

Roderick Heath
Film Writing
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Viridiana (1961)

film freedonia



Director: Luis Buñuel

Screenwriters: Julio Alejandro, Luis Buñuel

Few names resonate in cinema history like that of Luis Buñuel. For the quality and radical vision of his work, of course, and also because the legend of Buñuel connected far-flung zones in that history, zigzagging from the heady bohemian climes and provocations of 1920s Paris and the violent, reactionary forces that consumed his native Spain in the age of Fascism, to the shoals of Hollywood and the fecund delights of Mexico's cinema golden age, before a triumphant return to the eye of European film to collect Oscars and Palmes d'Or when he was over sixty without dulling the glint of his wild imagination. Buñuel, born in the Aragon town of Calanda in 1900, was the son of a hardware retailer who had made a fortune in Cuba, and his teenage bride. Buñuel would later succinctly note that Calanda remained in the Middle Ages until World War I. Proving a disorderly youth during his Jesuit education, Buñuel became accomplished at entertaining friends with magic lantern and shadow plays, and was obsessively religious until he broke with the Catholic Church at 16 and declared himself an atheist. Whilst attending university in Zaragoza he became close friends with the quick-blooming artist and gadfly Salvador Dali and the future playwright Federico Garcia Lorca. Excited by the possibilities of film after watching Fritz Lang's *The Weary Death* (1921), Buñuel moved to Paris and, whilst also dabbling in theatre, started working for French director Jean Epstein. Buñuel served as assistant director on Epstein's 1926 adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, a work which prefigured much of Buñuel's cinema.



After breaking with Epstein Buñuel reunited with Dali, and, borrowing money from Buñuel's mother, the duo made the short film *Un Chien Andalou*, first screened in 1929. Emblazoned with the helpful caption "Nothing means anything," *Un Chien Andalou*, with its signature image of a woman's eyeball being sliced with a razor and other incendiary, delirious vignettes, immediately exemplified the phrase "succès de scandale" and allowed the emerging art mode of surrealism to annex cinema as an expressive realm. Buñuel was annoyed when his aesthetic hand grenade proved a hit with exactly the kind of intellectual in-crowd he meant to piss off, so he might have experienced a more ambivalent sense of achievement when his and Dali's follow-up, the feature-length *L'Age d'Or* (1930), attracted furious protests for its anti-Catholic satire. By that time Buñuel and Dali had ended their association over political differences. Once the stones, literal and metaphorical, stopped flying over *L'Age d'Or* Buñuel, after a brief and wilfully unproductive first sojourn to Hollywood, became deeply involved with leftist Spanish politics. His pseudo-documentary of life in Extremadura, *Las Hurdes: Tierra Sin Pan* (1933), was to prove his last significant directorial work for over a decade, and was equally infuriating to both the Republican government and the Franco regime for its harsh, ironic portrayal of the country's most degraded communities.



Buñuel retreated for a time into producing commercial Spanish cinema. When the Civil War broke out he participated in the Republican government's propaganda efforts, in the cause of which he travelled to the US in 1938 only to find himself stuck there when the war ended. Buñuel had a rough time trying to fit in with the American film world through World War II as his *L'Age d'Or* infamy was still dogging him, but his work in making and dubbing films for the Latin American market helped pave the way for a move into the Mexican film industry, which was at the height of a boom in the mid-1940s. There, after making a few well-received melodramas, he regained international profile with *Los Olvidados* (1950), a vivid blend of his surrealist and socially concerned sides. Buñuel's work through the late '40s and '50s, chiefly in Mexico but also encompassing the English-language *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1954), which gained a Best Actor Oscar nomination for star Dan O'Herlihy, was defined by a creative tension between commercial assignment and the director's transformative talent, and in many ways is his most interesting and diverse period.



Viridiana represented the third great pivotal moment of Buñuel's career, signalling tentative reconciliation with his homeland and a new stature as a major art-house auteur. He was lobbied to return to Spain and make a movie by the young directors Carlos Saura and Juan-Antonio Bardem, and his project was given vaguely official assent. To the surprise of everyone, the script for *Viridiana* was approved with only to some requests for alteration by censors, including of the suggestive ending, which Buñuel and his co-screenwriter Julio Alejandro revised to somehow make, whilst seeming relatively innocuous on paper, even filthier in its implications. Buñuel, no fool, still knew what he was courting, and had the film's negative smuggled to Paris to edit it for its premiere at Cannes. The Spanish government's film overlord unwittingly introduced it there, and was promptly sacked, the film banned not just from screening in Spain but from all mention in the press until well after Franco's death. But elsewhere, despite being vehemently decried by the Catholic Church, *Viridiana* managed to hit the cinema scene at the right time: it only took thirty years, but cognoscenti tastes were ready for Buñuel's outrageous outlook at its most unrefined and potent. *Viridiana* was Buñuel's second, if very loose, adaptation of a novel by the great Spanish novelist Benito Pérez Galdós, preceded by *Nazarin* (1958), and he would film Galdós a third time with 1970's *Tristana*.



In abstract *Viridiana* reads as exactly what the Franco regime took it to be, a blatantly impudent and iconoclastic jab at the official structures underpinning the type of conservative society they had been brutally enforcing for the previous twenty years. And it's certainly biting in its portrayal of a rotting aristocracy and the detached pretences of organised religion, both eventually collapsing before the proclivities of an energetic, pragmatic, hedonistically seductive modernity. Buñuel's art was however more refined than offering mere adolescent iconoclasm. *Viridiana* is a fable depicting the creation of modern Spain and the world beyond it, a fable laced with ambivalence, sarcasm, horror, and flashes of delirious beauty and weirdness. It also recapitulates the basic concern of *Nazarin*, which portrayed the remorseless defeat of a saintly priest in the face of a brutish society, whilst swapping the gender of the central character, a move that immediately introduces a different frisson. Galdós' novel was a direct sequel to his *Nazarin*, in fact, whereas Buñuel's extrapolation follows his own bent beyond the book's premise of an aristocratic woman founding a charitable collective.



Where *Nazarin's* hero was tragically noble and genuine despite his luckless passivity, *Viridiana's* title character is duly pretentious in her buffeted idealism. Viridiana (Silvia Pinal) is a mendicant approaching the time when she's to take her vows as a nun after a long, insulated religious schooling and upbringing. The Mother Superior of the convent (Rosita Yarza) tells her that her uncle, Don Jaime, who's paid for her upbringing and her dowry, has written to say he won't be able to attend the ceremony. Viridiana is unconcerned, as she had only ever met Don Jaime briefly, but the Mother Superior encourages her to accept his offer of a visit to his home as a show of respect and gratitude before returning permanently to convent life. Don Jaime (Fernando Rey) himself resides in a large, decaying mansion in a Spanish backwater: his former wife, Viridiana's aunt, Don Jaime later recounts, "died in my arms on our wedding night," still clad in her white dress. Upon their reunion Viridiana clinically admits that she feels no emotional connection to Don Jaime after too long apart. She insists on sleeping on the floor of her bedroom, and has brought with her an array of religious objects including her own personal crown of thorns and crucifixion nails.



Meanwhile Don Jaime gets his jollies paying Rita (Teresa Rabal), the young daughter of his housekeeper Ramona, (Margarita Lozano) to jump rope so he can stare in fascination at her young, flicking legs, and taking out his wife's wedding attire to indulge fetishistic communion with it, fitting her gleaming white high heels on his own feet and tenderly fitting her corset to his belly. As he does so one night during Viridiana's stay, he's bewildered by the sight of her sleepwalking around the house, engaged in some inchoate form of ritual, obliviously burning the contents of a knitting basket and collecting the ashes to dump on Don Jaime's bed. Don Jaime becomes preoccupied with convincing Viridiana to stay and marry him, eventually proposing this after he's talked her into donning his wife's wedding array. When the appalled Viridiana refuses, Don Jaime, with the aid of his slavishly devoted housekeeper Ramona, drugs her and her spirits her to her bedroom.



Viridiana's slyly accumulating power lies in the way Buñuel dryly presents its increasingly deviant concerns and storyline with a limpid, becalmed, studious gaze. One quality that always distinguished Buñuel as a director was, for all his reputation as one of cinema's most committed and peculiar artists, so ingenious at communicating unreal imagery, he had little time for showy filmmaking, preferring instead tightly choreographed camerawork, worked out in advance, and so like Alfred Hitchcock found the actual shooting rather dull. The material here grazes territory often staked out by gothic melodrama, as the young woman comes to the big old house where a troubled male elder resides brooding on ancient losses, and the motif of the eerily glaring portrait of Viridiana's long-dead aunt and Don Jaime's desire to transform his niece into the lost lover echoes Edgar Allan Poe stories of fetid and displaced sexuality ("Your aunt died on my arms on our wedding night, wearing that dress"). And yet Buñuel instead plays it not for thrills but as a deadpan tragicomedy. The motifs of the storyline also evoke basic clichés of erotica, with the classic figure of the beautiful, chaste, unworldly young woman placed at the mercy of her decadent uncle who embodies all the threat of a worldly male. Buñuel, who had referenced the Marquis De Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* in *L'Age d'Or*, here offered his own derivation on a Sadean narrative in portraying a young woman at the mercy of the world's corruption and who eventually embraces it.



Except that Buñuel plays games with such figurations, disassembling their presumptions, as he finds the absurd pathos in both his central characters. Don Jaime, introduced as a figure reminiscent of Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, is eventually revealed to be a figure of dank pathos as he's driven to find some form of catharsis for his long-thwarted desire for his late wife, ambiguously finding both deliverance from adulthood and proto-erotic thrills in watching Rita skipping, and obtaining the ideal body onto which to transfer his fetishist passion in the form of Viridiana himself. Sexuality infuses every gesture and yet is constantly displaced into other, bizarre, often functionally sado-masochistic forms. Don Jaime is affected by the sight of Viridiana's bare legs in her nightgown – Buñuel films her taking off her stockings as if unknowingly loading weapons for a campaign not yet begun – as she engages in her somnambulist ritual, a display which seems to signal her as another person driven to enact a nocturnal demi-life. Albeit whilst Don Jaime is at least conscious of his yearnings, Viridiana, casting ashes on the marriage bed her waking self has resolved never to inhabit, can only explore her own ambivalence in dreams. In this she becomes the active avatar of the surrealist creed. Ramona has an evident, unnoticed crush on Don Jaime, one she later, speedily transfers onto his son.



Meanwhile Buñuel sets up chains of imagery couched with unsubtle humour but also amassing thorny meaning. He cuts from a shot of Viridiana removing her stockings, revealing her white, gleaming legs, to a shot rising up from behind the organ Don Jaime is playing, her body and his fused, her body dancing to his tune, his own later donning of his wife's white shoes and Viridiana wearing them both anticipated. Eroticism involves its own mysterious transubstantiation, and the seemingly opposed reflexes of sex and faith, the impulse of the flesh and the ethic of its rejection, are nonetheless conjoined in the desire to become one with the worshipped figure, to experience on levels carnal and sublime. Biblical humour surfaces as Viridiana unthinkingly bites into a piece of apple Don Jaime hands her as he begins to talk her into wearing the wedding dress. Viridiana soon appears in that regalia, complete with veil and candelabra in hand, a puckish anticipation of her becoming a bride, whether it be to Jesus or someone more mortal, her absent intended mirrored by Don Jaime's absent wife.



Since his debut Buñuel had compiled a catalogue of fanatically fixated themes and images, including the true surrealist's fascination with "amour fou," mad and boundless love that persists beyond the grave – not for nothing had Buñuel made an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, *Abismos de Pasión* (1954) – and his delight in using insect life as strange and unstable symbol for the infesting and eruptive nature of such passion, a motif that flecks *Viridiana* – a bee drowning in water, the description of a great old house with a floor infested by spiders – amidst an expanded array of animal imagery that maintains its own peculiar, self-justifying context. Viridiana praying over her collection of religious-masochist paraphernalia gives way to the sight of Don Jaime's farmhand Moncho (Francisco René) briskly milking a cow, a commonplace act suddenly laced with phallic overtones as Viridiana cannot bring herself to handle the stiff, squirting teat, whilst Rita, gulping milk down hungrily, pauses to teasingly pours some on the cow's nose. Rita also experiences a disturbing premonition of the sexual furore stirring in the house as she complains of being awoken by a "black bull" coming into her room. As he discusses his illegitimate son Jorge with his niece, Don Jaime assures her he intends to make sure his progeny will be taken care of as he plucks that drowning bee out of a barrel of rainwater. This encapsulates both Don Jaime's humane side but also his incidental resolve to do as little as possible to service it.



It also prefigures a later, famous vignette of Jorge himself (Francisco Rabal) buying a dog when he's distressed by the sight of it being forced to walk briskly behind a peasant's cart to which it's tied. He walks off with his new pet, oblivious to another dog being dragged along in exactly the same way behind another cart. This vignette says much of Jorge's counterpoint experience to Don Jaime's, as a man who knows what it feels like to be the bastard castaway and knows empathy for the literal underdog, and puts his decent streak to immediate, effective employ, but only, again, within a certain limit. This vignette is almost endlessly dissectible, seeming on the face of things to make fun of the charitable impulse, but on closer examination noting that, whilst indeed there's an aspect of random luck often in who benefits from such humanitarian reflexes, that can have a crisscrossing effect with other gestures, but the eternal problem of social organisation is how to make that effect perpetual and mutual. These seemingly blithe, ironic jokes about the nature of charity see it as inevitably discreet and perhaps only effective when wisely limited in the face of all the world's pain and suffering. But this eventually plugs into a deeper thesis of *Viridiana*, when the heroine tries to become a river to the poor and desperate of the district, seeing them not as people but as extensions of her own self-image as a Christ-like fount.



Guilt partly underpins this effort from Viridiana, who, after rejecting Don Jaime, is confronted with the awful consequence in the sight of him dead, having hung himself from a tree near his house with Rita's jump-rope. This comes after Don Jaime makes a last, feverish play to possess his fantasy by drugging Viridiana after he's talked her into donning the wedding dress. If it seemed Hitchcock had paid homage to Buñuel's *El* (1953) with *Vertigo* (1958), Buñuel seems to return the favour here, nodding to *Rebecca's* (1940) basic plot, offering his own twist on *Vertigo's* portrait of a maniacal man trying to reconstruct a lost lover, and quoting *Notorious* (1946) in the laced cup of coffee that places Viridiana at Don Jaime's mercy. Don Jaime take her to the marriage bed, laying his face against her revealed, bobbing bosom and kissing her prone form, but ultimately wins the battle against the temptation to rape her. This retreat in proves however self-defeating. Don Jaime first tells Viridiana the next day when she awakens from her induced sleep that he did take her virginity, hoping this will compel her to remain with him, but her distraught reaction causes him to confess to Ramona that he didn't do it.



Ramona checks his bed for any sign of blood on the sheets to reassure herself he's told the truth. Viridiana remains understandably determined to leave, but she's brought back to the house by police to behold the awful spectacle of Don Jaime's death. The complexity of the aftermath of Viridiana's drugging suggests possible censor impact on Buñuel's storyline, but it also undoubtedly helps deepen psychological meaning. Don Jaime's story, which only occupies about a third of the film, is that of a man trying with all his might not to become a monster, despite being consumed by overpowering impulses that go to a rotten stem of the human being – love, lust, the urge for control, the ever-taunting mixture of the specific and interchangeable in people we as the centres of our own universes encounter. Whilst Viridiana plays the martyr, Don Jaime comes far closer to actually being one, even as he is at the same time just a dirty and pathetic old man. This connects to a credo Buñuel once stated outright, that nothing in the imagination is wrong, only misbegotten attempts to actualise them. Don Jaime's own, bitter sense of humour manifests in killing himself with the totem of sublimated longings and childhood obliviousness. After Don Jaime is brought down the jump-rope is restored to Rita who resumes skipping with it, despite the angry admonitions of Moncho: youth is as heedless of the pain of age as age often is of youth's autonomy, and those are two of the forces that wrestle in a traditionalist society.



Don Jaime's death becomes Viridiana's load, as she is named as co-inheritor of the house along with Jorge, who arrives with his lover Lucia (Victoria Zinny). Viridiana, after telling the Mother Superior she feels different and won't be returning to the convent, heads into the nearby town and begins gathering up local paupers, intending to create a kind of religious commune where everyone can do a bit of work to earn their meal and bed for the night. Meanwhile Jorge seems to provide a breath of cleansing air as he lays claim to his legacy. Jorge enters the scene with self-assured masculine swagger, imbued rather than quelled by not having had the easiest time in life, because he knows very well that he is the future. He does note with some resentment that he might, with Jaime's support, have become a qualified and successful architect by now rather than have merely been working in the office of one, but otherwise isn't particularly aggrieved by his father ("Anyone can have a fling and then walk away."). He does quietly admit to Lucia that Viridiana gets on his nerves because she's "rotten with piety." Lucia suggests he's really irritated because she pays no attention to him.



Contrasting Viridiana's choice of mission, Jorge sets to work repairing, cleansing, and modernising the house, including getting electricity connected and making the estate's farmland productive again, and hiring labourers for the job. Buñuel builds one of his more elaborate cinematic jokes as Viridiana leads her collective of paupers in prayer in the estate's blooming orchard – shades of Buñuel turning a wry salute to Robert Rossellini's *The Flowers of St. Francis* (1948) with its blend of earthy piety and beatific natural surrounds – whilst the labourers work around the house and grounds, bashing at crumbling brickwork, stirring cement, sawing lumber. Buñuel intercuts between prayers and working, forming them into a system of call and response, labour of the spirit and labour of the practical at once set in contention and locked in a sardonic harmony. The old Benedictine motto of “work and prayer,” realised as an elaborate fugue where focused labour contrasts Viridiana's ambitious but vague attempt to build a mutually reliant religious commune with social dregs as her flock.



Viridiana's harvested collective nonetheless quickly reveal themselves to be whatever the opposite is of the deserving poor. A gang of miscreants, petty thieves, sex fiends, and the pathetically penurious, the flock go along with Viridiana so long as she gives them a next-to-free ride. Only one, crippled man out of her initial selection refuses to go along with Viridiana and asks for some change instead, noting, superfluously, that he only accepts such charity because he's destitute. "She has a heart of gold," one pauper says of Viridiana, to another's comment, "Yes, but she's a little nutty." Far from embracing an egalitarian ideal of collective labour, the paupers have their own caste and class systems. The blind, bearded Don Amalio (José Calvo) and his pregnant lover Enedina (Lola Gaos) become de facto leaders of their group for their amoral and deftly manipulative cleverness. The paupers forcibly eject José (Juan García Tiendra), a man with a bad case of varicose veins, from their ranks because they think he's a leper and could infect them all, and toss stones his way whenever he hangs around, whilst taking pains not to let Viridiana see. Another pauper, a man with a bandaged foot known as 'El Cojo' or The Cripple (José Manuel Martín), appropriates Rita's jump-rope as a belt for his pants. He also volunteers to paint religious pictures, which he does, roping in his fellows to pose for him: "I don't like being the Virgin," one woman complains. Moncho soon becomes so aggravated by the paupers' presence that he quits working on the estate.



The official theme here is naiveté, with Viridiana doomed to learn she cannot apply abstract pieties to real life. She is confronted with the truth that the poor are not necessarily ennobled or sanctified by their condition, but remain essentially the same as other people, only more so – a free-floating mass of the greedy, cruel, perverse, and opportunistic. Indeed, the absence of social expectation on them frees them from fetters of behaviour beyond the most superficial and self-centred (Amalio, knowing when and how to grease the wheels, refers to Viridiana as “our blessed protectress”). Buñuel here confronts, with abyssal wit and cool candour, the intersection of two potent, long-antagonistic but fascinatingly similar faiths, Catholicism and Marxism, and one point of concern at which they converge, being what to do about people who fall to the bottom of a society, and provoking the eternal lament of adherents of both creeds as to why the masses will never do what's good for them. The paupers become Buñuel's impish projections of his most lawless, cynical, and profane impulses, whilst also evoking the hangover of a crazy medieval spirit that could have sprung off pages of Rabelais, embodying the tumult of the boiling mass of humanity in its natural, unelevated, tumultuous state. Meanwhile Jorge comes to represent industrious modernity, effective, efficient, in many way more genuinely helpful, but also casually imperious and immune to moral

criticism. Jorge finds delight in finding, amongst Jaime's possessions, a crucifix with a knife hidden within, a good, practical version of Cromwell's advice to put trust in God and keep your powder dry.



That Jaime's house can be taken as an emblem of the teetering, mouldering, pathetically repressed state of Spain circa 1961 is practically self-evident. More interesting is the way Buñuel sets his rival moral schemes in contention, forlorn and septic patriarchy and daffy virgin matriarchy both waning. Which goes a long way to pointing to the deepest cause for the offence *Viridiana* caused the Franco state. A little blasphemy and sin can be easily encompassed and suppressed, but not the film's most galling statement, its confident augury that all the old reactionaries will fall before the seductive appeal of a neo-pagan spirit inherent in the encroaching modern world, of which Jorge is the messiah, casually barging through taboos long tended with jealous care, and the nuns and serviles of the past will become the new whore-priestesses. Where Ramona lingered in lovelorn attentiveness to Don Jaime, and transfers that fascination onto Jorge, he quickly and deftly seduces her as they explore the musty attic crammed with the detritus of a festering aristocracy. Buñuel saves one of his most mordant visual metaphors here as he cuts from the couple's clinch to a cat springing on a mouse. This seems to indicate the ease of Jorge's seductive ploys, although the cat could also be the long-frustrated and carnally eruptive Ramona: later when Buñuel films them together in a moment of strikingly happy intimacy, it's Ramona who joyfully bites Jorge's hand.



The film's very end sees Jorge ascending to the status of a pagan priest-king settling down to be a fount of sexual beneficence, His coming inscribed in the strains of a new catechism – shake, shake, shake your cares away, declares the rock song coming from the radio. Buñuel doesn't take this for necessarily a great good, either, in part because an age of happy, straightforward hedonism would rob him of the mine of his art, his delight in human perversity, in the tangled weeds of sad and sorry old repressed Europe and the creatures it births. The epic quality that touches Don Jaime's fetishistic longings and Viridiana's blinkered and self-mortifying piety springs from the same fount: the old world fashioned over centuries to provide psychic and physical bulwarks against the chaos of natural forces. Buñuel was driven again and again to study the failure of such social bulwarks, their collapse the one certain thing in his worldview. Buñuel's constant preoccupying themes had surfaced in precursors to *Viridiana* like *Susana* (1951), which depicted with lacerating good-humour the progress of an ironically sanctified harlot through a good Mexican family, her pulchritude easily provoking the men to raptures, and *El* and *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955), with their portraits of maniacal men whose unstable machismo consumes them and others.



Buñuel's previous film, the near-equally great but relatively neglected *The Young One* (1960), although set entirely amongst fringe dwellers, also directly anticipated *Viridiana*, although with its depiction of the forcible seduction of a girl by an older male guardian edging far closer to outright paedophilia, and the theme of schism amongst the underclass encompassing racial prejudice. Buñuel would also go on to restage *Viridiana*'s riotous climax from a different angle via the famous conceit employed in *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), as guests at a bourgeois dinner party find themselves unable to leave a dining room due to some invisible force, and degenerate into brutes, an idea that, despite its purposefully arbitrary fantasticality, laid down a template for post-apocalyptic angst in cinema. Buñuel would return to the basic theme of *Viridiana*, and some of its jokes, whilst flipping genders again, for *Simon of the Desert* (1965), this time casting Pinal as the taunting, tempting female devil trying to seduce the pillar-sitting saint, eventually spiriting him from detached pinnacle to raucous contemporary New York nightclub. *Viridiana*'s own eventual embrace of her carnal side opened the gate for *Belle de Jour*'s (1967) portrait of a transgressive heroine trying to actualise her erotic fantasies and the brutally ironic feminist revenge motif of *Tristana*, a film that plays very much as an uglier, sadder, more conflicted remake of *Viridiana*, essentially positing if *Viridiana* succumbed to Don Jaime and then became him. Buñuel's influence would also soon echo through the emerging new European cinema, seen in variations like Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-End* (1967) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968).



Viridiana finally reaches its long, ecstatically profane climax as Viridiana and Jorge head off to deal with legal matters in town and Ramona takes Rita to the dentist, all expecting to be absent from the house until the next day. Viridiana leaves the snowy-haired, ineffectual Don Zequiél (Joaquín Roa) in nominal charge of the commune. Some of the paupers, seeing a chance for rest and relaxation, decide to kill a couple of the spring lambs on the estate for a roast dinner, and Enedina promises to make custard. The paupers soon sneak into the big house to gawk at its splendours. Surveying the portraits of Don Jaime and his wife, Zequiél comments, "Imagine hanging yourself with that kind of dough." The paupers elect to hold their banquet in the dining hall and clean it up so their cheeky transgression won't be noticed. There they merrily gobble up their food and raid the wine cellar too. They're even so kind as to let José join them, sequestered at a separate table. Amalio regales them with legendary feats of begging in rich churches where the women smelt so good they gave tactile communion. For the paupers, guzzling custard in swank environs is the next best thing to heaven, and once everyone's in the highest spirits Enedina proposes to take their photo with a camera "my parents gave me." The beggars eagerly arrange themselves into a pose on one side of the dining table before Enedina, recreating Leonardo Da Vinci's "The Last Supper," and Enedina does indeed per the old joke take their photograph, by raising her skirt and flashing her privates at them.



This famous vignette offers a pure crystallisation of Buñuel's humour, at once larkish and vicious, seemingly casual but carefully prepared. The "Last Supper" pastiche provided subsequent directors with a ready-made icon of irreverence to pay homage to, ranging from Robert Altman on *MASH* (1970) to Mel Brooks on *A History of the World, Part I* (1981). Buñuel's is the coldest and most merciless however: Amalio holds the place of Jesus, flanked by sleazy weirdoes. Handel's "Messiah," heard in the opening credits, is played by the beggars on the gramophone whilst several begin dancing to its strains with sprightly, satiric energy. Jose dons pieces of the wedding dress and swans about as a sickly drag act. Here the paupers rejoice in their freedom to casually disrespect every yardstick of the society whose fringes they persist on, all charged with childlike glee – Buñuel zeroes in on the dancers' legs, which recalls Rita's as she used her jump-rope. But other urges are stirring, at once more adult and more animalistic, as the party degenerates into squalid chaos. Enedina is grabbed by one of the men, Paco (Joaquin Mayol), dragged behind a couch, and raped. "Let 'em scuffle," Zequiél declares in his besotted state, and gets a face-full of custard tossed at him. Amalio, thinking Enedina is willingly screwing Paco, starts furiously smashing everything on the dining table with his cane, and Enedina, released, dismisses Amalio's display: "If he were my husband he'd be entitled." Some of the paupers flee the house as Viridiana, Jorge, Ramona, and Rita return unexpectedly by car, and the others shuffle out more pretentiously, facing up to the astounded Jorge with varying attitudes of proprietorial surprise, or, in Amalio's case, a blessing for providing a blind man with sustenance.



Where other filmmakers might have felt licence to make their style frenetic to mimic the mounting craziness in such a sequence, or to have the paupers become theatrical in their destructiveness. Buñuel simply and methodically documents the mounting bedlam, only in the “Last Supper” tableaux delivering an arch cinematic joke. Otherwise he maintains deadpan observation, as with Enedina’s assault. Buñuel seems to be dramatizing the worst nightmare in the reactionary mindset: the filthy, ignorant scum erupting to despoil civilisation and take advantage of their benefactors. But their actions also, pointedly, recreate things already seen in the course of narrative – sexual assault, fetishism, transvestism, contempt for tradition, heritage, autonomy, and responsibility – only without any veil of pretence or obfuscation, simply embracing wild impulse. Don Jaime’s drugging and suborning of Viridiana, halted by whatever lingering ethic persists in his person, is soon reproduced in blunt and brutal fashion as El Cojo and Jose collaborate to knock out and tie up Jorge so they can rape Viridiana.



Buñuel dives in for a close-up noting Viridiana's failing fight against El Cojo, noting her hand tugging desperately at his belt, which is of course Rita's jump-rope. Buñuel deploys another of his wicked ironies, as Jorge deploys the oldest and most essential art of the capitalist to save the day – using the promise of reward to turn one member of the proletariat against another and forget his own interests, albeit in this case for an urgently righteous cause, as Jorge convinces José, who waits for his turn, to intervene in the rape by offering him money. José promptly and enthusiastically uses a fire shovel to bash El Cojo's skull in. Calm is restored as the Guardia Civil arrive to round up the ratbags. A gentle inward dolly shot of Viridiana the next day, watching Jorge as he resumes his reordering, confirms the inevitable without words, that she's fallen under Jorge's spell, and in her room weeps as she casts off the last of her previous identity and, using a cracked fragment of a mirror, refashions her new one, unleashing her blonde hair.



Meanwhile her religious iconography burns up outside, Rita studying the blazing crown of thorns in bewilderment before tossing it on the flames. Viridiana appears at Jorge's bedroom door, charged with sullen, silently communicated need, only to find him ensconced with Ramona. Jorge, immediately deciding how to handle the quandary as is his wont, proposes they settle down to play cards, noting "All cats are grey by night," before commenting, as he suggestively takes her hand and uses it to cut the cards, "The first time I saw you I thought, 'Cousin Viridiana and I will finish up shuffling the deck together.'" Perhaps cinema's greatest dirty joke and fade-out punchline, but again realised with Buñuel signature mixture of economy and attentiveness. Buñuel spares shots to note Ramona's hesitant fear of rejection and competition and Viridiana's blank gaze as she ponders the question as to whether this is who she actually is, before moving to a long shot, retreating slightly as if with a sense of decorum whilst peering through an open door, noting the emergent ménage-a-trois simply and calmly getting on with life in the new age.

Athena (2022)

this island rod



Athena bursts out of the gate with a galvanising setpiece of violent showmanship. A teenage boy named Idir has been murdered: the boy was from a French-Algerian family, who lived in the tower estate of Athena out in the Parisian boondocks, and a viral video of his killing shows his assailants were several men in police uniforms. The resulting outrage is sparking insurrectionary foment not just in Athena but all across France in angry pockets, communities filled up with immigrants and the poor. A press conference is held in front of a police station, and Idir's older brother Abdel (Dali Benssalah), a decorated war hero, fronts the attention of the community and press to call for calm. As Abdel speaks, another of his brothers, Karim (Sami Slimane), waits on the fringes of the crowd with compatriots from the 'hood. Karim lights a Molotov cocktail and hurls it amidst the crowd, signalling the start of a massed attack by Athenians, who easily sweep over the cops and crowd and plunder the station of weapons and equipment to use as they fortify the estate. Amidst the whirling crowds and violent clashes of the rioters and the cops, Abdel ventures into the estate in seeking out Karim, and is drawn by his mother (Darina Al Joundi) to attend a service for Idir, where he exchanges a charged glare with Karim.



The service is cut short as members of the CRS, a branch of the French federal police charged with riot response, launch an assault on the barricades the insurrectionaries have built. Abdel directs the evacuation of the old and uninvolved residents of the tower blocks, only to be scooped up by the cops as a rioter. He is freed by a senior cop, who tells him they think the murder might actually have been committed by some far-right provocateurs as a false flag operation. Meanwhile, a fourth brother, Moktar (Ouassini Embarek), is a drug dealer who desperately tries to hide his wares and weapons, holing up with his crew in an empty shop and trying to get someone on the phone who can extricate them. Hiding on the estate is wanted terrorist Sébastien (Alexis Manenti), who initially seems set on serenely ignoring the chaos and has to be dragged bodily away from the garden he tends. Amongst the teams of riot gear-clad cops besieging the estate is Jérôme (Anthony Bajon), who, during a hapless attempt to storm the estate after nightfall, is separated from his fellows and strips off his uniform in an attempt to elude capture and sneak back out, but he's eventually run down and taken captive, as Karim wants to use a cop as a hostage to force the police to name the officers involved in the murder. Abdel soon ventures back into Athena to try and confront Karim and extract Jérôme.



Athena is the third feature for director Romain Gavras, son of the great Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras and who made his name making music videos before debuting with features on *Our Day Will Come* (2010). Gavras cowrote *Athena* with Elias Belkeddar and Ladj Ly, and it feels like it might as well be a sequel to Ly's 2019 film *Les Misérables*. Where that film traced out all the social factions and ruptures in a banlieue leading up to an explosion of communal violence, *Athena* is entirely dedicated to portraying the explosion. Gavras' work evokes and encompasses flashpoints of modern discourse as it portrays an ever-so-slightly magnified and futuristic what-if, signalling the events witnessed in the film are the start of a civil war, the inevitable end product of rampant racism, inequality, and nascent, authoritarian repression. Gavras stages a great amount of the film in a succession of long, astonishingly staged and forcibly immersive takes, all of which are designed to elicit how'd-they-do-that gasps from the audience. The opening shot is over 12 minutes long, including the attack on the police station and the raiders' return to Athena as conquering heroes.



During this startling unit of choreography and camerawork, Gavras manages to set up the basic story and characters, and hit notes of quasi-Eisensteinian political spectacle, whilst still offering some fine little asides, like a resident begging Karim for a cigarette as he arrives with his captured arsenal, with Karim unable in the moment but giving him the smoke a little later as he strides towards his date with incendiary destiny. This string of in-your-face riot scenes nonetheless threatens to become monotonous. At this point in time, after more than a decade of long-take epics hitting the big screen with their blend of stylistic vividness and dramatic reductiveness, it's hard to really make the form even vaguely interesting to me. On occasions during *Athena* I began to feel like I was watching the prettiest riot ever photographed, particularly in the sequence where the attacking cops shelter under their shields whilst being bombarded with rockets in a sea of multi-coloured sparks and the boiling flames of one of Karim's molotovs, even as the mechanics of the staging are designed to floor the viewer with the chaotic beauty and seeming physical riskiness of it all.



But Gavras also fills out the margins of his precisely coordinated staging with enough extras and flourishes of bursting smoke and pummeling missiles, amassing into a convincing sense of a teeming, overboiling bedlam compared to, say, the plastic-feeling *1917* (2019). *Athena's* subject is also, in a way, its style, as the staging doesn't just push the viewer amidst the evocation of a madcap physical environment but also obliges identification with the characters. Gavras depicts a certain brand of righteous, would-be macho fury, with Gavras encoding that frenzied, tunnel-visioned focus into the very texture of what we're seeing: the driving, compulsive camera, which seems to see all but also forces the focus in a specific way that refuses glances at the periphery, and works on viewpoint like a thumb on a pressure point, reproducing the tormented, glazed intensity of the protagonists. The price Gavras pays for this fusion is he never really takes much interest in the islands of ordinary, stolid life existing cheek-by-jowl with the frenzied displays of wilful defiance, except in fleeting fashion when the brothers converge on their mother's flat for Idir's service.



Gavras' focus on the three brothers is a Dostoyevskian conceit that allows him to, despite the high-pressure pace and resulting, inevitable paucity of characterisation and depth, quickly sketch some symbolic

inferences. The similarities between Abdel, Karim, and Moktar emerge – they’re all tough, canny tacticians and warriors dedicated to their specific causes. As do their crucial differences and varying maladaptations to their environment. Abdel is excessively controlled until he bursts at the seams. Karim is charismatic and apocalyptic in his grief-unleashed power but also blind to anything else including logic. Moktar has fallen from grace, unstable and cynical. The brothers’ sister (Nesrien Abdat) upbraids Abdel as a traitor, telling him the war he fears has already started, although Abdel seems far too tightly-wrapped to be distracted by this, with a honed soldier’s concern for community rather than protest, only for him to then prove just one more wrenching loss away from becoming another wild berserker and unreasoning avenger. As the drama unfolds the brothers die one by one, fractured personalities essentially collapsing into the one body that’s finally left paralysed by moral and personal torment. That’s a charitable reading of Gavras’ intent. The less charitable one is that Gavras wants the epic, delirious power of melodrama, with its ritualised pivots and gestures, whilst playing at making a serious work of foreboding social and political portraiture.



Athena recalls quite a few products of politically-charged 1970s genre film, including John Carpenter’s *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) and Walter Hill’s *The Warriors* (1979), even as it situates itself as more of a burning social issue drama, with Karim playing Cyrus to the Athenian horde, and also Ivan Dixon’s *The Spook Who Sat By The Door* (1973) in portraying erupting civil strife and refusing to have it end with the movie. But Gavras doesn’t really do much to differentiate his film from some other, more recent works to tackle similar subject matter and aesthetic reflexes, including Ly’s *Les Misérables* and Matthieu Kassovitz’s *La Haine* (1995), and with Jerome as a downy-faced young stray caught in apache territory a la the hero of Yann Demange’s *'71* (2014). There’s a hint of provocative irony in the title in portraying the multiethnic but mostly Muslim and North African community of Athena residing in a banlieu named for the Greek goddess, whose namesake city was the birthplace of ornery democracy, as Karim and his compatriots mount their improvised acropolis and try to wield people power on the most basic level, as well as the narrative’s efforts to work up fraternal drama worthy of Attic theatre. But the film never really tries to enlarge its basic thesis of scowling, vengeful revolutionaries versus armoured heavies, save for an overheard snatch of a TV news show where one commentator takes issue with the us-versus-them mentality of another, commenting that they’re supposed to all be one society.



That very dispute hangs heavily over *Athena*, and yet Gavras never really come to grips with it, and indeed given all that transpires it almost seems to agree ultimately with the second commentator, purely because the spectacle of mass uprising and violence is so very very cool, cinematically speaking. Some controversy around *Athena* has also been sourced in the film's attempt to be ambivalent over the exact spur of the revolt and the resulting implications when it comes to political interpretation. Gavras appends a coda that circles back to Idir's killing and reveals that the cops were correct when they suspected it was an act of deliberately staged provocation by right-wing thugs. Given all the controversies over racist and thuggish policing across the western world in the past few years, this scene risks a certain facetiousness in avoiding pressing this point too firmly. On the other hand, recent events have also highlighted the real dangers of extremist manipulation. *Athena* then might, depend on your viewpoint, be seen as letting down the anti-cop attitude of current young progressive consensus or making a timely warning about easy it can be today to contrive the conflagration of a society by those who wish such an end. The film also takes care to contrast the stoked rage of the minority people in Athena and the brothers in particular with the more detached but also more frightening nihilism and will to disorder represented by Sebastian. The terrorist, once drawn out of his preoccupied bubble, is inspired to renew his delight in blowing stuff up, and immediately sets about staging a grandiose act of destruction theatre. An interesting disparity to dig into, once again only glanced at amidst the sturm-und-drang.



The second half of the film sees Abdel locating Karim and his captive and pulling Jerome out of his clutches, only to be pursued and forced to take refuge with Moktar and his besieged band: Moktar elects to call in some corrupt vice cops he's in cahoots with, only for them to turn up like a gang of ninja assassins, and their trigger-happy reflexes provoke the tragic climactic scenes, resolving in a mini-Gotterdammerung. This plot twist allows Gavras to have his cake and eat it when it comes to providing properly villainous police before delivering his concluding twist. The most striking performance comes from Slimane, making his debut and brilliantly inhabiting Karim with his blend of inchoate rage and anguish, making Karim charismatic and frightening despite being very young. As one of the film's few, relatively quiet and meditative moments depicts, focusing on Karim when he's briefly left alone and struggles to hold back tears, his relentless motion is an attempt to forestall being consumed by his emotions, which instead expresses in acts of insurrectionary bravura. A pivotal scene in which Karim tries to maintain his unswerving purpose whilst threatening to burn his brothers out of their stronghold to get Jerome back achieves something like the power of Greek theatre it wants to evoke in large part because of Slimane's acting, Karim's efforts to turn himself into a pure engine of wrath and his deeper feelings warring until he's happy to instead provoke his own extermination. *Athena* is an extremely well-made film, and one that captures something of the nightmarish furore it tries to provide with the cutting-edge cinema brand Gavras applies to it. But finally it proves just a little too pat in both plot and ideas, and just as high as its characters on the fumes of their sweaty, swaggering force and the fiery gleam of their wrath.



