own life, and we shift back into it. A failed architect, he married a banker's only daughter, Elisa (Silvana Mangano), and lives out his days as a clown off his wife's money.

He goes to a spa, where he meets a shy young Russian woman, Anna. Now up to this point, there hasn't been anything in the film to differentiate it from any of the hundreds of other Italian films about the fin-de-siècle, nor has there been anything to impress you about the acting. There is Mastroianni, caricaturing his work in *La Dolce Vita*, and there are all of those little comic touches which Fellini has made almost an obligatory part of any Italian film.

But when the setting shifts to the spa, Mikhalkov begins an almost unique pace. It's fast, it's visual, it's full of sight gags of every description, a continuous and surely conscious overgoing of the kind of thing that we saw in fits and snatches in Fellini's *And the Ship Sails On*. And, at the same time, almost unbelievably, Mastroianni begins to act. He woos Anna, and she, despite her demureness, is smitten with him from the very first. There's something very funny and very sad about it, and one can see the extent to which Mikhalkov is playing with both the story of Chekhov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog" and with Heifitz's rather stodgy but still beautiful film of it. It's as though Mikhalkov is saying: see what a Russian director can do with Chekhov once he's freed from all the constraints of Mosfilm and Goskino and so forth and so on.

And, as in the story, after trying to forget her, and after she flees the spa, abandoning him, Romano decides to go to Russia and find her. Romano's trip through Russia, his attempts to get permission to travel, on the pretext that he is going to set up a factory to make unbreakable glass, is one long continuous joke. Like the other parts of this film, it would make a completely comprehensive little film all on its own. He carries the glass pane before him, going from ministry to ministry trying to get them to sign his travel papers. One minister would gladly sign the permission, but has no pen. Another feigns that he is handless. Finally, he reaches some high authority, who watches gravely as two large Russians dance on the pane, which has been suspended between two chairs. He nods, and the permission wends its way to the back of his entourage, to return, duly signed.

How wonderful is his excellency, the interpreter tells Romano, how he can cut through to the heart of a problem. It's the comic residue of a hundred Russian stories, most of them by Chekhov, and Mikhalkov mixes things up, producing a wonderful tribute to the spirit of Chekhov the storyteller as he mingles. Mostly his sources are bits from "Anna on the Neck" and "The Lady with the Pet Dog," although there are all sorts of references in the film, making it an unbelievably rich work, as well as one in which Mastroianni gave perhaps the best performance in recent memory.

Mikhalkov has a real sense of the cinematic as a means of storytelling, and the ability to tell his story that way. That is what separates those with real talent from those with competence. He also cobbled a story together out of bits and pieces of

literature, something that is surprisingly hard to do well, but is often a necessity for the filmmaker.

As these references to Fellini suggest, the Italian artist has become a standard for critics, and the screening of his latest film, *Intervista*, was at once a great media event and an opportunity to compare the master against his colleagues, and perhaps even against himself. In *Intervista* Fellini continues along the same course he embarked on with the making of *Amarcord*. This new film is personal, warm, and full of marvelous small touches. But it is the same course that he originally set out for himself in *8½*, which is to

The *Variety* reviewer was more charitable, arguing that it was "not just a sentimental tour of Fellini mannerisms" (20 May 1987: 18). But Fellini, like Allen in *Radio Days*, seems wrapped up in himself, even though, unlike Allen, he has a consciousness of what he's about, a deprecating self-awareness, that Allen does not have.

Intervista has two related subjects. One is Fellini's attempt to make a film of Kafka's *Amerika*, on which we see him working while he is interviewed by a Japanese television crew. This strand blends into another, which is Fellini's reminiscence about his first visit to the old



Romano and His Travel Permit

say it is autobiographical, elliptical, and deeply concerned with the role of the artist in contemporary society. Claude Bagnieres, writing in the *Spectacles* section of the Lyons daily paper on 19 May 1987, called it a "souffle d'un génie passe," which if harsh, has some truth in it (37).

Cinecitta lots outside Rome, where, as a young journalist, he was sent to interview a famous actress. These reminiscences, too, seem to be part of another movie, for we see the selection of a young man who is to play the role of Fellini, and we see him embark on a simulated streetcar ride

out to the lot; and, once there, he does interview the actress.

In this segment there are strong touches of the old master. He moves us effortlessly back and forth between the "movie" reminiscence of his journalism days and the filming of that reminiscence, and this journey is perfectly realized. It is Fellini's tribute to the magic of the motion picture, and, unlike *Good Morning Babilonia*, it works, because it is effortless, and because the director makes no attempt to try to impress us. Occasionally there is some small trick, but everything is tossed off in the most

ending with her dip in the fountain. Watching them as they watch this great scene is a marvelous moment, as is the final shot of Ekberg's three enormous mastiffs sitting on the lawn outside the den, watching the movie through the window.

These are scenes for which one can forgive almost any fault, but except for them, the movie meanders to a puerile end. It's clever, and it is certainly entertaining to watch Fellini preparing to make a movie, but that preparation, which here has become the movie itself, is a very thin reed on which to build a feature length film. One has the impression of a great artist who has



That was then, This is now: Fellini's *Intervista*

casual way possible.

The remainder of the film is less successful, although it too has one high point. Fellini and Mastroianni drive up to where Anita Ekberg lives, and together they all watch the famous dance scene in which she and Mastroianni star,

discovered (and mastered) Godard's *camera-stylo*, only now he's simply doodling with it. It's wonderful, but it has the same cleverness that marred the ending of *And the Ship Sails On*, and I must confess that it makes me rather more sympathetic to those films which, even though

they are deeply flawed, are avowed and perhaps even ambitious attempts at movie making.

2. O Brave New World

Andrei Konchalovsky's *Shy People* is just such a flawed work. It is by no means a bad film, although it is considerably less effective than *Runaway Train*. Konchalovsky continues his fascination either with the seamier underside of North American life, or with trying to make drive-in movies intellectually respectable. Jill Clayburgh is Diana Sullivan, a journalist working on a set of stories for *Cosmopolitan* about family origins, what her daughter, Grace, derisively terms as "honkie roots." She had an uncle named Joe Sullivan who moved to Louisiana and became, as she puts it, a bit of an outlaw, so she goes down there to do research. Grace, who goes to school at Trinity, is having an affair with an older man and is mildly into hard drugs. Her mother gets her to go to Louisiana, but she isn't too happy about it, particularly when she sees just where she's going, a dilapidated old mansion out in the swamp which can only be reached by a lengthy boat ride.

Joe Sullivan settled way out here in the bayou, and no one has seen him for ten years, but his wife, Ruth (beautifully played by Barbara Hershey, who also richly deserved the prize for best actress), keeps his memory alive, and controls her three sons with an iron hand. Konchalovsky keeps the action moving along, and from somewhere he has developed a real affection for crazy North Americans. It's milder than it was in his last film because *Shy People* is essentially structured around the three women. There's hardly a shot in the film that one of them isn't in, and Martha Plimpton, who plays Grace, gives Jill Clayburgh a tough time. She doesn't have as much presence as Hershey does, but her evocation of a sly and seductive sensuality is perfect. While Ruth and Diana take Ruth's pregnant daughter-in-law into town, Grace introduces the young brothers (who are all roughly her age) to coke, makes love with one of them, and then is almost raped by the oldest, Mark (there's a lot going on in town, too).

Panicking, she jumps into a leaky old boat and paddles off into the swamp. The boat sinks, and she takes refuge in a burned out cypress stump. Chris Menges did the photography here, but you would never know it's the same Menges who was working with Joffé, because Konchalovsky gets some real work out of him. Just as Greenaway can

almost convince you that Rome has some significant buildings, Konchalovsky can almost persuade you that the Louisiana bayous are beautiful, and yet he does so without glossing over them. In *Siberiade*, he revealed his ability to photograph nature and yet still keep his sensibility for the artifacts of man. The best thing about *Runaway Train* was the photography of the train itself, and quite the best thing here is the way he captures the reality of the bayou.

Unfortunately, the action itself, with Jill Clayburgh getting scared out of her wits by alligators, managing to fall out of her boat, and then miraculously managing to find her daughter again, is not at all satisfactory. This was another early morning press screening, and the emotional climax of this scene was greeted with a good many whistles.

The one thing that continues to be impressive about Konchalovsky, however, is that he has been so successful at getting under the skin of native Americans. The script is too schematic, and its resolutions far too melodramatic, but the observations about the characters ring true to form, and the language they use is surprisingly apt (although not particularly true to the way they actually speak). The comparison with Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby* is illuminating. Not only does the team of Konchalovsky and Menges capture the scenery in a way that Malle wasn't able to do, but the Russian has a better ear for North American dialogue, just as he has a better appreciation for North American crazies, and a much greater ability to get tremendous performances out of Hollywood actors. This is the first film in a long time where Jill Clayburgh's acting talents are put to any use.

Barbet Schroeder has a curiously similar feel for America, although *Barfly* is at once a smaller and more contrived work. Mickey Rourke plays a drunken writer (the script is from Charles Bukowski, who ought to know about such things), and Faye Dunaway plays an equally soused and out of work Wanda. Usually films which feature drunkenness become either sentimental or maudlin, and in almost every case the characters never really come across as convincing drunks for more than a few moments.

But for Schroeder, the alcoholic is an ordinary person, going about his life with purpose. It's true that his purpose is simply to drink, and that frequently he can't remember exactly what it is he's set out to do, but he's still in some way functional. There isn't one sober moment in this film, but it manages to stand up as both a realistic

and comic portrayal of a talented man who's only weakness is the bottle. Doubtless he will end badly, and his new found love will desert him, and his luck will change, but during this one period of his life we see him blessed with some beautiful luck, and we see an underdog triumph.

Schroeder's approach is like Malle's in *Atlantic City*, in that he seems fundamentally sympathetic to the down and out, cheers them when they climb, and doesn't have a particularly moral view as to whether they're behaving themselves or not. Just as Konchalovsky's film, with its mythicized isolation, is distinctively Russian, so is Schroeder's, with its sophisticated amorality, peculiarly French. But both films are intriguing windows into the underside of North American life, and novel illustrations of the degree to which we rarely see ourselves with the penetration that others can easily exercise in seeing us.

Brazil, like the United States, has always fascinated foreigners, but it has been much less fortunate in attracting foreign filmmakers. Those who have gone there never seem to be capable of getting past the clichés of singing, dancing, and the beach. The insights that Schroeder and Konchalovsky have about the United States have therefore been denied Brazilians, who see themselves in ways that may not be particularly lucid. Carlos Diegues' *Subway to the Stars* is the same sort of film that *Shy People* is, and it has the same kind of flaccidity. But it lacks the redeeming insight and cinematic vision of Konchalovsky.

His hero is a young musician, who has just gotten his big break, a chance to play in the backup group for a rock star while they cut a video. Guilherme Fontes, who plays Vinicius, is typical of a new breed of Brazilian actor. He's young, with impressive technical abilities, and although he hasn't had much film acting experience, he either has an intuitive understanding of what's required or he's been a good student. He does a good job of coming across as a talented jazz musician, one of those mildly eccentric artists who always seem to be listening to some inner music of their own that none of the rest of us can hear. When he's with his girlfriend, he starts mimicking the sounds of the city. He does it perfectly, with a real musician's facility for aural mimicry. Diegues has always been fascinated with things musical, but this is the first time I've ever seen anything in one of his films indicating that he had any understanding of music.

But while Vinicius is playing his sax, Nicinha disappears, and he tries to find her. He goes to

the police, and gets entangled with the sinister but ultimately benevolent policeman, Freitas. Milton Gonçalves, who plays him, is from an older school of Brazilian acting, but what he lacks in traditional acting skill he more than compensates for in his ability to project. He's a short guy, but he comes across like one very tough cop. When he walks into a bar and sits down, he fills up the whole room.

Where the film drags is in Diegues' attempt to give us an Antonioni style tour of the world as Vinicius hunts for Nicinha. That hunt takes us on a tour of Rio. It's a mildly interesting tour, although Diegues, like most Brazilian directors, can't really do justice to it as a city. He's come out of a generation that rebelled against the picture post card sentimentalism of Brazilian cityscapes, but he can't find a replacement aesthetic, and he can't do anything with his camera.

In *Shy People* Konchalovsky took the water directly in under an interstate highway causeway, planted a boat in it, and managed to produce something of great visual interest. He managed to do this in such a way that the residue in the dirty water, the sounds of the traffic overhead, all combined together. It was a peculiar image, and one would hesitate to call it beautiful, but it was certainly a classical case of the artist's ability to create significant form. Unlike Konchalovsky, Diegues can't look around at his environment and give it significant form. What he manages to do instead is to give us some competent documentary footage of the city, interspersed with recurrent shots of artifacts (helicopters, the subway system) that are supposed to have the significance that since Fellini everyone has looked for in the cinema.

Vinicius' search for his lost love at one point suggests the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, all the more so since Nicinha's real name is Eunice, which in Brazilian Portuguese is a quite reasonable sound-alike for Euridice. But, like most of Diegues' other references, nothing much ever comes of it, and it is thus a sort of throwaway, even though one of the characters in the film points it out. His journey is also a quest for himself. At the end he discovers that Nicinha wasn't done away with, but that she was involved in selling coke. Given the general ambience of almost all Latin American films, this comes as a bit of a surprise, as does the character of Freitas. Through most of the film you can't tell exactly what sort of a character he is. But towards the end, he shows up where Vinicius is playing. He's quite moved by the performance, and then

he takes Vinicius out to see his girlfriend, before they take her to jail.

When the young man asks if he can take her to hear him play before she goes to jail, Freitas agrees. Once in the nightclub, it's an easy matter for Vinicius to arrange it so that she can escape, but Freitas doesn't seem to mind. As they flee he stands there, grinning as though at some secret joke of his own. In some sense he's the father that Vinicius never really experienced, and in winning his respect Vinicius is getting some respect for himself. Something similar happens in his relationship with his mother. She's a stripper in a tacky nightclub, and she's not much use, but when he sees her go out on stage to a dazed and

about what they're doing.

But in it Diegues gets back to his strengths and away from his weaknesses, and, although it's not very good, it is the best thing he's done since *Summer Showers* back in 1978, which probably remains his best work so far. Diegues has always had an affinity for the big city, and, unlike most other Brazilian directors, when he turns his mind to it he can give you a better sense of what the organism of a city like Rio is than anyone else around. He's at his worst in trying to do anything historical, or at anything that involves any spectacle. He's good at working with actors, and he's almost alone in Brazilian filmmaking in letting them act with some subtlety. He's not



The Artist and Her Angel (*Wings of Desire*)

apathetic audience, he claps loudly. In some way he's come to terms with his mother.

But none of these things is ever worked out, and so the film remains a quilt of bits and pieces, symbolic shots, hints at myth and growth. All of Diegues' films have had this sort of flaccidity. It is partially a function of his refusal to rely on conventional scripts, and partially it is a symptom of the sort of self-indulgent filmmaking that many directors, and not simply Brazilian ones, have

good at capturing the look of a sprawling urban environment like Rio, but he's good at giving you the feel of it. He's still a relatively young director, and if he would concentrate on what he can do well, he could still make the sort of major film that would justify his repeated presence at Cannes, something that, based on his more recent films, is getting increasingly difficult to do.

3. All Quiet on the Western Front

Wim Wenders, like Diegues and Scola, is one of those artists whose films have been regularly shown at Cannes, while, unlike them, one of his films has won the palm (*Paris, Texas* in 1985). So his latest film, *Wings of Desire*, was regarded as one of the two strong contenders for the palm.⁷ I was one of the few who found *Wings* a disappointment, a throwback to the older German cinema of the 1960s. There was some nice photography (mostly in black and white), and the usual level of technical excellence. What there wasn't was any story that one could get a grip on.

The story is about the angels who watch over the population of Berlin. They can move about magically from place to place, and no one can see them, although children seem able to experience their presence. They watch over the people, comforting those who are dying and in distress. Those scenes are marvelous. Less so, but still compelling, are the recurring aerial shots. Although we don't ever see the angels fly, we see what they see from the air, and here, as one might expect, Wenders' formidable technical command of the medium allows him to suggest flight in the best way possible. It isn't, technically speaking, a truly subjective camera, but it gives us the right sort of feel.

One of the angels, played by Bruno Ganz, falls in love with a French trapeze artist, and this love affair is the story of the film. The idea, like all of the ideas in this film, is quite clever. It's logical he should fall for her, since when he first sees her, she's wearing wings. Or at least it is according to Wenders. But it isn't logical enough to sustain a movie with a running time of two hours and ten minutes, particularly since very little happens during the first ninety minutes to move along the story, although we get to see a good deal of Berlin. Berlin is as much the subject of the film as the peculiar love story, and we see documentary footage and hear reminiscences about the city.

One gets the impression of a wonderful short film of about twenty minutes, the sort of film that children would find deeply moving (as opposed to the sort of film that they're assumed to like),

⁷No director has won it twice, however, so the logic of this belief escapes me. But it was widely reported: *Screen International* spoke of it as one of the two "shortest odds contenders for the Golden Palm" (17 May 1987: 4). The film remained a favorite with the critics, getting one of the highest scores from the *Screen International* Jury, while Wenders got the prize for best director from the main Jury. Incidentally, there was some confusion about the exact title, since a literal translation of the German would read *The Heaven over Berlin*.

patched onto another twenty minute documentary about Berlin. But when patched together, and then stretched out to this length, the final result just doesn't work. As a result, the film drags on interminably. One finally tires of the photography, probably because Wenders, unlike Herzog, has surprisingly little interest in making his subject matter beautiful.

Or to use the same term brought up in the discussion of Konchalovsky, Wenders doesn't bother to reduce the city he spends so much time in filming to any sort of significant form. He has the same sort of flat visual sense here that we see in most documentary films, but, unlike his great documentarist peer, Herzog, Wenders doesn't seem to have much of an ear for urban eccentrics. His characters are just as flat as his photography. Alone in the competition, Wenders seemed to have gone back in time to an earlier period when this kind of film, formless and quite anti-literary, was fashionable and had great audience acceptance.

Of course this isn't to say that a strong script, coupled with a few good actors, or an idea of enough complexity to sustain a feature length film, is so crucial, although the relative critical scores given to some of these films is a good reminder of just how important it is. Diegues, Konchalovsky, and Karoly Makk (director of *The Last Manuscript*) are all filmmakers of vastly more experience and achievement than Paul Newman (as a director) or the young French director Jean-Pierre Denis. But *The Glass Menagerie* and Denis' *Field of Honor* got considerably higher ratings by the critics, and I think this is completely a function of the importance of a decent script and some well-chosen actors.⁸

It's hard to believe that anyone would have given any serious attention at all to *Field of Honor* except for those things, since on most counts it is a good example of what has gone wrong with French film. Eight years ago Jean-Pierre Denis' first film, *Histoire d'Adrien*, was shown in the *Semaine*, and awarded the *Camera d'Or* prize for the best first feature film. There was some question as to whether or not it was really the best film to receive the award, and one had the suspicion that it did so because it was a French film, and the French critics were tired of seeing the prize go to unknown Americans. But there were some interesting things about it. Unlike

⁸To recap the ratings: Newman's film got 23 points, Denis got 21, while Konchalovsky and Diegues each got 15. Makk's film received 13, placing it near the bottom of the group.

most of his contemporaries, Denis was actually trying to make an historical film with a recognizable narrative, and was so deeply involved in it that his characters spoke not French but Occitan. Given the tendency for younger French directors to make incomprehensibly banal films about the contemporary scene, *Histoire* stood out, and its director should have been encouraged.

But eight years later, Denis doesn't seem to have learned anything at all about making a film. He's still trying to make an historical film. *Field of Honor* is mostly about a poor young farm boy who sells himself into military service in 1870 so that his family can replace their dead cow. In France, as in the United States, it was possible for the wealthy to pay for a substitute to serve in the armed forces instead of them, and this is what the family of one young man has done in this small village of Cavagnac. So Pierre goes off to the army, and is thrown into the Franco-Prussian War.

In his first battle he's wounded, all his comrades are killed, and he wanders the battlefield in a daze. He befriends a young Alsatian boy, and the two of them try to get back to his village. He doesn't, but the young boy does, and through a series of coincidences manages to make contact with Pierre's fiancée. He recognizes her because her reddish hair is the same as his own, and she recognizes he comes from Pierre because he's holding a wooden virgin just like the ones that Pierre was always carving. The plot is long on coincidence, but it is still a terrific script.

The aftermaths of the battles have an interesting visual base. Denis has opted only to show the stacks of bodies lying on the battlefield. He does so with a surprising sense of visual history. His images recall nothing so much as Maximilien Luce's 1905 painting *Un rue de Paris au Mai 1871* (sometimes called *La Commune*). However, like Luce, he seems to feel that contrasting the scattered dead with the otherwise peaceful scene tells the whole story. What Denis, like Luce himself, lacks is some sense of significant ordering of the subject. Even in a somewhat banal painting like Edouard Detaille's *La Reve* (1888) the sleeping soldiers on the field are visually composed as though already dead, and their picketed rifles resemble grave markers.

So the problem is that Denis has not yet learned enough about historical filmmaking, or about filmmaking at all, to enable him to translate that script into a film. The result is a series of episodes,

amateurishly filmed, with nothing really linking them together. Denis would make a great scriptwriter, and a reasonably good casting director, but he lacks the ability that one has to have to be a serious director. A film is more than a bunch of scenes strung together, just as an historical film is more than putting people in old costumes.

4. The Importance of Being Earnest

Similarly, a film is more than a play and a camera, which is pretty much all we get from Newman, whose filmed adaptation of *The Glass Menagerie* is a repetition of what we saw in 1986 with Robert Altman's version of the Sam Shepherd play, *A Fool for Love*. Maybe Williams is a great playwright and Shepherd an inferior one, and maybe Robert Altman is a far greater director than Newman, but you couldn't have proven it from these two films.

Basically what Newman had going for him was great acting, Joanne Woodward in particular, although she too (along with the other actors), seems to be working more towards preserving a performance of a great play than trying to make a film (which is one reason why Woodward was passed over in favor of Barbara Hershey). The result is a curiously static work. It's as though, in his desire to be faithful to the play, Newman is afraid to do anything at all with it except transfer it onto film. It isn't fair to criticize this approach, particularly when the result is this good, but it isn't, strictly speaking, a film. Rather it's a documentary record of a play.

But the relatively high rating given both of these films is interesting not merely as a confirmation of how important some very conventional values can be in filmmaking, but also of the extent to which, despite its glamor, film criticism at Cannes is a serious business. Professional film critics at the festival, despite the fact that almost all of them write for commercial newspapers and magazines with large readerships, are willing to go a long way to support a film that they regard as a serious one, just as historically they are extremely tough on films that they regard as pretentious.

Both Denis and Newman were not just serious, but very earnest about what they were trying to do, and they were both trying to do something that is quite commendable, even if one only considers the importance of the subject matter: not nearly enough attention is given in either France or the United States towards working with

the material of literature and history. After *Birth of a Nation*, it would be hard to name a serious Hollywood film about the Civil War, which is surely one of the most decisive events in our national history (after *The General*, it's hard to come up with a film that's better than *Gone with the Wind*), while I couldn't find a single French film critic who could name a French film that dealt with the Franco-Prussian war.

The traditional concerns of the Cannes critics with earnestness, the literary-historical, and the genuinely cinematic, could nowhere be more clearly seen than in the surprisingly high scores given to Maurice Pialat's adaptation of the Bernanos novel, *Under the Sun of Satan*. This is the third or fourth year that the best French film has been a deeply theological work (some would add, a deeply Catholic work). In recent years we've seen Cavalier's *Thérèse*, Bresson's *Money*, and now this.

Each film has provoked some sort of internal French dispute, since France is a country where the debate between clericals and anti-clericals seems a perpetual one. Given the dominant tone of French intellectual life, particularly as perceived outside of France, it is often difficult to realize the extent to which historically France was a Catholic country, and the extent to which it is still such a country. There were scores of whistles at the end of the evening press screening, and Pialat came very close to getting into a screaming match at the press conference the next day, accusing the press of sabotaging his film.

This circus continued when Yves Montand, as president of the Jury, announced that the grand prize was going to Pialat's film. As he strode to the stage an unstoppable chorus of boos and whistles broke out, giving the entire population of France (or whatever percentage of them were watching the nationally televised awards live) a wonderful opportunity to see their film critics in a sort of festival performance of their own.⁹ With the same demoniacal consistency he had demonstrated during the press conference, Pialat levelled a few taunts at the critics, gave the entire world a great Gallic arm and hand gesture of

⁹And not, as many people who heard coverage of the festival via National Public Radio were led to believe, from the foreign press. Presumably there were some Italian critics booing in irritation that Scola's film won nothing; however, the majority of the booing and whistling came from the French themselves. As one non-French European critic remarked: "You certainly can't accuse the French of being chauvinistic. Here they are getting the first main prize in twenty years, and they're booing it."

derision, and left the stage.

By the press, he meant the French press, since his film got a completely respectable rating of 23 from the *Screen International* jury.¹⁰ It should have, because *Under the Sun of Satan*, like its predecessors, is an extremely fine film. There are only a handful of actors, and Pialat, who plays the priest Menou-Segrais, has them converse, a pair at a time, in a series of monologues. Although he doesn't use the sort of gray background that Cavalier used to emphasize the artificiality of things, the nature of the dialogues achieves the same end. As the characters engage in their dialectical monologues, we become aware that time is being compressed, shrunk, distorted, and that frequently the characters are speaking to themselves rather than to one another—or, more precisely, to the other who is inside or behind each human being.

Gerard Depardieu, in what seems to me flatly the finest acting performance of his career, plays the priest Donassan, a slow and clumsy fellow whose Christian faith and deep humility make him a potential saint. He's sent to a nearby town to assist at confession, and on the road he meets the devil, who not only tempts him, but gives him an awful curse: to be able to look inside people and divine their inner selves. In a terrifying moment he is able to perceive inside the young woman, Mouchette, the turmoil of her disturbed life, the extent to which her soul has become a prize which is almost lost.

What the modern world sees as social or mental disorder, Bernanos saw as sin. *Under the Sun of Satan* is thus a jarring film, because its director perfectly mirrors this view. I've always thought of these great French Catholic novelists (Bernanos and Mauriac) as being Gallic Manichaeians in their emphasis on the earth as battleground between the forces of good and evil. It's a grimly austere form of Catholicism that in curious ways is quite Protestant. Although one suspects that

¹⁰Vincent Canby spoke of this award as part of the "compromise that was to be the theme of this year's awards," allowing that Pialat's was a "serious, thoroughly unexceptional tale" (*International Herald Tribune* 21 May 1987: 24). What Montand actually said was that this year there were so many outstanding films that the process of awards was "cruel, even arbitrary," a term he used several times. A compromise would have been to split the palm between two films. The *Variety* reviewer, in a surprisingly judicious review, found the film to be "demanding . . . there's no denying the quality of Pialat's work," and the reviewer noted the "sudden shifts forward in time, and its complex, contradictory characters" (20 May 1987: 24).

Bernanos himself would violently disagree with this, he and Calvin seem to have some deep affinities for one another. So everything about Pialat's film grates on a modern sensibility, even an enlightened Catholic one (I doubt that all of the French critics who disliked this film did so out of simple anti-clericalism), but it remains an intensely accomplished sort of work, one of those films that one has to respect because of the force of the action and the consistency of it—all the more so because of Pialat's determination to make everyone aware that he is an atheist. He may well be, but he's a most Catholic and French one.

When the festival started, it was widely noted that the trend towards international productions had continued this year (this theme was picked up from an early *Variety* headline of 13 May 1987: 5: "Cannes Competition is an Intl. Waltz"). Konchalovsky, a Russian, was directing an American film, as was the very French Barbet Schroeder, while Mikhalkov (who is not an émigré) directed a largely Italian but still international production. Rosi's film was clearly an international venture, and Greenaway's film was an Italian-British co-production. However, the majority of the better films were all clearly national ones: Scola's intensely Italian *The Family*, Pialat's very French film, Frears' totally British *Prick Up Your Ears*, and *The Glass Menagerie*.

5. The Heart of Darkness

Of course the film that generated the most anticipation, Tengiz Abuladze's *Repentance*, completed in 1984 but only just now released, was a deeply nationalistic work, intensely Georgian, and just as intensely rooted in the agonies of the Soviet Union. Even more than Scola and Pialat, Abuladze reminded audiences that the cinema is an intensely nationalistic art.

Abuladze himself is as well a reminder of one of those great peculiarities that socialism has given us in the arts. Like Elem Klimov, now first secretary of the Union of Soviet Filmmakers, this Georgian is a film artist of middle age whose career has been built on films that hardly anyone has even seen. Given the degree to which a discussion of Stalin and Stalinism is still a delicate issue in the Soviet Union, Abuladze is a courageous and obstinate artist. He was born in 1924, but this is only his sixth feature film, and his first wasn't made until after the Thaw in 1958.¹¹ In the Soviet Union, even more than in the other socialist countries, one of the difficulties in assessing talent is that a director may make films

that are extremely significant, but they will be shelved, and no one will ever get to see them. There has been some of this in every country, the most notable case being that of Peter Bacsó in Hungary, but the situation in the Soviet Union seems worse than elsewhere.¹²

This peculiar state of affairs raises numerous questions. How good a director is Abuladze? Is a work such as *Repentance*, made in 1984 but just now released, the real beginning of movie *glasnost*? Or do we only start counting from the first reasonably contemporary release? What do we count? Do we count those films which simply ran afoul of the state bureaucracy, or do we restrict ourselves to those which are deeply critical of the structure of the state itself? Lastly, how important is quality? How does the topical importance or significance of a film affect our estimation of its worth?

Repentance is then interesting from a theoretical point of view, because it forces a consideration of all these questions. Strictly speaking, if we only count those films that are deeply critical, and whose production is roughly current with their release, Abuladze's film is the first feature film made in the Soviet Union that attempts structural social criticism. Nor is this position founded simply on historical happenstance. There is a temptation, of course, to argue that prizes like the Special Jury Prize that Abuladze's film received, are totally a function of politics: given the desire of almost everyone to encourage the spirit of *glasnost* in the Soviet Union, such a decision is defensible, given the extent to which European film criticism is so politicized. However, this isn't the case with *Repentance*, which, although a deeply flawed work, is a film of great power. The

¹¹All of this information, including the quotations immediately below, comes from the Press book. There are numerous internal inconsistencies in the published material made available, including the spelling of the names of the characters in the film, which was done entirely in Georgian, not Russian.

¹²Consider Klimov. According to Ron Holloway's accounting his career is as follows. Of 6 feature films in 23 years: *Adventures of a Dentist* (1966), shelved for 20 years; *Agonia* (1975), shelved for 10; *Farewell* (1981), shelved for 5. Of the other three, *Welcome* (1964) was his diploma film with limited release; *Sport, Sport, Sport* (1971) was basically a documentary; which makes *Go and See* (1985) the only Klimov fiction film to have been shown immediately after completion (*Kino* [Special Issue, 1987]: 2). Of course some people saw these films. *Agonia* was shown in one version at the Moscow Film Festival in 1981. I saw a different version in Czechoslovakia in 1982.

film is too long, and it is curiously old-fashioned, but it is powerful stuff.

In form it is loosely allegorical. Varlam Aravidze, recently deceased, is the mayor of a small Georgian town. After his formal burial, his body keeps appearing on the lawn of the family house, to the consternation of his son, grandson, and daughter-in-law. After several appearances and re-burials, they lay a trap in the cemetery, and the grandson, spying a mysterious interloper with a shovel, fires off a shot, and then wrestles the culprit to the ground.

To everyone's surprise, it is a woman, Ketevan Baratelli. At her trial she explains why she behaved as she did, and the core two hours of the film is a flashback starting with when she was eight. Varlam has just become the mayor. He affects to praise her father, the great artist Sandro Baratelli, and to worship her mother, Nino, but has them both arrested. First Sandro is taken, and we watch Nino and her daughter struggling to learn of his fate. Their story shows how many people have been arrested, and how terrible Varlam's police state has become, without ever showing any of the actual terror itself.

Then Nino's closest woman friend is arrested, and then Nino herself, before she can flee. She is separated from her daughter, who is now left all alone. As long as I am free, the daughter avers, I will dig him up until finally he is thrown to the vultures. It is the only punishment for what he did.

