Film QUARTERLY

RETHINKING *NAPOLEON*

MAKAVEJEV RETURNS

CINEMATOGRAPHY AS WRITING
(Vittorio Storaro)

BRAKHAGE LES BLANK

FILM & CRITICISM

Centre Universitaire Américain du Cinéma et de la Critique à Paris

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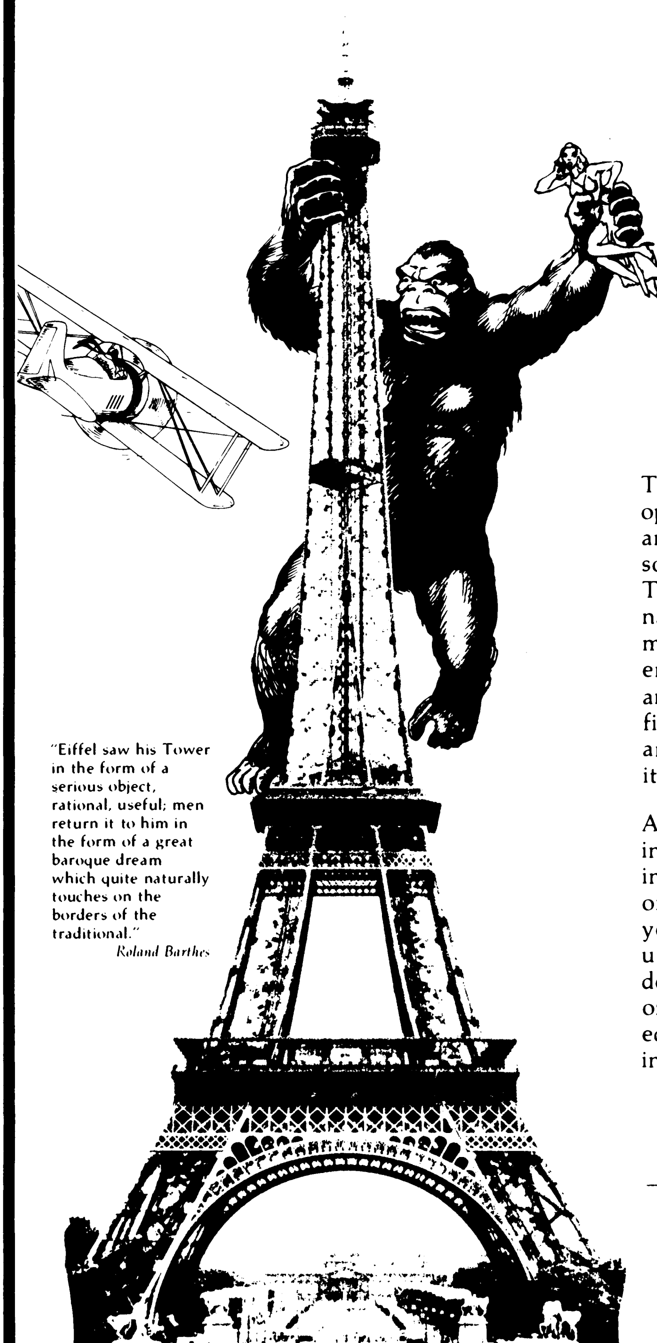

"Eiffel saw his Tower in the form of a serious object, rational, useful; men return it to him in the form of a great baroque dream which quite naturally touches on the borders of the traditional."
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VOLUME XXXV, No. 3 **Spring 1982**

THE COVER

"The Wild Tchoupitoulas" performing in New Orleans: from *Always for Pleasure,* by Les Blank (see p. 25).

Editor's Notebook

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CONTRIBUTORS

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RICHARD ABEL

Charge and Counter-Charge:
Coherence and Incoherence in Gance's Napoléon

The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 14, 1980. Looking like the third phase of the Sphinx's riddle to Oedipus, a small, stooped figure, his eyes twinkling under a swept-back thatch of white hair, introduces the Midwest premiere of Kevin Brownlow's meticulous reconstruction of *Napoléon* (1927). It is the film's maker, Abel Gance. "Why would anyone want to spend a whole evening watching an old movie?" he begins. Suddenly spotting a television cameraman recording the event, Gance brandishes his cane like a rapier and charges the camera with a spryness that belies his ninety-year-old frame. Then he backs away in feigned defeat, accepting the power of a machine whose ancestor he did so much to develop. Delighted by an enthusiastic, admiring crowd, he builds his oration, phrase by lofty phrase—"I am alive because I think always and only of the future"—and ends by dancing a jig to mime his pleasure. He refuses to leave—"there are too many beautiful women in the audience." But eventually he is persuaded, and the special screening begins. Nearly six hours later, the famous triptychs (in near perfect synchronization) draw to a climax that yields to a wave of applause and bravos. Rarely have I seen a film audience so charged, so "high."

To see this new reconstruction of *Napoléon* is nothing less than a revelation. That has been said before, I know, of other versions of the film. In 1955, at the Studio 28 cinema in Paris, François Truffaut and his colleagues at *Cahiers du cinéma* discovered Gance's two-hour sound version of *Napoléon* (1934), which integrated new footage with post-synchronized portions of the silent version, including a brief sequence of the final triptychs. Some years later, the Cinémathèque française revealed Marie Epstein's painstaking reconstruction of the silent version of *Napoléon,* which, though far from complete (absent were much of the opening snowball fight, the sequences with Violine, the triptychs), included nearly all of the major sequences.[1] Then, on the occasion of Bonaparte's bicentennial (with financial assistance from André Malraux and Claude Lelouch), Gance came up with a four-hour version (again mixing old and new footage), *Bonaparte et la Révolution* (1971).[2] For this last project, Marie Epstein discovered to her horror, Gance blithely set about re-cutting some of the original negative that the Cinémathèque française had returned to him.[3] Now comes Kevin Brownlow's reconstruction, some twenty years in the making, drawn from a dozen archive and private prints (especially those of the Cinémathèque française, C.K. Elliott, and MGM).[4] Inevitably, there are distortions and gaps: the image quality is sometimes inconsistent (due to sections of enlarged 17.5mm footage), the extensive tinting and toning of the original prints is gone, and nearly a half hour of the total footage is still missing.[5] But Brownlow's reconstruction is unquestionably marvelous—the most complete version yet assembled and the first to include the full final reel of triptychs.[6] To be accurate, there are two versions of Brownlow's work—a complete version (projected at 20 fps), produced by the British Film Institute and Images Film Archives in association with Thames Television, and a slightly shortened version (projected at 24 fps) sponsored by Francis Coppola's Zoetrope Studios.[7] Although the "Coppola" *Napoléon* has been widely screened in the United States, I have used the longer, more authentic version as the basis for this essay.

Impressive as Brownlow's reconstruction is, Gance's initial plans for the project were even more colossal in scope. As early as 1924, he had sketched out no less than six separate films on the life of Napoléon Bonaparte. The first film was envisaged in three parts: "La jeunesse de Bonaparte," "Bonaparte et la Terreur," and "La Campagne d'Italie." The other five were to be titled *D'Arcole à Marengo, Du 18 Brumaire à Austerlitz, D'Austerlitz aux Cent-Jours, Waterloo,* and *Saint-Hélène.*[8] Through a consortium of French-German companies and later the Société Générale des Films (both

financed largely by Russian emigré money), Gance commenced shooting the first stage of his project early in 1925 and finally finished eighteen months later. Because of its enormous expense (15–19 million francs) and epic length (six hours), only the first film was actually completed, and even then, its third part had to be condensed.[9] On April 7, 1927, a three-hour version of the film, audaciously titled *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* and highlighted by several triptych sequences, premiered at the Paris Opéra with an orchestral score composed by Arthur Honegger.[10] The following October, the complete six-hour version (apparently programmed in four successive segments, but without the triptychs) opened at the prestigious Salle Marivaux and ran for three months. This full-length version was not widely shown, but the three-hour condensed version was released selectively throughout France and the rest of Europe.[11] In a sense, then, by integrating these two different films into a single spectacle, Brownlow not only recreates but enlarges Gance's vision. As Bernard Eisenschitz notes, Brownlow's work has produced both a literal and an ideal reconstitution of the film.[12]

In order to situate the analysis that follows, let me summarize the narrative of *Napoléon* briefly, sketching the major plot lines and the distribution of characters. As a pupil at the military college of Brienne, young Napoléon is persecuted as an outsider by the teachers and other students. His only friends during his tribulations and first triumph (in a snowfort battle) are the cook, Tristan Fleuri, and a pet eagle. Some ten years later, in 1789, during the early days of the Revolution in Paris, Napoléon is little more than a marginal character, listening with interest to Rouget de Lisle's "Marseillaise" sung at the "Club des Cordeliers" but troubled by the lynch mobs roaming the streets. By the time of his return to his family home in Corsica, in the summer of 1793, however, he has become a supporter of the Revolution and an opponent of the Corsican patriot Paoli and his secretary, Pozzo de Borge, who have concocted a plan to annex the island to England. Their plan succeeds, and Napoléon is forced to flee by rowboat in a storm (and eventually on the good ship "Le Hasard") to France. Assigned to the French army laying siege to Toulon (which is controlled by the English), Napoléon re-encounters Tristan Fleuri, whose daughter Violine is "bewitched" by him. General Dugommier makes him commander of the artillery, and Napoléon leads several assaults on the larger English army and finally is victorious in a battle fought at night in a torrential rainstorm. In Paris, the Reign of Terror begins. Marat is murdered in his bath by Charlotte Corday; Danton, Robespierre, and Saint-Just are all condemned to the guillotine.[13] Accused by Salicetti, a fellow Corsican, and imprisoned, Napoléon is miraculously saved—Tristan Fleuri, imitating his friend La Bussière, literally eats the decree that condemns him. After refusing several posts with the army, Napoléon is finally called by General Barras to take command of the defense of Paris against the Royalist Rebellion. The Rebellion is put down, and celebrations break out all over the city. At the "Bal des Victimes," Napoléon is mesmerized by Josephine de Beauharnais and wins her away from his friend, General Hoche. The whirlwind courtship ends in marriage, after Barras makes him commander of the Army of the Alps. Buoyed by a vision of the ghosts of the Revolution, Napoléon assumes command of a bedraggled army at Albenga and quickly inspires the soldiers to victory at Montenotte. So the narrative ends as (an intertitle says) "Napoléon laughingly opens the gates of Italy."

As this summary suggests, *Napoléon* is, first of all, a grand example of the French historical reconstruction film, the most popular film genre in France during the 1920's. Although a good part of the film was shot on location (Corsica, Briançon, Toulon, Nice), most was done in a brand new studio at Billancourt, on the outskirts of Paris. There, with Alexandre Benois (Diaghilev's chief set designer), the Russian-born architect Schildknecht, and Ivan Lochavoff, Gance meticulously (for the most part) recreated the period decor and costumes of the late eighteenth century—e.g., the school at Brienne, the "Club des Cordeliers" and the Convention Hall in Paris, the battleground at Toulon. Together with an unusually talented team of assistant directors (Alexandre Volkoff, Viatcheslaw Tourjansky, Henry Krauss, André Andréani, Marius Nalpas, Anatole Litvak) and cameramen (Jules Kruger, L-H Burel, J-P Mundviller, Bourgassof, Lucas, Roger Hubert, Emile Pierre), he produced enough moments of spectacle for a half dozen films. The acting was consistently first-rate and sometimes inspired. Albert Dieudonné played Napoléon as a lean, active, decisive strategist, sometimes given to public posturing but also blindly naive in love. Gina Manès brought to Josephine's opportunistic character a matronly assurance and quick intelligence that made her behavior with Napoléon and his rivals fascinatingly ambiguous. The "Three Gods of the Revolution" were perfectly cast. Alexandre Koubitsky was a fiery, voluble, plump Danton; Antonin Artaud made Marat a sullen ascetic with a brilliant, mad stare; Van Daële was utterly transformed as the slouching, pock-marked Robespierre, his eyes mere slits above tightly drawn lips. And Gance used his own sense of self-importance ironically by casting himself as the cold, cruel, slightly effeminate theoretician Saint-Just. Yet, all in all, like Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne D'Arc* (1928), which the Société Générale des Films also produced as a complement to it, *Napoléon* was much more than a well-crafted, well-acted "costume film."

At the time of its original release, the French film critics' reviews of *Napoléon* corresponded closely to their reactions to Gance's earlier epic, *La Roue* (1922-23). The film was a monumental paradox—conventional yet unorthodox, anachronistic yet radically advanced. Again the critics objected, with reason, to the

number and mode of the film's intertitles, which included countless quotations from historical sources—a misguided attempt to invoke the mantle of "authority"—which merely labeled and affirmed, as if on parchment, what was presented in images.[14] The intertitles were also full of rhetorical declamations, especially Saint-Just's discourse on the Revolution, which critics found reminiscent of Edmond Rostand and literary pretension.[15] Once more the critics objected to irrelevant, uneven sequences and to "dissembling tirades" of "repetitions, redundancies, and over-prolonged effects."[16] And they were aghast at the way Gance rewrote history, depicting Napoléon as the legendary fulfillment of the French Revolution—a nationalistic messiah who saved France from the Revolution's destructive excesses and then provided his countrymen with a kind of Manifest Destiny to "liberate" (read "conquer") Europe.[17] To a man, however, the critics heaped praise on the "cinematic" qualities of the film. "The unrepentant lyricism, the vertiginous technical strategies, the generous abandon, the photographic delicacies, the acting in certain roles" —all more than made up for the film's numerous faults.[18] Specifically singled out, of course, was the innovation of the triptychs, the triple screen system, which produced a concluding "visual symphony" of extraordinary power. Perhaps Léon Moussinac summed up the critical reaction best. If Gance's subject and scenario were presumptuous, sometimes ridiculous, and dangerously chauvinistic, "From the cinematic point of view, *Napoléon* was the occasion . . . to put in play original ideas that succeeded in enlarging the resources of cinematography, in sum, an incontestable advance: a date in the history of the technical development of the cinema."[19]

The contradictions in *Napoléon* are, if any-

thing, now even more apparent. But their locus and distribution seem to have shifted. Take the most celebrated feature of the film—its technical innovations and achievements. It is clear that, from the beginning, Gance was preoccupied with questions of cinematic technique. For instance, Alexandre Volkoff, one of his assistant directors for a time, was astonished to find that "he was continually haunted by the idea of doing more and then more again, of surpassing himself and all others. Incessantly, he tried out cinematic innovations, combining new technical methods. He strove to go ever farther and higher."[20] This effort is clearly evident even now in the remarkable film record of the production which Gance instigated, preserved under the title, *Autour de Napoléon.*[21] But how successful, exactly, was Gance with his innovations? One of the earliest segments to be filmed, the snowfort battle at Brienne, provides an ambiguous answer.

Like the opening train wreck of *La Roue,* this sequence was orchestrated, in Gance's words, "to make the otherwise passive spectator an actor. He would not only look at but participate in the action."[22] In *La Roue,* he had relied on the rapid cutting of many disparate images to simulate the after effects of the crash, to integrate Sisif's perceptions and feelings into a larger conceptual design. Here, he privileges the character of young Bonaparte—to the point of making the flow of images his subjective experience—but reduces the number of disparate images and multiplies the technical strategies of combination and intensification. Initially, Gance superimposes a CU of young Bonaparte over shots of his battling cohorts, to convey the passion and force of his counterattack (after the boy is bloodied by a snowball with a rock inside).[23] To this, Gance then adds an unconventionally mobile camera. He had Jules Kruger (with a hand-cranked camera) sit on a sled that was pushed rapidly towards one of the two snow forts. Then, at Gance's insistence, Kruger also ran into the thick of the fighting with another hand-cranked camera strapped to his chest and supported by a brace around his waist.[24] The only thing he did not do was what legend has attributed to him—throw the camera about like a snowball.[25] Finally, Gance resorts to a form of rapid cutting—wildly fast tracks, dollies, and swish-pans—in conjunction with a repeated static CU of young Bonaparte. At the climax, the cutting accelerates to a rush of single frames, with the boy's smiling face appearing every four frames.

Despite the novelty of hand-held mobile camera shots in alliance with the by-then conventional technique of rapid montage, this sequence is less than astonishing. In part, the problem lies in its conception. Compared to the opening of *La Roue,* this sequence seems regressive—it limits itself to the representation of a single character's subjective state. More important, perhaps, the representation of that state, organizing the world around Bonaparte, is relatively simplistic (his enemies, Philippeaux and Peccaduc, are cruel buffoons; the counterattack is easily carried out). The single-minded diegetic flow of the images quickly becomes repetitive, wearyingly so, as the action is expanded in time. The longer the sequence goes on, the more excessive and empty it becomes. What could have been an exciting, riveting opening, in which the spectator shares young Bonaparte's intoxicating discovery of his skill and ambition as a leader, comes close to lapsing into bombastic cliché.

At least two conclusions can be drawn from such close analysis of the technical innovations in *Napoléon.* First of all, they tend to improve in quality and effectiveness as the film progresses. The combination of fast tracks, dollies, and swish pans, for instance, is much more controlled in the later sequence of Napoléon's journey to Albenga to join the Italian Campaign army. Here, even more than before, some of the camera movements deliberately call attention to themselves. The opening LS of the road down which Napoléon's coach and flanked horsemen race away suddenly turns into a following dolly shot; the movement allows for a smooth cut to a tracking shot of the countryside which then pans 60° to become a dolly shot following the advance horsemen. The spectator is caught up, quite consciously, in the diegetic process. After Napoléon has issued a number of orders, sent off a letter to Josephine, and changed to horseback, the sequence ends with a series of rapid dollying shots ahead of his pounding white horse, each of which becomes shorter and shorter as it is punctuated by quick swish pans. Here, the camera movement (in conjunction with the rapid cutting) functions less to convey Napoléon's subjective experience of the journey than to equate, through the accelerating rhythm, his driving ambition with the "flow of history" and, at this point, with the lightning-like speed of the narrative. This combination of camera movements will reach its climax in the final segment of the triptychs.

Secondly, Gance's technical achievements, for me at least, often depend on a striking economy and symmetry of articulation. The school dormitory battle, for instance, produces a visual assault even more effective than the opening snowfort battle. One snowy night, Philippeaux and Peccaduc vengefully release Bonaparte's pet eagle, and he storms into the dormitory to find the culprits.

LS dolly back ahead of Napoléon as he enters the room.
MCU dolly forward past one boy shaking his head, then a second and a third.
LS dolly forward behind Napoléon as he speaks to one boy after another.
MCU dolly forward past a boy yawning and then another shaking his head.
LS Napoléon stops at the end of the room, turns, and throws a pile of boys' clothes.
MCU Napoléon shouts.
Intertitle: "So all of you are guilty!"
FS dolly back ahead of Napoléon as he attacks one boy after another, systematically; they come out and surround him.
FS dolly forward behind Napoléon and the boys as they begin to fight—pillows and feathers fly about.
Four split-screen images of the fighting.
Nine split-screen images of the fighting.
A half-dozen superimpositions of the fighting.

What is interesting about this sequence is how succinctly it works through repetition and variation. The first series of movements, rhythmically matched, ends in Bonaparte's angry gesture and accusation. The second series begins to repeat the first and then oscillates quickly into a crescendo of simultaneous multiple images. Bonaparte's fury, metaphorically, tears the boys to pieces (clothes-pillows-feathers) and transforms the room into a dense cloud of feathers and white-robed figures. It is as if the snowball fight is recapitulated in miniature.

Still, whatever one thinks of these "highlights," an exclusive focus on Gance's technical innovations and achievements can be misleading. It tempts one to conclude, as do Jean Mitry and most other film historians, that *Napoléon* is incoherent, "a chaos traversed by lightning flashes."[26] To my mind, however, that supposed incoherence actually provides a basis for the film's appeal. In fact, in terms of narrative structure and syntactical continuity, it may not be incoherence at all. Let's admit, for instance, that the film deploys, throughout its narrative, a cacophony of styles or modes of representation. There are posturing "theatrical" characters like Paoli and Salicetti, "naturalistic" characters like Josephine and General Hoche, comic buffoons like the recurring Tristan Fleuri, and bold caricatures like L'Oeil-Vert (the one-eyed master of the guillotine lists) and Couthon (a decrepit old man who creeps about in a wheel chair with a white rabbit in his lap). There are "reproductions" of famous mass spectacle paintings of the Revolution and its aftermath, "documentary" moments (such as a bread line of women and children in a snow-covered street), American-style chases on horseback, an oddly anachronistic moment of "modern dancing" at the "Bal des Victimes" (including a line of flappers and shots of naked breasts and buttocks), and highly subjective visions articulated in a barrage of cinematic techniques. This kind of mixture is not all that unusual in the French cinema of the 1920's. One can find it in such diverse films as L'Herbier's exquisite melodrama, *El Dorado* (1921); Mosjoukine's satirical comedy, *Le Brasier ardent* (1923); Kirsanoff's poetic "slice-of-life," *Menilmontant* (1925); Cavalcanti's cruelly witty "documentary," *Rien que les heures* (1926); and Volkoff's fantastic historical adventure, *Casanova* (1927). If such cacophony seems deliberate, especially in films normally associated with the narrative avant-garde, then perhaps overriding the usual conventions of coherence here is a principle of play for its own sake, a playing that involves a mélange of styles. Or, even more likely, perhaps there is in the film a conception of structural unity that sets coordinates for this play, that shapes it into a coherent network of narrative relations.

Similarly, throughout its length, *Napoléon* deploys a variety of syntactical systems. In the "Bal des Victimes," for instance, Gance relies basically on the "classical" style of editing that creates a spatial-temporal continuity to ensure a clear chain of character action. At several points this involves a subtle alternation of eyeline matches between Napoléon, Josephine, and Hoche—when they first meet and when Napoléon takes Hoche's queen in a chess game. In a dramatic sequence during the Royalist Rebellion (as well as in other sequences), however, Gance sets up a different form of spatial continuity, shifting back and forth between matched and "mismatched" shots that define the relations between Barras, Napoléon, and a Captain Murat.[27] Finally, in Napoléon's journey to Albenga, as has been noted, the spatial-temporal continuity is sacrificed in order to emphasize a system of graphic, rhythmic, and connotative relations. Because of its inconsistent adherence to the "classical" continuity system developed by the American cinema, Noël Burch, among others, has called *Napoléon* a "primitive" film.[28] Unless Burch means to reverse the pejorative sense of the word, the label seems, to me, inappropriate. For what Gance and his colleagues in the narrative avant-garde seem to have developed and/or accepted was a discourse that was deliberately plural. At his disposal in *Napoléon* were several different or alternative systems of syntactical continuity. Again, the question is, does this simply provide another means for play or are there patterns to the deployment of these syntactical systems that coalesce into coherence?

Let me point the way towards grasping the film's integration of these modes of representation and continuity systems by focusing on that portion devoted to the relationship between Napoléon, Josephine, and her maid Violine. At the time of *Napoléon*'s release, critics tended to ignore this part of the film, presumably on the grounds that it was a sentimental digression. That attitude still persists for most of the cuts in the "Coppola" version now circulating in the United States are made here.[29] That is unfortunate because these sequences achieve a high degree of rhetorical complexity and emotional poignance and, in the process, reveal a nexus of coherence in the midst of incoherence. Furthermore, they introduce a disturbing note of discord, another level of contradiction, into the text of *Napoléon.*

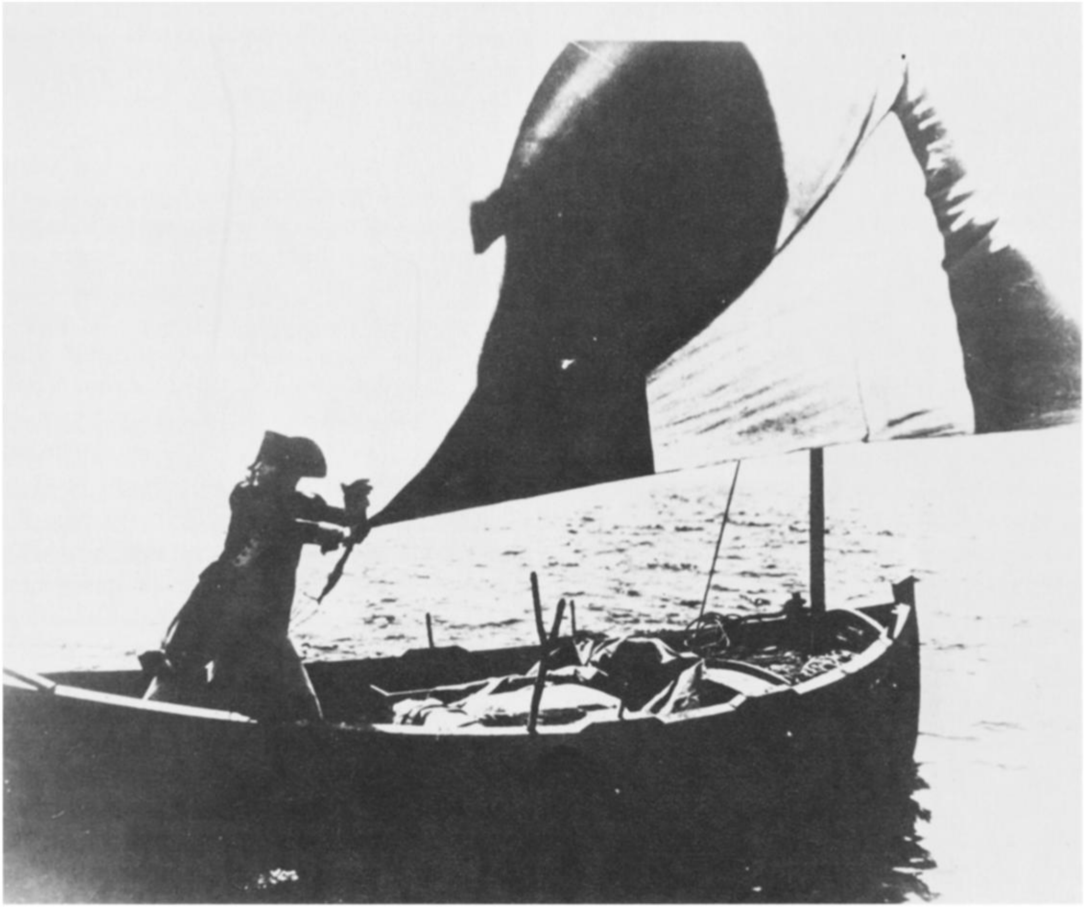
The courtship between Napoléon and Josephine is marked by a mixture of high and low comedy until one day Napoléon calls unexpectedly at her tiny chateau. While her son and daughter chat with the awkward suitor in an antechamber, Josephine tarries in the bedroom with Barras (whose mistress she has been and may still be), receiving his permission to marry. The children engage Napoléon in a game of blindman's buff; and as he fumbles about, blindfolded, Barras escapes by tiptoeing past him and out the door. Napoléon is caught up in the game (articulated in an accelerating montage of fast panning CUs) until Josephine sneaks up behind him and allows herself to be captured. Instead of taking off the blindfold, however, he tells her that he has no need of eyes to know whom she really loves in her heart. At this she does a warily slow double take, as if suddenly fearful that he may realize her actual feelings and motives and the extent of her duplicity. This sequence is remarkable in several ways. The accelerating montage sets up an implausible continuity, the subjective vision (all POV shots) of a character who is blindfolded. Yet the function of that implausibility is to call into question Napoléon's ability to see and hence to know. The subsequent series of shots re-enforce that questioning by juxtaposing (in matched CUs) the blinded lover and his all too seeing and knowing beloved. In the context of his skill as a military strategist and his inheritance of the visionary principles of the Revolution (which he accepts immediately after the wedding), Napoléon's blindness here takes on disturbingly grand proportions. If his love for Josephine can be mocked so cruelly and easily, can his devotion to the Revolution be any less of a delusion?