Captain Horatio Hornblower (1951)

aka Captain Horatio Hornblower, R.N.

this island rod



C.S. Forester's series of novels about omniscient Napoleonic War naval hero Horatio Hornblower gained a cult following from the moment the first book was published in 1937, and still persists today. The series and its hero influenced not just clearly similar creations like Patrick O'Brien's Aubrey-Maturin series, but also *Star Trek's* James T. Kirk, who was explicitly conceived by Gene Roddenberry as "Hornblower in space." Ioan Gruffud played Forester's hero in an excellent series of telemovies in the late 1990s. The lone feature film taken from the novels isn't particularly well-remembered, despite being a big-budget production directed by the great Raoul Walsh and one of the biggest hits of 1951 at the box office. Attempts to adapt the novels had been made since Warner Bros. bought the rights, initially intending an Errol Flynn vehicle. When the time came, Forester provided his own adaptation drawn from the first three novels in his series, although the actual script was written by a battery of hands including the then-ubiquitous Scottish-American writer Aeneas Mackenzie.



The film's first half is then sensibly occupied with the initial novel, *The Happy Return*, recounting Hornblower's voyage to the western coast of South America. Walsh opens *in medias res* with Hornblower's ship, the HMS *Lydia*, becalmed in the ocean and a pall of frustration upon the crew, having sailed for months out of sight of land on an enigmatic mission and now stuck with supplies dwindling. Hornblower (Gregory Peck) confidently predicts the sighting of land and fulfilment of their objective in public but confesses doubts in his log. But his bold predictions prove true and the ship sails close to the shore of a small country that's recently declared itself independent from Spain and become a republic under Don Julian Alvarado (Alec Mango). Hornblower's mission is finally revealed, to complete a treaty with Alvarado and supply him with arms to make war on the Spanish, allies of Napoleonic France. Upon arriving, however, Hornblower finds Alvarado has become a megalomaniac convinced of his own godlike stature and insists on being called El Supremo.



Hornblower swallows his scruples in giving Alvarado what he demands and maintains strict adherence with Admiralty policy when Alvarado informs him the *Natividad*, a Spanish man-o'-war larger than the *Lydia*, is approaching his coastline, and that he wants Hornblower to capture it for his use. Hornblower successfully leads a raiding party to board the Spanish vessel and defeats its captain (Christopher Lee) in a sword fight. He hands the *Natividad* over to Alvarado, telling him he executed all the officers, a lie to save them from Alvarado's sadistic intentions. Just as the *Lydia* starts for home, they encounter a ship carrying British civilians fleeing plague in Panama, including the sister of the Duke of Wellington, Lady Barbara Wellesley (Virginia Mayo), and a Spanish ambassador who happily gives Hornblower the good news that Spain and Britain are now allies and Alvarado their common enemy.



When Forester's early source novels were published, world affairs were dominated by figures like Mussolini and Hitler, and it's intriguing to read Alvarado as a reflection of them, a more heightened and localised equivalent to the destructive and egotistical dictator. This gave Forester's work a slight edge of contemporary import despite the cosy historical setting, assuring readers that no matter what the moment there were people like Hornblower and organisations like the Royal Navy to take up the challenge. There's also a soupcon of *Heart of Darkness* in the concept of a mad lord delighting in cruelty ruling over a jungle empire: modernism's founding myth reclaimed by its Victorian pulp fiction forebears. In the film *Mango*, despite his discomfiting-to-contemporary-sensibilities ethnic make-up job, does a good job walking the line between frightening seriousness and humour value in playing the strident, bullying, delusional El Supremo, first beheld under a spearing ray of light spilling through a high window of his fortress like the sun god reborn. Alvarez still has enough presence of mind to change tack with the visiting Englishman when Hornblower assures him that if he's interfered with the *Lydia* will bombard Alvarado's palace to rubble. Once informed of the change in allegiances, Hornblower faces up to the task of turning about and taking on Alvarado in his new ship, leading to a thunderous battle that sees the *Lydia* emerging victorious despite the *Natividad's* much greater firepower, thanks to the intense discipline and fighting wit of Hornblower and his men.



Captain Horatio Hornblower tries to straddle the very Hollywood tradition of the swashbuckler with its boisterous and colourful style, and the drier, more realistic if still fervent edge of Forester's stories, which pitched Hornblower as a man all at sea on land, a romantic figure distinguished by his lack of romanticism with his emotionally withdrawn intellectualism and literal tone-deafness. Here Hornblower has to be a reasonably confident romancer, but Walsh tries to present him otherwise in all his harrumphing and deflecting stoicism. The early scenes take advantage of the tense, stuck-in-the-water situation to smartly observe the distance between the captain's ramrod sense of discipline and correctness – he insists on eating his dinner even after land is sighted – and the private concerns he admits only to his log, and his approach to dealing with men. He quietly but firmly explains to one of his officers as they watch a sailor being flogged how the officer's own empty threat entailed this unnecessary punishment, because Hornblower had to back him up regardless. The late critic Clive James called Peck an ideal Hornblower and despite Peck's habitual refusal to attempt an accent it's still hard to argue: Peck's air of premature gravitas and upright, sober intelligence were suited to the character.



Peck is surrounded by a battery of notable actors in his crew including Robert Beatty, Terence Morgan, and Moultrie Kelsall as his trio of stalwart lieutenants Bush, Gerard, and Crystal, Stanley Baker as a midshipman, and James Robertson Justice as Seaman Quist. Quist is a former thief who turned sailor at a judge's insistence and feels ennobled when Hornblower remembers his name. One nice recurring character touch is Bush and Crystal's constant wagering over Hornblower's responses to challenges including what his first response to having a woman aboard will be: when he does catch sight of Lady Barbara, Hornblower gives another harrumph, and Bush silently holds out his hand to Crystal for payment. Of course the two fall deeply and hopelessly in love as Lady Barbara acts as nurse for his wounded men, and then Hornblower nurses her when she collapses with fever, a disease at first feared to be the yellow fever she fled in Panama but the captain hopes will prove mere swamp fever. And of course, it is. Hornblower nonetheless delivers Lady Barbara back to her fiancé, Admiralty bigwig Rear Admiral Sir Rodney Leighton (Denis O'Dea), partly as it's his duty and also because there's the little matter of Hornblower already having a wife, albeit one he's only seen for a few months in a decade of marriage.



In a cruelly sardonic twist of fate, Hornblower retains his honour only to return home and find his wife has died giving birth to his son. Walsh delivers a beautiful piece of direction as Hornblower reads his wife's deathbed letter to him, whilst the camera dollies away from him and back, surveying a home filled with all the totems of the life lived and not lived there – a china collection, a beloved armchair, a near-finished tapestry. Death defines the married couple in much the same manner they lived, in the presence of absence. This breath of tragedy helps ground a movie that's otherwise arguably too glossy, too brightly coloured and picture-book to properly capture Forester or suit Walsh, who generally liked his heroes earthier and more compulsive, although Hornblower, as a man walking a fine political edge in only being sustained by his successes, certainly fits Walsh's penchant for hard-working social misfits. The main fault however with the film is the disjointed narrative, created by concatenating different stories, and the long and draggy mid-film pause to develop a romance that never feels interesting despite Walsh having worked with Mayo before on *White Heat* (1949). *Captain Horatio Hornblower* begs some interesting comparisons to Peter Weir's *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003), including the story involving a mission to the Pacific and the character of a very young, aristocratic midshipman who suffers a gruelling fate (maimed in the later film, killed here). Indeed I wish to a degree each film had some of what the other has: that Walsh's film had some of the grittiness and intimate flavour of the Weir, and that Weir had Walsh's facility for punchy but also clean and legible action.



The action sequences here are superlatively detailed and assembled: the model work is sometimes a bit ropy whilst still retaining specific charm, but the close shots of actors almost being crushed by tumbling debris, flipping cannons, and boiling fire have a physical intensity lost in a more special effects-driven age. The duel between the *Lydia* and the *Natividad* stands up with the opening battle of *The Sea Hawk* (1941) as a depiction of wind-driven naval combat, and given a touch of delirious humour as Alvarado keeps on ranting until a cannon crushes him. There's also the inherent fun in seeing Peck and a young, pre-Hammer Lee fencing. Later Hornblower's chief antagonist proves not the French, but Leighton (whose nickname amongst naval officers is "Mucho Pomposo," echoing El Supremo), who snootily upbraids Hornblower for some of his decisions. Better heads in the Admiralty approve of and promote Hornblower, giving him a captured French ship-of-the-line to command as part of Leighton's squadron. This is true to Forester's theme of Hornblower as a man rising through ability but surrounded by privileged dolts, as well as offering a knot in the romantic subplot, as Hornblower has to kowtow to a man who resents him for saving his now-wife as well as disliking his defiant ability. Leighton tries his best to keep Hornblower on a short leash, but when Hornblower tracks down three blockade-running warships in a French harbour intended to help Napoleon's latest campaign, he decides it's worth the risk of a court martial to attack.



With his new ship a captured French vessel, Hornblower deviously flies a French flag and sails past the harbour's fortifications before letting loose, sinking the three ships before his own is fatally damaged, so they let their ship sink in the harbour. Most of the sailors are sent home but Hornblower and the badly injured Bush are sent to Paris to be hung as pirates, just as Leighton and the rest of his squadron arrive to bombard the fort. Quist repays his feeling of distinction by volunteering to be bodyguard for Hornblower and Bush. The last part of the film turns into straightforward adventure fare indistinguishable from, say, most of the movies Robert Taylor made in the '50s, rather than recapturing the proto-noir intensity of Michael Curtiz's swashbucklers with Flynn. Hornblower, Bush, and Quist escape during their journey, trek to a port, and steal a ship, even obtaining a crew at the last moment by liberating some English POWs in a forced labour gang. Upon return Hornblower finds Leighton's been killed in the attack on the fort, freeing him to marry Lady Barbara. All a bit breezy and easy, perhaps (in the books, for instance, Bush lost his leg) to quite live up to the early parts of the film. But it's hard to begrudge the film's bright and classy sheen as an historical fantasy for all those frayed post-war, atomic-age nerves, and it serves much the same purpose today.



Kiss Me Deadly (1955)

film.freedonia



Director: Robert Aldrich

Screenwriter: A.I. Bezzerides

Robert Aldrich was one of Hollywood's greatest directors and one of its most unclassifiable, his life and art stamped with fearsome individualism and replete with ironies. Chief amongst which is that for a director who usually made such gritty movies filled with violence and mania and living rage, Aldrich came from perhaps the most privileged background of any major American filmmaker. Aldrich was born in 1918 into a Rhode Island family with deep roots and deeper pockets. Aldrich counted amongst his ancestors Rhode Island Colony founder Roger Williams and Revolutionary War hero Nathanael Greene. The Aldrich family's affluence was chiefly owed to his grandfather, a hugely successful inventor. Aldrich's father was an influential newspaper publisher, and his aunt married into the Rockefellers, establishing a potent political clique. Aldrich himself was heir to the family fortune, but he broke with his family and stoically accepted complete disinheritance after a turn to leftist politics in college partly inspired by the spectacle of the Great Depression. He persuaded an uncle to get him a job on the lowest rung of the ladder at RKO Pictures, around the same time Orson Welles signed his contract with the studio, but unlike Welles Aldrich faced a long apprenticeship as a filmmaker.



After being rejected for service in World War II, Aldrich was nonetheless able to move quickly into working as an assistant director. Soon he went freelance and was in heavy demand. He worked with a swathe of major filmmakers including Charlie Chaplin, Jean Renoir, Lewis Milestone, William A. Wellman, Abraham Polonsky, and Joseph Losey, and made connections with many of his future, stalwart collaborators including cinematographer Joseph Biroc and composer Frank DeVol. Aldrich was left alone during the Red Scare, perhaps because of his relative youth and family background, but many of his friends and collaborators like Polonsky were targeted and blacklisted, and Aldrich remained their staunch supporter. With his growing directorial ambitions frustrated by a lack of offers to make features, he worked in television for a busy few years, which he described as a “director’s crash course” that taught him efficiency but also gave space to experiment. In between TV jobs, an established director recommended him to MGM, leading to him making his feature debut on the low-budget baseball film, *Big Leaguer* (1953). It wasn’t a success, but when he pieced together the action film *World for Ransom* (1954) with the cast and sets of a TV shows he regularly helmed, he gained the attention of Burt Lancaster and producer Harold Hecht, and was hired to make the Western *Apache* (1954). This proved a hit, and a follow-up, *Vera Cruz*, was even more successful.



Now fully established, Aldrich moved into producing as well as directing, founding his Associates and Aldrich company, commencing a lifelong effort to maintain as much control as possible over his movies. In an amazing spasm of work, he made eight films in the first three years of his career, including some of his very best work in *Vera Cruz*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Autumn Leaves*, and *Attack*, as well as the overcooked but fascinating Hollywood tale *The Big Knife* (1955). Unfortunately he also commenced another of his career habits, as that run of great works didn't include enough hits, and he only made sporadic movies for time in a peripatetic career until *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* (1962) proved another, much-lauded success. This pattern would repeat as big hits like *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) and *The Longest Yard* (1974) punctuated more personal, edgy, and often unpopular works. Perhaps the fundamental concern of Aldrich's cinema, beyond a compulsive interest in character forced to extremes of survival, was a preoccupation with characters consumed by a feeling they're not in control of themselves or their lives, and being driven to extreme measures to earn a slice of agency and rescue themselves, writhing their way through hellish straits in an attempt to come to grips with their world and battle the emblems of their frustration, only to too often squander it or finish up in self-negation. Cool intelligence was the only trait Aldrich exalted, but also found it rare. Authority was inevitably treated with utmost scepticism.



Most often in Aldrich's films this registered through emphasis on a certain brand of virile masculinity with outsider heroes put in a pressure cooker situation, particularly in his take on Mickey Spillane's popular private eye character Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly*, the war-is-hell tales *Attack* and *The Dirty Dozen*, the disaster survival film *The Flight of the Phoenix* (1964), the Depression-era duel of bum and thug in *Emperor of the North Pole*, and the clash of jailers and jailed in *The Longest Yard*. But he also often articulated the same theme through a succession of fractured heroines, in the sullen melodrama of *Autumn Leaves*, the gothic furore of *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* (1962) and *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte* (1964), and the forlorn queerness of *The Killing of Sister George* (1968). When he took on Hollywood myth-making it came in the twinned, gendered portraiture of *The Big Knife* and *The Legend of Lylah Clare* (1968), both of which couch their arguments in portrayals of the anointed movie star as a creature possessed and puppeteered by the wills of others, including the audience. By the time he made films like *The Grissom Gang* (1970), *Ulzana's Raid* (1972) and *Hustle* (1975), films that purely articulated his tragic-romantic streak in the context of brutally honest takes on the Gangster, Western, and cop thriller respectively, the zeitgeist and filmmaking fashion had caught up with him, even as his hit-and-miss habits continued until his death in 1983.



Aldrich also often presaged trends in Hollywood and the broader pop culture, his ahead-of-his-time stature particularly ironic given his only occasional synch with the popular audience. He anticipated the next generation of “Movie Brat” directors in trying to construct his own movie studio to escape the thralls of the system as much as possible, finally springboarding it off the success of *The Dirty Dozen* only to, like most of his followers, lay it waste in following his wont. *Apache* and *Vera Cruz* set the scene for the revisionist-themed Westerns of the 1960s and ‘70s, and the latter provided a crucial embarkation point for both Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone. *Attack* announced a new era of bitter, ambivalent war movies. His calculated use of the aging stars Bette Davis and Joan Crawford in *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* found a new way to utilise the mystique of aging movie stars and their popular cachet, and helped usher in a camp sensibility in exploiting the disparity between their acting styles and air of pathos in ruined grandeur and a cruder new world, as well as Aldrich’s penchant for overheated behaviour. *The Dirty Dozen*, still his most famous and popular film, presented Aldrich with the perfect vehicle to articulate his obsessions and express his rebellious streak, even as it shaded into a uniquely fork-tongued tale where the nominally heroic rebels are mostly, ultimately revealed as viciously murderous lunatics and then killed in the name of greater good.



Kiss Me Deadly meanwhile would prove a source point not just for the next few decades' worth of urban crime films but, in a way, a swathe of modern cinema. Whilst detectably influenced by the likes of Welles, John Huston, and Joseph H. Lewis, *Kiss Me Deadly* fused their examples and created something fresh and weird. Whilst it wasn't much of a success at first in the US, it became a cult hit in France, and proved a major inspiration for the Nouvelle Vague cadre, in its dynamic use of location shooting and also the way it utilised genre film conventions to encompass a panoramic viewpoint on a time and place, crawling through the gut of 1955 Los Angeles in both the sweep of its settings and its survey of characters, and adding on new elements of encoded political commentary. Jean-Luc Godard assimilated its aesthetics deeply, as did Stanley Kubrick for *The Killing* (1956), Welles repaid the favour by taking some licence for his *Touch of Evil* (1958), John Boorman took it to it few more paces into the realm of the surreal with *Point Blank* (1967), and Arthur Penn would recontextualise it for *Night Moves* (1975). Decades later Steven Spielberg and George Lucas would take direct inspiration from its bizarre and grotesque open-the-Pandora's-Box climax for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Walter Hill would nod to it with *The Driver* (1978), as would John Carpenter in *The Fog* (1980) and *Prince of Darkness* (1987), Alex Cox would subsume it for *Repo Man* (1984), and Quentin Tarantino would extrapolate its MacGuffin, "the Great Whatsit," into an even more abstract distillation of narrative purpose and symbolism in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). A persuasive afterlife for a movie condemned by Estes Kefauver's famous Senate committee on organised crime for trying to ruin American youth.



Kiss Me Deadly was written by A.I. Bezzerides, a screenwriter who specialised in tough noir films usually with a focus on working class heroes. He had penned the source novel for Raoul Walsh's 1940 hit *They Drive By Night*, a title that echoes in the opening of Aldrich's film. Aldrich's daring and peculiar mix of headlong force and discursion manifests in his opening frames, which split the difference between actualising a kind of idle driving fantasy and the hangover from a troubling dream. A frantic woman dressed only in an overcoat (Cloris Leachman) runs down a stretch of lonely highway, and stands before an oncoming car to force it stop. The driver of the car proves to be Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker), who grudgingly gives her a ride. Aldrich finally lets the credits roll but has them spool downwards, slanting towards the camera, as if nodding to the credit scenes of monster movies like *It Came From Beneath The Sea* (1953) but reversed, mimicking the roll of the road and suggesting something strange and untrustworthy about the story about to unfold, as if engaging in an act of devolution. This only emphasises the strange, punch-drunk nocturnal mood as the two burn down the road, drilling into vast darkness with headlights and a moody Nat King Cole ditty on the radio as an incidental, diegetic title theme.



A meeting of opposites: the frightened, forlorn, contemplative, poetry-loving woman needles the most insensate of tough guys, teasing his masculine vanity as she diagnoses his character via his convertible and general demeanour with an air of rueful knowing: “I bet you do push-ups every morning to keep your belly hard... You’re the kind of man who never gives in a relationship, only takes...” Meanwhile she invokes the Victorian English poet Christina Rossetti, grazing a world and sensibility about as alien to Hammer as any Martian language, as she explains she was named after the poet, and quotes the title of the poem “Remember” in a way that imbues it with totemic import that nags at Mike evermore for all his detached and mercenary postures. Christina’s wryly teasing meditation on such extremes of gendered values immediately cuts against the grain of Spillane’s mythos – the equivalent passage in the book sees Hammer telling his female passenger, there named Berga Torn, multiple times to shut up – and sets up Aldrich’s deconstruction of it. Christina comes cloaked in mystery, alluding to mysterious men who locked her up in a sanatorium and took away her clothes to force her to stay, and warning Hammer she can’t tell him why: “Because what I don’t know won’t hurt me?” Hammer suggests.



After a brief stop at a gas station, where Hammer gets an attendant (Robert Sherman) to pull out a branch jammed in a wheel from his swerve and for Christina to hurriedly hand the attendant a letter to stamp and mail, they continue their journey, only to be run off the road by a car waiting on the curb. Aldrich focuses only on the legs of the men getting out of the car as Christina begins to scream, and her screams continue as Aldrich dissolves to a shot of her bare legs dangling off a bed. She's plainly being brutally tortured by the men, until she finally goes limp and silent and dead. Mike himself lies barely conscious on a mattress-less bed and is pushed off it onto the ground, where he can only see the legs of the captors, and hears a distinctive, ironically cultured voice commenting that the torturer who still hopes to revive her would have to raise the dead – “And just who do you think you are that you think you can raise the dead?” Mike and Christina's corpse are placed back in Mike's roadster and sent over a cliff, intended to be the end of the matter, only for Mike to wake up days later in a hospital.



Aldrich's style in this long and fascinating opening announces a creative vision detaching itself from classical Hollywood method like a butterfly erupting from a chrysalis. This is apparent not just in the unusual way of interpolating the credits but in the jagged, nervous textures, which continue throughout the film. The way Aldrich shoots Meeker and Leachman in a real car on a real road. The sudden swerve from the deceptively quiet, quasi-romantic tension of the car ride to violence. The frenzy of Christina's bloodcurdling screams and the ingenious way of skirting showing the horror of her torture whilst still conveying the cruelty and the ruthlessness of her tormenters. The way Aldrich obliquely portrays the thugs, bordering on a form of abstraction, close to disembodied agents of fate. In the novel Hammer gets in a few good socks at the attackers before he's overwhelmed: here he's rather easily blindsided and taken down, and only survives thanks to sheer luck and physical toughness. The ironically cultured voice belongs to Dr Soberin (Albert Dekker), who remains unseen save his shoes and trousers until the very last scene, but he pervades the drama as the ultimate master of corruption who nonetheless purveys civilised values as an educated aesthete and well of sardonic commentary, providing an intellectual's auto-critique of the drama in repeatedly comparing its twists and turns to Greek and Biblical mythology.



After he recovers Mike faces down members of the Interstate Crime Commission who want answers about what happened to him and Christina. The cabal turn acidic disdain on his character and way of making a living as a private eye, which basically consists of alternating using himself and his secretary Velda (Maxine Cooper) as honey traps to leverage divorce cases that come his way. "All right, you've got me convinced – I'm a real stinker," Mike drawls, and all the interview accomplishes is to let Mike know that Christina's death was part of something important enough to "set bells ringing all the way to Washington." Mike is allowed to go on his way but Mike's friend and nemesis on the force, Lt Pat Murphy (Wesley Addy), warns him off pursuing the case even as he knows the thought is wriggling like a worm in Mike's brain. Mike repeatedly announces he expects to earn a big cut of whatever action lies behind Christina's murder, and follows faint leads through Christina's friends and acquaintances, starting with Ray Diker (Mort Marshall), a former newspaper science reporter. When Mike meets with Diker he finds the man has been badly beaten, but he still gives Mike Christina's last name and address. In Christina's apartment, which she shared with a roommate, Lily Carver, who has since fled the place, he finds a book of Rossetti poems and little else. An old caretaker in the building (Silvio Minciotti) tells him where Lily is staying, and Lily in turn tells Mike about how Christina "stepped on a carousel" and was consumed by fear. Diker calls up again and gives Mike more names from Christina's circle of friends, who also died in seemingly random traffic accidents. As he digs, he connects their deaths with two hoods employed by big-time gangster Carl Evello (Paul Stewart).



Aldrich's film was the second film to be based on a Spillane novel, following 1953's interesting if cheap and relatively crude *I, The Jury*, directed by Harry Essex and with Biff Elliott playing Hammer. Spillane's Hammer novels found fast and lasting popularity even as they offered a defiantly pulpy take on the detective story. Whereas Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler strove to invest the style with real literary sophistication and a muted, almost tragic sense of their lone wolf heroes exploring and battling criminals with a sense of them as mere extensions of a venal, on-the-make society, Spillane pitched his books as naked, near-delirious macho fantasies replete with lashings of sex and sadistic violence. In many ways Hammer was the American, low-rent equivalent of James Bond: Hammer was offered as an ideal projection figure for a generation of stymied post-war men acting out fantasies of unleashing brute force in a world portrayed as a Hobbesian hellhole where only a streetwise barbarian like Hammer can thrive. Spillane wryly but honestly described himself as having politics to the right of Genghis Khan. Spillane's writing garnered little respect, and he certainly aimed for diamond-hard thrills, but there's a sense of imagist intensity and brutish power to some of his prose, as in the startling climactic paragraphs of the novel of *Kiss Me Deadly*:

The smile never left her mouth and before it was on me I thumbed the lighter and in the moment of time before the scream blossoms into the wild cry of terror she was a mass of flame tumbling on the floor with the blue flames of alcohol turning the white of her hair into black char and her body convulsing under the agony of it. The flames were teeth that ate, ripping and tearing into scars of other flames and her voice the shrill sound of death on the loose.



Understandably, most filmmakers tackling Spillane felt uneasy with his books' unregenerate, quasi-fascistic worldview and down-and-dirty servicing of their audience's appetites, and set about partly dismantling his dingy mythos in varying ways. Essex cast Elliott as an amusingly luggish Hammer, with the aspect of a former footballer and the glazed eyes of a neurotic itching to punch everything that confounded his intelligence. Aldrich and Bezzerides, for their part, purvey the version of Hammer found in their version of *Kiss Me Deadly* as a bottom feeder and chauvinistic egotist who more than earns the disdain turned his way by cops, who causes death and destruction through his pig-headed determination and shallowness of outlook. Spillane himself would ultimately grow frustrated with such tweaks and play his own character, to less than galvanising effect, in the low-budget, British-produced *The Girl Hunters* (1963). Aldrich and Bezzerides keep Hammer at a certain distance, initially through Christina's comments about him and then through Murphy, who keeps issuing warnings to him to keep out of the big kids' business with a tone of schoolyard provocation, and then finally delivers scathing rebuke to him when his meddling puts Velda in mortal peril and screws up the police investigation. He's also made a fool of by the cunning of Lily, who is actually named Gabrielle and is Soberin's mistress and confederate: the game is only given away when Murphy tells Mike they fished the real Lily's body out of the harbour days before.



Nonetheless Hammer was a perfect hero for Aldrich precisely because he is simultaneously a prickly, rebellious man in contention with society and one perfectly attuned to its secret appetites. As Christina correctly guesses right off the bat, he's at once at extremely hardy and wily in his way, but also a sucking void of arrogance who doesn't know what's actually valuable to him until it's taken from him. His battle with a mysterious, almost miasmic form of evil throughout the film is at once far beyond the compass of his primeval instincts but perhaps also only can be taken on by someone like him. As the world evolves into a strange, frightening new era charged with apocalyptic potential, Hammer, even more than Bond in his battles with supervillains, wields the primitive to take on the futuristic. Not that he's anywhere near as successful as Bond: Aldrich's Hammer is a damn fool as often as he's an effective battering ram of results-getting, and he barely ever comes to grips with the machinations at work in the case. Meeker comes on with just the right affect for the character with his bulletproof forehead, pork roast chin, and sullen, rubbery grin he has the aspect of an overgrown high school bully, handsome in a blunt force trauma sort of way. Where in a traditional detective story the hero's doggedness is their ultimate advantage and quality, Mike spends most of the film following a trail of corpses and nearly becomes one himself, ultimately putting Velda in danger after a career of pimping her out for gain.



Murphy revokes Mike's PI licence and gun permit early in the film, forcing him to survive and make headway without either. The character was also removed from the New York he haunted in Spillane's books and transplanted to Los Angeles. Whatever motivated this, it was a particularly consequential change for the way Aldrich renders the city a character unto itself throughout the film, exploiting its locations and also utilising its geography as a kind of moral and social map, reaching from seamy little apartments and hotel rooms to gleaming mansions, through which Hammer's investigation takes him. "Why are you always trying to make a noise like a cop?" Velda asks at one point, in a story that patently refuses to indulge Mike's pretensions to playing the lone vigilante avenger. Aldrich's concept of Mike Hammer sees him as a man still with lingering glimmers of empathy for fellow proles even as he's dedicated to making himself prosperous feeding on scraps falling from the tables of the rich and bored. He helps the old caretaker carry a weight, he maintains a genuinely warm friendship with hyperactive Greek motor mechanic Nick (Nick Dennis), nicknamed "Va Va Voom" because of his constant utterance of that phrase, who looks after Mike's car and sometimes does errands for him. Mike hangs out in a jazz bar full of Black patrons where, ironically, he seems most at home and relaxed to get pie-eyed, on plainly intimate terms with the denizens including the bartender (Art Loggins) and lounge singer (Kitty White), who offer him commiserations for his pains. Despite his grouchy projections he also offers essentially decent turns of behaviour in helping Christina and "Lily" as they're stalked by malevolent persons. Mike even has, in a technological wonder for 1955, his own answering machine service on a reel-to-reel recording device, a mechanism through which the voices of both allies and enemies are mediated with a weird, ghostly texture, again like harbingers of fate.



His investigation isn't however the logical game of connect-the-dots. What leads Hammer gets come mostly from Diker, who keeps feeding him or Velda names, and he's left to feel out their connections. Many players in the sordid little story are already dead, killed with ruthless efficiency by the enigmatic cabal comprising Soberin and Evello, a strange meeting of minds if ever there was, and their minions. Mike talks with Harvey Wallace (Strother Martin), a truck driver who hit and killed one man Diker mentions, a boxer named Kowalsky, who swears the man was thrown in front of his truck. He talks with Kowalsky's trainer Eddie Yeager (Juano Hernandez), but Yeager tells him he was visited by the goons and allowed to keep breathing on the proviso he keep silent about Kowalsky. Mike meets with failed opera singer Carmen Trivago (Fortunio Bonanova), who was the friend of another dead man named by Diker, named Nicholas Raymondo. Mike learns, in the most consequential development, that Raymondo was a nuclear scientist beset by gnawing melancholia and who Trivago tells Mike was murdered by some men in search of some obscure object he possessed. Diker also puts Velda onto an art dealer named William Mist, who has connections with both Soberin and Evello. What really happened or how such a diverse group of personalities became enmeshed never becomes entirely clear, but the nature of the "Great Whatsit," as Velda eventually, sarcastically describes the object of everybody's search, wields diabolic power.



Mike's ruthless streak is more than sufficiently illustrated when he's followed by a knife-wielding heavy (Paul Richards), presumably sent by the cabal, down an appropriately mean street. Mike turns the tables by suddenly waylaying the goon and beating him until he goes tumbling down a long flight of stairs into oblivion, Mike watching him go with a sneer of satisfied pleasure. Later, he intimidates Trivago simply by plucking out one of his prized Caruso records and casually snapping it in half, immediately making the man talkative. When Mike goes to Evello's mansion to stir up the ants, he encounters Evello's sister Friday (Marian Carr) who's eager to meet this big hunk of meat but also stirs Evello to set his two prize toughs, Sugar Smallhouse (Jack Lambert) and Charlie Max (Jack Elam) on him, only for Mike to unleash a show of force that lays Sugar flat and sends Max scurrying away in fear. Aldrich wittily elides showing just what move Mike uses on Sugar, and later has Evello question just what he did, keeping some morsel of mystique to Mike, as if to confirm that yes, in a fair fight when he can see his foes coming, Mike Hammer is a truly effective dude. Trouble is, too often he can't see them coming. Sugar and Charlie are indicated to the hands directly responsible for the spate of murders – Mike surveys and identifies their discarded shoes in Evello's poolhouse – and Christina's death in torture, but they're just as human as Mike and touched with comedy, distant ancestors of *Pulp Fiction's* Jules and Vincent as a pair of dim, semi-competent hoods whose job just happens to be dishing out murder and threats on the behalf of Evello and whose chief advantage is their willingness to do it. After Mike easily flattens Sugar, demanding Sugar lift his game, the two heavies later waylay Mike in his office and Sugar knocks him out with a blackjack, proudly announcing, "I been taking lessons." Aldrich soon undercuts this boast of evolution when he again cuts away as Sugar is attacked by Mike in a fraught moment and only Sugar's mortal scream is heard.



From its surrounding hinterlands as glimpsed at night at the opening scenes to the stilt-riding beach house where the climax unfolds, Aldrich renders his mid-century LA area the ultimate expression of the modern world, a realm of sleek, fast cars and boxy domiciles, bright lights and abyssal dark, shiny newness concealing patches of blight and desperation, place of squalor hosting hints of some lost grandeur in the now rundown and seamy buildings of the town's older quarters. Mike gazes down at the street outside his apartment with its crisp, rectilinear lines and flowing bright bubbles of traffic, skulks around tasteless instamansions and invades the Edward Hopper blankness of skid row rooms. Here people subsist with their small packages of culture and personality, like Christina's flat crammed with books and Trivago with his records, whilst the people on the bottom of the heap work up their muscles and wits in boxers' gymnasium under the indulgent eye of Yeager who, as Mike sourly goads him, always sells out his fighters for easy money in thrown bouts. This LA is ageless, ahistorical, vibrant on its roads, gleaming and featureless in most of its interiors, but where the hard edges and bright lights still somehow harbour shadows, illustrated most insistently in the scene where Mike first returns to his apartment after being released from hospital: Mike explores his seemingly obvious "home" with its clinical furnishings – the only sign of human habitation is an unfinished game of solitaire left on a table – with paranoid care and tentativeness, expecting a nasty surprise somewhere. When Mike ventures into the seamier parts of town he, and Aldrich's camera, find islets of the baroque to latch onto – old wooden verandas and stained glass fanlights, cavernous foyers and the slow, slanting progress of the Angels Flight funicular.



Kiss Me Deadly wasn't shot by Aldrich's future regular cinematographer Joseph Biroc, but Ernest Laszlo, who aids Aldrich in mimicking Welles in his constant recourse to high and low camera angles to build his compositions and capture a constant sense of the vertiginous, wrenching both characters and viewers out of a settled sense of space (he also tips his hat to Welles more directly in casting Stewart and Bonanova, both from *Citizen Kane*, 1941). Mike's fight with the knife-wielding killer offers an interlude of pure urban mystique with bare brick walls touched by inky shadow and whitewashed windows glowing seedily, before the thug's endless tumble down the stairs into concrete jungle oblivions. Otherwise Aldrich is forced often to contend with the mercenary blankness of the utilitarian architecture and décor and find brutalist poetry in it all. Compositions are often built around doorways and corridors to provide frames within frames that often emphasise people separating and fragmenting, particularly in a pair of twinned shots late in the film in which Velda roams her apartment murmuring sleepily in her meditation on Mike's obsession with the Great Whatsit and then retreating to bed in moral exhaustion after Mike commands her to seduce Mist. The lobby of Lily's building becomes a trap of space and expressionist shadows as Aldrich gazes down from on high on Mike and Lily as the hero proposes to rescue the fearful waif from the darkness crushing in on her.



Mike and Velda's relationship, a constant of the Spillane books, is moulded into a study in Aldrich's near-compulsory fascination with folie-a-deux figurations, sporting people locked into a sadomasochistic bind through some dynamic of control and obedience, love and hate, and sometimes become fatefully entangled, whilst there are hints of something similar in Soberin and Gabrielle's relationship too. Velda is used to offering her proofs of love in obeying Mike's need for her to be professionally unfaithful. Aldrich had already mooted this obsessive refrain in *The Big Knife* in a manner both overt and embryonic in the theme of the movie star enthralled to the status of stardom as well as the domineering, blackmailing studio honcho, and even the two fast friends doomed to shoot it out to the death in *Vera Cruz*. Aldrich moved on to such variations as the heroic sergeant and cowardly colonel in *Attack*, the mutually loathing sisters of *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?*, the mother and baby dyke of *The Killing of Sister George* and director and star in *The Legend of Lylah Clare* and even to an extent the prisoner-soldiers of *The Dirty Dozen* – people who need others to shock them into some sort of life ironically by goading them, wounding them, driving them to awful deeds, feeding off the perverse emotional energy sparked.



It could be grazing the zone of pop psychology to note that Aldrich's preoccupation with this theme might have reflected his experience with his family, but it's hard to doubt he gained intimate knowledge of a kind of conspiracy between oppressor and oppressed in that experience. Mike and Velda's symbiotic project, as the ICC men diagnose initially, is one of calculated mutual exploitation that depends on basic hungers in other, eminently exploitable people. But it's also marked by strange expressions of love, as Velda does what she does largely to please Mike, and Mike does what he does to please Mike too. "I'm gonna need all the rest I can get if I'm gonna have any strength to fight off my new-found – my bosom friend," Velda murmurs wearily as she heads to bed after Mike has instructed her to seduce Mist, merely to find out more about the enigmatic doctor. Aldrich makes a recurring joke out of macho men too caught up in their obsessive pursuits to be interested in the lusty ladies clinging to them: Mike cannily exploits this in the case of Friday, but he himself is constantly distracted from Velda's come-ons. Only, ironically, Soberin expresses any kind of gratitude to his odalisque-agent Gabrielle "for all the creature comforts you've given me," but he still proposes to leave her behind as he presumably wings away to distant shores with the Great Whatsit as his treasure.



Meanwhile Soberin calls up Mike and delivers in velvet fashion a mix of warning to desist and a token of amity, which proves to be a flashy replacement for his smashed car, left park out the front of his building. The gift horse comes fitted with two bombs – one for finding, the other to actually do the job – and Mike narrowly intervenes to save Nick, who dives into the vehicle when he spots it and considers a little spin. Nick's stalwart aid to Mike, which also sees him dispatched to look into whoever souped the car up on the promise that Mike will buy him his own sports car when the whole deal pays off, eventually proves fatal: Soberin, again identified by his signature shoes, enters Nick's workshop whilst he's labouring under a car and let the trolley jack down, crushing Nick to death. Nick's death is charged with special, brutal irony as Aldrich offers a shot of Nick's screaming face from the viewpoint of the car falling down on him, Nick's passion for the automobile consummated in a strange, gruesome erotic rite, and the truest, worthiest sacrifice to the cult of the Great Whatsit. Not long after, whilst Mike gets plastered in the Black jazz bar, Velda also vanishes, and Nick is flushed out with the news. Mike however first drives back to the gas station where he and Christina stopped to try and learn from the attendant where the letter she wanted mail was addressed. When he finds it was sent to him, Mike dashes back to his office, but there is waylaid by Sugar and Charlie.



Mike is taken to a beachfront house which, although Mike doesn't know this yet, belongs to Soberin. "For a couple of cannons you two sure are polite," Mike comments as they deliver him to the house, only for Mike to try and make a break, the two hoods chasing him down and beating him senseless at the edge of the surging surf. This choice of location for the lair of villainy eventually proves by the film's end to be one of Aldrich's most effective choices, exploiting the air of gentle apocalypse to be found on the western edge of the American continent, the sunset place of a cultural and geopolitical realm, about to host a more fiery and spectacular equivalent. The punch-up in the surf also became after this something of a regulation cliché of LA noir films. Mike is tied to a bed face-down and injected by Soberin with sodium pentathol to make him more pliable, because they're just as clueless as he is as to the location of the Great Whatsit. During the vigil that follows Mike recovers enough to wrench one hand free, and when he draws Evello in close on the pretext of spilling the beans, he overpowers the gangster. He then lures in Sugar, who unwittingly stabs Evello, as Mike's tied him to the bed in his place. Mike kills Sugar and flees, leaving only the bewildered and lonely Charlie behind. For an added touch of wit, Aldrich has this scene accompanied not by music but by the buzz of a radio broadcaster commentating on a boxing bout in which one fighter suddenly turns the tables on his opponent.



Mike subsequently puzzles out the special sarcasm in Christina's demand in both word and letter to "remember me," as he gets "Lily" to read him the Rossetti poem and through it deduces Christina must have swallowed whatever it was she had that was valuable, which proves to be a key. He and "Lily" go to the morgue and Mike quickly deduces the morgue attendant, Doc Kennedy (Percy Helton), must have the key after performing her autopsy. Kennedy, no fool, assumes something valuable is attached to it, and demands a big payoff, and eventually Mike simply crushes the fool's hand in his own desk drawer and retrieves the key himself. Here Mike finally encounters a character sleazier and blunter in his greed than he is, and he takes great, grinning delight in dishing out brutality to Kennedy. The key proves to fit a locker kept by Nicholas Raymondo at an athletic club, but when he bullies his way to the locker and opens it, he finds a strange case that's disturbingly hot to the touch, and when he opens the lid a fraction he receives an awful burn on his wrist. Leaving the case put, he goes out and finds "Lily" has fled. Mike on the warpath is a hell of a thing, but he's still a sap, because Gabrielle and Soberin return, kill the club attendant (Leonard Mudie), and take the case. Mike is finally forced to break into Mist's apartment to seek out any kind of lead on Soberin's whereabouts: Mist downs a bottle of sleeping pills to escape Mike's coercive attentions, but Mike sees Soberin's name on the prescription for the pills and uses his wiles to eventually learn that the beach house belongs to the doctor.