Although a few things have been done to make it possible to claim with a straight face that this is a film about dictators in general, and not simply one about Stalin, a film about a Georgian politician who institutes a total reign of terror and becomes an absolute dictator is clearly a film about Stalin, just as the corpse that won't stay buried is clearly a reference to Stalinism. Although *Repentance* is a difficult film to follow, it is certainly not because of any topical obscurities or elliptical political references. Abuladze makes it absolutely clear that it is a scathing denunciation of Stalin and Stalinism.

When we finish with the Ketevan's story, and go back to the trial, we are also clearly aware of events relevant to the Soviet Union. No one knows quite what to do at the trial, but Avel Aravidze, Varlam's son, and his advisers hit upon the happy expedient of claiming that Ketevan is mentally disturbed, which means they can put her into a mental institution rather than having to worry about sentencing her (or acquitting her). Tornike, the grandson, has

already been deeply disturbed by the turn of the events, and when he discovers from Ketevan herself that she is to be sent to an insane asylum, he is so distraught that he kills himself. Avel, shaken, goes out and digs up his father himself, to throw him off a cliff where the vultures will pick his bones clean.

Although to anyone familiar with Soviet film this summary will come as a surprise, what is most surprising about Abuladze's film is its surrealistic approach and its anti-narrative style. As a film it resembles Parajanov's *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors*, or, going slightly further afield, some of the Bulgarian films of the 1970s. There are some great sequences: Varlam literally popping up in the doorway to Sandro's apartment wearing a gigantic sheepskin coat; once there he sings a tenor aria, accompanied by his two stooges. These image sequences are consistent. Throughout the film Abuladze uses similar musical scenes to suggest some facet of Varlam's life. When one asks why music, however, the answer is surprisingly hard to unravel. Like much of the film, the answers consist of a stacked set of elliptical references: Stalin fancied himself a linguist, Hitler an artist who liked opera. The staged musical scene is an early association with socialist films of the postwar period (one only has to recall Bacsó's *O Bloody life!*). There is something deeply operative about totalitarian displays and gestures.

Some of the images, although quite simple, are still effective, as when we see the figure of a blindfolded justice at the symbolic trial of Sandro, while other scenes are quite realistically done, and resonate with all of the accounts of life under the Stalinist terror. And in places the dialog seemed completely realistic, the sort of thing one reads in any novel of Soviet life dealing with the subject. Doubtless the Georgian dialog, which seemed to get a surprisingly sparse translation in the French subtitled version shown at Cannes, provided listeners with even more topical references. Certainly much of the film is purely and deeply Georgian. Although one believes Abuladze when he says that "practically every single scene of the film is the reflection of a true fact, or an actual character" (as quoted in the Press Book), the film's very historicity makes a viewing of it something of a puzzle. There are bits and pieces one can understand, but much of it eludes our grasp.

Repentance, despite the seriousness of its theme, is also a surprisingly funny film. From the opening funeral oration, where the speaker says

that one of Varlam's great achievements was that he turned friends into enemies and enemies into friends, we sense that the film has a real wit to it. Disconcertingly, much of Abuladze's humor comes out of vaudeville, The cries of horror when the body is discovered are out of a silent film, as is much of the acting of the first part of the film.

unknown to international audiences. *Yeelen* (*Brightness*), is a technically accomplished and deeply interesting film by Souleymane Cissé, a director from Mali of whom few filmgoers have heard, even though this is his third feature film. Although the film is primarily of interest for the manner in which it details a folk myth, for most



The hero of Cissé's *Yeelen*

The problem here is that these various approaches do clash. On the one hand, Abuladze has insisted, and it is certainly in the film, that what we are watching goes well beyond a particularly historical situation, well beyond the "concrete context." But then why make so much of film so dependent on what happened in Georgia under Stalin? There are answers to these questions, because *Repentance* is a formidable film, and I think that it will hold up, and not be retired to the great celluloid graveyard of topical films which were briefly famous owing to the interests of intellectuals when they were released. But it is a flawed work, and certainly one can't tell from it whether Abuladze will, like Buñuel after *Viridiana*, go on and on, or whether he will stay right where he is.

But the real surprise of the festival was not *Repentance*, but a complex film about African myths done by a director almost completely

audiences, the film has certain interest as pure ethnography, because it is an unusually detailed description of African life. It is always tempting to dismiss a film like this one as having only a sort of curiosity value, and in this sense Cissé may be his own worst enemy, for *Yeelen* is an extremely accomplished work of the cinema. The sound and the images themselves are of a quality that any director in the world would be happy to own up to, and, since this film was shown to the press the night before the projection of Francesco Rosi's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, the comparison is a natural one to make. But where Rosi managed to emulate the worst sort of Third World filmmaking (bad acting, images generally out of focus, sound completely unbalanced), Cissé's latest work is entirely the opposite.

It opens with a long unblinking shot of the rising sun, and then, without warning, shifts to a shot of a rooster being killed. Visually (and

aurally) it's an impressive opening, and Cissé seems to like such abrupt shifts. *Yeelen* is a tough film to like, but an easy film to admire. There are no compromises made in the telling of the story, whose director plunges us immediately into the world of myth, and doesn't hesitate to show us acts of magic. The myth is a folktale about the Bambaras, one of the ancient peoples of Mali. Their folk beliefs are a highly codified system of signs and rituals.

One has no idea how freely Cissé has adapted these things, but his fidelity in other areas is quite obsessive. He went to great pains to find people with "real Bambara features," for instance (*Press Book* 19). He apologized at length because he was unable to get a "real Peul woman" in one of the key parts. "Peuls have traditions, and a young woman cannot expose herself. Wherever we inquired about such a possibility, we got a firm no. For them, movies mean prostitution, therefore it is out of the question for a noble woman to accept being shot in a film. I had to look for an actress. During a screening of *Finye* [his previous feature film] I realized Aoua looked like a Peul woman" (*Press Book* 19).

Mali is a very poor country. It is about the size of Western Europe but with a population of about six million people, very few of whom, one imagines, would be able to see any sort of film at all. On the other hand, one doubts that anyone outside of Mali would have any awareness of such subtle distinctions as these. But Cissé cared enough to get things right. In a world of lazy filmmakers who seem constantly to operate under the assumption that the audience doesn't know, doesn't care, and will accept anything you hand them, knowing that there were directors out there like Cissé was one of the most optimistic things about this year's festival. *Yeelen* wasn't an easy film to watch, but seeing it was one of those rare instances where you could almost believe that the cinema is universal.

A father hunts his wife and son to destroy them. The son flees, having been given certain

magic objects to show to his uncle. At first he seems lost and helpless, and when he runs wildly through a herd of cattle, and is captured by the herdsmen and taken to their king, we feel sorry for him.

But when they propose to kill him, he uses his magic, setting fire to one warrior's sword, freezing another into immobility. The Peul king makes a place for him, and asks him for help, and the son routs an invading tribe by getting swarms of bees to attack them. The king then asks him for one last favor, which is to make his youngest wife fertile. The young man succeeds, but falls captive to her beauty and makes love to her. When he confesses this to the king, the king gives him to her, and the two leave.

Finally, the father and the son meet, and their clash turns their country into a vast desert, in which the young man's young son can play. It's difficult to tell whether Cissé's refusal to compromise the mythic line of his story is more impressive than his ability to tell such a story, but both are very fine. This is the sort of film that every "third world" filmmaker want to make, but this is the first time I have ever seen anyone do this sort of thing with any success.

Cissé's recognition by the Jury with an award, even more than the other prizes, signified the great seriousness with which Cannes takes the cinema. It has traditional values, particularly with regard to acting, but it values above all else those who are working deeply inside the artform itself. Cannes is, has always been, and probably always will be, seen as the great golden dragon of the cinema. But in its awards it shows a far deeper recognition of what the cinema is than any other festival. For anyone seriously interested in the cinema as an artform, the awards given to Pialat, Cissé, Fellini, Abuladze, Wenders, Hershey, and Mastroianni are a great comfort. □

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Stuart Peterfreund

WAITING FOR THE 7:12

Haze gives way
to flamed sugar maples,
and V's of geese
fly over as though
a surrender has been signed.
Their call assures me
it was the hunter's ear
that made him dream
an arrow can fly
articulate
to its destined place.

The call of geese overhead
and the Glenn Miller horns
of the 7:12, with the promise
of all that is done downtown:
the geese and the bell
of the grade crossing gate,
and the bell of the engine
as it slows, and the commuters
starting to climb aboard,
led away at right angles
from the south-seeking arrows
by the bells that mark
the place of their desiring.

Jan Newman

MAD MAX: GROWING UP A HERO

In the postapocalypse of the *Mad Max* trilogy, power is the game, dominance the goal, physical force the weapon. Through the first two films this game is played out predictably enough in the manner modern audiences have become used to: car chases, wholesale destruction of property, tortures, and murders. The action is frantic, the pace as relentless as the brutality from which there are few moments of relief. As it was in the movies of John Wayne, Alan Ladd, Clint Eastwood, et al., movies to which *Mad Max* owes a great deal in plot and character, heroism is a strong theme. In the first movie Max is a conventional hero, a policeman, driver of a V-8 interceptor vehicle pursuing lawbreakers on the roads of what is left of civilization. The second movie, *The Road Warrior*, develops Max as an anti-hero, a man who has renounced human ties and whose dealings with people are on the level of self-interest. The third movie, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, picks up where the second left off and traces Max's growth toward true heroism based on interest for someone else's well-being. All three movies attempt to build up Max from ordinary man to legendary hero. In the process the films accomplish something new in action/adventure films.

The off-beat villains of the trilogy personify the heavy metal and Punk rock phenomenon, which has emerged from infancy into undisciplined adolescence but kept its toys: drugs, sex, vulgarity, and so on. These toys are played with, but the heavy weapons have been pulled out too, the tools of rampant viciousness. The association of Punk and heavy metal with destructiveness reflects how many people feel about these influences. In our time the powers suggested by the subcultural influences of heavy metal and Punk are held in check by the weight of the straight establishment. But that cannot be relied on for stability so must be rebelled against and mocked. The loud, angry music—even when the subject is love—harangues the listener to dissatisfaction and rebellion. There are few legitimate enemies to turn against in our society with that level of rage and disgust; therefore

enemies are manufactured. Parents, police, teachers, institutions of any kind, governments, the rich, all become targets. It cannot be argued that all are innocent targets, but they hand out money, maintain or create order of a useful sort, and are sometimes known to be as generous as they are disastrously fallible. That a generation should call for reform is merely appropriate. But too often the heavy metal phenomenon is not calling for reform, is not calling for anything, is too busy being its own self-centered, self-serving thing—a form of cultural masturbation.

In some of its aspects the phenomenon is intended not to be taken seriously but only for fun. The creators of *Mad Max*, however, have not missed the potential for malevolence. It is not such a jump of the imagination to see the rebellious attitudes described above assumed by people made of harder stuff than some present day posturers who make a great deal of money at the game. In a culture where the restraints are removed, the wild trappings add the element of the sinister to the ridiculous.

The ordinary man and woman are portrayed as unable to defend themselves from the destructive forces. Peace and law and family have been trampled almost to death by the destruction of the old order and the coming to power of the children of chaos. Even strong, decent people with right on their side are not forces to be reckoned with. The reckoning power that should be theirs is usurped by the heavy metal villains, since they are the ones who do not hesitate to blast through the opposition. The good guys need a hero, and along comes Max.

He personifies Good in *Mad Max I* as Max Rockatansky and fulfills the conventional idea of a hero: a lawman fearless and brave; a loyal friend; a loving husband and father; a man with deep feelings who has trouble expressing them but tries to. He risks everything out on the road to keep civilized people safe from motorcycle gangs known as nomad bikers who terrorize small communities. The villains here are more Hell's Angels types, being slightly ahead of the Punk and heavy metal era. Their leader is

Toecutter, a man with mismatched eyebrows, homosexual tendencies, and a flair for the dramatic. Much of his authority rests in his air of restrained cruelty. Among the nomads' ranks are convicted criminals who were set free on psychological defenses—"terminal psychopaths" or "terminal crazies." These gangs get away by intimidation with rape and mayhem and symbolize a familiar illness in the judicial system which is also unable to cope with people defiant of the laws of society. It cannot cope in our own time. The jails are full and the streets are full too of those who refuse to be rehabilitated into a system where ordinary people feel less and less safe anyway.

Many feel there is no safety in a world where the missiles may fly at any moment. They feel the structure of our society is weak and slipping. In the *Mad Max* future the missiles have flown, the structure has slipped. The world is aligned in two camps. There are those who take advantage of the lost social order, and those who are trying to rebuild it, either in the old way based on family and community or in a way that creates what it can out of existing conditions. Then there are those who wander between the camps, aligned with neither, driven there by circumstances. Such a one is Max.

In the beginning there is almost nothing unusual about him. He is a postholocaust Will Kane at Australian high noon complete with a wife who wants him in a less dangerous line of work. Then we realize that all the things that make Max a conventional hero are not his idea of heroism. They are someone else's. In a scene where Max is trying to resign from the police force, his supervisor, Fifi, tells him: "They say people don't believe in heroes anymore. Well, damn them! You and me, Max, we're gonna give them back their heroes." And Max answers: "Aw, Feef. Do you really expect me to go for that crap?" Shortly afterward, he confesses: "I'm beginning to enjoy (that rat circus out there). Any longer out on that road and I'm one of them, you know? A terminal crazy. Only I've got a bronze badge to say I'm one of the good guys."

It is easy to see how one who is skilled at what Max does would begin to like it. A driver lives always on the edge of death, knowing he may either cause it or experience it at any moment. It is a high speed life of chasing terminal crazies, bikers, those the courts have turned loose on society. There is a gut-level satisfaction in watching someone who has run down a woman and her little boy without a qualm splattered to

bits on the highway. It satisfies a human need for the eye-for-an-eye type of justice. Almost everyone else around Max thrives on the law of the jungle. Fifi says: "So long as the paperwork's clean, you boys can do what you like out there." Jim Goose, Max's partner and friend, has no qualms to affect his attitudes toward his job. A man who loves women, he is outraged by the nomad gang rape of a young woman. The only culprit caught is a terminal crazy named Johnny, who is a favorite of Toecutter's. When the nomads intimidate the girl and others from coming forward to testify at Johnny's hearing, leaving him free on a no contest, Goose goes crazy. It takes Max, Fifi and several others to hold him back so that Johnny can leave.

Max feels that there is a higher order, a higher level of justice than eye-for-eye. He does not know what it is and, unfortunately for him, does not get a chance to find out. Jessie, his wife, and their son, Sprog, are senselessly run down and killed by Toecutter and some of his gang. Now the eye-for-eye justice makes sense to Max, as it always does on that personal a level. This idea is reinforced by the monster imagery. Jessie jokingly calls Max a monster. Later, he puts on a monster mask to try and break through her bad mood. After she and Sprog are murdered, Max sits with the mask in his hands and contemplates what to do. He takes the step, takes his road clothes out of storage, and goes out to hunt and kill the bikers. He becomes a monster, a killer without qualm, the thing he had tried to avoid.

In his search for information about the murderers of his wife and son, he lowers the jack on a car with the mechanic still under it. He drives Toecutter speeding into the front of an eighteen wheeler. Most chilling of all is the scene where Max, deaf to Johnny's raving, drags him by a bare, handcuffed ankle, chains him to a car set to blow up, and hands him a hacksaw. "The chain in those handcuffs is high tensile steel," Max explains. "It'd take you ten minutes to hack through it with this. Now, if you're lucky, you could hack through your ankle in five minutes." The final scene of the film shows the explosion in the background and Max driving away in the foreground. Max's vengeance signals the end of any desire for higher orders.

Afterward Max is "a burned-out shell." Having used up his quota of eye-for-eye justice, he becomes "a scavenger, a maggot living off the corpse of the old world," unrecognizable as Jessie's Max. In *The Road Warrior* we find him surviving as best he can on the fence between

good and evil. Wife and child lost, he attaches himself now to a mongrel dog as scruffy and fierce as himself. In fact, Max is like an animal. He eats dog food and goes through life now operating on his survival instincts. Human reactions are as far from him as he can keep them. He is loyal also to various objects—chiefly his road-worn V-8 interceptor, which he has booby-trapped to explode if anyone tampers with it. Vengeance is still a priority. He may be overcome and killed, but no one will benefit from his death. In general, he keeps very little, but that is his own, and he mostly minds his own business.

produces, they hope to drive far beyond the reach of violent men to settle in a place where they can rebuild their lives. The obstacle to this plan is a gang led by Humungus, “the Ayatollah of Rock-and-Rollah.” They have laid siege to the refinery to get the gasoline. There is no middle ground between good and evil, says this film. There are those who defend their dreams and those who attack. Max ultimately must choose either to help the good side or walk away from them and tacitly side with the evil forces opposing them. Seldom in real life is the choice so clean and well-defined. That is part of the appeal of the movie, to those



Mad Max

His encounters with the heavy metal crowd are far from over, though, and he will not be allowed to stay on his fence. *The Road Warrior* brings the war with dissident cultures that began in *Mad Max I* to the fore. The costuming is less biker and more Punk, an adjustment to the times. The whole look of the bad guys is darker, more outrageous and outlandish. The norm is exposed skin, leather, and chains as opposed to the light-colored, modest clothing of the good guys. The good people in this film hold an important trump card: an oil refinery. With the gasoline it

to whom it does appeal. Even Max has to see the choice finally; even he cannot totter along on his fence, though he tries that first.

One of the appealing things about Max as a character is the way he never leans so far toward goodness and charity that he becomes sentimental. His cynicism is not a shell at all but an integral part of himself. He knows where his own interests lie and follows that path with rare deviations. Now his personification of Good is muddy. In the first film he wanted out of the game of being a lawman licensed to do what the



The Road Warrior



The Road Warrior



The Road Warrior

nomad bikers and terminal crazies did illegally. Now he wants out of the game altogether. He is an anti-hero. He does not fight for the cause of good unless he exacts a price for himself. The settlers need a rig to haul their tanker of gasoline. Max knows where they can find one, and he is willing to go out and get it and bring it back through Humungus's lines—in exchange for all the gasoline he can carry for his vehicle. Then the settlers ask him to drive the tanker, but he refuses. No deal. It is not his fight until Humungus's gang kills his dog, blows up his car, and leaves him for dead. Then the fight is personal. Honorable when he makes a bargain, he never makes one unselfishly. In that sense Max regresses from the more mature, responsible person he was in *Mad Max I*.

Up until now we have concentrated on the grim aspects of the trilogy, but it is unfair to discuss it without mentioning the pulse of dark humor that beats at the heart of these films, for they would lose much interest without it. The humor is one of the things that sets *Mad Max* apart from other films of this genre. It also saves the last film from sentimental hogwash, the fate of too many sequels. Some of the humor in *Mad Max I* is provided by the disembodied voice of the female dispatcher. In the opening sequences she is alerting drivers to the theft of a police vehicle. "A pursuit special has been stolen," she says. "Call Captain Fifi McAfee does not like this any more than you. However, we must not compromise territorial range. Remember that only by following instructions can we hope to maintain a successful highway program." She later refers to the chase of the thief, a psychotic called the Night Rider, as "a routine pursuit." Obviously she is not on the scene where interceptor vehicles, trailers, and telephone booths are being demolished during this routine pursuit. Her voice provides not only humor but also irony. She represents an attempt to impose order on this luxurious violence. It is evident from the first frame of the movie that this cannot be done. Another fine touch of visual humor in this movie is a sign that reads, "Fat Nancy's Restaurant—BYO."

The humor in *The Road Warrior* is provided in part by the Gyro Captain and his mossy teeth, a man not too proud to go scrambling after a can of Dinki-Di dog food discarded first by Max then the dog, following which he fastidiously blots his lips with a handkerchief. He makes a good foil for Max. Though the two of them are much alike, both scavengers and outcasts living by their wits,

the Gyro Captain has a lighter persona, and there is a gentleness about him that is missing in Max. The rest of the humor is provided, darkly, by Humungus and the gang, who are too ridiculous and overstated to be taken seriously and too vicious not to be.

Sado-masochism is a prominent characteristic in these first two films. In the first, Toecutter obviously has a soft spot for young Johnny. When Johnny is left behind after the gang destroys a car and abuses its occupants, Toecutter sends one of his boys back to collect the straggler. But, having gotten Johnny back, Toecutter shows his affection by shoving the barrel of a loaded shotgun into the boy's mouth and leading him around by his necktie crooning, "It's all right. You'll get your chance. . . . It's OK. Just remember to keep your sweet . . . sweet . . . mouth . . . shut." Later he forces the reluctant Johnny to set fire to an overturned vehicle with Jim Goose trapped helplessly inside. *The Road Warrior* is full of similar scenes. Wez, a gang member of small intellect and large violent tendencies, keeps a chained Golden Youth sex slave but is himself a slave to Humungus, who enchains him when it is necessary. The Golden Youth accidentally gets in the way of a boomerang tossed by a wild boy, one of the settlers. In a scene reminiscent of Toecutter and Johnny, Humungus grabs the grief-crazed Wez in a stranglehold and promises him that sweet revenge for the death of the Golden Youth is forthcoming, but in the leader's own time. When all the protest, as well as most of the breath, has been squeezed out of Wez, Humungus tenderly turns him over to some associates to be cared for. So love and brutality are twistedly mixed in this crazy world, as it is sometimes mixed in heavy metal music.

Had *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* continued in this style, none of the films would be worth examining. Many filmmakers make the mistake of finding that they have a good thing that brings in audiences, and they ride the idea to death. But George Miller and company, obviously aware of the pitfall, decided to exploit it instead of falling into it. We have seen how the first two films used tired old themes and revitalized them with postapocalypse settings and exaggerated characters taken from modern subcultures. Violence dominated, with unusual twists, and the humor was grim. While there is not much less violence in *Beyond Thunderdome*, there is a different treatment of it and more room in this film for both humor and sentimentality. The wild boy in *The Road Warrior* was not exactly a mother's

dream with his deadly boomerang, but the children Max runs into in the second half of *Thunderdome* are rife with innocence, in spite of their foul language. The sentimental potential, however, keeps running smack up against Max's unflappable cynicism. He refuses to play messiah to the children who find him dying in the desert and bring him to their oasis, Crack in the World. Max learns that they were left behind there by their parents, descendants of people whose plane crashed in that place while they were fleeing the atomic holocaust.

These children are Punk in its innocent aspects. They paint their bodies and faces and mold their hair with colored clay. Their dress, for lack of any other, is animal skin. They decorate with the remnants of a dead civilization. Rifle bullets make a windchime, a stockless rifle makes a walking stick, and sticks bound together make a facsimile television screen for storytelling time. One of the children wears a communication panel as a breastplate. Another, a shaman figure, has a pull-the-string Bugs Bunny doll that still talks. A troubling point about the shaman is the collection of human skulls at his camp. One can only wonder, a little uneasily, why they are there and whose they are, for the movie presents them with no attempt to explain them.

The children multiply prolifically, and as certain of them reach an age, they set out on "tracks" across the desert in search of the place their original forefathers began to miss. The children call it Tomorrow-Morrow Land and long for its "high-scrapers," "v-v-v-videos," and "rivers of light," things they have never known but which enchant them as the unknown can. They think Max is the original Captain Walker come to take them home to Tomorrow-Morrow Land on the plane. That the plane is irreparably damaged and buried in sand is no worry to them. Max tries to tell them that the cities are dead and he has only encountered brutal lawlessness until he reached their oasis. He refuses to lead them out of it in search of a place he does not believe exists. "I say we're going to stay here," he tells them. "We're going to live a long time, and we're going to be thankful. Right?"

Max's concern is not only that the desert will do the children in. He also wants to spare them a place beyond the desert that he encountered and ran afoul of in the first half of *Beyond Thunderdome*. Bartertown has tried to organize what is left after the holocaust. The force behind it, Aunty Entity, has created a place where there are rules—very elementary ones, but a rough sort

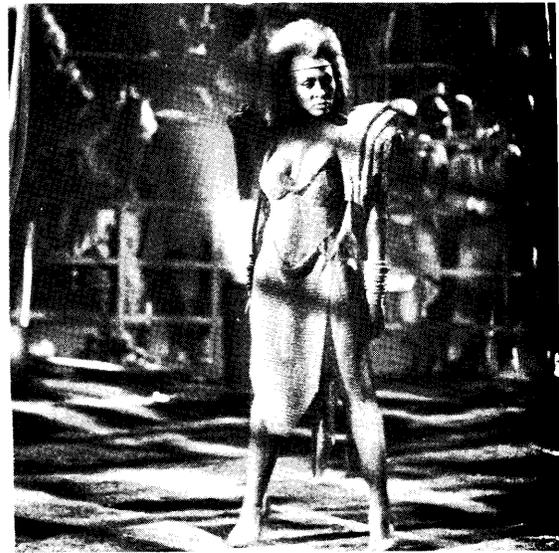
of justice nonetheless. If a fight begins, it ends in the Thunderdome arena where two men enter but one leaves after a fight with no rules. Eye-for-eye justice again, the method claims to be preferable to former ways that often ended up involving whole nations and continents. That is one thing about the Thunderdome that is hard to argue on practical terms.

Entity's army of guards keeps the Bartertown peace. They are the dark side of Punk, but Aunty is no Toecutter, no Humungus, and the army is no crazy, undisciplined mob. Although she is ruthless and not above commanding violence, Aunty Entity is out to create order from chaos, not the reverse. Faced with a pack of cutthroats, scavengers, and other such vermin, she creates rules that will keep them in line or dispose of them. Her only opposition in power is a symbiotic team named Master-Blaster. Blaster is a huge, hooded man, the brawn of the team, and Master is a dwarf with brains and technical skills to operate a crude but effective power plant in the underworld of Bartertown. Entity hires Max to kill Blaster so that Master will be at her mercy and stop tormenting her about who really runs Bartertown. The job must be done by an outsider so that Master will not suspect that Blaster was set up.

Other denizens of Bartertown are dealers who ask no questions about rightful ownership of merchandise, drifters passing through with something to trade, and the like. The chaos of the postholocaust years has had time to settle down and get organized. Time is one factor that helped Aunty Entity's organization. More importantly, this organization grew out of the chaos itself. The police force in *Mad Max I* was a remnant of the old society trying to impose order from above with a system that had literally been blown to bits. Aunty Entity has started from the bottom. She has worked with what she had and tried to bring it up. In the process, the line between good and evil that was so clear before is now blurred. In this movie bad people do good things, and good people do bad things. Aunty Entity put a contract on Blaster's life, but when Max foiled a very important plan of hers and ruined what she was trying to build up at Bartertown, she laughed ruefully and walked away. Master genuinely loved his partner, Blaster, but encouraged him to fight because of his great strength. This propensity for fighting led to Blaster's death.

Max too does bad things and good things. But it has become unnecessary for us to ask ourselves whether he is a good man or a bad man. He is

Max, a survivor in a violent world—and in one way or another we are all that. It has been interesting to watch his development from one film to another. As *The Road Warrior* developed his macho potential, *Beyond Thunderdome* picked up the philosophical potential that was introduced when Max said he was beginning to enjoy the violence of a road cop's life. As long as the violence was impersonal, as long as he could sit back on the "right" side of the fence as a driver and not be personally involved, he could afford to like it or not. Jessie and Sprog's deaths changed that, put violence on a personal level where he dealt with it only when it directly affected him. We see yet another treatment of Max and violence in the third film. Black humor aside, the first two took the rough stuff rather seriously. *Beyond Thunderdome* takes it seriously for the sake of holding it up to the audience as the senseless, mindless thing it is. The person in the film who most enjoys acting out violence is Blaster, and he is retarded.



Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome

Max waits for a good reason to resort to violence, but he is not always picky about the reason. When he agrees to fight Blaster, it is because all his possessions have been stolen and he has made a deal to get reequipped: kill Blaster in a fair fight in the Thunderdome. Whatever we may think of Max for making such a deal, we cannot quarrel with the outcome. When in the course of the fight Max realizes that Blaster is retarded, he refuses to go through with the killing. It must be pointed out that he did not know the consequences of "busting the deal," but it is certain he did not think Aunty Entity would

go through with her end of it either.

Max's next opportunity to use or avoid violence comes later in the movie when he is facing Savannah Nix. She has decided that Max is full of hot air and prepares to lead a group of children out in search of Tomorrow-Morrow Land in spite of his warnings. Max tries to stop them. In a priceless moment his hand wavers, loosely fisted in the air, as he hesitates to knock Savannah out to keep her from going. Then he does it anyway. Violence is still a tool for Max and always will be. But that moment of hesitation as well as his motive for the blow at least set him apart from those to whom violence is an end, not only a means to an end. We could admire him more for trying reason over violence; however, this is, after all, *Mad Max* we are talking about, and reason may still be too big a step for action/adventure films.

We must be satisfied with a new attitude toward violence. When Max is first on his way into Bartertown to see Aunty Entity, he is



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required to leave all his weapons on deposit. What can one do except laugh at the arsenal he pulls out from every fold of his robe? The lovely thing is that we are not laughing at the film but with it. The Thunderdome sequence makes the point in a different way. The arena is a cross between *Let's Make a Deal* and the ancient Roman circuses. The same people clambering for a good view on the open framework of it could be screaming for blood at a boxing match or slaving over gladiators put to the sword and Christians devoured by lions. The look and sound of things change around us, but human

nature remains the same. There is something in the best of us that a bloody good fight will always arouse. Few of us cannot be attracted by a catchy slogan, and there is no group of people who cannot be made into a mob.

Another thing the film does is put the dark side of heavy metal in its place, so much more effectively than the first two. One cannot miss the message when Ironbar, black-haired Kibuki mask poised over his head, ended up in a vat of pig excrement—not that he stayed there. No, by the end of the movie he is bent but still unvanquished. In *Mad Max I* and *II*, evil took a definite whipping. *Mad Max III* abandons this delusion. Somewhere in the progression of one film into another, the theme of Good versus Evil lost its crystal clarity but gained credibility as it grew closer to the way things really are in the world. Sometimes there is a middle ground, and the way off toward one side or the other is obscure.

When a filmmaker recognizes these things and presents them with an awareness of what he is doing, he is creating something in that ancient and honorable tradition, satire. So far, in spite of unusual elements and imaginative costuming, *Mad Max I* and *II* were fairly conventional films thematically. They were interesting for their use of modern problems and cultural elements and the twists these gave familiar themes. Yet at bottom they followed the trend of glamorizing a person who lives outside the laws of ordinary men. We knew who was good and who bad, but the films refused to take a moral stand even though they seemed to on the surface. *Beyond Thunderdome* takes a stand. Violence is worth the contempt of ridicule. It is fit for nothing so much as the dunk in the vat. It is refreshing to see that *Mad Max* is ready to grow up a little, to part ways with other films that glorify violence, as it once did itself, and step into the grownup world of satire.

But satire alone cannot further Max's character, and the movie must therefore pursue the theme of heroism also that was begun in the first film. The trilogy tries to make him into a legendary hero by means of storytelling. *The Road Warrior* began with a narrative voice which related how the old world came to an end and how ordinary men were crushed in the new one. In a way this defeats the purpose, because then all men who survive are extraordinary. They are extraordinarily brave or strong or clever or so on. And in contrast to the people who are making necessary sacrifices to keep their gasoline and get

away to make a better life, Max has to lose stature with his antiheroic behavior. He is still Max, brave and foolhardy and quite mad, a man worth telling stories about, but no legendary hero in the true sense.

Beyond Thunderdome also uses the storytelling technique. The children keep their history alive, dramatically and imaginatively, with pictures painted on rock walls, names carved in stone, and even a viewmaster with slides. Those who listen to the storytellers participate as much as those who "do the tell." By the end of the movie Max is part of their history for a good reason. He has finally become a real hero.

Max could not settle for being the hero that Fifi wanted him to be, that conventional ideal. As the Road Warrior he abandoned the idea of heroism altogether. We see him in the last film after all his years of wandering and his adventures, tired, clearly wishing to stay in the children's oasis and have an end of fighting. But when Savannah and her group make a getaway, he cannot stay behind and leave them to the sink pits of the desert or the ravagers of Bartertown. Then once he has found them he goes into the underworld of Bartertown with them to rescue Master. Obviously he thinks that Master and the children can help each other in some way, though what

exactly he has in mind and where he intends them all to go is another one of the movie's obscure points. At any rate, they all make it out of Bartertown—Max, the children, Master, and a friendly condemned criminal—and are away with Aunty Entity and her army in pursuit. The Gyro Captain—for some reason he has been rechristened Jedediah—enters the picture once again. Jedediah has a plane, the perfect escape from the pursuers if only there can be enough of a runway between the plane and Aunty Entity's company, who are closing in fast.

