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Mise-en-Scène

A FILM MAGAZINE



**Louis Giannetti on
Buster Keaton**

**Interviews with:
Nicholas Meyer
and
Verna Fields**

Mise-en-Scène

ISSUE 2

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Mise-en-Scène, published by the CWRU Film Society at Case Western Reserve University, hopes to promote writing on film which is clear, interesting, and informative. We are committed to presenting articles with a variety of approaches which clarify relationships in films, establish appropriate contexts, and analyze the techniques that film directors use to communicate their themes. We are particularly anxious to print essays with a strong visual emphasis.

The staff welcomes queries and suggestions. Please write to the address below c/o Ms. Linda Benn. Manuscripts (which should be typed, totally double-spaced, and documented when appropriate) must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please write to *Mise-en-Scène*, c/o CWRU Film Society, Baker Building, Room 2, 10950 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44106.

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FRAMED BY HITCHCOCK

by Thomas Hemmeter

There is no denying the powerful dramatic use Alfred Hitchcock makes of his *mise-en-scène*, encouraging audience identification with and involvement in the fortunes of his characters. But an emotional response is not all Hitchcock's complex *mise-en-scène* calls forth from the careful viewer: on a deeper level his disposal of visual elements in the space of the frame demands that the viewer disengage himself from the narrative flow. In other words, Hitchcock uses his particular film techniques to cut in two directions: to engage the emotions of the audience or to distance the audience.

Yet there is a critical tendency to emphasize the former to the neglect of the latter, perhaps due to the emphasis Hitchcock himself places on the viewers' emotions in his interviews. In his interview with Truffaut, for example, Hitchcock said with regard to his *mise-en-scène*, that "the screen rectangle must be charged with emotion."¹ Truffaut himself has continued this line in recent articles on Hitchcock, stressing "his profound emotional tension."² He calls Hitchcock's *mise-en-scène* "écriture," "which consists of focusing on the character through whose eyes things will be seen."³ Other critics have followed this path, which might be summarized in Braudy's claim that "all of Hitchcock's 'techniques' are aimed at destroying the separation between the film and its audience."⁴

But in insisting on the primacy of the dramatic content of Hitchcock's films, these critics ignore the deeper

meanings which emerge from Hitchcock's controlled manipulation of his visual field, meanings accessible only to the self-conscious viewer at an emotional distance from his images. I would like to examine both uses Hitchcock makes of his cinematic space by focusing on one aspect of his *mise-en-scène*: the film frame. First I will explore how his framing creates dramatic focus, involving us in the film by drawing us into the created world of the film. Here Hitchcock frames his images to draw the appropriate audience response from the dramatic situation. Then I will examine the use of the frame to call into question simple notions of space, to promote more complex ironies and self-consciousness, and ultimately to establish Hitchcock's film space as unstable and symbolic. Here Hitchcock's framing requires the audience to withdraw from the dramatic situation. In his use of the flexible film frame, Hitchcock establishes a rhythm of engagement and disengagement as he alternately encourages and discourages audience involvement.

I. Framing to Engage the Audience

Very often a filmgoer forgets that a movie has limiting borders, so flexible is the film frame. The camera may focus on a tiny object in a close-up, or it may take in miles of space; yet the picture remains the same size in the theater and the audience easily adjusts to the contractions or expansions of the images. Hitchcock uses his frame in various ways to involve his audience in the dramatic conflicts and to ensure audience identifica-

tion with the characters. I will discuss some of his more common techniques: tight framing; framing to isolate; positioning of characters within the frame; and framing to entrap.

Hitchcock uses the flexibility of the cinematic frame in moving from a longer to a closer shot to focus the viewer's attention on the important relationship or response in a scene. In *Shadow of a Doubt*, for example, when Uncle Charlie demands the film from the undercover cop who has taken his picture, Hitchcock cuts from a medium-long shot of Young Charlie between her uncle and the cops to a medium shot of Young Charlie as the cop hands over the film in front of her. The frame excludes the two men, seeming to defuse the obvious conflict. But the tighter framing of Young Charlie, whose eyes stare unbelievably as the exchange takes place, properly focuses on her psychological conflict. In this emphatic use of the frame, Hitchcock forces the audience to identify with Young Charlie and to share her confusion.

Besides its power to emphasize by selecting something for the audience to focus on, the frame can express the social isolation of a character by its ability to exclude. After Bruno tells Guy about his murder of Guy's estranged wife Miriam in *Strangers on a Train*, Guy discovers at the Morton home that this knowledge has separated him from the innocent Morton family. Upon first entering Mr. Morton's study, Guy is left alone in the frame as Ann Morton joins her father and

sister. This pattern continues through much of the scene, where one-shots of Guy make him appear trapped in the cubicle of his secret knowledge. Hitchcock uses a careful framing to separate a character whose guilty awareness of a crime distances him from the normal characters who are unaware of his connection with such dark affairs.

Hitchcock also conveys a character's state of mind by positioning him oddly within the frame. We expect characters to be centered in the frame or distributed in a balanced fashion across the horizontal stretch of the frame, so that its enclosing rectangle appears to arrange the characters and the space around and between them in logical harmony. When a character is situated at the edge of a frame with nothing significant filling the rest of the space, the audience becomes aware of the possibility of the character slipping right out of the lit rectangle of the screen. Before the final attack of the birds on the Brenner home in *The Birds*, Mrs. Brenner huddles in the rear-left corner of the living room, with only a table to be seen in the rest of the image. Her closeness to the edge of the frame suggests her fear of impending death.

By utilizing the extreme edges of his frame, Hitchcock can also indicate the relationship of two characters. The tension between two characters is conveyed by a longer two-shot which positions one character at one side of the frame, the second character at the opposite side. Hitchcock gives a tense edge to the conflict between a despairing Mrs. Brenner and her son Mitch when he shoots them at medium-long-shot range, she at the extreme right of the frame and he at the extreme left (*The Birds*). The space between them suggests Mrs. Brenner's hidden resentment of Mitch's love for Melanie. Their placement at the edges of the frame makes obvious the space separating them, a space which they rush into as the tension gives way to open conflict (and the camera dollies in to a medium shot of them shouting face to face). Another example appears



L.B. Jeffries, the protagonist of Rear Window (1954), keeps an eye on his neighbors across the court through a pair of binoculars. Here we peep with him at the unsuccessful (to the left) and successful (to the right) love lives of two women.

in *Shadow of a Doubt*. In the bar scene Uncle Charlie tries to convince Young Charlie not to betray his guilt to the Newton family. The framing maintains the tension throughout the scene, as the two are squeezed to the edges of the frame by the intervening table. Uncle Charlie tries to cross the space by reaching for her hand, but Young Charlie pulls back, later reaffirming the space separating them by placing the widow's ring on the table between them.

Hitchcock often uses the bottom of the frame to suggest the extreme vulnerability of a character. For example, their position at the bottom part of the frame practically becomes a metaphor for the helplessness of the Brenners and Melanie Daniels in *The Birds*. This use of the frame is comically introduced in the opening scene in the bird shop, as several shots show the hands of Mitch and Melanie waving at the bottom of the frame as an escaped bird flies above them. After the last attack on the Brenner home, Hitchcock cuts first from Mitch, then Melanie and finally Mrs. Brenner as each moves into an

empty frame, with only their heads visible in the three successive low-angle one-shots. In this chilling use of the frame bottom, each character's eyes look up into the empty space above, fearful of a further attack.

Because of its rigid shape of enclosure, the frame's rectangle becomes an easy visual metaphor for entrapment. Hitchcock often emphasizes this association in a frame-within-a-frame *mise-en-scène*. Using a door, a window, or two objects on the set, Hitchcock suggests the social or mental constriction of characters photographed within these internal frames. After peeping at Marion Crane undressing, Norman Bates returns to his Gothic home and sits at a kitchen table (*Psycho*). We see him at the end of a hall in the light, with both the narrowing, dark walls of the hall and the door frame into the kitchen framing him. These enclosing shapes emphasize Norman's sexual repression. Hitchcock also uses internal frames to underline Norman's desperate fear as social forces begin to close in on him later in the film. When Sam and Lila arrive at the motel near the



end of *Psycho*, we see Norman peering from behind the curtain of a bedroom window. The frame of the window makes visual his feeling of entrapment, and we sense his fear immediately upon seeing him so confined.

Sometimes Hitchcock holds a shot so long that the viewer becomes aware of the frame itself as an enclosure. Closer shots convey this most effectively, as in the medium-close shot of the sad face of the wife of the crofter in *The 39 Steps*. Hannay has just kissed her and fled out the back door while her husband is in the front betraying Hannay to the police. The tight shot is held long enough so that we sense the constriction of her loveless marriage as she stares forlornly within the close, cramped walls of the frame.



Marnie (Tippi Hedren) and Mark (Sean Connery) in *Marnie* (1964). In the longer shot the window is the obvious source of threat to Marnie as Mark tries to comfort her. Lightning flashes through the window trigger her psychotic panic. In the closer shot Mark comforts her again as her panic rises, but here we notice the proprietary hand on her neck. He is the real threat to Marnie, and soon will take sexual advantage of her fear.

II. Framing and Audience Disengagement

So far I have been analyzing Hitchcock's framing in its overt dramatic emphases, harmonies and disharmonies, its contrasts and ironies. But a thorough analysis must take into account more subtle and complex uses of the frame and the arrangements within it. Andre Bazin refers to Hitchcock's creation in his mise-en-scène of "an essential instability of image,"⁵ a resonant phrase which I hope to elucidate by exploring Hitchcock's framing as a distancing device. We will find that Hitchcock frames his images to create a highly unstable space which brings the audience to recognize the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality and between character and role. If the viewer develops this paranoid awareness of the deceptiveness of the mise-en-scène, he becomes conscious of his own limited way of seeing. This more objective and intellectual response to a framed image assumes a disengagement of the audience from the dramatic emotions of a film. I will discuss three of the most common ways in which Hitchcock asks the audience to become aware of the frame as an artificial device: by emphasizing the frame as an enclosure of space; by indicating the

unreliability of the framed image; and by using the frame to make the audience conscious of its own habits of seeing.

When asked about his compositions, Hitchcock replied that he uses all the available space to fill the rectangle of the frame.⁶ This is normally true, but the exceptions to this norm make the viewer especially aware of the frame as an enclosure of space. Empty spaces in a Hitchcock frame call into question the legitimacy or reality of the rest of the *mise-en-scène*. For example, balanced compositions imply a safe environment. But we notice a composition's symmetry only in longer shots when there is sufficient space between objects, lines, etc., to make the balance visible. Another space which such shots usually open up is an empty foreground, as in the near identical shots of the intelligence meetings in *Notorious* and *North by Northwest*. In both films, Hitchcock emphasizes this empty space in two ways: he pulls the camera back from a closer shot and he shoots over an empty section of the table in the immediate foreground. (In *North By Northwest* he even includes an empty chair close to the camera, a more overt statement of the absence of personal feeling in these public servants.) The agents are arranged in the background in a neatly balanced group, expressing an alien order. The empty space in the foreground indicates lack of human feeling as the agents discuss how to manipulate the innocents, Alicia Huberman and Roger Thornhill. An alert viewer notices the discrepancy in the frame between the extreme balance of the background and the empty space in the foreground, and rightly questions the notion of rational order implied in the balanced figures.

While open space in a frame can cause the audience to question the *mise-en-scène*, the audience tends to maintain its dramatic engagement in shots allowing no open spaces at all (mainly because these are closer shots). But occasionally Hitchcock so constricts a character or characters in a frame that the audience senses the falsity of the total

denial of space. We sense an artificiality in the close-up shots of Devlin and Alicia embracing in the hotel room in *Notorious*. The claustrophobic over-fill of the space in the frame denies the environment

around the lovers. Their fevered embraces, which express a romantic desire to block out the rest of the world, are shot in close shots which literally deny the existence of intruding space. Consequently the



Johnny Aysgarth (Cary Grant) and Lina MacKinlaw (Joan Fontaine) from Suspicion (1941). Positioning his characters at the extreme left and right of the frame, Hitchcock conveys the tension between the two characters.



*By positioning his actors within the obtrusive doorway, Hitchcock doubles his frame. This frame-within-a-frame *mise-en-scène* reinforces the fear of these characters huddling in a building after the first attack in *The Birds* (1963).*



The evil "Professor" from *The Thirty-nine Steps* (1935) finally reveals himself as the leader of the spy ring at the end of the film. The curtained loge emphasizes the treacherous role-playing of this master spy, for he has fooled everyone by acting the part of a cultivated professor up to this point in the film. Here we see him in his true role.



L.B. Jeffries is quite often incorrect in his opinions about his neighbors. We share his prying gaze at one of his neighbors as he peeps at her through binoculars from across the court in this shot from *Rear Window*. The visible window frame should make us aware of the restricted field of Jeffries' vision. He feels he can safely look into their lives, but a murderer catches him looking, breaks into his apartment and hurls Jeffries out his own window.



alert viewer does not take this intimate close-up at its dramatic face value, and suspects that the lovers are distorting the spatial world in their presumed intimacy.

A frame without a visible human figure is a more direct assertion of the hostility (or at least indifference) of the universe toward human relationships. Occasionally Hitchcock holds his camera in place after the characters have moved out of the frame. This occurs twice as Young Charlie and Uncle Charlie leave the bar after she rejects his argument that she should protect the other Newtons by keeping his secret (*Shadow of a Doubt*). They walk out the front door of the bar and off camera, leaving us to stare at the lonely facade of the dingy bar with its brick wall and silly, displaced clock face (it's the Tick-Tock Bar). The next shot uses a reverse dolly as the pair walk silently down the street, but rather than cutting away to a new image when they leave the frame, Hitchcock holds the camera on the empty, dim street for a second or two. These empty frames suggest the emptiness of the relationship between Uncle Charlie and his niece, and Charlie's desolation over her uncle's mania. After these troubled characters leave, the drab places seem emptied of meaning in their lonely anonymity. This double vision of the frame, with and without characters, makes the audience aware of the artificiality and contingency of the space around a character.

Sometimes we become aware of the empty space in a frame as an arena for manipulation, either by Hitchcock or by a character. As the two policemen chase after Uncle Charlie near the beginning of *Shadow of a Doubt*, the camera looks down on an empty court



The Morton family and Guy Haines (Patricia Hitchcock, Farley Granger, Ruth Roman and Leo G. Carroll, left to right) become aware that there is more to their world than the safe space in Senator Morton's home in this shot from Strangers on a Train (1951). These conventional, respectable characters have just learned that a police tail is following Guy, and go to the window to look. The underworld of crime is just off frame.

located between old warehouses on an alley. We presume that Uncle Charlie has already passed this area, and watch as the two policemen enter, run about, split up, leave the frame, and return to the court in apparent defeat. Suddenly the camera pans over to a medium-long shot of Uncle Charlie sitting on the roof of a building, watching the scene along with us. As Hitchcock plays with us, Uncle Charlie is playing with the police. The court below is a stage upon which the police enact their search for his amusement. He himself is free to leave the stage and join the audience.

Empty spaces are trickier when Hitchcock manipulates them without the connivance of a character. It is

all too easy for a gullible viewer to fill the space incorrectly. So we believe Miriam Haines was killed in the tunnel to Fantasy Island as we wait with the camera at the tunnel's exit for the horror to emerge (*Strangers on a Train*). After all, we hear her frantic screams as we watch the exit of the tunnel. Instead Miriam's boat glides out with everyone intact, followed shortly by Bruno's boat. What might have been was not, but Hitchcock's space has a horrible potential. The next empty space in a frame may be filled with that frightening image we dread, or it may not. Aware of the technique, the viewer learns to resist dramatic involvement and to beware Hitchcock's empty frames.

Hitchcock manipulates his frame to convey not only the deceptiveness of empty space, but the impossibility of forming a conclusion about a person from what we do see in the frame as well. So he will often shrink the frame in a closer shot to enclose the reactions of a character, but deny the viewer a clear picture of

←*The extreme balance of this shot from Marnie (1964) should put us on guard. Marnie (Tippi Hedren) has just robbed the safe, but a cleaning lady threatens to catch her in the act. Marnie must cross the space between herself and the camera to escape, without making a sound to alert the cleaning lady. But the danger of this space is false, for the cleaning lady is deaf. The artifice of this balanced mise-en-scene alerts us to Hitchcock's playful treachery, for he is manipulating the space within the frame to create false expectations.*



Roger Thornhill (Cary Grant) learns the hard way that open spaces may be the most dangerous in the cropduster sequence from North By Northwest (1959). In the opening shot of this sequence we see Thornhill standing alone in the empty Indiana farmland. But he is being set up for an attack from above by the airplane.

the action. In the famous stabbing scene near the end of *Sabotage* (like the death of Uncle Charlie near the end of *Shadow of a Doubt*), Hitchcock uses medium shots and medium-close shots of the two characters' struggle so that we cannot clearly see the actual killing. The action takes place below the frame as we see Verloc's face wince in pain. The audience is uncertain whether Mrs. Verloc stabbed her husband or whether he impaled himself on the knife. Hitchcock leaves us with this ambiguity, for his interest is in the psychological response of Mrs. Verloc (who certainly wanted to kill him if she did not actually complete the act). But the very framing of the shot suggests the unreliability of the senses, especially vision, to determine the truth of a situation. The viewer realizes that what the frame encloses is what he should focus on, even though he cannot see everything.

Sometimes, though, the viewer thinks that what he does see in the frame is the only significant information, but he is often wrong. Hitchcock uses sound evocatively to suggest the ordinary world on the streets below the apartment in which the entire film *Rope* takes place. The faint sounds of the outside world heard early in the film suggest that the enclosed space of the apartment is artificial because it is divorced from reality. This rarefied atmosphere encourages the two boys to carry out Professor Cadell's theories in an experimental murder. The sounds rushing through the opened window at the end clearly call the framed world of this film into question. The final shot of *Shadow of a Doubt* reverses this arrangement: the frame encloses a visual of Young Charlie and Jack Graham standing glumly outside a church, a visual which denies the authenticity of the syrupy eulogy we hear coming from a minister inside the church. In both cases the sound from off camera evokes a world which contradicts the world within the frame.

Hitchcock likewise allows his characters to draw false conclusions about the world from their restricted



Alicia Huberman (*Ingrid Bergman*) and Devlin (*Cary Grant*) from *Notorious* (1946) in a claustrophobic close-up embrace. The absence of space in the frame suggests the fragility of their love.

field of vision. Sometimes he questions the vision of his characters overtly, especially on point-of-view shots past an internal frame of some sort in the foreground. When Hitchcock shows us Hannay and the crofter's wife in an animated discussion inside the house, we see what the crofter sees: not only the pair bending toward each other, but the window frame through which the crofter is looking as well (*The 39 Steps*). This frame-within-a-frame suggests the limitation of his point of view, reinforcing the idea that what he sees is only the appearance of an affair which his jealousy transforms into a real affair. Here we realize the falsity of his conclusion, because Hitchcock's editing has established that the crofter's wife knows that Hannay is the hunted "murderer." But there is no such dramatic irony when we share Hannay's limited point of view. We share his illusion of safety as we share his point-of-view gaze out the Professor's window on the confused police beating the bushes below. In reality the danger is behind him. When Hitchcock inserts a point-of-view shot past a fence, window frame, rail, etc., in the foreground, the visual in the

space to the rear takes on the subjective unreliability of the gullible onlooker. The *mise-en-scène* becomes a stage to enact the character's fears or desires.

When Hitchcock shoots through an obtrusive internal frame which limits our vision like a masking shot does -- but the shot is not from any character's point of view -- we become aware of ourselves as watchers. This self-consciousness implies a double way of seeing, corresponding to the two frames of the image. In *The Lodger* Hitchcock cuts away from the Lodger sneaking out of his room late one night to shots of the latest of the Avenger's murders. Without the arch in the foreground through which we watch the crowd gather around the Avenger's victim, we might simply watch the gathering crowd as one more ongoing event of the plot. But with the intrusive arch in the foreground, we sense our own special point of view as different from that of the ignorant crowd, who look like a group of foolish players on a stage bewildered by events of which we have more knowledge. Not that this visual privilege means that we know the truth. In this case we saw the

second murder by the Avenger after we had seen the Lodger sneak out of the rooming house. Putting two and two together, we incorrectly assume the Lodger's guilt. The double frame of the arched mise-en-scene encourages us in this assumption of privileged vision, though it does not guarantee our correct conclusion. After all, we do know more than the crowd (if not enough to conclusively decide a character's guilt).

His use of the film frame is but one example of Hitchcock's complex manipulation of cinematic techniques to provoke a double response from the audience. Hitchcock, the importunate host, insists that we enter his film world and then mocks us for admiring the reality of this world. Like the frame of a mirror (to change the metaphor), Hitchcock's frames enclose spaces which appeal to our credulity. We want to cross the aesthetic distance between ourselves and the screen image; we want to see the image as though it were our own reality. Hitchcock

abets us in our desire for visual illusion, framing his images so that their dramatic impact causes us to forget the frame.

But to stop here would be to underestimate Hitchcock's sophistication, and as well to trivialize his films as mere melodramas. Hitchcock is certainly aware of the artifice of film, and a full experience of a Hitchcock film requires us to see the artificial border of the frame surrounding the enticing verisimilitude of his images. Once aware that an image is framed, a viewer will disengage himself from the image. In this removed state of mind he is more receptive to deeper reflexive and symbolic meanings. Usually such meanings become clear to the viewer only after he comes to recognize his previous failure to keep his distance from the dramatic content of the frame. This interaction of encouraged illusion (engagement) and subsequent disillusion (disengagement) knits the rich, ironic fabric of Hitchcock's films.

* * * * *

(1) Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 43.

(2) Francois Truffaut, "My Friend Hitchcock," *American Film*, 14, No. 5 (March, 1979), p. 25.

(3) Francois Truffaut, "Hitchcock -- His True Power Is Emotion," *New York Times*, 4 March 1979, p. 19.

(4) Leo Braudy, "Hitchcock, Truffaut, and the Irresponsible Audience" in *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 118.

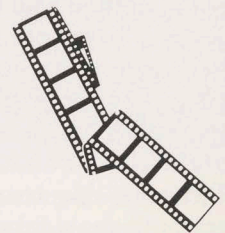
(5) Andre Bazin, "Hitchcock versus Hitchcock" in *Focus on Hitchcock*, ed. Albert J. LaValley (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), p. 69.

(6) Peter Bogdanovich, *The Cinema of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1962), p. 4.

* * * * *



Thornhill (Cary Grant) falls after being shot by Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) in *North by Northwest*. This death scene is being staged for the benefit of Philip Vandamm (James Mason) and his henchman on the right. Hitchcock's *mise-en-scène* reveals the artifice. The wall behind Thornhill separates him all too neatly from the other characters, framing his death act as a proscenium arch frames a stage act. The other characters stare at him like a mesmerized theater audience, all arranged appropriately on their side of the frame.



CITY LIGHTS

Chaplin's Indictment of the 20's

by Gerard Molyneaux

The reason Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* is not treated as a film of social commentary is that it originally was and often still is received with critical and popular amnesia. People forget. They ignore the instructive perspective given in the film's title because they forget the opening scenes. The film they concoct should be called the Tramp and the Flower Girl. The movie which concerns us is the one Chaplin created and titled very fittingly, *City Lights*.

In its very first frames the film establishes the basis for a thematic investigation of the modern city which will interact with the story of Charlie and the girl. Through the Tramp's efforts to aid the blind flower girl, the film guides us on a tour of the different social echelons and to its various locales: estates, back alleys, and ghettos. Counterpoised, the narrative and the thematic investigation add a poignant sophistication, depth, and intensity to this 1931 film that is unmatched in Chaplin's earlier works. It is the purpose of this presentation to examine the film in light of the perspective provided by the opening scenes and to alert the viewer to the film's ironic view of urban life in the Twenties. The film's skeptical attitude towards the city lifestyle of that era commences with the opening scenes, intensifies throughout the movie, and is brought to its climax in the bittersweet ending of this romantic comedy. A scrutiny of the opening and closing sequences and an overview of the film's progression will indicate how *City Lights* built its indictment not only of the American Dream of the time, but of the Hollywood-Urban version of it as well.

Chaplin opens his film with the image of the bright, gay white way of a large city. Over this image he superimposes, letter by letter, in

flashing neon-light style, the title *City Lights*. The jazzy musical accompaniment reinforces the image of a lively, swinging, and "roaring" metropolis. This impression would gratify an audience bent on seeing another of the Thirties' city films. (Using either gangster or musical formats, films about the city were staples of the early sound era.) Immediately, however, Chaplin establishes the tension of the film by undercutting the image of sensual, flashy euphoria with its opposite: a vision of rigid, bloated pomposity.

The jazz fades out to be replaced by a trumpet fanfare as the citizens gather to dedicate their new monument. Here the film symbolically attacks the Twenties' myths of freedom and prosperity. The scene is hyperbolic in its use of character types of the mayor, the do-gooder lady, and the bohemian architect, all fatuously courting and congratulating each other. Whatever seriousness might have attended their antics is com-

pletely debunked by a sound track which substitutes mechanical kazoo noises for their voices. (A secondary function of the noises is to parody Hollywood's early attempts at sound.) The expectation of nighttime revelry has been collapsed by these character-automatons and their civic rites. The blatant hypocrisy and arrogant vanity of the era find concrete expression in the ceremony's absurdly grotesque statue-monument.

As the curtain is raised on this monument to peace and prosperity, we see Charlie asleep in the lap of the center figure, mocking with his impoverished presence all the phony claims of the city and its ceremony. The citizens' immediate anger toward Charlie foreshadows the movement of the film. Set at the city's altar and surrounded by its partisans, the scene is the symbolic, ritualistic center of the movie. It expresses in a comic-dramatic fashion the tensions that will find more



The Tramp tastes the Millionaire's (Harry Myer) life.