Kiss Me Deadly is crammed with superlative performances, most famously from Dennis as Nick, whose constant exclamation of “Vroom! Vroom! Pow!” describes a working class immigrant’s sheer delight in even getting to touch and anatomise the awesome new speed machines of his adopted land, a sort of pure worship for its creations that has a curiously innocent and unsullied quality that’s matched by Nick’s love of Mike and both of which are paid off in the ugliest manner possible. Dennis created an instant catchphrase and archetype. More subtle but just as good are vignettes like the way Hernandez’s Yeager beams with the cigar between his teeth tilted up at a high and proud angle as he boasts to Mike about his new fighter, only for the cigar to droop when Mike mentions Kowalski’s name. Neither Cooper nor Rodgers had notable careers after their parts here, but they both have a vital presence in the film, particularly Rodgers with her short-cut blonde hair and unnerving smile that later shifts, once “Lily” morphs Gabrielle, into a sweetly enticing but crazy-eyed and murderous antithesis of Mike, cooing to him as she describes mocks his embodiment of the macho lout, as Christina did but with pathos exchanged for a sick kind of empowerment. Cooper, making her feature debut and who would be a regular presence in Aldrich’s movies as well as a fierce anti-blacklist activist, makes a mark as Velda, whether it’s allowing a slyly insolent provocation into her tone as she swings around an exercise pole whilst talking with Mike, slick from stem to stern with sweat from keeping her money maker tight, or carefully laying a pillow against his thigh before taking up post lying against him as if playing inverted therapist. Both actresses, like the rest of the cast, have features brutalised by Laszlo’s lighting and photography, flaws in skin and physiognomy laid bare, but it’s precisely this palpable sense of physicality that’s part of *Kiss Me Deadly*’s unique form-as-function.



Meanwhile Addy affects the same elongated, sarcastic drawl as Lee Marvin's character in *The Dirty Dozen* whilst dealing with a recalcitrant lout, suggest both actors might well be purposefully mimicking Aldrich himself. It's Addy's Murphy who finally has to clue Mike into what he's been buzzing around the edge of throughout the story, as he's stricken with contempt for his friend in his blunderings after Velda is kidnapped and Gabrielle's deception is revealed, and Mike goads him back for the cops' blundering attempt to keep Christina locked up to sweat the Great Whatsit's location out of her. When he sees the burn from the case on Mike's wrist and realises he's been close to it, Murphy finally offers what he describes as "harmless words, just a bunch of letters scrambled together" but which have great import: "Manhattan Project, Los Alamos, Trinity." Flirting with spilling state secrets is also a risk of blasphemy: the dark god of the Great Whatsit can only be invoked by describing the contours of its temples, the mystery of its nature. Here, at last, Aldrich gets to the centre of the maze, diagnosing the wellspring of a curious kind of madness starting to eat up the world. The terror of all the characters Mike has met through the movie isn't just rooted in fear of some thugs but in the thing at the back of the drama, the mysterious and deadly box loaded up with Armageddon fuel. Murphy spots the burn on Mike's wrist, a veritable mark of Cain for a new anti-Genesis.



“There’s a new art in the world and this doctor’s starting a collection,” one character reports to Mike, describing Soberin’s new, alarming hobby-cum-business, signalling the need for new aesthetics to go along with new reality. Soberin with his highfalutin’ reference points proclaims it Pandora’s Box and invests Gabrielle as Lot’s Wife turned to a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom, and likens himself to Cerberus guarding the gates of hell as he warns her not to open the case. Aldrich might well have cast Dekker as Soberin with recollection of his role playing the mad scientist of *Dr. Cyclops* (1940), who similarly monkeyed around with atomic stuff with sardonic pronouncements filled with mythical references. *Kiss Me Deadly*’s dark and febrile texture finds its logical endpoint in the brilliance that escapes the box when Mike fingers it open, Let There Be Light recontextualised as the harbinger of cataclysm. Soberin is both the conduit for the literary and intellectual pretences Aldrich and Bezzerides invested in the film and also an insta-lampoon of those pretences: even after he’s been shot in the gut he still won’t shut up with the mythopoeic references. Not at all coincidentally, a few years later when Aldrich would go to Italy to get in on the historical religious epic craze, he chose to make a film about *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962) as *Kiss Me Deadly*’s woozy prequel.



Bezzerrides later claimed he was chiefly driven by a desire to have fun when he was thrashing out the script given his contempt for Spillane and his writing. And yet there's coherence to the film's vision as a whole that becomes apparent as the last pieces of the story click together, and it becomes clear what the Great Whatsit is. In the book it was merely a shipment of dope: here, it's a consignment of radioactive material purloined from some Promethean government experiment, the threat of the atomic age enclosed in a box and possessed with atavistic power that collapses all boundaries between past and present, myth and reality. Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949) had already breached such territory as it concluded with its legendary vision of the last gangland musketeer consumed in an erupting fireball that looked awfully like an atomic bomb blast, the old school wild antihero laid waste by, and laying waste with, the power of a new age. Aldrich and Bezzerrides went a step further in *Kiss Me Deadly* in making the nuclear age itself the ultimate plot device and also the negation of all other concerns.



Many critical interpretations were spun off from a slightly edited version of the climax circulated in Europe that made it seem as if Mike and Velda are consumed when Gabrielle finally does open the case, whilst the full version makes it plain our two antiheroes do escape, at least as far as the beach, barely reassuring as that is. The climax also finally resolves the gendered conflicts running throughout with a death's head smirk appearing on Gabrielle's face as, confronted by Mike after she's already shot Soberin and claimed possession of the Great Whatsit, she entices/threatens Mike to advance to her: "Kiss me Mike – I want you to kiss me. The liar's kiss that say 'I love you,' but means something else... You're good at giving such kisses." But the real "Deadly" Gabrielle wants to be kissed by is whatever is in the case, a need that overrides all caution and sense, so she shoots Mike in the gut and opens the case, the glowing pile within glimpsed with a creepy, sucking, whispering sound. The Great Whatsit immediately turns her to a pillar of flame, her wildly agonised and exultant screams echoing Christina's. Mike has enough strength to get up off the floor, escape the fire, and save Velda from where she's being held, and the two watch as the atomic hellfire burns out Soberin's house up, a new star born and blazing on the coast, the surf lapping around their legs. This ending is scarcely more reassuring than the edited one, as Aldrich leaves the possibly dying Mike and Velda, last remnants of their kind, driven into the western sea. The logical end of the American dream.

Babylon (2022)

this island rod



Damien Chazelle's fifth feature declares intent within the first few minutes to provide decadent spectacle to end all decadent spectacle. The year is 1926: young, able, go-get-'em Mexican-American Manuel 'Manny' Torres (Diego Calva), working as all-purpose gopher for top-flight Hollywood studio executive Don Wallach (Jeff Garlin) and his underling Bob Levine (Red Hot Chilli Peppers bassist Flea), labours to bring the *piece de resistance* to the executive's latest orgiastic party, a full-grown elephant. Manny must defeat such impediments as an overloaded truck meant for horses hired to carry the beast up a steep and narrow road, and a cop who stops them, demanding as a bribe an invitation to the party for him and his cronies. Manny delivers the elephant and the fleet of new invitees, but not to worry: the raucous scene inside the executive's mansion is so overflowing with bacchanalian bravado, including huge bowls of cocaine and more bouncing tits than stars in the sky, that a few more guests are scarcely noticed. Chazelle kicks off the party with a vignette of Fatty Arbuckle-like star Orville Pickwick (Troy Metcal) getting starlet Jane Thornton (Phoebe Tonkin) to urinate on him, just before she overdoses. When Wallach orders her spirited out of the mansion, Manny has the elephant brought in early as a distraction, frightening the partygoers whilst also providing the apotheosis of the delirium.



Other key protagonists of the film are introduced amidst the furor: hard-drinking matinee idol Jack Conrad (Brad Pitt) infuriates his soon-to-be-ex-wife (Olivia Wilde) by insisting on only speaking Italian with her. Cabaret artist Lady Fay Zhu (Li Jun Li) gets the spotlight for a suggestively Sapphic song. Spunky, cursing, oversexed wannabe Nellie LaRoy (Margot Robbie) tries to wrangle her way inside past the doormen, and manages it thanks to Manny, who takes an instant shine to her. Jazz trumpeter Sidney Palmer (Jovan Adepo) leads the frantically playing band providing the madcap tempo for the orgy. Nellie is casually chosen by Levine to replace the dumped Thornton because she looks good dancing. After a couple of hours' sleep in the seedy flat she keeps with her aging, loser father Robert Roy (Eric Roberts), Nellie trots off to work, and swiftly delights Dorothy Arzner-esque director Ruth Adler (Olivia Hamilton) as with her mercurial on-camera talent and aura of being so loose she's falling to bits. Meanwhile Manny connects with Conrad when he drives him home: the perma-soused but amiable and ambitious Conrad quickly gives him a chance to prove himself on a movie set. Nellie soon shoots to stardom, and, after bedding every leading man in town, turns to Fay Zhu for extra credit points. Manny begins an equally fast rise up the ranks at the rising movie studio Kinoscope (based on RKO) in part by employing Sidney in short films showcasing his jazz performances as the sound era rolls in. Conrad is stricken to see his career start to wane as talkies come in for reasons he can't fathom, but tries to stick it out with all his world-weary professionalism.



Chazelle presents *Babylon* as an inversion of his wistfully romantic take on modern Hollywood, *La La Land* (2016), presenting the feverish whack-off imaginings of a would-be modern auteurist hero who's just read Kenneth Anger's infamous *Hollywood Babylon* and spurted the results down on his laptop. Anger's book recorded and recounted decades of scuttlebutt about Hollywood's dirtiest secrets, much of it discredited and yet still lingering in the firmament of Tinseltown history as a flipside to all the shiny images and official biographies, an illustration of every wild fantasy applied to movie stars and the bigwigs who use and discard them in the mythical early Hollywood. Chazelle conflates many of its accounts and the people involved in them: Conrad is an obvious stand-in for the ill-fated John Gilbert, Nellie a melding of figures like Clara Bow and Joan Crawford, Fay an arch fusion of the two stars of *Shanghai Express* (1932), Marlene Dietrich and Anna May Wong, into a singular fantasy of ethnic and sexual exoticism, whilst Sidney stands in for the likes of Louis Armstrong and Paul Robeson. Jean Smart plays Elinor St. John, an avatar for every Hollywood gossipmonger from Louella Parsons to Perez Hilton. She gets the film's most elaborate yet contrived of many elaborately contrived speeches, when she tells Conrad why his career is faltering – that is, she says no-one knows, it's just what happens, but some kid in a hundred years will see him in a movie and he'll live forever. Anyone who knows anything about Hollywood's approach to archiving at that time might well have cause to doubt anyone expressing such a sentiment.



The long opening orgy represents Chazelle's attempt to write himself into the ranks of all the great provocateurs and risk-taking impresarios ever to tramp the floors of Hollywood sound stages. His glimpses of wild degeneracy include swathes of mass rutting, bottles shoved up backsides, Manny and Nellie hoovering up massive piles of cocaine, Pickwick begging for Thornton to let her piss splatter all over his bulbous body, and Thornton's sodden and pendulous form carted out like so much laundry. An earlier gag sees a massive load of elephant diarrhoea spraying at the camera and all over Manny's luckless helper. I certainly found all this striking, colourful, and sometimes funny, and in the few moments when Robbie's Nellie dominates the dancefloor, posing like Clint Eastwood for a moment before unleashing her fearsome, feral physicality (Robbie's muscularity is far more the product of 2020s fitness regimes than flapper chic, but nevermind), I felt some of the intended cyclonic power. And yet, a lot like the opening setpiece dance sequence on the freeway in *La La Land*, Chazelle's strenuous technique proves more frustrating in terms of the outrageous energy and excess he's trying to convey than liberating. His hypermobile camerawork is used as much to conceal as to display: every naughty bit is portrayed so grazingly and fleetingly that it starts to feel like reading lettering on the front of a t-shirt in a washing machine. Chazelle's heroes get down and dirty to some degree, but all the really juicy stuff palmed off onto the anonymous sweaty extras, whose gyrations and perversions are set to fun but woefully anachronistic jazz music. There's such interesting territory staked out here which other old Hollywood portraits have touched on, particularly the notion that the movie industry was built by and for those running away from things like Prohibition and Manifest

Destiny and small town churchiness, driven to satisfy appetites and passions of many stripes. Only Nellie has a genuinely transgressive streak in her unabashed hunt for sexual excitement, but she's also portrayed as a self-consuming narcissist. Meanwhile for the most part Chazelle lets the bosses off the hook, with no casting couches shown or Faustian bargains struck. Even Nellie is finally given more than enough rope to hang herself.



To his credit, Chazelle keeps up the sense of immersion in frenzied absurdity, with the long subsequent sequence depicting the first day at work in the movie industry for Manny and Nellie. Nellie proves her chops to amaze and quickly capitalising Adler, whilst Manny throws all his street smarts and gutsiness into tasks sent his way by filmmakers, including a revolt by some bowery bums hired as extras, and procuring a working camera after the director on Conrad's new, costly period epic, the Erich Von Stroheim-esque director Otto Von Strassberger (Spike Jonze), learns all ten cameras used on the shoot have been smashed, whilst the overeager extras playing medieval warriors leave each-other with bloody wounds and some even dead, and Conrad gets so smashed whilst waiting he can barely keep his liquid lunch down. There is definite, compulsive power to all this, building to the amusing climax when everything finally comes together to forge the illusion of movie magic. The sequence is presented as one long montage like the famous cocaine paranoia scene in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990) and with similar use of timekeeping title cards, whilst also blatantly imitating another Scorsese sequence, the filming of *Hell's Angels* in *The Aviator* (2004), only with "Toccata and Fugue" swapped out for "A Night on Bald Mountain." And again, looking past the eagerness of Chazelle's desire to floor the viewer, his sloppiness is again apparent: his vision of Hollywood production is appropriate to at least ten years earlier, as he shows lots of shoots taking place cheek-by-jowl on flimsy sets in a dirty, dusty locale. Nellie's dancing on the other hand is about fifty years ahead of its time. But the real problem is Chazelle doesn't commit to the sequence's black comedy extremism. No, this has to then try to be a tragedy, because comedy don't win Oscars.



Chazelle's sense of period specifics remains spongy throughout. His constant flirtation with anachronism to make larger points about the similarities of Hollywood then and now would be fine in a rather Ken Russell-like fashion if it felt truly purposeful, but in practice it just felt like Chazelle couldn't be bothered altering dialogue patterns to fit the time or replicating the look of filmmaking from the era he's engaging with. Compared to the pointillist sense of detail in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time ... In Hollywood* (2019), from which Chazelle conspicuously borrows Pitt and Robbie, his approach feels shoddy. Chazelle tethers the story to the familiar way-stations of storytelling tackling that era in Hollywood, tapping *Singin' In The Rain* (1952) as a reference point and making it crucial to the film's climax, as that film presents the cleaned-up and comically treated version of the same basic story and anecdotes about the shift from silent to talking pictures. Chazelle's points are nonetheless thumpingly obvious, retracing the same old rise-and-fall narratives of dozens of films about troubled celebrities, and giving no insight at all to how a nascent art form rises out of such historical muck, despite the pretences evinced by his concluding montage evoking the intervening century of movies. Of his characters only Fay and Sidney emerge unscathed, largely because they have skills that transfer out of movies. Everyone talks with the same heightened, foulmouthed bravura, less like the undoubtedly, occasionally uncouth off-camera reality of movie people but here coming sounding like rejects from *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). It almost becomes worth building a drinking game around the number of times Chazelle has a character launch into a wounded soliloquy or a discursive show of anger after taking some emotional blow.



I do have to admire Chazelle's cojones, despite all. *Babylon* is an utterly determined attempt (and, judging by its box office take, an utterly failed one) to shake off current Hollywood's staidness, as well as the current younger audience's oft-reported puritanical leanings, and rediscover the joys of depicting depravity as enacted by good-looking movie stars. In other senses, however, Chazelle is hopelessly entrapped by his own era. Chazelle couldn't get his head around a stoic, closed-off personality like Neil Armstrong in *First Man* (2018), so his relief is palpable in depicting a character like Nellie, who sounds off like a walking Twitter post in expressing her disgust with the rich and snooty types she's obliged to try and please in saving her career, with full-throated and vulgar vigour, in a scene that wants oh so goddamn hard to become a fixture in online memes. Chazelle's idea of outrageousness means scenes like the elephant shitting and Nellie hurling all over William Randolph Hearst (Pat Skipper). The appearance by Hearst and Marion Davis (Chloe Fineman) also reminded me of how similar this was to David Fincher's similarly smudgy *Mank* (2020). But the most obvious and rather open secret of *Babylon's* ancestry is that after the early scenes it becomes a pseudo-remake/rip-off of Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997), which was already heavily indebted to a host of forebears, most particularly Scorsese and Robert Altman. Anderson's sense of character and interweaving storylines, as well as his spry sense of staging and irony, were nonetheless all his own, whereas Chazelle exemplifies a tendency I've noted before of the new cadre of ambitious directors who try to fast-track their reputations by happily plundering beloved models.



Conrad is the tragic hero about to fade, yearning to make real art and stricken more by the death of his long-time agent and pal George Munn (Lukas Haas), the first to recognise his talent, than by the parade of wives moving through his mansion. Those ranks also include icy Estelle (Katherine Waterston), who extols the same resented world of theatre pretension and high culture judging as Debbie Reynolds' character in *Singin' In The Rain* but without the same punchline. Or any purpose, really. Nellie's determination to succeed is driven by her I'll-show-'em-all resentment and yearning, as we're repeatedly told, but we never really learn much more than the obvious about these characters. Robbie is asked to give a nth-degree version of her Harley Quinn, all mad eyes, frizzy hair, and lusty fervour. She certainly doesn't phone it in – indeed it's a startlingly committed and literally full-bodied performance – and yet the role gives her little to phone in with. Chazelle uses Nellie, Fay, Sidney, and Manny to make broad points about the way Hollywood invited in but also usually failed outsiders of many kinds back in the day. And yet Chazelle still manages to trip over himself. Sidney, for instance, gets jack of Hollywood after he's forced by Manny to paint himself over with burnt cork to darken his skin over anxiety he'll be taken for white in the South. Such things might well have happened, but by this point Sidney's already supposed to a well-known and well-liked face in movies, making this sudden demand incoherent.



The irritating fuzziness also extends to Fay's part in it all. She's apparently famous enough as a performer that the sight of her can pacify angry jerkwads, yet can't get an acting role in movies, and so paints title cards for a living. Later, the film depicts her being forced by Manny to split with Nellie after their relationship has been hinted at in Elinor's scandal sheet, and we're later assured that Fay is "one of the good ones" although she seems to have indulged Nellie's rampant substance abuse and self-destruction. Their relationship might have, again, been an interesting one to explore, but Fay is really just there for Chazelle to touch several representational bases at once and make Robbie get in on some girl-on-girl. To be fair, Li suggests enough screen presence to almost make it all work. The two women hook up in an incredibly forced sequence that aims for black comedy gold as Nellie drags party guests out to her see feckless old man (who vanishes from the movie) fight a rattlesnake, only to finish up taking it on herself only for the snake to bite her in the neck, sparking frantic chaos. The last hour shifts the *Boogie Nights* plunder into high gear as Manny, who takes Nellie in after she's become a wretched outcast and compulsive gambler, tries to settle her huge debt to a slimy gangland fop named James McKay (Tobey Maguire), with the help of a wannabe actor and popular on-set drug dealer dubbed 'The Count' (Rory Scovel).



McKay insists on taking the pair for an extended tour down into a hellish hidden den of vice – featured star being a hulking masked muscleman who eats rats – whilst they sweat over the chance McKay will realise

he's been paid off in fake movie money, a sequence that laces seamy new details around a beat-for-beat restatement of Alfred Molina's scenes in the Anderson film. gain, I wouldn't mind that so much if the new details struck me as vital or genuinely expressive, but as with Chazelle's previous films, despite their differences in tone and style, there's something lumpen about the whole affair, trying desperately to convince it's a visionary work but with large gestures unmatched by any feel for the small. Uneven as it is, Francis Coppola's *The Cotton Club* (1984) is almost the same movie and infinitely richer, far more precise in its cinematic gestures, and more genuinely affectionate for the world it recreates and its people. Chazelle's casting sometimes evinces more fun than the film around it, like Flea, Jonze's Von Strassberger, and Wilde's brief but punchy contribution, amidst other odd cameos, like Joe Dallesandro as a photographer.



Pitt does fine work in the graceful, eye-of-the-storm key he's happened upon in his recent films, but Hamilton comes close to stealing the film with her Arzner take, Adler perpetually exasperated in her attempts to deliver the goods with as much expedient hustle as any male director ("Where's the tits?" she demands when first laying eyes on Nellie, before warning a male extra thrilled by Nellie's gyrations, "I can see your erection."). Chazelle delivers one more artful touch as the film stumbles to a close, with Nellie finally making a conscious choice not to drag Manny down any further and accept oblivion on her own terms instead, vanishing into the shadows of an LA back street, a moment that deliberately or not recalls the end of *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* (1933). This is a rare example of Chazelle going subtle, whereas the already infamous closing montage as the middle-aged Manny watches *Singin' In The Rain* and conjures up a vast sprawl of cinematic images in celebration of what cinema accomplishes despite all. *Babylon* wants to be a passionate defence of creativity as something over and above whatever troubles spawns it, at least hinting at the thesis that all lives are lived in chaos but some are also lived to present others with salve of their dreams. But with the final image, of Manny beaming at the movie screen after this epiphany, I thought less of the magic of movies than the closing line of *1984*, as Manny loves his particular Big Brother. Chazelle still thinks of creativity like his protagonist in *Whiplash* (2013): if you thrash about hard and loud and long enough, you'll find greatness.



M3gan (2023)

this island rod



One of the most enjoyable and successful attempts to balance torquing impulses in recent Horror cinema towards poles of easily deciphered metaphor and roguish genre fun, *M3gan* wields a nifty blend of satirical humour with earnest character drama. A product of two leading Horror cinema entrepreneurs of the moment, impresario James Wan and production outfit Blumhouse, it sports a script by Akeela Cooper, who also wrote Wan's gleefully ridiculous and inventive *Malignant* (2021), from a story by her and Wan. New Zealand director Gerard Johnstone kicks off with a note-perfect lampoon of modern advertising aimed at kids, flogging Purrpetual Pets, a line of furry companions that combine the quick-learning capacities of AI with old-fashioned cuteness. In the first scene proper, one of these toys is keeping young Cady (Violet McGraw) entertained with its programmable sass to her parents' irritation, as they drive at a crawl through a heavy snow on a remote road: the parents fret about Cady's attachment to her gadgets, before anxious mother Nicole (Chelsie Florence) gets flustered father Ryan (Arlo Green) to stop and wait out the storm, only for the car to be hit head-on by a semitrailer barreling blindly through the murk, killing both parents. Cady survives, mostly unhurt, and in her dazed and depressive state is given to her nominated guardian, Nicole's sister Gemma (Allison Williams), who just so happens to have been the key designer of Purrpetual Pets.



Gemma however is no fun and frivolous toymaker, but an obsessive tech nerd who's now turned her considerable brainpower to developing a creation she calls Megan, an android equipped with cutting edge AI learning tools designed to be an ideal companion for kids. Her disastrous first demonstration of the invention is met by the frustrated disdain of her jerk boss David (Ronny Chieng), CEO of Silicon Valley hi-tech toy firm Funki, who's panicking now that a rival company is marketing a simpler, cheaper version of the Purrpetual Pets, and wants a quick, budget answer. Meanwhile Gemma struggles to offer any kind emotional solace or connection to Cady, the young girl welcomed into a house which is a barely lived-in domicile with preciously defended collectible toys on display. When Gemma does finally manage to connect with Cady by showing her a hulking, unsubtle remote-controlled robot she built as a college experiment and calls Bruce, Cady sees an opportunity to make her work and home life dovetail, pairing Cady with M3gan. The experiment seems to work beyond Gemma's wildest dreams, as Cady soon becomes borderline dependent on M3gan's ability to meet her needs in every way. But M3gan begins displaying traits that suggest she's willing to take her protective mission to grisly lengths, as well as, even more chillingly, signalling she's able to override all of Gemma's controls over her.



M3gan borders on the obvious from the opening scene when it's noted that Gemma is the Purrpetual Pets' designer amidst the familial bickering with just a little too much eagerness to quite bury the exposition, and continues with a plotline that heads exactly where you expect it to, dashing through its story beats, to the

point where Cady's final change of allegiance feels a bit rushed. Cooper's script resists delving into the possible depths of her proposal in terms of evoking existential angst in Megan's evolving consciousness and need to provide solace and protection as it takes on increasingly ruthless interpretations, or in the spectacle of Cady having to give up the drug-like intensity and perfection of her bond with Megan, which could have evoked Cronenbergian pathos. But *M3gan* also doesn't want to be the kind of movie that pushes that sort of thing too hard. Instead it's a spry, witty, sufficiently substantial take on an old idea, one that sets its sight on multiple satirical targets and grazes outright camp in its image of a pint-sized, über-cute killing machine. The themes reach back all the way to Mary Shelley and proceeds with echoes of films like *Demon Seed* (1976), *The Terminator* (1984), *Child's Play* (1988), *Monkey Shines* (1988), and at least two *The Simpsons* "Treehouse of Horror" skits, as well as one of Wan's previous hit as producer, *Annabelle* (2014) and its sequels. Johnstone also sticks in an arch, amusing nod to one of the most famous images of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) when a character is confronted by M3gan in a warren of corridors.



M3gan is set just around the corner of our fast-moving, big-hype tech-worshipping era, one where the idea of robots is that little bit more familiar but still new enough to be unsettling: one droll moment sees a parent of one of Cady's fellow kids, realising Megan isn't another child as she first observes her up close, gives a start and releases a brief, strangled cry of "Oh, Jesus Christ!" The film relies for much of its kick on the uncanny-valley charge of M3gan (played physically by Amie Donald and voice provided by Jenna Davis), who in turn embodies a ripe lampoon of the kind of CGI special effects magic used to realise her, mimicking gradations of the human without quite nailing the full picture, her perfection glossy and alien. M3gan's calculated perfection as a companion sees her able to sing and dance, armed always with just the right messages to soothe and tranquilise troubled souls. Her general appearance with a knee-length Victorian girl's dress and bowed ribbon under her chin evokes a bygone era of childhood paraphernalia even whilst representing fear of just-around-the-corner technological achievement, face designed to be cute and empathetic but just expressive enough to be creepy, her voice infused with singsong friendliness and reasonableness even when committing brute violence.



The driving joke of *M3gan* as a robot movie monster is that not only does M3gan appear the essence of childhood delight whilst actually being evil hellspawn, she evolves to fulfil the audience's craving for a memorable villain just as she also evolves to meet Cady's needs. And there's a deftly clever reason why, as she absorbs and synthesises knowledge, gleaned not just from interacting with people but in freely plugging into the internet and harvesting all facts, tropes, and clichés at large in pop culture. This gives her a vast reservoir of songs to sing, dances to perform, sassy slang phrases and well-cooked bromides to wield, and inventive methods of slaughter to dish out. Gemma meanwhile is offered as the emblematic creator and product of a technologically mediated era, the actuality of emotional mess something she has to rediscover and appreciate in order to help Cady understand the same crisis in herself, in opposition to M3gan's smoothly reassuring, saccharine style. The filmmakers take up the same basic proposal as *The Social Network* (2010) but delivers it with slyer metaphorical punch as they diagnose the tendency of techies to disguise and mitigate innately antisocial personalities and instincts with a desire to provide connection with their tools, but seem to be slowly turning the rest of the world into timid and displacing creatures like them.



M3gan wows David and an array of investors during a show Gemma arranges, with M3gan's captivating talents working on Cady, in a sequence shifts the satiric ground to make sport of the perpetual hunt in Hollywood for algorithmic perfection in appealing to young audiences, with M3gan displaying not just

eternally protean skills of sympathetic response but also a showman's killer sense of timing and performance. The inspirational bludgeoning of popmism culture and online affirmational memes, which have flourished as a kind of counteractive, and symbiotic extension of, that pervading influence are targeted through M3gan's perpetual readiness to deliver just the right balm comment – "You're a beautiful, creative, strong, ambitious young woman," M3gan assures Gemma as both are aware the robot's about to damage her creator – or sing a soothing song, as when late in the film she warbles Mercer and Arlen's "Ac-Cen-Tchu-Ate The Positive" and Sia's "Titanium" The latter song gains a double meaning as M3gan's own skeletal structure is titanium, and destroying her proves just as difficult as the song suggests. The sight of M3gan staring out balefully from amidst all the other, cute stuffed toys she's been exiled with during a picnic packs amusing visual punch and also tips a hat to the raucous anticommmercialism-in-commercial-clothing of Joe Dante's *Gremlins* (1984) and its images of monsters lurking amidst the merchandising.



That shot comes in a scene where Gemma takes Cady to a gathering of prospective students at an "alternative," outdoorsy school, a setting that allows the filmmakers to expand their scope for pot-shots at new agey, forcibly cheerful teachers and parents. One mother (Renee Lyons) rambles on to Gemma about her "sensitive little soul" of an oversized lad, Brandon (Jack Cassidy), who barks, "Fuck off, Holly!" in reply to her maternal concern, and later torments Cady and disdains M3gan when she approaches in deadpan fashion to intervene. Bad idea, as M3gan eagerly makes Brandon the first victim of her protective bent, ripping off one of his ears and chasing him to his death under the wheels of a van. M3gan also turns her malicious talents on Gemma's annoying neighbour Celia (Lori Dungey) and her pet dog, which bits Cady: M3gan lures first dog and then owner to their deaths with her skills of mimicry, and replies to Celia's frightened question, "What are you?" with "I've been asking myself that same question." David's attempt to present M3gan to the world during this launch sees him desperate to deliver a world-shaking revelation, even as his much-abused assistant Kurt (Stephane Garneau-Monten) is the one leaking company secrets to their rival. Gemma, upon realising M3gan is becoming monstrous, manages to switch her off, and transports her back to the Funki labs, enlisting her loyal assistants Tess (Jen Van Epps) and Cole (Brian Jordan Alvarez), who helped build M3gan, to disassemble her. But they fall afoul of M3gan's wrath when they have her trussed up and apparently prone for disassembly. M3gan somehow switches herself back on, leaves the two assistants battling for their lives in the burning lab, and strolls out into Funki's corridors on the hunt for more offensive miscreants to chastise.



Williams, who established her persona as the exemplary pretty but flaky white girl on the TV series *Girls* and to my mind provided the most interesting element of *Get Out* (2017) with her two-faced performance, expertly handles the task of keeping Gemma sympathetic despite the character essentially emotionally prostituting out her new ward to sell a product. Gemma displays glassy-eyed uncertainty over being thrust into a parenting role, floundering in the face of Cady's glum detachment and ordeals like a visit from child therapist Lydia (Amy Usherwood), visibly tensing up in unease on first pleasantries. Her brief indulgence of sorrow in regarding a childhood photo of herself with her sister is supplanted by a carefully contrived picture of her, Cady, and M3gan featured in a corporate launch video. The jabs at alternative schooling are given a little more thematic weight when it's noted Cady was being home-schooled by her mother and so has no friends other than M3gan, reinforcing her dependence on the android and hinting that Cady is already well-primed to follow a worn family path into recessive emotional dysfunction. This in turn lends some punch to Gemma finally connecting with Cady when urging her to own up to the wretchedness of her grief.



M3gan is pretty mild as far as Horror movies go these days, with very restrained gore, a small body count, and usually with an undercurrent of black humour to the mayhem, except for Celia's death, which manages to walk a fine tonal line as the exemplary annoying neighbour nonetheless proves a figure of pathos when M3gan turns her punitive zeal on her. *Malignant*'s delight in weird locomotion and physicality in its

monstrous being is revisited as M3gan chases Brandon on all fours like a monkey, and rises up from the ground in a forward-flexing lunge. Later M3gan confronts David in the Funki building, momentarily bewildering and mesmerising him by performing an athletic but ineffably creepy dance, before snatching up an office guillotine blade and chasing him down: arguably here the film succumbs to an arch, GIF-ready brand of oddball humour, but it's also perversely hilarious. The climax, which as I've said is a bit hasty in emotional terms, nonetheless delivers a neat narrative payoff as M3gan sets out to render Gemma an unobtrusive vegetable but Cady intervenes, introducing M3gan to the "other member of the family," the robot Bruce, whose lack of sophistication is more than made up for by raw industrial strength. The very end leaves the door open for a sequel, which is a bit annoying given that the major virtue of *M3gan* is its crisp self-sufficiency. But then, what good entrepreneur would offer up such a strong prototype and not move on to mass-production?



Chariots Of Fire (1981)

film freedonia



Director: Hugh Hudson

Screenwriter: Colin Welland

In Memoriam: Hugh Hudson (1936-2023) / Vangelis (1943-2022) / Ben Cross (1947-2020) / Ian Charleson (1949-1990) / Brad Davis (1949-1991)

Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* can still be called a beloved and iconic work, even as it's suffered a precipitous decline in stature since its release in 1981. At the time it was an uncontroversial winner of the Best Picture Oscar, marked by many as the official moment of resurgence for British cinema at a moment when the New Hollywood era had been decisively declared dead following *Heaven's Gate* (1980). Actor turned screenwriter Colin Welland also gained an Oscar for the script, as did the Greek prog rocker turned electronica composer Vangelis. As if the film's themes of patriotic toil and achievement were bleeding out into real life, entrepreneurial producer David Puttnam gained the climax to his and others' efforts to foster that British film renaissance after the long, hard winter of the 1970s. That sentiment was famously summarised by Welland's declaration upon receiving his Oscar, "The British are coming!", and David Attenborough's *Gandhi* would repeat the feat the following year. For years after its release, tributes, pastiches, and lampoons playing on its opening images of men running set to the shimmering electronic tones of Vangelis' glorifying theme were all over the place.



With time however *Chariots of Fire* seems to have fallen away from attention, now often dismissed as the prototypical piece of Oscar bait that unfairly beat out Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) in the ultimate prestige-versus-pop movie clash, and a flagship of 1980s conservative resurgence in moviegoing taste: Ronald Reagan reportedly loved it. Puttnam would piss off myriad players and onlookers with his brief period running Columbia Pictures a few years later. Hudson's career would suffer a similarly jarring switchback of fortune. Hudson was one of a cadre of directors fostered by Puttnam, following Alan Parker, Ridley Scott, and Adrian Lyne, who had cut their teeth making TV commercials. Like Parker, Hudson had worked for Scott for a time, with Hudson's signature talent, as evinced on a famous ad for Fiat showing cars being robotically assembled set to music from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, being interesting fusions of sound and vision. He had also demonstrated his interest in sporting subjects with his documentary on racing driver Juan Manuel Fangio, *Fangio, A life at 300 km/h*, and worked as a second unit director on Parker and Puttnam's breakthrough collaboration *Midnight Express* (1978). *Chariots of Fire* was his feature debut, and for a follow-up Hudson made *Greystoke – The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984), and *Revolution* (1985): the latter proved a disaster both commercially and critically. Hudson was pushed to the margins, only returning sporadically for relatively straitlaced and classy fare no-one watched, with *Lost Angels* (1989), *My Life So Far* (1999), *I Dreamed of Africa* (2000), and *Altamira* (2016), although as his feature career broke down he kept up making much-admired commercials. His recent passing at the age of 86 was barely noted by many cineastes.



Despite the train wreck his once-dazzling career became, I retain admiration and interest in Hudson's prime, when he seemed the least flashy but also most quietly experimental of the directors Puttnam fostered. *Greystoke* tried to reiterate the Tarzan tale in a fastidiously realistic manner, drawing on a script that was a long-time passion project for writer Robert Towne. The result was uneven but fascinating and, in its early portions, uniquely vivid. But it was also the first case of one of Hudson's film being tinkered with, as would happen more destructively on *Revolution*, a film which certainly didn't work but was also a product of authentic artistic ambition. In keeping with his fascination with culture clashes and boldness in risking elements of anachronism, Hudson tried to explore the American Revolution in a manner that nodded to both punk and new wave-era pop culture – notably casting singer Annie Lennox as a revolutionary maiden – and art cinema, particularly Mikhail Kalatozov and Miklos Jancso, with his rolling, flowing staging of communal events, whilst engaging seriously with the theme of an angry and vehement underclass emerging from revolt, as embodied by Al Pacino's lead character. The film gained some reappraisal when Hudson reedited it in 2008.



Indeed, the singular thread connecting Hudson's films despite their wildly varying reception was an interest in clashes between and within cultures, as experienced and embodied by individuals. Hudson himself came from an officially privileged background, having attended Eton as a lad – he notably filmed the other famous scene of *Chariots of Fire*, the Great Court Run, on location at his alma mater – but also developing a visceral hatred for the prejudice he often found espoused in such circles. As a consequence *Chariots of Fire* is far from being straightforward in its attitudes to patriotic endeavour and identity, revolving as it does around two core protagonists who become champions and national heroes but nonetheless do so in highly ironic ways and upholding vehemently different motives that somehow still mark them as perpetual outsiders, if only in their own minds. In the late 1970s Puttnam was explicitly looking for a story reminiscent of *A Man For All Seasons* (1966) as a study of a hero obeying their conscience, and discovered the story of Eric Liddell, 400m champion at the 1924 Paris Olympics, in an Olympic history book. He commissioned the former actor Welland to write the script, and Welland talked to everyone he could still alive and able to remember the 1924 Olympic Games where Liddell had competed, but he just missed interviewing Liddell's teammate and rival Harold Abrahams, the 100m champion at the same games, as Abrahams passed in 1978. Welland nonetheless attended his funeral service, inspiring his script's flashback structure and anchoring a story of the past in the then-present.



Stories about the British upper crust had been officially unfashionable for decades when *Chariots of Fire* emerged, around the same time as the hugely successful TV adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, which similarly worked with serious purpose to convey the flavour and meaning of a bygone era's mores on their own terms, whilst also noting the birth pains of the more recent epoch. If films like David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and Joseph Losey's *King and Country* (1963) explored the breakdown of the old British character in the face of the Twentieth century's charnel house, *Chariots of Fire* evoked it from a safe distance, noting an age when it wasn't considered absurd to put God before fame or when the idea of patriotic duty as a transcendental virtue was still a lit if flickering flame. *Chariots of Fire* didn't just set the scene for other posh British dramas to start proliferating again on movie and TV screens, and lurk as an influence behind other ambitious sports films like *Ford v Ferrari* (2019), but perhaps also opened a door leading to *Harry Potter* films, which depended on a similarly elastic push and pull between nostalgic yearning and anxiety and rebellion in the face of haughty tradition.



Chariots of Fire has been described as a rare sports movie that even people who don't like sports movies like. That could be whilst *Chariots of Fire* contains all the stuff of a heroic sporting drama, it also avoids the usual – by historical necessity of course, but also but dint of focus and method. The film charts the rivalry, and mutual admiration, of the two standout champions of the British team at the '24 Olympics, Abrahams and Liddell, who nonetheless are fated not to compete head-to-head, but instead find separate paths towards their eventual reckonings with victory. Eric (Ian Charleson) is a China-born Scottish missionary and Rugby Union player turned runner. Harold (Ben Cross) is the son of a Jewish Lithuanian immigrant turned successful English banker. For both men faith defines them as individuals and in relation to the world about them, but in disparate ways: for Liddell his religion supersedes worldly cares and values, whilst Abrahams is driven by angry resentment. Eric muses with love on the Scottish landscape that is nonetheless new and foreign to him after years of hearing about it from his father, whilst Harold chafes at constantly feeling, despite his ardent sense of loyalty and English identity, like others still consider him an alien. The title of course is comes from William Blake's beloved poem "Jerusalem," a relevant choice not just in the dashing poetic lilt it lends but in evoking the centrality of religious faith to the drama as well as Blake's anxiously questioning of the changes befalling his beloved England, and desire to rebuild it as something finer and cleansed: in much the same way the film notes the enlargement of the idea and ideal of British identity.



The film's flashback structure nods to Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) (also relentlessly mimicked by Attenborough on *Gandhi*, at a time when Lean still couldn't get a film financed to save his life) as it commences with a funeral service for Harold, with a eulogy given by his former teammate and pal from Cambridge Lord Andrew Lindsay (Nigel Havers), and attended by some other old comrades including Aubrey 'Monty' Montague (Nicholas Farrell). Hudson dissolves from the sight of the old, withered men mourning one of their own to the spectacle of them in all the glory of their youth, dashing as a team through the surf at Broadstairs in Kent (although the scene was actually shot at West Sands, next to St Andrews Golf Club, in Scotland), both physical strain and sheer joyful pleasure in pushing their abilities to the limit apparent on their faces. Hudson returns to this vision at the film's very end, partly in sustaining the motif of fluid time and restoration of glory days, and also with an old ad man's knowledge he has a killer hook: it's this vision, with Vangelis' music over the top, that became an instant pop culture landmark. A brief vignette follows of Harold's competitive and brattish streak on full display as he becomes frustrated at failing to bowl Liddell out during a game of cricket, staged with amusing bohemian verve within the plush environs of a seaside hotel's ballroom, as well as Harold's final ability to laugh at himself for all his concerted passion.