"You'll have enough room," Max promises and sets out in one of Aunty Entity's confiscated vehicles to barge a way clear. The plane gets away, but Entity's henchmen close in on Max for the kill. It is at this point that she pushes them aside and laughs and lets Max live. Max did not know she would be so generous. At risk to himself he has helped others. It is such acts of selflessness that mark a hero, and at last Max is ready to take that step. It was a long wait, but it is good to see that Mad Max the character, as well as the film, is growing up. □

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Ina Rae Hark

THAT OBSCURE SUBJECT OF DESIRE:
GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND SUBJUGATION IN
THE LEWTON/TOURNEUR *CAT PEOPLE*



In *Totem and Taboo* Freud traces the analogies between the origins of tribal taboo in primitive cultures and compulsion neuroses in sophisticated ones, noting that "neither fear nor demons can be accepted in psychology as finalities defying any further deduction. It would be different if demons really existed; but we know that, like gods, they are only the product of the psychic powers of man; they have been created from and out of something."¹ Although it opens with an epigraph putatively taken from a fictional, pseudo-Freudian text, *The Anatomy of Atavism*, *Cat People* (1942), the atmospheric and celebrated first film of the RKO horror film unit headed by Val Lewton, insists that there is more to the demonic than is dreamt of in psychology.² The film's director, Jacques Tourneur, has said, "I make films about the supernatural because I believe in it. . . . In my films, I have always tried to suggest the presence of this supernatural world, never to caricature it."³

¹Sigmund Freud, *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Modern Library, 1938) 826.

Although *Cat People's* protagonist, Irena Dubrovna, appears a classic case of compulsion neurosis stemming from sexual repression, and although her fears have their root in her deviation from the culture's sexual model for women which psychoanalytic theory often legitimizes, it is none other than the author of *The Anatomy of Atavism*,

²Joel Siegel, in *Val Lewton: the Reality of Terror* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), refers to this epigraph, "Even as fog continues to lie in the valleys, so does ancient sin cling to the low places, the depressions in the world consciousness," as "the lines from Freud" (105), but J.P. Telotte, in *Dreams of Darkness: Fantasy and the Films of Val Lewton* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1985), is correct in pointing out that they are more a paraphrase of Freudian theory in general than a direct quotation from any Freudian text (35). Telotte refers, appropriately, to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, but the anthropological discussion in *Totem and Taboo* is particularly illuminating on the significance of the Serbian cat-people folklore. Both Lewton and Tourneur read widely in psychology.

³Bertrand Tavernier, "Interview," *Jacques Tourneur*, eds. Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Film Festival, 1975) 54-55.

her psychiatrist-turned-seducer, Dr. Judd, who arouses her demonic alter ego at its most ferocious and becomes her only human victim. Her tales of a totemic ancestry, as a descendant of cat people whom the violation of sexual taboos transforms into an avenging panther, which Judd has dismissed as an allegory of sexual dysfunction quite simple for the analyst to decode, have turned out to be literally true. In *Cat People* psychiatry embodies a rationalist ideology bent on releasing and authorizing phallic desire; in opposition to this ideology, the film summons up the supernatural and the spiritual as forces existing outside the psyche to authorize its depiction of desire, because of desire's necessary positioning of the self as either subject or object, as an inevitably destructive, tyrannical force. The film's counter-ideology advocates a regressive "happiness" in which Self and Other, subject and object, collapse into a passionless camaraderie purged of all desire to which the film grants divine sanction. This move to recontextualize the problematics of desire within theology rather than psychology underlies, for instance, Irena's telling Judd that he cannot help her because her problem originates in the soul, not the mind.

Whatever its reputed origin, desire in women as demonic is a concept that preoccupies forties filmmakers far beyond the horror-fantasy genre. Molly Haskell has classed Irena among those *femmes fatales* in forties films which create an atmosphere of "masculine, violent, and phallic" sexuality and project onto woman "the guilt for sexual initiative and faithlessness" so that "she became the aggressor by male design and in male terms, and as seen by the male in highly subjective narratives, often recounted in the first person and using interior monologue, by which she was deprived of her point of view."⁴ Irena's behavior conforms to Haskell's model, and her fate seems to confirm Ann Kaplan's assertion that "In Hollywood films, then, women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to male desire. They live out silently frustrated lives, or, if they resist their placing, sacrifice their lives for their daring."⁵ *Cat People* also belongs among the films of which Linda

Williams has observed: "The horror film may be a rare example of a genre that permits the expression of women's sexual potency and desire, and which associates this desire with the autonomous act of looking, but it does so . . . only to punish her for this very act, only to demonstrate how monstrous female desire can be."⁶

Yet there is one important divergence from the typical pattern of horror films or forties melodrama. The displacement of phallic aggression away from her suitor, Oliver Reed, onto Irena does not exonerate those men who continue to assume the standard sexual roles assigned to them by patriarchal—and movie—culture. While *Cat People* follows traditional Hollywood practice in viewing negatively a woman who makes herself the active subject of desire, it departs from tradition in viewing the male who does so with equal alarm. Hardly a feminist appeal for women's desire to be granted its right to subjectivity, the film at least uses its depiction of the "abnormality" of woman as subject of desire to challenge the culture's complacent acceptance, as normal, of the phallic domination routinely practiced by the male subject of desire.



The statue of King John of Serbia that Irena keeps as a sort of icon in her living room emblemizes the violent subjugation of the object that, throughout the film, is seen as the eventual outcome of the operations of desire. Mounted on a well-muscled horse, King John sits erect, with his arm and the sword in his hand extended

⁴Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) 198.

⁵E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983) 7-8.

⁶Laura Williams, "When the Woman Looks," *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Frederick, MD: Univ. Publications of America [AFI], 1984) 97.

upward. Impaled upon the sword's tip is a panther. The statue appears prominently in the frame with Irena and Oliver in the early scenes of their courtship and unconsummated marriage. An obvious image of maleness, the figure of King John further represents all the power that Lacan grants to the phallus-as-signifier—sexual domination, monarchy, fatherhood.

In her initial explanation of the statue's significance to her future husband, Irena compares King John to Lincoln and Washington and praises him for driving the enslaving Mamelukes from Serbia and then purging her village of their residual evil. She is, however, not at all specific about the nature of that evil, which the panther symbolizes. She merely alludes to "dreadful things" engendered by the people's turning away from Christianity toward devil worship. The King John of the Serbian legends represent a spiritual authority that the film will also call up to authorize its ideology of happiness. Yet the legends' celebration of the king as savior of the soul of the people does not quite jibe with the obvious sexuality of his sculpted image.

The roots of this contradiction become clearer when Dr. Judd recounts what Irena has revealed to him under hypnosis about the ancient evil. While she has indicated to Oliver that all the people of the village had been vulnerable to the sinful temptations the cat represents, with the wisest being potentially the most wicked, her unconscious mind identifies the cat people as exclusively female. They are "women who in jealousy or anger or out of their own corrupt passions can change into great cats like panthers; and if one of these women were to fall in love, and if her lover were to kiss her, to take her into his own embrace, she would be driven by her own evil to kill him." Thus, over the centuries, the cultural inscription of gender has apparently infiltrated the legends so that, at least for Irena, the agent of God and the subjugator of female desire have merged. All Serbians may not visualize King John as he is in the statue, but Irena, haunted by the cat within her ready to be awakened by a kiss or a jealous pang, does. Moreover, she fails to consider the full implications of the statue's depiction of phallic aggression, viewing it as a warning against female subjectivity but as a valorization of even the most ruthlessly dominating desire so long as subjectivity remains an exclusively male position.

The curse of the cat women, Irena believes, is to be unable to desire, to feel any kind of passion,

except as aggressive subject, in patriarchal terms, to desire like a man—and to kill any man who would attempt to reduce them to the familiar status as sexual objects.⁷ To her the impaled panther in the statue stands for male desire perverted by female appropriation; the panther which fascinates Irena at the zoo is male and pointedly identified as such. Its cries disturb her when it "screams like a woman; I don't like that." (On the other hand the appropriately masculine roaring of the lions that has upset her neighbors sounds to her "beautiful" and "natural" as the waves pounding on the seashore.) The sketch she makes at the zoo of a panther pierced with a blade represents her wish both to eradicate the desire within her and to acquire the power of the phallus that would legitimize that desire. Robin Wood notes an ambiguity in Irena's relationship to the panther in that

Most obviously (since Irena herself, at moments of crisis, assumes its form) it represents her *alter ego*. Yet since it is emphasized earlier that it is a *male* panther, we may see it as an alternative potential mate to whom she is taking food, and the point is strengthened by the fact that the bird [whose body she throws into its cage] was originally a gift from Oliver.⁸

But Wood is missing the point. Irena identifies with the panther *because* it is male, because it stands for the authorized position of active desire. Actions and emotions that she finds dreadful in herself appear beautiful in him.

Laura Mulvey has asserted that film spectatorship often turns the female body into a fetish to neutralize the lack, the castration fear, that it may engender in the male viewer.⁹ The

⁷Kaplan observes, even of recent, so-called liberated films, that "our culture is deeply committed to myths of demarcated sex differences, called 'masculine' and 'feminine,' which in turn revolve first on a complex gaze apparatus and second on dominance-submission patterns." She notes further that although the women's movement has made possible the representation of women in the "masculine" position, this only occurs "as long as the man then steps into *her* position, thus keeping the whole structure intact" (29).

⁸Robin Wood, "The Shadow Worlds of Jacques Tourneur," *Film Comment* Summer 1972: 67.

⁹Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," reprinted in *Women and the Cinema*, eds. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: Dutton, 1977) 422.

panther, as well as the phallic statue and all the cat-related *objets d'art* of which she makes fetishes, serve a related purpose for Irena. Possessing them may, she hopes, by a sort of sympathetic magic, grant her the phallic authority to naturalize the perverse cat within. The obsession with obtaining the key to the panther's cage that Irena subsequently develops represents her continuing effort to justify her desire through the possession of phallic signifiers. Much of her behavior also reveals this striving after male identity. She makes her living, as a fashion artist, with the pen. She takes the initiative with the opposite sex. When Oliver first asks her out to tea, she immediately invites him into her apartment, and, when they marry, Oliver gives up his lodgings to move in with her. Although she is sometimes the object of the camera's male gaze and of Oliver's, she more frequently makes Oliver and the panther the objects of hers. In one scene, in particular, Oliver awakes to discover that she has been leaning over the couch staring at him as he sleeps. "I was watching you," she says dreamily. "And it was fun?" he inquires. Irena replies with a confirmatory purr, "umm-hmm." At the very outset of the film, however, there occurs an image to announce that Irena's attempts to achieve male authority are doomed. When she attempts to toss a crumpled piece of paper containing an unsatisfactory image of the panther into a very suggestively-shaped trash receptacle, she misses. Oliver retrieves the paper, makes her acquaintance, and later easily hits the bullseye with a second discarded drawing. The authority of the phallus eludes and will continue to elude her.

Irena's fascination with maleness stems from an unconscious conviction that were she a man, she could stop believing herself a monster. In a culture which expects women to be the objects of desire, recipients but not initiators of passion, those who usurp this male prerogative as subjects of desire can only appear as murderous and monstrous.¹⁰ Since being a cat woman means being unable to participate in the operations of desire other than as murderous subject, Irena is

¹⁰Williams asserts that the monsters in classic horror films represent "The feared power and potency of a different kind of sexuality (the monster as double for the women)," so that when the women gaze at the monsters, they are actually recoiling from an image of themselves (87). The identification is simply taken one step further in Irena's case. See also Teresa de Lauretis on female monsters and the power of the gaze in *Alice Doesn't* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982) 109-12.

precluded from this longed-for reconstitution of herself as object rather than subject. She therefore becomes psychologically obsessed, as we have seen, with altering her gender by identification with the male panther whose potential for destruction seems as beautiful to her as her own analogous destructive drives seem perverse. Writing about another Tourneur film, *Anne of the Indies*, Claire Johnston compares the mindset of the heroine to a fantasy expressed by a patient of child analyst Joan Riviere. Riviere's patient was "a woman whose desires are 'masculine' in terms of the definitions imposed by patriarchal culture (her wish is for her place not to be the feminine one) and who fulfills such a desire not through homosexual object choice, but by assuming the mask of 'femininity' in order to avert her own anxiety and imagined retribution from the Patriarchal Law in working through these desires."¹¹ Although Johnston goes on to dismiss Irena, along with several other Tourneur female protagonists, as mere enigmas, behind whose mask "lies nothing but man's dread of the Otherness of woman, his disavowal of sexual difference itself," Irena is in fact seeking to work out guilt engendered by the same female desires held by Riviere's patient; and her quest to possess symbols of patriarchal authority provides a precise parallel to Anne's solution of a transvestite masquerade as "Captain Providence" (42).

What Irena cannot comprehend is that it is the desiring subject of either sex that is violently destructive, not just the woman. Eager, if only she could, to take her place on the tip of King John's sword as a properly socialized female object of desire, she, like patriarchal culture, condones the male-generated violence that accomplishes that objectification. *Cat People* in this way exposes the operations of ideology in sanctioning phallocentrism, even at its most violent and destructive, when expressed through male icons of "natural" power and control like the statue. Moreover, within the film itself there are voices, whose message is more explicit than that of the ambiguous signifier, the statue, to warn Irena and the viewer of the danger of buying into this ideology. If Irena can describe the male panther as beautiful, the zookeeper is there to refute her, saying, "He ain't beautiful—he's an evil critter," that he resembles the Beast in Revelations that was like unto a leopard. Thus,

¹¹Claire Johnston, "Femininity and the Masquerade: Anne of the Indies," *Jacques Tourneur* 41.

when Irena finally has taken possession of the key, simultaneously releasing both the full fury of her catlike desire and the panther from his cage, there is liberation for neither. Both she and the panther immediately perish, in accordance with the concluding epigraph from Donne's "Holy Sonnet V," "But black sin hath betrayed to endless night/My world, both parts, and both parts must die." As J.P. Telotte has observed:

In effect, a sense of absence, . . . is what differentiates man from animal, keeps him from becoming no more than a violent cat person. In the shift from that opening epigram [sic] to the film's last statement, then, we can glimpse the revision of human perspective which is at work in this story. It is one that, the film's makers may have felt, modern America particularly needed. . . . Seen in such contexts, the notion of a "cat people" seems especially suggestive, implying a threat that haunts man as a direct result of his Fallenness.

(37)

The "structures of absence" that Telotte observes throughout Lewton's oeuvre, converging here with the "mark of absence" in the "signifier of desire" that Paul Willemsen has discerned in many of Tourneur's films, stylistically mirror *Cat People's* insistence that, since desire can only be fulfilled through violent domination, the subject of desire must be banished to the realms of darkness impenetrable by the camera's gaze.¹²

As Irena's desire begins to manifest its violent, catlike presence from within those absent "dark patches," the developing relationship between Oliver and Alice structures the shift into the theological context, already signaled by Irena's insistence that her problem is of the soul rather than the mind. In a film famed for its suggestiveness and indirection, this contextual shift is marked out for the viewer with noticeable directness in a lengthy exchange between Oliver and Alice about the nature of love. The tensions in Oliver's unconsummated marriage have, he says, made him unhappy for the first time in his

¹²The film does not claim that repression can eradicate desire, only that repression is preferable to taking either of the dominant-submissive positions of desire. Visually, desire is always lurking in the shadows that fade into the edges of the frame, demanding constant vigilance to keep it repressed and therefore unseen (perhaps an analogy to the filmmakers' not wholly successful battle to keep the studio from inserting shots of a real panther into the "menace" sequences).

life. Alice then tearfully admits that she loves him, even though she knows that he loves Irena instead. But Oliver is no longer sure whether what he feels for Irena is love. Alice responds:

I know what love is. It's understanding. It's you and me and let the rest of the world go by. It's just the two of us. Living our lives together happily and proudly. No self-torture, no doubt. It's enduring and it's everlasting. Nothing can change it; nothing can change us Ollie. That's what I think love is.

Such a definition of love omits any idea of subject and object, subjugator and subjugated, and, as Oliver's description of his feelings for Irena indicates by contrast, of physical passion and its mysteries:

It's a different feeling. I'm drawn to her. There's a warmth from her that pulls at me. I have to watch her when she's in the room. I have to touch her when she's near. But I don't really know her. In many ways we're strangers.

To this Alice replies, "You and I, we'll never be strangers."

It is at this point that the significance of "happiness" in the film becomes clear. Desire requires an estranged Other, the possession of whom will satisfy the subject's need for the lacking object, but whose Otherness remains. Because it dispenses with subject and object, however, happiness dissolves Otherness into an instant recognition of kinship, of non-estrangement. The reason Oliver has never been unhappy before his involvement with Irena is that his desire has never previously been awakened, and, conversely, "happily" is a key word for identifying Alice's conception of love as a thing distinct from desire. We can make such associations because previous usage in the film has made "happy" a signifier for "free from desire." The zookeeper tells Irena that happy people never linger by the panther's cage. She defines those women who are "free" from her curse of desire as "happy," adding that "They make their husbands happy. They lead normal, happy lives." Tellingly, she warns Oliver not to arouse her passions because "Whatever is in me is held in, is kept harmless, whenever I am happy."

Irena's nature eventually precludes her

remaining happy and harmless, and she assumes the central role in a tragedy of desire. Yet her apparent damnation has its redemptive side; for she also serves as a *pharmakos* which assumes the sinful burden of desire from Oliver and Alice. The cat within Irena only begins to manifest itself after Oliver begins to turn away from her into a greater intimacy with Alice, and it is Alice who is initially menaced by the beast, as she walks to the bus stop, and as she swims in the pool. While on the literal level the transformations are effected by Irena's jealousy of her rival, they can symbolically represent projections of potential desire in Alice that might turn her "happy" love for Oliver into violent, destructive sexuality. Both incidents occur just as Alice has departed from a *tête-à-tête* with Oliver and might conceivably be indulging in a romantic fantasy about their relationship. The famous swimming pool scene, particularly, immerses her in an erotic context as she floats in water clad only in a bathing suit. (After the cat has departed, her bath robe is discovered in shreds, as if it had been stripped from her during a violent rape.) The fact that in both instances the cat disappears before doing her harm indicates that Alice always represses any incipient desire before it seizes control of her. Alice's passions will remain undeveloped. Like the three kittens she befriends throughout the film, they will not achieve the menace of the fully-matured cat. Alice will continue to be the "good egg," the Hawksian buddy, the "different kind of other woman" who is "dangerous" because she *doesn't* want to lure the married man she loves into an affair.¹³

Alice's experiences alone might merely support Irena's belief that desire in women is unnatural. But substantial evidence that the film is calling into question the overall morality of desire in patriarchal culture appears in its presentation of Dr. Judd, who has all the qualifications that that culture requires to validate a subject of desire. Suave and continental Tom Conway, who plays him, seems much more suited to the role of Hollywood leading man than the unexciting Kent Smith, who plays Oliver. As Molina, in Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, describes Judd in his retelling of the plot of *Cat People*: "He's the type women find attractive . . . incredibly good-looking, a fantastic flirt."¹⁴ (Were this a screwball

comedy, we might imagine Cary Grant as Judd, Ralph Bellamy as Oliver.) While Judd is a renowned ladies' man always in pursuit of sexual conquest, Oliver is characterized by his "kindness," "patience," and "gentleness" in forebearing to press for his conjugal rights with Irena. Judd is also identified with the male gaze of the camera—and, by extension, of the filmmakers and the audience—when he fixes the hypnotized Irena in an iris of light generated by a distinctly phallic apparatus in his office. This linkage between phallicism and psychiatry is assumed throughout the film. Note, for example, Alice's recommendation of Judd as a therapist for Irena: "The way he goes around kissing hands makes me want to spit cotton, but I guess he knows all there is to know about psychiatry."

Therefore, Oliver's telling Irena that the solution to her problem lies not with "King John with fire and sword" but with a competent psychiatrist is laden with irony, for each occupies an identical position in the symbolic order. The quotation from Judd's *Anatomy of Atavism* at the film's opening is superimposed over a still shot of the statue of King John. In Irena's dream, Judd and his phallic sword-cane metamorphose into the King and his mighty blade. Irena is looking for the spiritual authority with which the actual King John was endowed; Judd is associated only with that phallic power to subjugate women that inheres in the King's statue and that, by implication, underlies psychoanalytic thinking.

Given his ideology, Judd cannot help dismissing Irena's tales of the cat within her as atavistic expressions of her neurotic fear of her own sexuality. Hadn't Freud observed in *Totem and Taboo* that two of the most frequent ways primitive taboos express themselves in civilized man are in the fear of being touched and in the fear that violation of the compulsive prohibition would lead to the death of a loved one (826, 828)? As patient, Irena certainly displays all the symptoms of a classic Freudian case history. The apparent penis envy indicated by her fetishism, the death of her father before she was born, point to an incomplete Oedipalization which makes normal sexual relations impossible for her. Thus Judd, as Freudian psychiatrist, Don Juan, surrogate for the film director/viewer, and latter-day bearer of King John's phallic authority, sees himself as the perfect man to straighten Irena out by using that authority to obliterate her delusions of subjectivity. Once he convinces her

¹³See Telotte 27.

¹⁴Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, trans. Thomas Colchie (New York: Vintage, 1979) 21.

to accept her objectification as castrated female, desire will hold no terrors. Yet when this patriarchal ideology in which he believes, and which in turn authorizes his actions, leads him to try to cure her by making love to her, therapist evolves into the rapist, and his impaling her with his sword-cane cannot quell the feline fury he has released before it destroys him. Judd has acted in good faith, according to his ideological lights, but he completely lacks the kind of faith that Oliver has just previously displayed by invoking the cross (in the form of a T-square) and "the name of God" to banish the cat from his office; such is the only force in *Cat People* capable of repulsing the panther of desire.

It is not very hard to deconstruct this ideology from the very Freudian position it denounces, to point out its regressiveness, to question whether the psychic denial required for characters to maintain happiness is any less a violation than being subjugated as an object of desire.¹⁵ Nor is it difficult to claim that spirituality is being used as a stalking horse for cultural conformism. Robin Wood argues that the cat here, and elsewhere in Hollywood films, images "the dangerous instinctual world on whose suppression bourgeois stability depends" (65). What has frequently happened in critical discussion of *Cat People*, however, is that those who value the film, yet can't subscribe to its ideology, have rewritten the text so as to hide or deny that ideology's presence. Perhaps one reason that so many critics comment on the film's ambiguity is that they don't want to acknowledge that it may mean what it appears to say. This is particularly true when we consider the various evaluations of Judd's role. Wood finds the film's attitude toward the character uncertain, but discerns an (albeit "half-ironic") advocacy of him as "potential mate" for Irena. Richard Combs calls him Irena's "nemesis and her natural mate," claims that his authorship of the opening epigraph gives him "peculiarly privileged status," and concludes: "He is Lewton's representative, perhaps certifying that none of this should be taken too seriously or can be made much sense of."¹⁶ And

¹⁵Late in the film, when Oliver has declared his love for Alice, Judd gives him the choice of a divorce and leaving Irena to her fate or committing her to a sanitarium for treatment at the risk of forfeiting any chance for a legal union with Alice. Both Oliver and Alice rush to assure him that Irena's well-being must take precedence over the satisfaction of their desires. Their self-denial throughout borders on masochism.

¹⁶Richard Combs, "Retrospective: *Cat People*," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 48 (1981): 144.

even Telotte, whose reading does the most to elucidate and the least to violate the text, laments that absence cannot assume "a masculine and authoritative shape" for Irena because "the only forms [her] opposite takes, however, are Oliver and Judd, the one too immature for proper sexuality, the other too detached and self-concerned to perceive its full importance for his patient" (34). Since those who write about the film are, as professional viewers, so closely involved with ascribing significance to cinematic images in much the way that Judd rewrites Irena's dream images, and because, thus far, they have been predominantly men, they cannot shake the identification with Judd and his belief that all Irena really needs is a normal (i.e., objectified) sex life. The text admittedly invites this identification, but only, I believe, to repudiate it in unequivocal terms.

The tension between the opposing views of Alice, who early on admits, "I believe Irena's story," and Judd, who says, "I've never believed your story, Irena. I've never been afraid of you" just before enfolding himself in her fatal embrace, is resolved when Oliver pronounces the epitaph "She never lied to us" over Irena's corpse. *Cat People* ends with Alice and Oliver, arm in arm, walking away from the camera and from the lifeless bodies of Irena and the panther, as throughout the film actors have turned their backs to the camera a disproportionate amount of the time. This image well represents in cinematic terms the film's advocacy of the need to turn away from the phallogocentric desire that Mulvey has so persuasively argued to be a characteristic of the camera's gaze. Throughout *Cat People* those like Irena and Judd who seek to dominate through the gaze are the ones who, willingly or unwillingly, act as subjects of desire. Therefore, when Judd's advances finally persuade Irena to abandon her efforts to restrain her desires, an eerie light in her fixedly staring eyes gives the first sign of her transformation into the panther. The incarnation of that desire, Irena-as-cat, remains so shadowy that it escapes objectification by the gaze of either the camera, the characters within the film, or the viewers in front of it. Indeed, when characters' eyes search for the cat, they often probe that darkness beyond the screen occupied by the audience, whose own lurking desires the film repeatedly arouses in order to condemn. The apparently fortuitous circumstance of the film's title, dictated to Lewton in advance by RKO, lacking an introductory article is appropriate in that its subject is not just

the cat people of Irena's sort but all of us potential cat people out there in the dark.

Alice and Oliver's final gesture of relinquishing the gaze demonstrates that these "happy" lovers have firmly grasped the moral of this curiously Puritan horror fable. And, however dubious we might be about the validity of this happiness—my colleague Gregory Jay points out that its representation precisely matches Freud's definition of pre-Oedipal narcissism—I must emphasize that it at least derives from a paradoxically non-patriarchal Puritanism that does not put disproportionate blame for the sin of desire on Eve. Dr. Judd, the bearer of patriarchal authority, is punished with equal severity as Irena, the female who has usurped the

male position sanctioned by patriarchy; both Oliver and Alice must accept the position of lack and castration in order to be granted spiritual peace and happiness.¹⁷□

¹⁷If I were to engage in some of Judd's style of analysis, I might suggest that Lewton's childhood experience of living first in an all-female household dominated by "two handsome, intellectual, imperious women," his mother and aunt, the actress Nazimova, and then being sent to an all-male military school is germane to the film's renunciation of subjugating subjectivity without regard to sexual difference (Siegel 8).

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J. P. Telotte

OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM:
THE DOCUMENTARY VOICE OF *FILM NOIR*

To decipher a text in search of its presenter (narrator, author, culture, etc.) can raise pressing logical problems, ones that are closely related to those raised by the attempt to discover the origin and nature of consciousness itself. It is impossible for the self to describe or exhaustively analyze the self, for to do so requires a view from outside the system.

—Bruce Kawin¹

I

Critics have often noted the *film noir's* predilection for narratives employing voice-over and flashback techniques. Most often, however, that narrative styling has been viewed as incidental rather than crucial to the genre's project. The confessional voice-over employed in films like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), for example, has typically been viewed as evidence of the protagonist's "romanticisation" of his predicament or simply been marked off to their common source in the novels of James M. Cain.² In the case of the documentary-style *noirs* that flourished in the immediate post-World War II era, films like *The House on 92nd Street* (1945), *T-Men* (1947), *Boomerang!* (1947), *Call Northside 777* (1948), and *The Naked City* (1948), this oversight has been even more marked. Their narrative strategy, particularly their reformulation of the

voice-over as an authoritative "voice-of-god" narrator, is usually interpreted as a tactic for "distancing" the audience from the discomfiting events that typify even such "factual" *films noirs*.³ As Bruce Kawin's comment on the voice-over indicates, though, this narrative technique, with its implications of a limited, subjective consciousness at work, might also call our attention to the potential for an element of complexity in this form, or at least remind us of the problematic perspective many *noir* films employed in their critique of American culture. While a voice-over/flashback technique evokes the specter of a consciousness attempting to fashion—or simply assert—a singular meaning for events, it also raises an ideological issue by calling attention to the nature of the system about which that voice-over speaks and the distance from which it observes this system. In *noir's* documentary strain this complexity shows most clearly, for it deploys that subjective voice and its narrating eye as if they represented an objective, detached intelligence, simply reporting facts. The stories that emerge, however, are consistently *about* the unreliability of appearances, about the deceptiveness of all that we—and the movies—have traditionally seen as fact. From these forces of truth and doubt that play about the "system" depicted in the documentary *noir*, a tension emerges that reflects the pervasive doubts and dissatisfaction which plagued post-war audiences and would increasingly furnish a dark coloring for the era's films.

The *film noir* most commonly deploys the

¹*Mindscreen* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978) 4.

²See esp. Robert G. Profirio's "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*," *Sight and Sound* 45.4 (1976): 212-17, and Frank Krutnik's "Desire, Transgression and James M. Cain," *Screen* 23.1 (1982): 31-44.

³Foster Hirsch in his *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1981) 75, describes the voice-over as a device that "creates distance," although he does not indicate the purpose such a distancing or detachment is supposed to serve.

combination of voice-over and flashback to frame a narrative, as in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Lady from Shanghai*, or to insert necessary narrative information, as is the case with *Out of the Past* and *Criss Cross*. Because of its perspective—looking back on events in which it participated—such a narrative voice adds to its implicit subjective view a sense of authority that normally accrues to history, to any record of what has already occurred. Although coming from a character within the narrative and subjectively concerned with that figure's experiences, this perspective thus projects a sense of distance and even objectivity. In *film noir's* application of this technique, however, Frank Krutnik identifies a "dislocation" occurring "between the voice-over and the image, the former failing to contain the latter," failing, that is, to account for the truth that the images themselves assert (39). What results, he suggests, is "a structural confusion in regard to the discourse of Truth." It is confusion, I believe, sourced not simply in the insistence of the image, as he argues, but in the curious combination of subjective and objective stances that this narrative voice effects.

The documentary-style *noir* offers a singular illustration of this problem, for it not only creates such a narrative "dislocation," but carries out an important ideological task with it. Together with their on-location shooting and factually-based stories, these films employ a pointedly detached, usually anonymous, and frequently didactic narrative voice to introduce and describe all that we see, as if in flashback. Viewers, consequently, receive an enhanced impression of an objective and, it is implied, truthful perspective on the world they inhabit. With what may seem like the voice of history itself substituting for that of an involved narrator, these films erect a formidable frame of factuality that eases our immersion in and acceptance of their versions of reality. In studying such narratives, however, as Kawin cautions, "the question of voice becomes, finally, the question of mind, and both are inseparable from the question of meaning" (22). And when we look for the "presenter" or "mind" from which these narratives spring, we encounter the problem posed by the elusive positioning of the voice-over consciousness. While its anonymity and historical perspective try to locate it "outside the system," apart from the culture that it describes, the abiding sense of a consciousness at work and the carefully shaped stories that emerge remind us of the difficulty, even the impossibility of such a view. In light of the basic

project of *film noir*, as a capitalist system's self-critique, this contradiction and its implications for that voice's position as outside or inside the system seem particularly significant. What these films undoubtedly call attention to is an insistent *desire* for an extra-systemic perspective that *noir* sought to satisfy. They catered to that desire, though, by offering a vantage on post-war American culture that located itself simultaneously outside the system and safely within its bounds. Bill Nichols explains that an essential task of all such ideological structures is "to hide contradictions using those things that in their function as signs bear the trace of the very same contradictions ideology seeks to hide."⁴ In the documentary voice of films like *T-Men*, *Call Northside 777*, and especially *Boomerang!* we find just this sort of function, one through which we might better assess the kind of truth that these films actually documented for their audiences.