The wedding ceremony introduces a further sense of questioning and disturbance. In contrast to several brief sequences where the couple stroll in the gardens around her chateau (photographed in exquisitely glowing images that soften at the edges), the wedding is a lackluster affair of waiting (Napoléon arrives late) in a tacky civil chamber (the spot-lighting on the walls is even blatantly inconsistent). Intriguingly, however, this ceremony is almost displaced by the "wedding" (identified as such in an intertitle) that Violine stages for herself. This young woman has appeared repeatedly in the second half of the film—in the Convention as Robespierre and Saint Just are condemned, in the bread line of women in the snow, at the "Bal des Victimes" as a coat check girl. She becomes infatuated with Napoléon (at one point buying a wooden statuette of him that is hawked in the streets of Paris) and finally arranges her hair like Josephine's and gets herself hired as one of her maids. On the evening of the marriage, Violine dresses herself in white before a mirror in her room, then slowly gets up onto her bed and kneels in a position of prayer. In place of a headboard is a small cabinet that she opens, revealing a tiny altar to Napoléon that includes the statuette, some flowers, several candles, and one of his white gloves. The sequence then cuts to Napoléon and Josephine in their bridal chamber. For a moment he stands alone by the bed, which is thinly veiled by a full-length curtain, and then she comes to the opposite side and touches one of the garlands encircling the curtain. He joins her, and they kiss (in CU) as veil after veil falls diagonally across their faces until the image fades to white. The sequence then returns to Violine, who has left her bed to stand by the wall. The left portion of the frame, which has been blurred out of focus, suddenly clears, revealing the statuette on a small table. Violine's hand moves the figure slightly and its enlarged shadow appears on the wall. In a final MS, she moves to the projected shadow and presses her lips to it.

This double wedding transpires in a mysterious world, half real, half fantasy. In its startling white-on-white mise-en-scène, Violine often seems "to fade away into the grey mists of a magical background."[30] Yet the sequence is also unusually perverse, pushing passion and sentimentality to excess. Something like this had occurred earlier when Napoléon was taking lessons in courtship. At the end of that sequence, he faced a globe of the world and imagined Josephine's face superimposed inside it. When he moved to kiss her, she turned away; turning the globe brought her back again. But as Napoléon covered her face with his and seemed to caress her hair, Josephine's look was reluctant, even resistant. Here, in Violine's chamber, the situation is reversed. A woman produces her own image of the man she loves (or the image her society offers her) and manipulates that image for her own ends. But the man is absent, the manipulation a delusion. What does this suggest, not only about the "mad" character of Violine, but about perception and power in sexual relations? Does Violine's passion parallel and reflect on Napoléon's relation to Josephine? And does her fetishistic projection make us even more conscious of the film's representation of Napoléon?

The motif of testing that marks these sequences of courtship and marriage provides, I would argue, a basis of coherence for the film as a whole. The scope of *Napoléon* may be too large for its disparate parts to be organized into anything like the tightly-fitted, Chinese box-like construction of a short work such as Jean Epstein's *La Glace à trois faces* (1927). Yet there does seem to be an overall design that depends on more than the chronology of historical events (which already has suffered several major shifts and lacunae). To grasp that design is to see Napoléon propelled through a double series of increasingly more crucial tests and confrontations whose paradigmatic relations are as important as their syntagmatic progress. For in the reversals and transformations of those tests, the character of Napoléon undergoes a kind of deconstruction.

The first half of *Napoléon* introduces the motif of the test or confrontation at the outset, in the snowfort battle which is then recapitulated in the dormitory pillow fight. That segment ends in an image which condenses elements of the previous action and presages what is to come. Young Napoléon is alone in an empty storeroom, sitting on an old cannon, when his pet eagle returns through an open window from the snowy night to join him. This rhetorical form of closure—the lone figure, the imperial eagle, the military hardware,



the glittering particles in the air—establishes a pattern that will recur at several key moments in the film. The next segments, during the onset of the Revolution, delay any further test. The retreat to Corsica, however, sets up a confrontation between the island factions, especially between Napoléon and Paoli, who has sided with England. The confrontation begins in a local café (articulated in a slow montage of marvelous faces in CU), builds to a face-off in front of the actual Bonaparte family home (photographed with a special "brachyscope" lens to make up for space limitations), and then to a horseback chase that ends in his escape by sea. All of this culminates in two major tests—the storm at sea and the siege of Toulon—which climax the first half of the film. Both demand close scrutiny.

The first of the two begins with a stunning image that transcends cliché. In a small boat Napoléon has taken to escape the Corsican gendarmes, he attaches to the mast the huge French flag he has seized from Paoli and unfurls it as a sail. With one hand grasping the flag and the other guiding the tiller, he quickly puts out to sea—for France. This image culminates a series of simple similes in the film: young Bonaparte and the eagle, Danton and the flames of a blacksmith's forge, Pozzo and a snake (which, as in a prewar serial, incongruously coils about his shoulder). But it also marks the transition to an even grander simile. Apparently inspired by Victor Hugo's line, "to be a member of the Convention is like being a wave of the ocean," Gance concludes the Corsican period with a sequence that intercuts Napoléon's storm-tossed boat and the surging melee of the Convention—hence its title, the "Double Tempest."[31] Following Moussinac, Mitry has argued that this sequence is flawed because it simply visualizes a pre-existing idea—a mere literary symbol, no more.[32] However, the tumult of the Revolutionary assembly in Paris is not only paralleled to but transformed by the turbulent sea through which Napoléon navigates to his "destiny." The point of the charged equation, it seems to me, is to suggest that the Convention will soon test Napoléon as well and that he will survive it just as he survives the storm at sea. He will triumph over forces both cosmic and human, natural and political. In fact, the latter forces are diminished, and almost obliterated, by the former in this rhetorical process of mystification.[33]

The significance of the "Double Tempest" depends, in part, on its use of the celebrated triple screen or triptych system. As originally conceived, this system was intended simply to record panoramas several times wider than the normal frame area. Gance had André Debrie mount three identical Parvo-Debrie cameras on top of one another, aim the top and bottom ones to record the fields adjacent to that recorded by the middle camera, and synchronize all three to run automatically.[34] Despite a slight parallax problem in joining the three images, the results were so stunning that Gance used the technique several times in *Napoléon,* not only for panoramas near the end (as initially planned) but for other effects as well. Here, in the "Double Tempest," the shots of the Convention are marked by the vertiginous movements of pendulum camera shots—"the camera was placed at the end of a metal rod some ten meters long, which oscillated like a gigantic pendulum, imparting to the lens a forward and backward movement, similar to some sort of swing's rising and falling."[35] Similarly, the shots of the storm are marked by wildly tilting images of the boat as it is deluged with water, CUs of Napoléon's bloody hands, and both positive and negative images of enormous roiling waves (photographed from a glass box submerged in the surf). According to Gance, the sequence crescendoed in a rhythmic montage involving all three panels of the triptych, along with an increasing number of superimpositions, until it climaxed in sixteen images spaced across the triple screen.[36] Even in its present fragmentary form, one can see here the recapitulation of the earlier snowball and pillow fights literally enlarged to epic proportions.

The siege of Toulon extends the epic mode of this testing, but it also introduces the earliest discordant note of ambiguity. The first assault begins at midnight, and all the fighting thereafter is conducted at night. Furthermore, it begins in a downpour of rain that persists unrelentingly throughout the fighting. Together these conditions produce a shifting combination of "heroic" and "unheroic" images, in conjunction with which Napoléon is both larger-than-life leader and sharer of the suffering. Early on, especially, close shots of his face are intercut with the attacking soldiers and artillery firing. And in the climactic moments, several shots are divided into a miniature triptych, with Napoléon in the center panel seeming to direct the fighting at his sides. But the battle is also unusually brutal. In the first assault, a soldier is blown up in a water-filled ditch and a second soldier falls in dead after him; a third is wounded in the head, while a fourth has his foot run over by a cannon.[37] In the second assault, two soldiers struggle in a sea of mud until one drowns the other—the last image is that of an arm reaching up desperately, futilely, out of the murky water. In the aftermath of the siege, in several HALSs, Napoléon stands hunched in the rain on a mound surrounded by scores of dead soldiers in the mud. Yet the last shots condense and transform these elements from the battle, along with some from Brienne and Corsica. The master shot is a LS of a hill on which sit a house (frame right) and a low wall (frame left), near which, under a bare tree, Napoléon falls asleep on a drumhead. As smoke rises from the right foreground, the dawn light of the sun breaks in from the left background. On General Dugommier's orders, soldiers cover Napoléon with several French flags, and an eagle alights in the tree overhead. All these tests thus climax in a heavily latent symbolic tableau that "resolves" any sense of contradiction.

The second half of *Napoléon* is constructed somewhat like the first: there are a number of confrontations early on and then another more important series at the end. The beginning segment covers the period of the "Reign of Terror," during which Napoléon again is a marginal character, especially during the time when the "Three Gods of the Revolution" disappear. But when the Royalist Rebellion breaks out, Barras calls him to the Convention to take command of the defense of Paris. With a few words, Napoléon distributes arms to the citizens, and the rebellion is quickly crushed. As the segment climaxes in a moment of spectacle at the Convention—in a series of huge shot/reverse shots that will be echoed in the film's final reel—Napoléon announces to the cheering throng, "I am the Revolution." Yet this expected triumph is torn by contradictions. On the one hand, it recapitulates and transforms the sequence of the "Double Tempest." The new "storm" that threatens the Convention has been stilled—in place of tumult there is stasis and order; in place of several squabbling leaders, there is now a single figure of authority. On the other hand, Napoléon's position is even more ambiguous than in the siege of Toulon. A savior of the Revolution, he has turned into its dictator, its new "God." In the Convention Hall, whether fully lit or silhouetted, he is an overdetermined subject—the focal point of framing and editing, the source of powerful words (e.g., "Justice" hangs over him in the air). Before taking command, however, for one long moment, his shadow falls ominously over "The Declaration of the Rights of Man." And in the Convention's aftermath, his body is disguised and then fetishized in statuettes hawked in the streets. Oscillating between "Great Man of History," puppet, and menacing shadow, the figure of Napoléon has become plural, paradoxical.

If this Convention triumph displays an ever increasing sense of discord, the sequences of courtship and marriage that follow push the character of Napoléon to the brink of incoherence. There, a different form of testing, involving the dynamics of sexual politics and degrees of knowledge, raises disturbing questions about the Napoleonic hero and his position as subject in the narrative and in history. At the point of dissolution, the film suddenly backs off and recovers a form of coherence by displacing its questions and contradictions in the mystification of spectacle. The shift occurs in the long (and sometimes tedious) sequence in the now empty Convention Hall where, before going off to Albenga, Napoléon faces the dead heroes of the Revolution (in a series of superimpositions). Their interrogation turns into a warped, simplistic affirmation (read "betrayal") of the Revolution, and the dead begin to sing the "Marseillaise," echoing the very first moments in the Convention. The sequence modulates into an even montage of MCUs, commingling both leaders and common people in one continuous image that blurs

all distinctions. The final shot is a masterpiece of condensation through superimposition. It begins with a LACU of Napoléon listening intently (against the darkness of the hall); a superimposition of the wind-whipped tricolor (echoing the "Double Tempest") dissolves in *behind him:* then a canted LAFS of "La Marseillaise" (in place of Josephine?) dissolves in, replacing Napoléon—she calls off to the right and then points left into strong wind that billows her garments; finally, the initial image of Napoléon dissolves back in but replaces the flag *behind her.* Thus does the film, in an incredible stereoptic deception, equate Napoléon with the spirit of the Revolution, placing him at the still center of its swirling, dynamic charge. Now the challenges of Brienne, Corsica, Toulon, and the Convention can reach their apotheosis in the final reel, in a stunning series of triptych effects, all of them geared to Napoléon as the uncontested narrative and rhetorical subject par excellence.[38]

The final reel opens at the Albenga encampment (a crater surrounded by rock walls and crowned by a ruined castle) with a series of sequences edited primarily according to the "classical" continuity system. Several panorama shots establish the location as Napoléon rides his white horse back and forth among the troops, his movement linking the massed units of soldiers as well as the three panels of the triptych. His first brief speech to them confirms his dominance—an intertitle in the central panel is followed by a MCU of Napoléon, flanked by hundreds of soldiers in each side panel, and then by several panorama shots as he leads them forward and off-screen (the horses flash by impressively in MS). The following morning that dominance is re-established with a triptych MCU of Napoléon against dark clouds moving across the sky and a triptych LS of the troops arising (the panorama shot tilts up to include soldiers appearing on the castle walls above the rock face). Throughout his main speech to the army, the sequence generally alternates triptych MCUs of Napoléon with LSs of the soldiers responding to his words and gestures (in eyeline-matched shots). But the pattern varies to include gigantic shot/reverse shots as well as FSs of the soldiers and MCUs of Napoléon flanked by LSs of the massed army. And the speech climaxes in a series of reverse panorama shots, with a CU of Napoléon's look serving as the pivot of control and direction, linking the French army to the other side of the mountain with its "rich provinces and great towns" spread over the fertile Italian plains. In the "deep space" of the final shot, the soldiers charge forward (from ELS to MS) en masse.

For the descent into Italy that follows, the film shifts to a "musical" continuity that stresses graphic and rhythmic relations as much as the representational. Leaving the Albenga encampment, the army divides (in triptych) into three different lines of troops that march forward past ruined castle walls and through a valley of vast fields. As the central panel changes to dollying FSs of the marching soldiers and wagons, the left and right panels (inversions of one another) describe, in LSs, the advancing infantry, cavalry, and cannon. At Montenotte, a "classical" continuity returns in conjunction with a split screen of connotative parallels. In several panorama shots, the army descends a hill to attack and capture the town; while in gigantic reverse shots, a CU of Napoléon is flanked first by parallel tracking shots of the cavalry and then by ELSs as they race forward across the plains. The battle is quickly dispatched, and Napoléon is propelled ahead of his army and then, in a brief shot echoing the "Double Tempest," is joined with the wildly applauding Convention crowds in Paris—by means of an intertitle that explodes across the triple screen: "Hearing of / this sudden entry / into Italy / / the Parisians / burst the bounds / of their enthusiasm."

In its final minutes, the film shifts once again into a continuity system that is graphic, rhythmic, and highly connotative. Recapitulating the beginning as well as all the other moments of testing, this climax enacts the ultimate transformation and mystification of Napoléon's vision. It begins with Napoléon stalking the heights of Montezemolo, inscribing "in the Italian sky all his desires and all his victories." As he looks out over the mountains the valleys, three separate sequences erupt simultaneously onto the triple screen, the images metamorphosing through superimpositions, dissolves, and iris masks that shift back and forth from panel to panel "in a fugue-like movement of dizzying rhythms."[39] Initially, they include a FS of Napoléon, LSs of the army attacking across the plains, a LS of his white horse, and a suspended CU of Josephine. Soon,

in addition, appear the revolving globe, LSs of the valleys and mountains, maps of Italy and England, insignia, cannon fire, and attacking cavalry. Finally, the sequences shift into rapid montage, drawing together closer and closer shots of the victorious marching soldiers, CUs of Napoléon as a boy and man, ECUs of his eyes, blurred shots of the Revolutionary leaders, a beating drum, flames, cloud rifts, streaming water, and waves exploding in sunlight. Suddenly the vanguard of the army sees the shadow of a bird preceding them on the road, and there is a head-on FS of a soaring eagle extending its wings across the triple screen. The sequence shifts to CUs and ECUs of Napoléon again, and the film ends in a rush of images—blurred figures, swish pans, ECUs of Napoléon's eyes, and streams of light. Then, in a last twist, the panels of streaming light turn red, white, and blue, transforming the final triptych into a gigantic French tricolor. Although Napoléon is the apparent subject or source of this whirlwind of resonant images, this projection of the "Revolutionary spirit," he becomes, in fact, the object or figure restored by its charge. For what begins as his vision shifts deceptively into an omniscient barrage that "devours" its subject and, through that deception, subsumes the paradoxical nature of his character and all the contradictions of his seeing and knowing. Consequently, this celebratory restoration of Napoléon's power can be seen as the product of a cinematic spectacle whose operation renders its own resolution problematic.

What position can one take towards this rhapsodic celebration of a single powerful leader, a sort of Gallicized Hegelian ideal of the hero in history—anachronistic, chauvinistic, and perhaps even fascistic? For Gance, his hero must have seemed the Romantic artist in apotheosis—as he saw himself—a towering figure who made the real world, not an imaginary one, his province of action.[40] For his contemporary, the critic Moussinac, this figure was the embodiment "of military dictatorship," frighteningly close to the image of the Emperor then held by political groups of the extreme right.[41] On these grounds, some argue, *Napoléon* could join the ranks of such films as Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934) for the way it "weds" a pernicious ideology to an innovative and/or masterfully persuasive discourse.[42] Yet, ironically, in its structural repetition of narrative and rhetorical motifs, the film works much like Eisenstein's *Potemkin* (1925-1926) —culminating in a rush of images in which past, present, and future implode and seem to burst the bounds of the screen. And in the wake of that rush, for the spectator turned analyst, wash a welter of contradictions. Or there remain, in other words, several textual levels of incoherence in coherence. The overall effect of *Napoléon* may be mystification on a grand scale, but the text goes a long way toward producing the basis of its own critique.

NOTES

1. Kevin Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 634. Kevin Brownlow, "Abel Gance's *Napoléon* Returns from Exile," *American Film,* 6 (January-February, 1981), 31.

2. Lenny Borger, "British Slighted on *Napoléon* . . .", *Variety,* 76 (4 November, 1981), 1, 38.

3. Interview with Marie Epstein, August 14, 1976.

4. For the story of this reconstruction, see Brownlow, "Abel Gance's *Napoléon* Returns from Exile," 28-32, 68, 70-73.

5. Interview with Bob Harris of Images Film Archives, March 14, 1980. Several tinted frames from the film are reproduced in Kevin Brownlow's "How a Lost Masterpiece of the Cinema was Recreated," *The Observer Magazine* (9 March, 1980), 34-35.

6. An early version of this reconstruction was screened by the Pacific Film Archive in 1973, and by the American Film Institute in Washington, D.C., in 1978—see Brownlow, "Abel Gance's *Napoléon* Returns from Exile," 68.

7. The initial screening of the complete version took place at the Telluride Film Festival in September, 1979, with Gance himself in attendance. Since then, this version of

Napoléon has been shown at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis (March, 1980), at the London Film Festival (November, 1980), at the Edinburgh Film Festival (August, 1981), and again at the Leicester Square Cinema in London (September, 1981). The Zoetrope version (accompanied by an orchestral score by Carmine Coppola) opened at the Radio City Music Hall in New York (January 23-25, 1981) and has played for limited engagements in selected cities throughout the United States as well as in Rome. Which version will be screened in Paris, on July 14, 1982, is still uncertain. Lenny Borger, "British Slighted on *Napoléon* . . . ," 38.

8. René Jeanne et Charles Ford, *Abel Gance* (Paris: Seghers, 1963), 43.

9. There are discrepancies about *Napoléon*'s costs—see René Jeanne, "La Technique de *Napoléon*," *Cinéa-Ciné-pour-tous*, 86 (1 juin 1927), 9; Léon Moussinac, "Panoramique du cinéma [1929]", *L'Age ingrat du cinéma* (Paris: Editions français réunis, 1967), 268; Sophie Daria, *Abel Gance: hier et demain* (Paris: La Palatine, 1959), 116; Jeanne et Ford, *Abel Gance*, 52.

10. Carl Davis's specially commissioned score for the British version of Brownlow's reconstruction has been praised while Carmine Coppola's has been maligned, in part, because Davis integrated some of the extant music composed by Honegger into his score.

11. Jeanne et Ford, *Abel Gance*, 52. Interview with Kevin Brownlow, August 15, 1979. In 1928, in the United States, MGM distributed an 80-minute version of Gance's film which amounted to little more than a narrative sketch.

12. Bernard Eisenschitz, "From *Napoléon* to *New Babylon*," *Afterimage*, 10 (Autumn, 1981), 49-55.

13. In the Brownlow reconstruction, the sequence of Marat's murder is moved from its original position just prior to the Battle of Toulon in order to open the second half of the film with a sudden shocking action—the first shot is a CU of a knife being concealed in the bodice of a dress.

14. Jean Mitry, "Napoléon à l'écran," *Photo-Ciné*, 4 (avril 1927), 57.

15. Jean Tedesco, "*Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*," *Cinéa-Ciné-pour-tous*, 83 (15 avril 1927), 9.

16. Emile Vuillermoz, "Qu'en pense la critique?", *Cinéa-Ciné-pour-tous*, 87 (15 avril 1927), 6.

17. Emile Vuillermoz, "Abel Gance et *Napoléon*," *Cinémagazine*, 7 (25 novembre 1927), 337-338.

18. Tedesco, "*Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*," 10.

19. Moussinac, "Panoramique du cinéma," 227.

20. G.-Michel Coissac, *Les Coulisses du cinéma* (Paris: Pittoresques, 1929), 113.

21. Copies of this film are preserved at the Cinémathèque française and other film archives as well as in several private film collections here in the United States. Brownlow, "Abel Gance's *Napoléon* Returns from Exile," 31-32. See also Juan Arroy, *En Tournant* Napoléon *avec Abel Gance*, Paris: La Renaissance du livre, 1927.

22. Arroy, "La Technique de *Napoléon*," 9.

23. For convenience, I use the following acronyms to describe shots—ELS (extreme long shot), LS (long shot), FS (full shot), MS (middle shot), MCU (medium close up), CU (close up), ECU (extreme close up), HA (high angle), LA (low angle), and POV (point of view).

24. Coissac, *Les Coulisses du cinéma*, 113. Transcript of an interview by Armand Panigel with Abel Gance (1973).

25. Ronald Blumer, "The Camera as Snowball: France 1918-1927," *Cinema Journal*, 10 (Spring, 1971), 37. Transcript of an interview by Armand Panigel with Abel Gance (1973).

26. Jean Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma*, III (Paris: Editions universitaires, 1973), 355.

27. Much more work needs to be done on the alternative editing systems used by the French and other non-American cinemas in the 1920's. In Volkoff's *Kean* (1924), for instance, a sequence of perfectly matched shots (involving two characters) is bracketed by "mismatched" shots—as if the latter marked a transition.

28. Burch's remark was made in the session on Early French Film Theory, at the Ohio University Film Conference (May, 1980). Similarly, Barry Salt tends to assume that the French film-makers of the 1920's did not always have the "competence" to handle "classical continuity" editing—*Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (publication forthcoming).

29. Most of the cuts involve the character of Violine (Annabella), whose role, in effect, is eliminated from the "Coppola" version.

30. Moussinac, "Panoramique du cinéma," 276.

31. Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By*, 648.

32. Moussinac, "Panoramique du cinéma," 269-270. Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma*, III, 356-357. Actually, Mitry was much more positive about this triptych sequence in 1927—Mitry, "Napoléon à l'écran," 55.

33. In an essay that appeared after this analysis was written, Peter Pappas comes to a similar conclusion, by a different route—"The Superimposition of Vision: Napoléon and the Meaning of Fascist Art," *Cineaste*, 11, 2 (1981), 10.

34. Anon., "Le Procédé du triple écran," *Cinégraphie*, 1 (15 septembre, 1927), 17.

35. Arroy, "La Technique de *Napoléon*," 10. Transcript of an interview by Armand Panigel with Abel Gance (1973).

36. Brownlow, *The Parade's Gone By*, 648-649. Transcript of an interview by Armand Panigel with Abel Gance (1973).

37. There were precedents for this sequence in the battle scenes of Gance's *J'Accuse* (1919) and Raymond Bernard's *Le Miracle des loups* (1924).

38. This analysis of the final reel of triptychs is based on a viewing table sessions with the film, arranged by Elaine Burrows, Film Viewing Supervisor, at the National Film Archive in London.

39. Mitry, *Histoire du cinéma*, III, 361.

40. Vuillermoz, "Abel Gance et *Napoléon*," 336. See James M. Walsh and Steven Kramer, "Gance's Beethoven," *Sight and Sound*, 45 (Spring, 1976), 109-111, for a study of Gance's later film on another Romantic artist, *Beethoven* (1937).

41. Moussinac, "Panoramique du cinéma," 267, 272.

42. For instance, see the insightful but ultimately heavy-handed polemic by Pappas, "The Superimposition of Vision: *Napoléon* and the Meaning of Fascist Art," *Cineaste*, 11, 2 (1981), 4-13.

DENNIS SCHAEFER AND LARRY SALVATO

Writing with Light

AN INTERVIEW WITH VITTORIO STORARO

Q: *How and why did you first become interested in cinematography?*
A: Well, the decision wasn't mine. I was pushed by my father to study photography.

And what did your father do?

My father was a projectionist for a big company in Italy. I discovered later on that photography allowed me to express myself. Today I can honestly say that I don't see myself doing anything else but trying to express myself through light in cinematography.

VITTORIO STORARO
Films as Director of Photography

1968	*Youthful, Youthful*
1969	*Crime at the Tennis Club*
	The Spider's Stratagem
	The Bird with the Crystal Plumage
1970	*The Conformist*
	Adventure of Enea
1971	*'Tis Pity She's a Whore*
	Bad Day for the Aries
	Body of Love
1972	*Adventure of Orlando*
	Last Tango in Paris
	Bleu Gang
1973	*Malice*
	Giordano Bruno
	Identikit
1974	*Footprints*
1975	*1900*
	Scandal
1976/77	*Apocalypse Now**
1978	*Agatha*
	Luna
1979/80	*Reds*
1981	*One from the Heart*

**Academy Award for best achievement in cinematography (1979)*

So that's where everything started. My father tried to encourage me into the kind of school that was teaching photography. And at fourteen years old, you don't really know.

Did he have some inkling that you were talented in this area?

No, I believe he was thinking about himself. It was something that he himself thought he might do but never did. So he pushed one of his sons into it as a continuation of himself. I'm glad for that because, in the last several years, I've really discovered something about myself.

Photography, for me, really means writing with light.

Painting with light?

No, not really. For me, it's writing with light in the sense that I'm trying to express something that is inside of me. With my sensibility, my structure, my cultural background, I'm trying to express what I really am. I am trying to describe the story of the film through the light. I try to have a parallel story to the actual story so that through light and color you can feel and understand, consciously and unconsciously, much more clearly what the story is about. For several years I thought that the light and only the light was the main thing. I was really concerned with the fact that I was using elements that came between myself, my use of the light, and the audience. I'm talking about different lenses, different cameras, different film stock, different developing, different printing, and different screenings. These things were a kind of obstacle to really expressing myself clearly. These things got in the way of what I was trying to say in a story to an audience.

So I had a very interesting experience in the theater with director Luca Ronconi. He asked me if I would do some work with him in the theater. So I stopped working in the cinema for one season and worked in the theater. You know, in the cinema sometimes you build a kind of light in interiors and, according to what kind of things are done in filtering, that tonality, that color and that brightness will be changed later on. I really would like to show an audience exactly what I am doing. This was one of the main considerations for working in the theater. Plus I wanted to know why, in theater, the story of light had not changed for a long time. It was rare to find an opera interior lit in a new way.

I did *Kathchen Von Heilbronn* by Kleist and *Oreste* by Euripides. And what I discovered through them was that my total expression wasn't just with light. The light was the main thing; it was the start. The lenses, the camera, the negative stock, the positive stock—any single element that would affect the final positive image—that's what my expression was about. When I discovered that, I really understood cinematography.