The Tramp spends his last of "wealth" on the Flower Girl (Paulette Goddard).

specific manifestations in the course of the film. The urban ire that chastises Charlie for his appearance and drives him away will be reexpressed in various encounters the Tramp has with the populace. Each of these meetings will manifest this initial display of antipathy between Charlie's values and those of the city. The kind of incidents found in the film will reiterate the theme and action of this preamble described by Gerald Mast. This scene, he writes, "thumbs its nose at sanctimoniousness, civic pride and the glorification of dead forms and dead things at the expense of living people and living things." (Mast, *The Comic Mind*, p. 105)

Obviously the film is discrediting the city and its lights. In effect a film about vision, *City Lights* will argue that a blind girl can see much better without such mechanical distractions and manufactured allurements. The argument begins and ends in the same setting, with the same characters and symbols as calibrators of the validity of the film's theme. On his first visit to this city corner, the Tramp is harrassed by two newsboys whom he easily puts in their place. Freed of that distraction, he turns his attention to a nude mannequin in a store window. Using the subterfuge of an art connoisseur, Charlie studies the image so thoroughly that he nearly falls down an elevator shaft which has opened behind him. Jauntily waddling the street and warily avoiding the police, Charlie

meets the blind flower girl. With his last dime, he buys a flower from her; then through the accidental slamming of a car door, she mistakes him for a rich gentleman. All of this material will be recalled and thematically exploited in the film's last scene. To appreciate the complexity and intensity of these moments, one has to experience with Charlie the anguish his love for the girl has exposed him to, and the pain and violence with which the city has rewarded his heroic efforts for her.

In the early stages of the film, Charlie relies on the patronage of a sometimes loving, sometimes arrogant millionaire to aid him in creating the illusion of gentleman. With the millionaire's money, the Tramp plays the role of wealthy benefactor of the blind girl, the friendship with the rich man giving the earthy Tramp access to the city's finest homes and restaurants. These sections of the movie depict the wild urban nightlife filled with exotic dances, plenty of booze, and jazzy flapper girls who are still lounging around even as the sun comes up. But as in the film's opening, these exuberant parties are invariably followed by a crushing daytime hangover. The millionaire friend turns tyrant, tosses the Tramp out of his house, and takes off for Europe, leaving the little fellow to his own devices. Meanwhile the situation of the girl has turned more dire. Already blind, she becomes critically

ill, and she and her grandmother are threatened with eviction by their landlord, M.B. (Moneybags).

To save the girl and preserve her rustic ghetto home, Charlie turns active agent. His labors for the heroine take us on a journey through the city's lower levels. Though often funny, the tour goes steadily downward in its locales and in its mood. Charlie begins as a street cleaner; more specifically, we see him as the man who shovels horse dung from the streets. Fired from that chore, he then turns to boxing in a sleazy arena filled with part-time pugs and underworld types. A deal to fix the fight falls through, and the Tramp is pummeled. After this scene, the film's comedy drops off almost entirely.

Near despair, Charlie is momentarily rescued by the millionaire, who takes him home and gives him a thousand dollars for the girl. The drunken generosity is undone, however, when the sober millionaire testifies that Charlie has stolen the money. The Tramp finally grabs the bills, and with bullets flying over his head, escapes and gives the money to the girl for the operation to restore her sight. Unlike the knightly courtier who should claim his prize, Charlie now must leave the girl. The downward momentum of the film halts when the city's police apprehend this "villain" and throw him in jail.

Both the girl's condition and the fate of the hero serve as commentaries on the city's indifference and cruelty. But the final evaluation of its values is left for the film's closing moment. The scene opens with the flower girl now cured and operating a flower store at the center of the city. Though she can see, her vision is soon made suspect. When the door of a limousine slams, she associates it with the first meeting of her hero. Clearly, however, her image of a hero has been formed by Hollywood and the city, for she looks hopefully at the handsome and rich young man who enters the shop. Meanwhile the real hero, just released from prison, roams the city

streets. His image testifies to the havoc the city has wreaked on his spirit. No longer do we see the Tramp's jaunty waddle and his sprightly coat and bowler. Hatless and caneless, his coat barely closed with a pin, the Tramp shuffles wearily along the sidewalks, stripped of his indomitable spirit. The forlorn image of Charlie reflects the cost of coping with the city.

Now as he returns to the street corner, Charlie is quickly set upon by the same newsboys. This time he is barely able to fend off the little-league mercenaries, who seem to pick up where their parents have left off. As he reaches to rescue a frayed flower from the gutter, the boys drag him away by the seat of his pants. Ironically, the flower girl laughs at his predicament, and her response seems cruel. Yet it lifts her out of the stereotypic mold and complicates our feelings toward her. Now absorbed in the city life, the innocent flower girl may have adopted its flawed vision. She may, we suspect, be blind and indifferent to the hero, who deserves at least her gratitude. After gesturing to him, she leaves the store. At first he tries to run away, but then turns around. He readily accepts from her the symbol of natural virtue: the flower. The coin she offers, however, must be pressed into his hand; and it is in



Charlie's attempts to raise money for the heroine achieve elephantine proportions in his career as a street cleaner.

that touch that she recognizes her hero and patron. Replying to his statement, she says, "Yes, I can see now." Then the two gaze at each other, painfully and hopefully. In the manner of the figures on the Grecian urn, this couple remains eternally unjoined, while we scrutinize their faces for clues as to what will follow. The structure of comic romance urges that they marry. The film's plot has persuaded us that the girl should choose this uncorrupted hero over the ersatz, Hollywood type. Thematically, however, there is no

guarantee of that resolution.

Beyond these ponderings of the romance, the film has finished its tour of the city and has measured the genuine viability of life in it. Out of the contrasts of its imagined glamor and of its cruel reality come indictments of the place and the time. Thematically, this Depression film has enlightened us about an earlier period, the Twenties. First, *City Lights* dismisses as a bauble the glamor myth of city life. Second, it shows that life there is devoid of human values and disdainful of human needs. Third, the movie persuades us that the pursuit of the city values of money and success leads to dull vanity, loneliness, and depression.

The film's dramatic juxtaposition of the powerfully rich with the suffering poor does not evoke feelings of anger, much less social revolution. Instead, the film gratifies the audience's disdain for phony politics and bogus fashions. *City Lights* ridicules what most of its audience didn't have: money, power, and prestige. It endorses a life of simple virtues centered on the home, rather than in the nightclub. Further, at a time when the Depression had put him on the very bottom rung, the American common man was elevated by *City Lights* and returned to his role as folk hero.



An engaging smile is the Tramp's only defense in the city's underworld.

The *Mise-en-Scène* Interview: NICHOLAS MEYER

by Ken Horowitz and Janie Lindsey

Interview conducted by telephone, March 12, 1980:

Question: I'd like to start with a question about your background. You did your undergraduate studies at the University of Iowa?

Meyer: Right.

Question: Did your interest in films and moviemaking begin at that time or sometime afterwards — after you started your writing?

Meyer: My first interest in films began the first time I saw one — which was an unforgettable trauma for me. I was about seven years old and I was taken to see Peter Brook's film *The Beggar's Opera* with Laurence Olivier. I ran out of the theatre screaming in terror — I had never seen a film before. Interestingly, that became one of my favorite movies; Olivier became an idol. That's a phenomenon known as counterphobia in psychological terms: the object feared becomes the object loved.

I decided to *make* movies in 1956 when I went to see *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I came out of that knowing what my mission in life was.

Question: Which was?

Meyer: Films. I had no intention of waiting till I was a grown-up to do this, so I corralled my father into helping me, and starting when I was thirteen and continuing for the next five years we made an 8mm, all children's version of *Around the World in Eighty Days*. I played

Phileas Fogg — one should note that it is Phileas, not Finias. My best friend Ronnie Rolse played Passepartout. Ronnie grew up to become a film editor, first with DeDe Allen. Ronnie just edited *The Wanderers* with Phil Kaufman.

Question: Are you planning to work with him on any films?

Meyer: As soon as they let him into the West Coast editors' union. It's real disgusting — the parochialism is unbelievable.

Also in that movie, that sterling masterpiece of cinematic art, 8mm, one hour and ten minutes, was Paul Hirsch. We grew up with Paul, too. Not so long ago Paul won an Academy Award for *Star Wars* [film editing]. So my first movie was made, with my father sort of photographing and me writing and playing Fogg and sort of co-directing or something. We shot out of sequence like in a real movie. We started when I was thirteen and didn't finish until I was eighteen, so I grew up and down as the movie went on. Wanted to call it *Phileas Fogg Grows Up*.

Question: And your writing?

Meyer: I have been writing since I was very small. I like to tell stories and make them up. It was a kind of unconscious reflective activity that gave me satisfaction, and it continues to. But my conscious goal has always been, at least since age thirteen, to write and direct films.

Question: *The Seven Percent Solution* was a hit as a novel. Did

you envision that as a stepping-stone to get into movies?

Meyer: I was already in.

Question: When did you start working professionally in movies?

Meyer: My transition to being a professional from being an amateur writer is a little blurry, but I suppose one could say that it really took place in about 1971 when I left New York and came to Los Angeles. I had written, I think, one feature and two television films [*Invasion of Bee Girls* (1973), *Judge Dee and the Monastery Murders* (1974), *The Night that Panicked America* (1975)] by the time *The Seven Percent Solution* was bought for the movies, and the book was written as a novel during the Writers' Guild strike, which I think was 1973, and we weren't allowed to write screenplays. You had to picket every day for three hours and no screenplays. I had just finished re-reading the Sherlock Holmes stories, so I took advantage of the Writers' Guild strike to indulge in what was to be a private recreation for my own amusement. And that was to write my own Sherlock Holmes stories when I ran out of them.

Question: For your own amusement?

Meyer: For my own and the amusement of my friends. I had this great idea that since Freud and Holmes resembled each other so much that they ought to meet. And since the dates worked out and they had the

cocaine in common. . .

Question: Where along the way did the idea come to publish it and then make it into a movie?

Meyer: Well, when I said that I was writing it for my own amusement, I didn't mean that my own amusement was to have it privately circulated. I meant my own amusement was to have it published. I thought that like my first novel, *Target Practice*, it would sell a few thousand copies and give me \$5,000 to \$10,000 in advance. I was extremely poor at the time.

Question: So it was quite a surprise when it became a hit and sold so well?

Meyer: It was a total surprise. The last thing I expected was that the thing would be popular across the board. I was really astounded when you come right down to it. I didn't expect it to be a best seller, and when my publisher indicated that they were hoping it would be, I sort of felt sorry for them spending all that money for advertising. When it became a best seller I didn't think it would remain one, and when it remained a best seller, I didn't think it would go up. So I was wrong everywhere you can be.

Question: When were you approached to make it into a movie or write the screenplay?

Meyer: Well, the interesting thing about it is that my agents refused to represent the book when they read it.

Question: Why was that?

Meyer: They didn't think it was a book they could sell. I wound up getting it with the help of my lawyer and publishing it myself. And then my agents sort of abandoned me and didn't want to be my agents anymore because they couldn't sell any of my stuff. I found myself represented by someone assigned to me at the office — a young man

about twenty years old — who really knew nothing about agencing except what he liked — and he liked this book. But he couldn't interest anybody in *The Seven Percent Solution* as a film, so he sold it to his mother. And his mother, who is a woman named Arlene Sellers and is in partnership with a man named Alex Wonitsky, sets up movies and works with tax shelter money. Wonitsky was the one who put the deal together with Universal and helped me find Herb Ross.

Question: Once it was sold, did Universal approach you immediately?

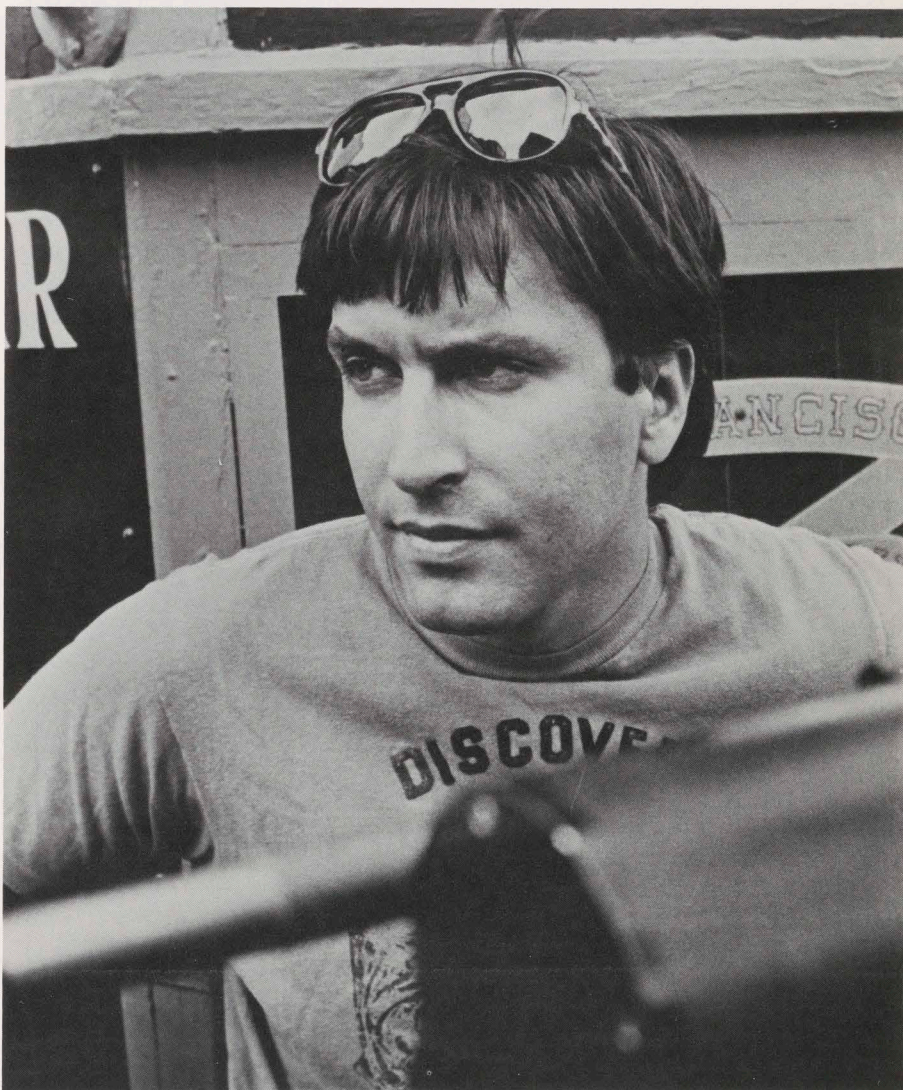
Meyer: To write the screenplay?

Question: Yes.

Meyer: We talked about this, and I said I thought this was a bad idea. Since the director was going to have some contribution to make, I said let's get a director first. So we got Herb Ross and then wrote several drafts in conjunction with him.

Question: When you adapted *The Seven Percent Solution* to a screenplay, what kinds of thoughts were going through your head as to the differences between writing a novel and writing a screenplay? Being an author and being a scenarist, what kinds of feelings were you having about adapting your own work?

Meyer: Well, let me begin with an



Author of two best-selling novels, *The Seven Percent Solution* and *The West End Horror*, Nicholas Meyer talks of his roles as screenwriter for *The Seven Percent Solution* and screenwriter/director for *Time After Time*.



Watson (Robert Duvall), Holmes (Nicol Williamson) and friend (name unknown) track their prey.

overview which can be summed up thus: in writing a novel, you put everything in; in writing a screenplay, you take everything out.

Question: Can you elaborate on that a bit?

Meyer: A novel is not a dramatic form, and a screenplay is a play for the camera and movies. And in a novel, not being bound to dramatic form, you can take your time: the plot does not always have to move forward. There can be digressions and subplots, observations and so forth. A drama is like a shark. It must always be moving, and this means that you have to take out a lot of stuff. Now, here I had a book whose purpose and success lay in its ability to hoax and to mimic in a clever and uncanny fashion the writing of Arthur Conan Doyle. It was a literary effort. The trick was to find some cinematic equivalent to that — keeping in mind that most of the descriptive digressory stuff was going to have to go.

I also approached the screenplay as an opportunity to fix the things that I had fudged in the novel. In other words, this was a second chance. I did not look upon the

book as a great piece of literature that was so sacrosanct that it had no faults. I was going to take this opportunity to try to improve it. For example, in the novel I always felt the weakest element was the mystery that Freud and Holmes solved. The fact that the woman was a catatonic and never spoke struck me at least from a dramatic standpoint as rather boring. Maybe in a novel you can put up with it. It wasn't much of a mystery because I wasn't the most experienced writer in the world, and I had pulled off this amazing coup of bringing Holmes and Freud together and then got so excited that I didn't know what to do with them once I had them. I knew what I *wanted* to do. I wanted to expose Freud to Holmes' methods of reasoning and on that basis have him invent psychoanalysis. To do that I had to have him see Holmes in action, so I had to provide Holmes with a mystery. Where should the mystery come from? Well, since they were in Vienna, it should probably come from a patient of Freud's. All that worked fine up to a point, but I just wasn't that good at writing a mystery. I think *The West End Horror* has a much better mystery

because I got clever, I learned a few things, and I took more pains with it. So in the movie *The Seven Percent Solution* I tried to improve the mystery, to what degree is problematic, but I think in some ways I succeeded. I left in a narration from the point of view of Watson which helped to provide the literary flavor, and I made the speeches as flowery as I dared. But compared to the speeches in the book, they have been considerably rewritten so they can be spoken.

Question: When you were adapting the novel to a screenplay, did you have trouble maintaining the integrity of the characters, plot and theme?

Meyer: All I can say is if you don't want to cook, you should stay out of the kitchen, and if you are not willing to go through the adapting process to make a novel into a film, and you are just going to bitch about all the things that are lost, then this is not the job for you.

I was not aware of compromising. I was aware of trying to find cinematic equivalents for literary characteristics or facets of the book. Sometimes I couldn't, but I was guided by my detestation of all the previous Sherlock Holmes movies, which I could never really stand. I saw the adaptation as more of an opportunity to *do* something, rather than bemoaning every time I had to cut into my own deathless prose.

I certainly don't think the characters are compromised. I think they are very true to not only the book, but in some ways very true to Conan Doyle. Certainly Robert Duvall's Watson is. We were very careful about Watson because in movies he is frequently a buffoon; Nigel Bruce was unwatchable, as far as I was concerned. You could never believe that this is the man who, one, set down these cases, and two, was the friend of a brilliant man. You would have to explain why a genius hangs out with an idiot, and I think the vanity of Holmes is too great for that.

Well, I saw this film as an opportunity to rectify deficiencies in other

Sherlock Holmes films and I don't think we made any compromise where the integrity of the characters was concerned. I think that's like going up to an elephant and saying why aren't you a blueberry, and going up to a novel and saying why aren't you a screenplay. There are very few novels, and they have to be tightly linear for the most part, that make really smooth adaptations. They have to be all plots like *Treasure Island* and *The Prisoner of Zenda*. *The Prisoner of Zenda* went through the in-between step of being a stage play before it became a film; somebody dramatized it.

Question: Moving from *The Seven Percent Solution* to *Time After Time*, did you find any differences or difficulties in adapting someone else's story rather than your own?

Meyer: It's easier to adapt someone else's.

Question: Why is that?

Meyer: It's easier because you are much more capable of being objective. It's precisely because you are not steeped in it — anyway for me this is true. If somebody tells me a story that I haven't written and don't know intimately, I am much more capable of saying this is important, this is important, and that isn't important.

If you are filming a scene and you have also selected the props, you may be aware that the 18th century stove that you bought was very difficult to lay your hands on, and it is a great prop and you bloody well better photograph it. And that may obscure the fact that it is not very relevant to the scene. But if you come in and somebody else has done the set, you are not aware of all this background stuff and you don't worry about it — the stove is not the story.

What may have struck me as relevant in the novel of *The Seven Percent Solution* may be kind of confusing for me when it comes time to adapt it to the movie. I labored so hard over the novel, so how could I

bear to do without this now? If you have done all the research, how can you bear to leave out the research? When it is somebody else's, the choices become a lot simpler to make. You are not confused by your intimacy and your emotional attachment to these objects.

Question: And the adaptation of *Time After Time*?

Meyer: *Time After Time* was not adapted from a complete story. What I bought the rights to originally was 65 pages of Karl Alexander's unfinished novel and a tentative outline. I really didn't adapt a complete anything. I just took a central idea and wrote my own screenplay — whatever I thought it should be. Based on that conceit, I have done one adaptation, but *Time After Time*, strictly speaking, can only loosely be an adaptation.

Question: What was it that drew you to the story *Time After Time*?

Meyer: What drew me to it was the idea that a multiplicity of ideas and meanings merged organically without any self-conscious laying on or adding to the central premise. This story was so strong that it supported at least five different kinds of

movies: a science fiction tale, a romance, a comedy, a thriller, and perhaps most appealing to me, it could make a social comment that didn't have to be dragged in — it was implicit in the very idea. All I had to do was have H.G. Wells look at a television set, and I had done it.

All these things could be hung on *Time After Time* with no difficulty and without forcing an issue. To top it all off, it was a hell of a good story. I had never heard the story before. It was a way of getting us to look at ourselves from the perspective of Martians.

Question: Were you writing *Time After Time* with yourself in mind as the director?

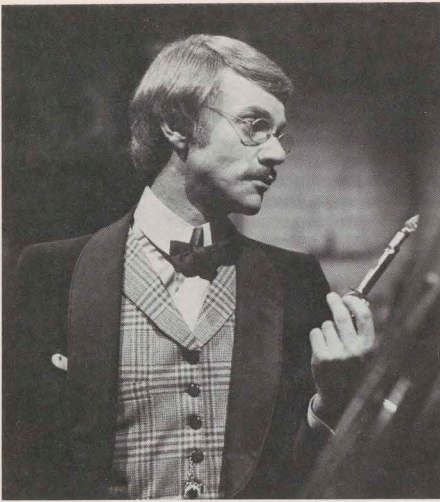
Meyer: Yes.

Question: Do you find any difference writing for yourself as a director than you did, let's say, for Herbert Ross and *The Seven Percent Solution*?

Meyer: Yes, in one sense. Since I knew I was going to direct this, I kept it simple. That was another thing that appealed to me about the story. When all things are said and done, it is mainly about three people running



H.G. Wells (Malcolm McDowell) and Jack the Ripper (David Warner) in *Time After Time*.



Nicholas Meyer: "What intrigues me is casting against type... When the idea for McDowell was broached [my response was] 'Oh, he doesn't do that.' Then I thought, pity. I wonder if he would be interested in doing it. Because in some ways he is real cute."

around San Francisco. And that sounded pretty easy, comparatively speaking.

I didn't write scenes where six white horses come charging out of nowhere, without riders or guidance of any kind, to trample Holmes, Watson and Freud. I tried to emphasize what I thought I could do well, and conceal what I could not do well. Now I realize that there isn't any difference.

Question: How do you mean there's no difference?

Meyer: I mean that ineptitude just pervades. You might just as well go for broke and write in the horses. And moviemaking being what it is, you have a 50/50 chance that it'll come out brilliant. Everything is hard in making a film. And if you want, it's possible to do it right.

Question: Were there specific sequences in *Time After Time* that didn't turn out as you originally intended them?

Meyer: Many sequences didn't turn out as I originally envisioned them. The more I think about it, though, there were only occasional sequences

that didn't turn out right.

Question: I meant, did the idea of the sequence change from the first writing to the final image on the screen?

Meyer: I think the only real differences involved mistakes that I made as a first-time director, or those which prevented me in some instances from executing the original conception as I had envisioned it as a writer. I'll give you a couple of examples. One, the most inept piece of directing in the movie, from the point of view of failing to put the camera in the right place and get sufficient coverage, is the scene at the end of the film when the Ripper loses Amy. It's not clear why he loses her. It just looks like she gets away.

Question: Right.

Meyer: The scene works simply because the audience is so involved with the story at that moment that they don't much care how she gets away. Events happen so fast after this that the next moment the audience very clearly understands how and why Wells is dispatching the Ripper. Nevertheless, it's a very poor moment in the movie. And it's too bad. It was intended to be quite simple, yet it just wasn't filmed correctly.

Basically, this problem harks back to another error made earlier in the film. That is when Wells first arrives in San Francisco and gets out of the Time Machine. His watch fob gets hooked on a piece of projecting material on the machine. That was filmed wrong also. You don't quite understand that that's literally what is happening to Wells. And certainly you don't appreciate the irony at the end of the film when the Ripper, dragging Amy towards the machine, hooks his watch on the same projection. Being that that is his little fetish, he reaches instinctively for his watch, and in the process, lets go of Amy. This was a nice idea and was cleverly set up in the first part of the movie; it had a nice ironic

payoff. The Ripper is done in by his watch. Undone by time, you might say. But none of it works.

Question: When you were writing *Time After Time*, did you have specific actors in mind?

Meyer: No.

Question: How did you go about the casting process? In particular, Malcolm McDowell. He is probably best known for playing rather violent characters, as in *A Clockwork Orange*. Here you have him in the pacifist role of H.G. Wells. Was there some reason for selecting Malcolm McDowell?

Meyer: I love actors. And I love them best when they are acting. Acting is pretending to be something else. What intrigues me is what might be called casting against type. I think that an actor who is always cast as the villain probably longs just once, and possibly more, to play somebody different. It's a way of startling the audience into paying close attention. They can't just sit back and relax and say, "Oh, here's Jimmy Stewart playing Jimmy Stewart again."

When the idea for Malcolm McDowell was broached, I had the same response that you did at first, which was "Oh, he doesn't do that." Then I thought, pity. I wonder if he would be interested in doing it. Because in some ways he is real cute.

Question: Oh, definitely.

Meyer: And I guess the movie proves that he is real cute.

Question: As a first-time director, what would you say was the most difficult aspect of the directing process? What did you find the most interesting?

Meyer: Since I started out being an actor, and since I have been a stage director, the actors were familiar to me. I used to direct a play a week on the radio back when I was in Iowa

City, so I knew something about acting. Not everything there is to know, but it was an area that was familiar to me. As a writer, I felt I had some expertise in fashioning a drama. Editing I took to like a duck to water because editing is like writing. Dailies in a movie are like sentences in a book that hasn't been written. And editing is the writing.