II

The documentary *noir's* strategy clearly owes much to the formula employed by the newsreels with which the public was already familiar, particularly the "March of Time," conceived and produced by Louis de Rochemont. He is credited with opening up a "creative" vein for documentary, one combining normal newsreel material with stock footage, a narrating voice-over, and "the re-enactment of an event so effectively that it simulates reality itself."⁵ Upon turning to feature films with productions like *House on 92nd Street* and *13 Rue Madeleine*, de Rochemont developed a popular narrative model from this technique, one employed in subsequent *noir* productions and subsequently copied by other filmmakers in this period. As one critic describes it, the de Rochemont formula consisted of "taking a story based on fact, photographing it in its actual locations, and producing a newsreel-like effect in a feature-length film."⁶ Spurred also by the advent of Italian neorealist

⁴*Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981) 290.

⁵Robert T. Elson, "De Rochemont's *The March of Time*," *The Documentary Tradition*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971) 107.

⁶Eugene Archer, "Elia Kazan—The Genesis of a Style," *Film Culture* 2.2 (1956): 6.

film, de Rochemont and those who followed his lead effectively yoked the documentary's reputation for objectivity and unfiltered access to truth to Hollywood's prior and primary commitment to an entertainment—and an ideology—that would satisfy the public's desires.

Like other *films noirs*, works like de Rochemont's *Boomerang!* and such imitators as *Call Northside 777* and *T-Men* concentrate on laying bare the criminal activities and destructive desires at work in modern American culture, although they do so in a distinctly non-threatening manner that marks them off from the darker mainstream of *noir*. What usually went unseen or unsaid in the American narrative film, they do render visible and talk about in a factual way; moreover, they identify their subjects not as metaphoric, but as immediately representative of real-life occurrences, and they establish a distanced and omniscient voice of *history*, as it were, to introduce, comment upon, and tie together the various narrative sequences, offered as if in flashback. In this way they draw upon our typical valuation of the real and the appearance of an objective, extra-systemic perspective, such as characterizes the scientific method, to qualify their treatment of a sordid subject matter and mask its narratization. Such a bracketing approach, as films like *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* demonstrate by their binding of the irrational and chaotic upwellings of desire within a rational voice-over commentary, permits viewers to relish those dark impulses that such films depict, yet also to keep them at a safe remove, even deny their threatening capacity. It is a narrative duplicity that suggests the fundamental difficulty these films faced in making their cultural critique acceptable.

The larger consequences of this almost paradoxical posture become clear when we follow the trace of those "contradictions" that characterize these ideological structures. For instance, even as the initial titles emphasize that *Call Northside 777* "is a true story," that *Boomerang!* is "based on fact," and that *The House on 92nd Street* contains such sensitive factual information that "it could not be made public until the first atom bomb was dropped," these films also acknowledge their status as *cinematic constructs*. Thus the first two films begin with tight close-ups not of the "case files" that supposedly inspired them, but of the film scripts themselves. While *Naked City* opens with a high overhead shot of New York—a privileged view of the city—the

accompanying voice-over is identified as that of the film's producer Mark Hellinger, who then speaks of the actors who "played out their roles on the streets, in the apartment houses, and in the skyscrapers of New York itself"—the locale which contributed this "true story" from among its store of eight million. *T-Men* moves from opening travelogue shots of Washington, D.C. to a medium shot of Mr. Elmer Lincoln Iren, former head of the Treasury Department's enforcement division, who looks directly into the camera and reads from a prepared statement about the work of his bureau. From this report which he holds so that we might see it—thereby underscoring the document-ary nature of his remarks—he cites statistics, outlines the present structure and duties of this arm of the Treasury Department, and recalls its achievements, especially its part in smashing the Capone gang. However, he then turns to another file which he describes as a



T-Men

"composite case,"; it is, in effect, a narrative drawn from—and relying for credence upon—this authoritative realm of truth that has laboriously been established. What another voice then proceeds to narrate is a "composite," not just of various factual events or case histories, but of fact and fiction, of naturalistic camera work and conventional narrative, as the film simultaneously attests to the absolute truthfulness of its discourse and admits the shaping, intrusive hand of the filmmakers. While this strategy of gradually moving from a factual ground to the fictional construct, or of introducing the filmscript drawn from the case history, might be interpreted as the triumphant possession of narrative by what Foucault terms the "will to truth" of all discourse,⁷ it is a strategy and imagery that also suggest another facet of

that will to truth, namely, an inevitable masking of its own impelling forces and desires.⁸ It is a strategy that also suggests the basic pattern informing these films, as they establish a ground of truth which opens onto a fictional construct, and then try to mask this disjunction by seeming to offer access to yet another level of truth—one paradoxically sourced in their fictive realm.

Even as they seek to assert their extra-systemic perspective and establish its credibility, then, these films also reveal the problematic nature of their narrative stance. While their narrators' voices apparently speak from outside the world and events depicted, we almost from the start see that both world and events share in the nature of those voices—all being fashioned with an eye to the valorizing power of reality. *The Naked City* clearly demonstrates this compromise in both its narrator who is also the film's producer—a source of narrative "truth" who is also, in effect, the source of the film's capital—and its insistence on its own singularity, that it is a film "different from most films you'll ever see." It is a difference lodged not just in the naturalistic backdrop described—"the city as it is—hot summer pavements, the children at play, the buildings in their naked stone, the people without makeup"—but in the storybook fashion in which this realistic context is deployed: "Well, let's begin our story this way. It's one o'clock in the morning on a hot summer night," the narrative opens. Taken from a circling plane, the high-angle shot of the city accompanying this introduction thus suggests both the removed, objective view we usually associate with the documentary impulse and a certain distance from reality itself that inevitably follows from the concept of "story."

Given this kind of strategic tension, the double character of these films as both fiction and fact, we can expect to find in their narratives a reflection of this problematic character and of an

effort to "hide contradictions," as Nichols puts it. As an exemplary text, I wish to turn to the work that James Agee considered the best of these "locale" films, as he termed them, the de Rochemont-Elia Kazan collaboration *Boomerang!*⁹

III

Boomerang! opens with the sort of establishing shot that typifies the documentary-style *noir*'s efforts to ground its story in a substantial and convincingly real locale. In place of *Naked City*'s aerial view of New York and *Call Northside 777*'s montage of Chicago, *Boomerang!* illustrates an initial voice-over comment that "the basic facts of our story happened in a Connecticut community much like this one" with a dizzying 360 degree pan of a bustling downtown area. The effect of this unusual circular shot is to suggest that we are being shown everything, as if nothing could be withheld from our high-angle view of the town's busy life. Of course, the privileged position of the camera itself, which implies as well the privileged situation of that narrating voice, necessarily remains undisclosed, not outside but unperceived, there at the very center of the panorama it offers the audience. This curious shot in effect reveals the outside that is in fact inside, a part of the cityscape in this case that cannot be seen because it is our own point of view, although it goes disguised by this camera movement as part of a truly comprehensive perspective. It is an effect that suggests the double nature of the view these films afford as they attempt to turn the inside out, to imply that the commonplace vantage we have from our position within the culture might easily open onto an objective and factual vision of our world.

The appearance of a comprehensive vantage is reinforced by *Boomerang!*'s emphasis on two different levels of activity surrounding the murder of an Episcopalian clergyman in this Connecticut town. On the one hand, it offers in documentary-style footage a surface view of the various police activities that follow Reverend George Lambert's killing: rounding up witnesses, searching for clues, questioning suspects. It is the sort of perspective on events newsreel audiences are accustomed to, one here complemented by a series of montage effects, typical of both the documentary and narrative film, suggesting the lack of progress in the murder investigation: inserts of newspaper headlines and editorial

⁷See Foucault's "The Discourse on Language" in *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) 219.

⁸For a detailed discussion of this pattern in Foucault's thought, see Hayden White's essay, "Michel Foucault" in *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), esp. his comment, "Discourse wishes to 'speak the truth,' but in order to do this it must mask from itself its service to desire and power, must indeed mask from itself the fact that it is itself a manifestation of the operations of these two forces" (89).

⁹*Agee on Film* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969) 1: 275.

cartoons criticizing the police's inability to locate the killer, juxtaposed with various groups of townfolk—firemen, customers in a barbershop, people listening to the radio, reporters discussing the case, and women hanging out their wash—all eager for a solution to the crime that has obviously upset their community. Even as the film moves further away from the documentary and into the realm of more traditional narrative with the comments of these various townsfolk, though, it also implies, as if in compensation, an access to another level of truth, one usually unseen by the documentary eye. On the other hand, then, in the style of traditional film narrative it grants a privileged insight into the political turmoil that has developed around this case and is fundamentally related to it. From a close-up of a headline describing the state legislature's demand for action, the film cuts to a reaction shot of Police Chief Robinson remarking



Boomerang!

that his investigation into the murder is "turning into a political three-ring circus." Besides linking the documentary-like scenes of the investigation to the narrative proper, this shift makes available to our outsider's perspective a privileged knowledge of the ongoing political struggle between the Reform Party in power, which finds the failure of the police an embarrassment in an election year, and the opposition party headed by newspaper owner T. M. Wade, which sees in the floundering investigation a great opportunity for propaganda and a possible avenue to return to power. Even as the anonymous narrator describes the "over-zealousness of the public," we see in a way that the public cannot what complications this murder, as well as their own reactions to it, has created, how much of the truth of this situation remains blocked from the public's view because they lack the encompassing

perspective which the narrative purports to offer.

Even as it probes beneath the surface realism of the police investigation to suggest the complexity of this world, however, the film also insinuates the elusive nature of truth in such circumstances. On the level of the investigation, for instance, a montage of suspects being rounded up is accompanied by the voice-over describing "the nebulous figure conceived in the minds of the seven witnesses," a figure so vague that "the mere fact of wearing a dark coat with a light hat" became sufficient cause to detain someone. For this reason, even after the witnesses pick John Waldron out of a line-up, Chief Robinson is reluctant to claim a breakthrough in the case; as he cautiously puts it, "All I've got is a guy." State's Attorney Henry Harvey, who must prosecute the case, seems equally cautious, despite the political pressures he faces. The police psychiatrist's inability to



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identify Waldron as "a homicidal type" irritates him, and his eagerness to see the ballistics report on Waldron's gun, since it is the product of "a more exact science," as he says, underscores his concern with locating a reliable truth. Rather than offering some assurance, therefore, Harvey's subsequent and repeated comment that "it seemed like a well nigh perfect case" suggests a certain uneasiness in his own mind and a depth of truth that continues to slide away from the gaze of the film's documentary eye.

This uneasiness and uncertainty are underscored by the film's political focus, which emphasizes that guilt and innocence are not essential questions for the people in power. T. M. Wade's distanced perspective suggests little concern with truth, as we see him relaxing at his country club, golfers playing in the background, while he gives orders to his employees on

Waldron's defense: "I don't care if he's guilty or not. I've got an election to win, and the only way I can do that is to make Harvey look bad," he says. The members of the Reform Party seem to have a similar attitude. Public Works Commissioner Paul Harris, for instance, reminds Harvey that "we have to win an election, and to do it we need a conviction." When Harvey is noncommittal and suggests an ambiguity surrounding the Waldron case, the narrative opens onto still another level of truth connected to these political machinations, as Harris pulls a gun on Harvey and threatens him, because he fears that a further investigation could expose his own corruption—reveal the reform that is not reform but corruption itself. What *Boomerang!* attempts to do at every level, in fact, is to admit the possibility for uncertainty, ambiguity, limitation on perspective, but only to counter that potential by suggesting another level of truth that the narrative's encompassing and penetrating perspective affords us, as if in compensation.

Even on its largest structural level *Boomerang!* demonstrates this strategy of testifying to the ultimate integrity and trustworthiness of its own narrative voice, while acknowledging the sense of doubt and anxiety to which such *films noirs* typically spoke. The Grand Jury hearing on Waldron's case which occupies the last third of the film forms a second level of voice-over and flashback narration, one provided by Henry Harvey, which effectively mirrors and affirms the film's controlling and original narrative voice; and while it admits that no resolution is forthcoming for Reverend Lambert's murder, it dramatically demonstrates the unpopular truth of Waldron's innocence—a far more difficult truth to reveal, we are led to believe, than the identity of the real murderer. Just as the film's anonymous narrator purports to offer "basic facts," so does Harvey's testimony to the Grand Jury proceed from the primary consideration he announces at the start of the hearing, "that all the facts be scrutinized with the utmost care and in an impartial manner." In fact, a subjective shot from Harvey's point of view of *The Lawyer's Code of Ethics* underscores the sense that the testimony he is to offer comes from "a completely honest man," as even his political opponent T. M. Wade styles him. What follows, however, is not only an attestation of truth by a speaking voice whose veracity has repeatedly been certified, but a testimony given precisely in the manner of the larger narrative and its assertion of truth, that is, as a series of flashbacks and recreations of events

on which Harvey's voice comments. He relates how he and his staff have, with complete faithfulness to circumstance, reenacted the events of Reverend Lambert's murder in order to certify the eyewitness testimony they have received and to determine beyond all doubt Waldron's guilt or innocence. Those reenactments reflect the film's status as reenactment, and the truth they conclusively prove—that Waldron was not the murderer—thus becomes a validation of the narrative's documentary strategy as well.

It is as if the film itself was on trial, its method for revealing and asserting truth called into question. By placing this trial at the narrative's climax, the film assures us that even in a recreation of reality, the truth will out. The unpopularity of that truth, the fact that Harvey must defend the person he is supposed to be prosecuting, prove innocent an individual that both his political party and the general public would eagerly accept as a scapegoat, sheds light on the film's basic strategy, which admits local doubts and ambiguities, even the *movie-ness* of its documentation, but only by way of more strongly suggesting the larger truthful impulse that propels the narrative. Harvey's actions here add to our sense of reassurance by implying that his narrating voice, like that of the narrative itself, serves in a completely disinterested fashion, solely in the service of truth. Of course, that is the point of the offer made by Harvey's political cohorts who propose to run him for governor if he can convict Waldron, and of his subsequent conversation with his wife wherein he remarks that he could be as happy "in a one-room flat" as in "the governor's mansion." While this dramatizing of Harvey's pivotal role as a potential voice of truth or duplicity implies a choice that the individual must make, Harvey has been so set apart from the politicians of his party, subject to the penetrating eye of the narrative in a way that no other character here is—for instance, we see into his intimate family life and past history, while we investigate no other character in this way—that we find no room for doubt or a real conflict of motivations in his character. His own commitment to truth, like that of the narrative, seems absolute; in effect, the narrative attests to his character and concern with truth, just as his own voice reminds those in the courtroom of the hearing's purpose to document reality. However, this interdependence of testimony, like the ultimate truth which Harvey's investigation uncovers—that the murderer cannot be located; the truth the public is eager for cannot be made

known—hints at the inevitable limitations on perspective and its abiding link to “the system” that it purports to stand outside of.

In attempting to offer a resolution for the murder mystery element here, however, the narrative again tries to close up this ambiguity with a strategy that asserts its distinctive capacity for an “outside” vantage. An early flashback to Reverend Lambert’s life and several subsequent scenes during the inquest insinuate the identity of the real killer. Consequently, in light of the narrator’s comments about the “over-zealousness of the public” and the various officials’ manifest eagerness to cater to the public’s emotions, even if simply by providing them with a scapegoat, we follow the prosecution of Waldron and listen to his unheeded protestations of innocence with a sense of how difficult it is to distinguish between truth and falsehood, and how easily one can be mistaken for the other when we are immersed in a situation and unable to view it objectively, from “outside.” From outside this clash of confused motivations—the political aspirations of Harvey’s party and that of T. M. Wade, Police Chief Robinson’s single-minded concern with solving the murder and thus removing public pressure from his department, the public’s desire for some revenge or sign of justice here, and Harvey’s abiding concern with truth—we repeatedly see shots of the man we take to be the real killer—one of Reverend Lambert’s parishioners whom he had sought to have institutionalized because of a dangerous psychosis. The camera singles him out in the first courtroom scene as a curious spectator, and in medium shot registers his strangely pleased reaction as Harvey describes how three witnesses have positively identified Waldron as the man fleeing the murder scene. It is a shot repeated to show this figure’s shock when Harvey then announces that, despite this testimony, he believes Waldron is innocent; and to indicate that this mysterious figure is more than emblematic of the crowd and its general reaction, a shot shows him seated while all around stand in shocked protest at this unexpected announcement. The subsequent long shot of him seated alone in the courtroom after all the other spectators have left—a shot taken from a high angle in front of the room, as if from the judge’s bench—completes the visual pattern of singling out and then indicting the real killer. It is a pattern that has provided us with a privileged perspective shared by none of the film’s characters and thereby ensured our attitude towards the demonstration of Waldron’s

innocence.

The factual proof of innocence should be quite satisfactory to the removed, uninvolved spectator, to a documentary eye concerned simply with discerning fact and attesting to the truth. As the narrator’s voice comments at the film’s opening, however, “the death of a man like Father Lambert leaves a gap in any community”—much like the gap which period audiences sensed in their own society. *Boomerang!*’s strategy, as we have already noted, is to attempt to close such gaps, to render the blank spots in the narrative’s perspective at least unnoticeable, and thereby to disguise any contradictions in its structure. To balance off Reverend Lambert’s death and append a sense of meaning to it, therefore, two other deaths occur. First, Paul Harris shoots himself in the courtroom, his gun going off immediately after Harvey shows that Waldron’s gun could not have been the murder weapon. This conjunction metaphorically links Harris to Reverend Lambert’s murder and hints at a significance that can be found in his death; although accidentally, it has effectively exposed and rooted out a corruption in this society and visited justice upon an individual responsible for that corruption. Second, the figure singled out as the real killer is himself killed in a car crash. A close-up of the newspaper headline announcing Waldron’s innocence also shows a picture of the true murderer who, in his already disordered mental state, assumed a passing police car was after him and crashed his car into a tree. While the narrator comments that the murder of Reverend Lambert “was never solved,” this image, as if emanating from a distance even beyond that of the narrative consciousness, suggests otherwise. It implies, in fact, a providential justice watching over and at work in this world, giving meaning to even the most senseless acts and guaranteeing justice despite our fears about its seeming absence.

Of course, it is a resolution and consolation that, to be effective, must seem sourced in a view from outside the system described here. Faced with what seems like a breakdown of the moral order—the senseless killing of a priest—and the failure of the police to reassert the workings of justice, we need almost a god-like perspective to affirm the persistence of a morality operating beyond our limited view. This affirmation, however, clearly comes not from the documentary eye, the facts it observes or the history its voice recounts; rather, we hear the voice of the system itself speaking our anxieties

about the availability of truth and meaning, and, in the absence of other assurance, drawing from within the culture's store an old and powerful ideology that might yet serve for an answer. The comforting message which concludes the film, that Henry Harvey was in reality Homer S. Cummings, who went on to become Attorney General of the United States, further corroborates this marriage of outside and inside perspectives, for even as it reaffirms the documentary aspect of the narrative, its precise correspondence to documented human history, it also implies the workings of a benevolent, rewarding providence in which, despite its anxieties, the public might still find significant comfort. Thus even as the narrative pulls back to assert its documentary ground, it also falls back for certification upon the very system it purports to examine.

IV

The assertion of a conventional sense of order and meaning and of a closure for the open world the narrative has let us glimpse is paradigmatic of the conclusions to which these documentary-style *noirs* work. *T-Men*, for example, closes on a close-up of the pages of *Look* magazine, itself a document of the real world, although one whose factual nature might be questionable. As we survey these pages, a voice-over summarizes this "factual" story on the fictional Shanghai Paper case that we have seen dramatized. The voice and story assume a reassuring tone, affirming that corruption has been rooted out, and in a reversal of appearances that rivals *Boomerang!*'s surprise revelations about Paul Harris. Oscar Gaffney, an international antiques dealer who, we are told, "posed as a philanthropist and civic leader," has been exposed as one of the masterminds behind organized crime in the country and been brought to justice. And Treasury agent O'Brien, whom we saw shot in the final round-up of criminals, appears in another *Look* photograph, sitting up and smiling from his hospital bed, as the voice-over notes that he has "recovered from serious wounds and is again on active duty." *Call Northside 777* has a more difficult task in employing its documentary perspective to assert a sense of justice and meaning in the world it describes. While a new scientific development, an enhanced photographic enlargement process, has proved Frank Wiecek innocent of murder and brought about his release from prison, he has spent eleven years in jail, his wife has married another man, and his friend Tomek Zaleska,

who, we are led to believe, is also innocent, remains behind bars. In fact, as in *Boomerang!*, the crime that is here investigated is never solved, despite the efforts of newspaperman P. J. McNeal. McNeal's final comment, however, attempts to strike a positive note by arguing for that larger perspective which these films lay claim to: "It's a big thing when a sovereign state admits an error. And remember this: there aren't many governments in the world that would do it," he says. Viewed in an exterior location shot that contrasts starkly with the dark and enclosed compositions that dominate much of the film, Frank nods his agreement and offers his own assessment that "It's a good world outside." It is an assertion almost in spite of what the narrative



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has documented—perjured testimony, police cover-ups, an official disinterest in justice—but in the context of this documentary-like shot and when repeated by the narrator, asserted from that voice's larger, authoritative perspective, it takes on conviction and seems a fitting *coda* for the film. In fact, we might take it as an appropriate slogan for the documentary-style *film noir*. From that "outside" perspective they lay claim to, the world can indeed seem like a "good" place, at least a realm where justice, truth, and meaning hold sway, despite occasional appearances to the contrary.

As *Boomerang!* particularly shows, the perspective that these films typically offer is hardly as distanced and objective, as fundamentally concerned with the nature of reality as their title cards, newsreel-type footage, and especially their voice-over narrations imply. As Kawin explains, though, a "view from outside the system"—the self, society, the movies themselves—is practically impossible; but these films could offer the system's own view of what

it might look like from outside. While these documentary-style films focus on the same dark passions and criminal actions, set against the modern American cityscape, as do the majority of *films noirs*, they seem to suggest that these elements are temporary disruptions in a largely orderly and properly functioning social system, not characteristic manifestations of the culture and period. This approach has prompted one critic to see in their “realistic mode of



Call Northside 777

presentation” a straightforward critique of the system, evidence that these films sought to “take on the difficult task of providing an answer” to the problems of crime and cultural decay.¹⁰

¹⁰Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977) 117.

In commenting on the number of crime films in this period, though, Siegfried Kracauer posed a question that speaks to the affirmations for which these films seem to reach, and thus to the difficult task they faced in attempting to mark off an acceptable position for their critique of American society. He asks why “a creed that had a real hold on its adherents would . . . need to be so explicitly and superficially proclaimed.”¹¹ Of course, the normal human desire for freedom from troubling anxieties always prompts us—individually and culturally—to try to close the “gaps” we perceive in our system, in this case, those which the war and its aftermath disclosed in American society. However, in aligning our voices and perceptions—our public consciousness—with a voice and pattern of images that spoke a certain cultural or ideological truth in the guise of a detached and objective narration, these films offered neither answers nor real indictments; they simply sought to bracket their disturbing subjects within a conventional, reassuring, ultimately even melodramatic perspective and thereby still their disquieting voice. What these films most successfully document, therefore, is less the objective reality of post-war America, than their audiences’ *desire* and certainly a deep-felt *need* for an objective reality that might coincide with their long-held assumptions about the world they inhabited. Unable and probably unwilling to be released from this system, viewers could only hope, as Frank Wiecek affirms upon his release from prison, that it is indeed “a good world” when viewed from outside. The documentary-style *film noir* sought to confirm that hope.□

¹¹“Hollywood’s Terror Films,” *Commentary* 2 (Aug. 1946): 134.

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Angela Sommer

THE HAUSFRAU

Translated by Billie R. Engels

and when I've dusted,
watered the flowers,
and done the windows
I sit in the garden

ever since I caught the pox
it seems so restful here at home

I buried my children first
then my husband and yesterday the cats
and when I'm dead
an aunt will bury me

but meanwhile I'll carry the pox
as far as Munich
and then it's finished

CINEMA HISTORY AND
THE "B" TRADITION:
NOTES TOWARD A NEW HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As the Golden Age of Hollywood film production recedes further and further into the mist of college film history texts, the study of film history at the undergraduate level becomes increasingly problematic. Most film teachers rely on the basic "milestones" of film production. Films like *The Gold Rush*, *Citizen Kane*, *Triumph of the Will*, and *Metropolis* have been taught over and over again in historical survey courses, until they cease to be individual works, and become an orthodoxy of cinema history. While each of these films is certainly valuable, and represents individual artistic peaks for its respective creators, the rushed and highly selective "history" that these films collectively convey is suspect for a number of reasons.

Most pressingly, film history can be seen, as viewed through a "core" curriculum of classics, as a static thing, not open to revision or further qualification. While no one could argue that the films mentioned above are not worth viewing, the subjectivity of their selection also cannot be denied. Film history, as a university study, is of relatively recent vintage. The study of cinema did not become codified at the university level until the early 1960s, and then owed a heavy debt to the basic foundations laid down by André Bazin and Andrew Sarris, in *What is Cinema?* (Vols. I and II), and *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions*, respectively. Both of these texts were revolutionary in their time for claiming the works of such now recognized masters as John Ford, Howard Hawks, and other journeymen American filmmakers, as personal artistic statements, albeit mitigated by circumstances of economics (shooting schedules, budgets, actors under contract, and numerous other factors). However, now that the case has been made for these artists, the question arises: is this Pantheon sufficient?

Perhaps it is, as a beginning (something Sarris himself claimed *The American Cinema* to be), but perhaps it is also limiting. For every director

elevated to Pantheon status in Sarris's world of the cinema, numerous other directors are either ignored or belittled, and their works are dismissed without full consideration. More than twenty years after its initial publication, *American Cinema* seems sound in its judgments, but unduly narrow. The cultural climate which shaped Sarris's perceptions of cinematic history has altered drastically, yet his text has seemingly remained inviolate. Cinema history has changed, and changed significantly, if for no other reason than the fact that most of the filmmakers listed in Sarris's Pantheon are either dead or inactive. A new generation of cinema artists has risen to prominence in the last two decades, yet conventional cinema history is in no hurry to acknowledge their contributions. Further, many film historians continue to be blinded by the artificial division between "A" and "B" pictures, when, as Orson Welles himself observed, the "B" picture at its best represented a workshop for those filmmakers whose ideas were simply ahead of the public taste. Welles wrote in 1944:

Did you ever hear of a 'B' picture getting one of the prizes (an Academy Award), or even a nomination? *The Informer* doesn't count as a 'B' in spite of its slow budget because its director was famous and successful and well-paid. A real 'B' is produced for half the money and is twice as hard to make worthy of attention

Gold statutes for score and photography aren't enough. The movie industry is the only big business I know of which spends no money on real research. A valid Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences would be a laboratory for experiment, a studio—by which I do not mean a factory building for the manufacture of a product—but a place removed from the commercial standard and reserved for study, for honest creative effort.

To date, Hollywood has yet to take Welles' advice on this matter, unlike many other countries (Poland, the Soviet Union, Belgium, France, Denmark), and so the "B" film, at its best, was forced to fill this creative vacuum until the mid-1960s, when television effectively killed off the bottom half of the double bill.

Indeed, if one looks for the source material for most contemporary films, one finds it in "B" pictures, not in their "A" counterparts. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, for example, is simply a remake of the 1943 Republic serial *Secret Service in Darkest Africa* (Director: Spencer Gordon Bennet). And is *Secret Service in Darkest Africa* really any sillier than Howard Hawks' *Air Force* or *Only Angels Have Wings*, with their tired and artificially enforced codes of male and female behavior, which are repeated by Hawks in film after film? Where are Spencer Gordon Bennet, William Witney, John English, John Farrow, and numerous other journeyman Hollywood directors in Sarris's scheme of things? They are either ignored, or relegated to the rank of curiosities.

If one is to get anything out of a "B" film, one must extend to it the grace of extenuating circumstances, and in this, a consideration of the distinctions between "B" and "A" films becomes singularly important. More than any other medium, the cinema is inherently tied to commerce. If an idea is not particularly popular, and is not thought to be resoundingly commercial, there is very little chance that it will see the light of a carbon arc lamp. But in "B" films, even those concepts which seemingly go directly against the grain of public taste may find a home. Here are a few examples of directors and films that have generally been overlooked or underrated in most cinema histories.

Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), a film made for one of the cheapest Hollywood studios, Producers Releasing Corporation, on a budget of \$20,000 in six days, has long had a subterranean reputation as one of the most pungently effective melodramas of the 1940s school of *film noir*. But the film's cheap and unapologetic production has worked against it in most cinema histories, whereas Dick Powell's unconvincing Philip Marlowe films of the same period are invariably mentioned, simply because they have a higher production gloss. In *Detour*, Tom Neal's performance is often wooden and unconvincing, the interior sets are a few cheap hotel rooms and a run-down diner, and most of the rest of the film takes place in a cinematic twilight zone, as a cut-off car sits in front of a poorly focused rear-

projection machine which displays an endless ribbon of US Highway 66. And as it is, the film emerges as a bold charcoal sketch of a work in progress redeemed principally by its informing concept of American nightmare, and by Ann Savage's vitriolic performance as the female lead. Yet, do you think that the film would have been made otherwise? Probably not. And isn't it rather sad to speculate that the film might not exist at all, were it not for Ulmer's farsightedness, and his willingness to accept production circumstances that "A" directors would simply have sneered at? More to the point, most "A" directors wouldn't even have recognized that a film *could* be made in six days for \$20,000. Considering this, is it not a narrow and arbitrary view of cinema history to call Ulmer, as Sarris does, "one of the minor glories of the cinema"? Had the circumstances existed to produce *Detour* on an "A" budget, Ulmer undoubtedly would have done so. Certainly, he demonstrated that he was perfectly at home with a top-line production in Universal's 1935 film of *The Black Cat*. Yet *The Black Cat* is far more conventional and altogether less interesting, even with the use of "A" stars and a lavish budget, than even the slightest of Ulmer's PRC efforts. In fact, Ulmer quit Universal when they tried to loan him out to 20th Century Fox to direct a Shirley Temple picture, on purely aesthetic grounds: he simply didn't want to be swallowed up by the Hollywood Machine. Several years of poverty followed, as Ulmer directed black musicals and westerns, and even a few Yiddish musicals for good measure. He later described the working conditions on these independent films as "pitiful." Most of these films were made on budgets of \$6-10,000, in a few days, and the black films were shot after hours in Harlem cabarets on "short ends" of raw film stock, often running 100 feet (1 minute) or less in length. Yet Ulmer preferred working in such marginal circumstances on projects over which he exercised some control, rather than working for 20th or Universal on just another streamlined entertainment. When Ulmer found his home at PRC in 1943, he agreed to work for the studio on one condition: that he be allowed to make whatever films he wished, so long as he accepted the titles given to him by the marketing department, and brought the film in on time and on budget. This meant making films on a shoestring, but Ulmer wisely chose the physically compromised circumstances dictated by PRC over the aesthetic compromises dictated by Universal. Ulmer's resultant canon of work,

including such excellent films as *Isle of Forgotten Sins* (1943), *Girls in Chains* (1943), *Bluebeard* (1944), *Detour* (1945), *Strange Illusion* (1945), *Club Havana* (1945), *Her Sister's Secret* (1946), *Ruthless* (1948), and *The Naked Dawn* (1954), to name just a handful of Ulmer's more than forty feature films from 1929 to 1964, shows that he clearly understood the necessity of being true to his own vision, rather than subjugating himself to the Hollywood system. Despite their admittedly lurid titles, which were frankly designed to lure the more sensation-seeking patrons into the theatres, Ulmer's work emerges as a humanistic statement on a par with the films of Hawks, Fuller, Godard, or Brahm, although Ulmer's world is his alone. *Girls in Chains* for example, is a brutally incisive examination of the appalling conditions in women's prisons; *Bluebeard* offered John Carradine one of his few chances to play a lead, and made magnificent use of the Schüfftan process to evoke turn-of-the-century Paris; *Strange Illusion*, based on a screenplay by Fritz Rotter, is really a modern-dress version of *Hamlet*; *Club Havana* is an intriguing example of improvisation along the lines of *Grand Hotel*; and *Her Sister's Secret* can correctly be seen as an early feminist tract, at a time when a "woman's film" was considered by most to be something like *Back Street*. Ulmer's films, then, emerge as cohesive, cumulative personal statements, despite all the constraints forced upon him by PRC's uncertain economic structures. Nor is Ulmer an isolated case.