So this experience in the theater really helped you?

Yes. You know, we are talking about light. Light itself is energy. So it is very difficult to transmit your feeling in pure energy. You have to translate it into something. This energy is being stopped by an object or the human figure and being registered on film through a kind of glass and then it's developed and printed. It's like the paper and pen for a writer or a canvas for a painter. These kind of elements are not something that is going to be an obstacle to my expression and what I want to say. It is really the brush, the pen of artistic expression. That was something important I discovered about myself.

You had also studied a great deal and did a number of short films while you were working your way up to first cameraman.

Yes, I had studied photography and cinematography for nine years. After that I right away became the youngest first assistant cameraman and camera operator. Then for a few years I was a camera operator. Then there was a big film crisis in Italy and I stopped working for a couple of years.

That was 1963–64. There was a production lull and a financial crisis within the industry?

Yes, production started shutting down. The cinematographer I was working with was not working anymore. That lull gave me a chance to research and study, on my own, anything that I didn't develop during my student period. Particularly because at that stage you are learning because you have to learn. Your knowledge is limited to names and dates and things that you have to learn. Mainly you gain technical knowledge. So I used this slack period as a kind of development and formation of my cultural background. That gave me concepts of how to use all the technical knowledge that I had before. And this was one of the most important moments in my life. Like everybody, I don't think you just start at point A and go straight to point B. You always go up and down in the way the energy is moving. So the more you go down and escape into your roots and your background, the further you can climb up the hill afterwards. There will be important moments and I have had these moments throughout my life. There is a moment after I have done something very important, something that I think was an incredible expenditure of energy, when I really have to stop and recharge my battery. Or go back and study some more or do a movie that is totally opposite than what I've done. I try to get involved in an involution to myself to create new energy. Even the idea of starting from the beginning again is very important in our lives. After this stage, I started working again as an assistant cameraman and I met Bertolucci on *Before the Revolution.* And after that meeting, he called me back again and that started a totally new era for me. So if I had never had this crisis, if I was never able to start from the beginning again, I would not have been able to have this evolution later on with him.

In his early years, Connie Hall worked with Ted McCord. And Connie said that every time Ted started a new film, he came onto the set as if he'd never shot a film before.

I think that this is one of the most important feelings that we should have. I remember every first screening of every picture I've ever done. I remember my first picture specifically. The moment that the screen is going to be lit by an image, there is an incredible emotion in my heart. You can see an image moving and the magic thing is happening again. At that moment it doesn't matter which kind of image it is; just the fact that you can see an image is something very magical. It is really painful until this moment; until the light going through the positive stock breaks the obscurity of the room and you can see an image. Afterwards you can analyze and discuss whether it's good, bad, or whatever. But that moment is a wonderful moment.

I must say that on the first few days of each new picture, I am so frightened. Because each time I'm trying to take a step forward. I try to have the strength and energy to do it because otherwise you just get bored doing the same things all the time. The first days of a new film create an incredible pain and suffering until you establish what you want to do. Once it's clear and you see it on the screen, you go forward. And you never stop. Day by day, you must concentrate intensely on what you are doing because otherwise you will become distracted. As soon as I read the script and I speak with the main auteur of the film, the director, and I have the first direction about where the movie should be going, I try to find a way to understand how to conceptualize an image, from the photographic point of view, of the story itself. I try to find what is the main idea and how it can be represented in a symbolic, emotional, psychological, realistic and physical way. That's my approach.

That's your role as a cinematographer?

Yes. And if I don't find that first, I don't think I can do the picture. Because I wouldn't know what I was doing. After I find this kind of specific direction, I contrapropose to the director what I think can be done in the photographic area. If we agree, this will be my way, my structure. It's very clear from the beginning. Of course, as there is an evolution of things around us, each movie can change with us day by day. So this main plan or structure is very important because it will lead you through anything you think can attract you. Sometimes you see something that can be more beautiful than what you want to do or say. But it would be wrong because it would be something that would distract you from the main idea. So you should be very strong in selecting only that kind of light, that kind of tonality, that kind of feeling and that kind of color that you think is right for that story. When you are writing a book, each chapter of the book is not as important as the book itself; but if each page doesn't help your understanding of the following page, then that page didn't contribute to the whole.

You're talking about a unity?

Maria Schneider in LAST TANGO IN PARIS

I am talking about the unity of the work itself. So from the moment that you have this idea, this intuition of what you can do with the movie, you try to make it clear so you can talk about it. Sometimes you can have an idea but it is difficult to express. That's why, in the last few pictures, I've tried writing out these ideas. I do this to make my ideas very clear. Because after you work your ideas out, you have to be very concrete with the director, the production designer, the costume designer, etc. Everyone needs to be going in the same direction. And from that time, moment by moment, day by day, during the realization of the film itself until the answer print, it is all one arc. You never stop. You always can add, you always can continue until you have the answer print. Only at that moment can you say, "I've done it. It's there; it's on the screen." Through the lab, you can use a technique to reveal an image or to represent an image, from negative to positive, in a particular way that you need for this particular picture. I do not usually do two pictures the same way at the lab. Each one is different. But there are some basic things I do, which is part of myself, part of my expression that you can recognize in all my movies. And that's just the particular kind of person I am, just like any other person trying to express themselves through something.

My first picture in 1968 was an incredible moment in my life. It was like my first love. It was the first time I had the chance to express myself in a complete "opera." I had previously done some short films, but a feature allows you to be more solid, complete and specific. I was trying to be present every single moment of every single day. I told myself, "Vittorio, be careful, because this moment will never come back again. You will do hundreds of pictures that will be bigger, smaller, better or worse but this particular time in your life will never come back again." After your first film, you can add and develop certain things but it will never be like the first time. I remember that two days before the end of my first film, I was crying like a baby. A friend of mine didn't understand and wanted to know what was going on. And I told him what I was thinking: that it was a beautiful moment in my life. I was going to lose something very, very important; that is, the innocence to do something for the first time.

Everything I have done since then, like *Spider's Stratagem, The Conformist, Last Tango in Paris, 1900,* and *Apocalypse Now,* is sort of a branch of things that were born on my first picture. I just went on to develop this main idea. I think my first film is like an imprint.

THE SPIDER'S STRATAGEM

Everything is there in that first expression?

Everything. It is like my fingerprint. After my first film, I just took any single element that was there and tried to evolve it. I tried to make it clearer, bigger, more evident. It evolved especially in the translation of black and white and color. Because the dialectic of the conflict between artificial energy and natural energy was always one of my concepts. The conflict between day and night, shadows and light, white and black, technology and energy; these are things that you can always recognize in myself and my work. The dialectic between two different things, two different poles are in conflict only because they are separated. And the moment the two poles are reunited, there will be balance. It will be the most beautiful thing that can happen.

In fact, you may have noticed one of my symbols that I used in *Spider's Stratagem, The Conformist,* and *Last Tango in Paris.* Any lamp that I was using in those pictures was round; it was a globe. It is the image of two half things put together. Any circle has always been my symbol. I think I developed this kind of area, between these two energies, from my first picture up to *Apocalypse Now.* With *Apocalypse Now,* I wanted to express the main idea of Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) which is the imposition of one culture on top of another culture. I was trying to express the conflict between natural energy and artificial energy. After I had done such a huge "opera" as *Apocalypse Now,* I felt I was going to close the first chapter in my life. It was very hard for me to start again after that because nothing was able to give me an idea or enough energy to start something new. So I stopped one more time in my life and I tried to escape into my past. I escaped into all my books and any knowledge that I had before in school. I did research into what "color" really meant for me. I researched all the meanings of color, all the theories of color. I wrote about my research and this turned out to be a very important moment in my life again. It was beautiful to go back as a student, it was beautiful to go back into myself and it was beautiful to know where I was at that moment. Because before that I didn't know where I was. I knew where I had been but I didn't know what was in front of me or which direction I should be going in. That research on color once again gave me the strength to continue in a specific direction.

THE CONFORMIST: *Photography by Vittorio Storaro*

Luna was the first movie I did in this new chapter of my life, using mainly the symbolism of color. Luna is the symbol of the mother in psychoanalysis; so when I understood that, I tried to use the symbol of the color of the character to express the character itself. Concerning the light, I tried to surround the character in a kind of way to give it depth. I tried to give thickness to the characters; I tried to build the volume of them up; I tried to give them such a presence that you could touch them physically on the screen. I'm not talking about having three dimensions, I'm talking about giving volume, about something that is more a personality presence. But mainly I wanted to develop the symbol of the color in *Luna.*

What do you mean by "the symbol"?

In psychoanalysis, every color represents something specific in an emotional sense. It's not something that I made up; it's something that scientists and researchers have studied. In other words, if you dream something in yellow and red, that has a specific meaning because of the colors involved. So I used this kind of theory of the symbol of color to represent the emotion of the characters in *Luna.* The second application of this is in *One from the Heart.* In that film, I was concerned with the physiology of the color. That is, is what ways the human body reacts to color. Now the human body has been exposed to light and color for thousands of years. And since the beginning of time, the body reacts one way: you expose the body to light (or yellow), you get activity, you need to work. Each time you expose the body to darkness (or blue), you need to rest. Since the beginning, the human body has made this kind of journey into night and day. Today scientists have proven that your body changes in the presence of a particular color. Your body reacts differently to different colors. You become more active or more relaxed or more depressed. Even your blood pressure may change. So in *One from the Heart* I tried to establish the emotion of the character through the emotion of the color.

How did you train yourself or become able to think in these unique terms?

For example, when Francis Coppola talked to me about *One from the Heart,* he told me the story which was very simple and realistic. It was set in Las Vegas. So we went to Las Vegas and I was astonished with the way Las Vegas was built. Las Vegas has such an incredible amount of light and the reason it does is to regenerate your energy or your body. We were talking about this exact thing before: how your body reacts to light and dark. In Las Vegas, you never have to feel it is night or late.

The lights basically replace the sun.

Exactly. Being inside the hotel or casino, you don't see the sun outside so you want to go for a walk or have some fresh air. But you see that each window has been painted blue so you feel that there is no sun outside and you want to stay inside and gamble. They were using these color principles to have a particular unconscious stimulus to the human body. Having the story set in Las Vegas and being based on the passion and emotion of people, I had the idea to use the physiology of the color itself to establish the mood of the film.

I remember that I didn't know why Bernardo Bertolucci titled his film *Luna.* But suddenly it hit me that Luna means mother. And that was the key. So I tried to represent, in color and light, the story through the symbol of the color. When I read Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* in preparation for *Apocalypse Now,* I asked myself what the book was about. The main concept was about one culture on top of another culture; it was a conflict between two different cultures. I asked myself how I could represent that. I felt it was the difference between natural energy and technological (artificial) energy. That's where I started from. On *The Conformist,* the period that it was set in was a very claustrophobic period. It was a time of dictatorship. One of the ideas we had for *The Conformist* was to use a location for every single interior. And outside the window, we would never show the reality. Because at that historical time the promises were very great but their fulfillment in reality was very little. So, outside the window, we have something phony, something unreal, something painted. In fact, the sequence on the train was done with rear projection. We wanted to show the kind of conflict between the stated reality and the real reality. I wanted to show through light the idea of claustrophobia, of being caged. I used the idea that the light could never reach the shadows. So that there was a distinct separation between the shadows and the light. That's why I was using the kind of technique to give very sharp shadows and very sharp light in the first half of the picture. Now when they were going to Paris—Paris for us was a free nation; it was where everybody was going to escape from the dictatorship—I expressed this sense of freedom by letting the light go into the shadows. I completely changed the style of the light and I gave the audience colors that they hadn't seen in the film before. *The Conformist* is almost a black and white picture in the beginning. But in the last half in Paris, you see differently. You see the light going into the shadows. It's like two sections that are united once more.

All the night sequences of *The Conformist* are blue. At that time I didn't know specifically why I chose blue; I just felt that I should. Later on, I understood the kind of symbol blue intellectually is. When we were talking about *Last Tango in Paris,* I went to Paris for the first time in the winter and I saw the lights of the town all on. The natural light was so low that the town was used to having all the artificial light on. The conflict between these two energies (natural and artificial) gave me the different wavelength or vibration, the different grade of Kelvin that can be represented, the different color that you can take. So I was starting to understand how it can be important to represent the story in this kind of town. I used the color of orange. Once again it was the different wavelength or energy that gave me the idea; the high level of that wavelength was giving me the impression that it was about passion. We started to paint that empty apartment orange; we started to use the winter sun, which was very low, during the daytime. The light of the sun gave us very warm tones. And the color of the artificial light next to the daylight suggested this color too. It (orange) was the color of the passion, of the emotion. So that's how the idea for *Last Tango in Paris* came about.

On *Spider's Stratagem,* the main idea for the approach to the film was suggested by the story itself. It was something that didn't exist but we wanted to represent it as a real story. So the idea was to show this little country as an enormous stage because the story is set in a little town. The kind of color we were using was very strong and very pure. It was the first film I did with Bertolucci. On that film, it was an incredible moment to come out of a big city like Milan or Rome and, for the first time, go out into the country. In town, the smoke and fog act as a kind of filter so that you really don't see the true color of things. You don't really see the red of the sunset, the blue of the water or the green of the field. So it was an incredible and impressive emotional experience to see, in the clear air, the pure color of nature. It was incredible to hear without the filtering of the city noise. You know, when you constantly hear the noise of the car, APOCALYPSE NOW: *"a conflict between two different cultures." Photography by Vittorio Storaro*

of the air conditioner and of the TV, you lose the ability to really hear. But if you take away that noise level, suddenly you hear the leaves fall, the wind move through the trees. And that was a very important discovery. The look of *Spider's Stratagem* came from this kind of experience.

As a generation of cinematographers, we represent all the cinematographers that have gone before us. We are at the present moment because of all the work that has been done up to now. Without them, we couldn't be here today. There's no question about that. But even before that, there is a whole history of painting. Since the first grafitti was scratched on the walls of caves, since the first Egyptian drawings, since Piero della Francesca, we have had ways to express emotional stories and emotional figures in a particular style. There is no question that when you make a design, shoot a picture or photograph a movie, it is the representation of all two thousand years of history, whether you are conscious of it or not. So I think we should be conscious of what has been done before. And I think it would be wrong to take a painter and ask him to paint in a certain style from the past. It would be wrong to ask a cinematographer to photograph a film in the same style as another picture because you can never do that. And the reason is that the same elements, the same history does not exist in the same way as it did previously. But you can have reference to past work in order to be more clear with yourself about where you want to go and what you want to do.

It exists purely as a reference point?

Having a reference allows you to decide that you want to move into this direction rather than that direction. So that the knowledge of culture, history and your own experience is very important. At this moment, it is not only painting that is important but the theater and even our conversation right now. The kind of shadows that your papers are making on this table right now is a background for me. It's something that may be affecting my mind; I don't know how, why, or when but it's something that will come back to me.

What you're saying is that there is a lot of unconscious expression in your work?

Not only in my work, but in everybody's work.

Yes, but some people won't admit that.

Because it's unconscious. Otherwise it would be conscious. You realize it's unconscious because you can't explain it or you don't know where it came from. I mean, why suddenly do I have an idea and then turn off this light rather than the other one? In making that decision, there are so many millions of elements that push me to make that choice. You may choose green instead of red, black instead of white.

But maybe sometimes you don't know why? But you look at it and you know it's right for you.

Maybe sometimes you don't know. But you know that this is what you want, that this is what you feel. You know that this is what you want to achieve. Some time later you may discover why. Honestly, I didn't know why I did all Paris in blue tones for *The Conformist* and then two years later I did it in orange for *Last*

Tango in Paris. At the time, it was the feeling I got through these kind of wavelengths and through these kinds of color. Eight years later I discovered what these colors represent and so maybe I know why I made the choices I did. At the time, it was something emotional and something that I felt.

It's something that you can't explain rationally.

Sometimes you really can't explain it. It arrives to you by intuition and you do it. It may be difficult to talk about, especially if you are in a creative state. I gave you these two pages to read about my concept for *One from the Heart* because I'm finished with the shooting. We have some retakes but I am basically finished. Ninety-nine percent of what I was doing is there. So it is easy to talk about now. When you are in the creative moment, it is very hard to talk about it. If you already have in your bones everything that you are going to say, it means that you are already done. Only if you know what can be done and which, in your opinion, is the right way to do it, then day by day, step by step and moment by moment, you do it. You have the realization of the thought that you had. Afterwards, you understand that you are right or that they can even be pushed and developed further or that they can be realized exactly the way you thought. Afterwards you can talk about it. Before, it is only an intuition; you don't know if it works or not, you don't know if it can be done or not. You know rationally, being a professional, what your odds are; it can be ten percent or ninety percent. But it can never be one hundred percent. If you produce an image and you want to do it over again exactly as you did it the first time, it is impossible because it will never come back again in the same way. Never.

But do you really know what you've done until you finally see it, until it's finally projected? Right now, you say you're finished with One from the Heart *and you know what you've done. But do you really?*

I can really say that it's ninety-nine percent done. This is a function of how confident you are of your technical knowledge, how much experience you have in this field and how much concentration you have at the time you produced that image. I think I know enough that from the moment I think an image to the time I realize that image, I know how it will look on the screen. And I think I know how I can put it on the screen. There is no question that percentages will be involved; sometimes there is one percent and sometimes there is ninety percent that is new. These are things that you didn't expect. It's something that maybe you felt inside yourself but you couldn't describe what it was. I never believe anyone when they tell me, "I knew it was exactly like that." It can be in the same direction and it can be like the same thing but it can never be exactly like it. Never. Technology changes and comes between your thought and the screen. And in technology, you have choices. Some items are variables. For example, the standard of the lab changes each day. The tolerance changes each day, the structure of the emulsion changes each day and the screening changes according to each theater. The light, the bulb itself, is changing every single moment because every moment that it is sending out energy, it is not being replaced in time. Day by day, you have a different image. I feel that the emotion of the people who are going to create and build an image will change the image itself. The film is so sensitive that it can register the emotion of the people present. When you see a movie, you can feel if it was done with joy, anger, or passion. And if you change one element of the crew, the movie will be changed. The collective emotion will be different. Because each one of us, whether we have a very small job or a very big one, makes decisions every moment. Pushing the dolly a little faster or a little slower changes the movie. Putting the flag in front of the light a touch lower or a touch higher changes the movie. And I'm talking about something very simple. I really think that a picture is not just a picture and that we put all of ourselves into it as human beings.

But how do you try to control these things? Or do you?

The only control you can have is in choosing to have the right people next to you and then try to put the right energy into it. So, in a sense, you can control, you can give direction. That's the only control you can have. Otherwise the more control you exert, the more you limit emotion and the more you limit freedom. So you end up having a movie made by prisoners. That's what happens when people are not allowed to think, to tell an idea, to tell an emotion to someone. Maybe there will be nineteen ideas that aren't very good but maybe there will be two or three that are. So I don't

One from the Heart

think you can control it; people try to do it. The form of control you can exert is to try to push in the right direction. And when anyone is going in the wrong direction, you try to persuade him and make him understand which is the right direction. Sometimes that's not easy.

For example, what is your relationship with your crew?

I've had my crew forever. I've had the same crew since I did my first picture. It is like my family, my professional family.

Are you dictatorial? How much freedom do you allow?

Well, you need a captain, you need a conductor. If you just let everybody do whatever they want, you will be doing a hundred different movies at the same time. I think you need a leader to give the right direction and that's what I try to do. In their own specific field, I think they should be allowed to express themselves, i.e., as a camera operator, as a key grip, as a gaffer. At the beginning of a film, you try to be as specific as possible about the direction and the way you want to go. Because you don't know if other people will go in a different direction. That's why, step by step, you get closer to the right direction as your people come to get to know you better. It becomes easier to be freer among us. We just talk at the beginning about the type of style we want to establish on the picture and we develop from there. After that I don't have to check anymore on the way the gaffer set the lights, on the way the operator made a pan. I don't have to check and see if the camera has the right filter and if it's set at the right aperture. That's something that has already been established. It's like a language between us. So I can concentrate my energy on the film. Otherwise, if you change your crew on each film, then you have to start at the beginning with them again.

To establish the ground rules.

We've had enough time to establish the ground rules and now we can fly.

You wouldn't want to operate your own pictures?

No. For several years, I was hand-holding the camera because it was part of something that's difficult to explain. It was part of making photography more specific and building to an image, more so than just operating on the tripod or dolly. But no, I don't do that anymore.

You believe in very strong controls at the lab?

I started my collaboration with one particular lab. It's not the lab itself, it's the man at the lab. I had a good relation with this man at the lab and he was so involved that he was almost part of my crew. In the beginning, I remember the difficulties I had with whether he was going to understand me or not. When I was doing *Last Tango in Paris,* he felt I had too much yellow and orange. It was because he didn't understand what we were doing and why. So I called him to the set and explained everything to him. Afterwards it was much clearer to him what we were doing. We have worked together on several pictures now. And when I'm going to go in a new direction, I'm very careful and try to be very specific about what I'm trying to do. One of the most important things is how he reads what I wrote. There is no question that when he chooses a printing light that this is a particular choice that is part of his personality. So any image that I'm going to see will be my emotion, my involvement plus all the technical things plus his emotion. He puts his emotion on top of my emotion and knowledge and so this image becomes a new image.

For example, on One from the Heart, *you didn't use a Hollywood lab?*

One from the Heart started out to be an MGM picture so I convinced the MGM people to allow me to bring in this same gentleman from Technicolor Rome to print the film. I am very particular about this. And on this film I was trying to do certain things with color and I couldn't start from the beginning with another lab man. So I brought this man and we started the film with a lab in Hollywood. But we discovered that here they use high-speed machines in the lab, which is different than what we were used to in Rome. In Hollywood, which represents the most important center of the movie business, the lab companies have the new machinery to develop the negative at a very high temperature in a high-speed machine. There is no doubt that whenever you're going to gain something, you're going to have to pay for it somewhere. In essence, the lab saves time and you lose on the quality of the image. In the last few years, we have been considered very lucky as a generation of cinematographers. Today we are really able to be free in relation to what the cinematographers of the past were able to do. We are free to use light and just deal with the main concept of light without worrying about all the technical details of exposure for balance and so on. Today, the new films, the new lenses, the new cameras, the new lighting equipment, really give us an incredible freedom. But here in Los Angeles you are starting to see an involution. The way the high-speed processor has been built and the way it is being used here, the variation of tonality that you can register in a positive print today is less than yesterday. That's one of the reasons I stopped using a Hollywood lab on *One from the Heart* and switched to an out-of-town lab that still used the old system. It was ridiculous that I wasn't able to do what I wanted in a lab here. I think this situation is very bad and something should be done about it. It is important for a lab to meet the desires and requests of the cinematographer. Since the beginning I have felt strongly about the lab because when I start one particular thing, I try to continue with it. That's why I was using the same man with the same lab even when I was doing *Last Tango in Paris.* I would send the film to Rome. When I worked in London, I would send the dailies to Rome also. There is another thing that is very difficult for a modern lab to do and that is to get them to try to do something different. They find it hard to change the way they do things. But that little change in treatment gives your own personality to that film. It allows you to better express yourself in that particular picture. Today, with the new processing and the new technology, they try to have no change at all between my piece of film and another cinematographer's piece of film. They try to level everything out at a mediocre standard. This allows the lab to process and develop the maximum number of feet per minute. This is very damaging because there will be no distinction between one film and another film, between one cinematographer and another cinematographer. We will be stuck on a standard level and all work will be like a flat line; there will be no variation. They will not allow you to use your own personality which is the most important thing that we have. We should be able to be different like writers or musicians are.

Let's talk about Warren Beatty's picture, Reds, *which you've invested so much time and energy in. And now you're not being allowed to shoot the last five days of the picture because you're shooting in Hollywood and the union is objecting to your working in their jurisdiction. This is exactly what we are talking about here. The union is telling you that someone else can finish up the picture and it won't make any difference! It will look the same anyhow!*

I wrote the following letter to the American Society of Cinematographers: "If it is true that one is an 'author,' that is, one who has the creativity to transform an idea or an intuition into literature, art, music or photography:

if it is true that photography is the literature of light; if it is true that the cinematographer is a writer who utilizes light, shadow, tonality and color, tempered with his experience, sensitivity, intelligence and emotion to imprint his own style and personality on a given work, it is then incomprehensible how a union that represents cinematographers of one nation can, in good conscience, impede the final critical week of cinematography by a representative of another nation—on a work which has been in progress for over a year.

"It is like refusing a writer permission to finish the final chapter of his book, or stopping a painter's last strokes of the brush, or denying a composer the opportunity to complete his 'finale.'

"This issue strikes at the heart of efforts made to date to advance the art and status of cinematography. It leads us backwards into the past, in which the director of photography was considered simply an obscure technician, interchangeable with any other technician at any moment and thus, a helpless witness to the sudden violations of his creative efforts and the individual vision he brings to a film.

"It is an act against the cinematographers of all nations as authors of their own work; an act against the very membership of the union in question; an act against the magic of the 'literature of light'—photography."

Eloquently stated.

I think it's crazy to think that you can defend the work of cinematographers and, at the same time, believe that we are as interchangeable as a piece of machinery. This has been one of the most discouraging experiences of my life. I was not able to hold my light meter, I was not able to look through the camera on a movie on which I had collaborated for thirteen months before.

ANDREW HORTON

A Well Spent Life: Les Blank's Celebrations on Film

I believe in the flesh and appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles,
and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

"The blues is somethin' to get acquainted with like death," says Texas blues guitarist Lightnin' Hopkins in Les Blank's 1967 documentary of the singer, *The Blues According to Lightnin'*. Hopkins pauses and with the camera close up to his rugged face with his eyes hidden behind an omnipresent pair of sunglasses, he finishes, "The blues come so many different ways, it's hard to explain . . ." What we hear in this 31-minute film is the blues and Lightnin's comments on them; what we see are scenes, images, moments in the old man's life. Blank's combination of sight and sound, editing and selection results in a film that takes us out of our daily routines and plunges us into the *experience* of Hopkins's life. And that direct experience is what Blank is after. In his own words, he says, "I try to show that the people in my films are human beings who have just as much right to be on this earth as anybody else. Maybe *more* right."

Les Blank is an American Breughel with a 16mm Eclair camera. Born in Florida some forty-three years ago, educated at Tulane University and the film school at the University of Southern California, he is now based in El Cerrito, California. Like Breughel, he portrays in many of his films the spirit of simple, basically rural folk. American blacks, Chicanos, Cajuns, Creoles, Polish-Americans and Appalachians are documented through their food, talk, celebrations, and, most importantly, their *music*. Like Breughel's engrossing canvases of peasant celebrations, Blank's films expose us to simpler and more vibrant ways of life that have all but been forgotten by suburban Americans.

He calls himself a well-meaning "peeping tom," but he is much more than that. A large reserved man with a full beard who could easily if it is true that photography is the literature of light; if it is true that the cinematographer is a writer who utilizes light, shadow, tonality and color, tempered with his experience, sensitivity, intelligence and emotion to imprint his own style and personality on a given work, it is then incomprehensible how a union that represents cinematographers of one nation can, in good conscience, impede the final critical week of cinematography by a representative of another nation—on a work which has been in progress for over a year.