I am very proud that there is no flab on this movie. This isn't a self-indulgent film. And the reason is that as a writer I had learned to cut out what doesn't work. And that was damn good training because it prevented me from falling in love with things simply because I had labored over them in the shooting.

The thing that gave me the most difficulty, and the thing that I was the most ignorant of, was the camera: where to put it and how to set up scenes and shots. When it comes to this, I am an infant, a baby, an ignoramus. It was a deficiency which I felt keenly during the making of the film. It made me make very simple camera moves, take "baby steps," and I think the film is nowhere near as exciting as it would have been had I had more dexterity in setting up a shot. I see things now where the angles are wrong or the shot is just

not imaginatively saved. When Wells walks past Amy in the shot at the end of the movie and goes into the machine, the camera stays on Amy. What would it have taken to emphasize her isolation at that moment by pushing in a little bit after Wells walks by? But it never occurred to me. So in Hollywood, as I find myself at various parties meeting directors, I say, "Hello, how are you, and where do you put the camera?"

Question: Many American films shot in contemporary environments take place in either Los Angeles or San Francisco. I know the major production studios are in Los Angeles, but is *Time After Time* shot in San Francisco for its proximity to L.A., or is there another reason? Was San Francisco the location you envisioned for the movie?

Meyer: Yes to all questions. The Karl Alexander story is set in San Francisco, and I wanted to keep it there for two reasons. San Francisco is one of my most favorite places, and when I wrote the script I literally chose all the places I love in San Francisco and put them in the script so I could be there. I didn't want to shoot in L.A. because L.A. is not a

city. It's a combination of cities where the automobile is all-important. I really don't like cars. I'd get into trouble having Wells get around in a city he couldn't walk in.

It seemed arbitrary to go to any other city, like New York, and it would have been fairly expensive. Also, New York opens up a tremendous can of storytelling worms. I didn't want to do anything that would alarm the studio — what I wanted was to give them the illusion that they could keep an eye on me. As opposed to asking to film in Bora Bora, my logic was to say, "Look, I'll only be in San Francisco. That's only 500 miles away, an hour by plane, you can keep an eye on me." Whereas in truth, being 500 miles away I may as well have been 3000 miles away because away is away.

Question: Did the studio actually supervise or watch over what you were doing, or did you basically have a free hand?

Meyer: I basically had a free hand.

Question: In the scene where the police are questioning Wells, they are not portrayed as the most intelligent, understanding people. At times they come across as fools.

Meyer: Why?

Question: They're unable to understand Wells or to consider that he might have some reason for saying what he does. They seem to immediately turn him off and not even try to help someone they may think is a bit looney. They just didn't come off as police officers doing their job.

Meyer: Well, I disagree with you. I think that if you were a policeman and a man came in, dressed a little strangely, and said, "Here's the man you're looking for, his name is John Leslie Stevenson, he's English, a surgeon, about six feet tall with flaxen hair, and he's about 37 years old," you would do what the police do. What's the first thing they do? They run him [John Leslie Stevenson] through their computers and it



Nicholas Meyer: "The guy now says 'No, I'm not Sherlock Holmes, I'm H.G. Wells. I came here in a time machine of my own construction. I'm pursuing Jack the Ripper who escaped into the future before me.' What would you make of all this?"

turns up nothing.

The police ask him how he knows this, and he just says, "I know." The next thing he says is, "My name is Sherlock Holmes." Now from his point of view, he couldn't possibly know what effect saying he is Sherlock Holmes has. He never expected that Sherlock Holmes would be heard of 100 years from whence he lived. There had been only two Sherlock Holmes short stories published. When Wells left London there was no evidence that the character was to become immortal. It's just something he says on the spur of the moment, probably because the Ripper puts it into his head in the scene in the motel room when he says, "My dear chap, we must add detective to your list of accomplishments. You've become a regular Sherlock Holmes." Now, I put it to you, if you're a cop and a man comes in off the street, gives you this very vivid description of a man that no law enforcement agency or passport control agency in the world can fully substantiate, then proceeds to tell you he's Sherlock Holmes, what would you do? Treat him very politely. The cops say thank you very much, how can we get in touch with you, and they take his name and address. He leaves. The next time they hear from him it is in the

middle of the night and he predicts a murder. He calls up and says, "This is Sherlock Holmes. You better get to this place." They don't get there in time, and then they realize they had better pick him up since he was able to divulge this information.

They do pick him up, and that's when a fatal series of misunderstandings occur. And why not? The guy now says, "No, I'm not Sherlock Holmes, I'm H.G. Wells. I came here in a time machine of my own construction. I'm pursuing Jack the Ripper who escaped into the future before me." What would you make of all this? I think the police are portrayed very sympathetically, given that you in the audience know what's going on because you've seen it happen and you know it's true. They are not harrasing him, they are just intent on finding out something that he can't tell them in a way that they'll believe. I tried to put myself in their place completely with the very intent that they should *not* be buffoons. They're only buffoons because they don't believe Wells. And who the hell would?

Question: As part of the audience I accepted the premise that Jack the Ripper and H.G. Wells come to modern-day San Francisco, and because I as the audience accept this premise, and given the dramatic

confrontation and tension between Wells and the police, I . . .

Meyer: You want *them* [the police] to accept it too.

Question: Right. I wanted them to accept it. I think because they didn't and because of the tension, it is enacted as you intended it.

Meyer: Yes. You got angry.

Question: I certainly did.

Meyer: You said, "You fools, you idiots! Can't you tell the man is telling the truth?" That's exactly the way it is supposed to work. But in retrospect, I think everybody hates that cop after Amy is supposedly killed — but actually it is that other woman — and the cop comes in and says, "I'm sorry." You're sorry! You're sorry! In the meantime this woman has been hacked up. You're supposed to hate him and that's that.

I do think, however, that upon mature reflection, it's very hard to find fault with his behavior. If you were to honestly put yourself in that man's place of big city cop, every murder brings out nuts from everywhere — confessing, tipping off — and here's a guy dressed like a kook who keeps changing his name from one historical person to another every time he is seen. None of his story checks out the way our world has been able to verify things. How could he [the policeman] have known or behaved differently? It's a kind of miracle that he takes Wells seriously enough to send a squad car at all. When you think about it, it's only the graphic hysterical intensity of Welles that finally persuades the policeman to send a squad car to 2340 Francisco.

Question: I understand better now what you were doing with those sequences.

Meyer: I have heard people criticize Wells' encounter with the police and say how stupid for him to give his name as Sherlock Holmes. Well,



Amy explains life in contemporary San Francisco to H.G. Wells.

that proves that they don't get it. It's not stupid. He has no way of knowing what that statement will produce.

Question: As part of the audience, I questioned why he gave his name as Sherlock Holmes.

Meyer: Why?

Question: Because I was thinking, such a well-known name. . .

Meyer: How would Wells have known it was such a well-known name? It was 1893. How the hell was he to know that anybody would have even heard of Sherlock Holmes? What leads him to assume that the man who wrote those penny dreadfuls created a character that would become immortal?

Question: So that the age Wells comes from had not accepted Sherlock Holmes as a type of folk hero legend?

Meyer: He has no way of knowing that Sherlock Holmes books and movies are selling like hotcakes.

Question: Since the film deals with Jack the Ripper and there are a number of violent murders in the film, what reasons did you have for not depicting any of the actual violence? You show the after-effects like blood dripping to the floor, but the actual violence of the crime is not depicted.

Meyer: What do you think my reason was?

Question: Obviously to get the rating boards to accept the film as family entertainment for all audiences. But did you as a filmmaker feel that the violence of the crimes came across just as strongly as if you had had a graphic portrayal?

Meyer: I thought more strongly. I'm not a person who gets off on seeing violence. I thought I would like to see a movie where you don't see



Holmes (Nicol Williamson), Watson (Robert Duvall), Freud (Alan Arkin) in The Seven Percent Solution.

anybody do anything to anybody else. And you never do in this movie. You never see anybody harm anybody, just the results of it. I find it personally repugnant to see literal violence. The movie is just a way of galvanizing my glands from the filmmakers who have run out of imagination. That's my view, and that's the point, unless, of course, you're doing *Apocalypse Now*, where you're trying to say quite literally that this is what we did in Vietnam, this is what we want you to know. On the other hand, in this particular film [*Time After Time*] I was not concerned with the rating boards. If I had gotten an R rating and made it more violent, maybe it would have been more like *Halloween* and people would have flocked to see it.

The rating boards did not concern me as much as something else, and that is when I see literal violence in a movie (unless I'm told I'm watching a snuff movie, God forbid) I know it's been faked. I think a lot of art and a lot of movies currently discount the imagination as a contributing factor. We've all become so, if you'll pardon the expression, bloody literal-minded, that we don't

make allowances for the contribution of the viewer or the reader.

Question: Your work in radio back in Iowa is based almost entirely on the imagination of the listener.

Meyer: I love radio. I think it's great what you can do with radio. It totally exploits the imagination.

Question: You can be realistic with radio. You don't have to worry about visual special effects.

Meyer: Yes, because the human mind is fleshing it out. And I think there is nothing more terrifying than what terrifies you individually, and I have no idea what that is. But if I give you a situation and call imagination into play, I think that I'm ahead of the game.

Question: So instead of depicting some violent crime out of your imagination, it's left up to each audience member to imagine what is actually happening.

Meyer: Exactly. In the scene where the Ripper comes to Shirley's apart-

ment, who the hell knows what he does with the knife? I know he kills her, but does he cut out her throat? Cut off her head? I have no idea. But I'm sure the scene works because of its innate theatricality, which leaves out the actual dirty work, the business which would be simply mundane and messy. It is a bravura killing with that little tear of blood running down his [the Ripper's] face. Kind of an operatic gesture.

Question: In the actual time travel sequence, there is a sound montage letting us know when Wells is traveling through time. Why did you decide on this method as opposed to something else to inform the audience when a time travel sequence occurred?

Meyer: Such as mannequins changing clothes [As in George Pal's *The Time Machine*.]? Who the hell knows what time travel is? Nobody. I wanted one thing to be clear, and that is that time travel is not linear. It's not outer-space travel, it's not *Star Wars*. So I went back to my experience with and exposure to radio and said, let's use the imagination of the audience to provide the visuals. Let's just give them colored lights to watch and let's give them radio sounds. Let's turn the theatre into a giant radio set and give them a literal taste of 70 years of disaster. Human progress. It was a way of making my point. It was taking the curse off the idea of a "trip" sequence which audiences by this time just sit through and wait to be over. It was a way of making the audience actively participate in Wells' journey. They had to pay attention. While you're trying to identify the sounds, you're taking a trip down memory lane in a somewhat sinister fashion.

There were other reasons. I didn't have the money for special effects. And I didn't have the expertise. There was no way I could compete with George Pal, who has made a lifetime study of this stuff.

Question: When I first saw the advertisements for the film, I

classified it as science fiction. It is definitely science fiction because it deals with time travel, but it doesn't have the flashy effects that have become associated with science fiction.

Meyer: The public has come to expect that science fiction means outer space and a lot of hardware and a lot of special effects, but I'm fascinated that the Academy of Science Fiction, Horror, and Fantasy Films nominated *Time After Time* in more categories than all these other films. *Time After Time* also just won the Grand Prix at La Festival Alvoraz in France, which is a science fiction and fantasy film festival and quite prestigious.

Question: Both *The Seven Percent Solution* and *Time After Time* deal with Victorian characters. Are you drawn to characters from this period or was this coincidence?

Meyer: Mere coincidence. I'm tired of Victorian characters at this point. I like them because they speak English, a language for which I still maintain some affection.

Question: What are you working on now?

Meyer: I'm trying to get up two films. One is an original comedy, contemporary, that I wrote, called *The Frame-Up*. It's about two guys who stole the Mona Lisa. That's at MGM. They're trying to make up their mind about it. But I guess my dream project is a screenplay I wrote called *Conjuring*, based on a novel by a Canadian, Robertson Davies. The novel is called *Fifth Business*.

It's sort of a *Citizen Kane* with magic. I am assembling a cast now and hope to film it in the fall.

Question: What time period does *Conjuring* take place in?

Meyer: *Conjuring* covers a period from about 1910 to 1970, '74.

Question: Looking back at your first directorial effort — *Time After Time* — what would you say is the most important thing you learned about filmmaking that you would apply to *Conjuring*?

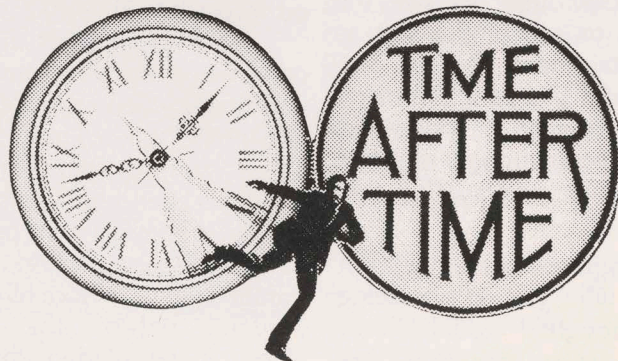
Meyer: I think I've learned most to take pains and not to rush. I was very concerned that I came in on time and on budget. Or under. I didn't want my reputation to begin as, or ever be, that of a filmmaker who doesn't know how to keep a budget and a schedule. I came in three days early on *Time After Time*. I should have taken those three days. I should have understood that only what happens in the frame is relevant. If you don't have it, you'll be in trouble later. I do think taking pains and covering myself more, all that kind of thing, is what I got out of *Time After Time*.

Question: Anything in closing?

Meyer: I do want to go on record as saying that making this movie was the most fun I've ever had in my life.

* * * * *

Our special thanks to Mr. Nicholas Meyer for granting us this interview, and to Louis Giannetti, Anne Miller, Peter Miller, and Neil Renton for their assistance.



ANTONIONI AND ARCHITECTURE

by Diane M. Borden

In *The Passenger* the architecture of Barcelona's Antoni Gaudi appears as a kind of phantasmagoric mirage. The film's main character, a man in search of an identity, meets an architectural student in Gaudi's Palacio Guëll and later finds an adventurer's communion with her on the roof of the Casa Mila apartment house. In order to understand the function of Gaudi's architecture in *The Passenger*, it is necessary to retrospectively analyze the dialectics of architectural imagery in Antonioni's cinematic vocabulary.

In the films of Antonioni, architecture functions not merely as setting or backdrop, but as a psychological and a cultural analogue. Architectural constructs help to shape the tone and environment of his world and its characters. For Antonioni, a value system is inherent within different architectural styles: the streamlined skeleton construction of modern architecture has, for the most part, a negative connotation in the films, while the elaborate organic stylizations of the Baroque are idealized as representative of lost tradition and beauty.

Antonioni creates what could be called the aesthetics of alienation. Sterility, despiritualization, loss of faith, technological expansion at the expense of human existence are all major facets of the director's vision of contemporary culture. This vision is certainly not unique; it may even seem clichéd. But surely it is not in these themes that we see Antonioni's artistic genius demonstrated. Rather, it is in the expressive function of his cinematic craft that he is able to uniquely shape the sterile oppressive

world so characteristic of his films. Certainly anyone who has followed his career understands his mastery of *mise-en-scène*. From *L'Avventura* through *La Notte* to *The Red Desert* and, in a modified way, to his most recent film, *The Passenger*, Antonioni's alienated vision is hauntingly and beautifully realized. And one of the key ways in which he creates this aesthetic of alienation is through architectural phenomenology.

Although it may sound like an oversimplification, there is a tension set up between "good" buildings and "bad" buildings, as if moral values resided within particular architectural styles. It is not that the architecture is anthropomorphic; rather, it functions as a kind of correlative, an

extension of the human values analyzed in the films. The buildings spatially objectify cultural and psychological states of being. One way Antonioni develops this dialectic between "good" and "bad" architecture is through juxtaposition. The juxtapositions can occur within the composition and dynamics of a shot, a series of shots, or parallel sequences.

For example, in the opening shots of *L'Avventura*, at the left of the frame in long distance is a complex of high-rise housing projects under construction. Though new, they appear impermanent, even shoddy. At the right of the frame, by a road that leads back into the depth of the shot, is the old provincial villa of Anna's father. (Anna is the girl who will later disappear on the island.) This villa represents tradition, family, and permanence. But noticeably, because of its juxtaposition to the new apartments, there is a sense of encroachment of the new upon the old, of the "bad" upon the "good" in Antonioni's aestheticized ethic.

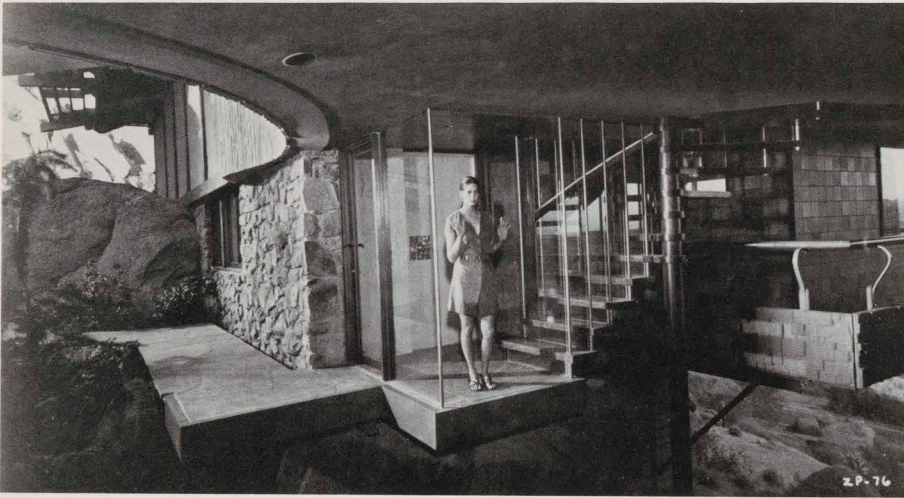
But the most remarkable thing about this shot is that in the extreme depth of the frame, we see, almost



David Stock (Jack Nicholson) and the young architecture student (Maria Schneider) who becomes his spiritual guide, in a scene from *The Passenger*.

like a mirage in the flat sterile plain, the dome of what appears to be a great Baroque cathedral. Distanced, almost out of the picture, the grandiose representative of high civilization still remains despite the transience and banality of contemporary life.

Architecture as expression: The striking similarities in composition among these shots from various Antonioni films point up his recurring use of architectural environment as an emblem for his heroines' alienation and psychological turmoil:



"Beautiful Desolation": Daria Halpern in the desert ranch house, from Zabriskie Point.

The juxtaposition of these three architectural modes in the opening sequence of *L'Avventura* telescopes through its imagery the film's central theme of search. The search for Anna, whose name means grace, becomes ultimately a symbolic search for spiritual grace. For Antonioni,

that "grace" is, in part, represented in the art and civilization of the past, hence the distant but numinous Baroque church at the end of the road in the opening shots. Throughout the film, the use or misuse of Sicilian Baroque architecture expresses a lack of appreciation for the grace of the past. A former palace, for example, is violated in its present state as a police station. The great town cathedral is locked, closed to worshippers and tourists, though a young architect makes drawings of its facade, as if attempting to save the remnants of a style that is tragically disappearing.

At one point, Sandro, the anti-hero of the film, maliciously spills ink on the young architect's drawing. It is an act of both pettiness and frustration; for he, as a young architect, had planned to create out of the great traditions of the past. He mentions that buildings are now put up to last ten or twenty years; before, they were built to last for centuries. The prosperous Sandro, despite his earlier ideals, has nevertheless sold his creative soul to "technological" builders who value



In La Notte, the harsh, barren composition of modern architecture becomes symbolic of the barriers between men and women. Shown here, Monica Vitti and Marcello Mastroianni.



The red splotches on the wall in this scene from Red Desert convey Giulia's (Monica Vitti) rage. They also bear a close resemblance to abstract expressionist painting.

quick money and mass production above permanence, craftsmanship, and beauty.

The majesty of Sicilian Baroque is undercut by the surrealist Sicilian town of Noto. Built as an experiment in functional architecture after World War II, it is a ghost town by the time Sandro and Claudia visit it. From long shot, Antonioni's camera probingly pans the unused buildings. The back-lighting in these shots emphasizes the isolation and sterility of the dead city. In one remarkable long take, the camera at low angle slowly tracks down a street toward a concrete block church visible in the distance. Then the camera stops abruptly and pans slightly to the left as if about to turn around to avert the sight of the "despiritualized" church. No doubt this shot is an inversional parallel to the idealized Baroque cathedral. For Antonioni, Noto appears as a microcosm of the potential emptiness of modern civilization. Noto, though new and functional, is a wasteland, a scene of spiritual and human emptiness.

The wasteland is an important image in Antonioni's films and works hand in hand with his architectural phenomenology. Indeed, in *L'Avventura*, Claudia calls Noto a desert. For Antonioni, the wasteland motif is represented through the interaction of modern architecture with a sterile landscape. Throughout *La Notte*, Lidia and her estranged husband, Giovanni, are constantly juxtaposed with barren lots and streets that are dotted with sharp angles and oblique lines of modern skyscrapers.

In one memorable composition, Lidia is shot from extreme high angle at the center of a series of asymmetrical lines formed by the facade of a new building. To her side is a concrete planter-box filled with sand. All elements in the make-up of the scene visualize a woman at odds with her environment. Desolate and dehumanized, her psychological condition is reinforced by the oblique lines of the building and the oppressive "heaviness" of the high angle and long distance of the shot.

Yet Antonioni is not totally pessimistic: Lidia wears a dress with flower patterns as if to suggest that some kind of fecundity may be possible within her own self. Importantly, Lidia's husband, Giovanni, like the hero of *L'Avventura*, is an architect who has compromised his artistic goals. Throughout the film, the stagnation of their marriage is mirrored by the claustrophobic architecture that forms the backdrop of their psychological environment. In the closing shot, a microcosmic image of the desert ingeniously appears: Lidia and Giovanni, amidst the luxuriant grass of a golf course, are nevertheless lying down embracing in a sand trap.

In *Red Desert* industrial architecture and polluted landscape literally drive the heroine mad. Giulia, the wife of an industrialist, is a sensitive and perceptive woman whose very being is constantly bombarded by the harsh, functional environment of the technological wasteland. Psychologically, inner self and outer architecture interact; the architecture both contributes to her pathology and provides us with an emblem for it. Of all Antonioni's films, *Red Desert* is perhaps the starkest in its creation of the aesthetics of alienation.

But there is an irony here. One danger of the architectural wasteland is that it can be transformed into a "beautiful object." The factories of *Red Desert* become works of abstract art when Antonioni paints pipes, walls, and machines orange, blue, and yellow; places the actors in sculpted positions within the mechanical constructs of the shot; and shoots fog, steam, and belching sulphur to create an atmosphere that is almost magical. The ugly reality of physical space subtly gives way to a beautiful surreality. Similar kinds of mutations are present in *Blow-Up*. For example, the hero-photographer, whose methods provide a surrogate for Antonioni's own creative process, positions his mannequins as elements in a photographed shot. They are important not as persons, but as aesthetic objects. The barren, sterile studio of the artist-

photographer, like skeletal modern architecture, becomes aestheticized by the attainment of objects. (Interestingly, the photographer goes to antique shops for these objects.) For the film, Antonioni painted whole blocks of London flats and even gave a coat of green paint to the park grass, thus transforming city and nature into aestheticized reality.

Though the wasteland can be physically transformed, human tragedy remains. There is no reciprocal alteration in the collective psyche of the people in Antonioni's world. In fact, the beautification seems to numb human beings so that their behavior becomes mechanical and de-sensitized. Giulia and the photographer have moments of insight, but these are fleeting in a milieu of psychological somnambulism.

From *L'Avventura* to *La Notte* to *L'Éclipse*, from *Red Desert* to *Blow-Up*, the architectural wasteland is usually urbanized. However, in *Zabriskie Point* and *The Passenger*, the wasteland appears in a new guise. The first half of *Zabriskie Point* is shot in Los Angeles, for Antonioni an architectural wasteland further devastated by the guerilla bombings of student radicals. Later, the narrative literally moves out to the desert. Antonioni's footage of Death Valley desert is ravishing for its beauty; but ironically the beauty is empty, shallow, and without human context. The two young people in the film, another pair of alienated anti-heroes, are outwardly beautiful but inwardly as empty and shallow as the desert in which they roam and make love. In the closing shots, Antonioni brings modern architecture into the desert. A highly stylized modernistic ranch house is blown up in equally stylized slow motion shots. It seems Antonioni was able to fulfill his wish of annihilating "bad" architecture, annihilating those representations of contemporary civilization that are themselves annihilators. While *Zabriskie Point* is the least of Antonioni's cinematic efforts, it nevertheless represents a catharsis: the preliminary stage of a



A scene in the artist-photographer's studio. From *Blow-up*, starring David Hemmings and Vanessa Redgrave.

breakthrough later realized in *The Passenger*.

The Passenger begins in the desert, but unlike the Death Valley of *Zabriskie Point*, the north African wastes are "humanized," inhabited by guerilla soldiers who mysteriously appear and disappear in and out of the frame, and populated by ancient people collectively represented by a witch doctor who has returned to primitive wisdom despite his Oxford degrees. Tonally, even at the beginning, the viewer senses that this is a new Antonioni; not necessarily new in his cinematic style, but altered in his vision of the human condition.

Grace, searched for in all of Antonioni's earlier films, seems to have, at least in part, been found. Antonioni has seen a modern architecture that saves the appearance and integrity of high civilization: the work of Barcelona's Antoni Gaudi. Whether praised or ridiculed, Gaudi's buildings are certainly an anomaly among the founders of modern architecture, artists like Wright, Sullivan, Gropius, or Le Corbusier. His style is unique, and it is difficult to designate a

school or movement that fits his phantasmagoric forms. A mixture of the Gothic, the Baroque, and Rococo, his work has been tucked into the category of Art Nouveau. Such elements in Art Nouveau as the curved decorative line and the organic stylization of the natural are certainly prominent in Gaudi's work. But one often thinks of Art Nouveau as miniature. However, in Gaudi's buildings, especially in the unfinished "Sagrada Familia," there are echoes of that grandiose imagination, vitality, and spiritual aspiration so representative of the Baroque style. For Antonioni, Gaudi is a saviour; among the modern architects, he is an artist who modifies but retains the best values in Western culture.