When Val Lewton was producing his beautiful group of sensitive, evocative Gothic films for RKO, he had only one critical champion: James Agee. Agee even went so far as to call Lewton "the most original filmmaker working in America today." As with Ulmer, Lewton saw that he could never have a free hand working in the "A" unit at any major studio, and after an apprenticeship at Selznick, he accepted an offer from RKO to produce a series of low-budget "horror" films that were to radically alter the history of Gothic Cinema. Left alone with budgets of \$70-100,000, and shooting schedules of 18-24 days, Lewton's bosses cared little what he shot, as long as it lasted slightly over an hour, and could be exploited with a grisly title and appropriately sensationalistic graphics. Compare this relative freedom, for example, to the interference that Orson Welles put up with on all of his films save *Citizen Kane* (in itself a potpourri of "B" movie techniques, pushed to their flashiest, most superficial extreme), and Lewton's line of reasoning

becomes clear and salutary.

Three of Lewton's most memorable productions were directed by Jacques Tourneur. Tourneur's career is a truncated one; starting out with a few small films in France, Tourneur came to the U.S. in 1937, and by 1939 was doing excellent work on *Nick Carter, Master Detective* for MGM. MGM dropped Tourneur, however, and he went over to RKO's "B" Unit, where he met Lewton. It is for this period that Tourneur is best remembered, as director of the Lewton classics *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) and *The Leopard Man* (1943). Because of his work on Lewton's small pictures, RKO promoted Tourneur to "A" pictures, and except for *Out of the Past* (1947), one of the definitive "noir" films, Tourneur's career slid downhill. Too late, Tourneur recognized that he was essentially a gothic filmmaker, and he created one last quietly successful little film before throwing in the towel: *Curse of the Demon* (1958), a film that owes much to Lewton style, and which was unfortunately marred by cutting room interferences from the distributors. When American International gave Tourneur ten days to direct *Comedy of Terrors* in 1963, the director simply did not have the stamina to rise to the challenge of such a short shooting schedule, and this film, as well as *War Gods of the Deep* (1965), are the work of someone who has obviously given up. If only Lewton and Tourneur had stayed together, rather than both being lured into the supposed freedom of "A" films by the societal pressures of Hollywood, Tourneur's career would probably have been longer, more prolific, and more distinguished.

William Beaudine deserves mention, if only as one of the most prolific directors in Hollywood history, with more than 150 feature films to his credit between 1929 and 1966 alone; this figure does not include Beaudine's silent films. Beaudine's style is so utilitarian that it almost recalls the minimalistic insistence of Jean Marie-Straub, Andy Warhol, or Wesley E. Barry's *Creation of the Humanoids* (1962). In his earlier films in Great Britain and his first films for Warner Brothers/First National (*Penrod and Sam* [1931], particularly) Beaudine *tried* to move the camera around a bit, and relied on heavy intercutting of static set-ups to generate any excitement within a scene. But Beaudine never, *ever* went over schedule or over budget, and by his own admission cared little, if anything, for the films he was assigned to direct. The famous story is told of a Monogram executive rushing on to the set of one of Beaudine's programmers,

breathlessly demanding to know when the film would be finished. "You mean there's someone out there *waiting* for this?!!!" Beaudine demanded incredulously, and this pretty much gives one an indication as to why Beaudine's style, what there was of it, deteriorated completely in the early 1940s with such films as *Detective Kitty O'Day* (1944) and *Oh, What a Night* (1944).

His better films, *Voodoo Man* (1944) and *The Face of Marble* (1946), develop the true late-Beaudine style: the camera simply gazes at the actors in somnolent stupefaction, unhurried, disinterested, never using two shots to get what can be done in one. *The Face of Marble* has interminable sequences of John Carradine and Robert Shane eating breakfast in completely flat two-shot; but when the film gets cooking in the "Mad Lab" sequences, there is a certain power in Beaudine's monotonal, detached style.

Ford Beebe is better known for his work in serials, where he directed only action (the dialogue sequences in most serials were done by a second director). *The Night Monster* (1942) remains the most curious and resonant of Beebe's features, with an outrageous plot, and a cast that includes Nat Pendleton, Bela Lugosi, Nils Asther, Don Porter, Ralph Morgan, Leif Erickson, Frank Reicher, and Lionel Atwill. Even as an action director, Beebe never approached the heights of William Witney or John English in their best Republic serials. However, Beebe worked for Universal's serial department, one of the cheapest in the industry, and perhaps this explains things. *Don Winslow of the Navy* (1941) is the director's most effective chapter-play, although it is marred by too much stock footage and unconvincing miniature work.

The agreeable Charles Barton is remembered for his contribution to many of the best of the Abbott and Costello films, including the most restrained and unusual of all their Universal vehicles, the historical fantasy/romance *The Time of Their Lives* (1946). In addition, Barton did a creditable job on *Island of Doomed Men* (1940), an interesting Columbia "B" gothic, and the programmers *Phantom Submarine* (1941) and *Tramp, Tramp, Tramp* (1942). However, it was *Reveille with Beverly* (1943) that really brought Barton into his own. The film is a flimsily-plotted musical much in the style of Richard Lester's later *Hard Day's Night* (1964): endless optical effects, flashy and aggressive in its visual styling. The film led to the routine *Louisiana Hayride* (1944), which nevertheless introduced Barton to Abbott and Costello. *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*

(1948) is certainly Barton's most lavishly mounted production, and even though it would have been easy to turn in a routine horror comedy, simply letting Lugosi, Glenn Strange and Lenore Aubert walk through their roles, Barton demonstrated a great deal of affection and understanding for iconographic conventions of the horror film, and let the monsters play it straight.

Spencer Gordon Bennet is, without a doubt, one of the best serial action directors. He made dozens of top-notch action/western serials for Republic, and incidentally has the dubious distinction of having directed the very last serial ever made, 1956's *Blazing the Overland Trail* (Columbia). Bennet's style incorporated frenzied dollies with outrageously collisionary crosscutting, and he had the knack of making his sets look real and inhabited, as opposed to the obvious fakeness one sees in Beaudine's set-ups. Bennet was first and foremost a craftsman, who worked well with the Lydecker Brothers, Howard and Theodore, who supervised all the miniatures and on-set special effects (explosions, fights) for Republic, as well as having the confidence and support of his stunt men (indispensable in a serial), Dale Van Sickel, David Sharpe and Fred Graham, among others. Bennet planned every set-up in the manner of Hitchcock's storyboards, and when he got on the studio floor, he knew exactly what he wanted. The resultant high-tech, high-gloss imagery (so ably photographed by such Republic cameramen as Reggie Lanning and Bud Thackery) was perfectly lit, dressed, and composed, so that the inevitable destruction which occurs in every Bennet serial—usually as the protagonists "duke it out" in a particularly lavish, expensive-looking setting—is exciting, believable, and involves the audiences in every move. Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* series owes much to Bennet, as I'm sure Spielberg himself would be the first to admit.

Edward L. Cahn was in the most prolific period of his long career when he died in 1963. In 1961, Cahn made eleven features. In 1962, before illness prevented him from continuing work (he was an invalid for most of 1962), he completed five features, and would undoubtedly have continued on at this pace if he'd lived. Much of Cahn's work is very, very good: at his best, he manages to transcend his tawdry surroundings and create films of quiet, assured resonance. *The Four Skulls of Jonathan Drake* (1959) is my own personal favorite of Cahn's work, and the film moves with a certain awful, deliberate grace. Cahn's shots are always meticulously lit, and his cutting manages

to create an astonishing fluidity between static set-ups (Cahn's favorite mode of shooting). When it should move, Cahn manages to invest his camera with an almost supernatural grace. His films have lately proven to be fertile material for big-budget remakes: Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is a reworking of Cahn's *It! Terror from Beyond Space* (1958). Along with Roger Corman and Nicholas Ray, Cahn pioneered the "teenage rebel" film cycle of the 1950s, in such films as *Dragstrip Girl* (1957) and *Motorcycle Gang* (1957). Long in favor with aficionados of the action/horror film, Cahn was so characteristically modest about his work that a real reappraisal of his films is definitely in order.

William Castle is a curiously complex figure who didn't come into his own until 1955, after many years of apprenticeship at Columbia under Harry Cohn. Castle started out directing episodes in *The Whistler* series from 1944 through 1945, all of which starred Richard Dix. Castle's work in these twist-ended thrillers is adroit and largely successful. Episodes of other series followed, and a loan out to Monogram to direct *When Strangers Marry* (also known as *Betrayed*, 1944), a film which has acquired a certain *maudit* status (thanks largely to laudatory reviews by Orson Welles). In 1946, Castle became Welles' associate producer on *Lady from Shanghai*, and in 1951 left Columbia for Universal. Finally, Castle mortgaged his house and made *Macabre* (1958), a cheap little horror film starring Jim Backus and William Prince, with an extremely bizarre scenario adapted for the screen by Robb White. To publicize the film, Castle persuaded Lloyd's of London to pay \$1,000 to any patron who died of fright while watching *Macabre*, and Castle's career was truly launched.

Macabre's production and distribution stamped Castle with two labels that would stick with him for the rest of his life: horror director, and showman extraordinaire. Castle followed *Macabre* with *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), *The Tingler* (1959), *Homicidal* (1961), and many other films, all of them presented with lurid, shamelessly aggressive ad campaigns and gimmicks to lure people into the theatres. At first he released his independent productions through Allied Artists, but with the success of *House on Haunted Hill*, still one of the screen's most memorable ghost stories, he moved to Columbia, then Universal, and finally Paramount. In many ways, Castle's true achievement as a director is almost totally obscured by his often clownish tactics as a salesman, and, as in the case of Edward L. Cahn,

Castle needs to be examined by a new generation of viewers. This is already taking place: the Thalia theatre in New York City ran a Castle retrospective in the spring of 1983.

Probably the most important director of "B" films, along with Edgar Ulmer, Roger Corman put his stamp on an entire generation of moviemakers, including such later luminaries as Francis Ford Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich, Jack Nicholson, Monte Hellman, Dennis Hopper, Bruce Clark, and many other writers, directors and actors. Corman's films in the early 1950s betray a total impatience with accepted standards of physical representation on a movie set. Cheap, hastily executed, clumsily scripted, atrociously acted, shot with haste and hubris, Corman's early American-International films are still influencing exploitation and action films to the present day. His early successes include *The Shop of Horrors* (1960), *The Day the World Ended* (1955), *Not of This Earth* (1957), *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), *Teenage Doll* (1957), and *Machine Gun Kelly* (1958), before he became involved in the Edgar Allan Poe series with Vincent Price. Corman's Poe cycle in the early 1960s, including *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960), and *Tales of Terror* (1962), remains the most stylish series of Gothic Films since the 1930s and 40s at Universal, along with Hammer's 1959-1964 period in England under directors Terence Fisher, Freddie Francis, Don Sharp, and John Gilling. Corman's final period as a social critic in *The Wild Angels* (1966), *The Trip* (1967) and *Von Richtofen and Brown* (1971) served as the genesis for several sprawling epics of the mid-1970s, including Coppola's *Godfather* series.

Much has been written about Corman, particularly Will and Willeman's excellent monograph, *Roger Corman: The Millenic Vision* (Edinburgh Film Festival), and Ed Naha's more "popular" study, *The Films of Roger Corman* (Arco). The reader is directed to these volumes for further information on Corman's life and work. Corman hasn't worked as a director since 1971, simply because he got tired of it, and has certainly reduced the scale of his work in executive production, having sold his company, New World Pictures, for \$20.5 million in 1983. His new production/distribution companies, Concorde and New Horizons, have yet to make a decisive impact upon the industry.

Max Nosseck, like Fritz Lang, a German who fled his native country in 1933 rather than work for the Nazis, showed himself to best advantage in PRC's *Gambling Daughters* (1941), Monogram's

Dillinger (1945) (produced by the King Brothers), and RKO's *The Brighton Strangler* (1945). Both *Dillinger* and *The Brighton Strangler* operate in a convincingly violent atmosphere, although it should be noted that Nosseck simply lifted ten minutes from Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) to spice up a bank robbery scene in *Dillinger*. *The Brighton Strangler* is more effective, boasting the best production values of any Nosseck film to that date, and a strong performance in the lead by John Loder: the film was later remade as *A Double Life* with Ronald Colman. The film for which Nosseck is best known, however, is *Black Beauty* (1946), and it was also the film he liked least; following Ulmer's lead, Nosseck went to Eagle-Lion (which had absorbed PRC in 1947) to produce pictures more to his liking, and pretty much wrote himself out of the industry.

William Witney directed Westerns, and a lot of serials as well. Perhaps his most successful serial is *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941), which he co-directed with John English. Working almost exclusively for Republic, he specialized in action and stunt direction, eventually making many of the Roy Rogers films. But he could just as easily have taken on a Beach Party musical as in the AIP-derived *Girls on the Beach* (1965). When Republic closed down production in 1958, Witney went over to AIP to direct *The Bonnie Parker Story* (1958) (remade by Arthur Penn a decade later as *Bonnie and Clyde*), *The Cool and the Crazy* (1958) and *Paratroop Command* (1959). Still alive, his last film was in 1975, and while *Darktown Strutters* (*Get Down and Boogie*), a New World exploitation film, leaves much to be desired from a dramatic viewpoint, Witney's action sequences are as sharp as ever.

Nor does the list end there. Don Seigel, now revered as one of the most influential of 50s action filmmakers, made his prescient *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* for Allied Artists on a shoestring budget. Philip Kaufman's later remake of the film (which featured Seigel in an embarrassing cameo as a cab driver) proved that a glossy, big budget production could do little to improve upon the film's original intent. Director Samuel Newfield, one of the workhorses of low-budget Hollywood production in the 1940s, tackled themes of juvenile delinquency and parental responsibility in *I Accuse My Parents* (1944), made for PRC in 5 days on a budget of \$30-40,000. Similarly, low-budget black musicals of the late 1930s and early 1940s preserved and protected, albeit in circumstances of grinding poverty, many

priceless performances from such black jazz artists as Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, and others. None of these productions had optimal production circumstances: far from it. As I mentioned earlier, Edgar Ulmer stated that many of his musicals had been shot at various nightclubs throughout Harlem (including the now-enshrined Cotton Club) at 2 and 3 in the morning, after the paying customers had left, on rolls of film that averaged less than 100 feet each. Because of this, Ulmer was forced to film his musical numbers in short bursts of less than sixty seconds, and then pick up the sound and the image with the next piece. The resultant disjointedness of the film is then directly traceable to the poverty-stricken economic circumstances of the production, rather than to any lack of skill on the part of the cast, crew, or performers. It is, in fact, meaningless to criticize these films for their technical flaws, even when they encroach on the material being presented. The only other alternative was not to make the film at all. This is the central dilemma facing the best "B" films.

One can easily name a dozen or so currently appreciated Hollywood directors who came up through the ranks of "B" production: Seigel, Peckinpah, Siodmak, Florey, and others come instantly to mind. But what of those directors whose films have yet to be discovered, because most academicians simply carry forward the meager research which has been done to date? If one has only fifteen weeks in the semester to screen films, and runs a double-bill for each screening, one speaks of only thirty films during the course of that semester, and the tendency to let the curricula ossify becomes readily apparent. This leads to a duplication of film course offerings, with all film courses offering essentially the same abbreviated, and artificially narrow, overview of film history. It also discourages further exploration of previously unshown films. The film historian William K. Everson, who lectures at the New School of Social Research in New York, regularly teaches the more "obscure" classics, on the grounds that those films which are better known to general audiences will receive an adequate hearing elsewhere. Everson's contention is correct, and his screenings have a liveliness about them lacking in many entombed presentations of film's collective past. Further, Everson embraces those films which are not generally shown in order to allow the current public to make up their own minds about the works being presented, rather than relying on reviews, recollections, or sweeping

generalizations of decades worth of work to replace the films being considered.

If one is simply content to repeat the past, then film history does become static. But the more one examines alternative touchstones of filmic history, the more one becomes aware that the arbitrarily selected films used in most film history courses offer only one *version* of cinematic history. This conception of established classics limits, confines, and ultimately strangles further research in film, based as it is upon "A" films almost exclusively, and those few "A" films like Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, which condescendingly slum into "B" territory. Yet a more carefully considered selection of films to convey the feeling and concerns of a period must inevitably embrace films such as Christy Cabanne's *World Gone Mad*, or Michael Gordon's *An Act of Murder*, or Freddie Francis's *Nightmare*, or the early films of Roger Corman (*Sorority Girl*, *Teenage Doll*, *Rock All Night*). These films speak honestly and unashamedly of the world in which they were created, and of the audience that they hope to reach, without the gloss that seemingly permits a film like Edmund Goulding's *Nightmare Alley* to have it both ways. To condemn them from the outset simply because of their physical shortcomings is nothing less than an act of critical myopia, and ignores the past as well as the

present, and future, of film. These films inform the current wave of filmmaking, even as the current wave of exploitation films (*Cobra*, *Pretty in Pink*, *Top Gun*, and others) will lead to new ground breaking in the area of popular filmmaking. The thirties are not only *Public Enemy* and *Golddiggers of 1933*; they are also *Wild Boys of the Road* and *White Zombie*. The forties gave us *Casablanca*, but they also contain *Detour*, *Club Havana*, *Strange Illusion*, and *Her Sister's Secret*. And the fifties contain both *Forbidden Planet* and *Invaders from Mars* (the latter recently remade with uneven results by Tobe Hooper in 1986). These comparatively forgotten films, which spoke so urgently to contemporary audiences, have something to tell us of their time and mores, if we will only view them, as Orson Welles suggested, on their own terms.¹□

¹This article contains some material from Wheeler Winston Dixon's *The "B" Directors: A Biographical Directory*, published by The Scarecrow Press. This material is copyright © 1985 Wheeler Winston Dixon. All Rights Reserved.

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Sara Speidel
Robert Brinkley

NARRATIVE MIMICRY: *CITIZEN KANE*
AND THE FUNCTION OF THE GAZE

When we see the hero for the last time near the end of *Citizen Kane*, he appears as a series of reflections. Kane moves through the foreground of the shot, and mirrors on either side duplicate his image an indefinite number of times. The Welles-Mankiewicz shooting script envisioned a moment when Kane would turn and face his mirror image. In the film itself, however, the sequence of reflections confronts the viewer but not the hero. Without looking into the mirror, Kane exits to the right of the frame, emptying the film of his image. Only the vacant mirror remains, and the camera advances slightly toward it as the shot dissolves. In the shooting script, a moment of self-observation engages viewers in the mystery of Kane's identity. In the filmed sequence, on the other hand, the proliferation and disappearance of Kane's reflections in the mirror disengage us from an imaginary search—from attempting to answer the question, "Who is Kane?"—and focus our attention instead on the reproduction of his image—on what the film does.

Bruce F. Kawin suggests that the mystery of Kane's character is "inseparable from the [film's] narrative structure."¹ Presented as a search for the meaning of a word, *Citizen Kane* considers multiple narrative versions of the hero on the assumption that when we discover what "Rosebud" signifies, we will also discover Kane's true identity. Yet the search does not produce Kane, only the problem of representing him, as it both encourages and frustrates attempts to read the film in terms of its hero. Welles remarked at the time of *Kane's* release, "the point of the picture is not so much the solution of the problem as its presentation."² Thus Kawin's statement about the mystery of *Citizen Kane* is true only for one of

the modes of narrative we find in the film. Alongside the narrative structure which generates the enigma of Kane, co-extensive yet pointing beyond it, is another narrative mode that focuses not on the mystery but on its production.

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"Cinema should be, above all, film," Welles observes: "[T]he artist should explore his means of expression."³ A juxtaposition of the scripted and filmed versions of the mirror sequence can provide an initial text for discussing what is at stake when the work of representation is displayed. The shooting script calls for a traditional staging in which film functions as an imaginary mirror, inviting our participation in the illusions it produces:

Kane sees himself in the mirror—stops. His image is reflected again and again in the mirror behind him—multiplied again and again in long perspectives—Kane looks. We see a thousand Kanes.⁴

If this were the scene Welles had filmed, we would tend to identify with Kane as he faces his reflection in the mirror. Like the child in the mirror stage, whose identification with a reflected image enables it to stage a world of objects in which the "I" is the central actor, the audience would attempt to read an infinite regress of mirror images in relation to the hero, as representations of the "real" Kane who remains inaccessible to us.⁵ Within the context of the narrative, this reading would recall unanswered questions about Kane's character and prolong the

¹Bruce Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-Person Film* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978) 25.

²Orson Welles, "Citizen Kane is Not Louella Parsons' Boss," *Focus on Citizen Kane*, ed. Ronald Gottesman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1967) 68.

³Juan Cobos, Miguel Rubio, and J.A. Pruneda, "A Trip to Don Quixoteland: Conversations with Orson Welles," *Focus on Citizen Kane* 11.

⁴Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles, "The Shooting Script for *Citizen Kane* (dated July 16, 1940)," *The Citizen Kane Book* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971) 285.

mystery which the narrative structure had generated.

If Welles had followed the shooting script, it would have been tempting to regard the endless series of reflections as the film's depiction of its narrative search. The multiple reflections in the mirror would reproduce the multiple narrative versions of Kane (in the mirror these versions appear as repetitions of the same image; of importance is not the narrative variation but the multiplication of the image *per se*). These narrative accounts overlap in a kind of montage, each providing a different view of the hero. None adequately answers the questions raised by the reporter's investigation, however, and if we participate in the search, we discover that any interpretation we produce can never be more than another in a potentially unlimited series of narrative versions. The problem of locating the hero in this montage (which, unlike Eisenstein's, works more toward the deconstruction than the construction of an idea) is all we might find depicted in the mirror sequence if it had been filmed as scripted. Even in its self-reflexive function—as a moment in which the film refers to its own problem of representing Kane—the exclusive concern of the scripted sequence remains the drama of the imaginary scene, the effects of the scene of representation rather than the material from which the scene is produced. In pointing to the limits of the film's power to portray its hero, the scripted sequence continues to engage us in the problem of representing him. As the hero stands before the mystery of his identity, the *mise en scène* becomes a *mise en abyme*, the "centreless" labyrinth that Borges describes in his essay on the film: "[N]othing is more frightening than a centreless labyrinth. This film is just that labyrinth."⁶ Such a deconstructive reading reflects the hollowness many viewers detect in the film, the sense that it is a code without a content. What a deconstructive reading finds in the *mise en abyme* is the absence of any referent: "In this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference . . . does exist . . . [b]ut it is a difference without reference, or rather a reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no

⁶See Jacques Lacan, "The mirror as formative of the function of the I," *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 1-7.

⁷Jorge Luis Borges, "Citizen Kane," *Focus on Citizen Kane* 127.

flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth, or presence."⁷ This may well be what the search film in *Kane* discovers and what the scripted mirror scene would have depicted: Kane's absence, the hero as phantom. Such a reading seems inadequate when applied to the film itself, however, because the film leads us to the absence of any referent only if we restrict the range of reference to that which a sign can represent.

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Welles does not regard the labyrinth as frightening, but as an opportunity, a particular "manner of saying things" that is an effect of the camera's intervention. Commenting on the "visual obsession" of his films, he explains that "they are based not so much on pursuit as on a search. If we are looking for something, the labyrinth is the most favorable location. . . . I do not know why, but my films are all for the most part a physical search" (Cobos, Rubio, and Pruneda 9). The labyrinth becomes the most favorable place to look for something when the point is the presentation, not the resolution, of the search. In the film, the mirror sequence suggests an alternative to reading *Citizen Kane* either representationally or deconstructively, in terms of its central character. Kane does not gaze into the mirror, and the scene of representation does not represent itself. Our interest is displaced from the metaphysical search for Kane's identity onto the physical mechanism of the mirror—by extension, the mechanism of the film itself—which produces the hero as a series of images.

As Kane walks down a hallway in Xanadu, the camera pans slowly to the right, leaving him behind. It stops when it reaches the mirror. This mirror reflects another mirror behind the camera, and for a moment, both mirrors are empty. For a moment the hero is missing. When he reenters the frame, he appears first as a series of images in the mirror and only subsequently in the hallway, as if he were another in the series of his reflections. As he walks past, looking straight ahead, images of Kane multiply, then disappear when he exits from the frame. Only the vacant mirror remains, and the camera moves slowly forward until the frame of the mirror becomes the frame of the screen.

⁸Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981) 206.

Unlike the scripted sequence, this mirror sequence does not draw viewers into an imaginary identification with its hero. Instead, we are intensely aware of Kane as an object of the camera's gaze—as someone who is filmed. Any opposition between the man and his images is lacking. In the absence of a subordination of image to "reality," the entire scene flattens out, just as the shot flattens out when Kane disappears offscreen and the camera focuses in on the mirror's two-dimensional surface. In the script, the mirror is a stage prop, and if the film had followed the script, the result would have been another sequence shot, a scene in which the viewer determines the relationships among objects that are viewed simultaneously—precisely as in the theater.⁸ As filmed, however, the theatrical scene is transformed into a sequence of images; the mirror/stage becomes the unreflecting surface of a film.

Becoming a film, the mirror makes us conscious of the material from which the film is produced. The two-dimensional quality of the mirror calls attention to the physical nature of the filmstrip: if we were to look at this scene as it is printed on the filmstrip, we would see a sequence of images similar to the ones we see in the mirror. The camera's movement toward the empty surface of the mirror not only alerts us to its role in creating an illusion of depth but points to a moment when we were absent, the moment when the image was recorded on film. Christian Metz has suggested that what we see when we watch a film is not the object itself but its image, "its shade, phantom, double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror," and *Kane* reminds us of the absence of the cinematic object.⁹ It reminds us that there is a discontinuity—both temporal and spatial—between the filming of the object and our perception of the image. If classical codes of cinematic representation tend to mask this discontinuity in order to maintain a realistic illusion, then, by pointing it out, the mirror sequence in *Citizen Kane* changes our relationship to film and to the images it produces.

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Theatricality and representation—far from having to

⁸See André Bazin, *Orson Welles*, trans. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York: Harper, 1978) 67-82.

⁹Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. C. Britton, A. Williams, B. Brewster, and A. Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982) 45.

be regarded as a given of libidinal existence, a fortiori metaphysical, result from a certain work on the labyrinthine and moebian band [the film], work that imprints those special folds and refoldings whose effect is a box closed in on itself, filtering impulses and allowing to appear onstage only those which, coming from what will henceforth be called the exterior, satisfy the conditions of the interiority.

—Jean François Lyotard¹⁰

According to Lyotard, narrative cinema traditionally involves a presentation of film as "theater"—a term Lyotard uses to designate the effects of the work of representation. Theatrical cinema is determined by a law of exchange, in which film is valued for what it represents rather than for the forces that have produced it. The theatrical scene—action in a three-dimensional



space—occupies the consciousness of the viewer; of the film itself—the moving transparency through which a projector bulb shines—the audience in general remains unconscious.¹¹ To the extent that the exchange does not occur (we become aware of film as film), or to the extent we are aware of the process of exchange (we become conscious of film becoming theater), the potential for imaginary identification is disrupted. In *Citizen Kane*, Welles blocks the exchange of film for theater by displaying the discontinuity between the two modes: the theatrical or representational which the film plays at producing, and the work of cinematic production which it indexes.

The notion of the indexical in film criticism has normally been restricted to an application of

¹⁰Jean-François Lyotard, *Economie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974) 11.

¹¹Jean-François Lyotard, "L'acinéma," *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: UGE, 1973) 53.

Peirce's discussion of photography. According to Peirce, photographs are indices—signs “by physical connection”—because they have been “produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature.”¹² This definition leads Peter Wollen, for example, to treat the indexical as that aspect of the iconic which makes it the “natural” sign for what it signifies.¹³ We have in mind a broader conception of indexical signification which would include film's reference to its status as a means of production—the kind of reference Wittgenstein describes when he says that a picture shows itself even while it represents something else.¹⁴ In *Citizen Kane*, Welles plays with the indexical status of the film image in a way that highlights the activity of production



over any sense that the “physical connection” of the photograph guarantees a representative or iconic relationship to nature. If anything, by marking the activity of production, the indexical calls the representative relationship into question. We are aware, not of how reality has imprinted itself on film, but how the cinema produces impressions of reality, how film itself is what is real.

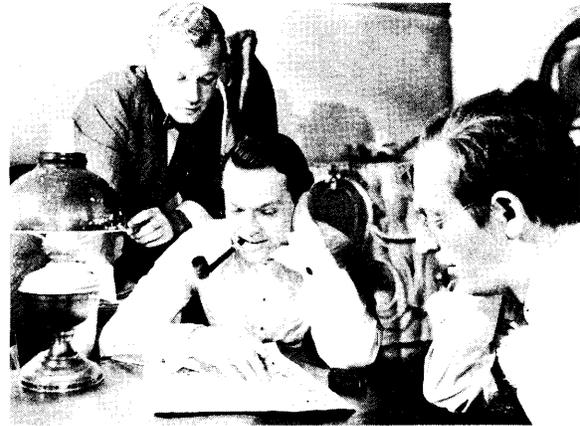
Peirce notes that unlike other signifiers an index remains a sign even when it is not recognized as such. Whereas symbols and icons

¹²Charles Sanders Peirce, *Elements of Logic*, in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960) 2: 159.

¹³Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972) 122-23.

¹⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1922) 41.

exist as part of an exchange of one sign for another—they create “an equivalent sign” or *interpretant* in the mind of the audience they address—an index does not require this exchange (Peirce 135). Unlike other signs, for which the referent is always imaginary, i.e., always another interpretant, an index involves the existence of its referent (Peirce 170). Iconic and symbolic signification produce a potentially infinite series of interpretations (“the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum”)—a production which in many ways resembles the search film in *Citizen Kane* (Peirce 169). The indexical signifies apart from this interpretive exchange because its character as a sign is constituted by an “existential relation” to its referent: “it would not lose that character if there



were no interpretant”; “a bullet-hole [is a] sign of a shot . . . whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not” (Peirce 170). But if an index remains a sign irrespective of the consciousness of an audience, to the extent that we become conscious of the indexical, we also become attuned to a mode of address that transforms our relationship to meaning. No longer searching for an object through endless interpretation, we discover instead the material referent which the indexical sign displays. Welles plays consistently, not only with the imaginary that the film represents, but with the imaginary that it *is* from the start, with the status of film images as signs of the intervention of a camera, whether anyone recognizes this or not.¹⁵

The mirror sequence is one of many moments in *Citizen Kane* where the camera produces a series of images which cannot be appropriated in the name of any identifiable subject. As Kane passes through the frame and the camera moves

¹⁵See Metz 44.

toward the surface of the empty mirror, we experience a moment of vertigo with the realization that this “cinematic subjectivity belongs properly to no one.”¹⁶ While the sequence is presented as part of the butler’s narrative, the camera does not seem to reflect his point of view; what is narrated seems to escape the framework that a narrator’s limited perspective provides. Other comparable moments include the shot of Kane’s sled as it is covered by snow—the conclusion of the sequence in which Kane’s mother sends him away to live with Thatcher.¹⁷ The shot occurs within the framework of Thatcher’s memoirs, yet does not necessarily correspond with his point of view. More likely, the perspective is the boy’s. But if the shot originates in Kane’s experience of leaving home, the narrated has again escaped the narrative framework; the camera has become “an independent expressive device.”¹⁸ In this breakdown of the relationship of narrator to narrated in which the camera can entertain both perspectives, can enact both without being restricted by either, the film presents us with a puzzle like that of Kane’s identity. Yet as we watch the snow cover the sled, our interest is displaced from the question of who produces the image onto the activity of production itself. As the camera rests on the disappearing sled that is the focus of the reporter’s search, the film indexes its production of *Rosebud* as an enigma.

The sled in this shot reminds us that the central problem of *Citizen Kane* is a problem of storytelling—a question not of Kane’s identity

but of its cinematic enactment. Thematically, this question is introduced in the screening room sequence, where the activity of making a film—of remaking Thompson’s film—is interpreted as a problem of finding a narrative perspective. When Thompson’s boss selects “Rosebud” as an “angle,” the project of filming a man’s story becomes defined as a search for “hidden” meaning, the probing of “internal” psychological depths.

This approach grows out of a dissatisfaction with the superficiality of the original newsreel (“It isn’t enough to tell us what a man did, you’ve got to tell us who he was”). A response to a failure of representation, the search for *Rosebud* leads in turn to a series of other failures. From the point of view of the problem of storytelling, Thompson’s documentary can be seen as an inadequate response to the opening sequence of *Citizen Kane*, to the disorientation that the camera produces as it moves over the gates, the grounds, and finally through walls of what will later be identified as Xanadu. Whose story is being told? By whom? The abrupt juxtaposition of the documentary with this opening sequence only increases our confusion; the first interpretable scene does not occur until the newsreel fizzles out and we find ourselves in the screening room.