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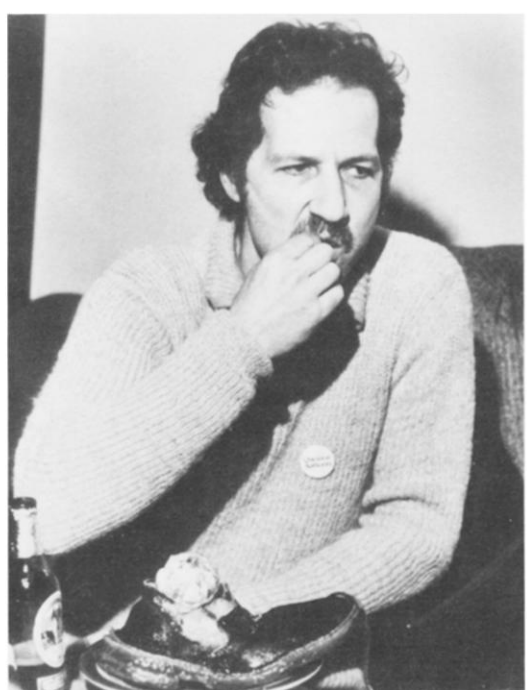
SPEND IT ALL: *Will Balfa, Cajun singer*

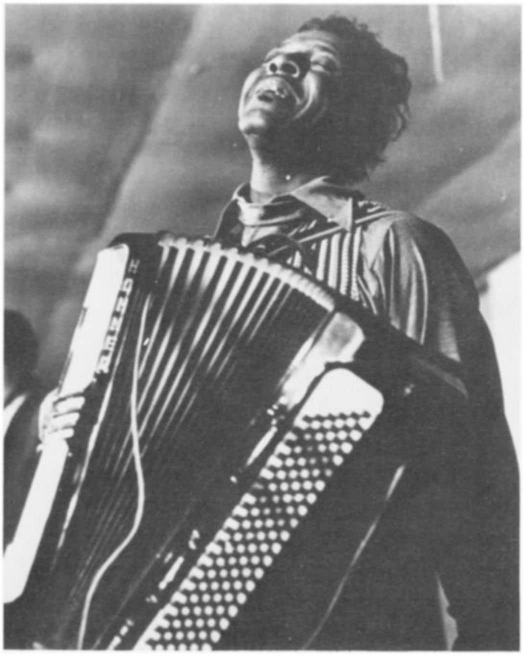
pass for a lumberjack or a shrimp-boat captain, Blank as a film-maker is part poet, part ethnographer, part curious child. In Robert Christgau's view he is, ". . . an artist rather than an archivist, an interpreter rather than a collector." It's the spirit and sound and rhythm of people he wishes to interpret, and the titles and subjects of his films speak for themselves. There are films about individuals: *The Blues According to Lightnin', A Well Spent Life* (on the late Mance Lipscomb), *A Poem Is A Naked Person* (a feature length film on Leon Russell's life and music which, at Russell's request, has never been released commercially), and *Hot Pepper* (Clifton Chenier, the black Cajun accordion player from Cajun country). And films about groups: *Chulas Fronteras.* (a Tex-Mex documentary), *Spend it All* (Cajun), *Always for Pleasure* (New Orleans street celebrations culminating in Mardi Gras) and *Dry Wood* (more Cajun lore). But that's not all. He has also shot thematic films such as the ironic *Chicken Real* (about the world's second largest poultry producer) and, most recently, the definitive loving tribute to the stinking rose which took several years to put together, *Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers* (its official première was at the 1980 Berlin Film Festival). And his wry sense of humor and eye for the unusual is evident in his short, *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe,* a document of the German director cooking (in garlic sauce!) and eating his boots before a Berkeley audience as a tribute to Errol Morris's first film, *Gates of Heaven,* a documentary on pet animal cemeteries in California.

At the center of Blank's work to date, however, are his Louisiana films. *Spend It All* (1971) captures the Cajun way of life in Southwest Louisiana, *Dry Wood* (1973) focuses on a rural Mardi Gras and Cajun and Creole life, while *Hot Pepper* (1973) is an in-depth portrait of Clifton Chenier, the rural black accordion "zydeco" (a mixture of blues, Carribean and Cajun influences) musician. But *Always For Pleasure* (1977) deserves special attention. It is a 58-minute celebration of the spirit of Mardi Gras in New Orleans as viewed through the festivities and music of the working-class white and black neighborhoods.

"Always for Pleasure" is the motto of one of the carnival krewes (clubs) in New Orleans. More important, it's a way of life in a city rich in the mingling of traditions and cultures. Blank presents a jazz funeral, St. Patrick's Day celebrations, Mardi Gras street festivities, the black "Indian" tribes of the city such as The Wild Tchoupitoulas with their elaborate beaded costumes and their African-influenced

Werner Herzog samples a piece of his shoe—cooked with rosemary, garlic and duck fat.





Clifton Chenier in HOT PEPPER

upbeat music, shots of crayfish being boiled and red beans and rice being prepared, scenes with such musical notables as the late Professor Longhair, Irma Thomas and Alain Toussaint, and the ever-present pictures of the "people" enjoying themselves through their celebrations. Blank goes even further to make this film a "happening" for the viewers during personal appearances when he cooks red beans and rice during the viewing ("SmellaRound") and distributes the food as well as Mardi Gras beads and doubloons after the show.

Music, food, dance, humor, a sense of shared community: they add up to an exhilarating experience that is both pleasurable and instructive. There is, in fact, a healthy festive spirit to the film (and his others) suggestive of a pagan "religious" experience. Blank explains it this way:

> People spend their time crying over the loss of Christ, and they don't really think about the pleasures of life. One of the things I've come to see is that people do have a limited time span on the earth. Knowing this, it would be well to fill those hours as pleasurably as possible, playing music, getting along with people, eating well, drinking, screwing, enjoying the pleasure of one's company and helping others do the same.

Middle-class suburban America has lost most of this sense of festive pleasure, he feels. Thus his desire to document in *Always For Pleasure* and all of his films those regional cultures that have survived.

Blank's focus on the New Orleans black Indian "tribes" in *Always For Pleasure* is a good example. Over the years the blacks in New Orleans have developed a unique subculture based on African tribal roots but adopting American Indian customs and costumes as well. Little is known about the origin of these tribes. But in black neighborhoods throughout New Orleans, tribes such as Wild Magnolia and Wild Tchoupitoulas are a vibrant part of community festivities. Blank features their music which is a strongly rhythmic blend of percussion and freewheeling call-and-response "chants." The music, performed by the Wild Tchoupitoulas featuring the Neville Brothers, a pioneering New Orleans R&B family, sets the mood and rhythm. Blank's camerawork and editing does the rest. Typical of his technique here and in much of his work involving crowds enjoying themselves, Blank employs a constantly restless camera that moves in and out and all about the action, often in close-up and never in a posed-for, well-framed set-up. He goes *cinéma vérité* one better: his on-the-scene "motion" picture work is *cinéma vitalité.*

The music holds the scene together while the camera is free to explore, dance, and experience as much as its eye can behold. But what the camera can't capture, the editing does. Blank continually cuts back to his musical source, be it the Neville Brothers or Professor Longhair, but throughout the number he cuts to and fro between street scenes in long shot to close-ups of bystanders and observers on the front porches of "shotgun" houses (traditional wood frame dwellings). Furthermore, the editing destroys both time and space as Blank combines footage from various parts of the city shot on different occasions. His justification for such a musical montage is simple: the scenes all illustrate the culture from which the music has developed.

The "Indians" are usually men, but the festivities bring everyone together. We see women and children, the old and the young celebrating the black tribal Mardi Gras spirit. "This is an environment that's part of the people," says one Indian: "We wish that we could convey to every person, you know, a feeling of tradition." Blank's Mardi Gras film thus conveys the opposite of disco fever with its emphasis on sensuality without any sense of tradition behind it. Here we experience through the Wild Tchoupitoulas the essence of carnival as an on-going cultural heritage. "When it gets to the point where I have to drop out, I want my kids to take over for me," says another Indian.

Blank's film-making style heightens our sense of pleasure. He learned his trade making industrial films in the mid-sixties. While he gained experience as a one-man team, often shooting, editing, and writing documentaries contracted with the army and navy, for instance, he also became bored with traditional documentary techniques. He developed a particular aversion to any kind of omniscient narrator who would *tell* us what we were supposed to know. His films make no pretense of being "objective" studies of subcultures. They are instead intensely felt, closely observed, and carefully edited experiences he has had with people he enjoys—documentary as a kind of sharing, not "capturing." "I don't like the word 'capture' for a film: it's sort of like *violating* them, like stealing, like the original concept of photographers as 'soul-snatchers'," he states emphatically. Blank, in contrast, prefers to trust his instinct and reactions when on location and shoot whatever interests him at the time.

Always For Pleasure is typical of his impressionistic approach. He had a general feeling for what he wanted to explore about Mardi Gras and the New Orleans festivals throughout the year, based on his six years in the city as a Tulane University student (BA and MA in English). But he used no set script, no voice-over narration, no closely worked-out structure. Instead he spent three months in town and shot twenty hours of film to get the hour of final film he completed. Editing thus becomes equally important to Blank in creating the rhythms, motifs, spirit of his films (editing credit should also be given to Maureen Gosling who has helped with Blank's films since 1973).

What Blank strives for in his editing is what he calls "a kind of poetry." He explains that he feels poetry and film have much in common since he uses images the way a poet uses words: to make us see, feel, *experience* a moment, a sensation, a thought freshly and with intensity. "Even transitions," Blank says, "are based on your senses rather than on your thoughts." For Blank this means that he has structured his films and cut within scenes according to the *feeling* of the footage and the moment. At times, as mentioned in the Wild Tchoupitoulas segment, he edits diverse material which is unified by the music. At other times it is the unexpected juxtaposing of scenes and shots that he wishes to highlight.

Take the opening, for example. The film starts with a bright morning on the Mississippi River by New Orleans to the strong beat of the old R&B hit "Sea Cruise" playing on the sound track. Soon after there is a shot of crowds dancing ("second lining") in the streets followed by a shot of the Mississippi River at night. Cut then to Kid Thomas Valentine, 80 at the time and still one of the great New Orleans musicians, telling a tale about an old rogue who said, "If I knew I was gonna live this long I would a take care of myself." Blank does not like to define the "poetry" of his work. But it is clear from this brief segment that Blank's particular talent consists in part of its seeming lack of structure ("what will happen next?"). On the other hand, there is a theme, a dialectic, and a rhythm established between night and day, old age and youth, music and silence, motion (the river, the people dancing) and stasis (the night shot, Kid Valentine) that runs throughout the film. The overall effect of Blank's editing is to unite all within the spirit of the place (New Orleans) and the time (Mardi Gras but also the other celebrations such as St. Patrick's Day).

Some have accused Blank of being a one-sided Romantic. After all, doesn't he focus primarily on pleasure among those who are not in the "mainstream" of American life? And don't New Orleans blacks, and Cajun whites and Chicanos have bad days and hard times? Isn't "always for pleasure" a misrepresentation of the lives of these people? Blank's primary response is to agree that his films are biased in favor of depicting people enjoying themselves. But his point is not to suggest that these groups do nothing else in their lives; rather he wants us to see that even though they may not have all the material advantages and education that suburban America has, they have maintained a culture which allows for self-expression and group enjoyment.

Two Louisiana films suggest darker and deeper dimensions to Blank's usual festive spirit. *Dry Wood* concerns the blacks living in southwestern Louisiana and conveys a sense of the passing of old traditions. *Hot Pepper*, also filmed in the southwestern part of the

The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins

state, is even more moving. "Whatever you is, be that," says a man at a barber shop in the film, and through Blank's loving film, we see what Clifton Chenier *is:* a talented black musician with roots in the countryside around Lafayette. We see him as the star that he is making people happy at clubs in the Lafayette area (though he travels widely around the rest of the country as well: he played to enthusiastic reviews at Carnegie Hall in April, 1979, for instance). But we also see him in much more personal scenes. There is the attempt to communicate with his 108-year-old grandmother who speaks only Cajun French, and there is the scene shot outside on a barren winter day when he sings a song about going home to see his mother and then explains that his mother died before he could sing this expression of love to her. Blank emphasizes pleasure in his films by using short scenes, fast dissolves, and rapid editing. But in *Hot Pepper* the stationary camera is held for long close-up takes of Clifton and his grandmother, for instance, without a musical background. The effect is that we *share* grief and old age, yet are warmed by the comfort of her traditions.

Blank is unabashedly pro-"celebration," but he has the clear sense to know that he is a white middle-class peeping tom behind a camera on the *outside* of the individuals and cultures he films. Given this perspective and his avoidance of any political approach to his subjects, Blank is most effective in conveying a freshness of sound and image, an eye for details that intuitively ring true to experience, and a relaxed manner that allows the viewer to draw his own conclusions based on the footage that flashes before the audience. On the other hand, his limitation is that he remains an outsider (think of minority cultures such as the American Indian and Chicano who have begun to use film themselves to express their own cultures) despite his sensitivity, enthusiasm, fairness.

Consider *A Well-Spent Life,* his 1970 film about the late blues singer Mance Lipscomb from Navasota, Texas. Even more than in Blank's portraits of black musicians Clifton Chenier and Lightnin' Hopkins, this film is

A Well-Spent Life: *Mance Lipscomb*

testimony to how close a white outsider can get to a black artist from a completely different culture. The film suggests both Blank's strengths and weaknesses.

Blank's usual impressionistic collage of techniques ranging from voice-over narration to double exposure are all the richer because of Lipscomb's articulate manner and his rugged, attractive looks. Blank works without a script. But the film is not quite *cinéma vérité*, for Lipscomb as he appears on film is not the simple Texas farmer who played honky-tonks on weekend nights before 1960 when he was "discovered" and started on a national and international singing career. He is, rather, a simple but clever man in his seventies who has managed to preserve his rural Texas roots but who is clearly aware of the consequences of a camera and thus an "audience" intruding in his life (Blank acknowledges this fact by including a scene in which we watch Lipscomb watching one of his records playing on a stereo set).

We open early in the film with Lipscomb's hands repairing a barbwire fence: he has always been a farmer, and his experiences in song and speech are shaped by this fact. Shots of Navasoto and its main street follow as we hear Lipscomb sing:

I got a big boss man
Just won't treat me right
Work me hard all day
Just can't sleep at night.

Later, in a slightly low-angle close-up, Lipscomb speaks of women and love as his face is in shadow against a richly hued sunset. He speaks of being married to the same woman since 1913 and raising four children (three adopted) and fourteen grandchildren. This is followed by home shots of a robust Ms. Lipscomb eating and sipping away on a coke. The scene then switches back to the sunset conversation in which the blues man explains that, "If you love, you can sacrifice. Love makes you take things. And if you don't take things there ain't no love." Blank then cuts to a one-legged old black man riding a horse while Lipscomb in voice-over gives us his story, a tale of love gone bad in which the man's wife shot him for getting drunk and messing around with other women. They have loved each other ever since, concludes Lipscomb.

Such direct illustrations help us to *feel* the music. But the most consistent correspondence that Blank establishes is that between Lipscomb's face and the barren yet sharply evocative landscape. There is a Texas sunset and the lonely twang with a strong thumping beat of Lipscomb's guitar. And there is the sunrise over a flat landscape punctuated by stark telephone poles as Lipscomb belts out, "Cried last night, I cried all night long." Or there is the daylight scene of the open road as the old man hits his version of "Keep on truckin', Mama." Finally there is the quiet dignity of the ending, especially since we know that Lipscomb has died. "The way you live, is the way you die," he says with what we can accept either as calculated simplicity or simple and honest folk wisdom (or perhaps both). And he closes with an unusual rendition of "St. James Infirmary" as we are given a montage of highway shots. The film ends with Lipscomb looking up as he sings and a freeze-frame allowing us to dwell on his face as we have on the Texas landscape throughout.

Besides the landscape, Blank also gives us some sense of the community. As in most of his films, he includes shots of people strolling along down a half-deserted main street, hanging around in front of boarded-up shops, sitting in parked cars, and dancing and talking in cheap bars as the music, Lipscomb in his soft manner playing "Cried last night, I cried all night long," gives Blank's montage a unifying drive. And in the longest segment of the film towards the end, Blank focuses on a black congregation's baptism in a muddy Texas river. This is Lipscomb country; these are his people, their traditions. Water works as a healing motif through the film, juxtaposed to the dry landscape. Blank makes no blatant point about how he uses such a motif, rather it is in such a way that he succeeds in being lyrical instead of didactic—intuitive instead of political. Earlier in the film we see Lipscomb's face superimposed on a flowing river as his voice flows through "Every woman I got, she got someone else." Then the long baptismal scene introduces community, religion, tradition as the group sings "I shall not be moved."

The power of this subjective documentary is that we get to know one man—who happens to be poor and black, one guitar, one woman, one location, one life. The man is old and sings the blues. Yet the overall feeling of the film is one of triumph and folk wisdom and love.

Lipscomb is calm and wise; he has lived a full life and has his music to keep him on top of adversity. There is no way we doubt the sincerity of Blank's title. Lipscomb has led a well spent life, and, while the film-maker makes no pitch for us to try to lead such a rural Texas life ourselves, we certainly feel that Lipscomb, the man and musician, have Blank's warmest respect. Toward this end, Blank appears briefly in the film (as he does in each film) sharing watermelon with his subject. Such a touch is not a Hitchcockian ego trip or a wink at the audience, but rather a sign or signature that unites film-maker and protagonist, documentary and subjectivity.

All well and good. But on the critical side it can be said that Blank often whets our appetites (literally as well as figuratively) for more than he serves. Yes, we have a feeling of who Lipscomb is and where he comes from and how his music relates to the landscape. Yet Lipscomb's calm is deceptive. We want to know how bad his times really were, how much or how little things have changed in Navasota, how those who are not internationally recognized blues singers fare in the area, and how representative a strong sense of community, particularly religious community as represented by the river baptism, really is.*

In his Texas-Mexican documentaries, *Chulas Fronteras* (1976) and its sequel, *De Mero Corazon,* Blank keeps his personal-lyrical approach to film-making, but goes further than in previous films to show the past and its influence on the present. *Chulas Fronteras* deals with Norteño music, the music of those Spanish-speaking Americans who live along the Texas-Mexican border. Blank shot both this film and its sequel with Chris Strachwitz, a blues collector turned record and film producer (he founded Arhoolie Records which records blues, Cajun and Tex-Mex songs). According to Strachwitz, Norteño music is ". . . the last Mexican regional style and the only uniquely Mexican-American style."

Blank's searching camera and impressionistic editing pull us into the nostalgia and festivity of Chicano culture in the present. Norteño groups play over a dozen songs in the film

*It is ironically pointed out that Mance was not present at this baptism. He was expelled from the congregation because he refused to stop singing blues.

CHULAS FRONTERAS

on the traditional accordion, guitar, bass, and drums. At times we watch the groups perform in cantinas, bars, dance halls, but more often Blank presents a montage of Texas cookouts with steaks and Lone Star beer, river scenes along the Rio Grande, on-the-road highway shots, cock fights, the making of Norteño records in a small studio (including the hand pressing of records!), and close-ups of sunflowers, cactus, and many Texas-Mexicans of all ages.

But we are constantly given glimpses of the roots from which this music developed. A musician explains that the polkas that are so much a part of the Norteño tradition, a tradition that has only identified itself as such since the 1940's, was influenced by German polkas mixed with Spanish elements. As he talks about his own career, we see shots of Narciso from 1949 and 1938. Later in the film Blank follows the Jimenez family presenting three generations playing Norteño music. We hear the similarity in their playing, and yet each generation has altered the style and content, absorbed new influences. Old man Jimenez plays a simple squeeze box and explains that he learned to play from his father who was "one of the best in those days," but he does not know who taught his father. It doesn't really matter: Blank and producer Strachwitz have given us enough to grasp that Norteño music is a distinctive blend of several cultures passed on from father to son, mother to daughter.

Del Mero Corazon covers much of the same territory but focuses on love songs—thus the title, "Straight from the Heart." Though half as long as *Chulas Fronteras* which is an hour, *Corazon* includes an even broader perspective on Chicano society. Besides the usual celebrations, most particularly a wedding sequence, which emphasize the continuity of family and social life, Blank includes scenes that cut against the gaiety and romanticism to suggest darker elements. There is a cartoon of the dance of death, perhaps from the Mexican tradition of the Day of the Dead, a long sequence in a cemetery as a mournful ballad about visiting a tomb plays (plastic flowers are contrasted ironically with real ones), shots of cockroaches scuttling across tables, Dantesque night shots of a Texas highway with billboards followed by a shot of a bar called El Inferno, followed by the appearance of a Felliniesque whore. Then there is the local politician who speaks of the need to shut down the bars and cantinas and open more schools. The politician's words stay with us. Surely the Chicanos could use more education and of course no one should spend his or her life in a cantina. And yet as Michael Goodwin has pointed out, "In the lowest denomination, Norteño, like blues, is whorehouse music." Without the cantinas and bars and low life, this strongly regional music would never have come to be. More so than in any of Blank's other films, the words of the political candidate serve to create a dialectical tension, without being didactic, which forces the viewer to participate in the rich romanticism of the music at the same time that he is made to sense the conflicts and problems that have produced this music.

Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers is Blank's latest, most complex and, in many ways, most successful film. In time, personal funding, sweat, and psychic involvement, it is his *Apocalypse Now.* But unlike Coppola's overly ambitious project, Blank's culinary carnival seems destined for more general critical and popular applause. Five years in the making, *Garlic* is a passionate hymn to the stinking rose, that cousin of the onion that has been a central ingredient in the cuisine of more traditional cultures but which, until recently, has been banished for bad breath by American bourgeois society (I can't remember having garlic until I was old enough to vote).

With *Garlic,* Blank's experience in filmmaking, obsession with good food based on traditional ethnic fare, and appreciation for simply enjoying himself blend joyously. The film is a departure in the sense that the star is a plant, not a person. But if one wonders how Blank can sustain our interest for an hour with the general theme of garlic power ("fight mouthwash—eat garlic"), once into a viewing the audience discovers that garlic has not only a distinctive flavor, but a feisty personality and multi-faceted character with an ancient history. In fact, spotlighting garlic allows Blank the loose thematic format he is most comfortable with. The film is many films in one. It is the *Citizen Kane* of food films, substituting "clove" for "rosebud" as Blank begins with a super close-up of a garlic bulb and then investigates the mystery of the power of the stinking rose. *Garlic* is also a trip into various cultures as we learn of its place throughout history and observe it prepared in French dishes during a garlic festival at Berkeley's Chez Panisse restaurant, as well as in Spanish and Chicano recipes (there is a flamenco song and dance routine dedicated to the tasty bulb).

In *Garlic* the scope is expanded to show us how important the stinking rose has been to many cultures. For instance, while Blank has focused on minority cultures in most of his films, in this one middle-class whites are also included. It is perhaps doubtful that anyone would want ten mothers, but the film entertains and educates us to the reality of garlic's multiple benefits and, through the film, to its ability to bring people of various backgrounds and social classes together. One white American, for instance, is John Lloyd Harris, author of *The Book of Garlic* and founding father of the "Society for the Lovers of the Stinking Rose" (he has a remarkable hat in the shape of a garlic bulb). Besides numerous other white Americans who appear eating, singing and celebrating their liberation from sterilized, odorless food is Michael Goodwin, West Coast film critic and freelance writer, who appears several times to articulate the virtues of garlic.

Food is difficult to make appealing on film. In commercial films, failure is the rule. The gourmet dishes in *Who Is Killing the Great Chefs of Europe?* looked more plastic than real, and even in the darkly diverting *La Grande Bouffe* in which Mastroianni and three other middle-aged men decide to commit suicide by eating the best food money can buy, the food already looks dead . . . to the tastebuds. Only in Brazilian director Bruno Barreto's *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (1976) can I remember cooking and eating as a joyous, sensuous celebration. And in that film it is so because Barreto, building on the novel by Marxist writer Jorge Amado, uses food as a

GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS

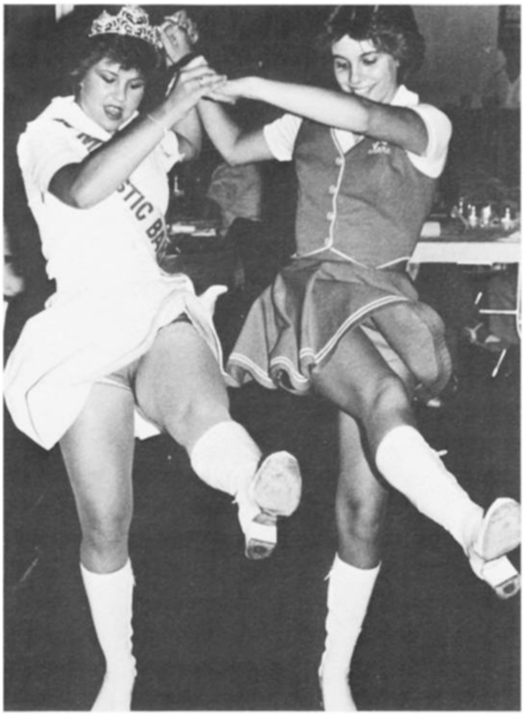
personal and cultural expression of the lower-class Brazilian protagonists. As in Blank's films, food-culture-music become the recipe for fulfillment in Barreto's tale (whole recipes are literally included in the novel!).

Thus, in its way, *Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers* is Blank's most revolutionary film. It is a direct assault on suburban backyard barbeques, a slap in the face of fast-food addicts, a finger to programmed executives munching on roast beef sandwiches behind glass topped desks. True, some may be suspect of the film and Blank's missionary zeal particularly since the film originates from California, the pandora box of "isms" in our century. But the gospel according to garlic as preached on film by Blank comes with several thousand years of history behind it. (Carrie Rickey in her *Village Voice* review of *Garlic* [11/17/81] calls Blank's film "a charming manifesto of garlic's manifest destiny. If garlic be the food of love, press on!").

That Blank has spent so much time on the film and even today does not consider it complete (he would like to include some footage of garlic use in Greece, for instance) is a clue to how significant it is in his total work. He has, in fact, shown it numerous times over the past year or so as a "work in progress," each time in a different cut, a different length. His additions, subtractions, and re-editing are not unlike Whitman's progressive involvement with the ever-changing *Leaves of Grass*. Blank could (and might?) issue a new version ever so often. I had a chance to see an early working print in New Orleans in April, 1979. When I saw a near-completed copy in El Cerrito in December, 1979, roughly 60% of the material had changed, not to mention the entire rhythm, structure, and feeling of the film. Shooting 20 to 1 has given him much to choose from. But because of the thematic nature of the film, he has been able to go back and add new scenes that he felt were lacking in earlier cuts. Such involvement simply points to yet another dimensions of personalized documentary: unlike traditional "objective" documentaries, Blank's film is open to change as its creator changes.

What next? 1982 should see the première of two new Blank documentaries. *In Heaven There Is No Beer?* promises to explore the Polish-American subculture of the "polka" with thorough loving appreciation. Blank has been putting polkas on film for over a year now, primarily in Pennsylvania, but also in Florida where a major polka festival is held. Another celebration on film, Blank's "polka film" will give us glimpses of the ethnic origins of the polka complete with lots of Polish food (sausages, sausages, and more sausages) and a Polish wedding that according to Michael Goodwin, who assisted Blank on the shoot, "makes the wedding sequence in *The Deer Hunter* look pale." This new work goes beyond the ethnic scene, however, to show that the polka has grown past the folk dance category and become a widely practiced experience.

A much more controversial film scheduled for airing on PBS in May, 1982 is *Pelicula O*



In Heaven There Is No Beer?

Muerte (Movie Or Death). This 90-minute project is a documentary of Werner Herzog making his latest film, *Fitz Carraldo,* in the jungles and mountains of Peru. Herzog's film is loosely based on a turn-of-the-century figure who decided to become a rubber plantation baron in an inaccessible section of Peru and who used Indian slaves to haul a steamship over the Andes in order to make his obsession economically feasible. Herzog, who is himself given to obsessions, particularly about films (as Blank has already shown in *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*), has been beset with seemingly insurmountable problems from the beginning in making his film. Having lost Jason Robards to amoebic dysentery after filming 40% of the project, and Mick Jagger because of scheduling delays, not to mention money and equipment lost during difficulties with the local Indians, Herzog has sworn to finish the film or die (thus the dramatic title).