Gaudi's work is first seen in *The Passenger* when David Stock, the hero with a double identity, meets a young girl in the Palacio Guëll. The girl is an architecture student who, like Ariadne, helps Stock wander through the labyrinths of his travels and his double selves. At Palacio Guëll, the hero asks about Gaudi and the girl remarks that he was hit

by a bus. This is in fact how Gaudi died, but more importantly, the motif of journey (hence the title *The Passenger*) reverberates with added meanings in a film in which all modes of transportation, psychological and physical, are visually represented.

Later, Antonioni shoots Casa Mila apartment house (located on Barcelona's Paseo de Gracia [Street of Grace]) with a hand-held camera at low and wide angle. The building seems to waver like a floating mirage, an Oz shimmering in the sun. The image is more than simple exposition: it captures the organic movement of this "living" building. The subsequent shots take place on the roof, Stock making further revelations of his situation to the Ariadne figure. The sequence is reminiscent of a roof episode in *L'Avventura*, where Claudia and Sandro ring bells on top of the Baroque cathedral. Both sequences are moments of harmony and idealism, and both take place on "good" buildings.

A curious sequence shot in a Bavarian Rococo chapel in Munich seems gratuitous in the film. However, it is a visual reinforcement of the stylistic link between Rococo and Gaudi's art. In the chapel, David Stock witnesses a marriage, a ritual of tradition and permanence; and his head is constantly framed by the altar's tabernacle niche. Though this strikes a note of humor, Antonioni seems to be suggesting some kind of impending respiritualization for David Stock. This motif is carried through the film by a later entry into a bar named "Fatima" and at the end by Stock's death in a hotel called "La Gloria."

In *The Passenger* Antonioni's protagonist dies, but unlike the earlier films where the characters live on in a kind of psychological death, here there is no sense of desolation and barrenness. The hero of the film has been "successful" in the quest for new identity. The desert has been humanized. And the "good" architecture of Antoni Gaudi has been discovered amidst the modern urban wasteland.

MOVIE MAVERICKS OF THE 70'S

by Larry Cohn

Film in the Seventies was characterized by an unmistakable trend towards escapism as horror, science fiction, and special effects-dominated fantasy films proved to be the most popular genres. The activism of the Sixties also carried over, not so much on the screen as behind the scenes. Since 1970 a number of people have announced plans to revolutionize the way films are produced and distributed. These "rebels" have one thing in common: audacity. However, most of them have failed in their attempts to stem the ever-increasing stranglehold power held by the six major Hollywood studios over the world's movie screens.

The most successful (though limited) innovation has been the Midnight Movie phenomenon. This late-night craze began in 1967 when Mike Getz and friends organized a national network of theatres to showcase the experimental short films of young independent filmmakers. Cleveland was among 17 cities which initially launched this project, with Saturday midnight programs at the Continental Art Theatre. Besides experimental films, the programs included old movie serials, oddball exploitation movies like *Reefer Madness*, and an occasional classic film. By 1968, the format had been expanded to include many feature films. The forerunners of the "Rocky Horror" cult would go week after week to see the popular Andy Warhol films of the period, such as *I, a Man*, *Bike Boy*, and *Nude Restaurant*, featuring "superstars" like Viva, Ultraviolet, and Holly Woodlawn. Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground were part of Warhol's troupe at this time, and the films reflected the punk and transvestite fashions soon to become popular

during the Seventies.

The life's blood of Midnight Movies was student films, with festivals at Ann Arbor and UCLA providing many of Mike Getz's best program selections. An even greater number of student films are produced today, but in the Seventies success radically changed the Midnight movie scene. In New York, long-running hit films dominated the Midnight Movies: Alejandro Jodorowsky's surrealistic *El Topo* and *The Holy Mountain*, Fernando Arrabal's *Viva la Muerte!*, Jonathan Demme's trashy *Caged Heat!*, horror movies like David Lynch's *Eraserhead* and George Romero's classic *Martin*, and finally Jim Sharman's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The experimental short films which

started it all are no longer widely exhibited.

With less enduring impact than the Midnight Movies, the decade's first rebel was Dennis Hopper, whose 1969 film *Easy Rider* briefly destroyed time-honored industry wisdom concerning the production of feature films. With a cost under \$500,000, a huge box office gross, and reams of world-wide publicity, *Easy Rider* rapidly convinced most film industry thinkers that low-budget, youth-oriented films were the wave of the future. Strict budget ceilings were set, causing the cancellation of many big-budget, important projects, such as Fred Zinnemann's version of Malraux's *Man's Fate*. Except for cost overruns like *The Exorcist*, no budgets in excess of \$10 million were authorized for the next five years, after which super-productions made a comeback. The cheap youth films made by the studios, with the exception of *Woodstock* and *Getting Straight*, all flopped, leaving the studios with no "big" product to take up the slack. Hopper's example had been followed, but did not work on an assembly-line basis. *Easy Rider's* success was a fluke.

Hopper himself attempted a breakthrough in 1971. His friend L.M. "Kit" Carson (actress Karen Black's husband) shot a revealing documentary about Hopper entitled *The American Dreamer*. Hopper insisted that the film not be distributed through regular channels, but that it be rented to a string of campus-related theatres. If successful, this would be the first step towards booking new films directly to a new, young filmgoing public and bypassing the traditional distribution system. *The American Dreamer* was shown at U.S. colleges for a week in the



The Rocky Horror Picture Show

spring of 1971, but not enough interest was generated to pursue Hopper's scheme further. Hopper's epic motion picture *The Last Movie* was released soon after by Universal, but a generally negative reaction to this film set back his career as a director, forcing Hopper to return to acting in a wide variety of international films for the rest of the Seventies.

Dennis Hopper's attack on film distribution patterns set the tone for subsequent Seventies challenges to the film industry establishment. Another unsuccessful attempt at direct distribution was made in 1973 and 1974 by Ely Landau via his "American Film Theatre." Landau produced low-budget film versions of famous plays, utilizing the top British and American talent available. He booked each annual series of films to a network of contracted individual theatres nationwide. Box office receipts for the two series were good, but Landau's plan fell through when pressure from the major distributors (angered at the disruption in their playdates) made many theatres reluctant to sign up for a third season.

One of the most-publicized challenges was conducted in 1972 by Jerry Lewis. Lewis attempted to create a new mode of exhibition of

films by opening a chain of mini-theatres, franchised under his name. This multiplication of available screens seemed feasible due to low overhead compared to the existing "white elephant" theatres. Lewis's instant empire crumbled within two years due to poor management, poor locations (e.g., the closest Lewis Theatre to the Cleveland market was in Brunswick, Ohio), and the extremely limiting factor of Lewis's insistence that only "family movies" be shown on his screens. As Radio City Music Hall in New York was to learn several years later, there are not many family films being made anymore. The widespread practice of twinning and further subdividing existing theatres proved more profitable than Lewis's scheme. Just like Hopper's, Lewis's finances and career went into a tailspin after this failure, but both of them have finally directed new films in 1979, due to be released during 1980.

John Cassavetes' maverick status has been emulated since the success of his first piece of direction, *Shadows*, in 1959. A very independent filmmaker, Cassavetes is the model for young directors both here and abroad; for example, he is often

cited as a spiritual leader by the new German directors. In 1974, when an inability to find a distributor for a film faced Cassavetes, he reluctantly set out to distribute *A Woman Under the Influence* himself, via his "Faces" company (named after his most successful film). Though scoffed at by industry professionals, he made large profits by booking *A Woman* in unusual places, e.g., blue-collar "action movie" theatres in the East, and black-oriented Chicago theatres. The scores of small, independent production companies took heart in Cassavetes' example and some copied his success, e.g., the Silvers distributing *Hester Street* themselves. Unfortunately, Cassavetes' next self-distributed film, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, died at the box office, and his subsequent *Opening Night* picture was previewed but never released. At an impasse, Cassavetes has decided to return to "the system," and is directing a new film for Columbia.

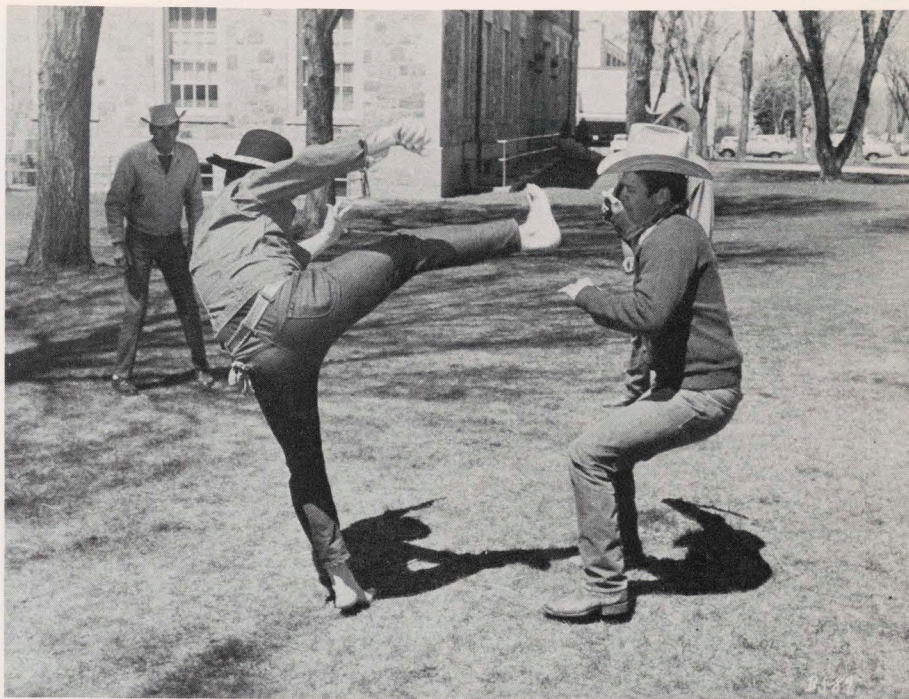
While Cassavetes was literally forced to wear many hats, others have aspired to the role of empire-builder. No one has so egotistically proclaimed a new kingdom or so ignominiously fallen from the heights as Tom Laughlin, the star and



Easy Rider

director of the hit *Billy Jack*. A James Dean-styled actor since the mid-Fifties, Laughlin has been directing films since the mid-Sixties, and, along with his wife Dolores Taylor, was a political activist who wanted to "say something" on film. After lukewarm (i.e. a small cult following results) when first released by Warner Brothers in 1971, *Billy Jack* became a huge hit when re-released under Laughlin's personal supervision a couple of years later. What Laughlin and his sophisticated sales force perfected was a procedure known as "four walling." Instead of merely renting his film to theatre-owners and dividing up the receipts according to established formulas, Laughlin would rent the theatres at flat fees, pocketing all the gross in excess of those figures. Although risky, this practice significantly increases the profit margin for the filmowner. Success with *Billy Jack* caused the major studios to imitate Laughlin's practice, but with very spotty results, while Sunn Classics and other purveyors of outdoors movies and *Chariots of the Gods* documentaries made four-walling into a science.

Laughlin's own fortunes suffered from an excess of ego. He followed *Billy Jack* with the over-blown *Trial of Billy Jack*. A hero among exhibitors due to his box-office success and rabble-rousing pronouncements, Laughlin announced a very ambitious film program, including many titles to feature his wife, and proposed funding it all via advances from the exhibitors. This pyramiding process was moving along smoothly when problems suddenly arose. His next feature -- *The Master Gunfighter* -- was a failure. To try and save the film, Laughlin sponsored a hokey advertising contest inviting viewer reactions (with a promise of prize money) to counteract the negative criticism of the film. This stunt only served to make Laughlin look foolish, as yet another "I Hate Critics" demagogue. Lawsuits and countersuits with Warner Brothers over the proper allocation of *Billy Jack* profits tied up Laughlin's time and money. What broke his back was a too-ambitious remake of Frank Capra's



Billy Jack

"Mr. Smith," entitled *Billy Jack Goes to Washington*, filmed in 1976. Cash flow problems contributed to the film's not being finished on time, losing Laughlin his support among the exhibitors. Faced with bankruptcy, Laughlin was never able to release the film and was back at point zero in his efforts to create a Hollywood empire. His concept of financing films with exhibitors' money is far from dead, however, most recently having been revived by Ely Landau (American Film Theatre) for the production of his new movie *Hopscotch*.

One of the most radical remedies of the Seventies was put forward by George C. Scott. Directing himself in an ecological message-movie *The Savage is Loose* in 1974, Scott proposed selling prints of the film outright to theatre chains or other theatre owners rather than renting them. This would be the first time such a practice was attempted with a major movie since *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. Scott went through with the idea, also announcing that he had retired as an actor and would henceforth devote himself to directing. He was quickly shot down when his film got scathing reviews and the public did not respond favorably to its in-crust theme. No directing offers were

forthcoming and two years later Scott was once again a busy, if frustrated, actor. In 1977 he vainly tried to resuscitate *The Savage is Loose* with a four-wall New York City booking paid for out of his own pocket, but the film played to near-empty houses. Scott's experiment floundered because he had a bad film to sell, not a faulty concept. Ely Landau's plan to "sell" *Hopscotch* to those exhibitors who help pay for its production, while distributing the same film to all others through a conventional Hollywood distribution company, is the next serious test of both Laughlin's and Scott's innovations.

Innumerable independent producers have attempted to challenge the major studios' dominance over product and talent. These mavericks call upon international tax shelters and territorial advances as their prime money sources, along with the bank lines of credit used by the major studios. Most visible of the independents is Dino de Laurentiis, a symbol of the free-spending late Seventies. Anticipating a new crisis and depression in the Italian movie industry, de Laurentiis relocated in the U.S. in 1972. With several violent movie hits in a row, such as *Serpico*, *Death Wish*, and *Mandingo*,

de Laurentiis marshalled his private sources of funding (hinted by his critics to be Mafia-derived) to embark on an inflationary program. His trademark \$20 million-plus projects -- *King Kong*, *Hurricane*, and *Flash Gordon* -- inspired others, e.g., Joseph E. Levine with *A Bridge Too Far* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. The Salkind family topped de Laurentiis at his own game by pre-selling *Superman* to the tune of a \$35 million to \$50 million budget. The Salkinds also invented a new gimmick in their "2 films at once" practice which hit paydirt with *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers*, filmed back-to-back in 1973. De Laurentiis' progress was partially set back by a string of box office failures which hurt his reputation and made enemies with exhibitors who had given him large, non-refundable advances for *King Kong*. Undeterred, De Laurentiis still threatens to (literally) conquer the universe by producing *Flash Gordon*, *Conan*, and *Dune*, three ultra-expensive projects in the currently profitable science fiction field.

De Laurentiis represents the new breed of independent producers, most of whom are allied with Hollywood studios, e.g., Zanuck/Brown or Chartoff/Winkler. A similar but more fundamental rebellion was taking place overseas. The head of a huge British entertainment conglomerate, Lord Lew Grade started dabbling in films with *The Possession of Joel Delaney* (1971) and *The Tamarind Seed* (1973). His financial backing of *Return of the Pink Panther* (1974) brought him big profits. With his feet wet and vast sums of capital at his disposal, Grade decided to create an "instant" major source of international films. Boasting budgets comparable to or higher than Hollywood productions and relying heavily on literary properties for source material, Grade's roster of films looked good on paper. Unfortunately, they were simply bread and butter "action movies" lacking style and impact. Weak scripts and grab-bag casting made these films a collective



The Muppet Movie

laughingstock. With world markets hungry for big-name product supporting him, Grade was not hurt financially. For his comeback in 1979 he bravely joined with his brother Bernard Delfont (head of Britain's EMI Films) to form a new major distribution company, Associated Film Distributors. Associated quickly established itself with a big hit -- *The Muppet Movie*.

More threatening than Grade were attacks from within the establishment. The top brass at United Artists took a walk in 1978, setting up a new major company named Orion. On the basis of the contacts and talent they had nurtured at UA, they were able almost instantly to begin production, eventually distributing their films through Warner Brothers. A 1979 walkout at 20th Century-Fox promised more of this mutinous activity.

These big names represent the establishment; they are interested in capturing someone else's market share, rather than changing the

system. A different fellow is the complete outsider who decides to take a chance in the picture business. The biggest such entrepreneur is Mel Simon, a shopping center magnate infatuated with the movie industry. Anxious to get going (and actually succeeding in making over a dozen films in just two years), Simon inaugurated a well-meaning but foolhardy procedure. He actively solicited projects that had already "made the rounds" and been turned down by the major studios in Hollywood, and proceeded to select and fund movies within this "leftovers" group. Admittedly a boon to filmmakers having trouble getting their projects going, this approach left Simon with only marginally commercial properties with which to enter the marketplace upon completion. He has yet to show any appreciable payback on his investment. Further, with no distribution apparatus in-house, Simon has had trouble getting the majority of his completed films released. He recently

signed a distribution agreement with 20th Century-Fox, but significantly this deal does not cover the release of his backlog of old, unreleased films. A less risky approach than Simon's was undertaken by Robert McNeil, who buys the U.S. rights to numerous foreign films and then places them with small distributors. Here, McNeil's taste and discrimination (and second-guessing faculty) can be rewarded without the huge risks involved in fully funding a production program on the scale of Mel Simon Productions.

Yet to be resolved are the inroads being made by the San Francisco mavericks. Francis Coppola in the late Sixties suffered setbacks in his American Zoetrope project to make San Francisco a filmmaking capitol. When his studio backers, Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, withdrew their funding, Coppola had to shut down his own San Francisco-based studio. Then in the early Seventies, Coppola amassed tens of millions in profits from his productions, *The Godfather* and *American Graffiti*. His creative influence became considerable, as his cronies like George Lucas, John Milius, and Steven Spielberg became big-name directors. Coppola overextended himself with his long-cherished *Apocalypse Now* project, beginning in 1975. He hoped to create a new distributing company called Cinema 7 and bought into the existing New York firm of Cinema 5 as a first step. As production on *Apocalypse Now* went forward, he challenged the escalating structure of stars' fees (McQueen & Brando then commanding over \$3 million per picture) by inaugurating a return to the long-term contract system, the bastion of the Hollywood studios during the Thirties and Forties. To this end, he signed many of his lesser-known *Apocalypse Now* principal actors to long-term contracts guaranteeing them work in an announced program of several Zoetrope productions.

Coppola's grandiose plans have been altered. Production delays and cost overruns on *Apocalypse Now*

caused him to go into his own pocket (to the tune of \$18 million) to pick up the excess tab on the movie, rather than lose artistic control over it to distributor United Artists. He sold his Cinema 5 shares to raise cash and gave up temporarily on his own distribution company plans. His hopes for a San Francisco entertainment conglomerate were set back by operating losses on his magazine there. The release and/or production of his other film projects, *The Black Stallion* and Wim Wenders's *Hammett*, have been delayed. With *Apocalypse Now* behind him, Coppola is back at work but on a smaller scale. His big dreams are not dead, however, as witness his recent purchase of a small movie studio located in Los Angeles.

Coppola's San Francisco friend and protégé George Lucas has different plans and priorities. After student films *THX 1138* and *American Graffiti* which he made for Coppola's production company, Lucas directed the biggest hit of all time, *Star Wars*, in 1977. Together with his production teammate (and former schoolmate) Gary Kurtz, Lucas now had personal capital of about \$100 million. Temporarily retiring from film directing, Lucas has produced sequels to his two hit movies. Lucas's big gamble is the creation of

a "filmmakers' retreat." He has bought a costly, remote ranch in the desert where filmmakers can come to discuss, plan, and edit films with full, modern facilities on the premises. More importantly, they will be away from the interference of the Hollywood studios. Lucas has the money to make this dream come true, and could be the revolutionary who actually succeeds in re-directing the U.S. movie industry.

The revolutionary schemes of the film mavericks of the Seventies were advanced against a backdrop of growth and prosperity in the movie industry. Currently, unprecedented inflation and ongoing changes in video technology threaten the continued existence of the theatrical motion picture. As viewing quality (and access to product via cassette and disk) at home improves while theatre facilities deteriorate, will large masses of people continue to queue up at first-run movie houses to pay \$7 to \$10 for a seat? When an average film costs \$10 million to produce and a like sum to promote, will risk capital remain available? Traditional movie industry people have no answers to these survival issues. It will probably take innovations from film mavericks to save the motion picture from extinction in the crisis ahead.



Apocalypse Now

BUSTER KEATON

The Poetics of Space

by Louis D. Giannetti

"For a real effect and to convince people that it's on the level, do it on the level. No faking. Move the camera back and take it all in one shot."

--Buster Keaton

Thanks largely to the pioneering work of the French critics of the 1960s, Buster Keaton is now regarded as a unique comic genius, not merely as Chaplin's greatest rival. No one was more surprised than Keaton himself when the French wrote so admiringly of his movies, for he was a modest, unpretentious man who thought of himself as a professional entertainer rather than a self-conscious artist. Totally apolitical, Keaton seldom dealt with serious social themes, nor was he interested in a wide range of ideas. In his interviews, he became excited only when discussing the mechanics of a gag, or the intricacies of a shot. But style is the man, despite Keaton's self-effacing disclaimers. His style has been called classic: poised, sophisticated and elegant, yet at the same time functional, simple, direct. There are few "beautiful shots" in Keaton's works, only superlatively intelligent ones. Though he was trained in vaudeville, he expressed himself in almost purely cinematic terms. He used fewer titles than any other American silent filmmaker: his shots are composed and edited with such self-evident lucidity that words are usually unnecessary. Keaton was a physical comedian rather than a traditional pantomimist. His was a comedy of *mise-en-scène*

as well as character and situation: we laugh not only at Buster's indomitable pluck, but also at the "perverse" objects which loom threateningly in his environment. The French surrealist Jean Cocteau once remarked: "The more one touches mystery, the more important it becomes to be realistic." This observation might well serve as Keaton's artistic credo, for his filmworld is both dreamlike and concrete. Rejecting trick editing, he insisted that most gags are funnier when they're presented with documentary-like matter-of-factness, when they occur in space that's not been artificially manipulated at the editor's bench. In fact, his gags are mounted with such cinematic mastery that they would retain much of their wit even if someone else performed them.

Joseph Frank Keaton was born in 1895 in the tiny town of Piqua, Kansas. When he was six months old he fell down a flight of stairs, and his godfather, Harry Houdini, who later gained fame as an escape-artist, dubbed the youngster "Buster" because he could take such a fall without busting anything. The boy's parents, Joe and Myra, were variety performers with a number of traveling tent shows in the midwest. Eventually they worked their way up to vaudeville, and for over a decade they were a headliner act. Fortunately the Keatons were a hearty lot, for they were oddly accident-

prone: they were nearly trapped in three separate hotel fires; their two-year old daughter stepped out of an open window and plunged two stories to the pavement below without killing herself; and weirdest of all, three-year old Buster was lifted out of a hotel room by a cyclone which flattened the entire town of Piqua. A gentle downwind deposited him--without a scratch--four blocks away. Not surprisingly, Keaton developed a fatalistic attitude towards life long before he reached his maturity.

As a youngster, Buster begged his parents to let him join the act. By the time he was three, he knew all of Joe's routines by heart. The child was a natural acrobat and enjoyed roughhousing with his father, who tossed him so high in the air that Myra was unnerved by their recklessness. Unable to leave the child alone for fear he'd get into mischief, Joe and Myra finally let Buster join their act when he was five. His contribution was to allow Joe to hurl him into the wings, against the scenery, even into the orchestra pit! Apparently The Three Keatons was one of those you-had-to-be-there kind of acts, for it was enormously popular. At the age of 11, Buster was perhaps the best known juvenile comedian in America, and by the time he was 16, the act was built primarily around his acrobatic feats. Billed as "The Human Mop," the resilient youth never seriously injured himself in all his years in vaudeville. In addition to acrobatics, The Three Keatons also featured



such standard fare as musical interludes, satirical sketches, pantomime, standup comedy, improvisations, recitations, and parodies. All of this experience proved invaluable when Keaton later turned to performing in movies.

He had an exceptionally happy childhood, for in addition to being a travelling entertainer, he amused himself by building fantastically intricate Rube Goldberg machines. He also loved athletics, especially baseball--a passion he never abandoned. His only day in school proved disastrous when he parried the teacher's questions with zippy one-liners--much to the delight of the other children, who were vastly impressed by his wit. Myra took over his formal education, though she had gone only as far as the third grade herself. Keaton's real schoolroom was the vaudeville stage, and he enjoyed the instruction of some of the most talented entertainers in show business.

The act broke up in 1917, after Joe's heavy drinking began to affect his work. Keaton was 21 at the time. He was soon offered \$250 a week as a solo act, with his name up in lights. But Fate intervened. While pondering his future, Keaton ran into an old vaudeville friend who was now working for Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. Fresh from his Keystone triumphs, Arbuckle had just formed a new company and planned to go into independent production. Keaton accompanied them to the studio, and immediately he became fascinated by the camera and the elaborate technology involved in producing movies. When Arbuckle offered him a job as second comic lead, Keaton accepted without hesitation, even though movies were far less prestigious than vaudeville. Later he learned that his salary would be \$40 a week.