Welles’ staging of the problem of narrative presentation in the screening room segment thus coincides with a gesture which reminds viewers that they have been watching a film. From the titles at the end of the newsreel, the camera cuts to a more distanced shot of the interior of the darkened room. We see the screen itself and, off to the right, the light from the projector. In the next shot, the projector light is extinguished, and the soundtrack becomes blurred before dying out completely. As we become accustomed to this new setting, we see the shadows of Thompson and his colleagues silhouetted against a beam of light streaming from the projection booth above. The primary elements of filmic expression become visible and audible in the stark contrast of light and shadow and in the soundtrack’s spluttering commentary on Thompson’s newsreel. We notice the material from which the imaginary is produced. Welles’ foregrounding of the medium of expression makes us conscious of our position as spectators of another film—Thompson’s—which exists within and alongside Welles’ film but is not identical to it. Similarly, in the transition from the Thatcher library to the famous boarding house sequence, Welles focuses on the material production of images to

¹⁶P. Bonitzer, “Les deux regards,” *Cahiers du Cinéma* 275 (1977): 41; as paraphrased by Elizabeth Bruss, “Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980) 309. Bruss observes that “where the rules of language designate a single source, film has instead a disparate group of distinct roles and separate stages of production. Even if a single individual should manage to be scriptwriter and director, cameraman, set designer, light and sound technician, and editor to boot . . . the result would be a *tour de force* and not the old, unquestionable integrity of the speaking subject. An auteur is never quite the same thing as an ‘author’ because of the changes film effects in the nature of authority itself” (304).

¹⁷See Leonard J. Leff, “Reading *Kane*,” *Film Quarterly* 39 (1985): 17.

¹⁸Welles, quoted by Jonathan Rosenbaum, “The Voice and the Eye: A Commentary on the ‘Heart of Darkness’ Script,” *Film Comment* 8 (1972): 27-32.

demonstrate the disjunction between his own method of cinematic narration and the search film. As Thompson reads Thatcher's memoirs, the camera follows the movement of his gaze in a close-up shot, panning slowly to the right across the surface of the written page. The two-dimensional surface gradually becomes a three-dimensional scene: black letters on a white page become a small black figure against a white background, which we subsequently recognize as Charles playing in the snow outside his mother's house. As the audience watches, patterns of light and dark become iconic; the content of a narrative emerges. We observe not only a narrated event but a mode of narration.

*

The display of the work of cinematic production in *Citizen Kane* resembles the mode of signification which Lacan calls mimicry, a signifying practice based not on substitution and exchange, but on "a gratuitous showing."¹⁹ Drawing on research in animal mimicry which suggests that various forms of camouflage are unrelated to the survival of an individual or a species, Lacan observes that mimicry is less an act of concealment than a response to being seen:²⁰ "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind. . . . It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled . . ." (*Four Concepts* 99). The cinematography of *Citizen Kane* involves a similar play with signifiers, the exercise of an image-making capacity independent of any prior logical construct. Welles narrates at the level of film itself—from the position of otherness that the theatrical cinema would silence—and this narrative gesture takes the form of an irrepressible mimicry, a pleasure in exposing the limits of the melodramatic search film, in pointing out an excess that the melodrama cannot represent.

Throughout *Citizen Kane*, Welles plays with established codes of cinematic narration, combining two modes of presentation and emphasizing the discontinuity between them. If

¹⁹Jacques Lacan, *The Four Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 76.

²⁰See *Four Concepts* 73f, where Lacan refers to Roger Caillois' *Méduse et compagnie*.

the film signifies the cinematic, it does so indexically, not representationally—signifies existentially, as Peirce would say, and "marks the junction between two portions of experience" (161). What the film's narrative indexes is distinct from the story it represents. According to Kawin, "each section of *Kane* is dominated by the *mind* of its narrator, each of whom presents an apparently third-person view of the world informed by a first-person bias" (44). This mixture of perspectives leaves the viewer with no stable point of identification in the film; identification with individual narrators has been precluded by the third-person perspective in which the narrator is both "object and mediator of our vision."²¹ In a similar way, Welles manipulates accepted codes of perspective to both encourage and discourage our identification with Thompson, who acts as our surrogate in the search for the dead hero's identity.²² Though we never get a clear view of the reporter, and his angle of vision frequently approximates our own, he is not identified with the camera. The camera pointedly demonstrates the limits of his point of view when it finds Kane's sled, the "missing piece" in the puzzle Thompson could not solve, only after he has exited from the film.

Uncertain of our relationship to individual narrators in *Citizen Kane*, we find that identifying with the camera—an identification the film encourages from the outset—has an even more radically destabilizing effect. The tendency in *Kane* criticism is to discover sources for shots whose status is ambiguous, to limit the camera's role to representing consciousness. For instance, David Bordwell dispels some of the mystery of the film's opening sequence by attributing the disjointed series of images to Kane, observing that "we enter Kane's consciousness as he dies, before we have even met him" (105). In a similar vein, Kawin treats the sequence as a flashback which represents the "mindscreen" or mental world of an unidentified narrator, perhaps of Kane himself (29). Leonard Leff proposes a new category, a disembodied "supra-narrator," to explain the origin of the opening sequence and shots of the sled (13, 17). But if the camera narrates, it no longer functions as a narrator, a dominant consciousness which controls the

²¹Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978) 160.

²²See David Bordwell, "*Citizen Kane*," *Focus on Orson Welles*, ed. Ronald Gottesman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1967) 110.

image. Instead, the camera's movements participate in a process of mimicry or gratuitous display unbounded by traditional notions of subjectivity. What is displayed is the productive capacity of the cinema, an ensemble of technical and signifying practices which exists prior to the appropriation of its images/stories by a narrating or perceiving consciousness.

As the camera moves forward and backward in space, passing through what appear to be substantial obstacles, dissolving the distinction between image and reality with constant shifts in framing, we engage a mobility free of the restrictions of the theatrical scene. Throughout the film variations of a forward tracking shot—often combined with dissolves—call attention to the camera's voyeurism.²³ When Thompson sets out on his assignment, the camera begins the search by penetrating an image: the billboard picture of Susan Alexander Kane and the neon sign which flashes her name. The camera moves through the sign, then through a skylight in the roof of the El Rancho nightclub, seeking out the person signified (an interpreter, but also another sign because she represents an aspect of Kane's life). This characteristic probing is played off against a complementary movement in which—by pulling back to expose the limits of the image we have been viewing—the camera adds to the viewer's anxiety and disequilibrium. In the opening sequence, a snowy landscape becomes the interior of a glass paperweight as the camera moves back to reveal the surface of the object. A scene turns out to be a miniature representation of a scene, an image in a sequence of images. Later, during Bernstein's reminiscence, what appears to be a photographic image of the *Chronicle* staff is transformed, as the camera draws back, into a scene of that staff—now at the *Inquirer*—posing for a photograph (being transformed, that is, into another photographic image).²⁴ In each case, a particular cinematic trick is marked.

What the camera discovers in *Citizen Kane* is never the "reality" behind the images. Our desire to read the film transparently, in terms of what it

represents, is simultaneously sustained and frustrated by camera movements which produce an illusion of depth and emphasize that production as an effect of the medium. When the impression of movement is clearly the result of lap dissolves—as in the opening and closing sequences—the apparent movement of the camera is revealed as the movement of film itself, i.e., still pictures in motion.²⁵ The film may create the impression that it has taken us through the protective barriers surrounding Xanadu, but it also displays the cinematic artifice that this impression involves. In the same way, the "real" Kane may appear to be hidden, but he does not exist except as the film produces him. Even as the subject of documentary, Kane is "only an image" (Bordwell 108). The "News on the March" sequence draws its material not from reality, but from the cinema. Along with some authentic newsreel footage, it is largely a collection of fragments from other films, set to a musical score which was compiled from materials in the RKO files.²⁶ Shots of Kane with Hitler and Theodore Roosevelt, rather than persuading us of the hero's historical existence, make us aware of how cinematic conventions can be manipulated to falsify reality, to create images which lack any real, extra-cinematic referents.

Adolf Hitler's appearance in the same frame with the actor/director/producer of *Citizen Kane* is an ominous reminder of the myth-making power of the media. Yet, by repeatedly calling attention to how images are being used, Welles subverts the production of myth—including the myth of Orson Welles as a master of deception. His own reputation as a skilled manipulator of audiences had been established by the *War of the Worlds* broadcast, and in a sense, this reputation is what got him to Hollywood in the first place. A practical joke, *War of the Worlds* was also a practical demonstration in how radio can be used to mislead its listeners. The reception of *War of the Worlds* revealed, on the one hand, the dangers of assuming that what lies outside an imaginary scene is the reality that scene represents, and on the other, that what actually lies beyond the scene

²³See James Naremore, *The Magic World of Orson Welles* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978) 69.

²⁴Kawin discusses this "dialectic between image and reality," but emphasizes its relationship to the problem of representation, rather than focusing on the way camera movement indexes the cinematic as that which exceeds theatrical representation (30).

²⁵See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Minuit, 1975) 137-38, for a brief discussion of "architecture" in Welles' films, which focuses on the interplay between infinite depths and unlimited lines of movement.

²⁶See Charles Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970) 14-15.

of representation are the forces, the energies, the signifying practices which produce it. Mimicking various techniques of radio broadcasting, Welles created a disorienting mixture of the "serious" (in the form of mock news reports) and the entertaining (consisting of "regular" programming and fictional narration). As *War of the Worlds* so clearly showed, the disconcerting side of his playfulness arises from a transgression of the boundaries which representation establishes between an area of reality on one side and an area of play and irresponsibility on the other.²⁷ Welles' double mode of storytelling in *Citizen Kane* involves a similar transgression, making fun of the illusions it produces. The frustration of being unable to discover "real" referents for the images in the film is only a



problem from the perspective of the search, and only if we take the search seriously. From the perspective of Welles' narrative mimicry, the film's production of the imaginary is exhilaratingly playful.²⁸

For example, if the search film takes Rosebud seriously, Welles describes it as a narrative gimmick, "the only way we could find to get

²⁷See "L'acinéma": "The *mise en scène* is not an 'artistic activity,' it is a general process that overtakes every field of activity, a profoundly unconscious process of deciding between, of exclusions and effacements. . . . [T]he work of the *mise en scène* is effected on two planes simultaneously, and it is this which is most enigmatic. On the one hand, this work basically means the separation of reality on the one side and an area of play on the other. . . . [O]n the other hand, for the function of representation to be assured, the work which stages must be . . . not only a work which places offstage [*met hors scène*], but also a work which unifies all the movements on both sides of the limit of the frame, which imposes the same norms here and there, in 'reality' as in the real, which establishes all impulses in parallel, and, as a consequence, excludes and effaces no less off stage than on. The references it imposes on the filmic object it necessarily imposes on all objects outside the film as well" (61-62).

off."²⁹ Near the end of the film, when the camera shows us Kane's sled, it also underscores the questionable value of this discovery. We watch the long sought-for object burn on a pile of rubbish. Apparently the joke has been on us and our attempts to represent the hero. As a sign of his identity, Rosebud is worthless because we cannot exchange it for the referent we expected, a full and coherent portrayal of Kane. It seems the sled was of value only to Kane (as the primordially lost symbol of the childhood he sought to recover), and Kane does not exist.³⁰ In Welles' hands, Rosebud turns out to be a plaything, a sign without value, an elaborate cinematic hoax.

But like the best jokes, this one is revealing. If the solution the film proposes is false because the



problem it solves is a false one, the point of the joke may be its presentation.³¹ Of significance in the revelation of Rosebud is not the sled itself, but the gesture of revelation as an enactment of

²⁸In her discussion of mimicry as a strategy for women writers, Luce Irigaray suggests that joking and laughter can be an initial step in escaping the repression of otherness; she reminds us "not to forget to laugh . . . not to forget that the dimension of desire, of pleasure is untranslatable, unrepresentable, irrecuperable in the 'seriousness' of a discourse that claims to state its meaning" (*This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985] 163).

²⁹Welles, quoted by Peter Bogdanovich, "The Kane Mutiny," *Focus on Orson Welles* 39.

³⁰Although a large supply of sleds were burned during the making of *Citizen Kane*, the sled itself has retained a curious value. Shortly before his death, Welles learned that Steven Spielberg had bought Rosebud for \$45,000. "'But,' I said, 'we burned the sled, Steven,'" Welles recalled, adding: "I was very pleased" (Interview, *NBC Today*, 1985).

cinematic possibilities. As the camera moves over Kane's countless possessions to rediscover Rosebud in the furnace, the shot dissolves into a closeup of the burning sled. The lettering that will reveal its identity has already been partially destroyed by the flames. A moment later, however, the lettering is restored, because cinematography can reverse time by running a shot backwards. The word "Rosebud" becomes legible as the fire burns in reverse.

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The cinema has no boundaries. It's a ribbon of dream.
—Welles³²

[F]ilm, on the one hand extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.

—Walter Benjamin³³

"What is marvelous about the cinema," Welles remarks, "what makes it superior to the theater is that it . . . offer[s] us a life impossible anywhere else" (Cobos, Rubio, and Pruneda 8). The apparent reversal of cause and effect in the burning of Rosebud is one of many gestures in *Citizen Kane* which affirm the existence of a "cinematic" logic beyond the limits of a discursive system based on hierarchical distinctions between subject and object, signifying and signified, film and theater. When film is no longer subordinated to the production of imaginary theater, the spectator's role is no longer restricted to reproducing the perspective of another. Welles' narrative strategies block the process of substitution sustained by the metaphysical assumption of a pre-existing consciousness

³¹Compare Bordwell: "The Rosebud sled solves the problem that Thompson has set—'A dying man's words should explain his life'—but by the end Thompson realizes that the problem was a false one: 'I don't think that any word can explain a man's life.' The appearance of the sled presents another perspective on Kane, but it doesn't explain him" (111).

³²Welles, quoted by Kenneth Tynan, in "Orson Welles," *Focus on Orson Welles* 22.

³³Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 236-37.

whose point of view camera and spectator duplicate by turns. When the camera no longer functions as an "I" or an eye, the visual field is reorganized along the lines of the "unconscious optics" which Walter Benjamin discovered in films.³⁴ Time and space alter their contours, as the mechanical intervention of the camera provides access to a dimension of experience inaccessible to consciousness alone. In this derealized context, the viewer is no longer the focal point from which vision emanates. The geometry of classical perspective, which reflects and reinforces the position of an observer, is supplanted by what Lacan defines as an optics of the gaze.

Differentiating between two functions that govern the subject's relationship to the visual field—the function of the eye and that of the gaze—Lacan notes that the latter is elided "in the so-called waking state" (*Four Concepts* 75):

In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze.
(73)

Lacan argues that the self-reflexive tradition of Western philosophy is predicated on an evasion of the function of the gaze and that this evasion involves a profound misunderstanding (*Four Concepts* 73-74). For it is the "gaze [which] circumscribes us and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at" (75). Prior to the punctiform vision for which the eye serves as a metaphor, there exists a given-to-be-seen: "what determines me at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside" (106). Prior to and beyond any identification with itself as the subject of consciousness, the subject exists in the field of the Other.³⁵ From the perspective

³⁴Compare Benjamin: "With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of the snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. So, too, slow motion not only presents familiar qualities of movement but reveals in them entirely unknown ones. . . . Even if one has a general knowledge of the way people walk, one knows nothing of a person's posture during the fractional second of a stride. . . . [T]he camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (236-37).

of the gaze, “that in which the consciousness may turn back upon itself—grasp itself . . . *as seeing oneself seeing oneself*—represents mere sleight of hand. An avoidance of the function of the gaze is at work there” (*Four Concepts* 74).

Because film lacks the self-reflexive capacity of language (it is impossible for someone behind the camera to be, simultaneously, the person who is filmed), and because, unlike theater, film cannot represent an actual viewing audience, it may be uniquely suited to manifesting the function of the gaze. Welles makes explicit film’s limitations as a mirror—its inability to reflect an image of the spectator’s “self”—in the mirror sequence in *Citizen Kane*. When the camera moves in toward the mirror, the audience is confronted with its own invisibility, its unrecognizability from the point of view of the film. As the mirror becomes a blank, unreflecting screen, we realize with a sense of dislocation that the film we are watching cannot see us. “We” are no longer there, at the point from which perspective is grasped.

Reflecting neither the spectator nor the camera, the mirror sequence in *Citizen Kane* provides no visual image of its audience. Yet, even though our reflection is lacking in the mirror, as it is elsewhere in *Citizen Kane*, we are not “absent” from the film. We no longer occupy the position of a subject of representation, no longer participate in the pre-defined relationship in which, as Christian Metz explains,

[I]t is always the other who is on the screen; . . . I am there to look at him. I take no part in the perceived, on the contrary, I am *all-perceiving*. . . . [A]bsent from the screen, [the spectator functions] as a pure act of perception: as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject anterior to every *there is*.

(48-49)

We exist, instead, as an effect of cinematic production. Describing this retrospective mode of existence as a “subjectivity released from the ostensible temporal and spatial integrity of the speaking subject,” Elizabeth Bruss remarks: “Such freedom, multiplicity and mobility could not occur without mechanical assistance. The cinematic subject cannot, then, precede the

³⁵“The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject—it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear” (*Four Concepts* 203).

cinematic apparatus” (319). Like the backward movement of the film in the sled-burning sequence, the mirror’s opacity reminds us of that other logic, the logic of mimicry in which effects produce, behind them, their own causes.

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One can own a mirror; does one then own the reflection that can be seen in it?

—Wittgenstein³⁶

For Lacan, the spontaneous, a-teleological display of animal mimicry indexes “the primal nature of the essence of the gaze” (*Four Concepts* 76). As a mode of gratuitous showing which playfully disorients the self-referential evasions of the subject, mimicry marks the junction between the imaginary scene and the field of the other. When we look at the coexistence and non-coincidence of the two films in *Kane*—the search film, and the film which produces, exceeds, laughs at the imaginary search—as a relationship of mimicry, we notice that Welles’ narrative strategy is reinforced by his acting style. As *Citizen Kane* mimes its melodramatic plot, Welles mimes the film’s melodramatic hero. Barbara Leaming points out that it was not Welles but William Randolph Hearst who identified with Kane: “as an actor Orson deliberately did not,” but “entirely distanced himself.”³⁷ Welles may have played with the possibilities of such identification less innocently than he has sometimes suggested, but for him Kane was finally a cipher. “The secret,” Welles recalls, is that “there was really no secret. . . . [Kane was a] hollow man” (Leaming 210).

Mimicry rephases the question that motivates the search film: *who is the hero?* becomes *who is the hero in relation to the cinema?* From the perspective of the film’s mimetic strategy, Kane exists in relation to the actor/director who produces him. As we watch Kane, we also see the young actor, Orson Welles, enacting a stereotype, enraging the society whose conventions become material for another of his practical jokes. In view of Welles’ recent death and the curious retrospectives this has produced in the popular

³⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Anscombe (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1970) 117.

³⁷Barbara Leaming, *Orson Welles: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1985) 210.

media, one begins to imagine that Welles also died at Xanadu. Yet his stance in *Citizen Kane* provides an alternative to the hero's. Welles' omnipresence in this and other films is not a gesture of egotism or of control but an exploration and expansion of cinema's storytelling potential. André Bazin, who admired *Citizen Kane* for its exemplary realism, also wanted to classify it as a tragedy (65). Perhaps we can regard Kane as a tragic hero as long as we forget that he exists on film. But if film constitutes the hero's unconscious, Welles demonstrates that it need not be ours.

An illusion himself, Kane is also a producer of illusions. Unlike Welles' productions, however, Kane's are rarely playful. With Xanadu in mind, Susan may accuse her husband of "making a joke out of everything," yet she realizes what Kane and Xanadu lack: "A person could go crazy in this dump," because there is "nobody to have any fun with." Like the other elements of Kane's personal myth, the unfinished Xanadu is part of a game of power and self-aggrandizement which reduces people to the status of useful material. Kane can push Susan, against her will, into the singing career he desires ("we're going to be a great opera star," he tells reporters), but he is remarkably unaware of the material he has to work with and of his own relationship to that material. Only when Susan's unmelodious screech fails to produce the desired effect does he confront the fact that he has not created an opera singer, but an unfortunate parody. Kane also discovers that he cannot force his friend Leland to write a face-saving review of Susan's performance. When Leland writes a negative review, which he leaves unfinished, Kane completes the piece himself. In a Wellesian gesture of mimicry, Kane momentarily assumes Leland's authorial persona and produces the other, undesired account of Susan's operatic debut. This gesture is immediately repudiated, however—the humor is lost—as Kane reasserts his control and fires the reviewer he mimicked ("He was always trying to prove something," Leland recalls).

Yet if Kane's attempt at mimicry quickly reverts to manipulation, his failure as an imitator reminds us again of Welles' success. The material of Susan's disastrous singing career—the hopeless voice, the amateurish acting, the false headlines—is not simply "something" Kane "is being funny about"; it is something that Welles is funny about as well. While Xanadu represents the hero's failure to realize what he imagines, Welles' Xanadu is an exercise in mimicry which

calls attention to the material from which it is made. Xanadu is an extended visual quotation, an assemblage of film clips, painted scenery, and sets from other movies, including *Gunga Din*, *Mary of Scotland*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. But Xanadu is only one of the failed productions in *Citizen Kane* at which Welles so entertainingly succeeds: the newsreel which is constructed precisely as Xanadu is constructed; the projected newsreel that Thompson never makes; Kane himself.

When Welles visited the RKO Studios for the first time, he remarked that it was "the biggest electric train set anybody ever had," and *Kane* is permeated with the energy and playfulness of Welles' discovery of filmmaking (Bazin 53). "The mechanics of movies are rarely as entertaining as they are in *Citizen Kane*," Pauline Kael notes.³⁸ It is the entertainment—the pleasure of making a film—which leads us to engage *Kane's* narrative as cinematic production. If certain conventions involve us in the imaginary as they lead us to search for the hero's reality, the mechanics of filmmaking consistently remind us how imaginary the real Kane is. At the conclusion of the film—after "The End" has appeared on the screen and the final composite shot of Xanadu has dissolved into the credits—the relationship of mimicry between actor and character is reaffirmed when the Mercury Theater cast is introduced. To a soundtrack that is no longer somber but playful, the credits replay scenes from the film. They do not consist of the names of "real" actors who are absent, *hors scène*; instead, we see each actor in character in a brief clip—an outtake, Leonard Leff notes—from the movie (19-20). Again we are addressed with a double discourse in which actor and character are present and speak simultaneously, indistinguishable but not identical. As outtakes, *Kane's* credits point beyond the closure of the film, reminding us of the unlimited potential for play and invention that can lead to the production of "other *Kanes*"—by the Mercury Company, perhaps by others as well (Leff 20).

We notice that Orson Welles is conspicuously absent from the film's final credits, as absent in his own way as Kane has been throughout the film. On the other hand, the producer/director/co-writer of *Citizen Kane* has been calling attention to himself throughout, reminding us in every shot of his involvement in all stages of filming. If Kane is absent because he is the referent which

³⁸Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane," *The Citizen Kane Book* 4.

an imaginary search would represent, Welles—who is never represented—is also never absent. While Kane exemplifies a failure to exist in the imaginary, Welles' pervasive existence in the film becomes an enactment of a new, unlimited invention.³⁹ When the hero walks down the

³⁹See Richard T. Jameson's discussion of the credits for *The Magnificent Ambersons* in "An Infinity of Mirrors," *Focus on Orson Welles* 83-84: Welles introduces those "who made the film" while their machines are pictured on screen—"camera, sound meters, editing spools," the machines that have made the film possible. "The facelessness of the machinery really expresses one face of Orson Welles. He is the true protagonist of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and of every film he has ever made."

hallway in the mirror sequence, he remains oblivious to the production of his reflections. Yet if we watch carefully, we may also notice that the actor's head is turned slightly toward us, that he is watching the camera out of the corner of his eye. We say "the actor," because it does not seem to be Kane but Welles who notices the camera as it films him in character. Unlike Kane, Welles is never unaware of the film: behind or in front of the camera, his strategy of mimicry points to a mode of existence impossible anywhere else.□

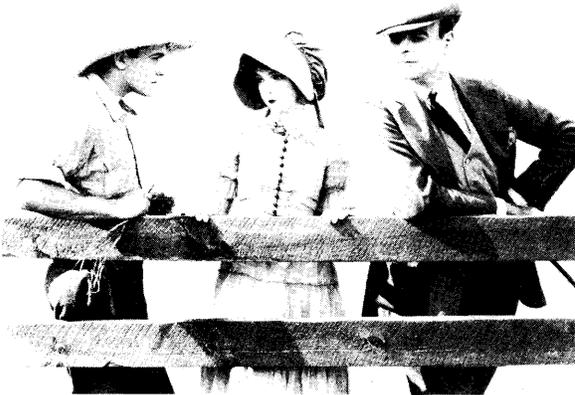
Sara Speidel is completing a dissertation on Virginia Woolf.

Bert Cardullo

WAY DOWN EAST: PLAY AND FILM

In his book *Dynamics of Drama*, Bernard Beckerman distinguishes between “plot,” which “signifies the sequence of events, or incidents, in a play,” and “story,” which “designate[s] all incidents and activities that occur before, after, and during the play, onstage and offstage.”¹ In *Way Down East* (1920), D. W. Griffith tells the story that occurs before the play of the same name, by Lottie Blair Parker, Joseph R. Grismer, and William A. Brady, in addition to recounting the plot. I would like to consider Griffith’s possible reasons for telling Anna Moore’s entire story chronologically, and to examine his adaptation of dramatic techniques to film.

It should not be overlooked that *Way Down East* was made during the silent era. That is, even if



the director had wanted simply to film the play as it stood, he would have been unable to do so without the heavy use of titles. Naturally, Anna’s past is revealed through dialogue in the play, which begins when she arrives at Squire Bartlett’s farm in Maine looking for work, after her baby has died and she has been evicted from the rooming house. Lennox Sanderson, who had seduced her in Boston, is staying at his country estate nearby; his visit to the Bartlett place provokes the drama. Griffith must tell Anna’s story from the beginning through pictures (and

the discreet use of titles). Beyond this, he uses nature to evoke characters’ inner states where the drama would use, for instance, the soliloquy; and he uses nature as a silent but expressive character. Two examples are the scene of Anna walking down a country road after her eviction and the one of her meeting with David, the squire’s son, near a falls. In the former, a long shot, the environment underlines Anna’s desolation by seeming to overwhelm her, a tiny figure by contrast who becomes even smaller as she walks away from the camera. In the latter, the gleaming, tranquil river reflects the couple’s contentment, while the falls that pours into it is a representation of the passion surging inside them.

The sources of tension in the play *Way Down*



East are the gradual revelation of Anna’s secret and the definition of her relationship with Sanderson. These tensions disappear in the film because we follow her from her first meeting with him, after she has arrived in Boston from the country to visit a rich aunt. Perhaps believing that an equivalent of dramatic suspense would be necessary to hold the audience’s interest in his chronological tale of Anna’s ordeal, Griffith creates tension in the first half of the film, before his heroine leaves Boston, through visual means as well as creating literal visual tension. The first type is produced when, several times, a scene from life on Squire Bartlett’s farm is inserted into the action. We do not know that this is where

¹Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama: Theory and Method of Analysis* (1970; New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979) 171.

Anna will eventually seek refuge and find salvation through David; we look forward to an explanation of the farm's presence in the film. Literal visual tension is created in two ways. Stanley Kauffmann has pointed out that life in the city, in Boston, is filled with verticals—tall doorways, spiral staircases, high ceilings—whereas life in Maine, in the inserted country scenes, is composed mainly of horizontals—the long porch of the Bartlett family house, the flat land, the background action that crosses the screen from right to left (e.g., a man riding past the farm on a horse).² In addition to this horizontal-vertical juxtaposition, there is the larger, even more striking one of outdoors against indoors. Almost all the shots of the country in the first half of *Way Down East* take place outside, in the fresh air and sunlight. By contrast, all the shots of the city occur indoors, in darkened, smoke-filled rooms. The atmosphere in Boston is frenetic: there are seemingly round-the-clock parties. The inhabitants of Bartlett village are so relaxed that they are constantly falling asleep during the day; this may explain the otherwise



curious shot of David in bed on a sunny afternoon, awaking only when Anna, as yet unknown to him, is entering into the bogus marriage with Sanderson miles away.

Filming the whole of Anna's story, as opposed to solely the plot of the play, gave Griffith one large advantage: he could make it appear less melodramatic, or better, he could enhance the *realism* of the melodrama. In the play, Anna seems doomed. If it were a tragedy, she would be; since it is a melodrama, she is not. She is trapped in what Bernard Beckerman calls an

"intensive structure":

If critical actions are effects of the past, man is a prisoner of his past. He is caught in a highly contracted situation, his end foretold before the plot begins, for the plot is enmeshed in the toils of the story. . . . Subject to overwhelming circumstances his initiative is limited to *how* he will act not *what* he will do. As the action progresses, his range of choice is increasingly reduced, and he *discovers* that it is so reduced.

(187-88)

David pulls Anna miraculously from this structure at the last minute.

In the film of *Way Down East*, Anna is placed in something resembling Beckerman's "extensive structure":

In contrast to the practice of commencing the plot after the story is well-advanced is the practice of commencing story and plot almost simultaneously. . . . The full story



unfolds within the duration of the plot, with the result that the characters are not victims but makers of destiny. Whatever blows fall are consequences of events we clearly see. Responsibility is evident. . . . There are always possibilities open for the characters, insofar as action is concerned. . . . The time and space covered in the course of such a play militates against highly compressed circumstances. . . . As a result, the human being is not enmeshed in circumstance but passes through them. Action becomes journey rather than confrontation. Hence, it can always take a new turn.

(187-89)

²Stanley Kauffmann, Prefatory Remarks to a Screening of *Way Down East*, Yale Univ., New Haven, Ct., 16 Sept. 1983.

Clearly Anna is enmeshed in circumstances in the film, but just as clearly, she passes through them, and we see her do so. Although she is victimized by Sanderson on account of her rustic innocence, she struggles to make her own destiny: she endures the disgrace of giving birth out of wedlock and the grief of her baby's death, then creates a new life for herself through hard work at Squire Bartlett's farm. Circumstance intervenes again in the persons of her erstwhile seducer and of her former landlady, who betrays her past to the squire, and again Anna fights against it: she rightly accuses Sanderson of deception in front of his neighbors, then walks out of the farmhouse defiantly into a huge snowstorm. Because we witnessed her strength and bravery immediately after she was deserted by Sanderson, and were not simply told about them, we find those qualities in her at the end more believable. Because we witnessed her journey from the Maine countryside (where she lived with her impoverished mother) to Boston, then from there back to Maine and Squire Bartlett's farm, where she found a home, we are more ready to view her foray into the snow as possible escape rather than probable death. In the play, we only hear of Anna's incredible rescue. In the film, her rescue becomes credible because *we see it happen*, seemingly without gimmick: David searches for her in the blizzard, sees that she has fainted on the ice of the river as it is breaking apart, and follows her from floe to floe until he snatches her from the falls at the last possible moment. After this, her forgiveness by Squire Bartlett (since she is indeed not immoral) and marriage to David can be only anticlimax; in the play, they are meant to be epiphany.

I do not mean to imply that Griffith increases the literary value of the Parker-Grismer-Brady script by expanding it in time and space. It is still a melodrama. What he accomplishes, however, in adapting the play to film is to point up a significant difference between the two forms, not the most obvious one—that drama is verbal and

cinema visual—but the difference in structure and philosophical assumption between the two. The paradigm of dramatic form in the West up to Ibsen, with the exception of Shakespeare and his coevals, has been intensive or Aristotelian. Shakespeare's plays are often called "cinematic" precisely because their structure is extensive. Film form is by its nature extensive: the camera easily extends itself over time and space. In adapting *Way Down East* to film, Griffith essentially dropped an intensive structure into an extensive one, with favorable results. Plays are still being "opened up" on film, but it is clearer to us now that they belong on stage, not on the screen.