The full tale remains for Blank to tell. But it is true that on two separate trips to Peru during 1980 and 1981, Blank has been with Herzog on location for over three months. It is also true that an extremely rough cut of the film which might better be described as random selections of dailies caused a tempest when screened at the 1981 Telluride Festival. Kevin Thomas of the *Los Angeles Times* went so far as to say Blank's portrait of Herzog makes the New Wave German director look like a Hitler. Blank denies that this is his intention or the effect of the film that will emerge. Much of the footage that provides a balance to the view the Telluride crowd received was not ready at the time. Apparently no damage has been done to the friendship between Herzog and Blank: Herzog has since been in San Francisco and approved all but minor segments of the footage Blank is busy editing.

Blank has a steadily increasing group of admirers. In recent years critics have begun to discover the talent of this unique American film-maker. John Rockwell in the *New York Times,* for instance, who is not one to indulge in hyperbole, states that "Blank's films are documentaries, and they're brilliantly sympathetic, well-crafted essays in that form." His films have now appeared in a number of film festivals including the 1980 Berlin Festival. Francis Coppola used his services in the spring of 1979 to film his fortieth birthday party at his Napa Valley estate, and also to shoot 60 videotape hours of drummers Mickey Hart of the Grateful Dead, Alrto (from Brazil) and his wife, Flora Purim, who added the percussion to the sound track of *Apocalypse Now* (neither work has been released). In June and July of 1979 the Museum of Modern Art in New York ran a complete retrospective of his work, and in November, 1981, his New York première of *Garlic Is As Good As Ten Mothers* played to enthusiastic critics and audiences at the Film Forum. (Vincent Canby in his *New York Times* review of *Garlic* [11/11/81] stated that the film is "so good—and funny—that it doesn't even offend someone who takes a dim view of baked whole garlic and who doesn't exactly long to munch chocolate-covered garlic cloves.") Several of Blank's films, especially *Always For Pleasure,* have appeared on national television.

Rockwell is right: Blank does use documentary in a sympathetic way. But I beg to differ with him when he describes Blank's films as essays. I see them rather as documentary poems, much in the spirit of Walt Whitman, a spirit that helps us hear American singing and celebrating, sometimes with joy but often with the passion that comes from triumphing over hard times.

DAVID JAMES

The Film-Maker as Romantic Poet: Brakhage and Olson

Reduced to an eye
I forget what
I
was.
—Denise Levertov,
"The Cold Spring"

One of the most common methods of approaching the specificity of post-World War II American independent film has been the invocation of poetry as an analogy. The distinction between the "poetic" independent film and the "prosaic" feature film has been used to justify the former's density, its difficulty, and its rejection of illusionist narrative as well as to valorize it as uncommercial and by that a purer art. P. Adams Sitney's *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) is only the most substantial and impressive contribution to a body of theory which goes back to the recruitment of formal models of poetic film from the French surrealists and the discussion of this and related issues at the Cinema 16 symposium, "Poetry and the Film," in 1953. At those sessions, Parker Tyler emphasized a "surrealist poetry of the image" in his list of "the types of poetical expression that do appear in films today."[1] Maya Deren, whose own work was already an important influence on the emerging independent movement, attempted to be more restrictive, arguing that the "poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a 'vertical' investigation of a situation, in that it probes the ramifications of the moment" as distinct from the "horizontal" construction of the drama. When she was driven to recognize that her distinction between vertical and horizontal boiled down to a distinction between lyric and narrative, the specificity of a poetic cinema as involving elaborations or intensifications of a series of isolated moments as against the continuously unfolding action of the feature (metaphor against metonymy, paradigm against syntagm) became clear and in fact remained a dominant point of reference.

Deren's argument is idealist, both in its attempt to abstract a transhistorical essence of poetry and to phrase that essence in formal terms, and consequently all that she and her successors could do was reproduce the poetics dominant at the time, the modernist moment of Romanticism. References to Eliot and Pound littered the symposium and would continue to appear in subsequent theorizing through Sitney's book. It is not my purpose here to dispute the overall analogy with poetry and, in this case, the work of Brakhage but rather to re-argue it in materialist terms—and then suggest that the most appropriate formal analogy for Brakhage is not Pound and Eliot but the development of the Pound tradition in its post-modernist phase, specifically the work of Charles Olson. Finally I will draw attention to several works by Brakhage in which that aesthetic confronts its own limitations.

The parallels between Brakhage and the Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, are clear and Sitney's decision "to trace the heritage of Romanticism"[2] (rather than to use Freudian hermeneutics or sexual analyses) in his essay on American independent film moved critical discussion to a new level. But like the work of his mentors—Hartman, de Man and especially Harold Bloom—Sitney's account is incomplete to the extent that it is limited to the stylistic and epistemological levels.[3] In formulating his models, Bloom omitted reference to the emergence of industrial capitalism and to the consequent changes in the social location of the artist which produced the formal conditions of High Romanticism and its characteristic philosophical concerns. A similar hermeticism in Sitney allows him to present the development of independent film from the sixties to the seventies as an autonomous evolution in art itself rather than a determinate historical production. The appropriateness of the analogy between the Romantic poet and the sixties independent film-maker is not simply a matter of parallels in epistemological concerns so much as a continuity in the situation of the artist in industrial capitalism, a situation which, while it conditions all cultural production in this period, is more thoroughly fulfilled in the case of the poet and in the case of some independent film-makers in the fifties and sixties.

The new concerns of the Romantic poets (notably the investigation of the imagination as the mediator between consciousness and nature and the eventual apotheosis of it as the location of all spiritual, ethical and finally social values) marked a profound shift from Neoclassic esthetics with their more overtly didactic and social orientation, themselves reproduced as stylistic forms embodying social values—the order, harmony and decorum of the heroic couplet being exemplary. This development may be traced to the more profound shift in the social location of the poet.[4] For it is at this point that alienation in its modern form began to dominate both social and intellectual life as simultaneously the poet was displaced from a corroborative social environment (the local community—village, coffee-house, or court) to confront the commodification of his work, now obliged to take its place as one item among many in a competitive market place. This social dislocation, compounded by the difficulty of sustaining utopian republican aspirations after the failure of the revolutionary movements throughout Europe, precipitated the artist into the scrutiny of his own consciousness and allowed him to elevate the drama of that scrutiny into an end in itself, the proper function of art. Where it continued to be possible to envisage social effectiveness of a more general kind (as, notably, in Blake and Shelley) this was supposed to follow as an implication of the renovation of the individual imagination in the experience of art.

Though modified in various ways and dressed up in different clothes, this situation endured through the liberal tradition and in fact allowed that tradition its characteristic critical posture against the dehumanization of capitalism and its consistent attempts to industrialize the mind. By the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century the model with its mutually ratifying presuppositions as to the centrality of the imagination and the primacy of the individual creative act had been so thoroughly internalized that it appeared as a condition of nature itself and became invisible as ideology. So total was the process of naturalization that even those Modernist writers who most vehemently attacked the Romantic tradition (such as Pound and Eliot) ended only by reproducing it in the way they thought of the artist's possible social role.

What has been said is, *mutatis mutandis*, true of art in all media since the late eighteenth century, but the rigors and the contradictions of the model are especially intense in the case of poetry since it proved progressively more difficult to integrate this medium into either the mercantile processes of capitalism or its attendant social rituals. Whereas painting could easily be recast as real estate, music and theater as social bonding, and fiction as consumer recreation, poetry remained intractable and unincorporated. The intense inwardness of postwar American poetry, reaching its apogee in the "confessional" investigation of private neurosis, was a function of sensibility adrift without either recourse to a public language or certainty of an audience, the former having seeped away in the jargon of Cold War propaganda and its mother dialect, the advertising industry, with the latter almost entirely conditioned by the mass arts of the communications industry.

This situation, in which economic marginality mirrored massive social irrelevance, was exactly that faced by any independent film-maker who understood his or her work as art, as an end sufficient in itself rather than (as in Cassavetes's case) as a means of entry into the studio production system. Apart from a few scattered and isolated projects (the work of Florey, Watson and Webber, and Richter for example), there was no tradition of independent production in the United States, and so no previously theorized role for it. The innovation of a role for the film-maker as an artist —as, most crucially, a poet—then had both theoretical and practical components. It involved the conceptualization of the film-maker as an *individual* artist (itself made possible by the creation of a tradition of such out of previous film history) and it involved the innovation of a working situation, a means of production and distribution, alternative to the technology and labor practices of Hollywood. In none of these areas was Brakhage entirely unique or original; his singular importance derives from the extremes to which he pushed in each case and by the way in which he was able to theorize them jointly so that a given development in any one area became a concomitant of all the others. They come together in the evolution of a film practice in which artisanal, domestic production is the material form of a theory of film as an entirely personal activity which, like Romantic poetry, originates from a context that is at once biological and quasi-metaphysical.

By the time Brakhage made his first film (*Interim*, 1952), film poetry as a stylistic category was already established and three years later he had become so identified with it that Jonas Mekas could write that his work seemed "to be the best expression of all the virtues and sins of the American film poem today."[5] As mentioned, that category had been derived from the formal practices of the surrealists, recognition of which supplied the structural motifs of Brakhage's early work (what Sitney calls the "trance" film) and also the early stylistic traits, especially the use of metaphor by which the narrative was retarded, thus opening the way for elaboration of an image or a group of images.[6] The conceptualization of the surrealist cinema as poetic was however only the beginning of a re-reading of film history in terms derived from it (i.e., as the personal production of *auteurs*) and the creation of an avant-garde tradition of personal films made by obsessive individual stylists independent of their historical and political contexts. Parallel to the move of the School of Paris to New York, this tradition consisted of the primarily European directors of the prewar years and the postwar American independents.[7]

Recognition of this historical continuity supplied a justifying context for Brakhage's work on two levels. It allowed him to see his own stylistic practice as traditional, a continuation of techniques that could be identified as characteristic of a film practice alternative to that in use in the dominant cinema, a way out of the necessity of conforming to the formal codes of Hollywood realism. "My big problem has been, all these years, that no one has recognized that I (and all my contemporaries) are working in a lineal tradition of Méliès, Griffith, Dreyer, Eisenstein, and all the other classically accepted filmmakers. . . . I took my first cues for fast cuts from Eisenstein, and I took my first sense of parallel cutting from Griffith, and I took my first sense of the individual frame life of a film from Méliès, and so on."[8] And it allowed him to see his own use of the medium for interior investigation as similarly traditional and in fact identifiable as its true one. Hence *Film Biographies* presents the directors admitted into the canon as using film to come to grips with psychic trauma; each is engaged not with a historical situation or with a social function, but rather with some kind of demon, frequently of a psychosexual origin: Méliès as a magician trying to find a heroine who will restore his psyche shattered by prenatal trauma; Griffith fulfilling his destiny to right all wrongs under the mental guidance of his sister Mattie; Dreyer searching out "the demon-of-himself"; and even Eisenstein fighting the animal that had ravaged his personal being in the womb.

Since Brakhage's reading of this tradition so completely suppressed any concern with the means of production (except in so far that studio mechanisms or other bureaucratic controls were seen to inhibit the creative genius of the film-maker), it could supply a lineage for his own stylistic practice but not a model of how a contemporary film-maker, seeking to investigate his own psyche, could find a social situation that would allow such an investigation. What the underground (including Brakhage) developed for distribution and consumption—the co-op system and the practice of personal showings before small groups, which had more in common with a poetry reading than with the situation in which mass film was consumed—may in its earliest stages have seemed like an attempt to confront Hollywood or compete with it, but eventually became simply an alternative. As such, it was thoroughly compatible with the way in which Brakhage was simultaneously theorizing his production methods and the overall function and value of his work. These latter may be summarized by reference to the assumption of total responsibility by the artist over all stages of production and the concomitant rejection of Hollywood as entirely other. Personal attention to all the mechanics of production followed from his notion of film-making as a vocation, as a way of life rather than as work. According to one of his favorite puns, Brakhage was an amateur, one who did it for love. Rejecting alienated labor and accepting an economically peripheral position, he thought of film not as a means of sustaining life, but coextensive with life itself. Two important implications followed:

work in the medium acquired an overwhelming centrality within the life processes, and subject matter became that of the biology and metaphysics of life itself—"birth, sex, death, and the search for God"[9]—and its parameters rarely extended beyond the family. In the blankest rejection of the industry, art film became home movies.

This being so, Hollywood did not appear as a competitor or a threat except in so far as it assumed the status of a hegemonic system, co-extensive in the public mind with the definition of the medium itself. As far as the practice of film was concerned, it was not so much to be challenged as regarded as an entirely separate enterprise: "If I had needed to show them 'sights' [rather than 'sharing a sight with them'] then presumably I'd have gone to Hollywood."[10] Behind this there is of course an implicit value judgment (art vs. entertainment) which can appear as the chronological component in a theory of the avant-garde itself by which artists, the "antennae of the race," are always ahead of popular consciousness. This however was mostly thought of in stylistic terms, by which technical innovations in the underground eventually surfaced in Hollywood, though the interruptive flash frame is about the only instance Brakhage can ever cite. Since working with or in the industry was theoretically inappropriate as well as practically infeasible (RKO's difficulty with Welles and the initial financial failure of *Citizen Kane* having effectively closed the door on independent directors in Hollywood until the success of such films as *Easy Rider* proved the possibility of tapping the counter culture itself and so opened the doors for the New Hollywood) the only alternative was to polarize methods of production with the result that in Brakhage's case film-making became literally a cottage industry.

Parallel to his rejection of the form of the feature and of Hollywood-style production, Brakhage evolved a radically original attitude to the technology of the medium. Rather than attempting to imitate the effects of commercial film, his essential gesture was to minimize his technology and at the same time to exploit as fully as possible the complete resources of what he retained. Unlike Jon Jost, for example, and other independents in the seventies, Brakhage had no political awareness of the technology of the medium but neither did he promote scrutiny of it to a position of centrality as did some of the Structuralists. Instead his thrust was to organicize it, to bring to it a flexibility by which it could approach the suppleness of the human eye at the same time that it extended the eye. The minimization of technology took the form of an initial reliance on 16mm and shooting in natural light situations (both of which he shared with the American documentary movement initiated by *Primary*) and eventually the use of 8mm, Super-8 and the pocket camera. The extension of the resources of the camera entailed rejecting the reproduction of post-Renaissance models of perception by attempting to escape the limitations of lenses ground according to the primacy of such models; hence the use of distorting lenses, pieces of colored glass, etc. (especially in *Dog Star Man*) and the use of the full range of aperture, focus, and camera speed, considering these as variables to be manipulated according to present expressive needs rather than as a means to ensuring "correct" exposure, etc.

Editing was similarly liberated, most notoriously in *Mothlight* with the use of natural materials, but more generally by shooting in double-sprocketed 16, thereby allowing a given shot to be incorporated in four different ways; by using black leader and flash frames of solid color; by using the splice bar as an item in the vocabulary; and by scratching, painting, dyeing, baking film and by allowing it to mold. Brakhage's only limitation was the requirement that the finished film be projectable; otherwise the attempt to defetishize technology and to subvert the repressive technical standards of the commercial film were phrased as the attempt to exploit the total resources of the medium: "There is a vast area of any art where the grammar of that art and its technique are interrelated and even synonymous (in the sense of: to be taken for granted); and one of the definitions of any medium could, and perhaps *ought*, to be in terms of the technical limitations of that medium."[11]

The ideal of an anti-technological, organically human cinema, alternative but not oppositional to Hollywood, was lived by Brakhage in his retreat from the city to a nineteenth-century log cabin in the Colorado wilderness, where with his family he could be most free from the dominant categories of modern urban life, free to re-create the Romantic problematique. His discovery of a tradition, his evolution of a method of production and his choice of a social and geographical situation necessary to the formulation of the role of film artist determined the limits of his style and subject matter. That situation, prefigured 150 years before in, for example, Wordsworth's retreat to Grasmere with his sister and Coleridge, ensured that the parameters of his aesthetic would remain within the general terms of Romanticism. The fullness of his elaboration of a film aesthetic within those terms accounts for the achievement of his mature work and also for its inevitable limitations. The coincidence between this Wordsworthian situation and the poetry of Charles Olson, however, can be more precisely specified.

The polemical center of Olson's thought is what he called "objectism:" "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects."[12] As an aesthetic and the basis of an epistemology, objectism implies both a stylistic practice and a situation of the self in respect to nature, the later of which Charles Altieri has defined by distinguishing between two movements within the Romantic tradition. The former, typified by Coleridge's "meditations on poetic structure and on the mind's dialectical pursuit of an ideal represents an essentially symbolist model that reaches its fruition in Eliot, Yeats and some Stevens and then narrows into the academic art of the second-generation New Critics."[13] The alternative model, represented by Wordsworth and which produces post-modernist poetry, is "an essentially *immanentist* vision of the role of poetry. Here poetic creation is conceived more as the discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms. Hence its basic commitment is to recovering familiar realities in such a way that they appear dynamically present and invigorate the mind with a sense of powers and objective values available to it" (*ibid*).

In Olson this immanentist vision produces a method of constructing poetry which foregoes ordering reality by means of large mental structures (such as myths) to satisfy the desolate modern ego and instead eliminates that ego in an attempted direct contact between consciousness and nature; the poetry becomes an articulation of that contact as well as a means to it. Hence form becomes organic, a function of content to be discovered in experience itself ("Form is never more than an extension of content"). Rejection of both ideas and the intending role of the humanist ego ("Art does not seek to describe but to enact"), theoretically allows the poet to go beyond the imagination to direct perception, to that place where consciousness and nature are in perpetual interchange. Hence in a successful poem, "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception."[14] Finally, since the ego is by-passed, the significant drama is displaced into the body, resulting in the biological imperative of Olson's emphasis on the breath rather than the line as the primary unit of composition.

While Brakhage himself constantly reiterated the importance of Olson's thought for him in the sixties,[15] it seems to me that that importance was largely a matter of finding a way of theorizing what he already understood as his essential concerns, which I construe as an attempt to circumvent ideology and experience physical vision in an intense, sophisticated and complete way. Olson's stress on immediate perception and on the poem's continuous self-generation out of its present are nodes around which Brakhage's own theories and the details of the style he created during the sixties fall into place: his total and physical involvement in the shooting process, the visual presence and energy of his films and his instigation of the camera as an extension of the eye all cohere at this point. Even an early and apparently modernist reversion to myth like *Dog Star Man* is incorporated in it. For the modernist use of myth, summarized by Eliot's recognition in "Ulysses, Order and Myth" that Joyce inaugurated the possibility of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity," thereby providing "a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history," is conspicuously absent. Though Brakhage has asserted the importance of the "mythic" image of the tree on the Cretan coin, claims for the mythic structure of the film rest finally on its "archetypal" images and on the film's observance of the cyclicism of the sea-sons. To the extent that the woodcutter's quest is universalized it is so by being naturalized back into Brakhage's immediate environment and perceptions, rather than articulated against a narrative line drawn from antiquity.

Similarly Sitney's analysis of the three aspects of Brakhage's vision—open eye sight, "brain movies," and "closed-eye vision"[16]—finally designate points within the interchange between consciousness and nature rather than categorically distinct areas of inquiry. That analysis is however useful in drawing attention to variations in the relative roles of the imagination and the external world in the overall phenomenology. Though the possibility of seeing both "from the inside out and the outside in"[17] remains, in general there was a general shift through the sixties by which the point of origin of vision is relocated from the imagination to the impingement of the outside world on sight, producing consequently a heavier emphasis on the eyes themselves. That shift may be seen by the juxtaposition of the two following remarks, the first from 1963 and the second from 1972:

> OF NECESSITY I BECOME INSTRUMENT FOR THE PASSAGE OF INNER VISION, THRU ALL MY SENSIBILITIES, INTO ITS EXTERNAL FORM. My most active part in this process is to increase all my sensibilities (so that all films arise out of some total area of being or full life) AND, at the given moment of possible creation to act only out of necessity.[18]

> I am the most thorough documentary film maker in the world because I document the act of seeing as well as everything that the light brings me. . . . I have added nothing. I've just been trying to see and make a place for my seeing in the world at large.[19]

The first, itself a development from a previous preoccupation with his own ego as potentially the source of "universal concern"[20] repeats Olson's emphasis on attentiveness and on biological urgency as the motor of composition, but still retains the notion of the artist as conduit for perception whose origin is so far behind consciousness that it dissolves into the divine. Brakhage continues to invoke this unknowable source, frequently designating it as "the Muses," but by the early seventies those Muses, if not exactly located in the perceptual organs themselves, are at least essentially discernible there. Thus Brakhage is more and more inclined to refer to the peculiarities of his own eyesight, both in respect to the phosphenes which create closed eye vision and to the open-eyed perception of, for example, the streaks of light in the sky before rain or the glow with which certain material objects present themselves to him. (At his most extreme, Brakhage will even hypothesize light itself as an ontological absolute, invoking at such times Pound's reference to Erigena's dictum, "Omnia quae sunt, lumina sunt,"—all that is, is light.) In this sense he becomes not so much the fabricator of correlatives to experience but the documentarist of the impingement of the external world on his field of vision.

The rejection of the ego as the agent of vision accounts for what otherwise might appear as an unresolved tension between, on the one hand, the aggressive idiosyncracy of Brakhage's style and his habitual and similarly aggressive inscription of himself on his work by the signature scratched into the emulsion and, on the other, the rhetoric of his disengagement from the completed work. Typically Brakhage claims that once a work is complete, he is no more authoritative about it than anyone else; he is reluctant to speak of *his* films, certainly of his *own* films, and prefers locations like "what was given to me to see." However ingenuous this may be, the claim is a logical implication of the documentarist aesthetic which defines the individual eye as the location of vision and de-emphasizes the imagination as its origin. This in turn allows for the supposed social utility of Brakhage's work, for while he can present himself as merely the vehicle of his vision, the courage of reproducing it is of vital importance in the mechanism of encouraging others similarly to see for themselves and in so doing rediscover themselves: "To put it simply: in the name of 'progress' an *extensive* view of human personality has been almost destroyed as a posssibility of consideration for most people. There's really no problem in seeing that the same man who made *Anticipation of the Night*, then made *Dog Star Man*, then made *Scenes From Under Childhood*, and is now doing the films that I'm doing. There's really no problem with that at all, because you have one absolute surety to go on, and that's *style*. I had thought to emphasize that by *signing* those works. It takes me hours to scratch on film: By Brakhage."[21]

The centrality of style, both as the locus of continuity in the oeuvre and as the significant feature of any given film, accounts for Brakhage's amazing prolificness, for once a mechanism for reproducing vision has been secured, then its product is as extensive as seeing itself; all Brakhage films are finally excerpts from the grand film which has rolled before his eyes since birth. It also accounts for the aridity of "new critical" interpretations of given films; it is not simply that the experience of Brakhage's films is so completely visual and hence resistant to verbal description or summary, but also what is finally at issue is the style itself, not what it can produce or reproduce. A Brakhage film is the occasion for the practice of a determinate style.

Brakhage's move towards the position of being a documentarist of what was given him to see coincided with a change in his production methods. In his earlier position, still inflected towards the modernist creative artist, production was bi-partite, involving shooting and editing in relatively equal proportions. While shooting did involve acute attentiveness and relied on biological urgency for decision making, it could be conceived of as the collection of material preparatory to editing where the same motivating imperatives would have to declare themselves. Hence the elaborate editorial processes, involving in *Dog Star Man,* for example, the collation of up to four synchronous rolls and all the painting, scratching, etc., on the exposed film. Though the *Songs* often contain similar work on the exposed film, in general the move to 8 mm coincided with an increasing reliance on shooting alone, such that by the late sixties Brakhage's control over the camera and especially over single-framing was so supple that the editing process became largely a matter of selection. Thus, for example, *The Text of Light* (1974) is edited in that the separate shots are strung together, but the film is conspicuous not only for its interest in light itself even to the extent of abandoning a literal image, but also for the absence of elaborate cutting within the shot and of similar extensive work on the film itself. To describe it Brakhage preferred to use the word "arranged" or "composed" rather than "edited": "There is an energy in the amount of shooting which editing again can leak out for you. What's interesting to me is the energy of immediacy. That comes out of my involvement with Charles Olson. . . . Editing is always an afterthought."[22] At such points, where the camera most closely approaches the condition of an extension of the eye (and in fact in *The Text of Light* the relationship between the camera and the ashtray metaphorically and functionally reproduces the usual relationship between the eye and the camera), awareness of the means of reproduction is de-emphasized and so the divorce between Brakhage and the structuralists becomes pronounced.

To the extent that Brakhage's work approached the absolute sensuality of the documentation of organic perceptual processes—to the extent that it became immanentist—it involved a corresponding diminution of interest in and capacity for conceptual articulation. The attempt to escape the ordering of the ego produced a style that while singularly flexible in its own sphere of operation inhibited the ability of his work to approach issues that could not be handled in sensual terms. Thus, when Brakhage is faced with social phenomena, issues that could only with extreme difficulty be reduced back into his own body or re-enacted as domestic drama, the limitations of his entire aesthetic declare themselves. Even such a celebrated excursion into the public world as the *Pittsburg Trilogy* can finally do no more than approach its subjects as packages of sensory data. Hence it becomes possible to read Brakhage's style politically in such a way that the disengagement from public life involved in the retreat from present society to the nineteenth century domesticity of the backwoods becomes a concomitant of it rather than incidental to it. Such a retreat is of course itself a political act, and one which had considerable currency in the sixties when various counter-culture ideologies valorized the rejection of the social machinery of capitalism as a means of social renewal. For various reasons the idealism of such gestures was not readily apparent in the period, and it is inconceivable that the deficiencies of Brakhage's Romantic individualism could in any way have been modified without upsetting the entire theoretical premise of his art. It will be useful to conclude therefore with two instances where Brakhage's technique proved itself incapable of accommodating public matters, one where the outside world penetrated the mountain retreat and one where Brakhage attempted to venture into the heart of the beast.

The fragility and ultimate untenability of social disengagement became most forcefully apparent in respect to the war in Vietnam, and the film Brakhage made about his response to it, *The Twenty Third Psalm Branch,* the longest of the *Songs,* both displays and dramatizes the point beyond which his aesthetic could not go. The means of entry of the outside world was the TV, itself used in the Brakhage family as a surrogate for "going out in the evening."[23] The reports of the war precipitated domestic quarrels of unprecedented severity and bombarded Brakhage with guilt: "I couldn't deal with the television set. And it wasn't just the object itself, but that it was our only specific connection to Society with a capital S or something we were expected to be responsible for" (p. 109). Rather than confront the specific connection or even the images themselves, Brakhage adopted a series of strategies by which the historical specificity of this event could be displaced.

First the Vietnam war was replaced by footage from World War II, a war which Brakhage had known as a child from movie newsreels. While this allowed for the contrast between the personally shot domestic scenes and the alienness of war (and so supplied the film's primary strategy of attempting to incorporate that alienness into his own vision by painting, overlaying with benday dots, etc.) nevertheless this remains a mark of the limitations of the immanentist practice, its inability to confront whatever is not phenomenally present to immediate vision. The war that is approached is a constituent, not of contemporary social reality, but of private consciousness, of memory. This displacement was entirely consistent with Brakhage's essentialist attitude to war, which saw it as a natural disaster, an act of God like "hurricanes and tornadoes and droughts and floods" (*ibid,* p. 116), yet with its final source in human consciousness. Hence the interest in the crowd formations in fascist Europe; public behavior as the manifestation of a "war state of mind." But even on these terms the film is able neither to complete itself, nor to face the implications of that failure.