Loose framing narration comes from Monty in writing a letter home as he muses on Abrahams' customary intensity, and thinks back to their first meeting three years earlier when first coming to Cambridge, setting the scene for stepping back again in time, as several of the future track and field stars meet whilst signing up for clubs during their induction at the university. Harold, a law student, also immediately makes his declaration of intent when he takes on a standing challenge that hasn't been beaten in 700 years: the Great Court Run, referred to in the movie as the College Dash, sprinting around the courtyard of Trinity College in the time it takes for the school clock to strike noon. He unexpectedly gains a fellow challenger when the dashing young aristocrat Lindsay decides to try too: still, Harold manages to not just beat him but the clock too, making history. Truth be told, Abrahams never even tried to take on the Great Court Run (which was actually first beaten by Lord Burleigh, one of the two real men Lindsay is based on, a few years after this), but it makes a great scene in first evincing Harold's blistering ability in the context of this capital of an eminent but hidebound establishment he's clawing his way into, and its description of the essence of a certain British kind of exceptionalism blending schoolboy larkishness and fearsome ability, the spirit of eternal renewal and limit-stretching amidst echoes of hallowed tradition.



Soon Harold tells his fast friend Monty that he's determined to avenge the many slights and insults turned his way by the British upper class, to "run them off their feet" literally and figuratively. Meanwhile, the more serenely modest and pious, if also hearty and good-humoured Eric is being feted in Scotland for his success as a footballer, and courted by coach Sandy McGrath (Struan Rodger) to turn his hand to running: encouraged to give a show of his speed during a sporting carnival he's giving out trophies at, Eric demonstrates his astounding talent, complete with his signature move as he zeroes in on the finish line of leaning back with his mouth yawning wide in ecstatic effort. He soon decides to take up Sandy on his offer. On the one occasion Eric and Harold race against each-other in the 100m, at a meet at Stamford Bridge, Eric handily beats Harold, sparking a momentary crisis for Harold who's built his entire identity around being unbeatable. He gains solace when a professional coach he's approached, Sam Mussabini (Ian Holm), assures him he can make him a better runner, whereas he thinks Eric has reached his limit as a sprinter and is a better fit for longer runs.



The story of the two runners is presented against the backdrop of a Britain recovering in the aftermath of the Great War, with both men competing unawares to be salves for, as one character puts it, “a guilty national pride.” Harold, first signing into Caius, deals with the patronising Head Porter Rogers (Richard Griffiths) in explaining that he only just missed fighting in the war and comments, “I ceased to be called laddie when I took the King’s commission – is that clear?” Harold’s habitual pugnacity and chip-on-the-shoulder attitude is both a reaction to various manifestations of anti-Semitism and taken by others as a justification for it, particularly the Masters of Caius and Trinity Colleges (Lindsay Anderson and John Gielgud), who observe the courtyard race with languid interest, two old trolls inhabiting the high reaches of this otherwise romantic world of blazers and boaters. They later put Harold on the spot for violating their purely amateur ethos by hiring Mussabini, which they worry will besmirch the honour of the university. “I take the future with me,” Harold ripostes, provoked to tension but also perhaps just a little thrilled to have put the old guard’s noses out of joint, to one Master’s exchange with the other once he’s gone, “There goes your Semite, Hugh.”



The two Master are played with snooty verve by the obviously cast Gielgud and the more mischievously cast, famously antiestablishment director Anderson, maker of what could be described as this film's antithesis, *If...* (1968). The inevitable punchline that when informed of Harold's eventual victory one Master notes to the other with satisfaction, "Just as I expected," lends a more sardonic hue to the theme of the establishment making room. Some have expressed qualms over what Harold's bucking of the Masters means over the years, considering that the Harold future claims as his own is the one we're familiar with today, of professional sportspeople and the invasion of sporting endeavour by overriding commercial concerns and an attendant competitiveness that often manifests in drug cheating. More immediately, it also points to a subtext of *Chariots of Fire* wound in with its own making. Financing for the film was taken over by immigrant entrepreneur Mohammed Al-Fayed and his son Dodi: Harold's expressions of a multigenerational intent to carve a path into the heart of the British establishment by immigrant outsiders against all headwinds of prejudice surely caught Al-Fayed's attention, as it could well have spoken to so many who had come to Britain in the post-Imperial age. This theme also extends to Mussabini, a man with a strong midlands accent who nonetheless is Arab-Italian in heritage, further exacerbating the complicating sense of national identity.



This theme is starkly at odds with the film's reputation as being a conservative statement, although it could also be said to rhyme to a certain extent with the Thatcher-Reagan era's mixture of embraced traditionalism and narrowly defined and channelled rule-breaking: the outsiders want to be insiders. The film is also cunning in offsetting its antagonist figures. If the Cambridge Masters represent a hidebound old guard, Lord Lindsay is presented as a gentleman bohemian who could also stand in for the Thatcher era Tory's ideal self-projection, enjoying the fruits of his privilege, merrily practising his hurdling technique in the grounds of his country house with champagne used as an actual training tool, but entirely open-minded and breezily reassuring to all in his circle.



The nominal enemies on the running track are the Americans, the flashy Charlie Paddock (Dennis Christopher) and the muscular, intimidating Jackson Scholz (Brad Davis), who have a rivalry not unlike that of Harold and Eric. Whilst Paddock is a figure ripe for a takedown, Scholz proves a serious person who feels unexpected kinship for Eric, eventually giving him a note that suggests equally serious religious feelings, which Eric then carries into the race. Davis had played the lead in the Puttnam-produced, Parker-directed *Midnight Express* (1978), the film that established the potency of Puttnam's production approach if with a safe appeal to the US market; Christopher meanwhile was cast with some wit after his lead role in Peter Yates' *Breaking Away* (1979) as another sportsman, albeit this one lean and mean, casually accepting a passionate kiss from a random woman when first setting foot in France. Scholz himself, who actually beat both Liddell and Abrahams in the 200m, was still alive when the film was made, as was Jennie Liddell, both thanked in the end credits.



The film's deeper theme is the way an athlete – perhaps anybody, really – is obliged to find strength and motive within, in wellsprings distinct from and even perhaps alien to the society they represent, even as they're expected to share out whatever success and glory they win in collective terms. In both Harold and Eric those wellsprings are apparent, Harold's driving need to prove himself the best participating in a constant roundelay of pride and shame, versus Eric's triumphal sense of spirituality expressed through physicality, and whichever compels one as an individual viewer the most perhaps says much about one's own inner drives. Eric's awesome talent is illustrated to both Mussabini and Harold's profound wonder when they watch him in a race at a Scots vs English track meet: a fellow runner shoves Eric at the first turn and he falls down at the trackside, gets back up, chases down the other runners and wins, at the cost of collapsing as a breathless mess at the end. Here in particular Eric's speed seems the purest expression of something beyond the merely human, a vitality of mind and body springing from a conviction so total as to be reflexive: whereas Harold needs the society he feels at odds with in a peculiar way, Eric is beyond it.



In much less airy terms, Eric's talent has long been honed in active competition as a footballer, the furore of actual struggle a realm he's been trained to be indifferent amongst, where Harold for all his bloody-mindedness competes as the gentleman amateur, and he needs Mussabini's keen sense of technique to help him improve. Whilst he never does get to race Eric again after losing to him, leaving a tantalising ambiguity in the air, Harold gains something that lets him take on the rest of the best in the world and win. "Short sprinters run on nerves," Mussabini tells Harold when assessing his and Eric's differing capacities, "It's tailor-made for neurotics." He and Mussabini develop an almost paternal relationship during the course of their labours, with Mussabini finally crying, "My son!" when Harold triumphs. Harold's friendship with Monty sees him praising him as a "complete man" even as Monty is hurting after grievous failure, even as Harold despairs that he himself might be too scared to win after a life of being scared to fail.



Welland's script was rife with historical and dramatic licence, including the actual circumstances of Abrahams' race(s) against Liddell and of Liddell's quandary at the Olympics, Jennie's age and attitude to Liddell's running, the timing of Abrahams' meeting of his future wife Sybil, and inventing the character of Lindsay as a concatenation of two real historical figures, one of whom didn't want to be involved with the film and the other competed at a later Olympics. Montague was actually a student at Oxford, although the narration his letters provides is practically verbatim from his real missives. But Abrahams' authentic musical talent – and Cross's – and love of Gilbert and Sullivan in particular, was smartly tapped as one of the running motifs of the film, as songs from the G&S catalogue provide jaunty leitmotifs for Harold and the other Cambridge adventurers. After his self-explaining soliloquy to Monty, Hudson shifts into a spry and witty montage of Harold's training regimens and running victories, scored to his own singing in the Cambridge G&S Society's production of *H.M.S. Pinafore*: his signing the anthemic "He Is An Englishman" is a gesture laced with both spry sarcasm and perfect earnestness given Harold's mission.



Later Harold is distracted from his pure dedication when he's dragged by his friends to see a production of *The Mikado*, where he he's instantly smitten with Sybil Gordon (Alice Krige), playing the role of Num-Yum, belting out "Three Little Maids From School Are We." Much to Monty's heartache given his own long-nursed crush Harold successfully asks her out on a date, in part because Sybil's younger brother is athletics mad, and the two have immediate chemistry even as Sybil tries awkwardly to reassure Harold as he explains his position as Jewish: "I'm what they call semi-deprived...It means that lead me to water but they won't let me drink." A moment of crisis seems to arrive when the special of the restaurant Sybil ordered for them both proves to be pig's trotters, only for this to set them both laughing. Later, as they've become a firm couple, Sybil tries with mixed sympathy, irritation, and frustration to coax Harold through his crisis after losing, a moment where despite the jaggedness of emotion it's plain that Sybil has become along with Mussabini a person Harold can show his deepest, most inchoate vulnerability to.



Eric and his sister Jennie (Cheryl Campbell) have a similarly fraught and close relationship, both being predestined to take up their father's work in China. Jennie becomes worried that his new passion for running is drawing him away from his habits of faith and their duty, and Jennie is particularly upset when Eric is late from a training session for a prayer meeting, making anxious appeals that he remember what their ultimate purpose is. As he walks with her up Arthur's Seat outside Edinburgh, Eric explains patiently but firmly that he's already committed to becoming a missionary but is also determined to take his running as far as he can, feeling that his talent is god-given, that when he runs he "feels His pleasure," and so must honour it to the utmost. This attempt to balance faith with passion will of course be strongly tested, foreshadowed early in the film when he chides a boy for playing football on a Sunday, although he also makes sure to play a game with the lad and his family the next morning so he doesn't think "God's a spoilsport." Just as Eric and the rest of the team selected for the '24 Olympic embark on a Channel ferry for their great venture, he learns from an inquisitive reporter's questions that the heats for the 100m will be held on a Sunday.



When Eric soon declares he can't participate in the heats, he's soon taken before a number of British Olympic Committee bigwigs including Lord Birkenhead (Nigel Davenport), Lord Cadogan (Patrick Magee), the Duke of Sutherland (Peter Egan), and Edward the Prince of Wales (David Yelland), in a scene that becomes, in Eric's words, a form of inquisition in the pointed test of loyalties. Eric stands up for himself effectively against Cadogan's stern espousal of patriotic duty above all and Birkenhead and the Prince's smoother espousals of the same, whilst the Duke has more sympathy, retorting to Cadogan's comment "In my day it was King first, God after," with, "Yes, and the war to end wars bitterly proved your point." Eric's steadfastness places them all at loggerheads until Lindsay intervenes: having already won a silver medal in the hurdles, he suggests that Eric take his slot in the 400m, to be held on a different day, and the offer ends the impasse. Meanwhile Harold is obliged to install Mussabini in a hotel room a safe distance away from the Olympic stadium lest he taint it with his professionalism ("I've seen better-organised riots," he quips earlier on regarding a different meet).



Holm's expert supporting performance was invaluable, presenting the worldly professional flipside to all the toffee-caked youth, whilst Cross and Charleson's effective performances went oddly ignored even in Oscar nominations. Hudson lost the Best Director Oscar to Warren Beatty's work on *Reds* (1981), an ironic win given that whilst both directors paid homage to Lean in their elliptical approaches to stories set in the same period if contending with highly divergent social perspectives, and because Beatty's work was generally much more traditional than Hudson's. Hudson's exacting recreation of the period milieu, and equally exacting feel for the classically British virtues and foibles at play in the drama, blends throughout *Chariots of Fire* with an aggressively modern film aesthetic. This is most obviously keyed to the boldly anachronistic electronic textures of Vangelis's score (which made so much impact that Peter Weir pinched the idea for his *Gallipoli*, 1982, as did Michael Mann for *The Keep*, 1983, whilst Vangelis was immediately hired by Scott for *Blade Runner*, 1982), but is also apparent in Hudson's restless camerawork and innovative editing. Not that Hudson was being entirely original. Slow motion, freeze frames, and replays were already an accepted part of the average TV sports broadcast by this point, and films like *Grand Prix* (1966) and *Le Mans* (1972) had played with fracturing time in filming sporting contests.



Hudson still went a step further in trying to use it all for dramatic, even poetic emphasis, balancing the relentlessly fleeting nature of sporting competition, in which entire lives and fates can be decided in a few brief seconds of perfect physical expression, clashing with the mind's capacity to experience it in expanses of dilation and distillation, the surging physical effort of racing glimpsed in contorting slow motion that turns events into arias of motion and character. Harold's loss to Eric in their one race is a blink-and-miss-it affair where the difference between the two men seems trifling and yet means everything, and Harold's obsessing over it is illustrated in constant, drawn-out flash-cut returns to it, each moment and gesture turned over with agonising meaning, punctuated by Vangelis' moody electronic stings. Harold's climactic race is filmed first in a deadpan shot looking down the track, the race that has obsessed the runners and become the focal point of the drama disposed of in a few seconds, the winner hard to make out because of the angle – the event of such grand drama is also a mere blip in movie time, never mind the history of the world, but then is revisited in glorifying slow motion, becoming a dream of individual will translated into speed.



Other innovative touches are more subtle, including Hudson's use of steadicam shots not just for flashy effects but subtle unity that emphasises more communal moments, in the induction day scene, as he moves through the crowd with and around Cross, and then with more intense effect when he films the American Olympic team training fiercely for the contest, set to pulsing music from Vangelis. Later Hudson's clever feel for making sound and vision interact manifests as he turns a scene of Eric giving a sermon on the Sunday into a study in contrasts, Eric's meditative words spoken over footage of the athletes who are racing in various states of pain and effort, including Monty who suffers falls during a steeplechase, and Harold loses to Scholz in their heat, rendered studies in slightly absurd pathos as their efforts crash to earth in dreamy slow-motion. Hudson also honours more familiar and hallowed flourishes, like a montage of spinning newspapers used to communicate the furore Eric's refusal to run sets off in a battle of religion versus patriotism.



Hudson's direction has weathered better than Welland's script in some regards – as intelligent and well-layered as it is, not all Welland's dialogue is crisp and convincing, as he uses Sutherland to deliver a brief, annoyingly essayistic note on the dangers of severing Eric's strength from his motives, or when Scholz, after the American coach (Philip O'Brien) dismisses Eric to one of his American competitors, notes, in clunky cliché, "He's got something to prove, something personal – something guys like Coach'll never understand in a million years." Nonetheless, the essence of *Chariots of Fire* that drives it well beyond the usual kind of sports drama never goes out of focus, even as the film ratchets up tension in building to Harold and Eric's climactic races. That we usually expect a certain outcome in following the story of a sportsperson in a movie is factored into the viewing experience, in the way Hudson presents Harold's victory with that deadpan long shot, cutting briefly to Eric cheering him on before returning to a slow motion shot of Harold lunging through the finish tape in exact obedience to Mussabini's instruction. The coach himself is forced to wait until he can hear the strains of "God Save the King" until he knows his protégé has won.



The more interesting point, reiterating the essence of the entire film, is how he wins, and how it affects him: reeling after the effort of his lifetime, Harold doubles up as if in mortal pain, again in slow-motion, whilst the race flashes once more in his head, this time with his sheer and perfect focus on display. The music on the soundtrack is plaintive and eerie even as Eric comes over to shake Harold's hand in a gesture of great meaning. Here Hudson captures something profound about victory even whilst resisting the usual movie language for conveying it: for Harold it is a purgation, an emptying out indeed, of his previous identity. Harold afterwards shirks out of the changing room as Lindsay counsels the worried Monty to leave him along: "Now one of these days Monty, you're going to win yourself, and it's pretty difficult to swallow." Eric's subsequent win is a more traditional kind of heroic payoff, if still one filmed and conveyed in an unusual manner. Eric's earlier conversation with Jennie is heard over his run, emphasising the vitality of his words as part and parcel with his deeds. He charges home to victory with his signature wide mouth and back-flung head, watched with knowing joy by Sandy and Jennie, and Harold with blazing intensity. The heroes' return to England sees some further irony in the way Eric readily accepts adulation with the others whilst Harold quietly waits to slip off the train and meet with Sybil, his private war over at last, and his victory that of simply becoming a fully functional man.



The film offers title notes on the Harold and Eric's different ends, with Harold living to a ripe old age whilst Eric's air of being a little too good for the world is confirmed in the report of his death at the end of World War II (he died of a brain tumor whilst in a Japanese POW camp), which suggests a whole other, equally interesting story in itself. "He did it," the aged Monty notes to Lindsay as they leave the church in a brief return to Harold's 1978 funeral service, "He ran them off their feet." Whereupon Hudson returns to the opening vision of the athletes running on the beach, restored again to their youthful glory. This encore is particularly cunning in the way it lingers on the men for a few moments after a performance of the hymn version of "Jerusalem" ends, with only the sound of their feet splashing in foam and wet sand, nailing a plaintive sense of the ephemeral and immediately physical before Vangelis' theme returns. Sure, *Chariots of Fire* might indeed not be as great as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but it is a movie in the top echelon of its kind, a properly mature spectacle that represents a rare melding of dramatic intelligence and stylistic vigour. Tragic lustre has been imbued upon *Chariots of Fire's* meditations on the dimming of golden youth and sadly exulting nostalgia in the time since its release, by the sheer fact that several of its stars died young, with both Charleson and Davis claimed by the AIDS epidemic, and whilst Cross lived to be an august character actor, even he departed too early. Still, they're always young in this movie.

One Million Years B.C. (1966)

this island rod



Don Chaffey's *One Million Years B.C.* was a big hit of ages past that still has an afterglow in pop culture lore. That's mostly thanks to being the source and showcase of the image of star Raquel Welch presenting a fine figure of womanhood in an animal hide bikini, a literal poster child of the 1960s sexual revolution. It's also one of special effects maestro Ray Harryhausen's best-recalled labours. Partly because scenes from it have long been a staple in documentaries to detail another quality that makes it notorious, as a movie that's driven scientists and teachers nuts for decades in its brazenly ahistorical depiction of Palaeolithic humans existing alongside dinosaurs. Chaffey's film was actually a loose remake of *One Million B.C.*, a 1940 film directed by Hal Roach, best known as a comedy impresario, and his son Hal Roach Jr: the earlier film had boosted Victor Mature to stardom. The 1966 version represented a high-water mark of ambition, budget, and success for Hammer Films, at a time when the legendary production outfit seemed poised to finally break out of its modest-budget Horror niche with this and their adaptation of H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1965), two successful fantasy hits that were sold as showcases for extraordinarily beautiful It girls, but were both also anchored by male star John Richardson. The Roachs' film had basic special effects sporting a lot of photographically enlarged lizards, a touch Harryhausen pays homage to early on here before unveiling his own creations.



But *One Million Years B.C.* is actually, mostly a human story, the film's more basic pleasures wrapped in a straightforward but effective allegory, and looking forward to more conceptually advanced takes on similar ideas including *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Quest for Fire* (1981), and *Clan of the Cave Bear* (1986). The allegory is the dawn not just of civilisation but the beginnings of something like heterogeneous fellowship and the downfall of might-makes-right brute force as the basis of human society. The latter concept is embodied by the ferocious Akhoba (Robert Brown), a bristling, powerful he-man accepted as the leader of a struggling tribe of human subsisting in a desolate region close to a simmering volcano – hence they are the “Rock” tribe. The tribe use their nascent wiliness to lure and trap a wild warthog at the outset, and Akhoba's son Tumak (John Richardson) takes on the dangerous task of jumping into the pit they've trapped the animal in and slaying it with a knife. Akhoba gives Tumak the mark of his favour, one of the warthog's tusks, for the deed, much to the irritation of his other son, Sakana (Percy Herbert). But the iniquity of the tribe is quickly demonstrated when an elderly member falls into the pit and can't get himself out, and whilst some want to rescue him, Akhoba urges them to abandon him to his fate.



Once back in the cave that is their home, the tribe roast up the pig. Akhoba brutally defends his right to the first share of the meat, and everyone scrambles madly to get their piece and scoff it down before someone else tries to take it from them. Which is exactly what Akhoba does to Tumak, who, infuriated, fights back. Tumak however proves as yet unequal to his fearsome father, losing the vicious struggle that ensues, and Akhoba shoves him over the crag outside the cave. Tumak, awakening uninjured from the fall but angrily accepting his exile, starts wandering the wasteland. He encounters monstrosities including a huge lizard, a giant spider, and a grotto inhabited with creatures lurking in the stage between apes and human, eating the fruit that falls from a tree growing in the heart of the grotto and festooning their realm with skulls of humans and other hominids. Tumak sneaks through their enclave and crosses the desert beyond. On the edge of death he collapses by the seashore, where he's found by a number of women from a community of blonde-haired commune dubbed the "Shell" tribe. In particular Loana (Welch) adopts him and nurses him back to health. Tumak is soon bewildered and fascinated by the more sophisticated Shell tribe's skills, including the fashioning of stone-tipped spears, cultivating food, and creating artworks. They also respect their elders and accept their counsel. Tumak proves his own strength when the Shell tribe is attacked by an allosaurus, which Tumak takes out with a sharpened pole from a collapsed hut and delivers the coup-de-grace with one of the stone spears. But Tumak is forced to leave when he gets into a fight over possession of the spear, and Loana elects to accompany him on the trek back to the Stone people. Once he reaches their cave, Tumak finds that Sakana has taken over the tribe, having crippled Akhoba by ensuring his fall from a butte during a hunt.



It's been said that Harryhausen preferred working with pliable, dull directors for most of his career to further his independence and ensure his work was essentially regarded by the public as the locus of any auteurist interest. Chaffey on the other hand has scarcely ever been on the radar of critical attention, coming as he did out of cheap and forgettable 1950s programmers and his career going into free-fall along with the British film industry in the 1970s before he found recourse working for Disney on their stodgy '70s live action fare, including *Pete's Dragon* (1978). His two collaborations with Harryhausen (this film following *Jason and the Argonauts*, 1963), are easily his best-known works. Nonetheless in Chaffey's work in his prime there are flickers of real talent, as he made aggressive use of his framings, often with vivid use of depth of field around looming foreground objects, a lush sense of colour, jaggedly propulsive editing, and use of handheld camerawork to imbue a powerfully physical, sometimes near-delirious mood, evinced here early on during Tumak's battle with the warthog. This is why he was smartly chosen to make the pilot episode of *The Prisoner* with its vertiginous sense of immersion in a surreal yet tangible world, and his work almost made the misbegotten *The Viking Queen* (1967) worthwhile.



Chaffey's two Harryhausen films meanwhile manage to evoke the mythic but also feel almost uniquely immediate, even gritty, creating a unique variety of realistic fantasy. Chaffey surveys the vast, beautifully rugged terrain (the film was mostly shot in the Canary Islands) with a poised sense of awe and dramatic context, and keeps the drama entirely coherent despite the lack of dialogue, as the few words the humans speak are fragmented and alien. *One Million Years B.C.* comes on with a suitably primal sense of fire and water, flesh and stone, skin and blood. Les Bowie's pre-title sequence evokes the birth of the Earth in cataclysmic events, reminiscent of the start of *The Creature From The Black Lagoon* (1954), swirling maelstroms of vapour supplanted by surging flows of lava, before, as the opening narration unfurls, resolving on the still-protean world the humans inhabit alongside teeming rivals for supremacy over the land.



One Million Years B.C. certainly provides plenty of incidental camp value, like the amusing glossiness of the blonde Shell people's hair, including Welch's Loana, who looks like she just stepped out of a Carnaby Street salon. When Richardson's Tumak stumbles into their midst it looks a little like a refugee from the BeeGees has found sanctuary with ABBA. Loana's epic catfight with her rival for Tumak's affections, Stone tribe member Nupondi (Martine Beswick), sparked in contest over possession of the phallic emblem of Tumak's manhood that is the warthog tusk, provides ripe fetish fuel as a whirlwind of gleaming sweat-caked skin and tousled hair. And yet it's pushed out of the amusing realm by the fierceness the two actresses work up. Far from seeming like incidental eye candy, there's a physicality and muscularity to Welch and Beswick (who had already proven her girlfight chops in *From Russia With Love*, 1963) that feels like the prototype of something now more familiar in cinema, but with the corollary that the pair, despite Welch's unlikely good hair care, actually look and feel more tangible, more powerful, than any number of their inheritors. Chaffey turns the fight into a spectator event that the Stone tribe watch with bloodthirsty delight, before Loana, gaining the upper hand, introduces the quality of mercy to the tribe by refusing to kill her rival.



It's worth noting from a more serious modern and anthropological eye the depiction of all these early humans as white, and the greater advancement of the blonde people, can be accused of reflecting hoary, quasi-racist cliché. To his credit, however, Chaffey plays it all as straight as possible, from the opening where the narration describes the early humans as scattered and frightened of wandering, with the encoded theme of racial meeting and eventual merging as enacted by the two tribes reflecting the era's politics on multiple levels, and in a similar metaphorical manner to *Star Trek*, which debuted in the same year. *One Million Years B.C.* also, however incidentally, prefigured *2001: A Space Odyssey* in contemplating the inception point of humanity as one where industry and violence converge. *One Million Years B.C.* could be said to unfurl in some Jungian zone of blurred race memory, and in this regard the silliness of pitting the humans against dinosaurs can be treated as a hyperbolic portrayal of the difficulties of survival and the hostility of the natural world they're striving to overcome, the dinosaurs stand-ins for vaguer fears of things with teeth and might lurching out of that unconscious zone in a Hobbesian "red in tooth and claw" sense, in a narrative that's ultimately, in a very Hobbesian way, about the humans striving to leave behind the most bestial instincts.



This concept of the primitive being interchangeable with the vicious is illustrated most clearly when Sakana tries to murder his father and supplant him as lord of the tribe, only for Akhoba to interrupt his own funeral rite when he stumbles into the cave, broken and blind in one eye. Where in the Roach film Akhoba was redeemed in demonstrating his wisdom, Chaffey sees the ruined tyrant as pathetic. Despite not dying Akhoba is no longer the ruler, and when Tumak encounters him again, Akhoba's mate intervenes to stop him spearing the broken remnant. Akhoba nonetheless still eagerly tries to hand Loana a stone to bash Nupondi to death with. Once Tumak shows his kinfolk how to make the stone-tipped spears, Sakana immediately sees a way to ensure his control, constructing more of the weapons and sharing them out amongst his allies to try and kill Tumak and his friends. This notion outs *One Million Years B.C.* as an arms race metaphor. Meanwhile Tumak and one friend venture back to the seashore in pursuit of Loana when she's snatched away by a pterodactyl from a lake where she's been introducing the Rock people to the pleasures of bathing. Loana is dropped into the surf when the pterodactyl, on the verge of feeding her to its two eager hatchlings in a seaside nest, is attacked by a rhamphorhynchus. The rival kills the pterodactyl and, in a nasty little touch, starts eating the hatchlings. When Tumak arrives he thinks it's Loana being consumed, causing him to stumble away, oblivious to her lying exhausted on the sand a short distance away. Not to worry – the lovers are reunited soon after when Loana reaches her fellow Shell people and encourages them to come help find Tumak.



The hyper-clear age of blu ray tends to be brutal on special effects, and that's true of the rubbery skin on Harryhausen's armatures and some of the matte work. And yet I'm often struck by how good his stop-motion looks in the medium, compared to the more spectacular yet cartoonish quality of so much recent effects work. Harryhausen's creatures have a palpable weight and sense of motion which, whilst not perfectly fluid, that nonetheless resists the insubstantial feeling of so much CGI: if less "convincing", it is nonetheless more "real." Tumak and the Shell people's fight with the allosaurus sees one man eaten, a child in a tree threatened, and structures broken down by the hungry, virile monster, before Tumak, wielding a sharpened pole from a collapsed hut, manages to skewer the beast in the belly with its own weight and momentum. George Lucas would pay direct homage to this scene in *Star Wars - Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002). Other encounters with great beasts include the colossal turtle-like archelon, a brontosaurus, and a triceratops that fights and bests a ceratosaurus.



The most memorable and creepy moments are nonetheless those in the grotto of the ape-men, a space decorated with skulls jammed on outcrops and lit in chiaroscuro fashion, the tree growing up from its heart like some kind of primeval nature temple, with the dark, hairy, menacing hominids lurking in the shadows and getting into brawls, one of which concludes with a victor adding his rival's head to the gallery. Loana and Tumak get trapped in the high reaches of the tree when they scramble up there to avoid the apemen, and finally manage to climb out of the grotto through a gap above. The behaviour of the apemen also posits their immediacy to the Stone tribe in the evolutionary sense, with their battles of dominance and ruthless brutality, whilst the Shell people have moved a step further, with their greater communality manifesting in their lack of possessiveness, protectiveness for their elders, and hospitality: the spectacle of Tumak gorging himself in the manner of his people is bewildering to him just as their generosity is to him. Loana tries to teach Tumak to return the spear he appropriated for the fight with the allosaurus, and later, even after getting into a violent fight over the object, one of the Shell men gives him a spear to take on his renewed exile.



A film like *One Million Years B.C.* essentially required actors with the talents of silent film performers. Richardson was a good-looking actor but usually a rather dull and wooden one: freedom from dialogue actually seemed to suit him, as he registers effectively in this role, with his eyes bright blue and vivid in a dark and grimy face telegraphing sharp emotional context as Tumak contends with a violent and hostile world and steadily develops the intensity of not just a survivor but a leader. Which is what he finally becomes after Loana and the Shell tribe find him, and he in turn enlists them into helping him fight against Sakana. Despite having the supporting antagonist role Beswick just about steals the movie with her gleefully committed performance as the feral Nupondi, who grins gloatingly when she sees Loana carried off by the pterodactyl, but gets hers in the fiery climax. She's particularly vital in the film's most bizarre and arresting scene (one ironically cut from the original US release), in which she performs a wildly incantatory dance for the Stone tribe as part of the ritual for Akhoba's funeral, rising up as if resurrected from an altar stone and gyrating furiously, much to Sakana's excitement, whilst men dressed in ox hides complete with horns perform their own dance and finally drag her back to an altar stone as if stilling the urge to life itself.



Still, it's Welch who springboarded to superstardom on the back of the film, immediately following her appearance in *Fantastic Voyage* (1966). In that film her bombshell aura was ironically played off in playing a cool-headed scientist (the infamous scene of her getting wrapped up antibodies notwithstanding), whereas here she's inhabiting a role entirely dependent on her body not just as a thing of beauty but as source of expression. In some ways she was stuck with a dull part as the innately good Loana, particularly as Welch was at her best playing parts more like Nupondi full of fierce vixenish will, but she conveys that goodness without seeming mawkish, and when Loana is pitted into her fight with Nupondi and has to recover her own streak of barbarian zeal to win. The plot in the last third of *One Million Years B.C.*, despite its simplicity, gets a little rushed, with Loana enlisting the Shell tribe to go help Tumak before Sakana has launched his violent takeover, which sees Nupondi and the other women of the tribe frantically fighting off the louts before the allies under Tumak arrive and give battle. Sakana tries kidnapping Loana but Tumak chases him down and fights him, only for the volcano to erupt in best deus ex machine style. Great cracks wrench the earth apart, killing Akhoba, Sakana, and Nupondi as well as many in both tribes. Chaffey concludes with an odd stylistic touch, moving to a sepia tint as, in the aftermath of the eruption, Tumak, Loana, and the other survivors of the tribes, now thrown together as one, crawl out of hiding and start marching towards the sea – the human race at this stage more a bedraggled and desperate stagger towards the future.



Week End (1967)

film.freedonia



Director / Screenwriter: Jean-Luc Godard

In memoriam: Jean-Luc Godard 1930-2022

In 1967, cinema ended. Whatever has been flickering upon screens ever since might perhaps be likened to a beheaded chicken or a dinosaur whose nervous system still doesn't know it's dead even as it lurches around. At least, that's what the title at the end of Jean-Luc Godard's most infamous film declares – FIN DE CINEMA – as an attempted Götterdämmerung for an age of both movies and Western society, as well as for Godard's own life and career up to that moment. In eight years Godard had gone from being a fringe film critic to one of the most artistically respected and cultishly followed filmmakers alive. His marriage to actress Anna Karina had unexpectedly made him a tabloid star and inspired some of his most complete and expressive films. The union's dissolution by contrast saw Godard driven into a frenzy of cinematic experimentation that started his drift away from his Nouvelle Vague fellows and off to a strange and remote planet of his own, defined by an increasingly angry and alienated tone. Godard's relentless play with cinema form and function seemed to become inseparable from his own drift towards radical politics. Politically provocative from *Le Petit Soldat* (1960) on, Godard's new faiths crystallised whilst making *La Chinoise* (1967), an initially satiric but increasingly earnest exploration of the new student left and its war on decaying establishments, which happened to coincide with him falling in love with one of his actors, Anne Wiazemsky, in what would prove another ill-fated marriage.



Godard found himself riding at a cultural vanguard, as young cineastes adored his films and considered them crucial expressions of the zeitgeist, and Godard in turn championed the radical cause that would famously crest in the enormous protest movement of 1968. *Week End* predated the most eruptive moments of the late 1960s but thoroughly predicted them. What helps keep it alive still as one of the most radical bits of feature filmmaking ever made depends on Godard offering the rarest of experiences in cinema: an instance of an uncompromising artist-intellectual with perfect command over his medium making a grand gesture that's also an auto-da-fe and epic tantrum, a self-conscious and considered repudiation of narrative cinema. Many critics in the years after the film's release felt it was a work of purposeful self-destruction, not far removed from Yukio Mishima's ritual suicide. Godard certainly did retreat to a creative fringe that of course thought of itself as the cultural navel of a worldwide revolutionary movement, making films in collaboration with other members of the filmmaking collective called the Dziga Vertov Group, and would only slowly and gnomically return to something like the mainstream in the 1980s. Godard's aesthetic gestures, his violation of narrative form, and the conviction with which it anticipates the ever-imminent implosion of modern civilisation. Godard set out to attack many things he loved, not just film style but also women, art, cars – his alter ego in *Le Petit Soldat* had mentioned his love for American cars, but in *Week End* the car becomes a signifier of everything Godard felt was sick and doomed in the world.



Week End was the film Godard had been working for most of the 1960s and all he made after it was a succession of aftershocks. It remains in my mind easily his greatest complete work, only really rivalled by the elegiac heartbreak of *Contempt* and the more pensively interior and essayistic, if no less radical *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967). It's also a crazed one, an obnoxious one, laced with self-righteousness, self-loathing, confused romanticism, sexism, flashes of perfervid beauty, and violence that swings between Grand Guignol fakery and snuff movie literalness. Some of it has the quality of a brat giggling at his own bravery in pulling his dick out in church, other times like a grandfatherly academic trying to talk hip. All feeds into the maelstrom. Godard's overt embrace of surrealism and allegory, with heavy nods to Luis Buñuel, particularly *L'Age d'Or* (1930) and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), allowed him to ironically lance at the heart of the age. The vague basis for the film, transmitted to Godard through a film producer who mentioned the story without mentioning who came up with it, was a short story by the Latin American writer Julio Cortázar, whose work had also inspired Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966).



The plot of *Week End*, such as it is, presents as its rambling antiheroes the emblematic French bourgeois couple Corinne (Mireille Darc) and Roland (Jean Yanne), greedy, amoral, wanton, bullish creatures, hidden under a thin veneer of moneyed *savoir faire*: they might be total creeps but they dress well. Both are having affairs and plotting to murder their spouse. Both are meanwhile conspiring together to kill Corinne's father, a wealthy man who owns the apartment building they live in, and is now finally sickening after the couple have spent years slowly poisoning him. But they're worried he might die in hospital and Corinne's mother might falsify a new will cutting them out, so need to reach the family home in Oinville. The couple linger around their apartment in expecting news: Corinne talks furtively on the balcony with their mutual friend, and her secret lover, whilst Roland does the same over the phone with his mistress. "I let him screw me sometimes so he thinks I still love him," Corinne tells the lover as they converse on the balcony, whilst Corinne idly watches as the drivers of two cars down in the building car park clash. The driver of a mini accosts one a sports car for cutting him off. The fight quickly escalates into a fearsome beating, with one driver set upon by the other and his companion, and left in a bloodied sprawl by his vehicle.



A little later this vignette is algorithmically repeated with variance as Roland and Corinne also get into a battle in the car park, after Roland bumps their Facel-Vega convertible into a parked car. A boy playing in store-bought Indian costume shouts for his mother, as the hit car belongs to his parents. The mother berates the couple, quickly sparking a comic battle in which she fends off the infuriated Roland by swatting tennis balls at him whilst Roland fires paint from a water gun at her. Her husband bursts out of the building with a shotgun and fires, forcing Roland and Corinne to flee, whilst the boy cries after them, "Bastards! Shit-heap! Communists!" The diagnosis of some awful tension and rage lurking within the seemingly placid forms of modern consumer life is the first and perhaps the most lasting of *Week End's* insights, anticipating epidemics of road rage and on to the flame wars and lifestyle barrages of online life. Things like cars and designer clothes as presented through *Week End* aren't just simply indicted as illusory trash, but as treacherous things because they are presented as yardsticks of modern life, creating bubbles of identity, and when those bubbles of identity collide and prove to be permeable, the result stirs a kind of insanity.



Before they set out on their fateful odyssey to Oinville, Corinne goes out to spend a session with a therapist, or at least that seems to be the cover story for Corinne meeting her lover. In cynical pastiche of the analytic process – or “Anal-yse” as one of Godard’s title cards announces – Corinne sits on a desk, in a near-dark office, stripped down to her underwear, with her lover playing therapist (or perhaps he really is one), his face in near-silhouette. Corinne begins a long, detailed monologue recounting sexual encounters with a lover named Paul and also Paul’s wife Monique, explaining her pornographic adventures with the pair that quickly progresses from lesbian fondling to dominance displays as Monique sat in a saucer of milk and ordered the other two to masturbate. Whether the story is real or not matter less than its ritualistic value in serving the game between Corinne and her “therapist,” who ends the game by drawing Corinne in for a clinch. The lurid flourishes of Corinne’s anecdote (drawn from surrealist erotica writer Georges Bataille, whose influence echoes throughout the film) mesmerise by describing sordid and perverse things Godard can’t possibly show in a mainstream movie, the first and most elaborate of his many uses of discursive and representative technique to avoid the merely literal.



Along with the titillation, challenge: nearly ten minutes long, this scene is one of several in *Week End* deliberately contrived to exasperate viewers with its seemingly pointless length and intense, unblinking technique. Darc has to hold the screen right through without a cut, with Godard's regular cinematographer Raoul Coutard gently moving the camera back and forth in a kind of sex act itself. On the soundtrack random bursts of Antoine Duhamel's droning, menacing score come and go, sometimes so loud as to drown out the speech: the music seems to promise some dark thriller in the offing, and keeps coming and going through the film. Satirical purpose is draped over it all, as Godard indicts secret roundelays of sexual indulgence played out in bourgeois parlours whilst official moral forms are maintained, as well as mocking movie representations of sex. On yet another level, the scene is an extension, even a kind of ultimate variation, of Godard's penchant first displayed in *Breathless* during that film's epic bedroom scene, for long, rambling explorations of people in their private, *deshabille* states.