Keaton admired and respected Arbuckle, who taught the newcomer everything he knew about filmmaking. The boss ran a loose ship, with lots of practical joking and impromptu baseball games between scenes. Everyone enjoyed working there because Arbuckle believed that work



Early two-reeler, circa 1919. Even as a boy, Buster had already fixed that melancholy, stoical gaze which later give him the nickname The Great Stoneface. Deadpan humor was a staple technique in vaudeville, but when employed by a child, its effect was doubly funny. "If I laughed at what I did," Keaton later recalled, "the audience didn't. The more serious I turned the bigger laugh I could get. I didn't even know I was doing it."

should be fun. Within three months, Keaton became his assistant director, and increasingly, Arbuckle was turning to him for advice. Both of them were expert improvisors and the generous star allowed his assistant to take the spotlight on many occasions. Some of the films they produced have been lost, but scholars have estimated that Keaton made from 14 to 17 two-reelers in his two years with Arbuckle. They became close personal friends, and several years later, when the fat clown was wrongly implicated in a rape and homicide scandal, Keaton was one of the few to stand by his old friend, lending him money and securing him employment as a director. Though the ill-fated comedian was legally acquitted, his acting career was finished.

In 1920, as a result of his box-office popularity and on the advice of his business manager and brother-in-law Joseph Schenck, Keaton went into independent production. Never very concerned with the

business aspects of his career, the comedian allowed Schenck to manage the Keaton Film Company for him. In the early years, Keaton drew a salary of \$1000 per week, plus 25% of the net profits. As usual, he didn't bother with a written contract: all agreements were oral. Later his salary was raised to \$2000, then to \$3000 per week, 25% of the net, plus occasional bonuses. Most important of all, Keaton had total artistic autonomy. Schenck handled only the business affairs and never interfered with artistic matters.

The 1920s was to be Keaton's Golden Era. During this period, he made 19 two-reelers and 12 features. Encouraged by his box-office popularity, he continued refining his art and accelerating his pace. Within a five-year period, he made nine first-rate features: *Our Hospitality* (1923), *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), *The Navigator* (1924), *Seven Chances* (1925), *Go West* (1925), *Battling Butler* (1926), *The General* (1926), *College* (1927),

and *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928). Each movie cost about \$210,000 and each grossed about \$1½ to \$2 million. Keaton's two favorites, *The Navigator* and *The General*, are regarded as his masterpieces.

In his first three years as an independent artist, Keaton concentrated on perfecting his craft. Several of his two-reelers of this period are frankly experimental, and aren't always artistically successful. Some of the gags seem to be included only to raise an easy laugh. A few of the films are based on vaudeville routines, and employ a variety of comic personas. The casts were usually kept small--"the villain, myself, and the girl, and she was never important," as Keaton once remarked. Eventually the comedian learned to unify his shorts around a central premise, perhaps a prop as in "The Boat" (1921), special effects as in "The Playhouse" (1921), or a villain or group of heavies as in "Cops" (1922). Discarding unmotivated gags, Keaton and his regulars were careful to include only organically related humor. Given a central concept, they then outlined what they called "the main laughing sequences," which were developed in a cause-effect pattern from the initial premise. Each sequence builds to a rising climax, culminating finally in a chase. This formula allowed Keaton sufficient room for improvisation--still the soul of his comedy--yet also provided the movies with a sense of coherence and dramatic inevitability. When Keaton graduated to full-length movies, he retained many of these structural principles.

Critic Daniel Moews has pointed out that most of Keaton's features employ the same basic comic formula. Buster begins as a callow greenhorn who bungles every attempt to ingratiate himself with a person he holds in awe--usually a pretty girl. At the conclusion of the day, he often falls asleep, lonely, depressed, and discouraged. When he awakens he's spiritually invigorated and goes on to succeed, usually at the same or parallel activities of the earlier portions of the movie. Most of the films open with

an expository prologue establishing the comic premise. In *College*, for example, the bookworm hero must prove to the girl that he's a "real man," and hence is worthy of her affection. "When you change your mind about athletics," she informs him haughtily, "then I'll change my mind about you." The rest of the movie is devoted primarily to Buster's efforts on the athletic field of battle. Similarly, in *The General*, a Civil War comedy, the battle is for real, and Buster must prove himself a brave soldier before the heroine will consider him for marriage. Keaton almost always ended his films happily, for to violate the American myth of success was to court boxoffice disaster.

Most of the features are highly symmetrical, with the second half of the film a virtual recapitulation of the first half. Of course this formula allows for considerable variation: occasional successes are allowed in the earlier sections, just as Buster sometimes suffers temporary setbacks in the second half. In general,

however, the narratives follow an elaborately counterbalanced pattern, in which most of the earlier humiliations are triumphantly cancelled out on the second day. Keaton often ended his movies with a chase, which he believed was the most effective form of climax: "It works so well because it speeds up the tempo, generally involves the whole cast, and puts the whole outcome of the story on the block."

Described thus schematically, Keaton's narrative structures sound excessively mechanical. But as his French admirers have pointed out, his architectural rigor can be likened to the works of the great Neoclassical artists of the 18th century, with their intricately worked out parallels and neatly balanced symmetries. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Keaton avoided seamless transitions. Instead, each self-contained gag sequence is a witty variation on a larger theme. The comic formula is not submerged beneath the surface details, hidden from view. It's deliberately heightened and meant



Buster Keaton in *The Three Ages* (1923), written by Keaton, Clyde Bruckman, Jean Havez, and Joseph Mitchell, cinematography by Elgin Lessley and William McGann, technical director Fred Gabourie, directed by Keaton and Eddie Cline, distributed by Metro Pictures Corporation. Keaton's first feature is a delicious parody of Griffith's *Intolerance*, intercutting three love stories from three historical periods: contemporary America, Imperial Rome, and (shown here) the Stone Age.

to withstand our scrutiny. It's part of the show.

As gag-man and co-director Clyde Bruckman pointed out, the story itself was an aesthetic pretext, "as important as a tune to a jazz band, and no more." The artistry lay in what Keaton invented to embellish his stories. The gags were determined by the premise of each

movie. Hence, in *The Navigator*, they revolve primarily around nautical situations, as they do in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* In *Battling Butler*, the comic situations deal mostly with boxing and physical prowess; in *Go West* with western movie clichés, and so on. The actual routines were never scripted. Keaton had to know only a movie's premise and conclu-

sion: the middle sections could be improvised.

A number of his works are parodies of other movies and moviemakers. Since many of his satiric targets are no longer familiar to present-day audiences, some of the humor is inevitably diminished, though Keaton usually insisted that a gag ought to be funny even to viewers who didn't recognize what was being travestied. In *Our Hospitality*, for example, he lampooned D. W. Griffith's fondness for historical facsimiles. A title card announces the setting: "Broadway and 42d Street as it was in 1830. From an old print." What follows is not a shot of Times Square as we think of it, but a dusty country crossroad with a solitary farmer leading a cow. The shot was, in fact, modeled on an 1830 print of what is now Times Square. "The Frozen North" (1922) burlesques the popular western star William S. Hart, who was famous for his "sensitive" crying jags on screen. Hart refused to speak to Keaton for several years after the movie's release.

Keaton was fascinated with the possibilities of special effects in the cinema. Like the early French Surrealists, he believed that no medium was so well suited to capturing the "concrete irrationality" of dreams and fantasies. A number of movies, like "The Playhouse" and *Sherlock Jr.* contain supernatural sequences. Wish fulfillment plays a major role in his movies, and as critic Moews has pointed out, the fact that Buster's reversals of fortune are usually preceded by a long, deep sleep suggests that the comically far-fetched triumphs of even the more realistic films might be interpreted as adolescent fantasies.

The more unreal the material, the more Keaton insisted it be presented "realistically." In *The Three Ages*, for example, he combined live action with animation in a shot which shows the Stone Age hero riding a dinosaur. In "The Playhouse," Keaton plays every role: the ticket seller, all the spectators, the performers, and so on. In one scene, he plays nine minstrel



Buster Keaton in *The Navigator* (1924), cinematography by Elgin Lessley, written by Keaton, Clyde Bruckman, Jean Havez, and Joseph Mitchell, directed by Keaton and Donald Crisp, distributed by Metro-Goldwyn Pictures Corporation. The dim and pampered hero of this movie is introduced with the title: "Rollo Treadway -- heir to the Treadway fortune -- a living proof that every family tree must have its sap." Many of the gags revolve around contrasts in size, for Rollo and his girl are stranded at sea, the only two passengers aboard a drifting luxury liner. The visual gags in Keaton's works are impeccably framed, without an inch of wasted space. In this shot of Rollo cooking his breakfast, for example, the camera is distant enough to include the enormous pot, yet sufficiently close in to reveal the incongruously tiny egg.

Publicity photo of Keaton in *Seven Chances* (1925), written by Keaton, Clyde Bruckman, Jean Havez, and Joseph Mitchell, cinematography by Elgin Lessley and Byron Houck, technical director Fred Gabourie, directed by Keaton, distributed by Metro-Goldwin Pictures Corporation. Buster's clothes are usually symbolic, and vary from film to film. The flat porkpie hat is his most persistent sartorial trademark, but in many of the movies he doesn't wear it. In the earlier comedies he sometimes wears oversized slapshoes, but they're seldom seen in the more realistic features. Buster usually sports a necktie, a symbol of his bourgeois aspirations. If the character is rich, he dresses expensively, if not outright foppishly. If he has to earn his living, he generally wears the uniform of his profession, and proudly. But Buster's clothes are mere coverings, divorced from his actual merit. Many characters -- especially members of the heroine's family -- dismiss him out of hand because of his doltish initial appearance.

players simultaneously: all are on stage at the same time, and are photographed in one shot. No one could figure out how he managed to photograph this extraordinary scene. Later Keaton explained that he had a special lens box constructed, with nine separate shutters, allowing only 1/9th of the film emulsion to be exposed to light. Each time Keaton played one of the nine minstrels, the film was re-ran back to the original starting point. Needless to say, the synchronization had to be split-second perfect. The director gave much of the credit for such brilliant special effects to his regular cinematographer, Elgin Lessley, whom Keaton described as "a human metronome."

Critical commentators often refer to Keaton's persona as "Buster" as a matter of convenience. In fact, the characters he plays are more varied than is generally acknowledged. His French admirers have stressed Buster's grace and resourcefulness; others have defined him in terms of his ineptitude; still others have concentrated on his dogged courage in the face of danger. Keaton himself described his persona as the classic Slow Thinker, and emphasized his delayed reactions to life's maddening fluctuations. "The audience wants the comic to be human, not clever," Keaton explained. There's considerable evidence in the movies that Buster can be both: first human, then clever. Of the silent clowns, only Harry Langdon's persona seemed younger and more naive than Keaton's. Though clearly an adult, Buster has the social poise of a shy

15 year-old boy. The hero of the features is generally given a name in a diminutive form to suggest adolescent immaturity: Willie, Johnnie, Jimmie, Junior (two times), or simply "the boy" (also two times). The persona is defined somewhat by his work: a railroad engineer, a cowboy, a would-be detective, a college student, and so on. Nor is he always from the same social class: in several movies he's rich and spoiled, in others he's comparatively poor and must work for a living. In films like *Battling Butler*, *The Navigator*, and *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, he begins as a hopeless wimp, while in *The General*, he's unusually competent right from the beginning.

In most cases, as Moews has pointed out, Buster is something of a split personality. At the beginning of the majority of the features, he's passive and fatalistic, hardly bothering to defend himself even against unjust accusations. Once he decides to take control of his life, he's galvanized into action--suddenly quick-witted and aggressive, where previously he was timid, tentative, or just plain dumb. At the beginning he often tries to conform to the prevailing social mores, and the gags are based on his zombie-like attempts to appear "normal." In his opening scenes with the heroine, he's the quintessential gawky suitor, determined to court her in the most ploddingly "correct" manner. He's almost totally insensitive to the vibrations of others. Females are especially unfathomable, and he seems to court them not out of any genuine ardor, but because it's the expected



thing for an eligible young bachelor to do. After his transformation, he demonstrates more naturalness and common sense. The callow Buster is languid to the point of somnambulism; the heroic Buster is adventurous and alert, his eyes blazing with determination where previously they were scarcely visible beneath their heavy lids. Buster the rookie is impractical, abstract, and formalistic; Buster the veteran is pragmatic, concrete, and flexible in his responses. The kid insists on being "logical," even if logic doesn't work; the man is shrewd enough to realize that instincts are often superior to mechanistic thinking.

As an actor, Keaton displays a relatively narrow range, but within that range, he's superb. The labels of "The Great Stoneface" and "the man who never smiles" have done him a disservice, suggesting that his face is inexpressive. A number of commentators have remarked on its ethereal beauty. The exquisitely chiseled features suggest classical sculpture; the melancholy eyes are dreamy, innocent, and vulnerable. As David Robinson has pointed out, there's a soul behind those eyes. His face recalls the tragicomic Pierrot of the canvases of Picasso, and the sad White Clown so tenderly extolled by Fellini in his nostalgic *The Clowns*. In his early movies particularly, Keaton powdered his face to suggest

a fragile, porcelain effect. As Robinson points out, Keaton's face is far from immobile: "He is the only silent comedian with whom you are never for a moment in doubt as to what his thoughts are." His acting genius is expressed primarily in terms of understatement, for modest Buster constantly tries to stay cool.

Keaton's economy as an actor is admirably demonstrated in a scene from *The General*. The railroad engineer hero is impeded in his chase by a rickety boxcar which groans ahead of his train at a snail's pace. He tries several ploys to deraill the car so that he can again accelerate his engine, but without success. While he's distracted by other matters, the boxcar veers off the tracks by itself. When Buster returns to his problem, he discovers to his astonishment (conveyed by a slow, uncomprehending blink of his eyes) that he no longer has a problem--a typical instance of the awesome, inexplicable mysteries of his universe. When asked why he remained so sober-faced, Keaton replied, "I concentrated on what I was doing." And of course this solemn concentration is what makes him so funny. Only once was he persuaded to smile, and the preview audience booed, hissed, and groaned in response. The smile was cut.

The finest acrobat and athlete of all the movie clowns, Keaton insisted on performing his own stunts. Surprisingly, he injured himself only twice in his career. His range is breathtaking: he leaps from bridges and steep waterfalls, swims against ferocious currents, climbs mountains and dangerous cliffs, falls off of all kinds of speeding vehicles, and even flies through the air during a hurricane. His athletic activities include baseball, football, swimming, boxing, rowing, and virtually every kind of track event. Incredibly, he almost always executed his stunts correctly on the first take. He insisted in the name of realism that whenever possible the stunts be photographed in a continuous shot, or the audience would think that the event was faked through ingenious splicing.

Keaton's movements are usually

sharp, virile, and trajectory-like, seldom insinuating or conventionally graceful. Critic J.-P. Lebel has described his body as "coiled like a spring," ready to pounce into action on the slightest cue. His motions are generally rapid and efficient, and he seldom exhibits any panic, or dissipates his energies. An incurable optimist, Buster believes that every problem has a logical solution. As Lebel has pointed out, the hero first analyzes the problem with a prodigious amount of attention to its mechanical dynamics. His curiosity satisfied, he then quickly calculates a logical solution. Only then does he spring into action--often with hilariously anticlimactic results, for nothing's as logical as Buster thinks it is. When he finds himself in a totally unfamiliar situation, he often shades his eyes with one hand, arches his body forward, and intently scans the horizon in an effort to get his bearings. Only after repeated failures will he become discouraged, at which point his body seems to collapse and he sits down in disgust, his repertory of solutions totally exhausted.

Above all, Keaton's comedy is spatial. Most of the gags center around the way objects and people are positioned and manipulated within the *mise-en-scène*. Buster's body is seldom funny in itself, but in the way it's juxtaposed with other physical elements within the frame. Keaton often used the distant long shot because it allows the viewer to see simultaneously all of the relevant variables of a gag. In *The Navigator*, for example, we see the hero and heroine engaged in a futile search for each other on an otherwise abandoned ocean liner. Keaton shoots the scene from a considerable distance away, allowing us to view all three levels of the ship's decks. The comedy is both spatial and temporal, for the two bewildered searchers just miss each other by a matter of seconds as they wander from level to level.

Often the gags revolve around contrasts in size. No comedian ever worked with larger props: cars, busses, bridges, railroads, ships. Buster is sometimes photographed

as a speck in the *mise-en-scène*, fighting valiantly against monstrous odds--a herd of cattle, a gang of bootleggers, a precinct of cops, a tribe of Indians, even the Union and Confederate Armies. The conflicts sometimes assume elemental proportions: Buster contends against winds, fires, oceans, deserts, waterfalls, and storms of every variety. Keaton manipulated these spatial conflicts brilliantly. The shots aren't just photographed, they're composed. The visual weights, shapes, and kinetic shifts are choreographed with balletic grace.

"We get it in one shot, or we throw out the gag," the comedian often instructed his staff. Once he had to repeat a gag 75 times before it was completed to his satisfaction. But in some cases one shot was all he could command. In *The General*, for example, he wanted to show a train--a real train, not a miniature--toppling off a high burning bridge into a river far below. He photographed the scene from hundreds of yards away, documenting its authenticity by including within the frame several cavalry soldiers on the banks of the river. The contrast in scale between the enormous falling train and the mounted soldiers provides the movie's most thrilling--and funny--epic spectacle.

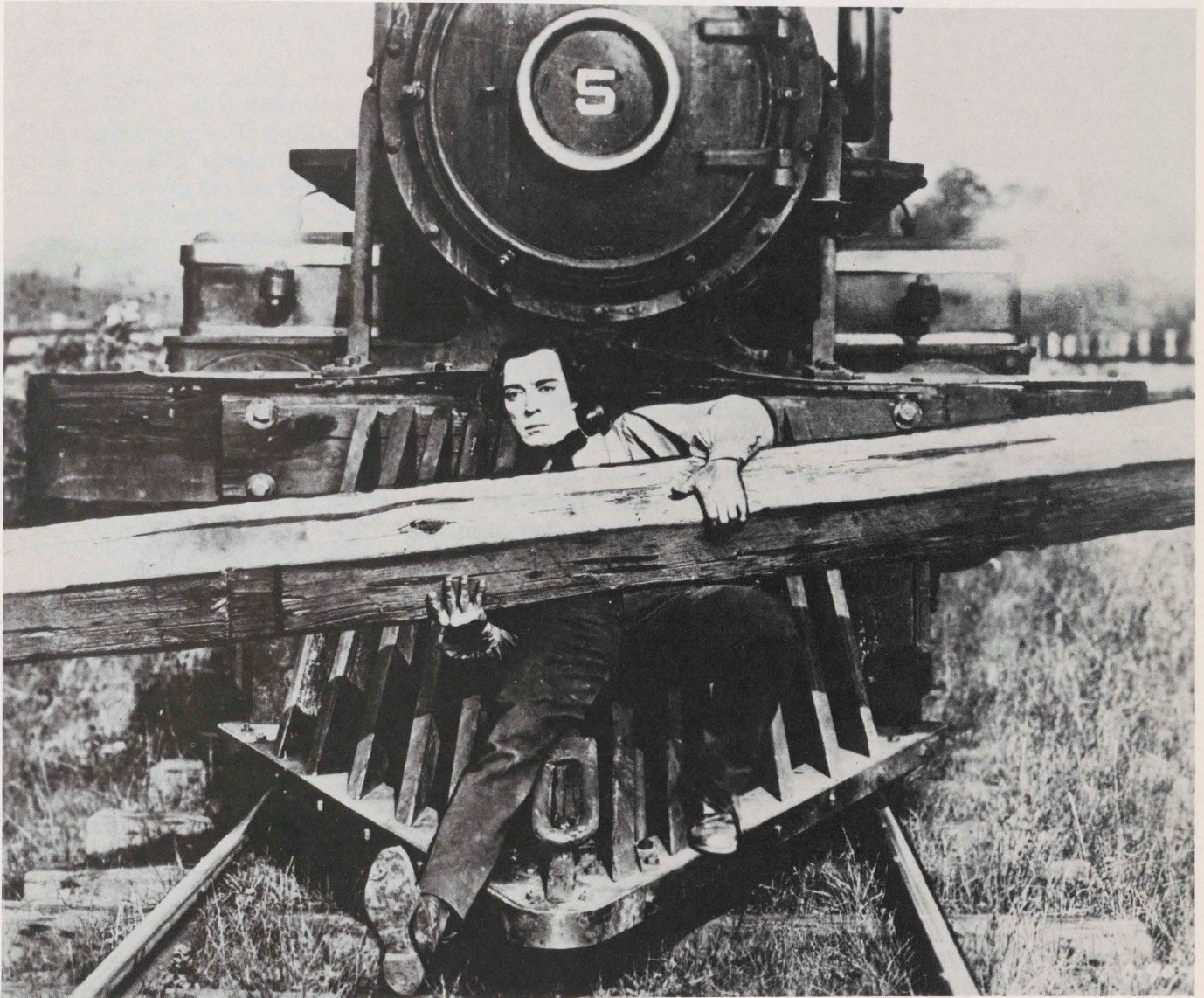
On a number of occasions, Keaton even risked his life in the name of greater realism. Perhaps the most famous instance of his daring can be seen in the hurricane sequence of *Steamboat Bill Jr.* Fierce gales whip the inhabitants of the small town like puny splinters, uprooting trees and collapsing \$100,000 worth of sets. While Buster surveys the wreckage from in front of a two-story building, its facade suddenly crashes over him *en bloc*; but a tiny second-story window which happily was left open leaves him still standing at the conclusion of the shot, gazing at the debris of the facade enveloping him. The breakaway front weighed two tons, and Keaton allowed himself only three inches of clearance at his head and shoulders. Audiences gasp rather than laugh at such realistically

staged gags. Or rather, they gasp first, *then* laugh.

A number of commentators have remarked on Keaton's fascination with machinery and anything involving mechanistic systems. He was a well-known bridge enthusiast, and some of his plays have been included in bridge manuals. Buster's

behavior is often machine-like, and in most of the movies he's associated with a characteristic vehicle. Trains are the favorite by far, and are included in most of the features. Several films contain Rube Goldberg machines whose baroque networks of wires, levers, weights and counter-weights perform such functions as

preparing and serving breakfast for two. The machines can take on a life of their own. In *The General*, for instance, Buster throws dirt under the train's skidding wheels to get it moving forward again. When he turns his back on the train for a moment, its wheels begin to function properly, and driverless, it chugs out of frame.



Buster Keaton in *The General*. Keaton was a virtuoso improviser, and could spin off a variety of gags from a single prop -- almost like musical variations on a theme. These gag sequences are miniature dramas, with their own introductory exposition, complications that build up to a climax, and quick comic resolution. Such gag chains are funny in themselves, but they're also brilliantly integrated into the dramatic context. In the famous sequence pictured here, for example, our hero's pursuit of the villains is impeded by a railroad tie that they have dumped on the tracks. He slows his engine down to a crawl and scampers off to remove the obstruction. But it proves more unweildy than he anticipated, and while he struggles to lift it, the train slowly chugs forward and sweeps him off his feet. A number of comic variations result, as Buster precariously tries to balance the tie in this humiliating posture. While attempting to recover his equilibrium, he sees another tie sprawled across the tracks ahead of him. In a burst of inspiration, he converts his tie into a flying lever by strategically bouncing it off the edge of the other tie, thus hurtling them both off the tracks. Two problems are deftly cancelled out with one stroke. Audiences often burst into spontaneous applause at such resourceful mechanical conversions.



Buster Keaton in *The General* (1926), with Marian Mack, cinematography by Dev Jennings and Bert Haines, written and directed by Keaton and Clyde Bruckman, released by United Artists. One has to mine a Keaton shot for its artistry, because function always takes precedence over form. Or rather, form is the embodiment of function: there's no misalignment. In this shot, for example, the human material is paramount -- as it almost always is in the classical American cinema. The dramatic context of the shot is a chase, and Buster and his girl are alarmed because their pursuers are catching up with them. But the shot can also be viewed as an almost abstract design. Its underlying structure is triangular, with the topmost circular shape forming its apex. Within this design, Keaton includes an array of geometrical shapes and patterns, and subtle gradations of black, grays, and white. The shot is exquisitely balanced in its visual weights and symmetries, yet for all its elegance, there's nothing arty or pretentious about it. It's too simple and functional. Keaton's genius at design was purely instinctual. He almost never talked about such matters.

When Buster returns to his problem, once again he discovers that it's mysteriously disappeared.

Keaton was a master at snowballing a gag until it acquired monumentally threatening proportions. In *Seven Chances*, for example, Buster must marry within a few hours in order to inherit a vast fortune. He randomly approaches over a dozen women, who all reject him. The news about his inheritance later becomes public, and the second half of the movie is devoted to Buster's attempts to escape the importunities of a flotilla of ludicrously veiled would-be brides. Some of Keaton's

gag chains are almost domino-like in their inexorability. In *College*, Buster tries to impress the heroine by attempting a number of field and track sports, which of course he bungles dismally. Later in the movie, she calls him up in a panic, for the villain --with obviously nefarious intentions-- has locked himself in her dormitory room. Before she can finish, the rotter yanks out the telephone wire, leaving Buster to imagine the worst. Like a bolt he flies to her rescue, cancelling out in the process all of his earlier athletic failures: he leaps out of the window, sprints towards her dormitory, feints through a crowd,

high-jumps a tall shrubbery, then a series of lesser hurdles, broad-jumps across a small pond, snatches a clothesline pole just outside her dormitory, vaults up to her second-story window, and lands squarely on his feet inside her room. Once there, it's only a matter of seconds before the villain is meted his comeuppance.

Lebel and other French commentators have been intrigued by the fatalism of many of Keaton's movies. His is a universe dominated by whimsical shifts in fortune, and this constant flux of objects and relationships makes it difficult for Buster to master the rules of the game. Indeed, the mechanistic rigor of Keaton's comic formula suggests a kind of structural destiny, as though the hero has no choice but to retrace his previous steps. Moews points out a certain treadmill principle, in which the hero exerts a tremendous amount of energy that's often wasted or reversed. But in general, Moews finds the films good-natured and cheerily optimistic. Fate, for the most part, seems ultimately benevolent. Defeats are provisional, and even when Buster seems totally helpless--as at the conclusion of *The Navigator*--a "miracle" usually pulls him through. Somebody Up There is watching over Buster. A few of Keaton's earlier works--most notably "Day Dreams," "Cops," and "The Boat"--end in failure, but the conclusions lack a metaphysical dimension. There's no sense of the movies being *shaped* towards a preordained destiny, as there usually is in the happy endings of the features.