First Brakhage is reduced to words and the quotation from Zukovsky, "Song, my song, raise my grief to music," indicates his uncertainty that this elevation could be achieved by nonverbal means without recourse to what he had eschewed in rejecting drama and the sound film. Subsequently he attempts to incorporate this limit into the film itself, first by photographing himself writing a "Dear Jane" letter, formulating a more precise interpretation of his state of mind than can be reproduced visually: "I must stop. The War *is* as thoughts/patterns are—as endless as . . . precise as eye's hell *is!*", and by scratching "I can't go on." What is here presented as a psychological limit is at the same time a limit of his aesthetic, produced simultaneously by his inability to confront the war on terms other than his own experience of it and by his inability to recreate it within the terms of his art. But instead of accepting the disclosure, which would oblige him to end the film at this point, leaving it "aesthetically" incomplete and, on its own terms, incompletable, he does go on and so avoids the impasse. He retreats once again into private experience, domestic scenes with the Kubelkas in Vienna, Austrian artists, an homage to Freud, and finally a return to his family in Colorado.

While *23rd Psalm Branch* indicates the inability of Brakhage's style and the Romantic aesthetics behind it to transcend privatized individual consciousness to engage in public issues, it nevertheless simultaneously fulfills itself by erecting itself as an alternative to the horror of contemporary political life, presenting itself as the location of values—aesthetic values—public espousal of which, it is implied, would eventually lead to amelioration of the public realm. Hence his apparent approval, in the talks he gave at this period, of Ginsberg's ostrich-like gesture of personally declaring, in 1966, the war over. In the western tradition, the comprehensive term for these values is "beauty," and it is appropriate to end with reference to one of Brakhage's most beautiful films and an event in his life which dramatically illustrates the conditions of avoidance under which that beauty could be secured. The whole event has the quality of an allegory.

Early in 1973, Brakhage renewed the acquaintance of an old school-friend who had become a millionaire and decided to make a portrait of him. He went to his friend's office in Denver with a new macro lens, which failed to work as expected. In despair Brakhage gave up shooting and the camera, with its bellows in the middle, sagged. Before he picked the camera up, he looked through the lens:

> . . . and I saw a whole forest-like scene! And I said, how incredible! and I looked to see what it was pointing to, and it was pointing to his ashtray. Then I brought him around the desk

and I said, look, see what I find, and he looked and said, how wonderful! and so on.

And I looked again . . . and it had changed. And a little stream was wandering through it! And this is how the film began.[24]

And so *The Text of Light* was discovered, a visual odyssey, almost entirely abstract and laboriously shot frame-by-frame over a period of months, resulting in a back injury so severe that it caused Brakhage to walk with a stick. The confrontation with capitalism, even in its most personal form, was avoided—but ecstasy was snatched from a millionaire's ashtray.

NOTES

1. 1. "Poetry and the Film: A Symposium with Maya Deren, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler. Chairman, Willard Maas. Organized by Amos Vogel," in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *Film Culture Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 171-87.

2. *Visionary Film*, p. ix.

3. For a convenient selection of Yale School work on Romanticism, see Harold Bloom, ed., *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1970).

4. Inevitably I have simplified both the social changes of this period and the materialist approach to its poetics. Work in this area is still at an early stage, but the following are useful: Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (New York: International Publishers, 1937) ch. v; Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York: Vintage, 1951), vol. iii; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958) and *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1976).

5. "The Experimental Film in America," *Film Culture* No. 3., rpt. *Film Culture Reader*, p. 22.

6. Since these intrusions were typically intradiegetic (e.g., the cat and the roses in *Cat's Cradle* or the boiling water in *Way To Shadow Garden*), it is in fact more accurate to speak of them as metonymy used as metaphor.

7. The most ambitious form of this undertaking came to fruition in the mid-seventies with the establishment of Anthology Film Archives' collection of "The Essential Cinema," which was "philosophically oriented toward the *pure* film. . . . The curriculum it proposes constitutes a film history for a student and aspiring filmmaker who wants to know the medium as an *aesthetic endeavor*." P. Adams Sitney, Introduction to *The Essential Cinema: Essays on Films in the Collection of Anthology Film Archives*, (New York: New York University Pass, 1974), p. xi.

8. Interview with Hollis Frampton, *Artforum*, Jan. 1973, p. 76.

9. *Metaphors on Vision*, rpt. in P. Adams Sitney, ed., *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 121.

10. Frampton interview, p. 79.

11. *A Moving Picture Giving and Taking Book* (West Newbury, Mass.: Frontier Press, 1971), p. 25.

12. "Projective Verse," 1950, rpt. in Robert Creeley ed., *Charles Olson: Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 24.

13. Charles Altiere, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 60's* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p. 17. The rubric from Denise Levertov is quoted from Altieri's magnificent book.

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17. Interview with P. Adams Sitney, rpt. in *Film Culture Reader*, p. 239.

19. Frampton interview, p. 79.

20. Sitney interview, p. 229.

21. Frampton interview, p. 75.

22. *The Seen* (San Francisco: Zephyrus Image, 1975), n.p.

23. "Stan Brakhage Speaks on '23rd Psalm Branch' at Filmmakers Cinematheque, April 22, 1967," *Film Culture*, Nos. 67,8,9 (1979), p. 109.

24. "Stan Brakhage: The Text of Light," *Cantrill Filmnotes*, 21/22, p. 36.

Reviews

REDS

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Reds is cinematically pre-revolutionary; Eisenstein, as a friend remarked, would have hated it. What makes *Reds* appealing, despite its shortcomings, lies in its treatment of the relationship between romance and revolution. Those who see *Reds* as the result of Beatty's shrewd calculations argue that he has neutralized the political force of John Reed's story in order to sell it as a love story. But to interpret Beatty's intentions in these terms is to assume that a love story cannot be serious or radical. *Reds* may not succeed finally in shattering that assumption, but it certainly calls it into question. If we look closely at the film's treatment of the Reed-Bryant affair, I think it becomes and I said, look, see what I find, and he looked and said, how wonderful! and so on.

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Before examining that story, it's worth noting that Beatty's visible efforts to give *Reds* a popular appeal need not be regarded as a pure case of entrepreneurial calculation. Another kind of concern is indicated by Beatty's appeal for the PG rating, for which he had to fight. He argued that his film "reclaimed an era of American history that every school child should see."* To the extent that *Reds* has political force, it is because it fulfills this intention. Remembering history is crucial to maintaining a critical politics, and reclaiming history is probably the most powerful means available to the left for combatting a dominant reactionary ideology. At a time when that ideology is being fostered by Reagan's astonishing rhetoric of forgetfulness—in his historical vision, nothing seems to have happened in the United States since the Puritans aspired to build a "city on a hill"—Warren Beatty's *Reds* has provided us with a memory of a period in our history which adults as well as school children have not so much forgotten as never really known about. It is a historical moment worth remembering, primarily because it was probably the last moment in our history before the ideologies by which twentieth-century America has lived became hardened and fixed. *Reds* gives that moment a resonance which makes it unforgettable, and it goes on to portray its passing with poignance and dismay.

As its title makes clear, *Reds* is not primarily about the Russian revolution, but about American "Reds," those men and women like Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and John Reed whose rejection of middle-class values and opposition to World War I led them into a radical sympathy with the Russian revolution. In its portrayal of this Greenwich Village community, *Reds* delivers a vision of a genuine, if fleeting, culture, one in which radical dissent flows in every direction at once. Or so it seems, from today's vantage point. But for us, radical art and radical politics—to take one example—mark different, even opposed directions. Not so for the John Reed who was both a poet (even if a bad one) and a journalist. Not so either for many others among this group. Only Eugene O'Neill adumbrates this split, which is partly why O'Neill's character is the easiest for us to see clearly. More importantly, in this culture, the personal and the political have not been relegated to separate realms. In its understanding of this culture's assumption that the personal domain is not necessarily private, and that the political domain is populated by individuals with the capacity for social action, lies *Reds*' power as a serious treatment of a historical era. No matter where you cut into the film, you cannot separate the personal from the political.

In a scene characteristic for its deft mixture of politics and domestic travail, Reed and "E.G.," as he calls Emma Goldman, arrive at his cluttered flat arguing over the priorities of birth control and antiwar protest. Invited to stay for coffee, Goldman briskly departs when she learns he has no Chase and Sanborn. Add to this the unseen presence of Louise Bryant, newly arrived from Portland, through whose eyes we watch Reed and Goldman from behind a half-closed bedroom door, and you begin to realize the skill with which Beatty has integrated the political and the personal in the very stitches of the film's fabric. The culture which thereby comes into view is one in which the personal struggle for freedom from the stultifying boredom, hypocrisy, and repression of the middle-class family (depicted with humor and economy in the opening scenes in Portland) is intimately related to the political struggle for social justice. If *Reds* is haunted by the memory of the American sixties, it is partly because the World War I era, like the Vietnam era, brought forth resistance to both oppression and repression. Plenty of arguments can be, and have been, made to the effect that the fight against social and political oppression is more important than the fight against personal repression. But the fact is that American radicalism in both the 'teens and the sixties was fueled by a vision of these as related struggles. In retrospect, it seems to be no accident that in both the twenties and the seventies, as the two causes were divided from each other, the radical force of both was neutralized. By presenting us with a historical moment in which this neutralizing division had yet to develop, *Reds* testifies to the rich force of radical energies not yet undermined and deflected into the safely compartmentalized spheres of the public and the personal.

*Quoted by David Thomson, "Looking for Mr. Beatty," *California Magazine* (January, 1982), p. 76.

But it is Beatty's treatment of the relationship between Reed and Bryant which works most powerfully to undermine this division. From its details, like the unfinished love poem to Louise Bryant written on the back of an I.W.W. handout, which Reed carries around in his pocket, to its epic climax, in which Reed's and Bryant's love-making is intercut with shots of revolutionary successes, all to the rousing strains of the Internationale, *Reds* aims to interweave these individuals' lives with political events. That the film does not finally succeed at this is clear enough from the many complaints that the revolution gets second billing behind the love story. Yet *Reds* comes closer to integrating the two than has been recognized. To appreciate this, however, we need to understand more fully the character of Louise Bryant, about whom there have also been loud complaints. Characteristically to the point is Pauline Kael, who describes Bryant as a "tiresome, pettishly hostile, dissatisfied woman" whom the film finally "embraces" in its last half "because she's doing what a woman is supposed to do—go through any hardship to be with her man." Because the transformation of Louise Bryant is not dramatized with as much clarity as one would like, it is tempting to resort to such a romantic formula as an explanation. But the formula in fact does not explain it. For one thing, if Bryant were merely a romantic heroine, she wouldn't spend the first half of the film becoming terminally annoying. Beatty, and/or Trevor Griffiths, who receives joint credit for the script, seem to have had larger ambitions for Louise Bryant, around whom they plotted the entire film. Those ambitions are worth understanding.

As far as one can gather from the readily available printed sources, Louise Bryant was a woman not without serious faults. (Today we would call them problems.) Regarded by many as a flighty and arrogant opportunist, incapable of loyalty to Reed, Bryant was apparently at best a mysterious mixture of femme fatale, ambitious intelligence, and desperate self-doubt. Her letters reveal a person given to self-aggrandizement and occasional outright deception, qualities which earn her the contempt of Reed's most recent biographer, Robert A. Rosenstone.* But then Rosenstone, who opines

REDS: *Jack Nicholson and Diane Keaton*

at one point that "Reed knew that women were creatures to be loved," is hardly a reliable interpreter of any woman, especially one as complex as Louise Bryant. Beatty proves better able to see the potential richness of her character and her situation. That she was not as talented a journalist as Reed is clear from the record. (That she was at least no worse a poet than he is also clear.) There being no way to posit her equality, the film focuses on her struggle to achieve it. Without romanticizing her, and indeed in part by refusing to romanticize her, the film represents her as caught up in a struggle with Reed and with herself from which she finally emerges as his equal—not in talent, but in moral, social, and even political maturity. In other words, we watch her grow up.

Louise Bryant is a young woman from the provinces. At the beginning of *Reds,* Bryant is a woman with untested talents and energies, untested largely because the social constraints of Portland are too petty to be outstripped with any satisfaction. Reduced to taking "blurry" photographs and posing for nude pictures as a means of challenging Portland's bourgeois limits, she longs for more formidable challenges, and John Reed's appearance provides her with one. While she gets the better of him in their first encounter, she soon succumbs to his charms, and follows him to New York. Here we see her self-doubt emerge. It was always there, though safely hidden from view in an arena as limited as Portland. But now it threatens to deflate her ambition and to corrode her affair with Reed. She can rebuke an editor for his half-veiled sexual advances, but the plucky defiance which gave her a reputation as a radical in Portland proves little more than a brittle veneer in New York. She asks for criticism of

*Robert A. Rosentstone, *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed.* New York: Vintage, 1981, p. 134.

her writing from Reed, but cannot take it. She claims repeatedly, "I write," but when Emma Goldman presses her to say what she writes about, she relapses into the familiar, flustered mannerisms we saw and loved in the Diane Keaton of *Annie Hall,* but which now grow embarrassing. Cowed by Greenwich Village intellectuals, and living with a man whose talent is internationally recognized, and whose professional confidence is utterly secure, Louise Bryant proves unable to survive the challenge she has taken on. Reed's taxi is always waiting, and Bryant is reduced, as she herself recognizes, to the snivelling, jealous little wife. Small wonder, then, that she falls into the waiting arms of Eugene O'Neill.

Under the circumstances, O'Neill is irresistible. A marvel of narcissistic seduction, Jack Nicholson's O'Neill makes Bryant's chatter about free love seem just that, chatter. Further, O'Neill at this time was not yet the recognized playwright he became in later years; so, unlike Reed, O'Neill does not force Bryant to live in his margins. (She is now reduced to smoking in his monologues.) Yet remarkably enough, she finally rejects O'Neill for Reed. In fact, Bryant's affair with O'Neill went on for years, and it is not clear that Reed ever knew about it. But Beatty and Griffiths have altered the facts here, and not only for good dramatic reasons. Acknowledging the lingering force of the affection between Bryant and O'Neill, through several scenes in which they come together after Bryant's marriage to Reed, the script uses these encounters to reveal a basis for Bryant's rejection of O'Neill which cuts beneath the level of mere romance. In fact, it is with O'Neill that Bryant has a romance; with Reed, she struggles toward, and finally achieves, something more powerful.

In the first of these scenes, O'Neill accuses Bryant of using him to force Reed to marry her. While it is impossible not to sympathize with O'Neill here, it is also clear that his interpretation of her actions is, at best, only half true. More important is the revelation that O'Neill's seductive power accrues to a man who regards women's behavior in the most stereotyped, and not coincidentally the most demeaning, terms. In his eyes, Louise Bryant is not a potentially creative or autonomous person. She is a manipulative woman secretly craving the security of possession, and willing to use any device to gain that security. In their very first romantic encounter, he asks, "What *is* your work?" His question is humiliating, and she is humiliated. For O'Neill, Bryant has no work. Like Rosenstone, he regards women as creatures to be loved, and he is the man to love them. What gives O'Neill the edge, with both us and Bryant, in these scenes, is that so far she has not proven he's wrong. It is by no means clear that she does have any work of her own. Yet the stereotype through which O'Neill sees Bryant, and through which she cannot help seeing herself often enough, is one which Bryant is visibly struggling to escape, a task both fostered and undermined by her relationship with Reed—fostered by his sympathy and understanding, undermined by her jealousy and self-doubt in the face of his shining example.

Bryant falls in love with and marries Reed in response to needs that lie beyond the perspective of a man like O'Neill, primarily the need to prove her worth in the realm Reed dominates and represents—the realm not merely of radical journalism, but of the freedom to say what one thinks and feels, and to make it count. Such a realm cannot be found; it must be made, as Reed knows from the start of the film, and as Bryant only learns after much travail. But as *Reds* makes abundantly clear, women face a harder struggle than men do in achieving this freedom. It takes an Emma Goldman to do it. Bryant is no Emma Goldman, but she does finally achieve such freedom, as Goldman herself recognizes. When Bryant finally earns Goldman's respect, it is not for "going through any hardship to be with her man," nor for the depth of her faith in a political cause, but for the proven strength of her loyalty, decency, and courage.

What matters about Bryant's life-risking journey to Russia* is partly suggested in the scene in which O'Neill offers to go in her place. There is a long moment here in which we must read Bryant's feelings through O'Neill's responses to her downturned face. Her silent refusal to let him go testifies not only to her determination, but also to the fact that she

*Beatty and Griffiths have tampered with the facts about Bryant's trip, but they have not altered them as completely as some reviewers imply. Bryant did not go to Finland to rescue Reed; she knew before leaving for Russia that Reed had been released. But she *did* smuggle herself into Russia, essentially by the same treacherous route Reed himself had followed. Under the circumstances, both physical and political, the journey was bound to be life-risking for both of them, a fact about which the film is accurate.

sees through, and perhaps pities him for, his offer to risk his life not for Reed, as he pretends, but for her. But she is well beyond romance by this point. For O'Neill to go to Russia in her place would have been an act of romantic gallantry; for Bryant to go is something else.

The Louise Bryant of this scene has already travelled a longer and more obstacle-ridden course than that she is about to travel. She has overcome her self-doubt and relieved us of the painful burden of watching her vacillate between shrill posturing and tearful collapse. Just what is the source of this transformation is what *Reds* fails to make clear. But what Beatty and Diane Keaton both seem to have aimed for can at least be seen. What has made this transformation possible is a combination of her refusal to abandon the struggle to prove herself capable of living beyond Reed's margins, and Reed's capacity to understand and be patient with that struggle. What has made the transformation *happen* is their shared capacity for political faith, a faith which the Russian revolution fulfills for a few explosive moments in Petrograd. The revolution is more than an aphrodisiac by which their quarrel is defused; it is a stimulant to political hope in which both can share. The scene of love-making to the tune of the Internationale may be Utopian, but this Utopian moment is envisioned as simultaneously political and sexual.

Further, Reed's and Bryant's relationship has been from the first fostered by political energies. Their first night together is spent in endless talk and endless cups of coffee. (Their first sexual encounter is not represented on screen at all, but only implied by before and after sequences. This strategy has the effect not only of equalizing, but of merging retrospectively, the two encounters. It's worth noting also that what helps to earn *Reds* its PG rating is also crucial to what prevents Bryant from *ever* becoming a sex object on the screen; love-making, when it *is* portrayed, is always shown in silhouette. Except in the picture at the art gallery, which hardly resembles her, Diane Keaton never appears nude in the film.) Despite the fact that Bryant's politics are never quite as ardent as Reed's, politics are always a crucial part of what attracts them to each other. It is not in real life, but in the fantasy world of ideological compartmentalization, that love and politics are separate and discrete.

Nowhere does *Reds* make this clearer than in the violent encounter between O'Neill and Bryant in which she assails his political cynicism for what it is—the easy out of a man who condemns political activism from the inside of a bottle. What she sees, and allows us to see, in this scene, is that O'Neill's cynicism is part and parcel of his narcissism, both of which fit well with his attitudes toward women. Bryant may be defending an activism she has only recently attacked to Reed, but that attack is actually a well-founded argument in favor of the greater political value of his writing over his current role as party hack. (And Reed himself takes the same position, once he gets to Russia and sees himself parodied in Zinoviev.) Both scenes reveal a Bryant with a clear-headed vision of the men in her life as well as of the political circumstances surrounding them all. She has become a political realist who refuses to give up her political faith. Capable of saying her piece not only to Reed, but before a Senate Committee as well, Bryant no longer lapses into either postured defiance or shrill complaints. When her house is searched by government agents, she dismisses them with a curt wit that exhibits not a sign of self-doubt.

If Bryant were motivated only by love for "her man," she would have accompanied Reed to Russia. What is at stake in her efforts to follow and rescue him there is indicated in the scene between Goldman and Reed in which Goldman explains why Bryant has not, and will not, appear. To come now, she explains with great patience, Bryant would have to risk exile; not being a revolutionary, like Reed and herself, Bryant can't be expected to take that risk. When Bryant appears, this inference is shattered. While we have watched Zinoviev destroy the revolution, and Reed begin to doubt it, and Goldman lose faith in it altogether, Louise Bryant has been risking more than exile in the effort to rescue a man she calls, in their final moments together, a comrade. I do not mean to suggest that Bryant is a revolutionary in Goldman's terms, but only that Bryant's journey to Russia is grounded in the same fusion of love and political faith we saw at work during the revolution.

By the end of the film, we have come to know not only a different Bryant, but a different Diane Keaton as well. Keaton, in the film's final half, actually begins to look and sound different. It's as if she has deliberately worked against, and finally works herself beyond, the

stereotype of Diane Keaton. The familiar mannerisms dissolve by the end, revealing a Keaton we have rarely, if ever, seen before. In the scene at the train station to which *Reds'* entire final half drives, Keaton's face displays a series of emotions markedly beyond the range of the young girl from the provinces who first arrived in New York. Anxious beyond measure when Reed does not at first emerge from the train, stony-faced at the appearance of a blanketed corpse, Bryant at last turns to see Reed at a distance looking toward her. She at first assumes the old sardonic look and swaggers toward him (a distinctive Keaton swagger), only to give that pose up almost instantly. The sardonic look which she dons and discards in an instant sums up, as a synecdoche, all the posturing she had previously used to defend her autonomy. But she no longer needs to defend it; she has earned it.

In both its virtues and its shortcomings, *Reds* resembles the kind of realist novel Lukacs called for as a means of critical resistance to the fragmentation of modernism, a realism in which the individual is represented as a social creature for whom the bourgeois world has not hardened into alienated otherness. It is an old-fashioned model, to which Brecht objected stringently, and from which both he and Eisenstein departed with powerfully radical aesthetic results. *Reds* is by no means radical in these terms; perhaps if it were more so, it might have found the means to explain Louise Bryant's transformation cinematically. But *Reds* does reveal some of the merits of the Lukacsian model. Beyond the coy charms of the husband cooking dinner and the dog popping out of his box under the Christmas tree emerges a vision of Reed and Bryant not only as real people, real historical actors, but as people who thought of themselves that way. They move from Portland to New York to Provincetown to Russia as if Jefferson's claim that the earth belongs to the living were an accepted, even a practical, fact. They live lives of a kind that are almost unimaginable to us today, lives in which political convictions stimulate direct, even occasionally effective, action. Even when that action proves misdirected, as it does for Reed upon his return to Russia, the political convictions he shares with Bryant remain in force. They remain in force because they are shared. —CAROLYN PORTER

MONTENEGRO

Director: Dusan Makavejev. Script: Makavejev. Photography: Tomsislav Pinter. Producer: Bo Jonsson. Music: Kornell Kovach.

Makavejev's new feature has been receiving suspiciously enthusiastic reviews. Can the director who outraged practically everybody in 1974 with his *Sweet Movie* have managed to make an ingratiating and modestly popular film?

Gone are the elegant political-psychological ironies of *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (which I take to be Makavejev's most important film) and so are the painful, mostly scatalogical excesses of *Sweet Movie.* And although the opening of *Montenegro* intercuts shots of apes lounging in a zoo with shots of its human characters, this does not lead to the kind of persistent collaging of several layers of reality which, in Makavejev's earlier films, made his outrageousness work so tellingly. Here, at least at first sight, we have a realist (though satiric) film with a twist ending. Yet even when he's trying to be "good" and win a Western audience, Makavejev can't help wonderful moments of craziness.

The film, a Swedish co-production, is set in Stockholm. Marilyn (Susan Anspach) is coupled with Martin (Erland Josephsson) in your ordinary tortured Swedish marriage. Josephsson is as hateful as ever: the quintessence of anti-Reichian man, wanly dead in his emotions, rigid in body and spirit, supercilious in his contacts with others, devoted only to ever-increasing international sales of flawless ball-bearings. Anspach, playing his American wife, is more appealing. (Makavejev's films, like Bergman's, have usually centered on women; his men tend to be illustrative "problems" though in the final analysis the real problem

stereotype of Diane Keaton. The familiar mannerisms dissolve by the end, revealing a Keaton we have rarely, if ever, seen before. In the scene at the train station to which *Reds'* entire final half drives, Keaton's face displays a series of emotions markedly beyond the range of the young girl from the provinces who first arrived in New York. Anxious beyond measure when Reed does not at first emerge from the train, stony-faced at the appearance of a blanketed corpse, Bryant at last turns to see Reed at a distance looking toward her. She at first assumes the old sardonic look and swaggers toward him (a distinctive Keaton swagger), only to give that pose up almost instantly. The sardonic look which she dons and discards in an instant sums up, as a synecdoche, all the posturing she had previously used to defend her autonomy. But she no longer needs to defend it; she has earned it.

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MONTENEGRO: *"The fruit is poisoned"* *(or is it?)*

—the mystery—lies within the women.) Marilyn leads a repressed bourgeois life, but at least she's interested in sex, and a certain intriguing madness lurks around her edges from the beginning; we gather it has always been difficult for *her* to be good, and now it becomes impossible. She cracks, like the egg we see her cracking for a schnitzel. . . .

The story mainly concerns what happens after Martin insincerely invites her along on a business trip; abandoning the children (who are creepy little parodies of the parents) she heads for the airport to follow him. There fate, in the form of Swedish customs agents, tosses her into the company of a lanky, emotional Yugoslav immigrant non-worker named Alex and the bumpkin Yugoslav girl he has come to pick up. Marilyn's life is never again the same. (It is characteristic of Makavejev that the stolid customs agents can't resist burning up some liquor they confiscate.)

Makavejev has always been centrally interested—he *is* a Reichian—in the oppositions between psycho-physiological realities and social constraints, and particularly in the pathologies (a source of a rather savage kind of comedy) which are generated by such tensions. The flash of his style comes, I think, from his attempt to embody in film these tensions and their ways of breaking out. Anspach is a little too soft for Makavejev's basic strategy to work at its best here; she doesn't quite bring off the irrational impulsiveness that the story requires. When she sets fire to the marital bedquilt in revenge for Josephsson's spurning of her advances, we don't quite feel it fits. And when, at the end, she evidently murders the man named Montenegro with whom she has just made love, we react to it as a Makavejev conceit rather than a shocking yet somehow inevitable psychological reality.

But the characters are never the dominant motivating force in a Makavejev film, and the polarity between repressed, decorous Swedish life and the bumptious life of the Yugoslav immigrant community is the source of most of *Montenegro*'s energy; there is a great deal of richness and surprise to it. Where the outlaw community in *Sweet Movie* rode a barge bearing the giant face of Karl Marx on its prow, here the immigrants have created their own little anarchist enclave amid the junkyards of Swedish society. Their bootlegger's Club Zanzibar, fabricated of scrap materials, is hospitable to rather irregular sexual relationships. Here the sight of a man with a large knife driven through his forehead (he cheated his brother at cards) is only mildly alarming. And here the gawky Yugoslav flowers into a bizarrely accomplished stripteaser, doing a number with a radio-controlled toy tank whose cannon has been transformed into a phallus—the blatancy of the device being charmingly offset by the lavishness of Makavejev's shooting and cutting of this set-piece scene.

Makavejev's is a world in which the irrational constantly and comically peeps through the stony facade of so-called civilization; he is the messenger of the ultimately unsuppressible id. Even the senile grandfather is not too senile to advertise for a wife (and get plenty of candidates), and he's sly enough to filch the family pistol, and batty enough to fire it at the ceiling when he thinks the psychiatrist is there to examine him, not Marilyn. Practically *all* the characters, however, display substantial aberrations. The psychiatrist (powerfully played by Per Oscarsson) is a ghoulish figure who demands payment in advance since, as his receptionist puts it, "he's only interested in money." Martin chronically and dementedly keeps protesting that it's his wife who has the problems. It is only the Yugoslavs—whose lives allow the free expression of emotion—who don't have these bizarre tics.