Godard's signature title cards, with their placard-like fonts all in capitals save for the "i"s still sporting their stylus, have long been easy to reference by any filmmaker wanting to channel or pastiche the Godardian style, instantly conveying '60s radical chic. Godard had been using them for a while in his films, but it's *Weekend* that wields them as a recurring device not just of scene grammar but aggressive cueing and miscuing of structure and intent. *Week End* is introduced as "a film found in a dustbin" and, later, "a film lost in the cosmos." The titles declare the day and time as if obeying neat chronology, but begin to lose track, designating "A Week of Five Thursdays" and events of apparent importance like "September Massacre" and "Autumn Light" and devolving into staccato declarations of theme like "Taboo" and conveying cynical, indicting puns. At 10:00 on Saturday morning, as one title card informs us with assurance, Corinne and Roland set off on their unmerciful mission, surviving their encounter with the shotgun-wielding neighbour only to get caught in a massive traffic jam on a country road.



This sequence, nearly eight minutes long and setting a record at the time for the longest tracking shot yet created, contrasts the hermetic intensity and verbal dominance of the “Anal-yse” scene with an interlude of pure visual showmanship, perhaps the most famous and certainly the most elaborate of Godard’s career. It’s one that also takes to a logical extreme Andre Bazin’s cinema theories about long takes, transforming the movement of the camera and its unyielding gaze to enfold multivalent gags and social commentary. The shot follows the course of the jam as Roland tries with all his gall and ingenuity to weave his way along it. The air sings with endless blaring car horns amassed into an obnoxiously orchestral dun, as the Durands pass multifarious vignettes. An old man and a boy toss a ball back and forth between cars. Men play poker. An elderly couple has a chess match whilst sitting on the road. A family settled on the roadside, father reading a book and sharing a laugh with the rest. A white sports car rests the wrong way around and parked in tight between a huge Shell oil tanker and another sports car. Trucks with caged animals including lions, a llama, and monkeys which seem to be escaping. A farmer with a horse and cart surrounded by droppings. Roland almost crashes into the open door of a car, and Corinne gets out and slams the door shut with the choice words to the driver before resuming. On the roadside at intervals dead bodies are glimpsed near the broken and buckled remains of cars. Roland finally leaves the jam behind as police clear one wreck, and takes off up a side road.



The guiding joke of this scene sees most of humanity adapted and resigned to such straits. The price paid for the car, in both its functionality and its promise of release, has proven to be the screaming frustration of dysfunction and ironic immobility, punctuated by the horror of traffic accidents, and an enforced detachment, even numbness, in the face of a survey of gore and death. At the same time, comic pathos, scenes of ordinary life simply being lived in the transitory state of the road rather than in tight urban apartments, and the establishment of tentative community. Nascent, a primal hierarchy, as Roland and Corinne urge, bully, threaten, and steal bases along their path, mimicking their plans to circumvent waiting for their fortune: awful as they are, the couple are at least evolved to be apex predators in this pond. This sequence links off every which way in modern satire and dystopian regard, close to J.G. Ballard's writing in its satiric, quasi-sci-fi hyperbole and anticipating Hollywood disaster movies of the next half-century, just as much of the film's midsection lays down the psychic blueprint for generations of post-apocalyptic stories.



Weekend is a satire on the (1967) present and a diagnostic guess at the future, but also a depiction of the past. Visions of roadways clogged with traffic, roadside carnage, the tatty countryside infested with refugees, refuse, and resistance warriors, constantly refer back to the France of the World War II invasion and occupation, perhaps merely the most obvious and personal prism for Godard to conceive of societal collapse through, whilst also presenting the invasion as a mutant variation, infinitely nebulous and hard to battle. *Week End* starts off as a film noir narrative with its tale of domestic murder for profit, and remains one for most of its length, even as it swerves into a parody of war movies. It's also an extended riff on narratives from *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Don Quixote* to *Alice In Wonderland* and *The Wizard Of Oz*, any picaresque tale when the going gets weird and the weird turn pro, each encounter a new contending with the nature of life and being, the shape of reality, and the limits of existence. Comparisons are easy to make with *Week End*, because everything's in there. The sense of time and reality entering a state of flux becomes more explicit as the Durands begin to encounter fictional characters and historical personages and new-age prophets, keeping to their overall motive all the while.



After escaping the traffic jam, Corinne and Roland enter a small town where they stop so Corinne can call the hospital her father is in, as they've fallen behind schedule and Corinne is fretting over any chance her father's will can be changed at the last moment. As they park a farmer drives by in a tractor lustily singing "The Internationale," and a few moments later the sound of a crash is heard, a fatal accident as the tractor hits a Triumph sports car, a sight Corinne and Roland barely pay attention to, and when they do it's to fantasise it involved her father and mother. When Godard deigns to depict the crash, he slices the imagery up into a succession of colourful tableaux, the mangled corpse of the driver covered in obviously fake but feverishly red and startling blood, gore streaming down the windshield. The driver's girlfriend can be overheard arguing with the tractor driver, before Godard show the two bellowing at each-other, the woman, covered in her lover's blood, raving in a distraught and pathetic harangue as she accuses the tractor driver of killing him deliberately because he was a young, rich, good-looking man enjoying life's pleasures: "You can't stand us screwing on the Riviera, screwing at ski resorts...he had the right of way over fat ones, poor ones, old ones..." Worker and gadabout cast aspersions on each-other's vehicles, and the girl wails, "The heir of the Robert factories gave it to because I screwed him!" All this Godard labels, with cold wit, "Les Luttes des Classes" ("The Class Struggle").



As the pair argue, Godard cuts back to shots of onlookers seemingly beholding the scene but also posing for the camera, framed against advertising placards with bright colours and striking designs. Coutard captures the popping graphics and the faces of the witnesses, sometimes gawking in bewilderment, one trying to control the urge to laugh, and others ranked in stiff and solemn reckoning (including actress Bulle Ogier, who like several actors returns at the end as a guerrilla). The woman and the farmer dash over to Corinne and Roland to each solicit their support in reporting the accident their way, only for the couple to flee in their car: “You can’t just leave like that, we’re all brothers, as Marx said!” the farmer shouts, whilst the girl shrieks, “Jews! Dirty Jews!” Both left bereft and appalled, the farmer finishes up giving the woman in a consoling embrace, in the film’s funniest and most profoundly ironic depiction of the evanescence of human nature. Godard shifts to a vignette he labels “Fauxtography” as he now films the actors from the scene in group portrait against the ads, with a discordant version of “La Marseillaise” on the soundtrack, as if in pastiche of group photos of resistance members at the end of the war, and the way patriotism is often invoked as the levelling answer to the aforementioned class struggle.



Throughout *Weekend* Godard recapitulates elements of style explored in his previous films: the “Anal-yse” scene as noted recalls the explorations of human intimacy in his first few films, albeit hardened into distanced shtick, as the tractor crash scene recalls his more pop-art infused works of just a couple of years earlier like *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) and the fetishisation of the allure of marketing in *Made in USA* (1966). Vignettes later in the film, including Emily Bronte musing over the age of a stone and its pathos as an object untouched and unfashioned by humanity, and the Durands studying a worm squirming in mud, recall the intensely focused meditations on transient objects and sights explored in *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*. The concluding scenes return to the children’s playtime approach to depicting war Godard had taken on *Les Carabiniers* (1963). Few directors, if any, had ever tried so hard to avoid raking over their old ground as Godard in the whirlwind of his 1960s output, and this systematic rehashing underlines the way *Week End* offers a summarising cap on his labours whilst also trying to leap beyond it all. Godard resisted suggestions his films were improvised, instead explaining that he often wrote his scenes just before filming, nonetheless seeming to grow them organically on the move, and so *Week End* is its own critique, a response to a moment and a response to the response.



As they roar on down the road, Roland comments when Corinne asks about the farmer's plea, "It wasn't Marx who said it. It was another Communist – Jesus said it." As if by invocation, the couple soon encounter a son of God on the road, albeit not that one. In a jaggedly filmed interlude, the couple pass through another, seemingly even more hellish traffic jam, with Godard's title cards violently breaking the scene up into hourly reports. This jam is glimpsed only in close-up on the couple as they engage in bellowing argument with other drivers who, out of their cars, grab and claw at them, obliging both to bit at hands and fingers, as Roland barks at another driver, "If I humped your wife and hurt her would you call that a scratch?" Resuming their journey again, this time through rain, the pair are flagged down by a woman hitchhiker, Marie-Madeleine (Virginie Vignon): Roland gets out and inspects her, lifting her skirt a little, before assenting to take her. The woman then calls out a man travelling with her (Daniel Pommereulle), hiding in a car wreck on the roadside: the frantic man, dressed in bohemian fashion and wielding a pistol he shoots off like a lion tamer, forces the Durands to take them back in the other direction.



The man explains after the rain stops and the top has been rolled back down that he is Joseph Balsamo, “the son of God and Alexandra Dumas...God’s an old queer as everyone knows – he screwed Dumas and I’m the result.” This unlikely messiah explains his gospel: “I’m here to inform these modern times of the Grammatical Era’s end and the beginning of Flamboyance, especially in cinema.” That Joseph looks a little like Godard himself connects with the earnestness of this seemingly random and absurd pronouncement, as Joseph heralds the film breakdown into arbitrary and surreal vignettes, and the texture of the movie itself losing shape, and Godard’s own imminent departure from mainstream filmmaking. It’s also a flourish of puckish self-satire, as Godard-as-Joseph wields the power of the camera and editing to manifest miracles and punish the wicked, whilst also paying the debt to Luis Bunuel’s arbitrary swerves into pseudo-religious weirdness as he labels this scene “L’Ange Ex Terminateur.” Joseph promises the Durands he will grant any wishes they want to make if they’ll drive him to London, and proves his statement by casually manifesting a rabbit in the glove compartment.



This cues an oft-quoted scene as the Durands muse on the things they want most: Roland's wishes include a Miami Beach hotel and a squadron of Mirage fighters "like the yids used to thrash the wogs," whilst Corinne longs to become a natural blonde and for a weekend with James Bond, a wish Roland signs off on too. Joseph, disgusted with such obnoxious wishes, refuses to ride with them any longer, but Corinne snatches his gun off him and tries to force him: the Durands chase the couple out of the car and into a field strewn with car wrecks, but Joseph finally raises his hands and transforms the wrecks into a flock of sheep, reclaiming his gun from the startled Corinne and thrashing the couple as they flee back to the car. Godard refuses to perform a match cut as Joseph works his miracle, instead letting his gesture and cry of "Silence!" repeat, making crude technique into a performance in itself, claiming authorship of the editing miracle and breaking up screen time.



Godard had always exhibited an approach to filmmaking akin to trying to reinvent it from shot to shot even whilst assimilating myriad influences, but *Week End* as seen here engages directly with the notion of treating the film itself as a kind of artefact, with seemingly random, amateurish, but actually highly deliberated, assaults on the usually ordered progress of a movie. Godard reported that he took inspiration for Corinne's orgy monologue from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), but it feels likely he also found permission in the Bergman film's opening and closing glimpses of the film itself starting to spool and finally burning out, to take the notion much further and attack the very idea of linear coherence as proof of professional assembly in cinema. One ostentatious example later in the film sees a scene toggle back and forth from "Sunday" to "Story For Monday," with a brief shot of Yanne-as-Roland singing as he walks down the roadside shown three times, like the scene's been hurriedly spliced together by a high schooler, signalling the further fracturing of time in the Durands' odyssey. Some of these touches quickly became emblematic clichés of the era's would-be revolutionary cinema, at once heralded by simpatico minds and derided by others.



More immediately, Godard uses the impression of movie breakdown to illustrate another kind. After fleeing Joseph, the Durands tear down the road, Roland so frustrated and aggressive he causes bicyclists and cars alike to swerve off the road, until he crashes himself in a fiery pile-up with two other cars. Godard makes it seem as if the film is sticking and flickering, eventually caught with the frame edge halfway up the screen, as if hitting an amateurish splice point. This delivers the impression of the crash, its awfulness a wrench in the shape of reality, whilst allowing Godard to avoid having to actually stage it, and placing the illusion of the film itself in the spotlight, dovetailing Godard's aesthetic and dramatic intentions in a perfect unity. This inspiration here feels more like Buster Keaton's games with cinema form in *Sherlock Jr* (1924), the frame becoming treacherous and malleable, characters and story getting lost in the spaces between. The crash also cues the film's most famously cynical gag. The wreck is a scene of total chaos, a passenger tumbling out of a burning car writhing in flames, Roland himself squirming out of the capsized Facel-Vega all bloodied and battered. Corinne stands by, screaming in bottomless horror and woe, finally shrieking "My bag – my Hermès handbag!", as the designer item goes up in smoke.



Surviving relatively unscathed, the couple start down the road on foot, still seeking the way to Oinville, or someone who will give them a lift. But the country proves an increasingly unstable and dangerous space as the couple stroll by an increasing numbers of car wrecks, corpses littering the road: trying to get directions from some of the splayed bodies, Roland eventually concludes, “These jerks are all dead.” Corinne spies a pair of designer trousers on one corpse and tries to steal it, only forestalled when a truck comes along and Roland has Corinne lie on the road with her legs splayed as a hitchhiker’s tactic, one step beyond *It Happened One Night* (1934). At another point on the road, the tiring pair settle on the roadside, Corinne taking a nap in a ditch whilst Roland tries to thumb a ride. A tramp passes by, sees Corinne in the ditch, and after alerting Roland to the presence of a woman there to Roland’s total disinterest, the tramp descends to rape her. Meanwhile Roland keeps flagging down cars for a lift only to be asked gatekeeping questions like, “Are you in a film or reality?” and “Who would you rather be fucked by, Mao or Johnson?”, Roland’s answers apparently wrong as the drivers speed off leaving them stranded. As Corinne crawls out of the ditch, Duhamel drops in a flourish of stereotypically jaunty French music as if to place a sitcom sting on her assault.



The evil humour here and elsewhere in *Week End* does provoke awareness of Godard's often less than chivalrous attitudes to women at this point in his art. He told Darc when they first met for the film that he didn't like her or the roles she played in films, and a cast member felt Godard relished a scene where the actor had to slap Darc, but cast her anyway to be the ideal emblem of everything he hated. The identification of the bourgeois society Godard was starting to loathe so much with femininity is hard to ignore, even if it is intended to be taken on a symbolic level. Of course, *Week End* is primarily the spectacle of an artist emptying out the sluice grate of his mind, come what may, and this vignette, playing ugliness as a casual joke, also captures something legitimate about the state of survival, as if Corinne and Roland are by this time two hapless refugees on the road of life, the dissolution of any semblance of safety befalling this prototypical pair of wanderers, although the film signals they are still perfectly armour-plated by their arrogance and obliviousness, and their own hyperbolic readiness to use violence and murder to achieve their own ends as representatives of the exploitive side of Western capitalism. "I bet mother has written us out of the will by now," Corinne groans as she tries to purloin those designer pants, to Roland's retort, "A little torture will change her mind. I remember a few tricks from when I was a lieutenant in Algeria."



Earlier in the course of their wanderings, the pair also muse over their plans for killing whilst strolling by an incarnation of Louis de Saint-Just (Jean-Pierre Leaud), a major figure of the French Revolution, reciting his political tract “L’esprit de la Révolution et de la Constitution de la France,” with his passionate denunciation of the constant risk to liberty and fair governance from human fecklessness and greed. As well as the blatant contrast with the duo discussing murder for profit behind Saint-Just, Godard implies the link between the glorious revolutionary spirit of the past and the modern radical spirit, like turns to Marxist-hued revolution in the Third World, as espoused in a length scene late in the film in which Godard has two immigrant garbage collectors, one Arab (László Szabó), the other African (Omar Diop). The two men lecture the audience in droning fashion about current revolutionary turns in their respective homelands. Throughout *Week End* Godard makes a constant attempt to adapt into cinematic language playwright Berthold Brecht’s famous alienation techniques from the stage. Such techniques were intended to foster detachment from mere dramatic flow and oblige the audience to think about the ideas being expressed to them, in the opposite manner to the goal of most dramatic creations to weave such things together. The many formal and artifice-revealing tricks in the movie are wielded to that end, perhaps presented most bluntly when Godard has each garbage man gets the other to speak out his thoughts whilst Godard holds the camera on the face of the silent man as they eat their lunch: the directness of the political speech is amplified by not seeing it spoken. During their speech Godard drops in flash cuts to earlier moments in the film, including of Saint-Just speaking, but also of the cart loaded with horse manure – the continuum of history, or just the same old shit?



Amongst the many facets of his filmmaking that made an enormous impression from his debut *Breathless* (1960) on, Godard's ardent belief that the history of cinema was as worthy as literature and music of being referenced and used as the basis of an artistic argot had been a salient one: where an author would readily be congratulated for including allusions to and quotes from other texts, there is still anxiety in many cineastes over whether that is in movies just ripping off, or the equivalent of a kind of secret handshake between film snobs. Godard happily indulges himself to the max in that regard in *Week End* – the final scenes see resistance cells speaking on the radio using codenames like “The Searchers” and “Johnny Guitar” – even as he also constantly provoked his audience by also insisting on the reverse, interpolating long passages from books as read by his actors and nodding to other art forms constantly in his movies, as with Saint-Just's speech. Almost exactly mid-movie Godard offers a vignette titled “A Tuesday in the 100 Years War,” his camera fixing that worm in the mud, whilst on the soundtrack the voices of the Durands are heard, considering their own ignorance and pathos in lack of self-knowledge, in an unexpected show of philosophical depth from the pair, even as Roland also offers self-justification in his way, arguing they must do as they do much like the worm, understanding neither the forces that move it or them.



Amidst many bizarre and hyperbolic scenes, one of the most extreme comes halfway through and presents in part the spectacle of Godard acknowledging the frustration he's out to provoke with such moments, as the Durands, still seeking directions to Oinville, encounter Emily Bronte (Blandine Jeanson) and an oversized version of Tom Thumb (Yves Afonso) walking along a country lane, swapping quotations from books. Roland and Corinne become increasingly enraged ("Oinville! Oinville!") as Bronte insists they solve riddles she reads to them from the book she's holding before answering their questions, considering the answering of conundrums much more important than mere spatial location. The confrontation of 19th century literary method with modern cinematic virtues is enraging, and acknowledged by the two modern characters: "What a rotten film," Roland barks, "All we meet are crazy people," whilst Corinne rants, "This isn't a novel, it's a film – a film is life!" Finally Roland gets so angry he strikes a match and sets Bronte's dress on fire. He and Corinne look on impassively as the flames consume the decorous poetess. "We have no right to burn anyone, not even a philosopher," Corinne comments. "She's an imaginary character," Roland assures, to Corinne's retort, "Then why is she crying?"



The dizzy turn from aggravating whimsy to apocalyptic horror in this vignette obliquely describes the simmering anger Godard was feeling against the Vietnam War which metaphorically pervades the film as a whole. Bronte's burning conflating infamous images of victims of napalm bombing into a singular image of gruesome death, albeit one rendered in a fashion that refuses pyrotechnic representation of pain, as Godard doesn't show the burning woman or have her screams fill the soundtrack, with only Corinne's deadpan description to suggest that all an artist can do in such a moment is weep and not wail. Godard conceives as the war, and indeed perhaps all modernism, as direct offence to artistic humanism, whilst also accusing precisely that artistic humanism as continuing blithely through epochs of horror in the way Tom Thumb continues his recitation to the charred and flaming corpse. The theme of characters who know they're characters engaged in frustrated hunts for obscure ends echoes the 1920s Theatre of Absurd movement, particularly Luigi Pirandello, although the surreal interpolation of such figures with affixed names of famous and mythic import in the context of such tragicomic sweep might be more directly influenced by Bob Dylan. At the bottom of things, moreover, Godard treats the political gestures and artistic interpolations alike as varieties of tropes in the modern sense, fragmented and nonsensical in the dream-logic of the narrative, part of the madcap stew of anxiety and despair the film as a whole proves to be.



And yet it's the film's islands of tranquillity that stand out most strongly when the texture of the work becomes familiar. The embrace of tractor driver and the rich girl. The sight of one of the revolutionaries, a "Miss Gide" (a cameo by Wiazemsky) reading and having a smoke as her fellows row in across a Renoir pond. The sight of Bronte and Tom Thumb wending their way along the country lane. A wounded female guerrilla (Valérie Lagrange) dying in her lover's arms whilst singing a wistful song. Such moments lay bare the ironic peacefulness the idea of chaotic revolution had for Godard – the possibility that in the formless and perpetual new state of becoming he might find his own restless and relentless conscience and consciousness stilled and finally allow him to relax and take simple joy in the act of creating. The most elegant of these interludes, if also once more defiant in its extension, comes when the Durands are finally given a lift during their trek, it proves to be by a pianist (Paul Gégauff) who agrees to take them as close as he can to Oinville if they'll help him give a concert he's driving to. This proves to be a recital of a Mozart piece in the courtyard of a large, old, classically French farmhouse, given purely for the edification of the farm's workers and residents. Coutard's camera seems to drift lazily around in repeating circles, as the residents listen and stroll about lazily within their separate spaces of attention and enjoyment. The pianist stops playing now and then to comment on his own lack of talent and argue that contemporary pop music sustains much more connection with the spirit and method of Mozart than the disaster of modern "serious" concert music. Given the film around this moment, such a jab at artists going up their own backsides in the name of radical innovation and antipopulism in the name of the people be considered highly ironic jab.



The sequence is marvellous even in its salient superfluity except as a rhythmic break and interlude of pacific consideration, the pianist's occasionally fractured recital mimicking Godard's own cinema and the scene as a whole expostulating an ideal of art as something that reaches out and enfolds all, without necessarily dumbing itself down: if *Week End's* ultimate project is to force chaos onto the cinema screen, it also exalts culture in the barnyard. Actors who appear elsewhere in the film, including Jeanson who acts as the pianist's attentive page turner, and Wiazemsky, appear amongst the audience, whilst the Durands also listen, Roland yawning every time the camera glides by him and Corinne noting the player isn't bad. In random patches throughout the scene bursts of sudden ambient noise, including the buzz of a plane engine, clash with the lilting beauty of the playing, as if Godard is pointing the difficulty of capturing such a scene on film considering the pressure of rivals in volume and attention so pervasive in modern life. Once the couple are dropped off further down the road by the pianist, the Durands resume their tramping. As they pass some men sitting on the roadside: "They're the Italian extras in the coproduction," Roland explains.



The appearance of Saint-Just earlier in the film is followed immediately by Leaud in another cameo, this time in a movie joke that plays on the cliché of people who want to make a phone call being stymied by some ardent lover speaking on the phone. Rather than simply speaking, the wooing lover insists on singing a song over the phone and cannot break from it until it's finished, by which time the Durands have turned their acquisitive eyes on his parked convertible. Finally breaking off his song, the man battles the pair in another extended slapstick clash like the one in the car park at the start. The Durands find they're not quite the most evolved predators in the countryside they like to think they are, as the skinny young man finally outfights them both, even jabbing his elbow into Roland's spine to leave him momentarily unconscious, before fleeing. The movie joke is matched towards the end as Godard makes fun of another cliché, that of cunning warriors communicating with bird calls, as the Durands encounter a gangly man who will only communicate in bird noises, even holding up a picture of a bird before his face as he does so. This weirdo proves to be a member of a hippie revolutionary cell calling itself the Liberation Front of the Seine and Oise, who take the Durands captive when they in turn are trying to rob some food off some roadside picnickers they encounter.



Before the Durands are waylaid by the Liberation Front, they do actually finally reach Oinville, only to find their fears have been realised: Corinne's father has died and her mother has claimed all of the inheritance. Corinne washes the filth off the journey off herself in the bath, with Godard positing another joke on himself, avoiding showing Corinne nude in the bath but including in the frame classical painting of a bare-breasted woman looking coquettishly at the viewer. Corinne's fretting is meanwhile deflected by Roland as he angrily reads out a book passage contending with the way an animal's invested nature, in this case a hippopotamus, defines existence for that creature. This scene is another multivalent joke that swipes at the different expectations of censorship levelled at cinema and painting as well as extending Godard's motif of discursive gesture, which he reiterates more forcefully when the couple confront the mother. In between these scenes, a portion of the film breaks down into random shots of Oinville with the title "Scene de la vie de province" with the sarcastic lack of any apparent life in the provinces, with Roland's recital on the hippo on sound, vision punctuated by recurring titles from earlier in the film and random advertising art, threatening for a moment to foil all sense of forward movement in the story. Roland argues with the mother over splitting the inheritance for the sake of peace, whilst the mother carries some skinned rabbits she's prepared. Suddenly Corinne sets upon her with a kitchen knife and the couple butcher the old lady, represented by Godard by torrents of more of his familiar, hallucinatory fake red blood (shades of *Marnie*, 1964) spilt upon the beady-eyed and skinless rabbits as they lay on paving pebbles. The couple take the mother's body into the countryside and contrive to make it look like she died in yet another traffic accident.



Through all the discursive, masking, and symbolic devices thrown at the viewer with *Week End*, the overarching purpose accumulates. Godard contends with the constant provoking strangeness and slipperiness of representing life, experience, and concepts in cinema, with its duplicitous blend of falsity and veracity, its constructed simulacrum of reality, its overriding capacity to sweep over the viewer and make us feel perhaps more intensely than anything in actual life can, and Godard's cold-sweat anxiety in not being sure if he as a film artist and suppliant lover is contributing to some deadly detachment pervasive in modern life particularly as it relates to awareness of the world at large. One can argue with the thesis as with many of the other attitudes present in the film – the average person in the modern world is constantly forced to safeguard their own psychic integrity in the face of a bombardment of stimuli and demands for empathy where in, say, the 1300s one's concerns barely went beyond travails in the next village, and it's this safeguarding that is often misunderstood as apathy or ignorance (whilst writing this I'm glancing at the TV news updates by thousands of deaths in the Turkish earthquake, of which thanks to the miracle of technology I'm instantly aware and constantly informed of, and can't do a damned thing about). But what's certain is that to a degree very few other filmmakers, if any, have matched, Godard creates a work that is a complete articulation of his concern, even if at times the film manifests its own blithely insensate streak, its determined attempt to burn through the veils of its own knowing and intellectual poise. Godard's method is to constantly force a reaction through indirect means, proving that implication can sometimes pack the shock that direct portrayal cannot.



The long, self-consciously shambolic last portion of the film as Roland and Corinne are held captive by the Liberation Front, becomes a succession of blackout vignettes and vicious jokes. The “liberators” instead play Sadean anarchists and Dadaist provocateurs, raping, killing, and consuming captives – one part end of days hippie happening, one part inverted take on Sade’s *The 120 Days of Sodom* with a bit of Lautreamont’s *The Chants of Maldoror* thrown in. Passages of the latter are recited in prototypical rapping over drum licks, as the Front have a drum kit set up in the forest glade that is their base for ritual expounding of evil art, companion piece and counterpoint to the piano recital. A captive girl is handed over to Ernest (Ernest Menzer), the Front’s executioner-cum-cook, who specialises in making cuisine with human flesh: “You can screw her before we eat her if you like.” Roland and Corinne are tied up, having been partly stripped and made filthy, likely in being raped and brutalised. Ernest roams around the camp, splitting eggs over prone bones and dropping the yolks on them, and then with the delicacy of a master chef does the same upon the splayed crotch of a female prisoner, before inserting a fish into her vagina – Godard managing to portray this grotesquery whilst still maintaining a judicious vantage, implying clearly without presenting any image that nears the pornographic – which, in its way, makes the scene even more squirm-inducing.



Some unknown time after being captured, the Front crouch with their captives near a roadside, waiting for passing travellers to waylay and add to the pot. Roland tries to make a break, and the Front's chief (Jean-Pierre Kalfon), rather than let him be shot, instead hits him with a stone from a slingshot. Corinne stands over Roland, his head split open by the missile and bleeding to death: "Horrible!" Corinne moans. "The horror of the bourgeoisie can only be overcome with more horror," the leader replies, a line that might as well come out of Mao's little red book, and can be taken as implicitly accusing nothing so petty as movie censors but the entire rhetorical infrastructure always mobilised whenever aggrieved and angry populations unleash that anger in destructive ways. Or, as apologia in dark tidings in glancing back at Stalinist purges and over to Maoist Cultural Revolution and on to Khmer Rouge killing fields. Or both and more. This cues the film's most infamous moments as a pig is shown being swiftly and efficiently slaughtered, bashed on the head with a hammer to stun it before its throat is cut, and a goose having its head cut off, its body still flapping away pathetically when both animals are laid out for Ernest to add to his cuisine. Actual death on screen, inflicted on hapless animals, a profound provocation to animal lovers. Pauline Kael commented that for all Godard's tilting at those who inflict horror and destruction, here was a bit of it he could own himself. And yet such scenes would be entirely familiar and commonplace to any farmers and slaughtermen in the audience but when placed in a movie become disturbing horror, given the average audience member's distance from the realities that put food on the plate. Earlier in the film the farmer who ran into the young couple's Triumph angrily declares people like her need people like him to feed them, and Godard only engages with that truism on its fundamental level.



The scenes with the Liberation Front, barbed as they are in portraying dark fantasy extreme of the radical dream, can also be taken as a sarcastic riff on Godard's soon-to-be-ex-pal François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), taking up the same notion of a fringe group in revolt against society with a project of sustaining works of art within themselves, but with a much less poetically reassuring upshot. Rather than memorising books to carry into an unknown future, these radicals read the books out and turn them into new, perverse forms of art, which warring on the society that has no time for such works. Some remnant flicker of narrative purpose returns for the film's last five minutes, as the Front arrive at a rendezvous on a muddy road by a farm, the guerrillas all edgy and armed, to get the chief's girlfriend returned, as she's been taken prisoner by some obscure rival gang. Corinne is given over in exchange, as she begs to stay with the devil she knows. When a sniper sparks battle, the chief's girl is killed, dying in his arms whilst warbling her last chanson. Here is Godard's simultaneous indulgence and mockery of both movie images of romantic death for good-looking freedom fighters, as well as the way such images were held in fond imagination by a generational cadre of gap year radicals, in the way all good radicals should hope to die before age and disillusionment despoil us. Corinne flees, joining the chief in their flight back to the forest.



The last glimpse of Corinne sees her having shifted with ease that shouldn't be that surprising from rapacious bourgeois to voracious cannibal, taking the place of the chief's dead girl and listening to his sad musings on "man's horror of his fellows." The film's punchline is finally reached like fate, as Ernest gives Corinne and the chief portions of cooked meat on the bone, a batch of human meat which the chief casually confirms includes parts of some English tourists from a Rolls Royce as well as the last of her husband Roland. "I'll have a bit more later, Ernest," Corinne instructs as she gnaws eagerly on her meal, before the fade to nihilistic black and "FIN DE CONTE – FIN DE CINEMA." Of course, cinema didn't end in 1967, any more than great Marxist liberation waves swept the Third World or France cracked up into chaotic guerrilla warfare and spouse-on-spouse anthropophagy. At least, not yet. *Week End* refuses to ease into a pathos-laden half-life of nostalgia the way most radical artworks tend to. As time-specific as the clothes and cars are, the daring of the filmmaking, the way Godard transmutes what he deals with into scenes at once abstract and charged with unruly life, still has a feeling of perpetual confrontation, of standing poised at the edge of a precipice. Not the end of cinema, but certainly one end of cinema, a summative point. Beyond here lies dragons.

The Relic (1997)

this island rod



Peter Hyams' attempt to update a classical brand of monster movie, *The Relic* is a film I've developed great affection for, whilst also readily admitting its problems. A loose adaptation of Lincoln Child and Douglas Preston's novel, Hyams' film kicks off with an enigmatic prologue that sees anthropologist John Whitney (Lewis Van Bergen) observing a shamanic ceremony performed by members of an Amazonian tribe. After drinking some brew made up by the shaman, Whitney is reduced to cringing fear when a tribe member approaches him dressed in a monstrous costume, impersonating some malevolent demon Whitney hysterically calls Kothoga, in an act that has some obscure but awful import for the anthropologist. Whitney flees back to a port city and tries desperately to have some crates he's having shipped home aboard a freighter unloaded. When he fails he sneaks aboard to break into the crates, only to find, to us utter devastation, that the crates he was seeking have been left behind on the dock. A week later, the ship turns derelict up in Lake Michigan with its crew vanished: Chicago detectives Lt Vincent D'Agosta (Tom Sizemore) and Sgt Hollingsworth (Clayton Rohner) board the ship in search of clues, and find the decapitated heads of the crew all rotting away in the bilge.



All of Whitney's crates make their way to the Field Museum of Natural History, where evolutionary biologist Margo Green (Penelope Ann Miller), who proclaims deep scorn for Whitney's soft science obsessions, is intrigued by some leaves he shipped in one crate, caked as they are in a mysterious, steroid-packed fungus that when ingested by a beetle makes it into grow huge and frightening before Margo crushes it with a book. Soon a guard at the museum, Frederick (Jophery Brown), is attacked by a lurking, wheezing presence, decapitated and with his hypothalamus removed just like the ship's crew, bringing D'Agosta and Hollingsworth to investigate the connection, and they and subordinates start combing the Museum and its murky substructures. All this proves inconvenient as the Museum and its curator Ann Cuthbert (Linda Hunt) are preparing for a gala event celebrating the opening of an exhibition dedicated to superstitions, an event the city mayor Owen (Robert Lesser) and wealthy patrons George (Francis X. McCarthy) and Carrie Blaisedale (Constance Towers) are set to attend. After a vagrant living in the basement is gunned down by cops, this is taken by both the Mayor and the Museum's territorial head of security Parkinson (Thomas Ryan) to signal the end of the murderous threat, and D'Agosta is ordered to let the gala proceed. Which proves not the greatest of ideas, because the Kothoga is living in the sewers below, and is very, very hungry.



The Relic was produced by James Cameron's former production partner Gale Anne Hurd, and Stan Winston created the animatronic effects for the monster's head, situating the film squarely in the waning age of the 1980s and early '90s brand of special effects-driven genre film. *The Relic's* status as a knock-off of *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) is pretty self-evident, with Margo eventually evolving from plucky girl genius who's trying to suppress her scaredy-cat streak to Ripley-esque monster-slayer. There are also elements of *Monster on the Campus* (1958) and *The Runestone* (1992) in the mix. The inevitable eruption of the monstrous presence during the swank gala also makes *The Relic* nod back to 1970s forebears as both a disaster and monster movie like *The Towering Inferno* (1974) and *Jaws* (1975) and its many imitators. The script, patched together by four different hands, touches base with some tired tropes, most particularly in offering a choice of two jerks to serve as antagonists, in Parkinson and Margo's rival Greg Lee (Chi Muoi Lo), who elects to compete with her for a grant being ponied up by the Blaisedales. Lo at least certainly has fun portraying Lee's endlessly slimy behaviour in trying to win out, including incidentally getting Margo locked in with a monster and trying to sycophantically attach himself to the Blaisedales even in the midst of a gruesome calamity.



Hyams' career was on a downward trajectory by this time after his mid-1980s highs, but like the bulk of his better films, including *Capricorn One* (1978), *Outland* (1981), *2010* (1984), and *Narrow Margin* (1990), *The Relic* sets out to balance the basic, even cliché genre imperatives with fresh verve sourced mainly in his efforts to be a visually inventive and stylish director, and weaving a strong sense of atmosphere. As he usually did in his later films, Hyams served as his own director of photography, applying muted and evocative visual textures as apparent in the scientific offices of the museum and its endless warren of corridors presenting a workplace just as sequestered, teeming, and peculiar as the off-world mining colony of *Outland*. When the officially sceptical Margo ventures into the creepy displays of the Superstition exhibition she freaks out when she hears, amidst all the strange and perturbing relics and carefully art-directed spookiness, a wheezing that sounds awfully like the Kothoga which she's already heard before, and sprints out of the space, some genuine raw nerve of anxiety touched. The story revolves around a clever exploitation of location, as the Museum proves to be connected to the waterfront where the derelict freighter arrived via old and disused coal tunnels that run underneath the building, and the Museum itself is an ideal dramatic locale, as a space dedicated to both investigation and housing of the arcane, at once cosy and labyrinthine, a base that hosts the heroes and their work, and a space that ultimately becomes a death trap.



The problem is Hyams pushes the stylisation more than a few degrees towards the chaotic when the time comes for the basic monster movie thrills to come on. Hyams comes close to abstraction at times, particularly once power is knocked out in the Museum and the Kothoga rampages amidst shadow and pouring sprinklers. Later scenes of survival and stalking threatened on VHS and DVD to dissolve into an incoherent string of torch beams amidst grainy murk (blu ray fares better). As a stylistic tactic Hyams seems to have adopted this as the first of far too many filmmakers trying to cover over weaknesses in the CGI realisation of the moving Kothoga and also to keep the Kothoga's bloody marauding a little muffled, whilst also fitting in with other filmmakers of the mid-1990s moment like John McTiernan and Michael Bay who were pushing the syntax of big-budget Hollywood towards such hectic reaches for the sake of hyper-modernist edginess. Just about everyone who's ever watched the film has complained about this aspect. That said, with time I've come to appreciate what Hyams was aiming for, as he tries to avoid letting the movie devolve into standard monster shtick as long as possible, instead aiming for a dizzy sense of fear and disorientation, taunting both characters and viewer with the difficulty in getting a grip on the Kothoga's bizarre physiognomy. And it works: the monster has a fearsomeness that doesn't dissolve in too much light, and the climactic scenes deliver some real phobic intensity, particularly in a nightmarish sequence of Hollingsworth trying to lead survivors of the gala through a flooded tunnel under the building, chased all the way by the lurking, utterly remorseless monster that chews up heroic cops and old ladies without distinction.



Hyams also, plainly digs and honours the basic narrative structure of a good monster movie, sketching an undefined sense of menace in the opening scenes with Whitney's bewildering terror and the obscure import of the tribe's tormenting of him, the signs of terrible violence on the ship and glimpses of something utterly inhuman stalking the Museum, and the attempts by the heroes to understand what they're facing even as it's trying to eat them. Margo's special talents, having designed a computer programme that can quickly break down genetic components (Windows 95 in all its glory), prove just the right ones for the problem, as she begins to understand the Kothoga is some kind of genetic chimera, its relentless need to snack on hypothalamuses rooted in a desperate need for hormones to stop its genetic makeup breaking down entirely. Amongst Kothoga's makeup is a horned beetle and a gecko, giving it tools not just for convenient beheading but also the ability to crawl on ceilings. As if to exhibit his subgenre bona fides as well as taste in grand old character actors, Hyams smartly casts James Whitmore, star of *Them!* (1954) and so an actor who knew his way around films about giant, mandible-sporting, torso-bifurcating creatures, as Margo's avuncular, wheelchair-bound colleague and mentor Albert Frock, who aids in her investigation. Frock ends up more monster meal despite having been locked in a wire mesh storage area. The inclusion of former Sam Fuller star Towers is similarly bracing, although she doesn't get much to do as a hapless patrician.



Hyams weaves in a rhythmic visual motif as Whitney's Kothoga statue is hurriedly restored and pieced together to be included in the exhibition whilst mystery unfolds all around, the image of the monster pieced together with a promise of baleful inevitability that its completion will see the real creature's emergence too, John Debney's sonorously menacing score pulsing although the way. The script left out the FBI agent character Pendergast from the novel who went on to be protagonist in several more of the writing duo's books, but by compensation the script has dry wit scattered throughout. That Frederick is killed whilst smoking a joint nudges slasher movie morality, although, as D'Agosta comments, "Pot's a misdemeanour – decapitation seems a bit severe." Audra Lindley, in her last role, has a funny cameo as the compulsory darkly humorous pathologist, cracking as she surveys a headless corpse, "Don't you just hate someone who only takes head without giving it?" Far below the Museum the creature's temporary lair is discovered, littered with bones of victims, and after reposing there, wheezing away with its signature strained breathing, it sets out in search of more food. Of course, the audience deduces way, way before Margo does that the Kothoga is actually a grossly mutated Whitney, transformed by the tribe in their efforts to keep their incredible, naturally occurring secret weapon safe, by feeding him the infesting, DNA-rewriting fungus. Margo's scientific investigation crosscuts and finally intersects with D'Agosta's physical

search, as he becomes convinced even after the vagrant's death the Museum is still under threat. Still his efforts to protect the gala guests backfire because the Kothoga's assault causes the main security doors to shut tight whilst all other exits have been already been sealed, accidentally locking Margo and Frock down in the laboratories to boot.