Keaton had a small staff of regulars who worked closely with him on most of his movies. Clyde Bruckman was his right-hand man, helping with the gags and with directorial duties. Other major writers were Jean Havez, Joe Mitchell, and Edward Cline. Keaton's gifted special effects technician was Fred Gabouri, who also helped research the period of the films, scout locations, and supervise the set construction. The underrated Elgin Lessley was the cameraman for most of the features. Working without scripts, Keaton and his

regulars improvised around the comic formula for about eight weeks, making due allowances for occasional baseball games. Everyone contributed, and gags were gratefully accepted from all. According to Bruckman, however, Keaton thought up 90% of the gags, and though he often allowed someone else to take directorial credit, the comedian chose virtually every camera setup. He also decided on the final cut of each movie.

Incredibly enough, Keaton seldom rehearsed even the most complicated stunts in advance, for he believed that rehearsals produced an effect that looked too calculating and mechanical. Most of his shots were captured on the first take, and he almost never repeated a shot more than once. Generally he would shoot enough material for five or six movies. Later the worst footage was discarded, and Keaton would edit together a preliminary print. All the films were sneak previewed, recut according to audience response, and only then released to the general public.

Even if Keaton never appeared before a camera, he would still be regarded as a great director. He was the first comic to discard the use of fast motion, which he thought threw off the timing of a gag. Later, Chaplin and Lloyd followed suit. Most of Keaton's movies were shot on location, and the historical details and costumes of the period comedies provide the *mise-en-scène* with an authenticity that few of his peers could match. In the staging of complicated scenes, he was the equal of virtually any director. *The General* required 4000 extras, and they're deployed with impeccable skill. Critic Kevin Brownlow described the hurricane in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* as "the most astonishing special-effects sequence ever attempted." Most of Keaton's shots are in deep focus, and usually the staging is also in depth, with important information on a variety of visual planes. No one used the frame more organically: almost any random shot demonstrates an acute sensitivity to how much--or how little--visual informa-



Buster Keaton in College (1927), written by Keaton, Carl Harbaugh and Bryan Foy, cinematography by Devereux Jennings and Bert Haines, directed by Keaton and James W. Horne, distributed by United Artists. Keaton's features are profuse in elaborate symmetries, parallels, and comic recapitulations. In this film, Buster works at a lunch counter to finance his way through college. While applying for the job, he observes another soda-jerk mixing a milkshake with extravagant virtuosity and precision. Pictured here, the same customer enters and asks Buster for a milkshake. Naturally he attempts to duplicate the other soda-jerk's bravura style, naturally with disastrous results.

tion is necessary to maximize the shot's impact. Keaton disliked over-acting, and despite the stock characters most of his performers were required to play, they're almost always convincing and natural in their roles.

Keaton was also a first-rate editor. He didn't use the flamboyant cutting techniques of Griffith, but favored a functional, economical style. The shots are never merely decorative: each contributes its unique visual information. Closeups are rarely used, and generally only for small props, so that the audience will recognize their relevance as a comic variable. The logic of Keaton's cutting is precise and inexorable, especially on repeated viewing. The scenes are never rushed: the pacing, whether jaunty or stately, is geared to the psychological effect of the gags. Some of his sequences, like the cannon gag from *The General*,

are classic examples of the art of editing at its cleanest.

Keaton had his shortcomings as an artist. Some of his gags no longer seem funny, in part because they've been copied to death. A few of the jokes lack bite, either because they're too contrived, or they're self-consciously cute. In an underwater sequence from *The Navigator*, for instance, Buster uses the claws of a live lobster as wirecutters. He also converts a passing swordfish into a rapier in order to ward off a hostile denizen of the deep. A number of commentators have lamented the ethnic stereotyping of some of Keaton's humor. Inherited from the vaudeville stage, this kind of comedy was popular in the early 20th century, when immigration was at its peak. Present-day audiences tend to find it repugnant, but Keaton never employed such gags maliciously. Jews, Italians and Negroes were

widely accepted as comic "types," and Keaton's occasional ethnic slurs exploited these conventions casually, without any meanness of spirit. A few of the movies are structurally lumpy, and some of the concluding chases don't evolve organically out of the materials at hand.

Keaton's heroines are seldom very interesting in their own right: they simply provide a pretext for Buster to surpass himself. Pretty, diminutive, and incurably bourgeois, they're usually portrayed conventionally: they're there only to observe, and occasionally to encourage, the hero in his gallant ef-

forts. "There's no sex, no passion for the comic actor," Keaton once said. "When a woman kissed me I became a father to her. I wanted to protect her for the rest of my life." The two most interesting leading ladies are in *The Navigator* and *The General*: their flakey ineptitude exceeds even that of the hero. Much of the charm of these comedies derives from the incompetence of these well-intentioned but exasperating creatures.

In 1928, Joseph Schenck persuaded Keaton to join with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, a move the comedian later referred to as "the biggest mistake of my life." Appalled by his

naiveté, Chaplin and Lloyd both warned him of the dangers of such a move. But unhappily Keaton lacked their shrewdness and cunning. After a half-hearted attempt to seek out alternative options, he signed with MGM for \$3000 a week plus occasional bonuses. The studio absorbed his regulars into its vast bureaucracy. Keaton was told by Irving Thalberg, the famous Boy Wonder of the studio, that the entire scenario department was at the comedian's disposal. No less than 22 writers were assigned to work on the script of his first MGM-produced film. In addition, a number of studio executives insisted on improving the script even more with ideas of their own. Thalberg was constantly worried that there wasn't enough story, and when Keaton explained that he preferred to improvise the story, the youthful production chief merely humored him. Thalberg was privately convinced that the factory system of production was more efficient. Finally a script was produced, complete with camera instructions for director Edward Sedgwick. Keaton sincerely tried, but he couldn't work under such conditions. Finally, Thalberg agreed to let Keaton do the movie *his way*. The first thing he did was throw away the script. *The Cameraman* is admired by many, but few would rank it with the earlier comedies.

In *Spite Marriage* (1929) the strain was clearly beginning to show. Thalberg never again allowed Keaton independence in his work. The classic yielding Nice Guy, Keaton always allowed Thalberg--who knew very little about slapstick comedy--to have the final say. The scripts got worse and worse. There followed a succession of glossy and forgettable movies, some of them with songs and dance, others with numerous subplots in which Keaton wasn't even featured. Under these pressures, his spirit shrivelled: increasingly he turned to alcohol for solace. His marriage to Natalie Talmadge--incompatible even in the best of times--was in shambles. Keaton was not the first great artist destroyed by the studio system. That



Buster Keaton in The Cameraman (1928), with Marceline Day, cinematography by Elgin Lessley, written by Keaton, Clyde Bruckman, and Lew Lip-ton, directed by Keaton and Edward Sedgwick, produced and distributed by MGM. Buster courts the girl (and she's always a girl, never a woman) in regulation fashion: with jacket and tie, hat properly doffed, manner properly sober. Love is a serious -- indeed solemn -- matter. For Buster, it's like a foreign country, and he doesn't know a word of the language. In the early stages, he's more secure with a protective buffer between himself and the awesome object of his affections. His manner is tentative, his motives unimpeachably chaste. Often he requires a gentle nudge to give him courage -- like the discreet digital maneuvering pictured here.

distinction probably belongs to the reckless Stroheim--who was also axed at MGM, also at the hands of their Boy Wonder.

In 1933, at the age of 38 but looking many years older, Keaton was fired by MGM, divorced and penniless. He was also a drunk. Throughout the next two decades, he was in and out of bars, drying-out homes, and mental institutions. A succession of ambitious, anonymous women took up his evenings. One bleary bloodshot morning he found himself in a cheap hotel with a stranger sharing his bed. Upon awakening, she triumphantly brandished a marriage certificate under his nose: in his autobiography, Keaton doesn't even mention his second wife's name. From time to time he was able to pull himself together, and he was usually able to support himself by the countless hack films he appeared in.

When he married the young dancer Eleanor Norris, his life improved considerably. A devoted and supportive companion, she solaced him through periods of near despair. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, he made guest appearances on a number of television shows. He also played in summer stock, and appeared in the Paris circus. As a result of the many TV commercials he made in the 1960s, he lived his final years in comparative comfort, though nowhere near the opulence of his life in the 1920s. Only one performance of his later years displays the old genius: the brilliant vaudeville routine with Chaplin in *Limelight*. In 1966, at the age of 70, Buster Keaton died of lung cancer.

His comedies were always admired in Europe, and in the Soviet Union his popularity exceeded even that of Chaplin and Mary Pickford--the boxoffice monarchs of the 1920s. Several commentators have pointed out Keaton's influence on the early French Surrealists, especially the movies of Luis Buñuel, and on such Absurdist dramatists as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Beckett even wrote a short film--cutely entitled "Film"--for the great clown. Keaton's influence can also

be seen in the comedies of Jacques Tati, Red Skelton, Richard Lester, and Jerry Lewis. Perhaps his greatest disciple is Lucille Ball, whose *I Love Lucy* series was indebted to Keaton's comedy--a debt she always acknowledged with pride. Keaton's biographer, Rudi Blesh, summed up his achievement with eloquence: "Beyond the man whom time inevitably had corroded is the figure that time has burnished--the beautiful mime, the tragic clown, the artist, speaking clearly through the silence."

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AN EXTENSION OF REALITY: SETTING AS THEME IN *THE SERVANT*

by Michael M. Riley and James W. Palmer

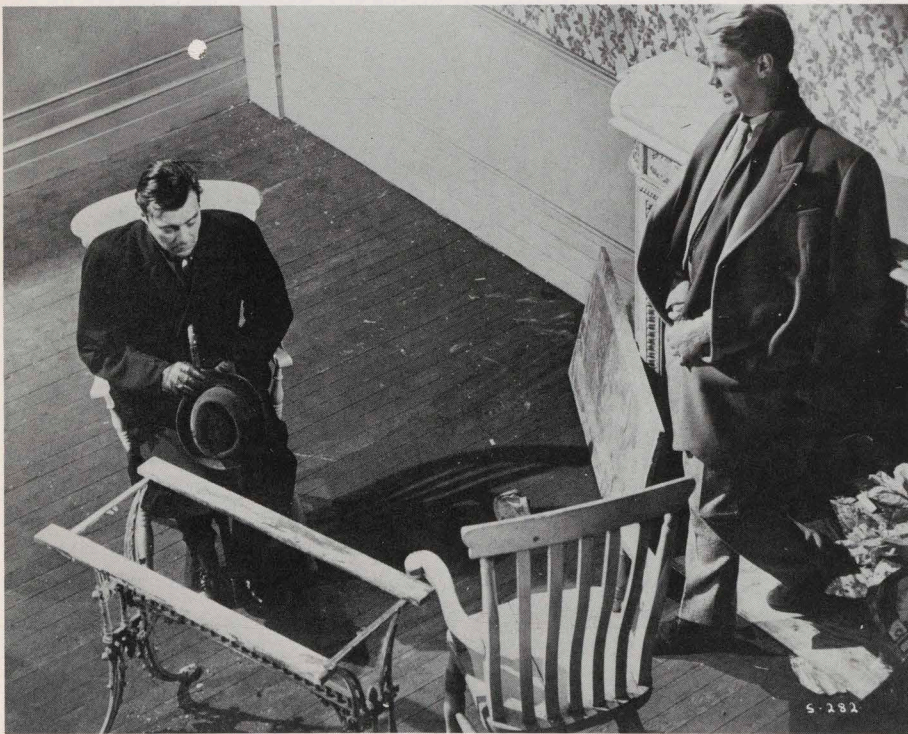
The three films directed by Joseph Losey from screenplays by Harold Pinter -- *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967), and *The Go-Between* (1971) -- may be seen as a continuing meditation upon the relationship between man's actions and the setting in which they take place. In all three films setting is a dynamic element of the narrative. Losey's sensitivity to the material world is evident in his films' rich images, which reflect his attentive, even sensuous response to the expressive possibilities of physical

detail. Both *Accident* and *The Go-Between* make subtle, effective use of the tension between fierce human conflicts and the serene, beautiful settings in which they unfold. However, in their first film collaboration, *The Servant*, Losey and Pinter achieve their most complex and sustained exploration of the thematic possibilities of setting, for the film deals specifically with an effort to create a setting or environment which functions as an aspect of the plot, a crucible in which the characters are defined and developed,

and, more significantly, an embodiment of the film's themes.

The plot concerns a young aristocrat who has recently purchased a London townhouse and wishes to employ a manservant. The narrative's primary setting is the house where most of the action takes place. In the beginning when Barrett (Dirk Bogarde), the servant, comes to interview for the post, the house is an empty, unoccupied space, a kind of abstraction of environment. In the course of the film, that space is modified -- decorated, inhabited, acted upon by the characters -- until it transcends completely the limits of mere physical setting. Although the physical details and decor of the house, including the many paintings, mirrors, and vases of flowers, seem real, the world of *The Servant* is, in a sense, hermetically sealed, its reality only apparent. Still, when the characters and their actions become increasingly bizarre, the setting seems to argue for a "realistic" reading of the film. Nonetheless, it resists simple explanation in such terms. In fact, Losey himself has said: "There isn't any strict reality in the whole picture."¹ The film derives its meaning from the tension that arises from the sense of the house as both reality and abstraction.

The empty house is at the outset a reflection of several of the themes and motifs which inform the film. Its emptiness reflects the essentially shapeless character of Tony (James Fox), its new master, and at another level it suggests a world of possibilities -- not necessarily negative --



An opening scene from *The Servant*: Tony, the master of a newly acquired house (James Fox) interviews Barrett (Dirk Bogarde) for the position of manservant. In this shot, Tony appears to dominate the deferential Barrett, but their positions will soon be reversed.

which demands choice to give it form, direction, and ultimately value. In the first sequence the camera moves fluidly through the entrance hall and adjoining rooms as Barrett arrives punctually for his interview and finds the sleeping form of Tony, who has had "too many beers for lunch."² As Barrett walks toward Tony, the camera dolly behind him, the stark image is subtle in its implications. Lacking any furnishings or ornaments, the house is defined only in terms of empty rooms, a succession of doorways, and the sleeping figure stretched out on a deckchair in the distance. Hence, the image's pattern is that of vertical lines crossed by a single horizontal line, the figure of the dozing Tony. In visual terms there is an opposition that foreshadows the multi-layered conflict that is to follow. More immediately, the scene presents Tony, prostrate, passive, without energy or direction -- the first of many such images. Awakened by Barrett, Tony rouses himself, and for a time his boyishly easy charm and aristocratic insouciance tend to override the initial impression. As he leads Barrett up the stairs to interview him in one of the house's upper bedrooms, Tony is seen through the banister railings. This image becomes a recurring visual motif foreshadowing Tony's final entrapment, even as he has momentarily taken charge. Standing over and circling around the seated Barrett, Tony dominates during the interview. But in the conversation he admits to his need for "general looking after," and the deferential Barrett is ready to assume the task. Like a patient, motionless spider, Barrett watches Tony begin to entangle himself. In dialogue and action, the scene is ordinary, but the images have established the potential drama of this seemingly undramatic situation. The scene introduces some of the important elements of setting which serve as symbols, and it lays the foundation for the plot and themes of class conflict and personal domination.

Although the house is, in a sense, shapeless, it will give shape to



Barrett ostensibly brings in his mistress Vera (Sarah Miles) to act as housekeeper; actually, she is to be used as a sexual lure for Tony. Here, the sinister couple ascends the centrally important staircase.

a story of moral collapse, of human possibilities perverted, of destruction which engulfs virtually all those who enter it.

When Barrett first enters the house before he has seen Tony, he crosses to the stairs and ascends the first step or two. In doing so he implicitly takes his place in the central battleground of the film. Whatever changes the house undergoes, it is the stairway which is visually sustained as the most important place. Separating the quarters of master and servant, the stairway symbolizes social or class difference. Again and again the characters move up and down the stairs in their shifting relationships, gaining and losing various kinds of supremacy, competing in uncertain contests. Even as it is a symbol of difference, of that which separates, the stairway is also that which connects, that which binds the opposing forces to one another. For it is a characteristic paradox of the film that opposition binds as surely as alliance. The stairway becomes an axis or vortex within the house, which itself exerts a kind of centripetal force that attracts and finally imprisons the characters.

The empty house invites its inhabitants to fill it, and in doing so with both objects and acts, the characters give the environment meaning. The house becomes what Losey terms an "extension of reality," a metaphor which conveys social and human contradictions, reflects and defines the characters, and comments upon them and their lives. Barrett's first task in looking after Tony is to supervise the decoration and furnishing of the house. Turning his hand to that task, the servant is soon exerting an influence on his master that foreshadows the reversal of roles which is to come. Tony, the dreamer of romantic notions about building great cities in the South American jungle (which would be another environment), having only the vaguest ideas of what his own house should be, relies on Barrett. Lacking any self-awareness, or even a strongly defined personality, Tony implicitly extends a fatal invitation to the servant to become the dominant force. The environment becomes almost a physical extension of the servant, who winces as the workmen clumsily nick the newly painted woodwork.

When Tony first shows the house to his fiancée Susan (Wendy Craig), he unintentionally reveals Barrett's already considerable control. Susan is amused by Tony's naive enthusiasm for his surroundings, but she is also dismayed by his lack of concern for the way Barrett has everywhere imposed his tastes. Unaware of this, Tony proudly unveils to Susan the new chic abstract in the garden, a formless sculpture installed by Barrett which metaphorically reflects Tony's own shapeless character.

Once Barrett introduces Vera (Sarah Miles) to the scene, all the principal characters are present. Vera, supposedly Barrett's sister, is in fact his mistress; an enigmatic tool in the servant's schemes, she seduces Tony, who becomes both sexually obsessed with her and increasingly bound to the house. He gradually drifts away from his already listless relationship with Susan. When he and Susan are away together for a weekend in the country, Tony seeks to return to the house, the environment in which his nominal mastery progressively yields to Barrett's control. Even the dreary weather, the rain and snow, contributes to the oppressive atmosphere that draws Tony back to the house and to the solicitous services of Barrett.

Susan is the one intrusion from the outside world, and she and Barrett are locked in combat over Tony's life and soul. The servant has constructed a pleasure house that is a prison, as the many camera shots through the bars of the stair banister suggest. Susan seems to react instinctively against Barrett and the hermetic environment he creates. Their struggle for Tony is conveyed through Susan's initial response to the interior decorating. The portraits of aristocrats hanging on the walls of the house are reminders of the past, of an elegant refined world now dead, along with Tony's father and Lord Barr, Barrett's former employer, who both died within the same week. But as heir to this world, Tony is over-refined, effete -- without individuality or purpose, ex-



Vera prepares to seduce Tony in the kitchen. Note the saucepans in the background through which we will later see their distorted reflections as they make love on the countertop.

cept for his absurd rationalizing talk, his romanticized version of *noblesse oblige* about building a civilization out of the Brazilian jungle. When Susan first enters the newly decorated living room and examines one of the paintings, Barrett tells her that "the simple and classic is always best." Susan objects that the painting isn't classic but "pre-historic." Her comment represents an intuitive rejection of this carefully arranged, superficially aristocratic world which will turn decadent, providing the stage for the most base and primitive emotions.

The conflict between Susan and Barrett becomes apparent in their quiet but intense struggle over the house's appearance. During one of Susan's visits to Tony, who is in bed with a cold, Barrett occupies himself with dusting books and spraying the house with disinfectant. When she brings flowers into the house and

even into Tony's sickroom, Barrett tries to remove them, but Susan insists that the flowers stay. Later, she tries to assert her authority over Barrett by changing the decor of the house with colored pillows and flowers and by treating him as a servant who must follow orders. Although she wins some battles, Susan's struggle to save Tony fails because Barrett uses the environment to seduce and finally to control him.

The very surfaces of the house reflect the characters' actions and reveal their personalities. When Vera seduces Tony in the kitchen, the room we associate with her as the housemaid, the two figures are seen distorted in shining saucepans. Even the translucent shower curtain that Tony hides behind, as Barrett in one of his intimidating games menacingly seeks him out, shows the distorted silhouette of the cower-

ing master.

Mirrors, too, are everywhere present in the house, a part of the "tasteful and pleasant surroundings" that Barrett is so anxious to create. When the camera focuses directly on a single character, there frequently is a doubling effect because the character's reflection is caught in a mirror. Such doubling suggests the split and divided personalities of the central characters, as well as their self-indulgent, narcissistic attitudes. In fact, our first view of the completely decorated interiors of the house is presented as a reflection in a convex mirror. Although the image of the living room is clear, the mirror has warped its appearance. Also, the multiple mirrors often reflect the triangular arrangement of the characters as their complex emo-

tional and psychological relationships shift. The figures seen in the convex mirror are foreshortened, diminished or elongated like the eerie images in a carnival house of horrors. Such views foreshadow what we will see in the decadent party that ends the film, where Vera not only takes a picture of Tony and herself in a mirror but also views the party through a glass ball or paperweight that distorts and literally inverts Tony's face and the entire room. Without resorting to a distorting lens or dream sequences, Losey and Pinter nonetheless convey the deformities of character and environment that reveal the perverse deterioration of Tony's world.

In this shifting world, positions of social class and sexual supremacy are usurped and reversed. Tony's

fragile self-possession is shattered when he and Susan return to find Barrett and Vera making love in Tony's bedroom, that same room where the servant was first interviewed. Tony orders the pair from the house, but when Susan refuses to stay with him, his emotional and moral collapse accelerates. Alone in the house without Barrett to provide definition, Tony slips rapidly into the state which was prefigured in the first scene of him lying inert. Later an apparently accidental meeting with Barrett in a pub culminates when Tony accedes to Barrett's plea and takes the servant back. It is the last time either is seen outside the house. The elegant dwelling dissolves into an ill-kept mess. Having created the environment by which he led his master into dependence



The triangular composition of this shot subtly conveys the tense battle between Barrett and Susan over the unsuspecting Tony.



Tony's fiancée Susan (Wendy Craig) in an increasingly intense struggle against the evil Barrett for Tony's soul.

upon him, the servant now becomes the corrupting and corrupted master of that environment. In a haze of drink and drugs, Tony sinks into a world of degradation and ambiguous sexuality. In one sense the roles are now fully reversed, but paradoxically the servant turned master is himself bound to his victim in a symbiotic-parasitic relationship. In a closed world lacking moral boundaries, both men are master and servant, and both are morally destroyed.

Within this elaborately created setting, Losey and Pinter work out the social, sexual, and psychological conflicts in *The Servant*. Although Losey regrets having once said that the film was about Faust because "this was a terrible over-simplification,"³ *The Servant* does recall elements of that legend, for Barrett is a kind of dapper Mephistopheles. However, no single rational explanation of the tragedy can account for all its details. Despite its surface realism, the world of the film is not merely realistic. Indeed, the mode of the film seems at different times to be realistic, surreal, and even allegorical. With its echoes of such diverse tales as those of Faust and

Dorian Gray, *The Servant* is a morality play where evil occupies the space that good has abdicated. The once empty house, now filled with the accoutrements of realism, has taken on a life of its own. The surfaces of reality have been exposed by the camera whose inexorable movement searches out "guilty secrets." All the deadly sins are eventually paraded before us -- pride, envy, anger, greed, gluttony, lust and especially sloth. Indulging Tony's every whim, isolating him from Susan and the outside world, Barrett has exploited his master's weaknesses by creating a totally self-contained, decadent world that we watch him securely lock up as the film ends. The precise punctuality of their first meeting in the empty house has given way to chaos. When the hour of reckoning is at hand, the house clock, whose chimes have regularly sounded at the most dramatic moments in the film, has stopped, and Tony, immobilized in his drugged and drunken stupor, has slipped into a timeless, eternal damnation.

In the closed world of *The Servant*, setting clearly establishes an oppressive and claustrophobic

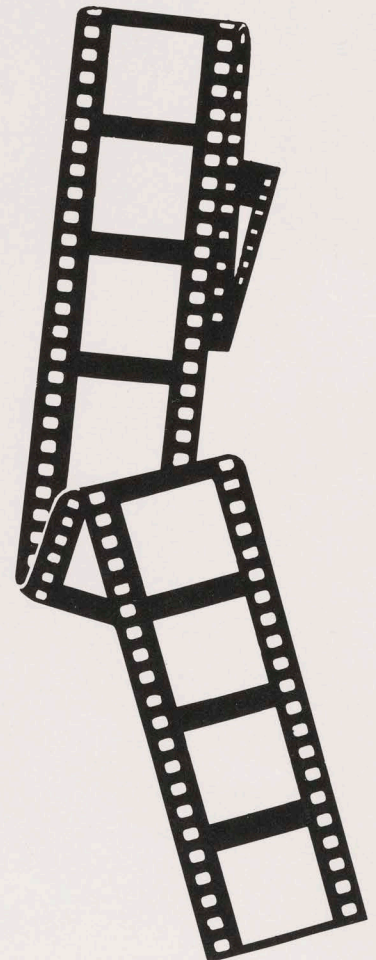
mood and tone, but with its complex relationship to the plot and characters, it goes considerably beyond this. Losey and Pinter steadily extend the symbolic implications of the house; setting acquires the force and characteristics of theme itself.

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(1) Tom Milne, *Losey on Losey*, (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1968), p. 136.

(2) All quotations are taken from the screenplay obtainable in Harold Pinter, *Five Screenplays* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973).

(3) Milne, *Losey on Losey*, p. 131.



MOTHER CUTTER AS PRODUCER: AN INTERVIEW WITH VERNA FIELDS



compiled and edited by Lester D. Freidman

Verna Fields, one of the top film editors in Hollywood, has edited such films as Medium Cool (1969), What's Up, Doc? (1972), American Graffiti (1973), Sugarland Express (1974), and Jaws (1975). Currently she is a production supervisor at Universal Studios in Hollywood, where she has supervised such films as FM (1978) and The Big Fix (1979).