After the shiny impersonal surfaces of bourgeois Sweden, the funky Club Zanzibar seems like home for the heart. The Yugoslavs inhabit the backside of industrial civilization, and in this enclave protected from "normalcy" everything from lamb-stealing to lesbian sex seems offhandedly natural. But Makavejev is no sentimentalist. After giving Marilyn a lethal-looking drink, Alex and a rough bunch of Yugoslavs bellow out a song of longing for the blonde goddess who has unaccountably appeared among them—whereupon two of them go outside and try to kill each other over her, in a battle with coal shovels. When Marilyn, draped in a dirty tablecloth in place of a bath towel, finds the handsome Montenegro showering and meaningful looks begin passing between them, Makavejev undercuts the scene with the cackling of chickens wandering around the distillery room rendezvous. Meanwhile, back in the antiseptic family mansion, Cookie the daughter has taken over for missing mommy, and is delivering breakfast to her "two men" with sinister precision. . . .

Makavejev's films invite, indeed demand, a political-psychological reading: they demand it by "not making sense" in any other way. Even though much of *Montenegro* is fairly straightforward by comparison with recent Makavejev works, we are compelled to ask what it *means* that Marilyn apparently kills her Yugoslav lover and then, returning smilingly to the family table (augmented now by the psychiatrist) poisons them all. We know from the clownish portrayal of the psychiatrist that Makavejev has little use for traditional psychological explanations; the shrink's only contribution to our understanding of Marilyn is to remark that she has nice legs.

There has been a consistent association of sex and murder in Makavejev's films. In *WR* the visiting Soviet skating champion slices off Milena's head with his skate blades after finally giving in to her sexual-political importunings. (Her head, of course, refuses to be silenced.) In *Sweet Movie,* Anna Planeta plunges her dagger into the sailor from the *Potemkin* after making love to him on a mound of capitalist sugar: a crime that doubtless falls into the diminished-capacity-defense category. And back in *Love Affair of a Switchboard Operator,* the unhappy rat catcher murders his blonde love in an access of sexual jealousy. Now, in *Montenegro,* it appears that when Marilyn becomes sexually liberated she also becomes homicidal. What is going on here? What would Reich say about it?

Makavejev would probably argue that the above way of putting things confuses causes and effects; in the psyche, causal relationships do not really exist. Moreover, from a Reichian point of view, no breakthrough in character-armor is simple or complete; it may also lead to distortions and perversions, given personal histories and social pressures. Sex is not the cause of the murders but only the occasion; that is, the process which breaks the heroine out of her previous stasis also enables her to act on *other* motives—in particular, political ones connected with the oppression of women. Marilyn, this line of thought would explain, poisons her family (and the psychiatrist) because her new freedom enables her to see that in some sense they deserve it; the bourgeois-trap family deserves to die.

This is a feeling which, needless to say, most audiences are hardly prepared to welcome if delivered straight. But we are dealing with a fairly expensive film, aimed at re-establishing its director's commercial viability. In Shavian fashion, therefore, such notions must be couched as afterthoughts in a comedy. Moreover, Makavejev usually provides foils surrounding the sex-murder nexus which question or counter it. In *WR,* Milena's roommate joyfully scrambles around their apartment with her partner, plainly enjoying sex in a healthy and nonhomicidal way. In *Sweet Movie,* one gathers that the commune members' therapeutic regressions enable them to live sexually rich lives, despite the traumatic effects they have upon Miss Universe.

Makavejev was genial and articulate when interviewed for *Film Quarterly* some years ago (see *FQ,* Winter 1971-72). So, having heard he was in New York, I decided to phone and ask if he would throw some light on these questions. I was probably not the first to ask, and he was charmingly evasive. We talked about the earlier films, and he pointed out that even in *Love Affair* the status of the murder is undermined by an unexplainable last shot of the two principal characters, both still alive. In *Sweet Movie* the apparently slaughtered children wake up. And Milena keeps talking. Makavejev seems to regard puzzlement of the audience by such conflicting imagery as a productive artistic strategy. Besides, he is willing to defend playfully some things that he half considers "mistakes"—signs that the artist is, after all, "an irrational being" (just like the spectator, I would add). As for the ending of *Montenegro,* Makavejev says that the whole film, or at least most of it, may be the wife's fantasy—presumably "opened" by the initial scene on the little pier, to which the camera returns just before the last scene, as if to suggest she has been there all the time, and may remain there as the final events unreel in her mind. The Zanzibar has been left in disarray behind her; Montenegro is dead. What was needed, says Makavejev, was some kind of "catastrophe," which need not be specified in realist detail. (There is also a later flash-shot behind the bars. . . .) To cap it all off, Makavejev adds that after all "in movies nobody ever really dies." And how do we know the fruit was really poisoned, or even that the film is "based on a real incident"? (Titles too can lie.)

This leaves us, obviously, pretty much on our own—which is where Makavejev wants his audience to be. (The spectator, he observes, "keeps the 'liveliest' moments in mind," and doubtless lets far weirder things slip by unchallenged.) Makavejev remains a disconcerting artist because his view of human nature is basically unsafe; he offers no consoling "understandings." In *Man Is Not a Bird* (the story of an over-achieving engineer who gets the prize but loses the blonde) he combined a dark humor and a droll realism. *Love Affair* was still an acceptably realist story, but its touches of strangeness were more unsettling. In succeeding films Makavejev moved to and perhaps beyond the margins of audience tolerance for emotional irruptions through the surface of everyday life. Now he seems to be moving back, toward the style of the earlier films. But still, as the only surviving feature-director heir of the surrealists and Buñuel, he reminds us that the human passions which lie beneath the slick bureaucratized surface of contemporary life are as turbulent and unpredictable as they were in *L'Age d'or*.

—ERNEST CALLENBACH

TAPS

Directed by Harold Becker. Script: Daryll Ponicsan. Photography: Owen Roizman.

Taps is about what can happen when idealism and pragmatism, both in questionable forms, collide. Once the trustees of venerable Bunker Hill Military Academy, which has turned out cadets for 141 years, order it sold for land development, its aging rector, General Harlan Bache (George C. Scott), a career officer who worships the traditions of the school and military life, tries to fight the decision. But after his pistol kills a local boy during a mishap and police take him away, his cadets gather rifles, grenades and machine guns from the armory and seize control of the grounds. Led by Cadet Major Brian Moreland (Timothy Hutton), they resolve to hold the place against a phalanx of cops and National Guardsmen until the authorities agree to reconsider the sale. A Guard colonel (Ronny Cox), fearful of carnage, tries to reason Moreland out of his stand. But, imbued with Bache's credo ("Burglarproof, weatherproof, foolproof, one hundred proof Honor") and worshipping him like a foster father, Moreland misunderstands the difference between an ideal in the capital letter abstract and an ideal operating in the world at large—and pays with his life. The poles of the movie are the boys' quixotic, unreasonable yet stirring love for their school and the practicality of the world outside its gates, where "the numbers" outweigh intangibles. Never cartooning either side of the conflict, blessed with a beautifully articulated dramatic screenplay (Daryll Ponicsan, who did the final version, has also written military novels, *The Last Detail* and *Cinderella Liberty,* scripting the movie version of the second), stately cinematography by Owen Roizman, and meticulously forceful direction by Harold Becker (*The Ragman's Daughter, The Onion Field, The Black Marble) Taps* is an entirely traditional but thoroughly engrossing picture which should need little defending.

Yet it does, because most prominent reviews thus far have been extremely narrow-minded about it, probably because of automatic bad feelings about anything military. The assumption has been that a movie about soldiers, if it is not an exposé of uniformed psychotics or a cutesy romp like *Private Benjamin* or *Stripes* undermined by an unexplainable last shot of the two principal characters, both still alive. In *Sweet Movie* the apparently slaughtered children wake up. And Milena keeps talking. Makavejev seems to regard puzzlement of the audience by such conflicting imagery as a productive artistic strategy. Besides, he is willing to defend playfully some things that he half considers "mistakes"—signs that the artist is, after all, "an irrational being" (just like the spectator, I would add). As for the ending of *Montenegro,* Makavejev says that the whole film, or at least most of it, may be the wife's fantasy—presumably "opened" by the initial scene on the little pier, to which the camera returns just before the last scene, as if to suggest she has been there all the time, and may remain there as the final events unreel in her mind. The Zanzibar has been left in disarray behind her; Montenegro is dead. What was needed, says Makavejev, was some kind of "catastrophe," which need not be specified in realist detail. (There is also a later flash-shot behind the bars. . . .) To cap it all off, Makavejev adds that after all "in movies nobody ever really dies." And how do we know the fruit was really poisoned, or even that the film is "based on a real incident"? (Titles too can lie.)

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Directed by Harold Becker. Script: Daryll Ponicsan. Photography: Owen Roizman.

Taps is about what can happen when idealism and pragmatism, both in questionable forms, collide. Once the trustees of venerable Bunker Hill Military Academy, which has turned out cadets for 141 years, order it sold for land development, its aging rector, General Harlan Bache (George C. Scott), a career officer who worships the traditions of the school and military life, tries to fight the decision. But after his pistol kills a local boy during a mishap and police take him away, his cadets gather rifles, grenades and machine guns from the armory and seize control of the grounds. Led by Cadet Major Brian Moreland (Timothy Hutton), they resolve to hold the place against a phalanx of cops and National Guardsmen until the authorities agree to reconsider the sale. A Guard colonel (Ronny Cox), fearful of carnage, tries to reason Moreland out of his stand. But, imbued with Bache's credo ("Burglarproof, weatherproof, foolproof, one hundred proof Honor") and worshipping him like a foster father, Moreland misunderstands the difference between an ideal in the capital letter abstract and an ideal operating in the world at large—and pays with his life. The poles of the movie are the boys' quixotic, unreasonable yet stirring love for their school and the practicality of the world outside its gates, where "the numbers" outweigh intangibles. Never cartooning either side of the conflict, blessed with a beautifully articulated dramatic screenplay (Daryll Ponicsan, who did the final version, has also written military novels, *The Last Detail* and *Cinderella Liberty,* scripting the movie version of the second), stately cinematography by Owen Roizman, and meticulously forceful direction by Harold Becker (*The Ragman's Daughter, The Onion Field, The Black Marble) Taps* is an entirely traditional but thoroughly engrossing picture which should need little defending.

Yet it does, because most prominent reviews thus far have been extremely narrow-minded about it, probably because of automatic bad feelings about anything military. The assumption has been that a movie about soldiers, if it is not an exposé of uniformed psychotics or a cutesy romp like *Private Benjamin* or *Stripes* (which sucks up to both the liberal-left Hipocracy and the renascent Cold Warriors of the Reagan eighties), simply must be a hog wallow in fascist fantasy. Accordingly, *Taps* has been condemned for trying to have it both ways by glorifying the military during its first half and denouncing war during its second. In a typical piece, David Chute of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* (December 18, 1981) says that Scott, "hired for God knows how many zillions of dollars to toss off a thumbnail reprise of his *Patton* performance . . . stands around dispensing wild-eyed militaristic bombast for about 15 minutes. . . ;" that Becker and Roizman "display an endless fascination with the textures of military ritual: the gold braid and the shiny brass buckles, the Dolby-ized crash and clatter of the Manual of Arms;" and that the cadets are just "spit 'n' polish terrorists." And he accuses the movie-makers of cowardly tamping down the "Straw Dogs Go to Animal House potential" of the material—meaning, to paraphrase him, that Dan Akroyd should have been the one to lead the cadets in commando-blasts against the bozos outside, thereby satisfying our own cravenly repressed dreams of annihilating all the creeps, nerds, and petty dictators who oppress us every day. That would have resulted in "a riveting crypto-fascist gut grabber." All this sounds so colorfully logical that who would ever guess, without seeing *Taps,* how thoroughly inaccurate it is?

Taps does indeed plunge us into the enclosed realm of the cadets; how else are we to comprehend the grip it has over them? Scene One, a baccalaureat service in a chapel, draws us into a liturgical ambiance; a choir lustrously intoning "Onward Christian Soldiers," gleaming rows of beribboned, blue-uniformed cadets in pews, Bache facing them from the nave like a ramrod, an honor guard approaching him with a profusion of flags, a silhouetted bugler softly blowing commemorative notes as Bache reads off the names of alumni killed in old and recent wars. The military's status as a virtual church for these characters, who range from 12-year-old plebes to a declining lifer like Bache, is as palpable as incense.

What seems to disconcert critics like Chute is Becker's refusal to parody this atmosphere, these rituals. The few undercutting touches, like the upward angle on Bache in the pulpit from which a warlike eagle juts, are understated, and even they convey an aura of genuine magnificence. Instead, his shots—like the very lengthy opening dolly movement up the center aisle—challenge us to yield to the intoxicating side of this life. Similarly, a term-ending parade a few scenes later contains a few low-key inserts which show two peach-fuzzed little plebes, Charlie and Derek (Brendan Ward and John Navin), sucking in their rounded cheeks as they march amid their elders. But, set in the verdant meadow where the school sits in red brick serenity, the parade is an attractive spectacle, a near-dream of existence as the most marvellous Eagle Scout convocation ever. Becker has also found unobtrusive ways to lighten the solemnity and to underline the human variety of the cadet corps. Several times, he cuts from lofty ceremonies to cadets clowning in the dorm halls, bitching in the shower, watching *M*A*S*H* and *Star Trek* episodes on TV, listening to The Doors and The Pointer Sisters, taking a holiday from their regimen without trashing or mocking it. Nonconservatives have become accustomed, probably on little personal experience in lots of cases, to thinking of practically all soldiers as latent or not-so-latent psychopaths. *Taps* would certainly gratify those feelings if it made the cadets the geeky apprentice killers that Chute carelessly and prejudicially labels them to be. But the film-makers want us to see ourselves and the ambiguities of our own conflicted emotions over dreams and reality in them.

Similarly, the film would be a whole lot simpler if Bache really were just a flaming Queeg spewing incendiary blather about the beauty of war. But he's actually a more divided figure: a war lover who is also a courtly, humane, soft-spoken dreamer enchanted by memories and fantasies of old glory yet unable to grasp, despite his rejection of rant, that this brew can be even headier to a certain kind of yearning, half-formed sensibility than any kind of "Damn the torpedoes" gaudiness. Obviously, Scott's presence evokes his Patton, but he also suggests one of those cavalry captains in twilight that John Ford liked to portray, such as Nathan Brittles in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.* Scott's first appearance in *Taps,* stiffened at attention and gazing over the camera as it glides to him like a mobile magnet after he has walked into the image, combines the frailer Brittles motif with a reference to his "No bastard ever won a war . . ." oration before the screen-filling flag in *Patton.*

TAPS: *Timothy Hutton, George C. Scott, and Tim Wahrer*

Bache might have been living the image of a continent-spanning modern warrior which that movie so calculatedly made into a character with appeals across the political spectrum. But he is a Patton only in his reveries; still, he strives to play the Patton of the speech's toplofty principles without the Patton who slaps the shell-shocked GI. Even when he does preach about Honor, Country, and Duty or quote Theodore Roosevelt on how "the wolf rises in the heart" during battle, Scott softens his trademark acrid rasp. His weary, disenchanted, self-consciously poetic reading of "With the stroke of a pen, sir . . . Their field of honor was a desktop," after Moreland asks how the trustees could jettison the school, is a particularly acute summing up of Bache: his absorption by an image of old-line military nobility, the commingled foolishness and beauty of his refusal to give it up.

In certain respects, the characterization is muddled. Bache tells Moreland about his fear and exhilaration during Korean War combat and calls himself "a veteran of many terrible battles." But Moreland's father (Wayne Tippett), an army sergeant who tries to talk him out of the insurrection, derides Bache and his pretensions as old jokes that the Pentagon has shunted aside into this jerkwater position. Bache does forget to unload his ceremonial pistol, which kills the townie thanks to his negligence, and for all his purported battlefield experience, he goes catatonic thereafter as the cops lead him away. But the movie fails to reveal enough to allow any valid judgment of the key unasked question: Is his high-flown talk based on a sham career or not? And it is a distinct loss that the scheme of the plot will not allow any reaction from him to the insurrection. Nevertheless, Scott uses his thickening body and croaking eloquence for their overtones of banked rage against advancing decrepitude. He accomplishes two feats that are crucial to the film's success: he makes Moreland's love for him and what he represents totally believable, and he suffuses the rest of the picture from offscreen.

Moreland is a figure to conjure up the tender adolescent dreamer that many in the audience may once have been, wanted to be, or imagine they were. Without verbalizing it, *Taps* uses him subtly to bring out the secret pact between students and schools upon which much American education, from kindergarten to Ph.D. programs, is based: When the crunch comes, forget the idealistic abstractions you've been taught; go with the numbers, wise up, be pragmatic always. But no doubt we all remember those occasional individuals (maybe we were them and still are in part, or maybe we wanted to be and felt guilty, gutless for not going their way) who somehow don't get this unspoken but gong-like message, who really do believe in capital letter ideals akin to those Bache espouses—not just Duty, Honor, Country but maybe Faith, Hope, and Charity or maybe

God, Sportsmanship, Intellect, Art. Moreland is one of these exotic creatures, and Timothy Hutton does a splendid job of detailing his intelligent naivete without slipping into narcissism or mush. It is implicit in the film that a primary function of military schools is raising children whose parents reject or cannot handle the task. If his father, who gave him precisely fifteen minutes to mourn his dead mother (yet does not come across as a purely reactionary macho bastard), had been richer or perhaps civilian, Moreland might have been laid off on a psychiatrist instead, like Conrad, Hutton's character in *Ordinary People.* But he has thrived throughout his teen years under martial strictures and Bache's personal catechism. The very structure of the movie—methodical as a military maneuver, with no nooks and crannies for digressions and subversive fantasies such as we find in *Zero for Conduct* and *If . . .* , yet still supple and alert within these utterly by-the-book parameters—mirrors the qualities that the academy has nurtured in him. And they are true qualities. Moreland has become, not a beady-eyed space case or a budding storm trooper, but a talented, flexible leader with a flair for inspiring both discipline and loyalty without becoming inhumane—which is exactly the sort of leader Bache wanted him to become.

But this hothouse integrity wilts with alarming speed once it moves ten feet outside the academy. One scene in particular—townies in denims jeering, yelling "fag" and "*Sieg heil*" as the cadets escort their gowned dates inside to a formal dance—astutely yanks us in two directions at once. The cadets cannot help looking all the more appealing juxtaposed to these grungy, obnoxious townies, who look and sound as though some acquaintance with the Manual of Arms might do them some good. At the same time, who other than rock-ribbed conservatives can deny having felt, even shouted openly, what these sneering kids are yelling? And the cadets, so impressive on the parade ground, start to look ridiculous when they fight the townies, like smiling lieutenants from some Lubitsch/Lehar Ruritania trying to tangle with a street gang without mussing up their tunics. Suddenly, after experiencing academy life their way, we find ourselves looking at children playing soldier in daddy's old uniforms. Which is a trustee's evident thought shortly thereafter as he cooly dismisses inquiries from Moreland and what his father, only a master sergeant but a real one, implies during their confrontation when he asks his son, "Do you expect me to call you major?" The movie consistently spurns narrow-minded bias against the cadets without ever denying the inherent absurdity of their position. But it also brings out the parallel hypocrisy of adults stuffing grown-up ideology into children while expecting them to remain docile. As Moreland tells the Guard Colonel, "You want us to be good little boys until you decide what war we're supposed to fight for you."

By this point, *Taps* probably has most viewers feeling sympathetic to the cause of the cadets regardless of such mixed cross-currents. When the leader of the Red Beret honor guard, David Shawn (Tom Cruise), and his contingent suddenly bring the authorities under the gun in the armory, and when Shawn (the most trigger-happy cadet) disperses townies by spraying the sky with machine-gun fire, the movie addresses its exploitational underside. These moments make many viewers, teenagers especially, whoop it up even though ironically they doubtless have more in common with the irreverent townies than with the cadets. Chute would like the entire movie to be what it is during these few seconds, and since watching people we "like" get even with people we "hate" is one of the primal appeals of movies, it's almost impossible not to share this burst of exhilaration. This, after all, is one ultimate idealistic answer to the drudgery and repression of practicality: cut the Gordian knot. Once the cadets settle in with their weapons, the movie cannily cements their common ground with the rebellious college students of a decade ago; even their "three demands" will give open-minded leftists a twinge of remembrance.

The long game of cat and mouse leading up to the violent climax stresses how well the cadets have absorbed the finest aspects of what they have been taught: they refuse to take hostages; they salute the flag every morning (and in a comic reverse angle, so do the cops outside); they stage a dignified memorial service after Bache's death, complete even to the riderless black horse which calls to mind the funeral cortege of John F. Kennedy. Their grace and fortitude in defense of their lost-in-advance cause compare favorably with the banal world around them: where Mom wants you to give up all this silliness and enjoy the summer, where the numbers rule, and the real military dispassionately enforces their rule.

At the same time, the hollowness of their position rises to the fore. Becker and the writers have positioned Cox's colonel midway between starry-eyed Bache and hard-nosed Sgt. Moreland on the spectrum of father figures. Cox's vigorous performance establishes the colonel as a spokesperson for the basic soldierly value of survival "in situations where it ain't all that easy." When Moreland starts losing his bearings (calling kids like his plebes the "seed corn" of warriors), the colonel's attack on him as a death lover is forcefully written, though basically obvious if taken as antiwar polemics alone. But it has a wider application to the underside of all idealism, which potentially rejects existence for inevitably tarnishing its lovely reveries. *Taps* bleakly locates the death in both idealism and pragmatism, which is what saves it (after Charlie's accidental shooting makes Moreland call off the revolt) from the tidy moral statements that so often wrap up "problem play" TV movies like cute pink bows. The twist is that the gung-ho Shawn, not Moreland, proves to be the ultimate idealist, but his idealism takes the form of trying to massacre the cops and the Guardsmen as Moreland leads the other cadets outside. The war bellow that he summons gleefully from his depths ("It's beautiful! Man, it's beautiful!") as he fires maniacally is not an antiwar "touch" (if it were, it would be a platitude). Rather, it is the exultant death cry of suicidal idealism, in any form.

—MICHAEL DEMPSEY

Books

OVEREXPOSURES

By David Thomson. New York: Morrow, 1981. $13.95 cloth, $8.95 paper.

Deep ambivalence quickens David Thomson's *Overexposures*—a collection of essays, some reprinted from film magazines, others seeing print for the first time—with intense, witty melancholy. He announces a crisis: ". . . movies are nearly at an end"—then has an imaginary Hollywood trendy trill, "Oh, shit, that one again." Others, expecting the usual platitudinous, scapegoat-seeking outrage at movies and television for supposedly causing all of America's problems, may want to trill right along. But there is none of this professional indignation in the book. Thomson's prose vibrates with an uneasiness that feels unmistakably personal. Just as certain film-makers (Joseph Mankiewicz, Sam Peckinpah, Paul Schrader) have called themselves "Whores," he compares his film teaching to pimping, but without their not-so-secret vainglory.

Part of his distress has a topical basis: the depressing personalities, practices, and predicaments of Hollywood during the past decade. A time of decreasing production and soaring costs—budgetary and especially marketing. Steadily less risk-taking and steadily more incessant appeals to the most fickle and immature part of the mass audience, "the kids." A time of baby moguls who do not love movies, only what they can get out of them, and baby geniuses (George Lucas is Thomson's prime example) who are prodigies of command over arcane technology, which they use to present "experience (as) a pretty, pat commodity, no more complex than chewing gum." A time when even more substantial figures (he cites Schrader and Francis Coppola) wallow in melodrama and paranoia. Bewitched by a smothering, essentially adolescent tidiness and tightness of style and effect which ignores "film's natural readiness for doubt," they oppress their audiences like jailers and torturers, confirming everyone's sense of fear and alienation. According to Thomson, most American directors (Bob Rafelson is his bright exception) promote "a voluntary and neurotic enslavement," show little or no feeling for "the complexity of human nature that surprises us in life," and scant "the dignity of ordinary lives." He declares: "I feel surer year by year that, by dwelling on the momentous dark, the American movie has turned its back on richness and enlightenment."

In framing his indictment, Thomson ranges over a broad landscape of popular culture: the Tonight Show, Jerry Lewis's annual muscular dystrophy telethon, slash-'em-up horror movies, the bizarrerie of Los Angeles, personal observation of Rafelson struggling to prepare you to give up all this silliness and enjoy the summer, where the numbers rule, and the real military dispassionately enforces their rule.

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In framing his indictment, Thomson ranges over a broad landscape of popular culture: the Tonight Show, Jerry Lewis's annual muscular dystrophy telethon, slash-'em-up horror movies, the bizarrerie of Los Angeles, personal observation of Rafelson struggling to prepare his first studio picture *Brubaker* (from which he was fired after a week or so of shooting), analytic profiles of some complicated personalities (Warren Beatty, James Toback, Pauline Kael, Bruce Dern), close readings of Alfred Hitchcock and his work (especially *Strangers on a Train* and *Psycho*), plus separate chapters on *The Shining, The King of Marvin Gardens,* and the four pre-*One from the Heart* Coppola films. He praises a few of these, slates many more. But through it all he writhes in furious, liver-gnawing, amazed ambivalence, as an Englishman entranced by movies since childhood, as a literary intellectual who moved here to teach respectably at Dartmouth only to find his senses awash in American garishness, and as a potential movie-maker who shamefacedly wants in on the racket.

But Thomson is wrestling also with the innate qualities of film itself and what it may be helping to do to human consciousness. Constant, massive doses of photographic imagery, he fears, are eroding our ability to perceive, understand, and deal with reality: "Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth." You will not find these words in *Overexposures.* They are the very first sentences of Susan Sontag's *On Photography.* But Thomson obviously agrees with them, and her book has unquestionably influenced his. Simplifying her argument drastically: Photography fools us into believing that it brings us closer to reality, whereas it actually renders reality more nebulous by giving us the sense that we can carry it around in the form of frozen pictures, like kids swapping baseball cards as though they truly owned Mickey Mantle or Reggie Jackson. "Essentially," she comments, "the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own."

Sontag pointedly excludes the movie camera from her study precisely because its product, moving pictures, exists in time (even though that movement is founded on an illusion). But Thomson extends this inquiry to film. Some samples of his recurrent themes:

> Books are latent experiences: They are tunes we play only when we take them up into our heads. Films are explosions, happenings, which do not actually need an audience. This means that the spectators they do attract feel relatively powerless and insignificant. We are less aware of an order that our imaginations can perceive. Instead, films have the characteristics of flow—elemental, heedless, and unconscious. . . . we may be less determined to live our lives once we have seen this allegory of life pouring through us.
>
> The shaping of films encouraged us to believe that the world shown in the dark and the world struggled with outside were different . . . No one alive in America in this century can believe that the distinction was observed. People have been confused, not least the filmmakers, men like Martin Scorsese, who expect Charles Manson every time they enter a taxi.
>
> The purpose of (*Jaws, Carrie* and the like) is to secure, or trap . . . not to move the audience, to change its mind, to delight or console it, to do any of the enriching things that one hopes for in art, but to hold it—as one holds a kitten and thinks of drowning it . . . It is a cruelty that the canopy of "entertainment" struggles to contain.
>
> . . . even the worst movies of the year seem immune to error or uncertainty. Film has such ravishing authority. Our helplessness in front of the flow of motion grants it an elemental force beyond questions of right and wrong.