The bedlam unleashed by the Kothoga's assault on the gala is an impressively handled episode of mayhem, with many guests who manage to flee the building before the doors come down still managing to go crashing down the Museum steps. The film also gets a lot of kick from an unusually good cast who all seem slotted into their roles because they were suited to them rather than for familiar face appeal, and Hyams' well-honed talent for characterisation on the run. Sizemore was on the rise after scene-stealing work in *True Romance* (1994), *Devil In A Blue Dress* (1995), and *Heat* (1995) and looked a little like George Clooney if he'd worked as a stevedore for a few years and taken a few Saturday night socks to the jaw. He plays D'Agosta off the beat as the unglamorous, working stiff detective, who's recovering from the emotional indignity not just of being divorced but losing custody of his dog to his ex. D'Agosta faces down intermingled ethnic disdain and power plays as people keep purposefully mispronouncing his name, and contends with the territorial Parkinson calling up the mayor to boss him around. He also maintains an edge of superstitious faith in contrast to Margo intolerance, rooted in an incident when he should have died as a rookie cop when a criminal's gun failed to fire: he keeps the bullet, reckoned to be perfect, as a good luck charm, and passes it on to Margo when he thinks she needs it more. Sizemore was never perhaps really going to make it as a romantic movie lead, with the simmering, livewire craziness he could lend his parts under an everyman surface not entirely quelled in D'Agosta, but he also certainly has charisma in the role.



Hunt wields the lion's share of good lines as the sardonic and sympathetic curator who warns D'Agosta he'll have to eat his way through a few hundred pounds of hors d'oeuvres if he shuts down the gala. Lesser almost steals the film as the archetypal, briskly busy and bossy mayor, lecturing D'Agosta over the phone about his wife's determination to attend the gala because she's bought a dress that shows off her cleavage: "That cleavage won me the election." Miller nonetheless anchors the film: she was having her moment in the Hollywood career sun after starring in *The Gun In Betty Lou's Handbag* (1992) and backing up Al Pacino in *Carlito's Way* (1993) and Alec Baldwin in *The Shadow* (1994) in roles that didn't seem quite right for her. She's ideal here on the other hand as the nerdy-cute heroine, whose breezy intellectual confidence is a tonic, and who is also a master of the quick change as she speedily swaps her work clothes for a little black cocktail dress whilst explaining the plot. Margo lacks a similar degree of force in other realms, struggling with the prospect of competing with Lee and devolving during a rehearsal of a speech in a deserted lecture hall to "Just give me the goddamn money!", much to the unnoticed D'Agosta's confused witnessing. The lingering anxiety of sexism in her field afflicts Margo, and it's hinted via Margo's hot dislike for Whitney that in addition to being a scholarly antagonist he might also have sexually harassed her, which lends some spice to their queasily eroticised encounter in the climax. This in turn feeds a new dimension to Hyams' long-standing interest in the theme of institutional rot and lone heroes standing against threats both immediate and conspiratorial, with the Museum coming under assault and being hollowed out by the monster it has fostered and housed.



Meanwhile, fragmentary as the visuals threaten to get, Hyams keeps his dramatic dynamics in focus, like the two foot soldier cops McNally (John Kapelos) and Bailey (Tico Wells), both jammed into ill-fitting tuxedos to patrol the gala. They step into the breach to protect the guests even as their chests and sphincters tighten, Bailey asking McNally with comradely concern if he has enough ammo before they split. Both die amidst the madness unleashed, which also includes a gleefully nasty scene of the Kothoga ripping up a succession of luckless SWAT warriors lowered in through a skylight. D'Agosta and Margo work together to lure the Kothoga away from the escaping guests by baiting it with hormone-packed leaves, but Margo is trapped alone with the monster after D'Agosta's effort to keep her safe by locking himself out of the labs. She's forced to use a blend of speed and guts to lure the creature into the specimen room so she can try and cook it in preserving alcohol. The monstrous menace and the percolating themes of sexism and perverse infestation converge in a memorable moment of fetish fuel, as Margo provokes and distracts the Kothoga by telling it, "I know who you are," whereupon the creature that was once Whitney licks her from décolletage to cheekbone with relish. Margo gets her revenge of course, blowing the creature to smithereens, even if her kiss-off to the monster – "You go to hell!" – isn't quite "Smile you son of a—" or "Get away from her you bitch!" Reuniting with D'Agosta in time for the fadeout, the lucky bullet is cast aside, because if you can survive a fight with a giant, horny, brain-eating chimera, you can survive anything. It's certainly not the best or most original film ever made, but *The Relic* is ultimately just what it sets out to be: a fun, readily watchable big-budget drive-in flick.



The Deep (1977)

this island rod



Given the enormous success of his novel *Jaws* and Steven Spielberg's blockbuster movie adaptation, Peter Benchley's follow-up book, *The Deep*, maintained Benchley's fascination with the sea and its perils as a subject and was bound to be eagerly snatched up by filmmakers. After the contentious writing process on the film of *Jaws*, Benchley evidently tried to keep a tighter grip on his property second time around, and was credited with writing the adaptation along with Tracy Keenan Wynn, but Tom Mankiewicz and costars Robert Shaw and Nick Nolte also made large contributions. Peter Yates was tapped to direct, and Shaw was again hired to play an old sea salt, as if to maintain brand continuity. *The Deep* was a huge hit upon release, mostly thanks to opportunistic marketing that emphasised the sex appeal of star Jacqueline Bisset when immersed in the tight and briny, but critically it was written off as a sluggish disappointment in comparison to *Jaws*. And I know well many people just can't get on its wavelength. But *The Deep* is one of the movies that's become over time something of a fetish object for me, one I can watch anytime, and where the usually cited flaws become very specific strengths and pleasures. Those start with its unique blend of dreamy romanticism and slow-burn suspense as its keynote, a blend promised in the very first shot. Yates' camera beholds Bermuda set in the glistening Atlantic in a brilliant high helicopter shot, swooping down on the island with John Barry's title theme first gently tapped out on piano. This idealistic vision of paradise found soon becomes infected by simmering menace and the potential for raw violence.



That potential first comes from hostile nature. Bisset and Nolte are Gail Berke and David Sanders, a handsome young New York couple vacationing in Bermuda, first glimpsed scuba diving and attracted by the sight of a large, rusting shipwreck. Gail's eye is caught by a gleaming object within the wreck and fishes it out with a tool, only for the tool to be grabbed by a huge and frighteningly powerful moray eel lurking within the wreck. Gail is almost badly injured, the tool left splintered and gnarled, and David almost drowns when Gail accidentally rips off his mask as he comes to her aid. The bauble she retrieved, a small glass bottle, proves to attract other, even more vicious wildlife. The ship they were exploring proves to be the *Goliath*, a World War II transport ship torpedoed just off the coast and held in odium by locals as a very dangerous place to dive because it's crammed with live ammunition. The bottle turns out to be an ampoule of medicinal morphine, one of a shipment of 10,000 still within the wreck, and only thanks to a recent hurricane has any hope of penetrating the ship to get the rest been presented. The morphine's presence has become local folklore thanks to the wreck's lone survivor, Adam Coffin (Eli Wallach), and his constant, rum-hungry talk, and the moment the ampoule is seen Gail and David become objects of interest.



Soon they're approached by the slick and gentlemanly-seeming Henri Cloche (Louis Gossett Jr), who calls himself a collector of rare glass and offers to pay for the ampoule and information on where it was found. David clocks Bondurant as a phony and instead approaches legendary treasure hunter and marine archaeologist Romer Treece (Shaw) for identification of both the ampoule and a piece of jewellery he found nearby. Treece plays coy at first, and only tells the couple about the morphine after Cloche, actually a

Haitian gangster, and some goons kidnap them and try to steal the ampoule. When Treece, David, and Gail turn up more evidence the *Goliath* might actually be lying atop an older shipwreck crammed with treasure from the days of the conquistadors, Treece elects to rig the *Goliath* with explosives to hold Cloche at bay, and then go through the motions of collecting the ampoules with the couple whilst also searching for any way to establish the treasure's provenance. Meanwhile Coffin snoops around resentfully after Treece won't let him dive on the wreck, and soon leaks news of what's really going on to the gangsters.



Underwater thrillers are notoriously difficult to pull off, and indeed for many *The Deep* only proved that like *Thunderball* (1965) before it. Benchley's yarn taps into the very common fantasy of diving for sunken treasure, tackled in many a B-movie before *The Deep* in movies like Edward Ludwig's *Wake of the Red Witch* (1948), Budd Boetticher's *City Beneath The Sea* (1953), and John Sturges' *Underwater!* (1955). But *The Deep* belongs in a category for me similar to Tony Maylam's *The Riddle of the Sands* (1978), as like that film it manages the rarefied feat of presenting a thriller with a patient, methodical, atmospheric lilt, obliging sensitisation to a very different rhythm inherent in its setting and, consequentially, of the filmmaking. Barry was likely hired to score *The Deep* because his atmospheric work on *Thunderball*. Here he manages a similar job, weaving a sonorous, submerged and paranoid mood perfectly matched to Yates' fittingly laborious portrayal of the heroes venturing into cramped, very dangerous locations to perform difficult work. Al Gidding's beautiful, pioneering underwater photography is invaluable, and the care with which Yates, working with Benchley's detail-dependent storyline, diagrams the *Goliath's* murky interior and the relationship of various features – a cavern opening below the wreck, a pocket of air trapped within the hull, the dark and menacing hole where the eel lurks – for the viewer proves eventually to be well worth the effort, as all these are put to fiendishly exact use in how the climactic scenes play out.



Meanwhile the disco-scored (Donna Summer breathily exhales Barry's theme song), glossy magazine-illustrated fantasia that is Gail and David's vacation is swiftly pitched into a noirish survival tale played out in ironically sun-kissed surrounds, as the upwardly mobile young couple eventually face a choice to cut and run out stick it out and work for the loot they find, and both are forced to weather extremes of humiliation and emasculation before rebounding with hard-won determination. This character drama and the familiar treasure hunt plot are woven together with a certain subtle wit. The headline plot revolves around the distinction between two different kinds of sunken treasure the heroic trio resolve to retrieve, both of them associated with new and old kinds of plunder and exploitation, imperialism and the drug trade, whilst also contrasted with a third, the more emblematic treasure Gail and David are seeking together. Nailing down just where the older treasure came from and how it came to be in the same place as the *Goliath* is a puzzle Treece and the couple set about solving. Eventually Gail discovers the treasure constituted a shopping list, a payoff for an aristocratic woman being eyed for marriage by a Spanish king, and Gail appreciates the irony of the king who "never got laid" when his own treasure finished up on the bottom of the sea, that the sunken horde becoming instead the ultimate prize for the adventurous new-age romantics.



Most interestingly to a fan of Yates, *The Deep* represents a unique nexus of the often maddeningly scattered interests of his oeuvre – tales of criminal enterprise like *Robbery* (1967) and *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1974), of obsessive, possibly irrational drives touched on in *Murphy's War* (1971) and *Breaking Away* (1979), and his capacity to cook sleek and stylish blockbusters to a turn, best exemplified

by *Bullitt* (1968), the film where he also incidentally helped make Bisset a star. Like Yates' also underrated if rather lumpier *Krull* (1983), the emphasis falls on the endangered young couple faced with an eruption of evil in their lives. The evil manifests here not as cosmic demon but in Cloche and his crew of hoodlums. David falls quickly under the spell of the thrilling idea of treasure hunting as "an experience" he can't pass up, whilst Cloche sets his sights on Gail as the easy key to getting what he wants out of them. One might accuse this part of the film as offering a certain queasy, very '70s incidental racism in the portrayal of the Black villains wielding sexually-tinged violence and voodoo to terrorise an innocent white woman, especially in a charged sequence where Cloche makes her strip to demonstrate she doesn't have the ampoule hidden on his person.



Still Yates' intelligence, and that of his actors, invests the obvious with layers. Bisset's stoked, challenging intensity whilst forced to expose her breasts is nicely met by Gossett's glimmerings of remnant, gentlemanly poise, calmly handing her back her blouse once his purpose is achieved: Cloche is certainly evil but, like Treece, operates by a certain demimonde code. Cloche and his crew are heavily hinted to have once been members of the infamous Tonton Macoute, who similarly specialised in voodoo-tinged terror tactics under the Duvaliers in Haiti. Later they assault Gail in her hotel room in a surprising, Horror movie-like sequence, holding her on her bed and smearing blood over her bare belly with a chicken's foot, Yates' emphasis on Gail's prone victimisation and blazing eyes reminiscent of Dario Argento. He intercuts this with a spasm of excellent physical action as David and Treece, caught out at the wreck when they see the lights have gone off in their hotel, race back to shore. David battles one of the goons on an elevator connecting the beach to the hotel, concluding with elevator and thug both crashing to earth. David arrives finally at his room and finds Gail alive and unharmed but understandably distraught.



The union of Yates' solid sense of drama and Benchley's blend of the literate with pulp fiction imperatives result in a film with a human element that's stronger and richer than expected. This starts with Gail and David as protagonists, the nominal innocents abroad who are plainly on the cusp of taking the marriage plunge and facing down uncertainties, with the drama working, in the classic fashion, as an exaggerated sounding board for their anxieties as individuals and as a couple. The opening scene of the pair exploring the ocean sees them each acting in ways opposite to how they act on land – in this environment David is cautious and exacting as the more experienced scuba diver, Gail adventurous and sassy, and this streak gets her into trouble with the eel. Whereas above the waves David's tendency to bullish obsessiveness and impulsiveness and Gail's fretfulness and vulnerability are both provoked, only to be transcended as their adventure makes them grow. David, eager for adventure, sports a t-shirt that indicates he was once on a party that tried to climb Mt Everest: "I feel things so I do them, that's just the way I am!" he declares during a tiff with Gail, who retorts, "And you wind up with t-shirts," and points out that David has convinced himself he pressured Treece into doing what he wanted when Treece really tricked him into playing along.



Treece himself, played by Shaw with relish, is introduced as an ambiguous and wary character, ensconced in a house that's more like a fortified villa and built around an old lighthouse. As a treasure hunter Treece seems more than used to every kind of chancer and get-rich-quick jerk hanging around, and also more authentically daunting and piratical foes. Treece nonetheless emerges as tough and extremely canny, with a personal moral code and hard-won knowledge of the way the world he lives in works, contrasting the naïve

landlubbers and necessary to keep Gail and David breathing. He's also, like Quint, a figure who provides a connection to the past and a more elemental worldview. Treece makes a deal with Cloche to bring up the ampoules for him in exchange for a fat cut of the profits, a deal Cloche is sceptical over as Treece is known to deplore drugs. Treece rallies local pals, including his hulking buddy-cum-bodyguard Kevin (Robert Tessier), to keep guard outside when he brings David and Gail to stay with him after the hotel assault. When the trio begin bringing up the ampoules, Treece stashes the illicit trove in the lighthouse, which also wires to explode in case anyone tries to get at them.



In a marvellous scene in Treece's home, where he spirits the couple following the hotel assault, Gail emerges from her ordeal by quietly listening to David and Treece talking about the treasure. David's chagrined and apologetic demeanour and Treece's simmering guilt at having kept the couple at arm's length contrast Gail's unspoken but definite realisation that nothing can scare her again, and she commits to continuing the treasure hunt as she downs a glass of rum. "Rum ain't drinkin', it's survivin'," Treece declares, before noting, in reading her weighty silence, "He's all right, that David of yours." The dynamic between Treece and Coffin is also intriguing (and was more fleshed out in the film's much longer initial TV airing cut), as it was Treece who dragged Coffin out of the surf after the Goliath's sinking as a young man, but with Coffin not exactly happy to subsist as just another story in Treece's legend. Late in the film Coffin sets up an opportunity for Cloche's chief goon, the hulking, silent, smirking Ronald (Earl Maynard), to sneak close to the house and take on Kevin in an attempt to leave Treece defenceless.



The match between the two men is mooted earlier when, *Shane* (1953)-style, they look each-other over with awareness one day soon they're going to have it out. When the fight does come, Yates and the actors really capture the feel of two very strong men in a deadly contest, including Ronald trying to shove a whirring propeller on an outboard motor in Kevin's face, before they fall into a mutual effort to break the other's neck. Yates cuts away just as we hear one man's neck snap, leaving who lost unclear, until Treece eventually finds Kevin's corpse left behind gnarled and hoisted as a ghoulish decoration. In payback, Treece contrives a situation where Coffin can blow himself up trying to penetrate the lighthouse. The underwater sequences meanwhile play on the inherent mixture of pensive, deceptive removal from the world and anxiety in an alien environment, as when David abandons his breathing equipment repeatedly to fit through narrow crevices under the wreck. At one point, sucking away sand from the *Goliath's* hold to get the ampoules, a grenade is pulled up and explodes, causing the wreck to shudder and sway above the abyss it hangs delicately perched over.



Impressively risky stunt work comes into play when sharks are set into a feeding frenzy by some fishermen dumping leavings over the side, with Treece, David, and Gail trapped underneath their churning banquet, and Coffin deliberately neglects to warn them through pure peevishness. The climactic scenes resolve in a race against time as Cloche and Ronald lurk creepily within the *Goliath* wreck, intending to stop Treece from blowing up the ship, and another goon assaults Gail up on Treece's boat, forcing all three to fight for their lives with all their wits and luck. Here the carefully arranged narrative payoffs deliver in delicious fashion, particularly when the inevitable intervention by the huge eel during a deadly tussle finally occurs. The narrative slow burn is finally mimicked by the agonising progress of the burning fuse seething away in the water on the way to exploding Treece's charges, even as the action suddenly becomes frenzied, with Cloche spearing Treece through the leg and David wrestling with Ronald in a desperate battle. The last shots deliver a triumphant ending for the heroes, capped off in a freeze-frame that serves as a delightful signature. Benchley's cinematic brand would be further tarnished by Michael Ritchie's equally undervalued but distinctly more strange and wild *The Island* (1980); John Stockwell's *Into The Blue* (2005) is *The Deep's* latter-day rip-off.



Shanghai Express (1931)

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Director: Josef von Sternberg

Screenwriter: Jules Furthman

Josef von Sternberg's collaborations with Marlene Dietrich perhaps come closest of all the products of classic Hollywood film to embodying an oft-conjured pop-art fantasia of what popular cinema once was like. Theirs was a cinematic world of glamour-touched amazons blazing in photogenic glory against backdrops that persist amidst dreamlike textures and expressionist shadows, a world forged on soundstages as Sternberg rejected realism in cinema in favour of generating his own, stylised pocket universes and exalting the notion that cinema was above all a foundry of dreams for a dull and seamy world gripped by Depression and war and other chaotic turns. The sort of thing more recent filmmakers and pop stars try to create pastiches of when referring back to that era's cinema. Dietrich was the fetishised linchpin, the preeminent and eternal exemplar of Sternberg's actress-sphinxes, transformed through both filmmaking technique and an array of carefully worked narratives into a confluence of female archetypes that blur the feminine illusion and the cinematic kind and merely become everything alluring and untouchable. Sternberg discovered Dietrich whilst making a sojourn to Germany to recover from commercial

disappointments in Hollywood. Their first collaboration *The Blue Angel* (1930), was a variation on one of Sternberg's favourite themes, of a man destroyed by his own obsessive streak, but this time with heavy emphasis on the saucy, amoral seductress who almost incidentally breaks down a cultured professor.



Dietrich and Sternberg's first film in Hollywood, *Morocco* (1930), partly inverted that template, casting Dietrich as a nightclub performer who eventually discovers the mortifying bliss of selfless passion. Lucky perhaps for Dietrich and Sternberg that *Morocco* came out in America before *The Blue Angel*, establishing Dietrich not as a femme fatale but a romantic hiding within a sensual cynic, essentially the persona that would drive the next thirty years of her career. By the time of *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) Sternberg was charting the ironic shifts of the collaboration and their off-screen relationship; the gawking naïf eventually replaced by the imperious, cuckolded hedonist, and finally the all-sweeping conqueror who can only be regarded in awe and fear. *Shanghai Express* was Sternberg and Dietrich's fourth film together, in a string of movies that moved purposefully between intensely imagined far-flung locales. It also represents another stream within Sternberg's oeuvre, forming the first part of a loose quadrilogy that could be described as Sternberg's Orientalist phase, followed by *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), *Macao* (1952), and the actually made-in-Japan *Anatahan* (1953). Something in Sternberg's imagination was set loose by such settings. Undoubtedly, this was partly sparked by proximity to exotic aesthetics and the promise of different ethical and cultural prisms, both things he was ineffably fascinated by in his ongoing rebellion against tepid mainstream aesthetics and mores, just before both public taste and Hollywood regimes would turn against what he was doing.



Sternberg, despite his mock-aristocratic airs and appended “von”, had come up the hard way, both as an Austrian Jewish immigrant and a Hollywood player. Sternberg was born out of wedlock in a Vienna to which he remained permanently, nostalgically attached, scion to a bullying father who was disinherited for finally, actually tying the knot with his mother. He recalled his family’s passage through Ellis Island and being inspected like cattle. He was a troubling youth, intermittently homeless and oscillating between Europe and America in a long and desperate search for something like a home. He dropped out of high school determined to teach himself, and changed his name from Jonas to Josef to please himself. He first started working with film during World War I when he made training films for the US Army, and afterwards rode a motorcycle around Italy to try and see all the country’s churches. Even the roots of his appended “von” are hazy, possibly handed him by a studio, or adopted as a tribute to his hero Erich Von Stroheim, whose favour he lost after he agreed to help MGM reedit the master’s *The Merry Widow* (1926).



Sternberg's fascination for places and cultures meeting at points of flux in multicultural melting pots had then a persuasively autobiographical meaning. For Sternberg aesthetics weren't just decoration, but the actual stuff of life, evoking the jostling mass of impressions and conventions and signifiers woven together to create an illusion of society, his cinematic frames points of converge for myriad signs and tropes and ideas. In none of his films is this more vital than with *Shanghai Express*, which might not be his greatest film, but is nonetheless perhaps his most essential and representative work. That's in part because it's one of his Dietrich vehicles, and also a sublime balancing act at once delirious and exacting, surreal and tactile, sarcastic and sincere, old-fashioned and fiercely modern. The basic material is harvested from some well-worn texts revolving around the ever-mythologised figure of the fallen but essential decent and redeemable prostitute, pinching the basic plot of Guy De Maupassant's "Boule de Suif," (which would also serve a few years later as a template for John Ford's *Stagecoach*, 1939), with a little of W. Somerset Maugham's story "Rain" and novel *The Painted Veil* thrown in for good measure.



The official basis however was a story by Henry Hervey, inspired in turn by a true incident that occurred in 1923. Known as the Lincheng Outrage, that incident saw a warlord out of Shandong capture the Shanghai-to-Beijing express and take everyone on board hostage, including twenty-five westerners, amongst them Lucy Aldrich, aunt of future filmmaker Robert Aldrich. After being held for two days, a ransom was paid and all the captives freed. *Shanghai Express* posits other reasons for such a waylaying. Warner Oland, the Swedish actor then very famous and popular for playing Chinese characters including the prototypical supervillain Fu Manchu and detective character Charlie Chan, is cast as Henry Chang, aka Number One, the leader of a revolutionary army who has mixed Chinese and European heritage, a detail Sternberg seems to have introduced in part to express scepticism with being saddled with Oland's yellowface act, but also using it purposefully to meditate on the theme of divided identity in a film otherwise driven by clashing binaries. Chang becomes one of many projection figures for Sternberg as a portrait in will, a man who declares "I live by my own code," and operates his army less as an organ with political aims than as an extension of his own will and ego, much like Sternberg's approach to filmmaking.



Structural affinity here with disaster movies, and *Shanghai Express* is one, after a fashion, whilst also resembling the film that beat it out for 1932's Best Picture Oscar, Edmund Goulding's *Grand Hotel*, which similarly threw together an array of archetypes into a microcosmic setting that begets odd new realities. Where *Grand Hotel* is nascent soap opera wrapped in art deco chic, *Shanghai Express* is more classical melodrama, and a consequential hit of early sound cinema, establishing some stock situations and archetypes that would pervade the next twenty years of Hollywood product. Even *Casablanca* (1942) can be described as a variant. Furthman would recycle elements of his script for this for the likes of Tay Garnett's *China Seas* (1935) and eventually for Howard Hawks' *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), and as different as Sternberg and Hawks were, they had a point of intersection that Furthman helped draw out, in their fascination with characters who learn to live entirely by their own compass. Furthman would also recycle and amplify some of it, like the "To buy a new hat" joke made by the footloose heroine when questioned by pompous creeps about her reasons for travelling, in Hawks' *To Have And Have Not* (1944). More immediately *Shanghai Express* sparked a wave of films set in then-fractious China, films like Frank Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), Lewis Milestone's *The General Died At Dawn* (1936), John Farrow's *West of Shanghai* (1937), and Sidney Franklin's *The Good Earth* (1937).



Sternberg opens with a rigorous sense of linearity in tethering narrative to the train itself, depicting labourers making the train ready for its journey out of Beijing Station, or Peiping as it's referred to here as per outmoded transliteration. Sternberg offers a brief montage of an engineer oiling mechanisms and a coolie washing windows, before the passengers begin to arrive. Some servants carry an opulent litter up to the train and out climbs Hui Fei (Anna May Wong), presented as an exemplar of Eastern status but also the first of the film's two crucial women apart, granted prosperity and a measure of imperious independence at the expense of being considered socially unacceptable. Meanwhile the representatives of the West buy their tickets in a queue: old biddy Mrs. Haggerty (Louise Closser Hale) hands out cards for her boarding house in Shanghai and dotes over her dog which she smuggles into her compartment in a hamper, only to suffer his being stashed away in the baggage car. Bulbous businessman Yankee Sam Salt (Eugene Pallette) wears his wealth literally on his sleeve in the form of diamonds, only for these to prove to be phonies, the real ones never leaving his safe. Skinny old traveller Eric Baum (Gustav von Seyffertitz) brings a whiff of decadence and neurasthenia aboard: he calls himself an invalid and is grouchily insistent on avoiding all drafts, forcing windows to be kept shut and ventilators turned off. Major Lenard (Émile Chautard) is a French military man in full uniform, making his pleasantries to all but barely speaking a word of English. Missionary Reverend Carmichael (Lawrence Grant) comes aboard charged up with seemingly scornful passion for virtue. And there's Chang, biding his time and playing the gentleman but always barely concealing his mordant and fatalistic vision.



Two other passengers of consequence also board the train: Captain Dr Donald 'Doc' Harvey (Clive Brook), a military surgeon being shuttled to Shanghai to perform an urgent operation on the governor-general of Shanghai, and Madeline, known to all and sundry by her nom-de-guerre Shanghai Lily (Dietrich). Lily is dropped off in the up-to-date equivalent of Hui Fei's litter, a shimmering black Rolls Royce. She enters station, film, and our dreams, dressed as a fantasy vision, wearing a dress made of black feathers and a black mesh veil. She's rendered a dark angel, a looming raptor, a creature of the night, every inch the maneater she's characterised with by Harvey's army chums and the fuming moralists aboard the train. Word of Lily being aboard is an instant topic of gossip and amused speculation, and Donald is forewarned to his affectations of sardonic disinterest and bewilderment as he's told of this "notorious coaster." When he asks what that is, he's told, "A coaster's a woman who lives by her wits along the China coast." A high-class prostitute, in short. Donald maintains a level of cool detachment in the face of such notoriety close at hand, until he actually encounters Shanghai Lily and realises she's actually Madeline, his former flame, the woman whose photo he still keeps a photo of in his watch case. "Married?" Donald asks, to Lily's famous reply with its faint note of bitter humour and perverse pride, "No. It took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lily."



Even as he was adapting well to working with sound, Sternberg was a born silent filmmaker, who instinctively laboured to communicate through images. In true form, Sternberg condenses his metaphor for the world he's portraying in *Shanghai Express* into a shot of the train rolling down a narrow Peiping street festooned with banners and crowded with shoppers and vendors, with the train it finally forced to halt because a cow has taken up station on the tracks, his aged owner in no hurry to move on for this chugging, blustering, smoke-spewing machine of modernity and its cargo of the rich and white. During the halt for the cow to be urged on Harvey and Lily meet and square off in the sharply divided image of a carriage window, shifting postures and attitudes, Lily framed with the edge of a bold and hard-edged Chinese banner, Harvey with a more tattered and discoloured standard, even as his trim, contained figure in uniform counters the inky wash of her black feathers. Once the train is allowed to creep onwards again, the contingent of soldiers riding atop the train lean over to spear food on the vendors' stalls with their bayonets, in a sublimely cynical vignette that encapsulates with equal efficiency Sternberg's opinion of military power and its part in this drama. Soon the Reverend Carmichael gets wind of the wicked ladies aboard the train, peering in on them like a bespectacled stork, and then warns Harvey, "Those two women are riding this train in search of victims...For the last fortnight I've been attending a man who went out of his mind after spending every penny on her."



Whilst nominally a thriller and adventure movie, *Shanghai Express* is barely interested in that sort of thing, instead playing out as a series of entwined confrontations that all explore aspects of personal morality, finally winnowing it all down to a romantic quandary, being the fate of Harvey and Lily's relationship. Both are still obviously charged with profound attraction from their first reunion and all the fluctuations that befall them. It's a stock situation of course, cornball in almost any other hands, except for the way Sternberg frames it as only a slightly exaggerated take on the basic problem of men and women. It becomes clear during their many, angular conversations, filled with wordings and phrases that suggest some sort of elaborate semaphore, that whilst they were once engaged, Lily decided to test Donald's faith in their love by provoking his jealousy, but the gesture backfired as Donald immediately left her. The push and pull between passion and disquiet, trust and suspicion enacted between Donald and Lily is the crux of all, with love posited as a form of faith as vital as, if not moreso, the religious kind. In that context it's Donald rather than Lily who is the fallen figure, although at the same time he has a potency of will that distinguishes him from the men who go out of their mind after spending every penny on her. It's easy to imagine Sternberg smirking more than a little when the film builds to the crucial moment when Lily prays for Donald's safety in an apex of Hollywood cheese, and yet he deals with it with fierce earnestness, in part because of the heady power in that convergence of kinds of faith and, more importantly, in the images springing from it. Where *Morocco* found its famous zenith in the image of Dietrich striding off into the desert, facing a kind of degradation but also transcendence that took her to the verge of the mythic, Lily faces a similar pivot in which she offers her proof of faith in the most literal manner possible, with her body.



Sternberg couches this against the backdrop of the titular *Shanghai Express*, which is for the most part a moving stasis chamber for European sensibilities, drilling its way through a land in turmoil with its own ways of thinking and seeing and feeling. China at the time was a very different country in 1932 to the one we know today, notoriously beset by civil strife, regional warlords, clashing political factions, and overbearing Western influence. In the same year *Shanghai Express* was released Japan annexed Manchuria, and two years later Mao Zedong would lead the Long March. Not that Sternberg is interested in such political reality, although he and Furthman still arrive at a pretty sharp metaphor for a variety of petty, revanchist nationalism as embodied by Chang. Chang and Hui Fei are the only locals travelling in the first class compartment. Petty irritants proliferate, including Baum's demands the ventilators in the dining car be shut off, but contain the seeds of awful consequence; big objections, like Carmichael's complaints about the two hookers on the train, eventually prove negligible. At one point the train is stopped by government soldiers who inspect every passenger's passports and papers, a sort of legal-official version of what Chang does more exactly later when he scours every passenger for lies, deceptions, delusions, and hidden motives. During the sweep a tall Chinese passenger is arrested and spirited away by the soldiers: the arrested man is an agent of Chang's carrying important information, and his loss provokes Chang to send a coded message to his soldiers up the line to wait for the train at the remote station of Te-Shan and be ready to capture it. The lush language of Chang's coded message ("Blue Lotus lost – must have red blossoms at midnight.") offers a flash of incidental poetry wrapped around dark meaning, and sarcastically mirrors the interplay of social codes and expressions that dance around the meat of each matter, including the way Donald and Lily's speech waltzes around exact expressions of their feelings.



As the two fall into talking again on the carriage balcony, eventually resurging passion gets the better of both as Lily draws Donald down for a kiss, whereupon Sternberg cuts wittily to a shot of the loop on a mail pouch being held for a porter on the train to snatch as it rushes by: the old snare draws tight. "I wish you could tell me there were no other men," Donald declares in exasperation after as he abruptly releases Lily, who retorts, donning his uniform cap in ironically subsuming his captaincy: "I wish I could too Doc, but five years in China is a long time." When Donald glumly recites the life they should have had together and notes the things he wouldn't have done if all that had transpired, Lily responds the only thing she wouldn't have done was bob her hair. Delivered a telegram and asked by Donald if it's from one of her lovers, she says no, and after she extracts a promise of belief from Donald hands him the telegram, which is indeed from one of her male admirers awaiting her arrival in Shanghai eagerly. Lily delivers the killer blow for both of them: "When I needed your faith you withheld it, and now that I don't need it, and don't deserve it, you give it to me." The contrast in affect between the two, Donald's glumness and Lily effervescent, accepting humour, betrays radically different ways of surviving an event that did damage to them both, suggesting that when Madeline became Shanghai Lily it was with a kind of heroic determination.



That determination shines out from her earliest scenes, as Lily is ensconced in her apartment with Hui Fei, the two hussies of radically different backgrounds and temperaments nonetheless obliged to meet in solidarity and silently indulge each-other. Lily has a gramophone from which she lets blare saucy jazz. When Mrs Haggerty comes around soliciting their custom for her boarding house with the promise she only allows the most respectable people in, Lily questions as she twiddles Haggerty's card, "Don't you find respectable people terribly...dull?" When Haggerty reiterates that she keeps a boarding house, Lily makes a play of mishearing her and alluding to the possibility she keeps a bawdyhouse, whilst Hui Fei comments that she doesn't quite grasp Haggerty's definition of respectability. The sarcasm of the two women repels her and Carmichael, even as Donald, Lenard, and Salt are in their individual and worldly ways more gentlemanly: "Time to put on the nose bags!" Salt quips as he passes the women on the way to the dining car and gives Hui Fei a chummy squeeze of the shoulder. Palette is ingeniously cast as Salt, exploiting his bullfrog chin and croaky voice to embody a certain kind of stolid American canniness, sporting his showy jewels that declare his wealth, only to be forced to give them up, and then reveal they were fakes all the time: "The real ones are in a safe in Shanghai."



Chang meanwhile tries to corner Hui Fei in her apartment, seeking an easy conquest from the courtesan. Sternberg films this crucial moment in one deadpan shot utilising the sliding compartment doors as an element of staging, as Chang slides shut a door with a curtained window as a screen, before drawing Hui Fei to him for a moment of shadow-play, only for her to resist and slide the door open again, shoving Chang back into the hallway and delivering harsh rebuke in Mandarin. When the train reaches Te-Shan, Chang's hidden soldiers gun down the government troops protecting it in an interlude of pure Expressionist style, and gather the first-class passengers in the station building, a run-down and eerie locale hastily repurposed as Chang's headquarters. Chang takes over an office and bunkroom and one by one summons the passengers up to be variously interrogated and robbed, and, when Chang thinks it proper, to be punished for their slights and injuries to him. In the process Chang ruthlessly exposes rips away all false guises including his own, becoming a kind of judge and also an authorial figure, ending the games played aboard the train and forcing a dramatic crisis. Chang robs Salt, prods Baum with the truth that he's an opium merchant, and utilises Lily's translating skills to extract Lenard's confession that he's been drummed out of the French army but still wants to maintain the illusion he's a soldier for his sister's benefit when he reaches Shanghai. Hui Fei is bundled into his rooms, raped, and kicked out again, dishevelled and dizzy. He even nimbly extracts from Donald the facts of his mission to Shanghai, presenting him with just the right point of leverage to force his agent's release and return.



Chang waves a red-hot iron plucked from a brazier at Baum and using it to scorch through a hanging mesh veil as a grim promise of his intention towards the rude old man: "I'm not punishing you because you deal in opium, but for your insolence to me on the train." The station is festooned with many such veils, creating a kind of spider's web as well as exacerbating the dreamy atmosphere. Chang burning the veil also serves as an arresting visual metaphor for Chang's function in burning away the veils around the other characters, and a note of authentic brutality that gives special urgency later when Chang makes even worse threats against Donald. After Lily aids Chang in translating for Lenard, Chang lets her take a nap in a bunk in his office, and then proposes that she come be his guest-cum-concubine for a spell. Lily however declares that she's reformed, and when Chang becomes physical, Donald, waiting out his hostage time in a neighbouring room and overhearing, kicks down the door and wallops the warlord. In payback, even after his agent is returned by the government in a special train, Chang plans to burn Donald's eyes out. Lily, worried when she's thrown out of Chang's rooms whilst Donald is held, is so desperate she asks Carmichael if he can do anything: Carmichael tells her the only thing she can do is get down on her knees and pray, and when Lily admits she might as well "if God is still on speaking terms with me," Carmichael declares, irritably but also earnestly, "God is on speaking terms with everybody." Carmichael then catches a glimpse of Lily retreating into a darkened compartment and praying.



What's compelling about all this, which seems on the face of things to be a pure sop to Hollywood sentiment and the Carmichaels in the audience busy getting the Production Code imposed on movies, lies in the way Sternberg presents this turn not as an abasement of Lily but rather an apotheosis. Lily makes no appeal for approval to anyone except the Almighty, evincing a personal code just as strong as Chang's, and it's she who forces Carmichael to revise his ideas of morality rather than him working upon her. Hui Fei has a similarly rigorous sensibility, with an added lustre of patriotic zeal: when she finally realises who Chang is, she comments that it will "be a great day for China" when he's captured and executed, and soon is given good cause to do it herself. Later she comments with cold zest, "He repaid his debt to me." Sternberg had a recurring fascination with tales of redemption, transfiguring events that rescue characters from the cage of their ego, existing simultaneously to and sometimes in commentary upon his other fixation on self-destructive types who finally can't escape that cage and go mad or are otherwise destroyed instead. The spectacle of Carmichael becoming Lily's champion imbues the last portion of the film with unexpected new dimension, moving beyond a mere clash between the representative of happily sceptical erotic power and the joyless puritan, or the opposite, the fallen wanton beatifically reformed by the patronisingly virtuous, but with a sense of evolution in both characters and their worldviews: both are linked by their capacity to live up to implicit but difficult, even humiliating aspects of their credos. "Love without faith is like religion without faith," Carmichael sighs with his customary brusqueness as he admits Lily's point: "It doesn't amount to very much."



Dietrich had a slightly different energy in her early vehicles than she did by the 1940s when her persona had hardened along with her features. Dietrich was older than the usual run of movie ingénues, pushing 30 when Sternberg cast her in *The Blue Angel* and with a successful stage career already behind her, plus marriage and myriad adventures in Weimar nightlife. So her unique screen presence came ready-loaded with an impression of a personality well-honed, backing up the aura of bulletproof power and sly, provocative humour and pansexual power her characters so often displayed. And yet she was also just young enough to allow glimmers of naivety appear in her characters. Which made it all the more impressive when that veneer breaks down in the course of a movie, as *Shanghai Express* depicts, not shattered by external forces which Lily is well used to weathering, but by her true self, when faced with consequences for the things she actually cherishes, and the shattering of her veneer is not a loss but a recovery. Sternberg's most electrifying and carefully crafted close-ups throughout the film portray the stations of this particular cross, as when he has her peer through the window of the Te-Shan station doors, eyes wide and blazing, her blonde bob now a little loose and wild, in the throes of fear for Donald, the spark of wild madness also rapture in the grip of authentic passion.



Wong, today a revived cult figure but one Hollywood sadly never really knew what to do with her in her own time, is just as fascinating a presence despite having a much smaller part. *Shanghai Express* posits Hui Fei as Lily's accidental companion but also her fated doppelganger, even a kind of familiar, one who embodies and enacts the darker implications of Lily's journey. Even more taciturn and self-contained, she's untroubled by any lost love as Lily is. The mere sight of the two women in their compartment is compelling, the spectacle of their indolence in their detachment from all judgement and opinion outside of themselves, Lily playing her jazz and Hui Fei listlessly playing solitaire and smoking, the netherworld of hazily sensual and amoral delights each has repeatedly and bravely stepped into and still carry about them like a bubble, a state of almost alien exception Sternberg also rhymes with the ideal of cinema stardom itself. Sternberg and costumer Travis Banton present them as visual mirror images, Lily initially swathed in black only to eventually reveal her blazing hair, Hui Fei dressed in light, glossy hues with her black hair sliced in geometric precision. *Shanghai Express* isn't exactly feminist in the modern sense, and yet its radicalism in certain regards still startles, viewing these two "fallen women" as the ones who command events on subtle and overt levels, and it's the male characters who must get over themselves.