What Griffith and his audience were discovering was that film not only satisfies the craving for physical reality, but also for freedom—from the restrictions of time and place, from the limitations of language, and *from the past*. To use Beckerman's terms, action in film is more of a journey in the present than a confrontation based on the past; the one is filled with possibility or promise, the other with suspense or foreboding. If melodrama, in which villainy is punished and virtue rewarded, was a last-second escape from the past, film is nearly an obliteration of it. Melodrama provided its audiences in the nineteenth century with momentary relief from a world in which man felt himself a prisoner of his past, of his origins, and in which justice was most often not done. By its very form, film reflects for spectators in the twentieth century the belief that the world is a place in which man can leave the past behind and create his own future; justice does not enter into the question, because man no longer need be the victim of his mistakes. *Way Down East* represents a transition between the worlds of intensive and extensive structure, of Aristotelian drama and film, of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. □

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Philip J. Skerry

SPACE AND PLACE IN JOHN FORD'S *STAGECOACH* AND *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE*

The very vision of the boy was special. His eyesight was poor and he could merely see a blur without wearing thick spectacles. When he took them off, his view of the world was changed to blocks of color or the distinctions between light and dark. Only the movement of people or animals or machines would make a whisk of reference in his hazy universe. But the act of putting his thick lenses over his eyes would change the boy's perceptions into the definitions of the everyday world. So he could choose either way of sight and direct his eyes from the bright mist of partial blindness into the sharp clarity of normal vision. He would make his disability a special focus on what he wished to see.¹

John Ford's defective eyesight provides a convenient metaphor for two radically different visions of space and place in *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*. These two films, the only westerns Ford made in the twenty-year period following *Three Bad Men* (1926), came at a seminal stage in Ford's development as a filmmaker and mythmaker. During this period, Ford's vision of the west underwent a dramatic change because of his combat experiences in World War II. This change involved a fundamental shift in attitude about the nature of the American West and the relationship between the Western hero and the space and place which contain and define him. My contention in the following discussion of *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine* is that Ford's Western vision in the earlier film is very much like the young Ford's blurred vision which revealed only "blocks of color" in space, but in the later film, Ford has put on the "thick spectacles" of his experiences in World War II and sees things and places much more clearly and much more somberly. Furthermore, I contend that these two contrasting states of vision are intimately connected with two different attitudes toward space and place in American culture.

As Philip French points out, ". . . one of the things the western is always about is America

rewriting and reinterpreting her own past."² Thus, by its very nature the Western film has dealt with the relationship between space and place in American culture, whether that relationship be expressed in terms of macrocosmic opposition between the town and the range, the fort and the frontier, the Eastern cities or the Western plains; or of microcosmic opposition between townsfolk and cowboys, Indians and outlaws, or Eastern dudes and Western gunfighters. Stated in general terms, this opposition is between a vision of the American West as Eden and the American hero as a kind of prelapsarian Adam, and the contrasting view, which sees the West as a part of the fallen, sinful world, and the hero as partaking of that fallen world and as therefore limited by place and by time.

The space and place corollaries of these opposing views play an important role in the Western film, particularly *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*. The Edenic vision of the American West is essentially a pastoral view in which the frontier's unlimited space represents freedom, growth, change, and most importantly renewal and regeneration. As R.W.B. Lewis points out in his *The American Adam*, American writers viewed America as a Garden of Eden, free from the traditions of monarchy, church and nobility, and thus free from experience itself, and from the limitations of time, death, and mortality.³ The major characters in such a pastoral setting always have the spaces of the frontier to escape to; they can always start over again because they are in essence good characters; the locus of evil resides in civilization itself, which is a corrupting force. Huck Finn is perhaps the quintessential representative of this point of view as he "lights out for the territories" to escape

²Philip French, *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977) 24.

³R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958).

¹Andrew Sinclair, *John Ford* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979).

Aunt Sally's attempts to "sivilize" him at the end of Twain's novel.⁴ The contrasting view sees the American character as inextricably connected to the fallen world—the world of experience—and American life and art squarely in the European tragic tradition. Hence the limitless space of the Adamic tradition gives way to the limiting place of the tragic tradition; likewise, the timeless state of innocence—in Ford represented by the mythical achronological plains of Monument Valley—succumbs to the timebound locus of place, whether that place be towns like Tombstone, or actual gravesites, like James Earp's or Mrs. Brittle's. If Huck Finn is the archetypal innocent fleeing from civilization, then Melville's Captain Vere is the epitome of the fallen world, represented by the HMS *Bellipotent*, a symbol of civilization and law floating on the anarchical sea.⁵

II

In many ways, *Stagecoach* is Ford's classic pastoral, for the film contains almost all the elements of the Adamic tradition. Most importantly, Ford, like Huck Finn, repudiates civilization as it is manifested in the two towns of Tonto and Lordsburg. The film opens in Tonto (appropriately meaning "stupid" in Spanish) with Dallas, the prostitute, being driven out of town by the Law and Order League, a group of McCarthy-like, self-appointed guardians of public morality. Doc Boone, the town drunk, is also asked to leave, and the prostitute and the doctor become victims of the caste and class structure of the town. These two outcasts are joined en route to Lordsburg by the archetypal outcast—the outlaw—in the character of Ringo Kid, on the way to Lordsburg to revenge the killing of his father and brother. It is clear from the structure of the plot and the development of the theme that these three characters are who they are not because of some evil within them but rather because of some evil within their environment; for it is only when they are free of "civilization" that they can regenerate themselves. Outside the brothels of Tonto and Lordsburg, Dallas can be given the opportunity

⁴Samuel L. Clemens, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: The Heritage Illustrated Bookshelf, 1940).

⁵Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative*, ed. Milton R. Stern (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975).

to become tender, caring, and compassionate; outside the prison, Ringo can be given the chance to act selflessly and caringly; outside the bars of the town, Doc Boone can be given the opportunity to pull himself together and bring new life into the world. The medium for this character change is the liberating space of the frontier, within which characters shed the trappings of caste and class.

It is instructive to examine the changes made in the Ernest Haycox story upon which *Stagecoach* is based: "Stage to Lordsburg."⁶ The additions that scriptwriter Dudley Nichols made to the Haycox story reveal the pastoral thrust of the film. Doc Boone's character is not in the story, but in the film his regeneration from drunken fool to responsible doctor shows the possibility of growth and change; in the same way, the "Army girl," Miss Robertson, of Haycox's story is transformed into the pregnant Mrs. Mallory, the birth of whose child symbolizes the hope of a new life, for it provides both Doc Boone and Dallas the means to reveal their inner strength. Haycox's Malpais Bill, a gunfighter bent on a showdown with the Plummers, is transformed into the Ringo Kid, whose father and brother were killed by the Plummers and who is therefore on a kind of righteous pilgrimage to extract justice. The end of the film—also a change from the original story—is in keeping with the pastoral promise of a new life, for Curley, the Marshal, and Doc Boone conspire to allow Ringo and Dallas to escape the confining borders of Lordsburg, where Dallas again faces prostitution and Ringo is still an escaped convict, but now a killer, too. As Dallas and Ringo ride off towards the border, Doc ironically says to Curley, "Well, they're saved from the blessings of civilization," an echo of Huck Finn's, "But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before" (346).

The key element of the Haycox story, though, is retained in *Stagecoach*, and this element is the *sina qua non* of the pastoral vision: the escape from the confines of civilization and into an idealized pastoral setting. In Haycox's story, Malpais Bill says to Henrietta, Dallas' original in the story, "Over in the Tonto Basin is a pretty land. I've got a piece of a ranch there—with a half-house built" (103). In the film, this line is changed to Ringo's

⁶Ernest Haycox, "Stage to Lordsburg," in *Stories into Film*, eds. William Kittredge and Steven M. Krauzer (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

offer to Dallas, "I still got a ranch across the border. It's a nice place, a real nice place. Trees, and grass, water. There's a cabin half-built. A man could live there. And a woman. Will you go?" That Ringo and Dallas are given a chance to start their lives over again is an indication of the corrupting effect of civilization, for if they had stayed in Lordsburg, Dallas would have returned to her life as a prostitute, and Ringo would have been returned to prison. It is significant that in the film Ringo and Dallas are released from the bonds of civilization by the two representatives of civilization itself: Curley, the Marshal, who represents law; and Doc Boone, who represents learning.

III

The pastoral vision of the American West in *Stagecoach* was tempered by Ford's battle experience in World War II. Several critics have commented on the relationship between Ford's war-time experiences and their reflection in his post-World War II Westerns. Gerald Mast, for example, claims that *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine* are "allegorical stories of American history in the years just before and just after the second world war."⁷ Likewise, Andrew Sinclair says that Ford's "battle experience would inform all his future pictures and personal relationships" (126). During the war, Ford was chief of the Field Photographic Branch of the OSS with the rank of lieutenant commander in the Navy.⁸ Even before the war, though, Ford had engaged in clandestine activities, gathering intelligence for the OSS (Sinclair 101-8). Ford came away from the war—it seems from the films he made thereafter—with a realization of the fragility of civilization, especially Western civilization, in the face of the Nazi and Japanese threats. From *My Darling Clementine* on, there is a strong current of belief in the necessity of human community, manifested in friendships, in families, in towns—in civilization itself. In earlier films, Ford had shown sympathy with outcasts and outlaws because of his sympathy with the Irish rebels who fought for their independence from the English. In fact, Ford loved the script for *Stagecoach* because there were, he said, no respectable

⁷Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1986) 255.

⁸Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (New York: Perigee Books of G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1979) 435.

characters (Sinclair 81). Yet after the war, Ford turned to characters who had connections with others, who were less rebellious, more committed to civilization, despite its weaknesses—characters like Wyatt Earp, Nathan Brittles, Ethan Edwards, and Ransom Stoddard. Perhaps *My Darling Clementine* is the beginning of the disillusionment critics see growing in Ford as he gradually lost faith in the Western myth. Certainly Ford seems to have become disillusioned with the wide open spaces of the frontier. In *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, Nathan Brittles heads off for the wide open spaces of California after he has retired, only to be summoned back again to the fort to resume his command. There is no question that Brittles is happier going back to the place of the fort than continuing towards the space of the frontier. Increasingly, Ford becomes disillusioned with the space of the frontier as a place for regeneration and for heroic individualism. We can see the disillusionment in Ethan Edwards' long search for his niece in *The Searchers* and in the Cheyenne Indians' long trek to their original hunting grounds in *Cheyenne Autumn*.

IV

The genesis of *My Darling Clementine* provides an indication of the emphasis Ford would place on commitment and community. As his first project after the war, Ford wanted to remake his earlier *The Last Outlaw* (1919) and retitle it *A Man of Peace* (Sinclair 129). The shift in titles from "outlaw" to "man of peace" indicates the change that had taken place in Ford's attitude toward rebellion and civilization. The *Man of Peace* project failed, however, and Ford turned to the memories of his old friend Wyatt Earp, who had told the young Ford the true stories of the West when Ford was first working for his brother in the film industry. Ford took the script of Alan Dwan's *Frontier Marshal* (1939), an earlier film of Wyatt Earp, and as Andrew Sinclair describes it, "Ford had the script extensively rewritten to suit his memories of Earp and his feelings of men coming back from the wilderness of war into the abiding values of domesticity and small-town life" (129).

We can see how Ford shapes these "abiding values" if we compare some key characters and scenes in *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*. Both The Ringo Kid and Wyatt Earp have lost brothers to outlaws, but Ringo is bent on extracting justice outside the system of law, and he kills the Plummers on the streets of Lordsburg

in the famous showdown at the end of *Stagecoach*. Wyatt, on the other hand, dedicates himself to the rule of law, not revenge, by pledging himself to law and justice at the grave of young James: "Maybe when we leave this country, young kids like you will be able to grow up and live safe." Instead of killing the Clantons to revenge James' death, Wyatt and his brothers become lawmen and work to rid the town of Tombstone of the lawless element within it. Those critics who view *My Darling Clementine* as only a revenge film miss the point. Andrew Sarris, for example, claims, "Ford's leisurely narrative style is at odds with the malignant Manicheism of the revenge plot."⁹ Sarris fails to see that the Earps must have evidence, according to the rule of law, in order to arrest the Clantons. Ford even goes so far as to have Wyatt deliver a warrant to the Clantons in the key gunfight at the OK Corral scene.

Other comparisons show Ford's concern with the values of civilization. Ford seems to switch allegiances in his depiction of the prostitute. Dallas is a positive character whose plight arises from her victimization by caste and class barriers, while Chihuahua in *My Darling Clementine* is petulant, scheming, dishonest, and unfaithful; in fact, Chihuahua dies at the end of the film in typical Hollywood justice. Mrs. Mallory, the representative of the Eastern establishment in *Stagecoach*, is snobbish and insensitive, while Clementine represents a positive force as she decides to stay in Tombstone to bring education and culture to the West. Doc Boone in *Stagecoach* successfully delivers Mrs. Mallory's baby, rids himself of his addiction to alcohol, and even confronts the Plummer brothers before Ringo's showdown. Doc Holliday, however, cannot save Chihuahua's life, nor can he kick his addiction to alcohol. He is a doomed figure, and his death at the end of the film is both fitting and expected. Lastly, the endings of both films are diametrically opposed to one another. In *Stagecoach* Ringo and Dallas escape to the promise of a new life. In *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt also leaves, but Ford's statements indicate that he intended Wyatt to stay in Tombstone. Ford claimed, "The finish of the picture was not done by me. That isn't the way I wanted to finish it. I wanted Wyatt to stay there and become permanent marshal—which he did. And that was the true story. Instead of that, he had to ride away" (Sinclair 130). It is true that scriptwriter Winston Miller questions the veracity

⁹Andrew Sarris, *The John Ford Movie Mystery* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975) 117.

of Ford's story, and it is also true that Ford's statements about his films and his intentions are not always reliable, but in this case, I choose to believe Ford.¹⁰ The whole thrust of the film is towards community, commitment, and law.

In many ways, Wyatt Earp's commitment to law and justice in Tombstone is a commitment to place instead of space. At the beginning of the film, when Wyatt has first taken on the job of marshal and is playing poker in the Oriental Saloon, he hears from Chihuahua that, "This is Doc Holliday's town." In effect, as the plot develops, it is clear that Tombstone goes from being Doc Holliday's town to becoming Wyatt Earp's town. This movement has several dimensions. On a character level, Doc Holliday's self-destructive personality represents a kind of cynicism that is closely connected to his rootlessness. Neither Easterner nor Westerner, Doc wanders in and out of town and seems frantically to be searching for some meaning in his life. His failing health because of tuberculosis gives him a kind of demonic fatalism that is reflected in the shadow and gloom that Ford surrounds him with. Wyatt, on the other hand, is a Westerner who comes to accept the "abiding values" of Eastern culture, represented by the character of Clementine. Ford certainly has some fun with Wyatt's acceptance of Clementine's values. His newly barbered mustache and hair and his strongly scented cologne allow Ford to create some humorous exchanges. Yet Ford sees the value in Wyatt's commitment to justice in Tombstone.

In essence, Wyatt Earp's values in *My Darling Clementine* involve a commitment to place and to the limitations that place imposes. Space always holds promise for a better life, for the hope of a Utopia, for perfect social justice. In fact, Utopian visions frequently involve some extension of space, or its corollary timelessness, whether that extension be a place different from our own (Utopia translates as no place; Butler's *Erewhon* is "nowhere" spelled backwards) or a time different from our own. Yet a commitment to place demands an acceptance of limitations, of imperfect justice, of death. Some of Ford's most poignant scenes take place in the most limiting and final of places: gravesites. Young James Earp is buried in the plains outside Tombstone as a kind of memorial and farewell to the values of space alone. In other films, Ford puts special

¹⁰Robert Lyons, ed., *My Darling Clementine: John Ford, Director* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1984) 149.

emphasis on graves. Henry Fonda, one of Ford's favorite actors, says that Ford ". . . loved graveyard scenes. He loved a man coming to the graveyard all alone, talking to the person. I've done that in two or three pictures for Ford" (Sinclair 90). In *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, for example, Nathan Brittles visits the grave of his wife, to whom he speaks as if she were still alive. At the end of the film, when Brittles foresakes the space of the frontier for the place of the fort, he again visits his wife's grave, but Ford shows great restraint in just briefly showing Brittles walking to his wife's burial spot. As Andrew Sinclair says of Ford, "[the graveyard] was his personal seal stamped on what he shot, his acknowledgement that he too was part of the great chain of the living and the dead, his work interpreting the past and showing it and talking of it to the present and the future" (90).

Ford's preoccupation with place is shown in other aspects of the film. Ford's camera seems anchored to particular spots in *My Darling Clementine* in order to show the effects of time and circumstance in a particular place. Michael Budd points out how Ford uses his frame to contrast the settled town with its "ancient surroundings," particularly in the "frame's extensive exploration of the long porch, the meeting point between shelter and wilderness" (Lyons 164-65). In fact, three key scenes are shown from this same angle in the long porch on the corner of Tombstone. The first is the arrival of the Earps in Tombstone; the scene is at night, and the town is wild and lawless, with smoke drifting through the streets and screams piercing the air. The second scene takes place in daytime after Wyatt has become Marshal, and the town seems quieter and more peaceful. The final scene is the opening one in the famous church and dance sequence, during which Wyatt makes his final commitment to the "abiding values" of family, religion, and law.

Finally, as Tombstone eventually becomes Wyatt Earp's and not Doc Holliday's town, the "ownership" of the town gradually moves from outlaws like the Clantons and social misfits like Chihuahua and Doc Holliday to ordinary folks like the ersatz preacher and the townsfolk who dedicate the fledgling church, the incompleting structure which is symbolic of the infant civilization growing in Tombstone. In accepting the values of place crystallized in locations such as graves, churches, and towns, Ford seems to have moved from the Huck Finn solution, which is to try to escape from the limitations and evils of "sivilization," to the Captain Vere solution,

which is to put human law above that of nature. In *Billy Budd* Captain Vere explains, during Billy's trial, "How can we a judge to summary and shameful death a fellow-creature innocent before God, and whom we feel to be so?—Does that state it aright? You sign sad assent. Well, I too feel that, the full force of that. It is Nature. But do these buttons that we wear attest that our allegiance is to Nature? No, to the king. Though the ocean, which is inviolate Nature primeval, though this be the element where we move and have our beings as sailors, yet as the king's officers lies our duty in a sphere correspondingly natural? So little is that true . . ." (106). Vere's choice of law over nature is similar to Wyatt's decision to seek justice in the town of Tombstone. In both cases the law—no matter how imperfect—is preferable to anarchical nature.

V

Can we say, then, that in the twenty-year period during which he made *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine*, Ford disavowed Huck Finn's solution and took up Captains Vere's? I think we can. Ford's vision did undergo a change from the "blocks of color" of the open spaces of change and rebirth to the clarity of vision with which a mature artist views the world. In many ways that vision was accomplished when Ford put on the "thick spectacles" of wartime experience and was even wounded, like Hemingway, in body and spirit. There is a marvelous scene in *My Darling Clementine* in which the actor Thorndyke recites Hamlet's famous soliloquy in the Mexican saloon. Unable to continue, Thorndyke asks Doc Holliday to finish, and Doc continues, "The undiscovered country from whose born/No traveller returns puzzles the will,/And makes us rather bear those ills we have/Than fly to others that we know not of?/Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . ." The tragic experience of death—of James', of Virgil's, of Chihuahua's, of Doc's—informs Ford's vision in *My Darling Clementine*, and the growth of conscience, law, and justice prevents the pastoral solution of escape to a new life. At the end of *My Darling Clementine* Wyatt has helped to make Tombstone not a perfect town, but one where ". . . young kids . . . will be able to grow up and live safe."□

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WELCOME TO THE UNKNOWN: THE WAR ON FILM

While it is probably the dream of every film artist to see the film with which he was involved entered in the competition at Cannes, or at least shown as an official part of the festival, it is the reality of almost every film critic there to treat the entire festival as a gigantic cine-bazaar in which he prowls looking for strange curios and bargains. In this regard, even the most sober and responsible critic becomes a trifle daft, spending every free moment looking at German sexploitation features, the entire film output of Norway or Switzerland for a given year, or something even more diffuse or obscure.

Frequently the written results of this mad shopping spree give a most peculiar picture of what is actually being made in any given time period. Readers of *The Economist* may get wonderfully objective and detailed analyses of current economic and political events. But they are given, courtesy of that magazine's anonymous film critic, the interesting but ultimately erroneous impression that almost everything of note going on the cinema is being made in Korea, Japan, or one of their close neighbors.

This is simply the snobbish version of what the North American critics do when they speak of the overwhelming success of a film in competition simply because it is the only one they've bothered to see, and it is quite separate from a certain amount of national chauvinism that often has a surprisingly distorting effect on one's critical vision.¹ On the other hand, there is no harm in speaking of the unusual and atypical if one is plain about the fact. In 1986, as has often been the

case in the past, one could see that there was a recognizable grouping. When one started looking around the corners of the festival, there were some intriguing films, and they were curiously related.

The most clearly identifiable subset of this group consisted of four films which clearly attempted to portray the extent to which warfare disrupts societies and victimizes its members. Raul de la Torre's *Poor Butterfly* shows how the winding down of World War II begins to affect the lives of an affluent Argentine couple, and Axel Corti's *Welcome in Vienna* delineates the ironic re-emergence of that city after the same war. The other two films deal more overtly with war and its effects, and one could easily categorize (and probably therefore dismiss) them as war films. Rauni Mollberg's *The Unknown Soldier* is an adaptation of Vaino Linna's 1950s novel about Finland's war with the Soviet Union after 1941, while Elie Cohen's *Ricochets* is a more contemporary work about the Israeli Defense Force in Lebanon. Both sets of films have a common thread linking them: thinly disguised anti-semitism in the first two and an unabashed sympathy for the young men who serve in their country's armies in the second. What all four films have in common is an extremely unfashionable attitude towards the impact of war, something in itself which has become virtually a taboo subject among serious critics.

Cohen's film is a curiosity in another sense as well, because the history of how it came to be made is probably more entertaining than the film itself (a peculiarity that is unfortunately all too often the case nowadays), and its interesting history is not entirely irrelevant to its reception. The IDF wanted a film as a part of its advanced officer training course which would focus on "la morale de combat," as the press book for the film put it so eloquently. Additionally, the film would touch on some of the peripheral but still tricky problems which officers could expect to face in Southern Lebanon. When the film was finished and shown, it proved intriguing enough to get an audience outside of the IDF, and then outside of Israel itself.

¹And this nationalistic tinge pops up in surprising places. In recent years the British have tended towards a sort of myopic nationalism in this regard. And not just with movies. Paul Frere has observed in *Road & Track* (38.7) that in the 1987 Car of the Year Award "all seven of the British jurors voted the Jaguar first," while the Germans split their votes and none of the Italians voted Fiat, a coincidence that reminds everyone that movies are just as much industrial products with a national origin as automobiles (100). The *Screen International* Special Jury at Cannes was largely an exception to this. David Robinson, the British representative, gave his highest scores to *After Hours*, *The Sacrifice*, and *Therese*, and this was the general pattern.

The result is definitely the most accomplished training film ever made, although this is obviously a somewhat limited category. But the simple fact of its history makes it important to anyone interested in the cinema: I doubt that anyone else's army has specifically commissioned a feature length fiction film to use as a training aid, although feature films have been used as training aids in armies before. It's an interesting testimony to the power of the cinema, and it makes the film worth seeing simply as a curiosity piece.

Of course *Ricochets* engenders obvious political problems simply by existing (as does virtually everything about the state of Israel nowadays). But there isn't much in it that's exceptional. All films that touch on explosive issues tend to hew to one side or the other, no matter how objective they might try to be. Although the lines dividing the various sections of the festival have become increasingly blurred in recent years, generally speaking the *Un Certain Regard* section is where everything ranging from Syberberg's *Hitler* to Haskel Wexler's *Latino* end up. It's an amorphous category, and over the years my own description of one component of it would be that it is where films are placed whose impact is greater than their importance. Films which reek of ideology



The aftermath of a bad command decision. *Ricochets*

thus compete with films that seem scarcely to be films at all, but exercises in sound and light, or in the juggling of slides.

That being the case, I tend to disagree with the opinion, voiced quite vigorously by an otherwise not totally imperceptive German critic, that a film like this one didn't belong at a film festival at all. However, it is fairly easy to understand the series of problems and misunderstandings that would lead someone to say this for reasons other than the standard one of adhering to a purely political

line in deciding what's acceptable film and what isn't.

For one thing, everyone expects spectacle out of war films, whether they approve of that spectacle or not. But the IDF was pretty parsimonious in its technical support. They lent (or more probably rented) more hardware to Cannon for *Delta Force* than to Cohen for their own film, so there isn't much spectacle. Part of this is inherent in this sort of sub-genre, which aims at capturing the minutia of military life rather than its drama, but it still surprises.

However, there is spectacle and there is spectacle. The most impressive parts of Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* don't involve much in the way of hardware, stunts, or technology. What they do involve is a sense of doing something more with film than running it through the camera, and in this sense Cohen's film has been fatally stunted by the impact of television news reportage. He repeatedly confuses realistic images with realism itself.

This is a problem that other directors working within this framework have encountered. Any detailed and realistic army film (as opposed to a war film or a partisan film) giving us a sense of soldierly life suffers from the chief defect of all such films, tediousness. Except when he's being



More problems. *Ricochets*

terrorized by battles or skirmishes, a soldier's lot is a boring one. Real soldiers are mostly exhausted, asleep, or trapped in some frightful nightmare in which the dominant emotion is simply fear, regardless of their side or whether they're winning.²

The problem is that in a funny way the subject isn't all that cinematic. Most of what passes for cinema in such movies is a sort of sham. Even when we leave out the sort of pop-up patriotism of the American war films of the 1940s (and of

virtually all Soviet films about the Great Patriotic War) we still have febrile stuff. We can have peculiar fascination for the impedimenta of war: when you see *Aliens* you realize that James Cameron really likes photographing armored vehicles and strange weaponry, and that the jump isn't too far to watching all those interminable parades of midget tanks one sees in newsreels of the Third Reich. Or you can have a sort of muddle, as in *Platoon*, where things are so scrambled during the climactic battle scene that one has no real sense of anything other than simple chaos.

Part of this is an inherent problem in the subject. Although warfare seems an inherently cinematic subject, in reality it is hard to move past a couple of neat set pieces. The people who have been the most successful (Griffith in *Birth of a Nation*, Pontecorvo in *The Battle of Algiers*) literally tried to recreate the war in its entirety, just as Eisenstein tried to retell the entire story of the October Revolution in *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

The approach taken by Cohen has consistently been the least successful one, although paradoxically it is by far the most honest. Pierre Schoendoerffer's *The 317th Platoon*, about a French infantry unit in Indochina, is a good example of this, as is the surprisingly thoughtful *The Odd Angry Shot*, a quasi-documentary directed by Tom Jeffreys about Australian Special Air Service troops in Vietnam.³ One respects these films, and

²During World War Two the American Army did a good deal of research into what actually went on in combat. Their general conclusion was that the battlefield, far from being a place where the traditional virtues prevailed, was a place of utter terror. As General S.L.A. Marshall wrote in *Men Against Fire*: "Whenever one surveys the forces of the battlefield, it is to see that fear is general among men, but to observe further that men are commonly loath that their fear will be expressed in specific acts which their comrades will call cowardice." Possibly if more intellectuals were aware of this they would be more sympathetic to the best instances of the war film and novel genre. See the discussion in John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking, 1976) 73, from where Marshall's quotation is taken.

³*The Odd Angry Shot*, photographed by Don McAlpine, who was a news cameraman in Vietnam, got a favorable *Variety* review (2 Feb. 1979: 25) when it came out in early 1979. It predates Coppola's film, although not by much, and is probably the first of the real Vietnam films. The reviewer noted the excellent performances and the convincingly authentic look of the film, which then pretty much vanished without trace, giving a good deal of credence to the cynical view that films like *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* have to be sensationalist or they would have no audience whatsoever.

in several senses they are more rooted in the particularities of the actual experience simply because they are unstructured.

Cohen opts for the same blended history that Tom Jeffreys took in his film. Nothing very much happens to his soldiers. A couple of them get killed, and one of them is seriously wounded. But they never experience any sort of traumatic combat related ordeal which we can easily see transforming them, and which was so much a feature of even the older war films like *Battleground*, or the costume epics like *Zulu Dawn*. But in some definitive way their lives are completely changed as a result of their experiences, possibly because these weren't anything glamorous or even traumatic.

The *Odd Angry Shot* is less concerned with command and adjustment problems than Cohen is, but it uses the same perfunctory news camera



Australia's Platoon: *The Odd Angry Shot*

approach (the cameraman had worked as a television news photographer in Vietnam). It is, at least as much as *Ricochets*, an honest attempt to capture the realities of a complex situation. Intellectually both films are excellent introductions into a somewhat thorny sub-branch of intellectual history, but they are undervalued because they are so studiously cerebral. Critics have their preconceptions about what war films should look like, even when they don't like the idea of the genre.

These likes and dislikes are something that a maverick like Oliver Stone understands very well: in the best (or anyway most successful) war films there are thematic conventions which it is extremely important to follow. Probably these derive from the war novel, of which, peculiarly enough, the first of any significance is apparently Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.⁴ There are certainly other, greater, novels

in which battle scenes play a great part (*War and Peace*, *The Red and the Black*), and ones that are just as good in which the experience of warfare is acutely measured (*The Red Badge of Courage*). But Remarque's is virtually the first novel about that peculiar institution, the mass army of conscripts, in its most traumatic phase, warfare.

Interestingly enough, what one gets from Remarque is a sense of an army deeply divided: the hatred between the recruits and Himmelstoss is far greater than anything they feel for the enemy. Indeed, one gets the impression that in the modern army the soldier fears some of his comrades in arms as much as he fears death itself. The enemy as a known quantity is conspicuously absent. When Remarque's Paul finally sees a wounded Frenchman face to face, he tries to help him and then mourns his death.

All the German writers, whether writing about World War One or World War Two, amplify on this theme, portraying a masculine world in which extremes of love and hate exist side by side with the utmost fear. Some of them, like Kirst, see this struggle as symbolic of the perversions of National Socialism. Others, like Willie Heinrich, see the same divisions and conflicts as still present. Hitler's ideology simply twisted the knife in an already bitter wound.

I mention exclusively German models because these ideas seem conspicuously absent in the Anglo-American writing. In Great Britain, with its tradition of a volunteer army, the tradition for this sort of hatred seems to have been absent, although when Christopher Wren wrote his popular melodrama about the French Foreign Legion, *Beau Geste*, he portrayed these deep inner divisions in surprisingly realistic detail. But no Englishman writing about the world wars does.

Partially this is because most of the English writers who write about their own army are officers (or, like Maugham, working for some branch of British intelligence). Both Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon were aware of the dannish and hostile clique of regular officers with whom they served, but they emphasize—especially Graves—that the real enemy was bureaucratic incompetence, not individuals. Although Graves' *Goodbye to All That* is a memoir

⁴Of course there had always been, from Caesar on, a tradition of the war memoir, what Keegan has termed a "literature of leadership" (26). *All Quiet on the Western Front* came out in 1928, the same year which saw Graves' memoir *Goodbye to All That*, seminal works that were quickly followed by others: *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, Sassoon's memoirs in 1930, and so on down to this day.

and not a novel, the attitudes it reveals towards the army seem closely related to what we see in Ford Madox Ford or even Evelyn Waugh. Making allowances for the vast differences between the people who make up their armies, writings about the American Army seem curiously similar, although American writers from Crane to James Jones to Michael Herr seem more disposed to write about the enlisted man, a choice which is curiously Germanic.

The surprising affinity between the American and German perspectives may explain why Sam Peckinpah found the subject of the German infantry so congenial a subject. In *Cross of Iron* he simply expanded on the themes running through the novels of both wars, using both Heinrich's novel and other sources as well. Unfortunately, by the time Peckinpah made *Cross of Iron* his work—outside of some grudgingly admitted contributions to the Western—was in complete eclipse, while hardly any Western intellectual would admit to having read novels such as Heinrich's and Kirst's—or if they did, to admitting that there was anything in the subject deserving to be called an interpretation.