This "domineering and extortionate" power, which most filmmakers rush to exploit, springs from the core of the medium—looking, voyeurism—which Thomson goes so far as to compare with rape. He believes that "The assertion of the photograph [rather than] the attempt of the word" characterizes our world. And that impels him virtually to cry out: "We are all mad who look at images and believe in them . . . A part of me wishes that there had been no photography, no film, no television . . ."

From ideas and emotions like these, Thomson zeroes in on specific moviemakers. In his view, Hitchcock never really cared about anything except hooking the audience and then misanthropically wringing it dry, not just separating style from content but rendering style hostile to content. Of *Psycho* (which he demolishes in detail as an "elegant, gloating trap") he insists: ". . . the pain inflicted in the film is secondary to the skill which keeps the hook in the audience's fish mouth . . ." Comparably, *Strangers on a Train* "assists Bruno's madness . . . The future of love and happiness that Guy is being denied is a hollow sham. Hitchcock never makes us believe in or want it . . . That is why Bruno is so good and unwitting a portrait of the director. Bruno has no real life . . . He is a man of ideas, envious of doers and blithely unconscious that his elegant ideas inflict a monstrous, prettified destruction on others." Coppola is similarly culpable: for the "soulless stylistic bravura" of *The Conversation,* for not noticing its similarity to the wizardry of repressed sound technician Harry Caul, for the "magnetic attraction" to Michael Corleone and his glamorously bruised, ostensibly condemned but actually relished evil in the *Godfather* films, for his floundering "struggle to be profound and popular at the same time—the torment which has always beset Hollywood" in *Apocalypse Now.* But *American Gigolo* evokes an interestingly mixed response. Afflicted by a sense that its script is basically garbage by literary standards, Thomson glows, with a bit of a red face, over its lustrous visual plan, its aural bath of Blondie and Giorgio Moroder, and Richard Gere's perfect embodiment of "photographed man." Similarly, *The Shining* drives him nuts with its hermeticism ("the great vow that gives up life for fiction"), yet its weird humor and eerie serenity tantalize him into reconsidering his previous criticisms of Stanley Kubrick (see his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*) and provoke him into writing the best interpretation yet of this perplexing movie. Rafelson he endorses without reservation; *The King of Marvin Gardens* is his favorite lost cause, "so astute about the romance of success in America, it was always likely to be a commercial failure." And he stands up for James Toback—indeed, romanticizes him —as an "outlaw artist."

The informed passion of *Overexposures,* so dishearteningly missing from nine out of every ten film books of recent years, makes Thomson confront intractible contradictions head-on. Part of him may wish the visual media out of existence, "but," another part continues, "I am moved by the energy in fiction. American movies may harness that too rarely, but they have entertained me all my life. Is it insane to live and work in that mode while still urging caution?" And he openly acknowledges what few academics dare to admit: "I suffer from a conflicting rage for the visual and the puritanically literate." But the book evades other matters.

These surface in occasional excesses of Thomson's vivid prose style: for example, a certain glibness whenever he tries to wax ironic about the Bitch Goddess El Lay, "a place for gamblers, spritualists and sunbathers, poets and druggies, stars and therapists, messiahs and people at the movies." Locals who do not have heads full of smog sometimes collect such Locustville numbers; Thomson's are more entertaining than most, but that is generally all they are. These and other statements like them Thomson hopes will add up to a portrait of mass America "pioneered and victimized by fantastical hope"—media fomented. But admitting that concrete evidence is hard to come by, he indulges in tricks of rhetoric—like the foregoing and like finding it striking that a nation with America's heavy fiscal preoccupations "should believe in a large rubber shark and the ominous musical theme current in the waters off Amity Island."

Mocking the "mania for inner meanings" that Los Angeles is said to encourage, Thomson sometimes gets stoned on it himself, detecting all but the Decline of the West in the comatose ramblings of a few Tonight Shows or working up an ominous froth of nouns and adjectives after gazing at some "unwholesome collection of hot and bereft people" in a movie theater's lobby "who must wonder why I am describing them." Well might they wonder, for the resulting description betrays the same insistence on pulsating melodrama and, finally, paranoia that Thomson accuses so many filmmakers ("looming above with the power of authorship") of foisting on us.

His comments about Hitchcock, though full of insights, reduce him to Fat Alfred, chortling orotundly as he pulls the wings off us flies in the audience and makes us love it. "We" react dutifully, Thomson indicates, whenever Hitch yanks our string: joining him to violate Marion Crane with our "tumescent" gazes in and out of the shower; cheering Bruno on as he pops a brat's balloon, throttles a bitch and lowers her corpse toward our avid retinas, toys byzantinely with that wimp Guy Haines, whom we (like the Fat Man) only pretend to admire. The helpless audience—Thomson strikes this note over and over again. But does everyone really react identically even to movies as cunningly controlled as Hitchcock's?

Let me be the lab animal for a moment. My most recent memory of *Psycho* is too old for detailed citation. But I did get to see *Strangers on a Train* for the umpteenth time while reading *Overexposures* for the second, and it wasn't Thomson's *Strangers.* Yes, I certainly did find myself fascinated and delighted (for the umpteenth time) by Bruno, which means, partially, fascinated and delighted with the finesse of his creation by Hitchcock, his writers (including Raymond Chandler), and Robert Walker. But do I or Thomson's "we" necessarily endorse Bruno? Like Hitchcock, I might have preferred actors other than Farley Granger and Ruth Roman as Guy Haines and his new love; still, allowing for that, it seemed to me that Hitchcock did his utmost, especially in the way he filmed their kisses, to induce our belief in their intimacy and our hope that they might save it. As for Guy's slatternly wife, must I, must "we," be nothing more or other than happy when Bruno murders her? But suppose "we" are happy about it. What then happens when we notice, at Hitchcock's insistence, her resemblance to the sister of Guy's love, a part played by the director's daughter? Thomson makes a lot of how the ostensibly accidental encounter of Guy and Bruno on the train is really "fated" by Hitchcock's insistent intercutting of their shoes as they approach it, separately and unaware of one another's presence. But Thomson does not mention the other strangers whom Guy meets on other trains, encounters which do not foment Brunoesque plots and paranoid moods. And if Bruno, like Hitchcock, really has us under such tight control, what do we make of the movie's climax, when the insanely disintegrating merry-go-round destroys him and his trap system?

It seems, then, that "my" *Strangers* differs significantly from Thomson's. I consider mine closer to Hitchcock's. I could be right, I could be wrong. But I am not "helpless." And neither is anybody else.

Thomson's remarks on Coppola read similarly: scintillating individual points (how the *Godfather* movies might be better had they built to Kay Corleone betraying her husband's criminal empire, the trickiness in the use of the line that Harry Caul records in *The Conversation*) trapped in a web of insistence on how "we" monolithically must respond to the films. "We long to be with the Corleones," Thomson insists—no other response is possible—thanks to Coppola's "meek, facile complicity" in their values under the guise of exploring and deploring them. As evidence, he mentions the commercial success of these costly pictures (to him, this proves their safeness—an easy bit of Monday morning quarterbacking) and Coppola's "guileless" satisfaction with such effects as Part One's intercutting of a baptism and a slaughter. "If Coppola sought irony," Thomson insists, "it has been smothered by the romanticism of the American movie: unflawed melodramatic progress and undimmed prestige bestowed on the people. Together, they define our response: identification, never any sort of detachment."

What these sentences define is Thomson's response, which he is certainly entitled to present (especially this interestingly). But this advocate of the necessity for doubt, in life and in movies, really should consider doubting his ability to be so sure of "our response." It is a matter of record that many "helpless" viewers—correctly or incorrectly, with, without or despite Coppola's true compliance—have managed to view Michael and the other Corleones with considerable detachment *and* different degrees of identification, varying throughout the films from quite a bit to none whatsoever. For all his sophistication, Thomson often sounds like the studio executives John Sayles described in these pages recently, who insist that the script say explicitly that Ralph is likeable. Thomson wants Coppola to have said just as explicitly: "These Corleones are really rotten sons of bitches, and don't you dare have any other thoughts or feelings about them." And his "puritanically literate" side appears again in his attack on Coppola for taking pleasure in how he says something (whatever it happens to be). It is also symptomatic of how, after indicating repeatedly that doubt and complexity and ambiguity are the true meat of life and film, Thomson continually falls into a deep funk whenever he discovers movie-makers like Hitchcock, Coppola, Schrader and the rest inextricably enmeshed in them.

This contradiction points towards another: despite his professed concern for the "dignity of ordinary lives," he finds little of it in how people respond to movies or how they might respond. He suggests that, had Coppola followed his recommendation for Kay Corleone, "it would have driven the audience away in the millions," the same millions who didn't turn out for *The King of Marvin Gardens*, thereby certifying its integrity. It doesn't speak well for all that dignity, especially when the dignified are also helpless. But Thomson's invocations of the helpless audience represent the height of paranoia. "Film has such ravishing authority . . ."—yes, it can be unnerving to see a theater full of people jump, shriek, laugh and cry on cue (and even more unnerving to find oneself doing the same right along with them). These also may be honest, non-Pavlovian reactions. Helpless? Hasn't Thomson ever heard people heckle movies or laugh in the "wrong" places? Hasn't he ever done these things himself?

More plangently than Sontag, Thomson seems to long for a "simpler" version of "reality" that will never come again unless some cataclysm annihilates the present one, which will continue to *include* photographic imagery. Thomson does bury an acceptance of this quandary in his text: "Reality and imagination . . . haunt and mimic each other, and properly so. Our most debilitating condition would be if either one overpowered the other. But if we must live paranoid, or in the discord of two ways of understanding, then we must expect extremes of dismay and exhilaration as the struggle goes on." This is his equivalent to Sontag's call for "an ecology of images," which is provisionally achievable only through constant thought and vigilance. Whatever my or anyone else's quarrels with parts of it, *Overexposures* is a distinguished contribution to this ecology, which will be all the more needed during the forthcoming deluge of cable TV/home video image-saturation. But the somber tone of even its humor differs sharply from her calm lucidity. Maybe that is what inevitably comes of trying to reconcile art, literary values, careerism, ordinary dignity, life itself, and the movies. —MICHAEL DEMPSEY

THE LAST NEW WAVE
The Australian Film Revival

By David Stratton. New York: Ungar, 1981. $19.95.

Immersing oneself in *The Last New Wave* is not unlike surfing: anything so oceanic as cinema or so fluid as the movie business must be seen from down under. In this book Australia takes the shape of a weir, so to speak, channelling a moderate eddy of talent into a great wave. In fact, it is a microcosm of the attempt to build "national cinema" in the Western world, whereby private interests and public policy, individual ambition and popular support, talent and management are the dam controls, so to speak, of national consciousness and prestige both to the tax-payer-investors at home and potential purveyors abroad.

Stratton approaches the film industry as a process out of which come, willy-nilly, movies only as good as the effort, patience, and judgment that went into making them. Therefore, in contradistinction to most books of this type, the focus is on the process rather than the product. Each film is presented first in a plot synopsis; then the origins are traced back to writer, director, or producer, whose origins, in turn, are traced back to his fundamental ambition in the cinema world. Stratton explains how makers meet their money or their match, as the case may be; where the snags in production most likely occurred; the impact of broken legs and contracts; and the crucial question of importing actors in order to create an internationally marketable Australian product. Toward the end of each post-mortem, he offers a personal opinion of why the film failed or succeeded, but never does he play film critic. This book is about how the Australian cinema became a commercial enterprise; sometimes Stratton's style is virtually a reprise of Australian "nuts-and-bolts" cinematic style.

Take, for example, two films as diametrically opposed as *Mad Dog Morgan* and *Mad Max.* The former's inception is traced back to director Philippe Mora's cineaste origins—founding with Peter Beilby the erratic film magazine *Cinema Papers* in Melbourne, city of alternate cinema, and to his expatriate days in London with other Australians in the same rooming house as Germaine Greer. He returned in 1974 to propose what was, for that time, the most commercial venture possible for an authentic Australian story. It was a critical success which failed at the box office and Mora, disappointed in the hostility expressed toward a returning native son, decamped for Los Angeles where he continues to make films. When questioned about the accuracy of this book, he admitted, "I liked it. If the rest of it is as fair and accurate as the section about me, Stratton has an extraordinary network for gathering information."

Comparative blockbuster *Mad Max* was less subtle in characterization but slicker in its grand guignol visuals and, due either to its crass commercial appeal or to its effective ad campaign—not to forget the American dubbed to see a theater full of people jump, shriek, laugh and cry on cue (and even more unnerving to find oneself doing the same right along with them). These also may be honest, non-Pavlovian reactions. Helpless? Hasn't Thomson ever heard people heckle movies or laugh in the "wrong" places? Hasn't he ever done these things himself?

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Comparative blockbuster *Mad Max* was less subtle in characterization but slicker in its grand guignol visuals and, due either to its crass commercial appeal or to its effective ad campaign—not to forget the American dubbed version for overseas sales—Stratton calls it "the most successful Australian film ever made, a matter of delight or gloom according to one's point of view." Its director, George Miller, became a medical doctor in 1970 (which at least explains how he became inured to gore), and dabbled in film, displaying a clear contempt for bleeding heart attitudes toward violence in the cinema in his 1972 spoof of a cineaste lecturing on same. Stratton clearly outlines the kind of teamwork that went into the film, not overlooking the stuntman Grant Page. With this unsubsidized, privately financed, utterly Australian movie, Stratton concludes his survey of the major films of the decade. A matter of delight or gloom.

It remains to be seen whether *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli* will eclipse *Mad Max*'s somewhat pyrrhic victory. They have certainly done more to generate and promote an image which every state-supported cinema dreams of dangling before its taxpayers. The escalation of Aussie consciousness should not be seen as chauvinism; the recapitulation of a nation's history is a necessary (but not sufficient!—witness, the German cinema) condition for developing an industry supported in equal measure by the private sector and its public.

A chapter devoted to film producers reveals a side of local cinema which has seldom received critical coverage, and Stratton tells the saga of loyal producers who enable a director to find and express his style. However, he verifies our suspicions that even in Australia there are producers like Tony Ginnane who stay afloat via the "single-minded sex romp for the raincoat brigade." Nor does he overlook others who "adopt the Canadian treatment," referring to Canadian films which flaunt US flags and license plates in a vain appeal to that market. And still others, like Tim Burstall, establish their own production companies so as to make the kind of B-movies they want to, namely, the kind that sell.

It used to be that one introduced the Australian cinema with tantalizing, little-known facts: that Errol Flynn and Jim Sharman (of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* mystique) are Aussies; that Jerzy Toeplitz, former head of Poland's film school, assumed direction of the Australian Film School in 1973 to produce students like Gil Armstrong (*My Brilliant Career*) and Phil Noyce (*Newsfront*) from the first class.

David Stratton is able to account for this ten-year wave drop by drop, although he is fond of the obscure, fascinating detail. Because Stratton is English and emigrated to Australia after leaving Oxford, he retains the vantage point of an outsider, although as director of the Sydney Film Festival, he is deeply enmeshed in the scene. After his accession to the directorship of that festival, it began to acquire the prestige it enjoys today, and it has played no small role in the development of the Australian cinema. He travels to Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and major production cities shopping for his festival program. This means that he has a perspective on cinema larger than most critics writing such specialized books. His assiduous, meticulous pragmatism is evident in all 337 pages.

Each film-maker in his book receives an introduction and each film is described in detail. By dividing his account into chapters according to film-makers, Stratton has produced a convenient reference work as well. The complexity of translating or transferring ideas to scripts and ultimately to celluloid is captured with such fidelity to the struggles of the many people involved that it is a wonder auteurism survives in theory, much less in the structure of Stratton's book. A straight chronological account, however, might have got muddled.

Stratton's approach is eclectic enough to realize how the kind of bizarre talent of a Jim Sharman was destined to erupt in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show,* as he traces the character and career of a kid born in a trunk in a vaudeville company. His auspicious beginnings can be seen in the fantasy-fallutin' *Shirley Thompson Versus the Aliens,* a must in any Australian retrospective. Sharman's vision of the decade of Aussie cinema also explains his own place in it: "It was a hybrid decade, all to do with nostalgia, taking from other decades—there was very little that was original in the entire decade. And *Rocky Horror* was the musical of the seventies because it was about this hybrid. It was based on a fictional reality, a mirror image of a mirror." Perhaps the overall success of the Australian films can be explained in the way they call up nostalgia without being nostalgic. Their best films seem old-fashioned but not campy or self-consciously so "old-Hollywoodish" that they evoke old masters.

The most interesting directors are Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, and Michael Thornhill, and Stratton takes them in that order. Beresford was burdened with an "ocker" image after his taking on the truly Australian mores and mode in a film called *Don's Party.* Few people were ready to believe he could also make *The Getting of Wisdom,* for which he suffered a severe critical backlash from the press. Peter Weir, with his uncanny ability to create in a film a new time zone, is the best known internationally, but his sensitivity for atmospherics is not always shared by critics, let alone investors. Stratton tells the appalling story of the South Australian Film Corporation's virtual betrayal when they sent United Artists a telex expressing their "disappointment" in *The Last Wave* in a fit of self-importance although their investment was less than half that of UA. The SAFC also pulled out of a commitment to produce Weir's hit *Gallipoli,* proving justice can be almost poetic. Thornhill's *Between Wars* and *The F.J. Holden* opened him up to accusations of being a macho, politically conservative director. He dismisses all critical opinion, particularly in Australia: ". . . a film that Australian writers call a male chauvinist sexist masturbatory fantasy and overseas it will be seen as a feminist picture attacking the Australian male." Thornhill is wonderfully outspoken—enough to make up for his less loquacious colleagues, and Stratton lets him talk: "These film and showbiz writers—who know nothing of international finance—write as if a tax shelter was some shonky scandal. And this kind of irresponsible writing has a fundamental effect on investment in the industry." Thornhill himself began as a journalist.

Stratton shows the damage that critics can inflict, in the case of *The Night The Prowler.* Australian novelist Patrick White was bound to collaborate eventually with one of these young talents, and it was Sharman. Together they produced an intriguing psychological thriller, but managed to inspire the local critwits. Their derision was devastating and undeserved, a case of the swashbuckling anti-intellectualism Stratton associates with film critics being underpaid. If penury is the problem, what are we to make of the film-makers of *Newsfront* and *My Brilliant Career* who each earned $15,000 for two years' work?

Competing with American films and entering their distribution network is still that obscure object of desire, as it is with any national cinema. Two clear obstacles to that goal are, in fact, surmountable: should the Australians fall into the trap of flooding the market in the wake of a few successes, their wave will surely be their last. The second hurdle is a matter of overcoming a provincial mentality in order to gain access to the information the International Federation of Film Producers Association dispenses to its members: the Australian Film Corporation refuses to join.

Although Stratton's work on "the Australian film revival" sometimes reads like an evangelist's work, he makes it clear that a streamlined production can remain open to new talent and Australian production has some pointers for the mainstream. —KAREN JAEHNE

Controversy & Correspondence

POSTSCRIPT ON LOVE AND MONEY

Michael Dempsey writes: My report on James Toback's *Love and Money* (*FQ,* Winter 1980-81) needs amending.

When the color-corrected print of the completed film was screened in July 1980, the word was that Lorimar and United Artists would première it in December 1980 or early in 1981. At the time, its male lead, Ray Sharkey, was being touted as a rising star. *Willie and Phil* was about to start its run, followed by *The Idolmaker,* which Hollywood scuttlebutt had pegged as a certain hit. The supposition was that *Love and Money* would benefit from following these two pictures into theaters. However, they both bombed and so, regardless of his talents, Sharkey's name was supposedly commercially worthless by the start of 1981. *Love and Money* did not open on schedule.

In addition, Lorimar's break with United Artists complicated matters by sending the film (along with, among others, *The Postman Always Rings Twice, Second Hand Hearts, S.O.B.,* and *Victory*) back to Paramount, where Toback originally developed it. Setting it aside, the company focussed on the other, more expensive and star-laden Lorimar productions, apart from the eccentric *Second Hand Hearts,* which got dumped, as Toback himself commented, "like a Czechoslovakian picture." Another story alleged that Frederick Stockheinz, Klaus Kinski's character in *Love and Money,* bore an unflattering resemblance to Charles Bluhdorn, the boss of Gulf and Western, which owns Paramount. Some Southern

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California viewers disliked the film, partly because they recognized Los Angeles area locations which had to stand in for Central America because of Toback's tight $3 million budget and 30-day shooting schedule. As 1981 passed, it began to seem that the film had been shelved. But finally, on February 12, 1982, it did open in one New York theater, the only booking announced at that time and this writing.

This is not all. The *Love and Money* which has arrived at last is not quite the same *Love and Money* which I (and David Thomson, in a *Film Comment* piece reprinted in *Overexposures*) have discussed. I had thought that the movie was about 90 minutes long; but last May, at a screening of what has become the release version, Toback said that the original cut ran only 84 minutes. After seeing this cut, potential foreign distributors complained that it was too short. Lorimar pressed for the reinsertion of scenes which, as described in our interview, Toback had painstakingly winnowed out of the movie during post-production.

Moreover, a 1980 preview in Seattle yielded cards indicating that 81% of the audience objected to the ending: a frozen frame of Byron Levin as he runs along an LA street in search of his grandfather, followed by another of Catherine Stockheinz at the instant Byron first saw her. David Picker, the (now former) Lorimar executive whom Toback credits with letting him make the film in the first place, then stated that it could not be released without a more "upbeat" ending. Despite the credit "A Film by James Toback," Toback did not have final cut and so, rather than let Lorimar recut the film, he returned to the editing room himself. Now Byron does succeed in locating his grandfather, Catherine does return to him, and they all prepare to drive off together into a new life—one of several possible conclusions that Toback had shot, considered, and discarded. He also put back several scenes.

As a result, the release version has lost some of the lyrical speed and quicksilver transience which the original cut had, at least for me. In the interview, for example, Toback spoke of how intercutting two episodes which originally followed one another (a plane ride and a political rally) made them play mysteriously faster than if they had been shown separately. But that is precisely how they are shown in the release version, with exactly the result in heavier pacing described in the interview. The release version undoes a significant amount of the original cut's editing style, which had evolved as a response to the way that Ray Sharkey's performance turned out. Sharkey is basically a comic actor whose New York nasality and antsy aura unerringly bring out the absurd side of his characters' predicaments. Toback sought some of this comedy but got a bit more than he wanted; Sharkey did not deliver enough of the weight and gravity that the role (originally slated for Warren Beatty) requires. By lengthening some of his scenes from the original cut and adding others, the release version of *Love and Money* tends to emphasize this problem in certain sequences. And the new ending feels shoehorned into the film, whose emotional and thematic development up to that point it defies.

Last May, Toback expressed the hope that audiences would not take this for a happier-ever-after climax, but he did not sound too confident. Asked if he would have changed the original ending had his contract given him final cut, he said no. This past February, while completing the shooting of his new terrorism thriller, *Exposed* (starring Nastassia Kinski, Rudolf Nureyev, Harvey Keitel, Ian McShane, and Bibi Andersson), he mentioned

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a failed attempt to extract a little money from Paramount to repair the ending. So *Love and Money* goes out with the current one. Even in its somewhat altered state, it remains must-see viewing for serious moviegoers, assuming many of them get the chance to see it. Time, in fact, has provided an additional incentive. Though the interview was not able to stress it, the film pits its romantic, ineffectual dreamer against the blunt realities of a Central American revolution under siege from within and without—a remarkable prophecy of recent and current events in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala . . . not to mention Washington.

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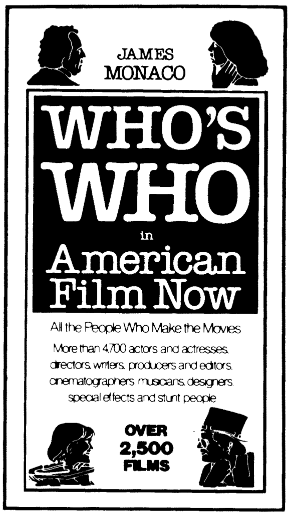

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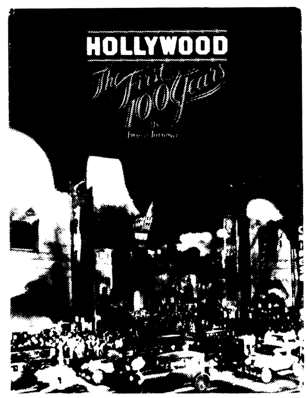

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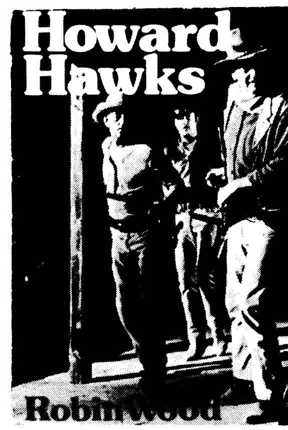

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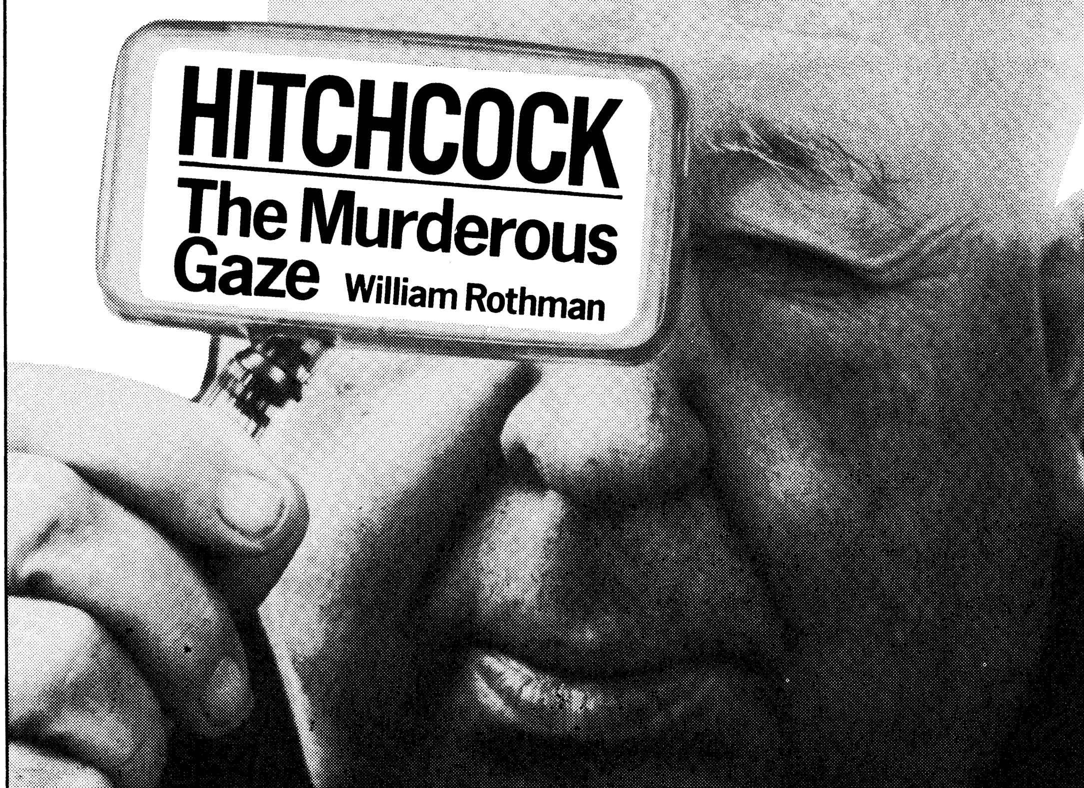

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