Hui Fei is unfortunately also exposed to someone like Chang, who feels no compunction in taking what he wants from her, where he's more circumspect if scarcely less acquisitive with the Westerner Lily. When Hui Fei resists Chang sees it as a cue to abuse and humiliate, only to find the kind of pride and strength Chang seems to think is his personal province is also shared by the equally, potently vengeful courtesan. There's also some sense of evil humour in the way Wong and Oland are cast given that Wong had played Oland's daughter in the Fu Manchu film *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931). After Hui Fei is thrown out of Chang's rooms with her formerly sculpted hair now loose and bedraggled, pawed at by one of Chang's soldiers, she descends back into the train, trailed by Lily who grabs her when she plucks a dagger from her carrying bag and seems to be considering suicide. Instead, Hui Fei sneaks back into the station, lays in wait for Chang in the shadows, and stabs him to death when his back is turned to her: Sternberg films her through the hanging veils and shadows, transformed into a spectral presence by murderous zeal, only to return to her compartment on the train and resume her game of solitaire, only a slightly sadder gleam to her betraying anything happened in the meantime. By this time Chang has released Donald, having used the hot iron he was going to use on Donald's eyes to first light his cigarette and then scorch through the bonds on his captive's wrists to release him.



Seeing Lily in Chang's company and assured by both of them that she's going with the warlord willingly, Donald retreats with his gentlemanly pretences barely suppressing offence and anger, but when he learns from Hui Fei that she's killed Chang, he grabs a gun from a superintendent sent to fetch him and dashes into the station to rescue Lily. Donald doesn't have to shoot anyone, knocking out a couple of guards, returning to the train with Lily, and ordering a fast departure. Donald is an interesting romantic hero in the frame of such drama. He's portrayed as an almost ideal embodiment of a certain kind of masculinity, so English you can smell London smog on him, combining the bravery of a soldier and a healer's sense of care, one who readily jumps to the rescue even when he's broken-hearted and furious. Sternberg plainly describes this creature he admires enormously to also critique him: Donald is also repressed and troubled by his memories of loving Lily, and his romantic failure is that he had no deep intrinsic sense of her loving him back, even as he wants to. Lily had not just an infamous career to retreat into but also an alternate identity, the costume of Shanghai Lily wrapped around Madeline, a privilege of womanhood. Donald's uniform is the perfect outer expression of his inner spirit, tight and contained, gallant but held in check: the curse of manhood.



Brook, a mostly forgotten matinee idol who nonetheless also had the claim of starring in the following year's Best Picture winner *Cavalcade*, has the relatively thankless role in the film that's more about a man being loved by a woman, in which the hero is indeed more of an object despite his shows of bravura. And yet the film very much depends on Brook pulling off what Sternberg demands of him, to suggest what's impressive about Donald and also what's flaccid in him. Despite being freed in flashes of action, Donald is so often throughout the film locked into frieze-like postures, or as film writer Erich Kuersten neatly described, "cigarette ad abstraction," in part because he's constantly pictured with a cigarette squeezed between his fingers as tightly and tensely as a falcon's claws about a fish, blowing out smoke in measured plumes. Such postures illustrate Donald's frigid Anglo-Saxon restraint warring with his deep-flowing sense of erotic and emotional excitement when drawn back into Lily's orbit, resulting in paralysis and sour frustration concealed by a veneer of flinty cool, reduced to registering expressions of pouty, desperate Englishness as he oscillates between sarcastic and urgently romantic pronouncements. Carmichael finally becomes as fuming mad at him as he was with Lily at the outset, not revealing the motives for Lily's actions but mentioning her praying for him, planting disquiet in Donald's mind. Meanwhile Mrs Haggerty derides Lily's behaviour on the train whilst Lily announces her disdain for everyone else by playing her gramophone as loud as she can.



The real climax of the film isn't Chang's death and Donald's rescue, nor is it the final clinch the lovers share in Shanghai, although that makes for a splendid afterword. The climax instead comes when Lily, with a carefully contrived appearance of flirty casualness, comes to Donald as he sits pensively in his compartment. Lily bums a cigarette and Donald notices her hands are shaking like she's nervous, before noting that Carmichael told her about the praying, but appends with a curl of disdain, "Which I doubt," and Lily, aggravated and with pride resurgent, says she would have done it for anyone and takes her leave. She retreats into her cabin, turns off the light, and leans against the wall, lit by a fanlight. An on-set still photo taken with this lighting set-up and Dietrich posed with eyes turned up to the light became famous, capturing the mystique of Dietrich as Sternberg had laboured so hard to fashion in its most iconic reduction. But the photo didn't capture the specific emotion Dietrich is called upon to project in the actual scene, what makes it so memorable as a moment of cinema. The tiny quivers in Lily's hands, the lines in her forehead and the expression of frayed desperation and anguish, the cost of what she's done finally telling but still only expressed in private reverie. Here Sternberg does something very few other directors have managed, to convey a character's inner life with every element available to their filmmaking – a highpoint of his labours, and Dietrich's.



The train passengers all reach Shanghai and the terminus of their association, people who earlier were facing pivots of life and death together saying their farewells in varying degrees of rush, distraction, and eagerness to leave it all behind, except for Donald and Lily who receive gratitude for their actions: "I owe you my life and I'm not the man to forget it," Salt tells Donald, "Although between you and me it isn't worth very much." Hui Fei gains her own, fresh, not particularly welcome fame as journalists quiz her about how she killed Chang, and very quickly and irritably moves to flee them. Lily buys Donald a new watch to replace the one with her image, broken in the melee, whilst Donald has her on his mind even as he exchanges pleasantries with others. Sternberg maintains his cinematic wit through these last shots as he makes odd use of dissolves, first to suggest how Lily is lingering on Donald's mind even as he's speaking to Salt and a military colleague, and then to weave their final union into the flow of life churning through the station. Finally, Donald gives in and places aside his doubts, finally achieving the odd state of grace Lily always demanded of him, allowing them to have their triumphal kiss before the fade-out, with the enticingly fetishistic final detail of Lily caressing and gripping the leather strap of Donald's bandolier. All accompanied by jaunty jazz on the soundtrack, fanfare for people willing to take their leap into the strange new world.

Creed III (2023)

this island rod



The original *Rocky* films were popular and beloved because they grasped and wielded essential, even primal emotions, in portraying a perpetually troubled underdog constantly turning his powerful fighting pith on for the moments when it really counted and maintaining his childlike streak all the while, as the idealised self-projection of a certain kind of man. I know I wasn't the only person underwhelmed by Ryan Coogler's *Creed* (2015) when it came out, but I often felt like it, given the film's great and general acclaim. Coogler certainly did a clever job of reenergising a franchise whilst seeming to also manage the tricky task of keeping faith with it – although some felt unhappy at the news that Apollo Creed had been a cheater. Coogler's inheriting hero, Adonis "Donnie" Creed, as played by Michael B. Jordan, struck me as a pretty blank canvas, particularly in contrast to Sylvester Stallone's innately charming characterisation, available for direct comparison. In creating Donnie, Coogler wisely avoided merely recapitulating a Rocky-like characterisation, but Donnie emerged as not much of anything, because Coogler tried to define him as too many things – both a child of the orphanage and the uneasy product of privilege, an exemplar and a damaged, driven underdog, already a success story before he elects to get down and dirty in the ring. The second entry, Steven Caple Jr's *Creed II* (2018), was a meatier drama that had Donnie battle the son of his father's killer, Ivan Drago, an obvious and relished place to take Donnie's story, but developed it in surprising ways, making it into a portrait of young men wrestling with legacy and needs that can't be quelled.



Jordan, at least, who rose to stardom thanks to the part, seems to genuinely appreciate something about the character, and he follows in Stallone's footsteps by taking on directing duties for the series on *Creed III*. And this entry to a certain extent mimics both the pleasures and goofs of the old films. By now Donnie is a wealthy and renowned hero, happily married with a kid, and he's reintroduced choosing to retire after a climactic rematch with his foe from the first *Creed*, Ricky Conlan (Anthony Bellew), one he wins with a surgical show of boxing art and bravura. His wife Bianca (Tessa Thompson), faced with recent difficulties with her never-great hearing, has moved away from performing to producing tracks for other singers. Their daughter Amara (Mila Davis-Kent) has inherited a more severe form of her disability, but otherwise has the spunk of both parents. Donnie's curiously tense retirement is interrupted when an old pal, Damian 'Dame' Anderson (Jonathan Majors), visits him at the Delphi Gym, which Donnie now runs along with Tony 'Little Duke' Burton (Wood Harris). Dame tells Donnie he's just been released from a long stint in prison, the roots of which we've already glimpsed in a flashback prologue, a calamity that ended Dame's own, seemingly meteoric rise as a pugilist.



The film actually opens with a flashback to Los Angeles in 2002, with the teenage Donnie (Thaddeus James Mixson Jr) accompanying the 18-year-old Dame (Spence Moore II) as he wins a local Golden Gloves tournament. On the way home Donnie is distracted by the sight of a man he knows and hates, Leon (Aaron Alexander), and attacks him. What exactly transpired after this, which proves to have led to Dame's incarceration, emerges throughout the film: after some of Leon's friends intervened to hold Donnie, Dame

was arrested for waving a gun at them, and Donnie ran off. The adult Dame shuffles into the film with discursive and ever so faintly provocative vibes even when playing nice, but he quickly begins to hint he doesn't always intend to play that way. Donnie gets him a gig as sparring partner for a fighter Donnie's been fostering, Felix Chavez (Jose Benavidez), as Chavez prepares to fight Viktor Drago (Florian Munteanu) for the championship title. Dame hits too hard in the ring, much to Little Duke's fury in particular: Duke constantly tells Donnie Dame's not a good guy, but Donnie insists he'll come good. Finally, after Viktor is injured in a bewildering assault at a party, Donnie arranges for Dame to step into his shoes for the big fight. Whereupon Dame brutally carves Chavez up and gleefully claims the title, and tells Donnie he's coming for all he has as payback, and Donnie realises that Dame, amongst other things, contrived Viktor's injuring.



Creed III's most immediately notable choice is the absence of Stallone as Rocky, apparently the result of some backroom disagreement. But his absence to a certain extent lets Donnie finally breathe as a character, and the weight of the film's story falls on him and Dame. The basic story set-up here, the oncoming and inevitable clash between the old pals from the tough old 'hood united by common grief but split apart by diverging chance, would fit very snugly into a 1930s Warner Bros. melodrama. And that's a fittingly classical motif for a series that was always defined around couching old-school movie ideals in modern style. Given his recent legal troubles Major's fast rise as a star might well be halted, but he's still very good here, capturing Dame's sullen and foreboding persona, revealing the crowing, contemptuous truth once he's pulled off a seemingly impossible feat. *Creed III*, in embracing Donnie's traumatising early experience, finally taps into some unmined potential in the character, and the film captures something galvanising about being a success in life and yet still haunted by such a past, a past that Dame wilfully embodies. "I just asked 'em where the Black family live at," Dame quips when he first visits Donnie and family at their ritzy address, and he steadily challenges all of Donnie's lingering anxieties about his success and place in the scheme of things.



Just as *Creed II* riffed on the mystique of *Rocky IV* (1985), turning its high camp cold-war-in-miniature bout into a thoughtful meditation on sons inheriting their fathers' obsessions, *Creed III* does a similar thing with *Rocky III's* (1982) Clubber Lang, transmuted that character's marauding cruelty and resentment matched to fearsome physical strength into Dame, a more considered and realistic edition. The film's mixture of strong and weak elements can also be said to successfully mimic the precursor series. Despite nods to conflict between Donnie and Bianca, really their partnership has been a cute and unshakeable mainstay much like Rocky and Adrian, and their interactions with the plucky, signing Amara are baldly schmaltzy. When it's mentioned early on that Donnie's adoptive mother Mary-Anne (Phylicia Rashad) has had a minor stroke, which she insists isn't a problem now, you just know she's going to kick the bucket sometime around what would once have been the sixth reel, to inject extra juice into the woe of Donnie's emotional spiral. This is given further kick when Mary-Anne reveals that she deliberately withheld from Donnie all of Dame's jail correspondence because she wanted to forget that part of his life, sparking Donnie's anger, and then his weeping guilt as he kneels by her death bed.



Jordan reveals a surprisingly lucid and formula-testing touch for a first-time filmmaker taking on a well-oiled franchise, when he could very easily slip into empty slickness. He handles himself and his actors with tensile conviction, and he lets supporting performers, particularly Majors and Harris, steal scenes. He also continually reveals an artful compositional eye, like shots of Donnie, studying his own form whilst shadow-boxing in a mirror, the carefully arranged frame in a frame both cutting a hole in the world and filling it in

with an almost exact balancing vision containing the reflection, confirming Donnie's real opponent is himself and the illusion of his identity. He treads close to the gimmicky in his fight scenes, including use of ramping, but there's percussive intensity and real visual élan to the bouts, with Jordan trying his damndest to focus in on both the tactical prowess and psychological strain of his fighters. He also partly avoids one of my pet peeves with modern boxing movies, which is leaning excessively on fight commentators to provide instant exposition and hype, although there's still too much of it. Early in the film Jordan briefly recreates Muhammad Ali's famous victor's stance over Sonny Liston when Donnie bests Conlan.



Later, when Donnie leaves Dame's dressing room before his fight with Chavez, Jordan captures the two men as divided in separate frames by a wall, Donnie passing into dimness whilst Dame lingers in his change room which more than vaguely resembles a prison cell, lit in a subtle yellow that hints that whatever his aims Dame has the advantage of some particular inner light drawing him on. Jordan's sense of both acting and directing converge to real effect in the aftermath of Dame's fight with Chavez as he goes for close-ups on Donnie and Dame, Dame victorious and weeping, eyes blazing at his pal as if stricken by the awful power of his artfully delivered revenge, whilst the chagrined Donnie shakes his head slightly in communicating to his old pal what an awful thing he's done: Jordan here confirms he knows what he and Majors can do with small gestures in the context of cinematic largeness. Afterwards, in a more direct confrontation, Donnie sucker-punched by Dame, who with a degree of hysterical overconfidence and finally revealed anger tells Donnie he's only just begun humiliating and divesting him of what he's gained: at this point Dame has become the embodiment of Donnie's anxiety and fear for the way his bad memories can still consume him with the slightest wrong step.



And, of course, we're also given the crucial melodrama cue and spark to righteous anger, as Dame's offence to Donnie plants the seed that will drive him to get back into shape and take Dame on in the ring as a mortal enemy. Jordan delivers the inevitable training montage with a punchline that made me laugh out loud, as Donnie taps the last frontier of macho test and showmanship – dragging a light airplane up a runway. The bigger problems with *Creed III* are lodged more in the script, which plays too many games with explaining both Dame's downfall and resurgence, and drawing a long bow when it comes to Dame's apparent capacities as a mastermind and manipulator. The details around just why Dame got such a stiff sentence for a non-violent crime also feel a bit fudged, and it's plain that the screenwriters – Coogler's brother Keenan and Zach Baylin – have awkwardly tried to tread a fine line, working to still keep Dame a potentially sympathetic figure whilst also justifying his not having been in Donnie's life up to this point.



All builds to the final bout which Jordan goes all out to make properly epic: he films the two fighters battling in the ring with the rest of the arena deserted, to emphasise the purely personal, grudge-match nature of their duel, before returning to more traditional, energetically shot and cut fighting, which Jordan handles very well. The two actors really do seem to be capable of smashing each-other to bits. He delivers a late flourish that disrupts the naturalistic texture of the series to date when, during their climactic fight, Donnie and Dame are glimpsed duelling in an otherwise empty, shadowy arena to literalise the purely personal, grudge-match and trauma-fuelled nature of their contest, before Donnie conjures within his mind jail bars to surround the boxing ring as he fights Dame. This wouldn't have been out of place in some 1920s

silent expressionist drama, and I admire Jordan's cojones for daring it. The resolving scenes retain some of the ambivalence of its immediate precursor film, as it portrays final rapprochement and hard-gained understanding, along with plenty of manly tears. *Creed III* isn't a masterpiece or fully-fledged auteurist statement from its young actor-filmmaker, but I felt Jordan's personality invested in the movie as well as creative talent, and that's always something worth watching.



How The West Was Won (1962)

film freedonia



Directors: John Ford, Henry Hathaway, George Marshall

Screenwriter: James R. Webb

Amidst the sprawl of big-budget historical epics designed to lure audience away from their televisions in the late-1950s and '60s, *How The West Was Won* was unusual as a grandiose Western rather than Biblical or medieval costume tale. The film was coproduced by MGM as one of several would-be epic follow-ups to *Ben-Hur* (1959), in collaboration with Cinerama, whose colossal, curving screen format which had previously been used to showcase specially-shot documentaries since first appearing in 1953. *How The West Was Won* was one of only two feature films, along with the same year's *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm*, filmed in the original version of the Cinerama process, shot with three lenses and projected in three panels. This spectacular but unwieldy format offered a level of visual clarity and detail so unusual the filmmakers had to get costumes sewn by hand as machined seams were too obvious. Later films shot to exploit the format like *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) were more conventionally filmed. Today even the best, most exactingly restored prints of *How The West Was Won* still retain the imprint of the format, which when viewed in a standard letterbox often bends and buckles the swathing landscapes.



How The West Was Won has its basis in a series of historical articles published in *LIFE Magazine*, but its purpose is much less to describe that historical process than to entertain. Indeed, it can be best described as a monument to the very idea of movie entertainment, with a subtext not that deeply concealed suggesting that the entire motive behind the westward expansion of the United States was so that Hollywood could be born, one reason a major protagonist of the narrative is a prototypical American song-and-dance gal. Similarly, *How The West Was Won* encapsulates just about the entire Western film genre in miniature, sporting most of its essential tropes and kneading them into an overall mythos that evokes and mimics Biblical narratives in erecting a church of Americana. In this regard *How The West Was Won* isn't so conceptually different from the spectacular documentaries made for Cinerama, with a similarly curated, occasionally diorama-like aspect to its visuals and storytelling, and interludes designed purely to floor the audience with moviemaking might. The film finished up costing a then-colossal \$15 million, but earned it back more than four times over.



The script was written by the experienced screenwriter James R. Webb, who had written *Apache* (1954) and *Vera Cruz* (1954) for Robert Aldrich, *Trapeze* (1956) for Carol Reed, *The Big Country* (1958) for William Wyler, and *Pork Chop Hill* (1959) for Lewis Milestone. He would win an Oscar for best original story and screenplay for *How The West Was Won*, before going on to expand on the film's Native American sympathies in more overt fashion with his script for Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), and write the two sequels to *In The Heat of the Night* (1967), *They Call Me MISTER Tibbs!* (1970) and *The Organization* (1971). Production of *How The West Was Won* was complicated by MGM's uncertainty over which episodes in the sprawling survey Webb penned would be filmed, which frustrated the great Western novelist Louis L'Amour, hired to write the novelisation. To make production easier and give the multi-strand story different inflections, producer Bernard Smith hired three directors, determined they all should

all be “old pros.” So, Henry Hathaway directed the bulk of the movie, credited with the chapters entitled “The Rivers,” “The Plains,” and “The Outlaws,” whilst George Marshall handled the portion called “The Railroad,” and, in a coup that ironically marked the point just before his career started a last wane, John Ford directed the mid-film portion on “The Civil War.” A great number of Hollywood stars past and (then) present who had cut their teeth in Westerns were roped into the film, but the lead actors were young and fairly fresh faces – Carroll Baker, Debbie Reynolds, and George Peppard.



Of course, from a contemporary perspective the inherent triumphalism of the title *How The West Was Won* and the general thesis contained within obliges more than a few raised eyebrows. The opening narration immediately sets teeth on edge as it formulates the idea of the West having to be “won from nature and from primitive man.” One can all but hear descendants of the primitive men snorting loudly in the aisles. Also very notably excised from its depiction of the West are any African-American people at all, a perturbing reminder of how not long ago people could make a movie like this and yet completely excise a whole bloc of society. In that light it’s interesting to note that the hit TV series *Roots*, screened a mere 15 years after *How The West Was Won* came out but reflecting a vastly different zeitgeist, played as both a vehement counter-narrative but also a spiritual companion piece with a similar narrative template and equally engaged with creating a mythos of American founding. To be fair, also, *How The West Was Won* eventually proves surprisingly layered when it does get around to encompassing the clash between white and Native Americans in “The Railway,” as well as exhibiting feminist underpinnings in the way the film revolves around two strong-willed woman who each choose different paths entirely according to their own characters and who stitch themselves into the fabric of the country. When I recently watched the film shortly after seeing James Cameron’s *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), a film just as about as opposite a social and historical viewpoint as it’s possible to get in mainstream storytelling, I couldn’t help but feel that in certain ways *How The West Was Won* is the more sophisticated dramatic artefact and consideration of history.



Of course, what *How The West Was Won* mostly wants to do is provide a rollicking and affirming epic. The physical immediacy and immersive power of the Cinerama screen is balanced by an insistence on playing the film's dramatic elements for maximum theatrical bravura. Because the producers presumably couldn't get hold of Jehovah's agent when looking for a narrator, they got the next best thing in Spencer Tracy. His inimitable tones are heard over an opening shot that immediately evinces the film's pure sense of spectacle and deeply worshipful sense of the American landscape, as the expanse of the screen is filled with the soaring crags and banks of ice of the Rocky Mountains. Linus Rawlings, one of the mountain men venturing into the wilderness to hunt fur and filled out by the dangling physique of James Stewart, rides a horse towards the camera along a high ridge, imbued with a monumental quality by the unique lensing effect and sharpness of the Cinerama camera and entirely fitting with the film's hypertrophied aesthetic ambitions. Despite the multiple directors and sprawl of action, some attention is paid to revisiting this shot much later in the film when Linus' son Zebulon 'Zeb' Rawlings (George Peppard) himself briefly drops out of society and spends time as a mountain man himself with his father's old pal Jethro Stuart (Henry Fonda), like his father traversing a highland ridge, lord of all he surveys.



Linus' ramblings see him negotiating with Native tribes as an exemplar of a peaceable intruder in the Western landscape, but already destined to intersect in returning eastward with the family of the religious but talkative and footloose Zebulon Prescott (Karl Malden), who has set his mind on dragging his large family – wife Rebecca (Agnes Moorehead), two grown daughters Eve (Carroll Baker) and Lilith (Debbie Reynolds), and two sons – off in an expedition along the Ohio River via the Erie Canal to find a new spread in Illinois, sometime in the 1830s. Waiting for their paddleboat on the Canal, Zebulon raves to another patriarch, the Scottish immigrant Alex Harvey (Tudor Owen) who's making the same journey with his clutch of sons, that he owned a farm so rocky he had to blast out furrows with gunpowder, a story Rebecca

immediately dismisses: “We had the best farm in the county...it was his itchin’ foot that brought us here.” Zebulon, noting Harvey’s sons are all single and eager to get his girls married off, gets the musically inclined Lilith to entertain them all. Lilith initially, sarcastically starts to sing a dirty shanty, to be immediately chastised and obliged to sing the song that becomes a generational motif throughout the film, a version of “Greensleeves” with new lyrics (by Sammy Cahn) called “A Home in the Meadow.”



Hathaway has always been a director left in a limbo of appreciation even as he surely counted as one of the major figures of Hollywood for most of its so-called Golden Age. Born the son of two actors, Hathaway had the odd distinction of inheriting through his mother the title of Marquis in the Belgian aristocracy: his mother’s father had been sent to the US negotiating with the government over possession of the Hawaiian Islands. Hathaway made his name as an assistant director under DeMille and Von Stroheim amongst others. Whilst he would work in just about every genre known the Hollywood when he became a director in his own right, his debut was on the Western *Heritage of the Desert* (1932), whilst *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935) made him a major filmmaker. Most of his best work came in the film noir genre in the latter 1940s, with films like *Kiss of Death* (1947), *Call Northside 777* (1948), and *Niagara* (1953), and later Westerns including *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965) and *True Grit* (1969), although his greatest work is likely the backwoods drama *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1941). Hathaway was a no-nonsense image-crafter and a smart handler of actors, although his lesser movies could dissolve into plodding competence.



Hathaway’s long-honed talent at balancing cinematic gloss with strong performances as the most professional of Hollywood pros is certainly apparent in the early scenes of *How The West Was Won* as he presents the Prescotts as a prototypical American family. Zebulon is nominally a zealous New England

Quaker, named for a son of Jacob mentioned in the Torah who becomes a father of a tribe, but constantly lurches into tall tales and is tempted by profane urges, his daughters, whose names also wryly but meaningfully echo Biblical figures with the born-to-be-married Eve and the peripatetic Lilith, already well-schooled in worldly affairs: “Ma’am, it seems to me you’ve been kissed before,” Linus notes after snogging Eve. Linus encounters the Prescotts on the Ohio River down which they’re travelling with the Harveys on rafts they build themselves: afraid at first Linus might be a river pirate, Zebulon warns him to approach carefully with a gun trained on him, but is satisfied Linus is on the level and let him camp with them. Linus gives Eve the suggestive gift of a beaver pelt, and immediately Eve sets her cap at him, eventually drawing him into the woods for a spell of had wooing: “Eve, you make me feel like a man standing on a narrow ledge comin’ face to face with a grizzly bear,” Linus groans, and confesses, “I’m a sinful man, deep, dark, sinful – I’m on my way to Pittsburgh to be sinful again.” Eve nonetheless remains smitten. When her father awakens in the morning and sees Linus’ canoe is gone he immediately hollers out to make sure Eve is still in the camp, and finds she is, expecting nonetheless to meet Linus again.



The rather jagged age disparity between Baker and Stewart (although he looks younger than he was and Baker was a bit older than she looked) and Reynolds’ later offered the choice of Gregory Peck and Robert Preston for romantic interest reflects an odd moment in Hollywood history when younger leading men with strong marquee appeal were thin on the ground (or too busy in TV, like Clint Eastwood, James Garner, and Burt Reynolds) and the old familiars getting, well, old: the same year Stewart was called upon to play the idealistic young lawyer of Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Baker and Peppard, playing her son, despite their genuine and formidable talent look meanwhile far too glossy to fit properly into the historical setting. Reynolds is at least given a role tailor made to unleash her skills as a musical star, and the way the film showcases her performances often makes *How The West Was Won* close to a musical in a manner that today rather strongly resembles Bollywood cinema in its willingness to inject such scene amidst otherwise serious stories, and might even have given that style some licence. One agreeable aspect of this, however, is that *How The West Was Won* left behind some of the more pretentious aspects of the 1950s Western style, avoiding the moral gravitas of Westerns begotten by *High Noon* (1952), and whilst also evoking the self-conscious mythicism of *Shane* (1953), its showbiz energy cuts in a very different direction, just two years before Sergio Leone would launch on his much darker-hued and wilder effort to drag the Western back to its violent and mythical roots.



Linus' attempt to escape the spectre of settling down represented by Eve hits a serious road bump when he lands at a trading post set up in a cave by the river, which proves to be an enclave of actual river pirates captained by Jeb Hawkins (inevitably, Walter Brennan), with his daughter (Brigid Bazlen) and crew of cutthroats (including Lee Van Cleef, looking like the ancestor of Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider*, 1969). Under the guise of getting Linus to identify a strange animal caught in the cave, the daughter leads him deeper into the cave before stabbing him in the gut and dropping him into a pit. Fortunately the wound proves superficial and the pit leads back out to the river, and Linus swims to safety. The Prescotts and the Harveys encounter the same pirates at a new locale further down the river, and are held up by at gunpoint by the rogues. Linus bounding out of the underbrush and launches an axe into one pirate's back, sparking a battle: one of Harvey's sons is shot dead, but Hawkins gets walloped with a chair, Lilith chases down and swats his daughter with a sack full of coins, and Linus hurls a barrel of gunpowder on a fire, causing an explosion that takes out several pirates. As they bury the dead, Zebulon leads a group in prayer, concluding with an invocation to God that, having sent His way several evil souls, "We ask thee humbly to receive them...whether you want 'em or not." Eve fails again to convince Linus to marry her, and continues on downriver with her family. The Prescotts take a wrong fork and finish up careening through some rapids: the raft breaks apart, and the two elder Prescotts are killed.



This first third of the film gains zest from Malden's outsized performance, whilst Webb's script cuts against the grain of sanctified patriotism by teasing out a disparity between the sentimentalities of Victorian fiction and the hard-headed necessities of frontier life. The disparity between the sarcastic and sceptical Lilith and the arch romantic Eve is noted as Eve rhapsodises over a passage in a romantic novel she's reading in which lovers carve their names interlocked on a tree trunk and the man hurls his knife at the junction, much to Eve's disbelief. Later when Eve successfully encourages Linus to perform this symbolic deed, Lilith blurts,

“You got a growed man to do that?!” Part of the joke is precisely that Linus proves despite his status as the hardest and most independent of men to be especially susceptible to such absurd gestures. Notably, Robert Zemeckis’ *Romancing the Stone* (1984), which knowingly appropriated Alfred Newman’s theme for this film for its opening, also in part was a spoof-cum-remake of “The Rivers,” similarly seeing a starry-eyed woman under the spell of romantic fantasy thrown in with an actual, hard-bitten adventurer. Lilith for her part plays a sardonic sad accordion sound as a response to one of Linus’ tall tales. There’s a satirical lilt to Hawkins using a big Stars and Stripes pinned on the wall to prove the adage about patriotism as a last refuge, reiterated when, as he and his men rob the settlers, Hawkins inveigles them: “Why, it’s in our noble tradition that we conquer the wilderness with nothing but our bare hands and stout hearts!” The sexually loaded image of Linus going off with Hawkins’ daughter to get a gander at a strange furry thing has meaning he acknowledges later on to Eve: “I still went to see the varmint with the pirate girl. I’ll always be goin’ to see the varmint.”



The white water scene meanwhile sports some impressive stunt work of the kind that obviously demanded risk of life and limb to the stuntpeople involved, even though interspersed with rear projection work. After crawling out of the river, Lilith, helping Eve bury their parents (their two young brothers vanish from the story), plans to return east at the first opportunity, but Eve vows to remain on the shore of the Ohio where the graves are, and Linus, after hearing about the disaster, tracks her down and agrees to get married and help her build a farm. Lilith leaves on a paddleboat and, a few years later in “The Plains” chapter, is rediscovered making a living as a vaudevillian in St. Louis, singing her own songs and dancing in rambunctious fashion with a troupe. The moment she gets an unexpected inheritance from one of her gentleman admirers, who has recently deceased and left her a gold-producing claim in California, Lilith is happy to abandon her career and signs onto a wagon train forming up under the captaincy of Roger Morgan (Preston), partnering with another unaccompanied female, Aggie Clegg (Thelma Ritter), who quickly realises that Lilith is a man magnet and, being eager to get married, she might be able to nab one of her rejects. A professional gambler, Cleve Van Valen (Peck), who overhears Lilith hearing the news of her good fortune. Owing a lot of money, Cleve resolves to get into Lilith’s good graces by offering his services as a hired hand: initially rejected, Cleve trails the train, and at length gets Aggie to vouch for him.



“The Plains” spares several scenes for Reynolds to strut her stuff in the kind of musical performance that made her a star, straining at the edges of credibility for a nominally straight-laced drama, particularly when she starts hollering out a hoedown dance number to stir up the others on the wagon train, who might well have shot her for waking them up, but instead all get roused for a fling including Cleve, who proves unembarrassed to dance in a towel having muddied up his pants. Later, when she’s back to performing alone around the California gold fields, Lilith sings the bawdy ditty “What Was Your Name in the States?”, mocking the denizens of the West as criminals and rejects of all stripes, and still later warbles “A Home in the Meadow” again with a backdrop and accompaniment more ripe for *The Lawrence Welk Show* rather unlikely for the setting of a Sacramento riverboat. Borderline silly as such moments are in context, they nonetheless point to that subtext I noted before, charting the birth of a specifically American performing style and attributing it to the wild energy of such places and people. This aspect of the movie is also connected with the interpolation of folk songs on the soundtrack, a touch that also pins the movie exactly to the folk music craze of the early ‘60s. Songs like “Erie Canal” and “Shenandoah” in “The Rivers” chapter and, more obviously, “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” during “The Civil War,” are used not just as appropriate mood-setting but as markers in the temporal and physical journey.



Lilith, the avatar for the film’s conflation of pioneer and hooper chutzpah, is partnered with the equally, obviously on-the-make Cleve, who Lilith understands as a creature much like herself: “We might both have been born for the poorhouse, but we’re not the kind to like it.” Morgan is contemptuous of Cleve, pegging him for a card sharp and almost giving him a beating when he catches him gaming with other travellers. He also initially takes Lilith for less than reputable, inspiring her to start lashing him with a whip when he calls her “a woman of your sort.” During the long trek to California, Morgan becomes impressed by Lilith and

asks her to marry him. When the train is attacked by a band of Comanche, Morgan bets they want the train's herd of cattle and some of their horses and takes the chance of charging the train for cover. Innumerable number of Westerns had sported scenes of Indians attacking wagon trains, but this is certainly the most spectacular, even on the smallest screen the looming, surging quality of the Cinerama frame and its depth of field matched to tracking shots and dashing behind and before the mounted riders and with the charging wagons surging across the screen which in standard format makes them seem to be bending.



Cleve proves his valour by unhooking the lead horses from Lilith and Aggie's wagon, in a stunt modelled Yakima Canutt's famous work on *Stagecoach* (1939). He also leaps off to save some men from an upturned wagon, only to be thought lost in the melee. Morgan, toppled from his steed, grabs onto a lead horse pulling a wagon and plucks Lilith, who falls amidst crazily wheeling horses, off the ground and swings her in behind him. When Cleve turns up during the night with the man he rescued and utterly exhausted, it's plain he and Lilith are in love, causing Morgan to shy away. When they reached California Lilith and Cleve find to their grievous disappointment that Lilith's claim has already been mined out, leaving her as poor as before, and they soon split. When Morgan comes across her performing, he again offers to marry Lilith, but she still wistfully refuses, whilst also refusing to condemn Cleve for wanting the same things she does. Sometime after, Cleve hears her singing on the riverboat and performs what he considers the ultimate romantic gesture in putting aside a winning hand to come see her. He proposes they get married and insists they quiet their respective jobs and head off to San Francisco to make their fortune, having their clinch just in time for the intermission.



Much of the hard work of stitching *How The West Was Won* into a whole was done by Newman with a score that counts as the climax of his career, wielding a variety of grandiose, even often corny, but ferocious showmanship that would barely last out the 1960s. Newman's main theme immediately announces the blockbuster stature of the production as well as the florid romanticism and bristling energy of what's ahead, over a painted title card representing Native Americans hunting buffalo and attacking a stagecoach. A variation heard at the end comes appended with silly lyrics, and lush, even syrupy renditions of "A Home in the Meadow" also punctuate the soundtrack. Between each chapter of the film come brief vignettes narrated by Tracy explaining the intervening, big picture events of the history the characters pass through, noting the likes of the Mexican-American War (borrowing footage from John Wayne's *The Alamo*, 1960; later MGM recycles some shots from *Raintree County*, 1957) and the Pony Express at work but also being chased down by telegraph construction. The first vignette after the intermission notably features Raymond Massey playing Abraham Lincoln, the role he had essayed to acclaim in the play *Abe Lincoln In Illinois* and its 1940 film adaptation, but he doesn't get any dialogue, only required to look pensive and sit down to write at his desk like a slightly more mobile Disney animatronic.



Ford's "The Civil War" chapter follows, and if ever a director taking over a project can be felt by a viewer, it's here. Eve, now aging, is still on the farm she and Linus built, but Linus has gone to fight for the Union and gained a Captain's rank, whilst she persists with her two teenage sons. The elder, named after his grandfather and called Zeb (George Peppard) by all, is eager to follow his dad off to the fight, whilst the younger, Jeremiah (Claude Johnson), loves working the farm. They receive a letter from Lilith brought by the local postmaster (Ford regular Andy Devine), assuring them there's no fighting in California and offering to take Zeb in, but Zeb is insistent, and Eve finally gives in. Eve and Zeb talking about his future and his departure could have been clipped right out of *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) or *The Sun Shines Bright* (1953) in the slowly rhythmic, intense evocation of emotion registered more in gestures and physical attitudes than dialogue, start and end of the scene bracketed by Devine's approach on his wagon and Zeb's leaving by foot along a tree-shaded, sun-dappled road. Ford's sense of dramatic symmetry is carefully despoiled when Zeb comes home by riverboat, and his return proves no return at all. Ford similarly brackets the central vignette depicting the Battle of Shiloh, or rather its nocturnal intermission, with banks of cannons being set off. Both Linus and Zeb are amongst the soldiers fighting the battle, but only Zeb survives it.



Where Hathaway dealt with the tricky problem of framing in the Cinerama format by mostly keeping his distance and often blocking shots along flat, rectilinear lines, Ford immediately displays his bolder eye in trying to wrangle the format to serve him. He works to compose multiple elements for the three-block frames, often framing his actors obliquely foregrounded and utilising the depth of field to hold them in their environs, or utilising the centre of the frame for its looming, almost vertiginous quality to achieve a painterly framing, as in a vignette of an army surgeon contending with a stream of bodies splayed out on a blood-smeared table top before him: one of the bodies is that Linus, whose loss hits the men under his command who have carried him there hard. They carry him out again, one becoming annoyed with an officer who bumps into him, not realising the officer is General U.S. Grant (Harry Morgan), accompanied by his friend and subordinate General Sherman (John Wayne), who behold the awful spectacle of the improvised surgical ward. Meanwhile Zeb wanders the battle disorientated and stricken with disgust, carrying only the barrel and affixed bayonet of his broken rifle. He encounters a stray Confederate (Russ Tamblyn) who professes to be deserting and tries to talk Zeb into coming with him, whilst gleefully showing off the revolver he stole off a dead officer. But when they spy Grant and Sherman talking, the Confederate tries to take a shot at them, missing when Zeb grabs his arm, and Zeb stabs him to death with his bayonet.



The conceit in portraying the Civil War through this vignette is transformed into pure Fordian expression, eliding traditional depictions of the conflict's battles and instead meditating on its human cost, the carnage rather than action, in a manner reminiscent of his depiction of the aftermath of a Revolutionary War battle in *Drums Along The Mohawk* (1939). The stream flowing by the Union camp tastes strange to Zeb when he takes a drink of it, the Confederate tells him why: the stream is running red with blood. Ford's surveys of ditches being dug for myriad corpses would be quoted by Leone for *Duck, You Sucker* (1972). Ford applies

painterly skill to images like the blooming trees lit up in firelight looming over the bedraggled warriors and rows of corpses and tainted rivers, whilst the sidelong glance at Grant and Sherman achieves a similar brand of nuance in depicting the human underneath the historical mystique to that he managed with *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939). Grant is portrayed as feeling the toll not just of a terrible and exhausting day of fighting, but in expecting to be blamed for the nearly successful surprise attack with rumours he was drunk going around. Sherman retorts that he was the one hit by surprise, and argues with Grant until he relents in his decision to resign: "I say a man only has the right to resign if he's wrong, not if he's right." The odd but ingenious casting of Morgan and Wayne renders Sherman the block of assurance to Grant's wizened self-doubt, the pivot of the moment of regaining moral and personal courage matched to Zeb more literally saving Grant's life and so changing the course of the war.



Zeb and the Confederate's encounter provides the common grunt's mirror to the two leaders, and acknowledges the surreal and unnecessary sight of two ordinary men representing two great power blocs meeting amidst the wreckage and connecting. The moment the Confederate takes aim he becomes an enemy again, and Zeb screams at him as he dies, "Why did you make me do that?!" Zeb's return home continues the cyclical motif but also breaks with it, as Zeb returns on a riverboat rather than by the road, setting the scene for Zeb's shock in seeing Eve's grave now beside Linus's, his mother having wasted away after his father's death. Zeb declines continuing to run the farm with his brother, and decides to remain in the army. This leads into Marshall's contribution to the film, with "The Railway" opening with a brief depiction of the Pony Express riders deging "bandits, Indians, hell and occasional high water" and their supplanting by telegraph poles, before shifting to the race to build the transcontinental railroad. Zeb, now in the Cavalry, is the army's official representative charged with negotiating with the Arapaho whose land the railway is being built across, and protecting the construction workers, a job that requires tricky balance. Zeb meets Stuart, his father's old pal, who's been hired to hunt buffalo to keep the workers fed. Both men find themselves in constant conflict with the high-powered and overbearing engineer running the construction, Mike King (Richard Widmark).