This refusal to deal with the subject, or to admit that it is a fit subject, has produced some curious lapses of literary judgment. In Josef Skvorecky's vaguely autobiographical novel *The Engineer of Human Souls*, he can't even get his Canadian undergraduates to admit that Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* is really about warfare at all:

Higgins may have liked the novel, but when it came down to giving a paper he too obviously considered it his academic responsibility to give an interpretation of it rather than talk about it, and to this end he borrowed from the best-known authorities. So now he is trying to demonstrate to his audience, which as usual is not particularly quick in spirit, that *The Red Badge of Courage* is not in fact about war at all but rather about the emotional and intellectual maturing of a young man and his progress from idealistic illusion to knowledge and from innocence to a full experience of de-idealized reality.⁵

⁵Josef Skvorecky, *The Engineer of Human Souls*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) 213. At one point the despairing narrator not only can't get his class to agree that the novel is about war, he can't even get them to admit that there is any such thing as a just war. As a Czech émigré who experienced both the National Socialist and then the Russian occupation of his homeland, he finds this a little hard to take, and he dismisses the class.

This is the state of affairs which explains why Oliver Stone's neatly stitched together theme quilt in *Platoon* seems to have struck reviewers as such an original work. If the critic doesn't know there's a tradition, he ascribes what he sees exclusively to the artist's individual talent. Not only does he reveal his lack of knowledge, but he begins to attribute certain virtues such as originality and a higher realism to the artist.

Platoon is a good enough film. The point is that the film doesn't resonate well with American audiences because of its originality, its realism, or because the time is ripe to speak about the American experience in Vietnam. It works because it translates the conventions of the sub-genre into a relevant setting and because its emphasis on the ordinary soldier (in Vietnam era slang, the "grunt") is closer to the American national consciousness than other films made on the subject. Although I would personally like to think that the intensity of the images themselves contribute to its success, there are too many instances of abysmally photographed films done in the worst traditions of Hollywood set deco for me to believe that this is the case here.

This thesis about the film playing off of genre conventions may sound surprising, but consider that the major dramatic theme of the film is the conflict between two groups of grunts (one led by Sergeant Elias, the other by Sergeant Barnes), not between our army and theirs; further, that Chris' growth seems finally measured by his ability to defeat his internal enemies than in gaining courage, or, as one might expect, some sort of moral insight into an extremely confused struggle.

As in *Peckinpah* (who got it from Heinrich and Kirst), the real conflict is not that between the Americans and the Vietnamese, but between the two noncoms (and in *Peckinpah* between Steiner and Stransky). All of the soldiers in both movies become polarized by this struggle, which can only end when one side dominates the other. The senior officers who should be able to regulate this mess are either ineffectual or distant. The struggle is only resolved during some apocalyptic battle during which internal scores are also settled.

In fact the real novelty of Stone's film lies in its quintessentially European nature. Chris, the sensitive young writer surrounded by grunts, is closer to Remarque's Paul than to anything in American writing. And his growth is measured in somewhat ambiguous fashion: during the final battle sequence he jumps up and starts blazing away at the enemy in convincingly heroic

fashion, digs himself out of the debris afterwards and offs the evil sergeant. The scene is accompanied by others that are equally ambiguous: through the tattered jungle we see a shockingly clean red, white and black swastika flag flying from one of the armored personnel carriers supporting the mopping up operations. When the wounded Chris is lifted out he receives a final salute from one of his fellow grunts, a gesture which seems somewhat anachronistically patterned after Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Conan the Barbarian*.

Of course it is precisely this employment of the traditional war movie and novel themes that makes Stone's film as successful as it is, but the logical direction an analysis moves one in is somewhat of a paradox. If all of these isolated situations were really factual, as Stone has repeatedly claimed (arguing only that they occurred in the widely separated combat units in which he served), it would seem that there isn't all that much in the Vietnam War experience that is peculiar to Americans; that in fact, viewed from the level of the grunt, their war experience was pretty much like the war experiences of other grunts from other nations in other periods of modern history.⁶

As we shall see, if one looks at Cohen's film, one gets the impression that this is the case, although Cohen's film is a much more intellectual affair (it may not be the sort of film intellectuals like, but it emphasizes the moral and ethical conflicts that they habitually employ). But somehow one doubts that Stone wanted to make just another fine war movie, just as one doubts that he really wanted the final message of the film to be as ambiguous as it is: the young writer ends up finding his true self and his true place in the sun as a homicidal maniac executing private vendettas while his equally maniacal buddies look on approvingly.

This older, Europeanized thematic material is further beneath the surface and somewhat obscured by the obvious resonance with *Apocalypse Now* (a Cannes winner in 1979), which also uses a curiously unsatisfactory voice-over narrator who in Stone's film is coincidentally the

⁶The surprisingly cool *Variety* review of 3 Dec. 1986 noted the film's similarities with the "taut, close-up army unit films of the 1950s" and faulted what it saw as Stone's attempt to argue that the American problem in Vietnam was that we "lost the war because of divisions within its own ranks and an unwillingness to go all the way . . . the analysis goes no further than that; better if Stone had stuck to combat basic" (19).

son of the narrator in Coppola. But the resemblance is largely bogus, because Coppola's movie is not about grunts or writers. The major characters in the movie (Willard, Kurtz, Kilgore) are exclusively officers, who are in fact the film's only adults, since the enlisted men on the boat are portrayed as though they are children.

Up to this point it may seem as though we are totally discounting what Stone has insisted is one of his virtues, and that is the fact that he was actually there in Vietnam serving as a grunt. The structure he gives his experiences is quite standard for the genre, but his experiences really did shape the film, because this viewpoint is the grunt viewpoint, and although the narrator, via his epistles to his grandmother, seems frequently outside of the action, he sees it in civilian terms, not merely identifying with the enlisted men, but seeing the world totally from their perspective.

By contrast, *Apocalypse Now* is a film by, for and about one subset of armies, their officers. Not only are the major characters officers (viewers often forget that the boat commander is so senior a noncom in the navy that he is virtually an officer), but the dilemmas that they face—which are the focus of the film—are the dilemmas of officers, certain highly particularized versions of command decisions.⁷

Willard, for example, unlike the characters in the grunt films, isn't waging some personal war of his own. He's ordered by his superiors to go up the river and kill Kurtz, and on the way up he isn't sure if he can actually do it: does he follow his orders or doesn't he? It goes without saying that his orders are the sort that give him a good many outs (Willard, as a captain, is obviously an experienced officer who's well aware of how one gets around assignments like this one, as well as the fact that the order probably contravenes most interpretations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice which governs his conduct).

He's sympathetic to Kurtz, as he should be: he's a fellow officer and Willard has seen enough to understand how fine the line is between achievement and condemnation. Although the film is discreetly silent here, the implication is that most of what Kurtz has been doing Willard has done as well. The big difference is that Willard doesn't read T. S. Eliot over the radio. So it is clear that Kurtz' methods became extreme only because he was trying to be a good officer and win

⁷Immediately after seeing *Apocalypse Now* for the first time (and before its commercial release) a field grade officer who had served in Vietnam gave me this reading of the film.

the war. Willard, sent up the river to kill him, not knowing if he can, apparently only decides to do so when Kurtz kills one of Willard's men.

In the old tried and true Hemingway fashion, Willard has a professional code that crosses all the normal moral lines. He doesn't seem to be bothered by his role as some sort of professional assassin (what he has been doing before the start of the movie, and what causes him to be picked for the assignment). He doesn't mind killing off some civilian bystanders, and in this we can see how he's a model officer, taking the heat for the foul-up caused by the overanxious boat crew which results in the massacre of the Vietnamese fishermen. Willard can understand Kurtz going weird, and he can even forgive him reading *The Golden Bough*, but he can't accept him killing his own men.

It's one of those of Ian Fleming out of Ernest Hemingway existentialist codes, closely related to the sort of corner James Bond finds himself in when M asks him to kill some particularly vicious minor criminals: "Bond did not like what he was going to do, and all the way from England he had had to keep on reminding himself what sort of men these were. The killing of the Havelocks had been a particularly dreadful killing. Von Hammerstein and his gunmen were particularly dreadful men whom people around the world would probably be very glad to destroy. . . . Bond's mind hunted around for more arguments to bolster his resolve."⁸

The point of this extended comparison is that both directors relied heavily on novelistic or cinematic conventions to make movies that are therefore by their universality not particularly anchored in the Vietnam War experience of Americans. When you subtract Conrad and Fleming, Peckinpah and Hemingway, Heinrich and Remarque, all you have that is particular to Vietnam is some extremely detailed artwork and some fine cinematography. Stone certainly used his own observations to produce a film that has a nicely realistic texture. His film is full of the sorts of details that suggest a highly particularized place and time. It looks like Vietnam (although when Coppola's film came out a good many men

⁸From Ian Fleming's "Four Your Eyes Only," as quoted by Kingsley Amis in *The James Bond Dossier* (New York: New American Library, 1965) 17-18. Amis does a good job of showing how this sort of thing is in itself a convention not unique to Fleming, pointing out some parallels with Mickey Spillane's *One Lonely Night*. To my knowledge, no one has pointed out the close resemblance between Willard's meditations and Bond's.

who had been there said the same thing about his film). But both films are heavily dependent on material that has been imported into the time, the place, and the culture.

This discussion provides something of a context in which to appreciate what Cohen has actually done in *Ricochets*, which is to produce a film that is so highly particularized that none of it could be transferred to anywhere else. His film is totally about the IDF in Lebanon, and in that sense it isn't exportable. Although there are some minor situations that are familiar, they are clearly peripheral and largely coincidental. All soldiers anywhere at any time apparently try to befriend children, get muted crushes on the native females, and the like. But this is rather low key. The characters are forgettable as individuals. In fact, Cohen seems to avoid entirely that great curse of the mediocre war film, the colorful stereotype (although of course some of these young men may be more of a stereotype to Israelis than to outsiders).

There's a bit more action in Cohen's film: we see the soldiers trying to befriend the native children, trying to make sense of why they're there (something that seems increasingly a problem in modern armies), and above all we see them learning the real measure of fear. The events are a bit too structured: in places the film looks like a high level dramatization of one of those courses in which certain hypothetical situations are set up in order to see what a successful commander would do to solve them. In the ultimate one, the young infantry officer resolves to storm a house and risk casualties rather than subject the civilian bystanders to risk. He saves them but gets wounded for his pains.

In this sense the film is peculiarly open-ended, because most training films give one a clear sense of what the better options (or the only good option) are. But Cohen manages to sum up the dilemma neatly enough. The soldiers of a democracy instinctively try to preserve human lives, and when put in a situation where they are surrounded by a native population, however unfriendly, they persist in trying to make friends, and they inevitably make militarily poor (although deeply commendable) decisions as a result.

Of course there isn't much of this last in *Platoon*, where the younger officers are ineffectual, and hardly anyone has much sympathy for the natives. But then I know of no one with any professional expertise who has ever tried to argue that the failures of this sort in the American Army

in Vietnam were not serious failures which had to be rectified. Or, more simply, no one has ever said that the officers and men of the average combat unit in Vietnam in 1968 had the same professional competence as the officers and men of the Israeli Defence Force in 1982. The Australian film is probably more relevant because the Australian standard is closer to the Israeli one. Although Jeffrey's film was not funded (and therefore shaped) by the army, he gives us the same measured portrait. Moreover, his soldiers, as members of the Australian Special Air Service, are an elite group to start with, both in discipline and in tradition far removed from Stone's grunts.

Their armies are armies, not mobs or crowds. That his army will degenerate into an unruly mob is of course the great fear of every commander, and officers and historians alike tend to reserve their harshest criticisms for those commanders whose armies actually fell apart and became crowds. From a purely military viewpoint the chief weakness of *Platoon* is that its director seems completely unaware of this distinction, while Jeffrey's and Cohen make us constantly aware of it.

One often thinks of military competence as being a purely negative thing involving newer and better ways to kill people (or to pick up trash). Or as Keegan puts it, since the French Revolution one of the great unexpressed ideas has been that "Militarism is Theft" (176). But there's much more to it than that. Professional military competence in a democracy also means knowing what democratic values are and trying to exemplify them as best as can be done under the circumstances. In any reasonable reading of the legal system of the *Wehrmacht*, its officers who condoned (much less encouraged or ordered) the shooting of prisoners and the extermination of civilians were guilty of committing crimes—as are the platoon commander and the sergeants of *Platoon*. There's nothing flawed in Cohen trying to show that maintaining that sense of values—which is a military as well as humanistic one—involves a difficult and sometimes tragic struggle.

Unfortunately, the idea that "Militarism is Theft" has increasingly meant that few Western intellectuals nowadays worry about the relationship between the military and the state in any constructive way, either in film or elsewhere. This is certainly the case in the United States and by extension in the English-speaking world, where our armies have been always subordinate to a civilian structure. The few people who study this topic usually point out that

it is precisely this that gives our historians such objectivity: unlike the French, the Germans, and the Russians, we do not have to ponder whether a different tact would have spared us the loss of millions of innocent lives, our national landmarks, and even our system of government. However, I am not persuaded that intellectuals anywhere in the West think about it very much, regardless of their national history.

But Israel, for a variety of reasons, is a country where people have had to think about these things, and as a result has produced some interesting films. Some of them, like *Paratroopers*, aren't very good, and only one of them, *The Vulture*, could probably stand on its own as an accomplished film. But taken as a whole they form a pretty good corpus of investigations into an important if neglected subject. *Ricochets* is a good addition to the stable, and although it is doubtless unfashionable in the extreme to say so, even though there aren't all that many ideas in the film, there are certainly more than in many of the other films that one routinely sees passed off as examples of a great intellect of the cinema at work.

It is also worth more than passing mention that in no one area can we see more clearly the wide divergence between the mass audience (and mass audience thought) and the elite. The real history of America in the Vietnam War has been filmed not by Oliver Stone but by Sylvester Stallone and Chuck Norris. It is in their movies that one sees the deep and unhealable bitterness, the desperate feeling of being betrayed by one's government and abandoned by one's society, that is the real legacy of the Vietnam War.

Of course it is absolute madness for anyone to say so, because it has by now become an article of faith to see John Rambo as a homicidal maniac all too symptomatic of American warmongery rather than as a shafted grunt. Similarly, it is folly to praise any film made in Israel (possibly just because of that fact) which aims to portray the Israeli Army as anything other than a bunch of sadistic warmongers.

However, the deafening critical silence (except for a somewhat apologetic review in *Variety*) at Cannes had its ironic counterpart in the audience response to the premiere of the film. Whatever part of the world the audience had come from, when the closing credits appeared, they applauded with a good deal of enthusiasm. Now at the general evening screenings of the competition films there is frequently the same sort of mindless applause that one hears at the

opera. But the audiences of the daytime screenings inside the palais are a balanced mix of film critics, industry professionals resting from the beach, and some of the *Cannoise* themselves.

Three obviously jaded groups, in other words, and they generally don't do much more than a few perfunctory claps. Indeed, the most memorable audience responses at Cannes are walkouts during the film and whistles and hisses afterwards. In this case the applause had a somewhat defiant cast to it, as though the audience was saying that regardless of what is intellectually acceptable or fashionable, it liked what it saw. *Ricochets* was thus one of the few films I've seen in the palais that got this sort of response, and in this case the audience was probably more sophisticated than the critics.

The Unknown Soldier is also a war film, although one of a much more traditional nature. In general, given the state of the Finnish film industry, and the fact that hardly anyone has seen very many (dare one say any?) films from that country, it is easy to dismiss *The Unknown Soldier* as a sort of curiosity. This would be a mistake, for there are some images of incredible power and intensity here. Stripped of its alien language, its schematic plot, and its obscure historical situation, it is a powerful film of great accomplishment.

The Unknown Soldier has literary origins, as it is based on a Finnish novel written roughly thirty years ago. It is difficult to say how good Vaino Linna's novel was, but as he worked on the script of the film, he is unquestionably entitled to both the credit and the blame.

The blame part is simple. Like *Platoon*, this is one of those films whose structure seems so heavily derived from the sorts of war genre traditions we have been discussing that there cannot by definition be much in the way of deep human interest. Mollberg and Linna portray the same sort of heavily stratified army that one gets from German fiction of both wars. The officers are both a class and a caste, and they treat the ordinary soldiers with the sort of harshness that one scarcely credits even though it has been thoroughly described by writers like Heinrich, Kirst, and Remarque.

Since Finland was allied with Germany during the invasion of the Soviet Union, I suppose it is not too surprising to find affinities between the military systems of both nations. Films made in smaller countries tend to be forced towards a sort of realism that can be avoided in the larger ones, so presumably the portrayals are truthful, although having seen Mollberg's 1977 film, *Pretty*

Good for a Human Being, I see some of the same schematic class analyses of society here that I saw in the earlier work, a sort of closet pop-socialism that has been the bane of the Scandinavian cinema for decades.

The point of the film is also simplistic. In the best traditions of *All Quiet on the Western Front* we see how young men of an appealing age are first dehumanized and terrorized by the system, and then turned into cannon fodder. The problem is that the Wilhelmine Germany that Remarque was writing about bore a heavy responsibility for starting World War One: his criticism of the Army was therefore, by conscious extension, a criticism of the Kaiserreich as well. German writers like Kirst and Heinrich (on a more vulgar level) made the same conscious analogy: the brutalities afflicted on conscripts inside the *Wehrmacht* symbolize the brutalities the regime visited on the world.

For no real reason, Mollberg and Linna seem to be extending this idea to their own country. In fact, there seems to be a strong ideological undercurrent in the film to the effect that Finland's involvement in the invasion of Russia was a mistake.⁹ There may be some truth there, but the situation is not nearly so simple as all that. Outside of the official histories of the Socialist countries, it is generally agreed that the Soviet Union attacked Finland (the so-called "Winter War") out of territorial ambitions pure and simple. Having fought the Russians to a surprisingly stiff draw, the leadership of Finland understandably felt that neutrality à la Sweden was out of the question, particularly after the Germans occupied Norway.

Doubtless Finland was a country with an imperfect system of government whose armed forces reflected or even magnified those imperfections, but it seems both historically pernicious and militarily false to do very much with the comparison. Finland may be a country with a somewhat obscure history, but to my knowledge no one has ever seriously categorized it as a repressive society or a militarist one. What is quite probable is that the Finnish Army used the same brutal training methods that the elite divisions of the *Wehrmacht* used, and for the same reasons. Not out of a desire to brutalize an under class of enlisted men, but out of a desperate need

⁹These impressions are reinforced by the lengthy discussion of the film in the Finnish Film Foundation's *Film in Finland 1986*, trans. Ulla and Mark Shackleton (Helsinki: Interprint, 1986) 18-24, which implies that the film is both an anti-war film, and to a certain extent even an anti-Finnish film.

to produce soldiers who could fight successfully against overwhelming odds. Whether they did so out of conscious emulation, a sense of practicality, or whether they simply used a system so as to get similar ends, they appear to have been at least partially successful. Finland is the only state to have resisted the Soviet Union by force twice and then to have escaped being gobbled up in the aftermath of the debacle of 1945. Any one of those by itself is impressive, and anyone who knows even the briefest smidgen of modern European history finds Finland an interesting country as a result.

This is where the film becomes more successful. Forget about the old tired themes and the febrile attempts at class analysis. What remains is a sadly marvelous epic of death. Not one of the young soldiers survives, and after a few scenes the audience does not expect them to survive. No one knows what the fascination for these tales of long slow deaths amidst heroic deeds is, but Mollberg has managed to capture it.

Partially this is because the conditions in which the war was fought lend themselves to heroic images. The Finnish Army apparently fought with very little. The soldiers we see lack not only transport, but even most of the impedimenta of warfare. Their uniforms seem shabby, and most of them don't even wear steel helmets. These aren't the sorts of details that Mollberg could have fudged on, but he makes them work marvelously. The modern soldier increasingly looks like a sinister killer, no matter how innocent his face. Indeed, it was this dichotomy that Pontecorvo put to such good use in *The Battle of Algiers*, and it is present in *Ricochets* as well. In *Platoon* the situation is even more extreme: Oliver Stone's grunts are supposed to be seen as sympathetic figures, but, swaddled in their bullet-proof vests, waving their futuristic weapons, they look increasingly like your worst nightmare, and they act that way as well.

But somewhere along in his career since 1977 and *Pretty Good for a Human Being*, Mollberg has turned into a director who can capitalize on the somewhat minimalist situation of the Finnish Army, and, surprisingly, an action oriented director with a surprising flair for handling fluid action shots. There are still places where the film creaks to a halt and he resorts to his old talky style, but when he concentrates on the actual war itself, he transcends all the limitations of the genre.

Of course history itself is a good helper. These

Finnish soldiers, armed mostly with a submachine gun of local manufacture and some sacks of ammunition, really do look like the frightened young men all these other directors want you to think they are making their movies about. As a result, they're more sympathetic, and more believable. Their heroism, as it develops, seems the result of genuine courage, not of some sort of personality disorder. As they battle through these northern woods, they have an amateurish air of improvisation about them, which again is singularly convincing.

Even when successful they don't come across as trained professionals just doing their job, but as young men who are learning how to control their feelings of absolute terror. One is therefore conscious of the crowd/army dichotomy, and this feeling—the realization of the total strain it takes to be a soldier in such circumstances, to submit to an insane discipline which teaches that in organized killing lies the only hope of saving your own life—is absolutely unique to this movie. No other war film in recent years has even come close.

What even the most serious war films usually do is raise fears inside the audience. We fear that the filmmaker is glorifying war, or trying to make us feel good as we see aggressions being channeled. In some cases the films are simply horrific to no real end at all. Even when the director can capture the horror at the center of things, he often gives the audience some sort of prop. In *Cross of Iron*, for instance, we can't seriously believe that the end will come, because Corporal Steiner is simply too much the star of the film for this to happen. So Mollberg's images do an unusually convincing job of showing us this sort of horrible heroism from a sympathetic point of view. He doesn't glorify war, but he does glorify the young men who died in it, producing a surprisingly strong film whose appeal certainly doesn't require one to know very much about the ins and outs of Finnish geo-politics during the 1940s.

Down at the other end of the Eastern Front from Finland was Vienna. For most of their rule, the Hapsburg Emperors had been either the outright enemies of the Germans or their competitors. There was a curious love-hate relationship between them, probably symbolized as much as anything by the fact that their respective national anthems had the same melody but different words.

The Empire of course was itself a mass of love-hate relations and profound contradictions of the

first order. Centuries of imperial censorship and bureaucracy had built a Chinese wall around the place (as Grillparzer remarked), inside which the founders of virtually all that is significant in modern life lived and worked: Freud and Mozart, Kafka and Brahms, Klimt and Herzl, Schoenberg and Schnitzler.

It was a state in which nearly everyone had a uniform and a title, but which spent less than any of its neighbors on armaments and soldiers. Consequently, when the war broke out—which the Empire in typically paradoxical fashion managed to start by getting their competitor and ally the Kaiser to declare war on France as the prelude to their own invasion of Serbia—the Empire blundered on through, its army only quitting when the state behind them had ceased to exist.

What finally was left was the imperial city itself, with its perverse pride in tormenting its geniuses while they were alive, then only to heap honors on them after they were dead. Mozart, broke, was buried in an unmarked grave, only to become the city's adored idol in death. Strauss was lionized while alive, but had to become a German citizen to solve his marital problems . . . or so the legends went.

Some of the paradoxes were less romantic.



The hero (standing) eyes his future girl. *Welcome in Vienna*

Vienna's greatest mayor, Karl Lueger, was one of its most notable anti-semites. In the matter of festering hatreds, the Viennese had little to learn from their neighbors. The Viennese had their own brand of anti-semitism. It developed independently of anything to the north of it; indeed it was during his stay in Vienna that Hitler started becoming such a public anti-semite. The Austrians had their own fascism, their own militarism, and their own mixture of deceit and dishonesty. The Old Emperor died, the Empire

fell, the Little Chancellor went, the Little Corporal killed himself, and the Russians arrived. But much of the old self image still remained, even in a shrinking city choked with rubble.

Back to Vienna in 1945 come two young naturalized American soldiers. They were born in Vienna, went to school there, fled to America, and then entered the American army. Their mastery of German was useful, and they return as conquerors and rulers to the country they were hounded out of as Jews. They're idealistic, and they carry within them the same set of loves and hates that their birthplace still has. Axel Corti's sardonic portrait of his country after the war deals in all of these paradoxes, and with great relish. When *Welcome in Vienna* begins the war is over and peace has broken out. The two young men grow up in a fashion worthy of Schnitzler or Roth, which is to say that they move from naive idealism to satanic disillusionment.

Like the protagonists of most war films, they think that the war has solved something. The natives know better. Everything is still pretty much the same. Paradoxically, the vanquished adjust to life after the war better than the victors. One of the two young men succumbs. He becomes the true Viennese, while the other remains a bitter idealist. But both of them come to discover their birthplace, to discover the part of themselves that they left behind.

They discover that the world of Horvath, in which everyone was fundamentally charming and fundamentally crooked, is still there. A film like this inevitably deals in set pieces, and Corti, like many other Austrian filmmakers, operates with a certain kind of flawed flamboyance. One could describe this film by saying that it is a set piece of clichés (drug smuggling, the German general who is whisked away to Washington, the Nazi ex-school chums, etc.). But that would imply that Corti doesn't know any better. He does. It's a calculated risk to make a film this way, just as it is a calculated risk (even in Austria) to make a film in black and white.

But it works. There haven't been many decent Austrian films made. Saying that this is one of the best sounds like faint praise, and would leave an erroneous impression. It's an excellent film which strikes just the right note in its handling of all sorts of delicate issues, issues which, as recent events in Austrian politics have made abundantly clear, are still quite delicate.

The two young Jewish boys whose families were run out of Austria went to a country where they hoped to be able to live in peace. By and

large this was true, and both of them proved it by returning to Europe to fight, even though one of them came back to Vienna convinced that communism was the answer. He persisted in this belief until he met his opposite number on the Russian side. His persistence marked him as it marked many of his peers and immediate ancestors. The Jews in Europe had been actively involved in socialism, and they became actively involved in bolshevism as well. When they left the old world, disillusioned with its promise, they didn't let go of their newly acquired ideas so lightly. In the United States, of course, they prospered.

But not all Jews went to the United States. A surprising number went to South America, for much the same reasons that large numbers of Germans and Italians and Spaniards had been going there from the 1840s on. From Sao Paulo south into Argentina the country was fertile, the climate mild, the governments disposed to let emigrants alone. In some places the European emigrants who moved in formed towns and villages which were only nominally, say, Brazilian, but where the children were taught their native German, where for better or worse the customs of the old country were preserved.

Argentina was the most prosperous of these countries, the one with the highest standard of living, the one whose capital, untouched by war and occupation, was now more European than anything in Europe. Some of the Jews who moved there assimilated rapidly into the larger society around them, and some of them recapitulated the older patterns and formed their own small society.

It might seem that World War Two had very little impact on Argentina or Brazil, but this was not the case. Brazil's entry into the war on the allied side had a profound impact on its future development and on the role of its armed forces in the national life. In Argentina, on the other hand, the Army had been deeply influenced by the Axis. The population, heavily Italian, was deeply involved with the fortunes of fascist Italy. But Argentina was technically neutral, a haven for all sorts of refugees. The unravelling of the two fascist powers thus became the unravelling of Argentina as well.

Put so baldly, the case seems overstated, but it is Raul de la Torre's case in *Poor Butterfly*. De la Torre is not terribly well known outside of Argentina, but he's one of the country's more experienced directors, and one of its most proficient. The film was undervalued at Cannes,

as Latin American films shown in competition invariably are nowadays, and elsewhere it has been overshadowed by Puenzo's *The Official Story*, even though de la Torre's is by far the better film.¹⁰

One reason is that de la Torre has a better crew and cast. Graciela Borges, who plays Clara, the heroine, is the country's leading actress. Aida Bortnik, although less known, is Argentina's best script writer. She worked on *The Truce* and *The Official Story*. This is an experienced group, and it shows. Technically it's by far the best Argentine film made, with an expensive look to it. The acting is superior, and the story an absorbing one.

There isn't much of a plot, as de la Torre's emphasis is on the mood of 1945 and on his heroine's state of mind. The war is ending, and refugees are landing in Argentina. But for Clara, little of this is important. She is a radio announcer, whose career, such as it is, consists of making those breathless and melodious announcements that were a prominent feature of the old radio scene, which the film evokes in opulent style. De la Torre's recreations of 1940s radio shows, done live before enthusiastic audiences, are some of the best period work around. So Clara is a social butterfly, content to be a glamorous star, the wife of an established surgeon (played by the highly respected Lautaro Murua), and the mother of three upper-class adolescent daughters.

But Clara's father is Jewish. She was sent away at the age of ten and brought up as a Roman Catholic. She loves Boris (her father), but she hasn't done much to keep in touch with him. She's self-centered and thoughtless, and when he mysteriously dies, she's simply confused. Her confusion leads her to grapple with being Jewish in the year of 1945. Her father was a political activist. He brought to Argentina all those ideas he had fought for in Europe, but Clara never learned a thing about him or what he was doing, or what he stood for. Unlike the two young Viennese Jews in *Welcome in Vienna*, Clara has made a clean break with her past.

In Bortnik's very subtle script, Clara never comes to any great realizations about herself or her past, either. You keep waiting for her to become radicalized, or at least to become politically conscious of what is happening all around her. But she never does. De la Torre builds his picture impressionistically, simply

showing us bits of scenes. They don't lead anywhere, and there isn't any attempt to produce a coherent narrative, but we get a subtle feel for the complexity of Clara's situation.

Clara's central problem is quite real. When her father dies she realizes that she's Jewish, but she doesn't feel anything in common with her father's family. Her relations with them are a series of confrontations in which she invariably does the wrong thing. She can't understand their customs, and they, for their part, are baffled by her reflexive signing of the cross and her inability to understand Yiddish. In the best sequences of the film we watch them shout invectives at one another. For them, it's simply a means of discourse; for Clara, it's angry and upsetting.

One of the strengths here is that de la Torre isn't afraid to deal in cultural stereotypes. Clara really is the poor butterfly, who can neither understand nor escape her origins. Her Jewish family, with their shouting and their Yiddish, frighten her, while her husband's stolid reserve now seems almost as alien. So Clara is trapped in the middle. She can't get her life in order, although she can come to terms with her father's death.

1986 was not a good year at Cannes for actresses, which is probably why the Jury's split award to Barbara Sukowa and Fernanda Torres went without too much comment. But Graciela Borges was clearly the best actress around. Generally in her performances she plays at stereotypes, and she can do the best upper middle-class Argentine feminine twit around. But here she turns the role inside out, keeping Clara firmly in hand.

She plays Clara as a mass of contradictions, a woman who can't quite deal either with her past or her present. You can easily see how she never would have thought about her family background, her father, or contemporary events. She's consistent even in her inconsistencies. Her complete emotional breakdown when she admits her father's death, and her relation to him, is an unexpected masterpiece of emotional display. You don't expect the immaculate star Borges is portraying to do much more than weep a few dainty tears. But when her father's death begins to penetrate to her, she has what is virtually a nervous breakdown. It's a real tour de force, one of those moments of the cinema so real that it is painful to watch, and one of the very few displays of any acting ability at all during the festival.

After such a scene, we expect some growth, but it never happens. She's killed, offscreen, in an

¹⁰An abbreviated portion of these remarks appeared in *Americas* 38.6 (1986): 55-56.

accident. It's a grandly confident gesture on the director's part, to kill off his heroine like this. It may not be successful, because everyone expects, demands, something more cinematic. But it's a curiously fitting testimony. Her death comes to us just like those millions of other deaths that she has only recently become aware of. De la Torre starts his film with documentary footage of World War II, and Clara's cousin takes her to see a newsreel about concentration camps, which we

also see. So the ending works.

Poor Butterfly isn't one of those films that immediately overwhelms the viewer, but its virtues definitely grow on you. The more you study the situation it probes, the more respect you have for its creators. In large measure that sums up all four of these films, which explains why these excursions into the more peculiar areas of world cinema can be so rewarding. □

FEATURED ARTISTS

Kim Bridgford won the 1983 National Society of Arts and Letters' National Career Awards Competition in Poetry. She received an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Stuart Peterfreund is an associate professor of English at Northeastern University. He is the author of three books of poetry, the third of which is *Interstatements*, published in 1986 by Curbstone Press. Peterfreund has also published over thirty critical essays in the areas of Romanticism, literature and science, and eighteenth-century studies.

Angela Sommer-Bodenburg has specialized recently in children's books, such as the *Little Vampire* series (*Der Kleine Vampire*), soon to be released as a television series.