The following interview took place on the campus of Syracuse University, and it was recorded by Bernie Uebelhoer. Questions came from students and faculty of the College of Visual and Performing Arts' Film Program. Verna Fields' visit was made possible by grants from the Ford Foundation and from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Question: Could you speak about some of the unique problems confronting a woman in your particular position in the industry?

Fields: Right now, for the first time, it's helpful if you have anything to offer because the industry is afraid of being sued. Actually, you never really know why you were not hired for a job or why you didn't get a promotion. No one tells you it's because you're a woman. If you say it is, they holler you're

paranoid. But right now things are wide open because sexism has been brought to their attention. Two things have happened: the industry is now suddenly becoming aware of women and homosexuals. Enormous numbers of homosexuals have suddenly appeared in the creative and executive areas of Universal and in other studios, like Paramount and Fox. As the women became freer, they opened the doors. The sad exception is minorities, who as hard as they have tried, haven't done too well. Part of the problem is that the doors haven't been open long enough for trained people to be arriving at the door step. As I've often told people, I wouldn't have

told a daughter of mine to aspire to be a director — maybe a writer or an editor. I would never have said you could be an executive, or a producer, or a director. But I'm sure my children will tell their daughters that. They will grow up with a much wider range of what they can do. I am sure a lot of the girls here were not told at very early ages they could aspire to be an engineer, or an architect, or a whatever. It was the nurse or all the other roles women fill with ease that were always mentioned. Just now high school and college girls are being made aware of the things that have always been forbidden to them before.

Personally, I never had any



Roy Scheider and Richard Dreyfus in *Jaws*

problems because, as you can tell, I am not shy. If one thing didn't work, I just went around the corner and tried something else. When I was a sound editor, they didn't want to hire me because of their foul language. They just didn't want a woman around and that was always one of their excuses. I beat them to the punch and said, "Why don't you give me a room down the way so I won't hear you?" That stopped them from using language as an excuse. But I was more aggressive than a lot of women who were trying. One of the hardest things in getting to the top is filling the role under the top position as an assistant. In editing, it was very hard to get a job as an assistant because most of the men could not stand the idea of a woman lugging around the film and doing all the things they were trained not to let a woman do. A woman carrying 80 lbs of film and making 20 trips up to the projection room? Not likely! But men are learning to handle that now.

Question: Who are the bold, bright, new women filmmakers who you think have great potential?

Fields: I have a deal right now with Karen Arthur, who was an actress. She directed one episode of *Rich Man, Poor Man* on TV and a really strange film called *Mafu Cage*. It was called *Clouds* for a while. She was given the money to do a horror movie, and she turned it into one of the most exotically beautiful pictures I have ever seen. She has an incredible eye. She came to me with an idea from a story in the newspaper about a psychological rape — a young woman coming from the Midwest to live in New York. It's something most women have gone through at one time or another with obscene phone calls, notes being left in their cars, and having to cope with police who would like to help but they can't. It's a difficult situation which happens to a lot of women. She had a very good outline for a story, and I

talked the studio into going along with it. They're developing a script, and I think she has great potential. Joan Tewkesbury directed a picture called *Old Boyfriends* that Paul Schrader wrote. She wrote *Nashville* and I think she has great potential. Joan Silver is also doing something else. Although I think she's good, I feel she hit her stride. I don't foresee any enormous growth or change in her films. There are a lot of women writers emerging and as women writers emerge, so will directors. A lot of these women who are writing will eventually want to direct.

Question: Does Universal conceive of itself of having a particular image, a picture being a "Universal" picture?

Fields: Yes, and we're trying to change it.

Question: What I mean is that in the past they did a lot of TV-like things.

Fields: That's true, and we are trying very hard to change that image. Actually, it's very difficult to undo a reputation. Their movies last year, with the exception of *Earthquake*, *Airport*, or some of the Jennings Lang pictures, really stretched them pretty far. Pictures like *Blue Collar*, *September 30, 1955*, or even *Animal House* are a far cry from the "Universal" picture.

Question: But Universal also distributed *The Greek Tycoon*?

Fields: That's quite true. You don't change overnight you know.

Question: But what sort of reputation can they develop when they stick with gimmicks like sensurround?

Fields: Why did you mention that awful word? Actually, I think they hurt a good picture with sensurround and I think they know it: *Roller Coaster*. It wasn't a bad picture except for the sensurround. If

they had just taken all the crap out of it, all the Roller Coaster stuff left in just for sensurround, it would have been a nicely performed, good old mystery story B picture. Sensurround was a gimmick that worked; it made a lot of money for *Midway*, which was a terrible movie. It was a bunch of bad stock shots thrown together with some bad acting. but sensurround saved it financially. So, it served its purpose. *Earthquake* also made lots and lots of money. However, I don't know of any picture they are talking sensurround about at all now. They are inventing something called Lightsaround. Now the big thing is Dolby Stereo Sound, which is also terrible, at least I don't like it. But there are always going to be gimmicks.

Question: How much of the time and effort and money at Universal and other studios in Hollywood is now being devoted to made-for-TV movies, as opposed to feature films?

Fields: I can't answer that, thank heavens. I really avoid it because the TV machinery at Universal is so immense that I am afraid if I put my little finger in there, it's going to get bitten off. I mean it is just huge. That's one of the problems with feature films at Universal; it's one big plant. You can't fool around with an air date, so a lot of the facilities get you in trouble when they start treating a feature like they do a TV film. For example, when you are color timing a picture at the lab, it is a very arduous and difficult task that you have to give a good deal of care to. On TV you don't because it's color corrected when it goes over the tube. So they are used to just pushing it through, and they just want to push through the features too. It becomes very hard to talk to people, who worked on TV for the last four weeks and on the fifth are doing a feature, to change their way of working. What has happened now, and it started happening about that time I came in, is that the studio is seeking out stronger directors, people who care more about their film, who will argue and fight to get a

movie the attention and care it should have. You're not going to slop through Sidney Lumet's picture like it was the movie of the week. He is just not going to let you.

Question: As an executive at Universal, are you the technical liaison to the filmmakers as opposed to the businessmen and executives?

Fields: I have fallen into that because I can talk about it. But I have ended up at it from both sides. The directors and producers will come to me to help solve some technical problems or to use some clout to get something for them that I would understand the importance of that another executive might not. I can understand what their problems were in the dubbing room. Why they have to go back and redub, though it's going to cost something. I can make a judgment of whether it's necessary, and they will listen to me. If I go to the head of the sound department and say it's necessary that he get back in there, they will pay attention to me because of my position at the studio. So a director will come to me rather than to the executive who is on the picture.

Question: Are you the only person of that type around?

Fields: Pretty much.

Question: Are you the only woman?

Fields: Yes. After I was hired at Universal, there suddenly appeared a woman executive at every single studio. But I have been told that the only other woman in that position who has any power at all is Paula Weinstein at Fox. But her whole area is literary as far as making deals is concerned, which I can also do. But I think I am the only executive who was "below the line" prior to being an executive.

Question: Hollywood filmmaking has the reputation of being a business rather than a mode of expression, or if you will, an art. Being



Ryan O'Neal and Barbra Streisand in *What's Up, Doc?*

in a position at Universal, which has a reputation for the business film, how do you view the cinema and its purpose in terms of Hollywood, and is there a chance for any kind of personal expression rather than an economic — or moneymaking — ethic within the Hollywood system?

Fields: No, I don't think there is a chance that they will give up the economic aspects of the motion picture. However, I don't see any reason why one has to preclude the other. I think as more and more people become educated, as more and more people become aware of the arts, things will change. As more and more people become aware of art, or become interested in art, the studio heads will see they can make more money out of it. Once the studio finds out that they can sell an experimental film, they'll allow experimental films. They are in business. They are a public corporation on the stock exchange, and they cannot afford to lose money.

Question: What about the argument that Hollywood is preventing a greater art consciousness from becoming more universal because of their business tactics?

Fields: I don't think that is true. I really don't. I think there is an interest in cinema as opposed to

movie making, or film instead of pictures, in almost everybody I know. But there is a commercial responsibility to the studio, and I think if there were a way to make money out of the screening of the Museum of Modern Art they would be doing it. There is not a lot of encouragement from the studios towards experimental film and the only time that it happens is with a man like George Lucas, who is very interested in experimental film. He has now collected about 80 million dollars or something like that and claims he is going to devote part of his studio in northern California to experimental film. I imagine the interest alone on that kind of money will be able to support it for many years. It has not happened yet; I hope it will. I know George, and I think he is the kind of person who means it. I just hope that he can do it. But I think until you have something equivalent to the National Film Board in Canada you are not going to really have large-scale experimentation in this country.

Question: In that case, what do you think of the activity of the AFI [American Film Institute]?

Fields: I am disappointed. I think it has mostly attracted people who are looking to make their way into Hollywood, and for them it serves a

purpose. It certainly has not served any purpose in the experimental film, or regional film, or film for social reform.

Question: What about the Orion setup [A newly formed production company responsible for "10" and *The Life of Brian*]? Do you think it will influence things?

Fields: I think that it is going to have an enormous influence. Orion was given something like 90 million dollars with which to make films in their first period. They really don't have any responsibility to anyone. There are no stockholders. There is no one to answer to. So they have 90 million dollars to make films with, and they are offering some of the most outrageous, unrealistic deals. They are giving final cut to first-time directors. They are hiring without any great consideration at all. They could run through 90 million very fast or they could also come up with an enormous success that would bring in 200 million. So it is getting harder and harder for other studios to make a deal with a good filmmaker when he can go to Orion and get incredible amounts of money and total freedom. They don't even ask for script approval.

Question: You obviously think that is bad.

Fields: Of course I do. I think filmmaking is a collaborative effort. If you are going to use somebody else's money, they have a right to know what you are going to do. If you want to give some kind of money to somebody who wants to do some art film, who wants to do an experimental film and asks for \$15,000, I think that is fine. They know they are giving money to someone to do an experimental film. Somebody comes in and says, "I want to do a film about two men following the line of the Mississippi River and we want 20 million dollars," and they give it to them and then the filmmaker comes up with an experimental film about a painting. I don't think that is right. I think the person who is investing the

money should know what his money is being used for, not necessarily how it is being used, but what it is being used for.

Question: But Orion set itself up in opposition to the Hollywood system.

Fields: Not really. Let me tell you about that final cut because I found out about that. Directors have final cut if the picture is not one cent over budget (no picture is ever on budget), if it comes in exactly on schedule, if it has the rating required, and if the picture is the length required. I'll give final cut to anybody who meets those restrictions. First of all, budgets are mostly unrealistic. By the time you finish a picture, there is no way it is going to be on budget. Is anything on budget here?

Question: Yes, but we are not talking about millions.

Fields: But what difference does it make? A budget is a budget. When you write up your budget, you figure you can do it for that, don't you? Or at least that you are going to try to? Maybe you also try to do unrealistic budgets to get an OK? Anyhow, I cannot think of any picture at all lately that has come in within budget. So now the minute you come in over budget or over length, the studio has the right to take final cut away from you.

Question: If producers are mainly businessmen, why should they get the final cut?

Fields: I'm not saying the producer should have final cut. I'm saying the studio should, or somebody they assign to it, or the executive producer. I really think a film is a collaborative effort. Frankly, when our studio gets into an argument with the director over a section of film, unless I think it's going to cause either the making or the breaking of the film, I'll always opt for letting the director do what he wants. So what if there's a line of dialogue the ex-

ecutive vice-president doesn't like, as long as it's not going to hurt the picture. On the other hand, if it's a scene that I think is really destructive, I'll fight with the director, as I did with Marty Feldman. But just because these people are agents or lawyers or whatnot, and perhaps don't know technically about production, doesn't mean that their taste isn't as good or better than the director's.

Question: In the past you've cited Buñuel as a filmmaker who epitomizes the ability to be both very personal and expressive, and at the same time, commercially viable. Yet Buñuel's films, in terms of production costs, never approach the kinds of small films being produced in Hollywood. There are also directors like Roeg and Ken Louche who have already proved themselves to be reasonably viable commercially, yet don't receive support from Hollywood. Why?

Fields: They have never, and Buñuel has never, asked for support in Hollywood. I don't know if he wants to come to Hollywood.

Question: Well, I don't only mean him personally.

Fields: I just gave Buñuel as an example. I don't know that if Universal called him tomorrow and said they would like him to make a picture, he would do it. This is true for a lot of people who don't want anybody telling them how much film they can expose. They have a theory that there would be control and influence they don't want. Universal has a 25% overhead. There is no way Buñuel could make a picture like that. He isn't hampered by union or time requirements. He takes a long time on some of his pictures, and I think he has a lot of followers who work for very little, just for the honor of working with him. It is all very nice, but we are not allowed to do it in Hollywood.

The cost of a picture has affected the ability to gamble because the investment is so large. Historically this

has happened before. Prices were getting higher and higher and then profit requirements were getting bigger and bigger. *Cleopatra* was made at that time, for a phenomenal cost, and it broke the back of that whole system. Then *Easy Rider* came along and changed everything. It was the beginning of a whole new era in filmmaking, one of getting out in the streets, not having studio overhead, a lot of hand-held camera work, and smaller crews. Now, things have spiraled upward again. But something will break it again. It's ridiculous. How many pictures can

big with *Cuckoo's Nest*, which had been turned down by studios for 15 years, but they did it because it was not exactly artists who got involved with that one. Michael Douglas was the one who pushed it. He is certainly not a pusher of the arts, but he felt the script would work. However, there is an enormous, growing interest in experimental film. Take Filmex [the Los Angeles International Film Festival], which has not been the best-run film exposition in the world, but it is getting better and better. It's mobbed, absolutely mobbed. It's getting very hard to get

source of income. I find that wrong. They will use up the talent they have and where are they going to get the new talent if they don't help develop it?

Question: Do you think film schools will be the source of tomorrow's directors, more so than in the past?

Fields: I think it is now. A lot of the current filmmakers have come out of film schools. Right now the writers are beginning to push their way in because they have had it with directors chopping up their work, and they are starting to gain a stronghold in the industry. That is why Paul Schrader started directing. You really should see *Blue Collar*; it's fantastic, and Schrader is not a commercial, or I should say hard-core commercial, filmmaker. He was very disappointed with *Hard Core*. For one thing, he promised to make an R picture and said that had he been able to make an X picture, he would have had a brilliant anthropological film. But having to make an R meant he had to keep it within certain bounds. *Blue Collar*, for someone's first picture, was just phenomenal and done in a very un-Hollywood way, as opposed to Martin Scorsese who went very much into commercial pictures.

Question: Are you talking about *New York, New York*?

Fields: Actually, I was thinking about *Taxi Driver*.

Question: Could you define what you mean by a Hollywood film?

Fields: Slick.

Question: You mean technically?

Fields: Not just technically, no. I mean kind of pandering to easy acceptance. The audience does not have to work at all, except for the end. In a Hollywood film you don't have to do any work as an audience. You sit back, and it does it all for you. That's about the best description I can give you of a Hollywood film.



American Graffiti

be made that cost that kind of money and get their money back? There are going to be gigantic flops that will really hurt, and then they are going to look for a different direction for filmmaking. As of now, no studio is leaning towards any kind of experimental film work. Even Martin Scorsese has certainly tried to be commercial.

I don't know how many of these innovators have tried to get funds from a major studio. I know that it would be hard to get Universal to invest in a picture of that sort, which I am sad to have to say. United Artists, which has always been the dream of all the independent filmmakers, would not be one to be very experimental. They did rather hit it

tickets, and they're running films around the clock — marathons, student films, documentaries, and old films — for three weeks morning til night, and it's still hard to get tickets for any of them. I think this is also happening in New York.

I think it's probably up to the film schools to put on pressure and to get together. I think they could gain some strength together and work out some kind of an exposition of their own, perhaps in New York rather than in Los Angeles. They need a major touring thing where they sold tickets and made it grow. The problem is Hollywood has not been made to pay attention, and the only thing that will make Hollywood really pay attention is money, a

Question: How much influence does a critic have in decisions or in things that happen to films or directors in Hollywood?

Fields: We found out that some of the most successful pictures ever made got terrible reviews. However, critics do have an influence in New York and in Los Angeles. They have the ability to crush a filmmaker or have him go out and give a big party; filmmakers use their quotes for ads. The week after it opens, the ads change and you start reading what Rex Reed and what Paulene Kael had to say. They pull the good quotes out, even if the next paragraph says the film is terrible. They use a quote that makes it seem good. Someone gave me a list the other day of some of the pictures that just got slaughtered unanimously by all the critics. *Butch Cassidy*, *Sound of Music*, and even *Jaws* did not get the best reviews in the world. It was an incredible list. Previews aren't much better. *Saturday Night Fever* had three of the worst previews -- half of the audience walked out in one of them. They wrote on the cards NG (no good), piece of shit, and all that.

Question: Then why do the studios spend tremendous amounts of money inviting critics on junkets, having them come to New York or Los Angeles to preview films, if they are not really at all interested in what they say?

Fields: I didn't say they weren't interested. They want to use them in their advertising. Did you see the ad on *The Last Waltz*? It had the most incredible full page of just clips from different reviewers. After *Jaws* opened, I sat there with Steve Spielberg and we read all the reviews from all over the country to see if there were some good quotes we could use in the ads. That's its main purpose for the industry. The most influential critics are the ones on TV, like Gene Shalit.

Question: More than someone like Kael?

Fields: How many people in Kansas do you think read the *New Yorker*? But you see, they all see Gene Shalit. The TV critics have become much, much more influential. They perform. They tell jokes and get very smart-assed in their criticisms; they can really be brutal, or they can really build someone up.

Yet, I still say that there is something that goes on before that ever happens that influences a picture. I don't know what it is, a combination of some kind of magic. For *Saturday Night Fever*, it was a combination of the album with the film. Also, it was the best commercial I ever saw on TV; the feet walking with the music was just incredible. But I don't know if that made anybody go to the movie. After all, they were standing in line right away. I just don't know why.

Question: Even though you are now a producer, you were one of Hollywood's premier editors for years. Tell me some of the editing strategies you used in *Jaws*.

Fields: Ok, let's talk about the beach sequence. The scene on the beach when the little boy gets it was designed to create enormous tension. The film is very rhythmic, and the cutting was particularly rhythmic. You can create all kinds of illusions by maintaining your rhythm or breaking it. Rhythm and pace play a great role in the editing of a film. So, that scene was cut with a certain rhythm and then, in order to jog the audience, we kept the rhythm going at a very even pace and then broke it. You have a cut, cut, cut, no cut. You almost immediately felt that the person seen on the no cut was going to get taken, especially when we then went back to cut, cut. That was an experiment, by the way. I don't know anyone who had done it before. I had certainly not done it before, and it was something I had told Steven I wanted to try. He had designed the scene to work with people walking in front of the camera. It was a beautifully designed scene, and I think it would have worked without

that break as well. But when that was added to it, it just heightened it all the more. It was something I liked doing and used it, once I found that it worked in that sequence, a couple of other times. The scene that worried me the most as far as that was concerned was the one where the shark comes out of the water when Chief Brody says, "Come here and chump some of this shit!" No matter what Steven or I say, we had no idea that was going to happen, no idea that a line like "come here and chump some of this shit" was going to bring the house down with laughter. I mean it's not that funny a line. People were so nervous at that point that it created huge laughs, and during that huge laugh no one expected the shark to come. It was right in the middle of a laugh. I have tapes of audience reactions to that, and it's the middle of a laugh broken by this huge scream by everybody. That always worried me, and if you look at it enough times, you would see that you can see that shark in that water. I was always worried that the audience would laugh at us because you can really see it before it comes up, but it's that laugh that distracts the audience completely. They are completely taken off guard by that big laugh. No one really anticipated that happening, but of course that happens as a result of Roy Scheider saying "I need a bigger boat." That was nervous tension. We had originally decided on the whole break of rhythm there, hoping to distract the audience with that so that when the shark came up it would come as more of a shock. We were worried about them being able to see it. But we needn't have worried. Actually in the next-to-the-end sequence, that shark looks pretty bad, if you look at it carefully. It's just that by then in the picture, you have been sold, and so you accept almost anything.

Question: Why did you allow the shark to be seen in almost full view towards the end of the film?

Fields: It does sort of look like a cigar coming out of the water. It

always looks best when it's under water. But I don't think you can build an audience up to a certain point and not go all the way. You have to satisfy them after you've teased them the whole way through.

Question: Did they ever consider not killing the shark, just letting it go off into the ocean?

Fields: No, never. As a matter of fact, we went to enormous lengths to kill that shark. We reshot it about four times and actually a very, very, lucky break gave us one of the most spectacular shots in the film at the end. The blowing up of the shark, the topside of which was done at Martha's Vineyard and had about nine cameras on it and a regular moonshot countdown, just went "poof." So when we came back to Los Angeles, they decided to do an underwater one with a miniature. The miniature head was about the size of a table. Then they had all this junk piled into it so it would scatter underwater. We did it and Steven left, I left, and everyone left. But there was a cameraman there who did the under-water photography and who saw it sinking and decided to keep his camera rolling. So that whole sinking and the whole screen turning to red was just a cameraman's idea of let's try it and see what happens. That's what really killed the shark. Those explosions weren't very good. So you see, a lot of moviemaking is a lot of luck.

Question: Where does the responsibility for music fall? Does it come after or before the editing?

Fields: Well, there was no music in that beach scene we discussed earlier. As a matter of fact, that was designed to upset you as an audience as well, because what we did was have source music coming out of the radio. There was music going up to that point. As it got more and more tense, someone had the news on the radio, someone else had classical music on, someone had pop music, so it got very dissonant. I think it worked well there. The pic-

ture was scored by Johnny Williams. There was a very friendly situation on that picture, probably because of all the troubles. Zanuck and Brown (the producers) wanted Johnny Williams; Steven was delighted with the idea, as was I, as we all ran the picture together and talked about where music should be and where it shouldn't be. I don't think anyone disagreed on anything. Steven had an idea for the kind of music he wanted. He wanted real *Captains Courageous* English shipping music. But no one thought about that wonderful theme Johnny came up with. The picture was good before the music, but it was great after the music. It did huge amounts for the picture.

Question: How about the music in *Close Encounters* versus *Jaws*? After all, it's the same director and composer.

Fields: I suppose they have a certain signature that might be recognizable. If you look at the theme of *Close Encounters*, it is almost the same as *Jaws*. It starts with an innocent, middle-of-the-road guy who becomes obsessed about something and goes out in search of it. It has the same first, se-

cond, and third act, the same structural form.

Question: *Jaws* was a financial success. Everything went well with it. Why is it that people don't remain in the same company with one another?

Fields: That's an easy one to answer. Steven Spielberg had a deal with Universal for seven years during which he was to make four pictures in seven years. They gave him his first break. When he made *Jaws*, he had no points at all. They gave him two points out of the goodness of their hearts. But his contract called for him to get maybe \$50,000 on the second or third picture and maybe five points if he was lucky. After *Jaws*, he was so hot he was offered fifty points and \$500,000 to direct a picture. Universal wasn't going to meet that. They could force him to do it, but in the meantime he only had to do four pictures for Universal in seven years. Now Universal is not going to hold him to an unreasonably low fee just because they have a contract with him. Studios are very flexible that way. But at the same time, they aren't going to give him the moon. They have some right, they feel, to getting his services at a slightly lower



The Sugarland Express

rate since they were the ones who were willing to risk money on his work in the first place. That's why he changes studios.

Question: Yet *Jaws* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, though directed by the same director, appear to be two different films.

Fields: Well, as was mentioned, they have the same structure, and Steve used the same composer. Not only that, but he used the same cameraman he used in *Sugarland*, as well as an editor I recommended. I would have done it if I had not switched jobs. I would have stayed with him. He used quite a few of the same people — those who worked out well on *Jaws* and those who he was satisfied with, and who were available. But it was a long time between *Jaws* and *Close Encounters*. When you count the time he was actually shooting, it was quite a long time.

Question: Are there many editors whose work you admire?

Fields: Yes, there are quite a few.

Question: DeDe Allen?

Fields: She's great. She did *The Wiz*. There are a lot of good editors, a lot of people I would trust. There are also a lot of young editors who don't have a lot of credits who are awfully good. I don't have problems with good editors. I have problems with other people. I have problems with good sound people. They are hard to come by. There are always stars in their fields who get called on for every picture. I think DeDe and Bill Reynolds and I got calls on every picture being made for a while

Question: Was there stiff competition among the various editors?

Fields: Well, it's funny. I'm just not a competitive person. When I got to be a very successful sound editor and was always in demand, I started cutting pictures, but I figured I could always go back to sound. Now that I am an executive, if they don't like it,



Medium Cool

I can go back to cutting. I have been very lucky.

Question: Your background isn't in music editing, is it?

Fields: No, sound editing.

Question: Then how did you develop a sense of rhythm necessary for editing?

Fields: Well, this is going to sound very silly, but I am practically tone deaf. I can't even carry or even remember a tune, and I think it kind of helped me in editing. Rhythm is different from a tune, so I was never distracted by the tune and became very conscious of the rhythm. I don't know if that would help anybody else, but it did with me. For several years almost all American films were entirely looped. And all foreign films were looped. You can tell because the sync is off. Now they have a new, easier method of doing it called ADR which is Automatic Dialogue Replacement. You don't have to make a loop. It is done electronically with a computer: you just press a button, and it takes you right to the line that needs doing. Whenever you loop, you have to replace every

other movement that happened while the actor was talking -- the dress rustle, the footsteps, the movement, anything. You used to have to cut these in from library sound effects. But now what they do is put the same ADR thing and instead of having someone talk, they have someone walk and move in synchronization with the actors. But in all those years of cutting footsteps by the thousands, I found out when cuts were in the right place and when they were in the wrong place. I grew accustomed to rhythm, feeling, and movement. So, I learned about those things just by doing them.

Question: In the editing of *Jaws*, you spoke in terms of an innate sensibility that you had — you called it rhythm — but do you have a theory on editing in terms of it being a psychological mechanism?

Fields: No, my only theory is that the film in hand is what dictates to you how it should be edited. So, it's the director who really always puts the image on the film and tells you how to edit it. There's no theory that will tell you when to cut away from a close-up; that's a matter of the

dramatics of the film. If a director is very experienced and very secure, he will discuss things with you. If he's new, he will very often want an editor on the set with him to help structure shots so they will be easily editable. Then there are those directors who are both unknowledgeable and insecure, so then you have trouble afterwards.

Question: You have worked with two of the greatest Hollywood directors, Fritz Lang and Anthony Mann. How is working for them different from working for these new, young directors?

Fields: It's good to look back at Fritz Lang's pictures, study them, and understand why he was so wonderful. But I don't know that he has not been equalled by some of today's directors; I am sure that he will be by a lot of tomorrow's.

Question: Let's talk about Spielberg. How did you come to work with him on *Sugarland Express*?

Fields: He shot that picture in Texas, and the editor was in Los Angeles. Steven had done quite a bit of television up to that time. That was his first feature. So, he was used to the whole TV system: the director will shoot and the cutter will cut and never the two shall meet. There's just no time on TV. The director is off to the next show, while the editor finishes the first one. In the weekly series kind of thing, the director has very, very little input. So, he was in Texas doing a feature and the editor, who had also been doing TV, was cutting with no input from Steven. When he came back, he was just terribly shook up by what he saw. Not that the man was a bad editor at all, but there had just not been any input from Steven and so it was not cut the way he had intended or wanted it to be. He completely freaked out. They had a schedule to meet as well. This is when he met me and asked if I could take over some sequences. I was more accustomed to working with directors. The first editor just threw him out of

the room saying, "I'll cut it and you come back later." With me, it was more like, "sit by the pool and come when I call you and let's work on this together." He adored it. It was his breaking into that way of working. But it was a combination of schedule and the fact that he was frustrated with the way it was going that caused him to ask if I could help.

Question: What do you think about the way Nicholas Roeg makes films?

Fields: Well, I loved *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, but I think I was one of the few. I thought he tried some really exciting stuff. Casting Bowie was pretty experimental in itself. But he is a cameraman, and I'm finding out that cameramen who become directors don't seem to be able to forget they are cameramen. They spend a great deal of time working on their camera setups and their lighting as opposed to character and story development.

Question: How does a film company like Universal view a maverick like Robert Altman?

Fields: I'm sure if Robert Altman came to the door and said, "Do you want to finance a picture of mine?" they would say yes without batting an eye.

Question: There seems to be a discrepancy between the kinds of things you talk about and support, and the kinds of things you have done in your own career. For example, when I think of Spielberg or Lucas, I think of them as very, very competent craftsmen, very, very audience oriented — not as directors somehow out to say something, make serious films, or try for social changes. Yet you seem to gravitate towards those types of directors rather than, say, a Schrader.

Fields: Actually they gravitated to me; I didn't gravitate to them. I have moved towards Schrader. Even though he's working for another company at this point, I keep in close touch with him. When he was

doing *Blue Collar*, I don't know what went on before I got involved, but he wouldn't talk with anyone else at the studio but me and I didn't even know him. So the studio asked me to go to Detroit, meet with him, and talk with him. I went and he showed me a lot of the film that impressed me greatly. The studio loved the script but hated the ending and did not want to accept the ending that he wrote, and his contract said deliver an alternate ending. So I went to Detroit. I looked at his dailies, talked with him about his film, and agreed with him that there was no other ending other than the one he had designed for the film. Then I went back to the studio and made a suggestion that everybody agreed to: we should let Paul finish his picture with the ending he wanted as long as he delivered it to Universal in time to shoot another ending if it was still unsatisfactory, knowing damn well it was going to be fine. But there would have been time to change it, so they all agreed to let it go that way. Also it kept the director in a much better frame of mind. We weren't imposing anything on him until such time as it had to be done. When they saw the picture, finally, they all agreed that there was no way that they could use a different ending.

Question: Do you have any feelings why these particular people gravitated towards you?

Fields: Mother Cutter. They have nothing to fear as far as competitiveness or resentment of their youth on my part; there was no feeling of competition. They felt comfortable with me. I hope that's how they'll continue to feel about me now that I'm a producer.

Your comments and questions are welcome. Please write to **Mise-en-Scène**, c/o Linda Benn, Editor, CWRU Film Society, Baker Building, Room 2, 10950 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44106.

by Martin F. Norden

VISUAL DESIGN IN RENÉ CLAIR'S *PARIS QUI DORT*

The year 1923 marked the directorial debut of a man who was to make significant contributions to world cinema: France's René Clair. Unfortunately, the film with which he made his initial appearance on the filmmaking scene has received surprisingly scant attention from film critic-historians over the years. *Paris Qui Dort* (also known as *Le Rayon Invisible* and *The Crazy Ray*) is a remarkable achievement -- particularly since, as Georges Sadoul has noted, it was "a film made with equipment barely superior to that of an amateur"¹ -- yet it is the rare film history/criticism text that devotes more than a paragraph to it.²

This problem of neglect can be traced directly to the pre-eminence of the auteur and genre critical methodologies, both of which demand that a given film be discussed primarily in terms of context: the place of that film within either a director's *oeuvre* or a general type of film, respectively. When considered through either of these approaches, *Paris Qui Dort* quickly becomes lost in the shuffle. As a Clair film, it is usually overshadowed by his musical comedies, such as *À Nous La Liberté* (1931) and *Le Million* (1931), and to a lesser degree by his silent *Entr'acte* (1924) and *The Italian Straw Hat* (1927). And as an early representative of the fantasy/science-fiction film genre, *Paris Qui Dort* does not fare much better; its significance is obscured by the stagy and flamboyant efforts of Georges

Méliès and the large number of latter-day science-fiction films which incorporated special-effects techniques of a more sophisticated nature.

If we may disengage *Paris Qui Dort* from these twin contexts, we may be able to better understand the film that launched such a prodigious career. If by implication this article sheds some light on Clair's overall concerns as a director or on the genre of which *Paris Qui Dort* is undeniably a part, such illuminations would be welcomed as incidental bonuses.

The method by which I plan to analyze the film stems from a suggestion made but not developed fully by Gerald Mast regarding *Paris Qui Dort*: "Most Clairish in the film is not its story -- although the director would always feel comfortable with fantasy -- but the clever translation of its premise into visual and physical terms."³ In short, I wish to examine the visual design of the film, or the ways in which Clair rendered his messages in visual terms. This method deals with the formally visual qualities of film, such as composition and camera angle, as well as with visual communications through film, such as the body language of the actors and physical movements. (Admittedly, the distinction between the two is hazy, but they seem fundamentally different enough to warrant separate mention.) Such an approach appears well-suited to a film like *Paris Qui Dort*, and its fruits follow a brief recapitulation of this infrequently-

screened film and its story.

Plot Summary: As with most films, *Paris Qui Dort* begins with some visual exposition. We find ourselves overlooking the city of Paris from the unique vantage point of the top of the Eiffel Tower.⁴ Our attention focuses on the night watchman of the tower, a man identified only as Albert. Albert looks out the window of his living quarters atop the structure and watches as the rising sun brightens the distant surroundings below. Apparently waiting for his replacement, Albert continues to look out over the city, and at one point checks his pocket-watch. Through a bit of camera trickery, the minute hand of the watch moves very quickly, changing the reading from 10:05 to 11:05 in approximately sixty frames.

Albert eventually tires of waiting, and walks down the long spiral staircase instead of waiting for his relief to arrive in the tower elevator. Upon arriving at the ground level, he begins walking along streets which are astonishingly empty of human activity. A title card reveals his thoughts: "He knew he was not dreaming -- yet the whole thing was so impossible! -- He knew what the city *should* look like" This is followed by various scenes of the normally congested streets. As he walks, Albert comes across people frozen in various positions -- a man seated on a bench, another man bent over a trash can, and others. Through a brief montage of clock faces, we learn that everything in

Paris was "frozen" at 3:25 -- everything, it seems, except him. Albert eventually gets an automobile started, and drives off.

His unnatural solitude is broken in the next scene, however, as a carload of moving people makes an appearance. Albert gets out of his own car to talk to them, and we find that this assortment of people arrived in Paris at 4 a.m. from Marseilles by airplane. Through a series of titles, these people are identified: The Pilot, a prosperous Merchant, a Detective, an international Thief (who is handcuffed to the Detective),

customers and waiters; the group atop the Eiffel Tower enjoying life, then coping with boredom, and then fighting among themselves.

In the midst of one such brawl (which Clair hypes with some speeded-up photography), the group suddenly hears a woman's voice coming from the radio: "If anyone hears my call, come at once to Number 2, Rue Croissy . . ." The group responds, and meets a young woman who says she is the niece of a scientist who has developed a mysterious ray that has paralyzed not only Paris but the entire world.



A scene from the musical *Le Million* by René Clair.

and Hesta, described as "a lady of means, whose sole occupation is travelling the world in search of pleasure." Through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that everyone on the ground at the airport was frozen at the time the plane landed, just as everyone else was in Paris. They surmise that they were spared whatever it was that paralyzed the city because they were all well off the ground at 3:25 a.m. -- Albert on the Eiffel Tower, the other five on board a plane.

Following this realization is a series of vignettes of the six in Paris: The Merchant in search of his lady love whom he calls his "little Lisette"; a meal in a restaurant full of frozen

The group descends upon the scientist, a tall, portly, bizarrely-robed character suitably named Dr. Crase, and demands that he wake everyone up. He concurs ("Wake them up? Wake them up? -- I hadn't thought of THAT!"), and begins working on a formula which will undo his prior efforts. After hours of figuring, the scientist merely throws the lever on his ray apparatus the other way. Paris immediately comes back to life, as we see scenes of all the frozen people presented earlier in the film becoming animated once again.

The group plus the Niece leave Dr. Crase's quarters, and, as a title explains: "Nothing now remained

but for each to resume normal existence." One might well think this would be the conclusion of the film, but Clair has additional things to say. The group members say their good-byes to one another and split up (none more enthusiastically than the Thief, who dashes off with the Detective in close pursuit), and Albert and the Niece find themselves alone. It dawns on Albert that he is broke, in direct contrast to the time in which the rest of the world was frozen and all its money was there for the taking. As a title further illuminates: "Yesterday he could have given her a 'Rolls Royce,' but today! . . ."

Albert quickly reaches the desperation point. ("We can't go on like this! -- The World must stand still again . . . We've got to get some money . . .") He and the Niece return to Dr. Crase's quarters, and while Albert distracts the scientist, the Niece throws the lever. We see scenes of Paris street traffic coming to an immediate halt. Albert and the Niece depart, apparently bent on some nefarious scheme, but unknown to them, Dr. Crase and an elderly comrade re-enter the room containing the ray apparatus. Crase throws the lever the other way, and things once again go back to normal.

Unfortunately, Albert and the Niece are in the process of picking people's pockets when the people come back to life. Meanwhile, Dr. Crase throws the ray apparatus lever again, which stops all movement and then speeds everything up to a chaotic level.

Following this mayhem, Albert and the Niece find themselves before a booking officer of the police. Albert tries to plead their case by stating that the world has been frozen for four days, but the booking officer responds to a gendarme in attendance: "It must be an epidemic -- I've already got five of them who think the same." The seven are thus reunited, but they quickly find themselves incarcerated in a psychiatric ward. Their stay there is not long, however, as a title explains: "The new patients, taking the line of

least resistance, cast off their 'obsession' and were soon released!" A brief montage follows of these people returning to their normal lives, apparently unchanged by their adventures.

The final scene of the film shows Dr. Crase and his Niece seated on a bench outside the base of the Eiffel Tower. The Niece tells her uncle she is going up to the top of the tower and that she won't be long. Reunited, the Niece and Albert wonder if their experiences were just a dream. Albert then finds a ring -- perhaps the only souvenir of the experience -- and places it on her finger.

Some of the visual properties of *Paris Qui Dort* have been suggested here and there in the foregoing description, but a more rigorous and systematic examination of them is called for at this juncture. I propose to deal with the film by subdividing it into four special areas and analyzing the unique qualities of each as they are expressed in visual terms. The four areas are: settings, thought and dialogue, special effects, and humor.

Settings. Perhaps the most immediately noticeable aspect of *Paris Qui Dort* is that, for the most part, it was filmed on location. The interiors were no doubt artificial sets, but all of the exteriors were real Paris locations, some of them quite famous: The Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame Cathedral, the Trocadero Pools. Most striking of all are the shots of Paris from atop the Eiffel Tower, particularly when the actors are in the foreground dangling their legs, playing cards, fighting, etc. Clair's refusal to break up spatial integrity in these and other scenes, and his extensive use of the surfaces of reality lit by the frequent harshness of real sunlight, have the effect of contributing additional "rings of truth" to his otherwise fanciful tale. It is over this point that *Paris Qui Dort* parts company with virtually all other early fantasy films, such as the Méliès canon and the heavily studio-bound films that came out of Germany during that country's expressionistic period, such as *The Cabinet*



A naturalistic outdoor scene from Under the Rooftops of Paris, by René Clair.

of Dr. Caligari (1919), *The Golem* (1920), and *Destiny* (1921).

Real locations are not always presented in realistic, objective ways, however, and this general observation is particularly applicable concerning the case of Clair's handling of them in *Paris Qui Dort*. Most noticeable is his evocative treatment of the Eiffel Tower. Clair is clearly intrigued by the patterns formed by the structure, whether they are curving and spiraling or sharply angular. For example, when Albert walks down the long, twisting staircase of the tower near the beginning of the film, the camera follows him with a beautifully-mounted vertical tracking shot (the camera no doubt supported by and lowered in the tower's elevator), catching and emphasizing a number of the tower's curving lines. The thinness and intricacy of these lines are later echoed in the fine lacy dress and the string of pearls worn by Hesta when she and the others are living like gods high above Paris. In contrast to these treatments of the tower, several shots of Albert and the others on the structure feature striking angular compositions formed by the girders. The sharpness of the angles and the generally high-contrast lighting of

these scenes (in which the dark lines of the tower stand out starkly against a nearly washed-out background)⁵ are reminiscent of many of the pictorial compositions of the otherwise dissimilar *Caligari*.

Thought and dialogue. Thought and dialogue represent areas which are particularly difficult for a silent-film director to deal with, short of resorting to the facile solution of title cards. Clair frequently goes beyond the use of such titles by incorporating several visual means of conveying thought and dialogue.

One example occurs early in the film when Albert wanders the strangely empty streets of Paris. To convey Albert's recollection of the way the streets normally appear, Clair shows us such scenes following a title stating, "He knew what the city *should* look like . . ." The scenes we see include a shot of the traffic-snarled Champs Élysées (filmed from a moving vehicle), and a boat traveling down what is presumably the Seine River. The impact of the deserted streets of Paris is intensified through their juxtaposition with this "thought-sequence," even though these recollected images are not altered through slow motion or soft focus (which are the usual, "Holly-

wood” means of presenting such scenes) or in any other way.

Another means of expressing thought through the shorthand of visual imagery occurs when the life of luxury for the six people living atop the tower has degenerated into boredom and quarrelsomeness. The men begin following Hesta around the tower, and a title sums up the current situation: “Five men realized that ‘she was the only girl in the world!’” Prior to a free-for-all among the men for the affections of Hesta, Clair shows the would-be suitors seated around her on a bench. An ensuing dissolve-montage of the men’s heads as each one slowly turns toward her perfectly indicates their thoughts at the time.

An example of “visualized dialogue” takes place after the Pilot, the Detective, the Thief, the Merchant, and Hesta have been introduced via a series of titles, and they then attempt to explain to Albert what happened to them. Following the title, “Everyone was asleep at the aerodrome,” we see a flashback of several groundcrewmembers frozen in position outside the airport terminal. Several members of the landing party try to rouse them, to no avail. And when they ask Albert about his

own situation, Clair simply cuts from a shot of Albert talking to the others, to a single static shot of the Eiffel Tower. From this shot the director cuts back to Albert and the group, and the group members nod their heads in understanding. As with Albert’s “thought-sequence” described earlier, there is no optical distortion of any kind in these scenes, yet they remain economical and effective ways of expressing dialogue through visual means.

Final examples of visualized dialogue manifest themselves after the group has responded to the voice coming over the radio. The Niece of Dr. Crase begins explaining the reasons for Paris coming to a standstill, and in the course of her explanation, Clair shows us an animated scene depicting the entire Eiffel Tower in white set off against a black background. The tower is on the left side of the frame, and on the right is a representation of the ray, which begins spewing curving dotted lines over what is meant to be the skyline of Paris. The dotted lines miss the top of the tower, however, and they also miss an animated airplane near the top of the frame. Though crudely done (at least by today’s standards), this animated

scene efficiently visualizes what has happened to Paris and indeed the entire world, and why the six protagonists were spared the ray’s effects. Since Clair also chooses to reveal the reasons for the paralysis and the protagonists’ escape through title cards of the Niece’s dialogue, the information presented in this animated scene is redundant to a certain degree. Perhaps Clair was trying to underscore the importance of the otherwise unphotographable reasons for the paralysis (i.e., the emissions of the ray apparatus) by first giving a verbal explanation and then offering a stylized visual treatment of the same topic. In any event, the animated scene makes its statement quickly and clearly. These scenes are shortly followed by those of the group surrounding Dr. Crase, demanding to know if he realizes what he has done to the world. Rather than putting all of their statements into words, Clair uses the economical means of a montage of previously-shown scenes depicting people frozen in motion, such as the attempted suicide and a gendarme pursuing a thief.

Special effects. In his *Experimental Cinema*, David Curtis states that *Paris Qui Dort* “is little more than an excuse for exploiting freeze-frame, slow and fast motion techniques, but as a comedy it works within these terms.”⁶ Arthur Knight echoes this opinion by suggesting that the film reveals Clair’s “enormous appreciation of the comic possibilities inherent in the motion-picture camera.”⁷ Yet, strikingly, only a minimal amount of the film features such a use of the camera: that is, special-effects photography. There are moments of “camera trickery” in *Paris Qui Dort* to be sure, including the close-up of Albert’s pocketwatch that advances one hour in sixty frames, the animated scene described above, the speeding up of the action during the scenes of the men fighting over Hesta atop the tower, the ray going out of control near the end of the film, and the freezing of the action when Albert in-



from *Under the Rooftops of Paris*.

initially throws the lever of the ray apparatus. But the special effects photography is limited to these few scenes; there is no other such "movie magic" in *Paris Qui Dort*. The scenes of Albert walking among people frozen in position near the beginning of the film consist merely of people sitting very still while Albert moves around, which is more of a theatrical gimmick than a cinematic or photographic one. Perhaps the idea of being able to manipulate motion with the camera by freezing it, speeding it up, and slowing it down was to be the *raison d'être* for the film, but precious little of this cinematic manipulation was actually used in the final production. *Paris Qui Dort*, while very charming, is much more than a trick film.

Humor. A most observable aspect of *Paris Qui Dort* is its humor, particularly ironic humor. The comic side of the worldwide paralysis manifests itself early in the film when Albert comes upon a man frozen in position along the Seine River about to commit suicide by throwing himself in. Albert takes the note clutched in the man's hand, which reads: "It's the terrible pace of modern life that has driven me to this. I cannot stand the rush and roar of this city --" Ordinarily, the psychological and social underpinnings of this situation would have made it a moment to take completely seriously, but the juxtaposition of this man's reasons for wishing to commit suicide with the eerie silence and stopped motion within Paris makes the tragic qualities of the situation rather ludicrous.

Another ironic moment occurs when Dr. Crase commences to work on a formula to awaken the rest of the world, with Albert and the others in attendance. Hours later, Dr. Crase's chalkboard is completely filled with his cryptic notations, and he must stand on a short ladder to finish. By the time he actually gets around to throwing the switch to awaken the world, he has inadvertently succeeded in putting everyone else in the room to sleep out of sheer boredom.

A moment which depends on

surprise to deliver its impact occurs when the Thief has succeeded in breaking into the house of the Merchant's lover, at the Merchant's request. The group enters the house, and the Merchant finds his "little Lisette" frozen in position while seated in her boudoir. His elation at finding his lover quickly turns into shock, however, when he pulls back the door to reveal a dapper-looking man in a tuxedo also frozen in place while resting his cheek on her outstretched hand. The Merchant tries to shake them awake, to no avail, while the others, perhaps realizing that this romantic tableau is all the more poignant since everyone on the ground was frozen in position during the wee hours of the morning, smile and look away.

There are many other moments of humor and irony in *Paris Qui Dort*: the Thief, the only social misfit of the group (and whose proclivities for kleptomania are so great that he even snatches a leaf off of a tree), becomes the group's leader; the Detective applauds (literally) the Thief's ideas of breaking into the stores, banks, and museums of Paris; the stolen "Mona Lisa" is used as a wall poster amid the cluttered room where the group lives; Hesta, the "pleasure-seeker," is herself amorously pursued by the men but pays them no heed; two "sandwich-board" men come across a franc note lying in the street at the same time but their headboards collide, preventing either of them from getting the note; and despite the Merchant's frequent expression of passion for his "little Lisette" (who is bigger than he is, by the way), he and she begin quarreling almost immediately after everything has returned to normal. Such socially-tinged humor contrasts the irony of the formal properties of the film, in which Clair uses primarily realistic means to tell a fantastic story.

At this point, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that the special areas of *Paris Qui Dort* were realized almost entirely through visual means, but the issue of Clair's

reliance on title cards cannot be avoided. Several of the moments of the film described in this article are primarily visual in nature, but they often depend in one way or another on titles to help clarify them. This was a problem faced by most silent-era filmmakers and is certainly not unique to the film studied here; what is of interest are the ways that Clair attempted to overcome these and other constraints of silent-age filmmaking by making the most of the visual means at his disposal to make his statements.⁸

In the course of analyzing these visual means, this article has attempted to take apart some easy assumptions of the film, assumptions which no doubt developed as a result of the dearth of visually-oriented investigations into this film. One such supposition, perhaps the most significant of the lot, concerns the ways in which *Paris Qui Dort* establishes itself as a fantasy film. It is indeed such a film, but, as argued previously, it relies much more heavily on real settings, naturalistic camerawork, and theatrical "posings" of actors than has been suggested in previous works dealing with the film.

Another such assumption is offered by John Baxter, who argues in his *Science Fiction in the Cinema* that the success of Albert and the Niece in overcoming the crisis in *Paris Qui Dort* illustrates "yet another sci-fi cinema belief, that love can protect, solve and illuminate more than any other force."⁹ This is so feebly visualized in the film, however, that its significance is negligible. The only direct expression of love between these two is shown in the throwaway scene at the end when Albert and the Niece are alone on the top of the tower, and he finds a ring and places it on her finger. The other expression takes on a destructive quality, when, after everything has returned to normal, Albert realizes he does not have enough money for cabfare or even to buy the Niece a flower. He then plans to stop the world again so that he can raise enough money by rob-



from *Le Million*.

bing people.

The film also does not deal (at least directly) with the evils of science, a theme common to many science-fiction films. Dr. Crase is perhaps a precursor of the "mad doctor" stereotype, yet he is far from malevolent; indeed, "absent-minded" seems the best adjective to describe him. Additionally, we see no punitive action taken against him, nor do we see the ray apparatus dismantled or destroyed. Granted, it is a scientific discovery (i.e., the ray itself) that causes the problems, but it is also another scientific discovery that helps undo the crisis: the then-recent development of radio, which the Niece uses to attract the attention of Albert and the others. The fact that the radio is a real device while the ray is entirely a fictitious one seems to indicate that Clair is putting more stock into science than is immediately apparent.

One supposition that remains in effect concerning *Paris Qui Dort* is Clair's commentary on human nature. Free from economic and societal restraints, Albert and the others lead a life of wanton luxury, as shown by their splashing around in the Trocadero Pools, playing cards with unlimited sums of money,

and bedecking themselves with illegally-gained jewelry and fine clothing. Their freedom quickly changes into boredom, however, and we see scenes of Hesta dropping her pearls one by one from the tower while one of the men makes paper airplanes out of franc notes. The men eventually end up fighting among themselves over the only woman among them. In perhaps the severest indictment of human nature in *Paris Qui Dort*, Albert and the others find themselves essentially unchanged by the experience after the effects of the ray are undone.

I believe this article has demonstrated that, through "visual attentiveness," one may uncover the kind of detail that might normally be overlooked through conventional literary-oriented plot analysis. This approach offers the possibility of exploring new layers of meaning in all kinds of film.



(1) Georges Sadoul, *French Film* (London: Falcon Press, 1953), p. 38.

(2) Examples of the "one-paragraph" treatment of *Paris Qui Dort* may be found in the following: Thomas W. Bohn and Richard L. Stromgren, *Light and Shadows*, 2nd ed. (Sherman Oaks, Calif.: Alfred Publishing Co., 1978), p. 139; Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Mentor, 1979), p. 93; Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies* (Indianapolis: Pegasus, 1971), p. 247; and Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema From Its Origins to 1970* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1976), p. 141. Slightly more extensive treatment is offered in John Baxter, *Science Fiction in the Cinema*, International Film Guide Series (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1970), pp. 11, 24, & 25; Jacques B. Brunius, "Experimental Film in France" (trans. Mary Kesteven) in Roger Manvell, ed., *Experiment in the Film* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), pp. 86-90; and Sadoul, pp. 38-39.

(3) Mast, p. 247.

(4) The year of the film (1923) coincides with the death of the French engineer who designed the Eiffel Tower, and for whom the tower is named.

(5) The aging process of a film invariably entails the strengthening of contrasts between black and white tones, which should also be taken into account.

(6) David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema* (New York: Delta, 1971), p. 23.

(7) Knight, p. 93.

(8) Another constraint of the times that Clair less successfully deals with is the area of characterization. Albert is a reasonably complex character, but most of the others are rather shallowly sketched. Part of the problem is Clair's heavy reliance on long and medium-long shots of his actors, which has the effect of keeping the audience at a psychological arm's length from the characters and even obscuring their individual identities.

(9) Baxter, p. 11.

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