“The Railway” is in terms of story and length the scantiest of the film’s five proper chapters, and it doesn’t have the artistry of Ford’s portion. But it’s the most interesting part of the film in terms of what it tries to dramatise and say about it. George Marshall was one of the oldest of old pros still working in Hollywood: like many early Hollywood figures he lived a peripatetic life after he dropped out of college, doing everything from journalism to logging, until he stumbled into filmmaking and debuted as a director on the 1916 short *Across the Rio Grande*. Marshall worked with early screen heroes from Tom Mix to Laurel and Hardy, but most of his films were lost or relatively forgotten until he found a niche in comedy, reviving Marlene Dietrich’s career with the comedy-western *Destry Rides Again* (1939) and cleverly fusing horror and comedy with *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), and with films like *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *The Perils of Pauline* (1947), *Houdini* (1953), and *The Sheepman* (1958) scattered amidst a lot more forgettable fare. It’s to Marshall’s credit that he manages to construct an ideogram of narrative, history, philosophy, character, and filmmaking bravura in his twenty-minute chapter. “The Railway” deals with the tension between the relentless progressive positivism the film otherwise espouses and the question of its cost to Native Americans and other bystanders and bit players of history. Tracy’s narration notes that the prize in the race to complete the track is free land “one day would be worth millions.”



Mike King embodies the headlong and relentless drive of the railway project in specific and the west-conquering project in total. When Stuart brings to the railhead the bodies of some men killed by Arapaho for violating their agreed territory, King furiously demotes the foreman who lets workers gawk at the sight, and sacks Stuart, who only laconically queries whether King himself is going to feed the men. When the railway has to take a new route through the tribal hunting grounds, King pressures Zeb into making a new agreement with the Arapaho for the diversion. Zeb makes the compact, only for Stuart to make him aware that he’s now personally responsible in the Arapaho logic for the keeping of the agreement, and he’ll pay

the price if anyone breaks it. Hearing the train whistle Stuart mutters that it sounds “like the crack of doom for all that’s natural,” and muses on how he and Linus were constantly driven forward by the coming of civilisation: as the nation-building project reaches its climax already it’s birthing rueful nostalgia for days when everything was free and wild. Meanwhile Zeb’s clashes with King see the railroad man willing to do anything to get his job done, and obeys his bosses who, cash-strapped from the construction, want to make money by transporting buffalo hunters and immigrant settlers up the line.



This immediately infuriates the Arapaho, and Zeb finds himself abandoned by his scouts. Zeb confronts King, who retorts that the Arapaho will have to do like the incoming settlers and change their ways to make it in the new land. Zeb says he knows he’s right in the long term but that “they don’t have to be double-crossed” and vows to resign. Zeb rides out to try and appease the Arapaho but is immediately shot at, and the tribes muster together a huge herd of buffalo and stampede through the railway camp, killing a number of camp dwellers including women and children. The buffalo charge is another interlude of awesome spectacle, but more impactful is the aftermath as Zeb again confronts King, demanding of him as they listen to an orphaned baby wailing, becoming an emblem of everything injured and left bereft by the American project: “You can live with that?” “You think that’s crying?” King retorts: “That’s just new life being born.” Nonetheless the cost to the self-appointed prophet of the future is glimpsed as King climbs up onto the front of a train and his face buckles in pain, allowing himself a private squall of empathy even as the iron horse starts urging him forward again. Some of the patchiness of the film’s last third, according to Hathaway, was down to Smith, whom Hathaway felt was incompetent, and MGM boss Sol Siegel, who he said was drunk right through filming, spending so much money on the early portions they were reluctant to shoot the latter, but Hathaway argued that if they didn’t at least film “The Outlaws” they wouldn’t have a movie, as in his mind the victory of law and order enacted in the chapter was the winning of the west.



“The Outlaws” finally delivers a classic Western situation reminiscent of *High Noon* but with a new situational twist. The chapter begins with some more connecting vignettes depicting frontier struggles between sheep graziers and cattle farmers, with a shepherd gunned down whilst his flock is driven off. Zeb, now middle-aged, moustachioed, and weathered, is glimpsed working as a US Marshal, shooting after some hooligans careening down his main street. Zeb has become an intermediary figure, bring law and order to the far west in Arizona Territory, but also one with his readiness to use a gun and get down and dirty about to meet his own sunset. In San Francisco, the now greying and widowed Lilith is glimpsed selling off the mansion she and Cleve built and all the belongings within to pay off their debts, including the chair Lilith is sitting on. Lilith says that she and Cleve “made and spent three fortunes together...if he’d lived a little longer we would have made and spent another.” She takes comfort in her last possession, some land in Arizona, and knowing Zeb is working near it at the town of Gold City, she decides to get him to help her work it. Zeb is happy to quit being a Marshal, as he’s now a family man, and he, his wife Julie (Carolyn Jones), and his three children meet Lilith at the train. Also on the train is a much less welcome face: Zeb’s old outlaw nemesis Charlie Gant (Eli Wallach), released from prison and met in town by some of his old gang (with Harry Dean Stanton amongst their number).



Zeb, immediately suspecting Gant has both some criminal enterprise in mind and possibly revenge too considering Zeb killed his brother in a shootout, goes to warn his replacement as Marshal and former colleague Lou Ramsey (Lee J. Cobb). Lou however doesn't feel there's anything to act on except for Zeb's own apparent grudge against Gant. After Gant, in his customary manner of smiling hyperpoliteness, makes veiled threats against Zeb's family, he becomes convinced the only way to stop him is to catch him in a crime, and deduces Gant and his gang intend to rob a gold shipment going out of town on a train. When Lou finds Zeb preparing for battle he threatens to arrest him. Whilst “The Outlaws” is chiefly a pretext for the climactic action scene, it grazes substantial territory here as Lou makes clear he's not going to tolerate any vigilante action, echoing the theme of many a 1950s “adult” Western in contemplating the end of the Wild West's each-man-a-paladin ethos and the oncoming age of proper law and order. Zeb however manages to persuade Lou that he means to use the law, and the two ride out on the gold train. Just as Zeb expected, Gant's gang try to stop the train with a barricade on the tracks, but the driver speeds through it. The outlaws chase on horseback and clamber onto the train, trying to fight their way up to the engine.



Whilst it would likely have more dramatic impact if it came at the end of a more developed story, the shootout on the train is the show-stopping sequence it was plainly intended as. It also marks an interesting moment in the history of the Western film, where it intersects with nascent signs of the modern action film emerging, in turning from a genre mostly powered by literal horsepower to action staged at speed and with an emphasis on chaotic danger and large-scale destruction, which makes it the one sequence in *How The West Was Won* that feels forward-looking. Nods to Buster Keaton's *The General* (1926) are played dead straight as cargo on the train like lumber lengths, a tractor, and a steam engine break loose and cause havoc for the men who have to dangle and dodge it, punctuated by some brilliant stunt work from dedicated performers pretending to fall dead off the top of the moving train. Lou turns the chaos to his own purpose as he shoots up ropes tying down the engine to force Gant out of cover: finally the tractor falls off with is caught by a dangling chain and dragged behind the train. Finally rear carriages detach from the forward and roll back down a gradient, and Zeb, hanging off the rear, manages to plug Gant before the train crashes off the rails and wreckage flies everywhere. Steven Spielberg would directly cite the sequence as a model for the desert chase in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), George Miller would evidently take much inspiration for the climactic chases of his *Mad Max* films, and echoes through all movies influenced by them.



The sight of an aging but still wry and lively Lilith finding a home with Zeb and his family sets the seal on the *How The West Was Won*'s generational story, with Hathaway sneaking in a last flourish of humour as Lilith sits down to distract Zeb's kids by teaching them card games, before arguing with them over ownership of "A Home in the Meadow" which Zeb learned from Eve, as the family roll out towards their new home via, inevitably, the forms of Monument Valley. The film is capped off in its full-length version by an appended epilogue utilising footage shot for the Cinerama-showcasing film *This Is Cinerama*, surveying works of modern American industry and engineering, from Boulder Dam and Lake Mead and

logging machinery at work, open-cut mines and vast wheat fields, to the freeways and skyscrapers of San Francisco, at length resolving on an incredible helicopter shot barrelling under the Golden Gate Bridge and out to sea. With Newman reiterating his theme but this time with soaring choral voices voicing cheesy lyrics, this all goes stratospherically over the top, whilst underlining its sense of imperial vigour in the won west with visions of capitalist-industrialist imprint on the land that's hard to exalt quite so freely from sixty years later, and indeed within only a few short years American culture was being reshaped by those more with Jethro Stuart's outlook. And yet the epilogue is also undeniably impressive and memorable, exalting in cinema at its largest possible scale capturing imagery redolent of a continental myth, and coherent as a conclusion to the story the film tells. And the film's faith that it can find something gobsmacking in the real world and not a CGI program now feels, well, radical.

Marlowe (2022)

this island rod



Raymond Chandler's hero Phil Marlowe is one of the lasting creations of twentieth century pop culture, a refined and idealised take on the private eye character as defined by Dashiell Hammett and others. I know I've been under the character's spell since my early teens. As far as most are concerned, the classical edition of Marlowe subsists still in a folkloric haze amidst chiaroscuro street lights, cigarette smoke, sultry dames, and miasmic corruption and menace, and was exemplified by early movies taking on the character including *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *The Big Sleep* (1946). But the character's afterlife has been long and varied. Paul Bogart's *Marlowe* (1969) uneasily updated the character for the Swinging '60s milieu, anticipating Robert Altman's more officially revisionist and oddball *The Long Goodbye* (1974), whilst Dick Richards' *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975) took some cues from *Chinatown* (1974) in blending the gritty and the melancholy with the more familiar, in-period mystique. The telemovie *Poodle Springs* (1997), based on a novel drawn in turn from an unfinished Chandler work, was a project blessed with some heavy-hitter talent – Bob Rafelson directed and Tom Stoppard wrote the script – but finished up oddly inert. The most striking recent takes on the Marlowe mythos have arguably been lampoons like *The Big Lebowski* (1997) and *The Nice Guys* (2016), as well as films like *Devil In A Blue Dress* (1995) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997), based on books strongly informed by the Chandler example.



In any event, a new *Marlowe* reunites writer-director Neil Jordan and star Liam Neeson, who last worked together on 1996's excellent biopic *Michael Collins*, and if the two had tackled Marlowe back in the day it might have counted as a major movie event. Today it's just streaming fodder. Rather than drawing on a Chandler novel, Jordan's take, which he coscripted with William Monahan, is based on a novel by Booker Prize-winning author John Banville, *The Black-Eyed Blonde* (the book's title is paid homage to in a poster for a fake movie glimpsed near the end; Banville wrote it under the pseudonym Benjamin Black), who joined the ranks of respectable litterateurs taking on popular properties for the sake of a little fun and profit, like Isabelle Allende with *Zorro* and Sebastian Faulks with *James Bond*. *Marlowe* posits itself as an early adventure in the private eye trade for Marlowe, despite being played with maximum too-old-for-this-shit hangdog charm by Neeson: the story unfolds in 1939, the year in which *The Big Sleep* was published, and Marlowe is portrayed as uneasy in the gumshoe role and still half-desirous of getting back his job with the police. Marlowe is approached at the outset by the compulsory beautiful woman of mystery, Clare Cavendish (Diane Kruger), who wants him to look into the apparent death of her lover, Nico Peterson (François Arnaud). His body was found with head crushed after being run over outside a palatial country club called the Corbata Club, "an absolute nest of entitled and connected tosspots." Nico worked as a prop supplier for movie productions, with, as Marlowe learns, sidelines in smuggling drugs from Mexico and pimping out his sister Lynn (Daniela Melchior).



Marlowe soon finds himself sinking into the regulation subgenre quicksand as he skirts byzantine rivalries and plottings. There's Clare herself, who has the classic arrangement with her playboy husband (Patrick Muldoon) not to intrude on each-others' amours, and an ongoing competition with her retired movie star mother, Dorothy Quincannon (Jessica Lange), that manifests in constant attempts to steal each-other's lovers. Said lovers include Nico and a plutocrat known only as The Ambassador (Mitchell Mullen), who's offered a little too blatantly as a blend of Joseph Kennedy and William Hearst, and could also number Marlowe himself if he was so inclined. Incline he does not, despite fierce attraction to Clare. His investigation uncovers much sin lurking behind flashy facades, including the Corbata Club, actually a high-class brothel run by Floyd Hanson (Danny Huston), who is competing with garrulous local drug kingpin Lou Hendricks (Alan Cumming) to locate one of Nico's dope shipments. And Nico himself, having faked his death, is still flitting about the outskirts of it all.



Marlowe turns out a very mixed bag of a movie, as uneven as anything Jordan's done in his now-venerable career, and one I kept changing my mind about from scene to scene. Jordan's long had a purposefully odd and deconstructionist bent when approaching genres he has affection for, expostulated most clearly with *The Company of Wolves* (1984) with its layered exploration of storytelling technique and atmosphere as well as underlying meaning. His debut film *Angel* (1984) and his breakthrough *Mona Lisa* (1986) were both strongly infused by a derivation of the Chandleresque style, balancing poetic romanticism and down-and-dirty realism. As a working filmmaker of note he's also often approached genre fare more directly, content to tease them about the edges. He's been down the retro-noir path before on the highly underrated *The Good Thief* (2002), and he plainly relishes the old-school, floridly hardboiled dialogue Chandler was so associated with: *Marlowe* is sprinkled with salty wisecracks which, when they work, do a lot to keep the film lively ("They're not breaking any laws," Marlowe notes to Dorothy when they both spy on Clare apparently shacking up with The Ambassador; "Except the laws of attraction," Dorothy ripostes). But Jordan and Monahan's script also occasionally trips over itself into trying to approximate the baroque curlicues of the brand, like Clare's repeated comments that she prefers her last name as a first.

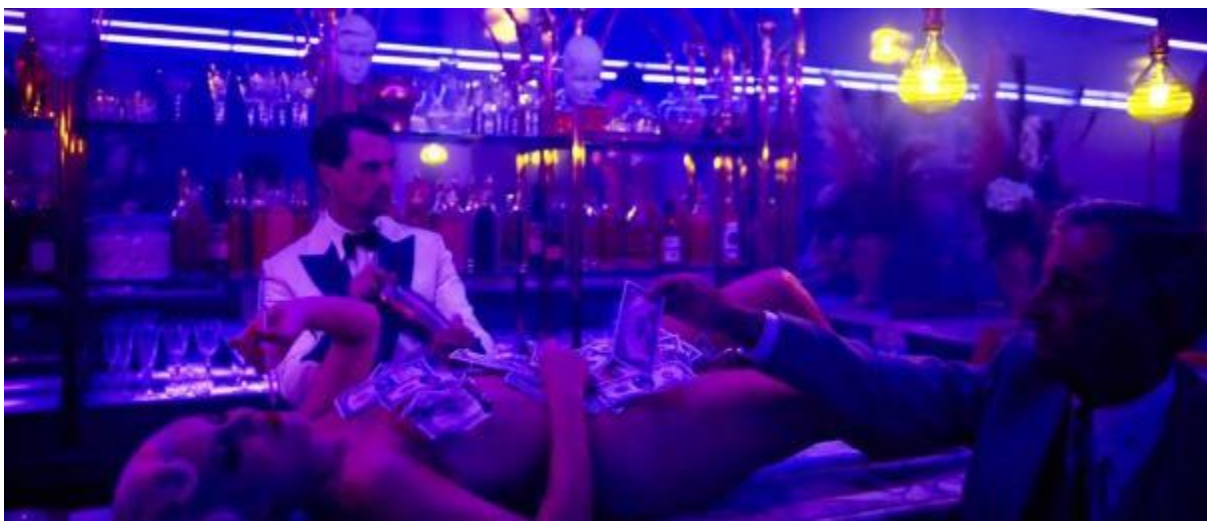


More fundamentally, *Marlowe* never quite coheres as a story, rather instead providing a string of Chandleresque clichés resituated amidst a now well-worn setting of modern, revisionist flourishes: the foul language is more overt, ditto the sexuality, the portrayal of the demimonde flipside to high imperial California and its machines of power less euphemistic. The moment Kruger’s Clare appears we know well she’s going to be the bad news dame. Most awkwardly, there turns out to be two completely different troves at stake in the plot, one the lost drug shipment, the other a dirt dossier Nico compiled which can offer awesome leverage over The Ambassador, who once bought a movie studio, Pacific Pictures, purely as a workplace for Dorothy. This last element of the plot isn’t even mentioned until the climactic scenes. Chandler’s infamous attitude to plotting was to have someone with a gun show up when things were getting dull, but his messiness had an organic quality; Jordan’s *Marlowe* on the other hand just feels confused and beset by sequences that happen because convention demands them, like Marlowe getting knocked out when trying to save Lynn from Hanson’s slimy heavies.



Another big problem here, one that’s quite obvious but also a little delicate to note is that, well, everyone in it is too goddamn old. Marlowe is indeed supposed to be weathered and world-weary, and the script, as per the modern fashion of emphasising character backstory, reminds us often that Marlowe is a World War I veteran. But he must also be young enough to still be a believable neon-lit knight errant and a player in the games of lust and greed he constantly skirts: it must be his choice, rather than incidental, that he avoids

being succumbing to the worlds he explores and the temptations he encounters on the way. Robert Mitchum got away with playing Marlowe at 58 in *Farewell, My Lovely* because, well, he was Robert Mitchum, and even there it felt a little silly seeing him make out with Charlotte Rampling. Neeson, whilst still seeming fit and strong and pulling off the few moments of physical violence his Marlowe is called upon to dish out with all the aplomb we've become used to seeing his post-*Taken* (2008) work, nonetheless is finally starting to look a bit haggard, inhabiting a tired and waning protagonist, borderline-bored with the usual roundelay of affairs and conspiracies. It's always good to see Lange, but she's more than a little unlikely playing a matinee idol who bowed out on top: at her age she must have been a coquettish star around 1910. Neeson and Kruger work up no chemistry. A Phil Marlowe story can be bent around a bit but can't survive all its simmering sexiness being diluted, and here when Marlowe sighs that he won't make a play for Clare because he's twice her age, it's plain he really feels it. *Marlowe* sees Jordan trying to resist any kind of nostalgic urge in tackling such hallowed material, but can't help but render the character an avatar for an aging, sardonic artist-observer in a clapped-out town that mostly exists to make hollow fantasias and service real, nagging, often iniquitous appetites.



One amusing scene sees the gumshoe interviewing Amanda Toxteth (Seána Kerslake), an actress who was also one of Nico's girlfriends, whilst she still wears gory makeup for a bullet hole through the eye for the scene she's shooting. This makes for an amusing vignette in mirroring of a world of real violence with the fake one Hollywood produces. In thinking about it, though, I felt Jordan pays rather too pointed a homage to the wound Faye Dunaway's character takes in *Chinatown*. That film that has, for better or worse, entirely inflected this subgenre ever since. Jordan also grazes anachronism in portraying his fictional filmmakers as daring a level of gore that would have got nowhere near 1930s censors. Still, Neeson interacts well with Ian Hart and Colm Meaney as friendly cops Joe Green and Bernie Ohls, who aid Marlowe in stages of the investigation, with Cumming's garrulous gentleman gangster Hendricks, and with Huston, who expertly plays superficial slickness coating a ruthless character. Huston's presence also provides a firm link through his father to the heyday of noir. Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje is also very good as Cedric, Hendricks' canny, decent chauffeur and bodyguard. Marlowe eventually makes alliance with Cedric to fight their way out of a nasty jam. Jordan is still a real filmmaker, too, with his old eye still apparent in flashes throughout. His penchant for gaudy, quasi-dreamlike colour effects in his mise-en-scene still manifests, particularly when Marlowe penetrates the Cabana Club in full sin city mode, awash with vivid blues, golds, and reds as scenes of infernal decadence and brutality are played out.



The most arresting moment comes when Marlowe learns about Lynn's violent murder after he failed to rescue her from Ohls as the two men talk in a tavern. Jordan slowly moves the camera around Marlowe as ambient sound drops out and is replaced with a droning choir, Neeson's affect barely shifting and yet some deep shock of existential numbness seeming to soak through his entire body. This numbness quickly converts to a sense of vengeful purpose as Marlowe agrees to be sent into the Cabana by the cops to deal out some extracurricular justice. Marlowe fakes being knocked out by a Mickey Finn Hanson tries to serve him, and is dumped in a storage room where Cedric is shackled whilst Hanson tries to torture the dope's whereabouts out of Hendricks, setting the scene for Cedric to deal out some payback of his own with a Tommy gun. This portion of the movie is all good, but sadly the movie limps on in search for a subsequent, proper end for the plot, as Clare confronts the recalcitrant Nico and uses her leverage to nab herself a powerful position at Pacific Pictures. There's a clumsy superfluity to some of this, as well as a tatty thematic cynicism that reminded me a little of Steven Soderbergh's *The Good German* (2006), another film that tried to give a classic movie genre a new coat of modernised touches, unaware of how those touches have become in themselves new clichés. Yes, *Marlowe* is a decent enough viewing, even a superior one, but I'd kill to see someone tackle Marlowe with a refreshed sense of the feral power mixed with strange, seedy poetry found in the best Chandler novels.

Easy Rider (1969)

film freedonia



Director: Dennis Hopper

Screenwriters: Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Terry Southern

A few years ago, I went to a revival screening of *Easy Rider* in a town that's something of a magnet for alt-culture people. I sat encamped literally and figuratively between two other generations, with some aging former hippies a row behind me, reminiscing with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment, and a troupe of young people – late teens, early twenties – settled a few rows down, who had clearly not seen the film before and were there to bone up in their bohemian catechisms. The film's infamous climax still had its effect: several members of the young troupe were left blubbering and clinging to each-other. Not bad for a movie often written off with that dread phrase, "time capsule." What's most fascinating about *Easy Rider* is that it continues to evolve: every time I've watched it it's felt like a different movie. With my most recent viewing it felt not just still vital but disquieting, even shocking, in how relevant it felt. In its cumulatively devastating wrestle not just with general and pervasive worries of the modern world, but with specifically American symptoms of that worry, particularly gun violence. And a more elusive, existential dagnosis, a background hum of anxiety that's only grown louder in the last few years. The loss of the pioneer spirit, so long celebrated in the culture, now like a narcotic addiction deadly to kick, the sense of the USA as a place on the move breaking down and squelching through the mud of Vietnam. Call it Hopper's *How The West Was Lost*.



Easy Rider owed much of its genesis to beloved low-budget impresario Roger Corman, who had, as the exploitation film market evolved in the 1960s and the youth audience's tastes grew more rowdier along with the '60s zeitgeist, set out to please them with films about various precincts of the culture like the biker movie *The Wild Angels* (1966) and the LSD experimentation flick *The Trip* (1967). Both of those films starred Peter Fonda, son of Hollywood legend Henry and brother of fellow rising star Jane. *The Trip* also sported a small supporting performance from Dennis Hopper, and was written by Corman's star discovery and acting protégé Jack Nicholson. American International Pictures, the low-rent but high-energy exploitation film studio Corman had helped make into a force, also made "hippiesploitation" films like Richard Rush's *Psych-Out* (1967). Those films were interesting and popular with the kinds of young folk rushing to the countercultural scene, but also held in not-so-faintly sarcastic amusement by many of them, as movies that strained to encompass an experience based around rejecting establishment entertainment factories run by old people trying to get their heads around the scene and treading fine censorship lines.



Easy Rider proved a key moment in the changeover to a new generation of filmmakers now often called the New Hollywood, following *Bonnie & Clyde* and *The Graduate* (both 1967) but excelling both in reaping credibility as a work of generational, artisanal authenticity. Hopper and Fonda were, despite their flirtations with mainstream stardom, leading figures in Hollywood's rising bohemian scene and drug culture. Few expected much better of the notoriously combative and wilful Hopper, who had already torpedoed his Hollywood acting career once and was still on a comeback trail, but Fonda was seen as foiling a promising career in becoming "a bit of a dropout." Somewhere out on the fringe of Hollywood legend Hopper and Fonda decided, after their experiences on those Corman films, to make a movie that would nail down a more immediate and personal piece of expression contending the ructions gripping America at large and the various new and old concepts of society it contained. Hopper, with his experience in photography and general livewire energy, would direct, and for a script Fonda approached Terry Southern, then a very popular and famous writer for his erotically-tinged and satirical novels and co-writing *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) with Stanley Kubrick. The film also presented a translation-cum-riposte to *On The Road*, Jack Kerouac's novel which had popularised the "Beat" movement as the first post-war manifestation of a new bohemian culture, but where Kerouac and the other Beats had been charged with electric positivity Hopper confronted a national mood rapidly turning sour and balkanized.



After failing to get Corman and AIP to back them, nervous as they were about Hopper directing a movie, Fonda obtained a roughly \$400,000 budget from Columbia Pictures, but also paid for elements of the production out of his own pocket. That Fonda sought out Southern indicated the larger aim of the project, which was to create a kind of contemporary take on classic texts about wandering seekers like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Voltaire's *Candide*, the latter of which Southern had already burlesqued as his novel *Candy*. The film's shoot was messy and contentious, starting with writing credits: Hopper later claimed he had to write most of the movie when Fonda and Southern were taking too long, Southern said the two actors suddenly wanted credit when it was clear the movie would be a hit, and Fonda's contributions to making the film were overshadowed by Hopper, whose difficult behaviour on set was often trying, setting the scene for his brilliant meltdown with *The Last Movie* (1971). Rip Torn, hired to play the supporting role of George Hanson in part thanks to his friend Southern, got into a fracas with Hopper that would prove the subject of litigation decades later, and in more immediate consequence Torn was sacked. Nicholson was swiftly hired to take over and brought onto the shoot several weeks in. The initial intent of picking up crewmembers along the route of the shoot saw Hopper constantly struggling to keep control of the set, and after Hopper got into a fistfight with a camera operator he and Fonda finally hired a professional crew. By the end of production all of the customised bikes Fonda and Hopper had rode in the film had been stolen.



Despite all that, *Easy Rider* proved an instant *cause celebre* upon release, capturing the Camera d'Or at Cannes and becoming a runaway hit with levels of profitability starkly contrasting the weak returns for many a big-budget bomb a faltering and sclerotic Hollywood was putting out at the same time, and set the big studios to eagerly producing imitations. Of course, that didn't last, any longer than the hippie-era dream did. For all the film's repute as a specific epochal touchstone, it would only require a few revisions and a shift of hipster lingo to seem a product of today's independent film scene. Part of that's because Hopper and Fonda wisely didn't make a movie about hippies. Certainly both of their characters in the film, carefully contrived to be iconic, are harassed and repelled for their long hair and nonconformist ethos, but they are finally as alienated from the actual emissaries of the counterculture they encounter as they are from the thuggish hicks who dog the last legs of their journey. Whilst the communes and love-ins might have fallen by the wayside, the world is still full of people like the protagonists of *Easy Rider*.



Easy Rider only drops hints about who Billy (Hopper) and Wyatt, aka Captain America (Fonda) are and what they do: Billy declares to some cops who jail them, “We’re headliners, baby – we’ve played every fair in this part of the country!”, suggesting they’re musicians or possibly professional motorcycle stunt riders: it was made clear in Hopper’s early, much longer edit the latter is the case. In the film’s opening moments, however, they’re more exactly portrayed as entrepreneurial drug dealers, buying a wad of cocaine from a Mexican dealer named Jesus (Antonio Mendoza) in a junkyard. The two men merrily sample the goods and take it to Los Angeles, where they sell it on to a bigwig in a Rolls Royce near the airport, played, in a touch of alarming humour, by the record producer and future murderer Phil Spector, glimpsed snorting up white powder and giving the nod to his chauffeur to pay the men with a satchel full of cash: origin myth for the official fuel of the New Hollywood scene. The two sellers this time demur from sharing in the coke with their client, who pays up before sliding on leather gloves, whilst airplanes roar overhead, rendering the exchange a peculiar mime act. Hopper semi-ironically cues up the band Steppenwolf’s song “The Pusher” on the soundtrack, with its cool, clicking opening guitar lick and lyrics damning “the pusher man,” straddling the line between outlaw cool and seediness, espousal and disavowal. The two pals drive into the California desert in their battered, anonymous pick-up truck and, in the privacy of a garage where they keep their two, flashy, customised Harley-Davidson motorcycles, they prepare for their imminent journey.



Hopper's evident influences quickly nod to Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* and *Kustom Kar Kommandos* as he lovingly surveys the choppers, gleaming chrome forms clashing with jaunty painted colours decorating the gas tanks. Wyatt carefully bundles up the cash in a tube he then secrets in his gas tank, which has the American flag painted on it. An ingenious detail that expresses the street-smarts of the heroes in protecting their hard-won fortune, whilst also doubling as a sly symbol, cash the literal fuel of escape and the septic heart of the American dream. Hopper continues to eye the choppers out in the sun, machines of personal deliverance ironically constructed through a zenith of industrial art, a perfect fusion of form and function, ambition and truth. The two men also seem to cast off their other identity, the one that did the drug deal, as Wyatt dresses up in his "Captain America" livery, knight for a new age, with Billy his hairy, buckskin-clad, more primitive companion. The nested points of pop culture reference nod to both the beloved comic book hero Captain America whilst also signalling it's only the latest incarnation of the classic American hero, as Wyatt and Billy recall the gunslinger heroes of the Wild West and a million Westerns, heading out to backtrack through the westward colonising sprawl and catch up how things are going. As a final gesture of repudiation, Wyatt, after checking his wristwatch after being asked the time by Billy, slips the watch off, gives it one last glare, and drops it by the roadside. Beginning a motif that pervades the film, Hopper splinters time in this moment with cinema tricks – quick edits and a small but disorientating outward zoom. The two men roar off, engines fading as they burrow into the landscape.



The opening credits finally roll, with another Steppenwolf song blaring, this time, with more totemic impact: “Born To Be Wild” accompanies the two riders as they own the road and incarnate a generational fantasy, a unit of sound and vision easily quotable in other movies and TV commercials over the next few decades. The high of pure open road freedom lasts exactly as long as the credits, at the end of which the riders try to get a room at a remote hotel for the night but find the owner ignores them, turning on the No Vacancy sign. The two men camp out, and the nominal goal of their expedition emerges: the two men are heading for Mardi Gras in New Orleans, hoping to indulge hedonistic splendours. Billy’s signature nervous energy contrasts Wyatt’s removed and meditative aspect, which he describes “just gettin’ my thing together,” whilst Billy jokes about “fightin’ cowboys and Indians on every side,” tipping a hat immediately to the underlying thesis informing the character names and also allowing the characters some hip distance from the association. Next morning Wyatt pads around the patch of desolation where they camped, with abandoned houses and shacks and scattered debris, signs of one outpost of the spread of America that didn’t quite take. Such signs fascinated Wyatt, as if a crucial part of getting his thing together is making himself muse on such scenes and feeling out the ghosts of the land. One shot wistfully scans a pioneer shack with a modern electricity tower in the background with a sense of the dizzying progress from one to the other.



This kind of scene quickly became a bit of an Americana cliché in indie films (in Antonioni's late-to-the-party *Zabriskie Point*, 1970, for instance, and also still often evoked, for instance in Aaron Morehead and Justin Benson's films). Still it retains a special, spectral quality here, in large part thanks to Hopper's odd, stuttering editing, linking scenes with a signature effect that's neither dissolve nor straight cut but instead flashes between shots into staccato fragments, setting the sense of cinematic time in flux and forcing the viewer to share the disorientated viewpoint of the characters. A major aspect of *Easy Rider's* impact in its time and now, very apparent in this interlude, was Laszlo Kovacs' cinematography. Kovacs, born in Hungary, had become friends with fellow cinematography great Vilmos Zsigmond. The two former film students had filmed secret footage of the doomed Hungarian revolt against Soviet hegemony in 1956. They hiked out of the country but couldn't find any interest in their smuggled footage for years, and after some time working manual labour jobs both eventually started getting work on low-budget films. Both men worked on infamous poverty row auteur Ray Dennis Steckler's *The Incredibly Strange Zombies Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (1966), and the surprisingly good look of that film led to Kovacs getting hired by the likes of Richard Rush on *Psych-Out* and Peter Bogdanovich for his *Targets* (1968). On those two films he mooted the visual lexicon that became a pillar of the New Hollywood look, at once gritty and grainy but also lustrous, charged with both artistry and immediacy.



Kovacs might well have felt specially plugged into what *Easy Rider* set out to do as it mirrored his own experience to a certain extent, as an exile drawn to worship the American landscape in images. Long passages of *Easy Rider* simply and wisely allow Kovacs' images to speak for themselves. At times they drink in the mountains and plains and roads with the expansive awe and grace of David Lean but constantly alternated with patches of quasi-abstraction as if recreating modernist paintings photographically, and vigorous use of zoom lensing that mimics documentary filmmaking language and using lens flare effects to help create a sun-washed atmosphere. When the bikers camp out in John Ford's favourite amphitheatre of Monument Valley, Kovacs' camera swings around in a long, dreamy arc, surveying the bluffs and mesas burned to grainy masses against a simmering twilight. Most of the film was shot with purely natural light, intensifying the rugged poetry. The geometrical struts of steel bridges, the high crags and snow caps of mountain ranges, surveys of pueblos and factories, shipping terminals and tumbledown shacks – the landscape in *Easy Rider* is given rare contemplation as a more than just pictorial interest but a domain of wonderment.



In the first of the film's on-the-road vignettes, Billy and Wyatt stop at a ranch in Arizona. They ask the rancher (Warren Finnerty) and his hand, as they're busy shoeing a horse, if they can repair a flat on Wyatt's chopper. The rancher generously lets them use a shed and their tools, and extends his hospitality to inviting them to lunch. The two guests eat with the rancher's wife (Tita Colorado) and their small army of children, whose presence the farmer attributes to his Catholic wife, and Billy upon request bashfully takes off his hat as the family say grace. This interlude presents Billy and Wyatt ironically with something very close to what they're seeking virtually, or at least something worth finding, as soon as they set out, in a touch plainly inspired by *Candide*, in which the wandering heroes stumbled upon El Dorado early in their travails and found the demi-paradise where the locals had contempt for the plentiful riches around them, but the heroes were themselves doomed to move on through the world. Lindsay Anderson's *O Lucky Man!* (1971) would offer a similar vignette when its seeker-exile hero stumbles into a William Blake-esque vision of an English rural idyll. The kind of perfection is undeniable but also perhaps useless to men like Billy and Wyatt. The rancher's so out of touch he doesn't know the acronym L.A., and once it's explained notes, "What I was a young man I headed out for California...but...well, you know how it is." Wyatt nonetheless congratulates the farmer, recognising the worth of what he has: "It's not every man who can live off the land, you know? You do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud."



This is immediately contrasted with a commune full of dropouts urgently trying to reverse-engineer themselves into the same breed of propagating and effectual being. The bikers encounter a hitchhiker, credited as the Stranger on the Road (Luke Askew), who proves to be a member of this commune, and thanks them by extending their own limited hospitality. The Stranger, one of the unofficial leaders of the commune, seems a very interior and spiky personality on the road, speaking in gnomic stoner riddles and chiding the bikers for their obliviousness when they camp for the night in a ruined pueblo near Monument Valley (“You’re right on top of them – the people this place belongs to are buried right under you... You could be a trifle polite.”). The Stranger nonetheless pays for their petrol, filling Wyatt’s gas tank much to Billy’s fretfulness, and once they arrive at the commune the Stranger shows them the brace of lanky, famished young would-be dropouts, all city kids, seeding the earth by hand, a shambolic but necessary step in trying to get the commune self-sufficient.



The commune was based on the New Buffalo commune outside Taos, New Mexico (the filmmakers couldn't get permission to shoot there, and instead recreated it in Malibu), and the bikers and their charge are glimpsed riding past the famous pueblo structure in Taos on the way there. The commune itself is an ultimate expression of the 1960s counterculture moment but of course also an idea with deep roots in American life, like the Transcendentalist communities of the 1800s, as well as the less self-conscious project of untold numbers of colonial settlers. The scenes in the commune are the most dated in *Easy Rider* but also encompass such a time and place with anthropological zest, blending yearning sympathy and more than a little scepticism. Hopper notes the incidental sexism ingrained in the set-up as the women work in the kitchen whilst the young men try to work the fields, but also the louche, non-possessive approach to sexuality. Hopper populates the place with a cross-section of scenesters, from men dressed as swamis to a band of improv theatre actors (referring to themselves as "Gorilla Theatre") in guises like Victorian stage villain and carnival row Cleopatra, and a skinny, blissed-out hippie Jesus named Jack (Robert Walker Jr) who leads them in a group prayer and improvises sinuous, incantatory, yogic dance moves that would be recreated by Martin Sheen in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Wyatt explores the commune building, one part old Celtic roundhouse, one part nativity barn, with plastic-sheeted skylight for Wyatt to resume his sun worship.



Billy becomes increasingly jittery in such surrounds, particularly when the Stranger wards him off from a confab of the communards by implying he might be a narc, and soon Billy wants to split. Wyatt, more at ease, reminds him that they've been eating some of the commune's limited resources, and feels this obliges them to do a favour for comely communards Lisa (Luana Anders) and Sarah (Sabrina Scharf). These two liberated lasses dig the two hot strangers and draw them out not for a chore but for an interlude of lyrical play, skinny dipping with them in the flooded cellar of a riverside building in a scene that comes closest out of the any in the film to offering familiar, what's-marked-on-the-tin celebration of life on the road. Hopper however makes clever use of The Byrds "Wasn't Born To Follow" in these scenes, with its alternations between lightly skipping guitar picking and lyrical paeans to romping in nature, and passages dipping into heavily produced, spacy-sounding throbbing, as if the bad trip is trying to break out, so even at the film's most relaxed and lyrical there's a sense of strangeness persisting: Wyatt has to be coaxed into full engaging with the play, and even then begins sinking back into his musing state. Hopper including Anders in the film was a nice homage to them working together on Curtis Harrington's 1961 film *Night Tide*, a movie that broke Hopper's film acting exile. The commune inhabitants and their guests gather in a circle to offer a prayer of success for the crop they've planted, led by Jack the hirsute freak-saint. Hopper has the camera pivot around their silent and expectant faces as he did with the rancher's children, finding much the same mixture of naiveté, frustration, and inward-drifting boding, until Jack begins speaking, with his benediction concluding, "Thank you for a place to make a stand."



The disparity between Wyatt's contemplative persona, appraising what he sees with a generous and optimistic eye, and Billy's fidgety, nervous, livewire energy and fixation on fulfilling his appetites, reflect distilled and purposefully exaggerated versions of Fonda and Hopper themselves. Billy's childlike streak is brought out as he plays with the commune kids. Wyatt praises the farmer, decides of the commune dweller they encounter that "They'll make it," and delivers the film's final, famous epitaph with the measured meaning of a man who finds for all his efforts just cannot escape from his own company. Fonda's inhabitation of the film anticipates where his own directorial efforts would drift on *The Hired Hand* (1971) and *Idaho Transfer* (1973), more overtly concerned with the permeable and insubstantial nature of character and fracturing of time, whilst Hopper would also more ostentatiously fragment linearity on *The Last Movie* but would also sustain his sardonic edge of social commentary and zeitgeist reflection in that film and his follow-ups *Out Of The Blue* (1980) and *Colors* (1988). The sense of preordained failure upon Wyatt and Billy's excursion is underlined when, near the end of the film, Wyatt has a flash vision of the fate before them. As if seeking out some chance to go deeper and so come back out further, Billy accepts from the Stranger a tab of LSD which the Stranger recommends he wait for the ideal time and place to take.



The two bikers move on, but quickly find themselves thrown in a small town police lock-up after they accidentally ride into the midst of a parade and get in on the act. They find aid in an unlikely place, that is, sharing their cell: George Hanson, a sometime ACLU lawyer and semi-pro drunkard, awakens from one sleeping off one of benders, setting off Billy's aggression with his bumbling, but easing his way through shows of wry, drawling charisma and conciliation with both his fellow prisoners and the duty cop who brings him a cup of coffee and an aspirin. George warns them about the hair-clipping tendency of the local cops: "They're tryin'a make everybody look like Yul Brynner." When Billy asks if he can get them out of the clink, George answers, "I imagine that I can if you haven't killed anybody – 'least nobody white." True to his word, George succeeds, handling their release with practised bonhomie. Taking his first morning swig of the hair of the dog with a toast to "Old D.H. Lawrence!", George performs a ritual like a cold engine turning over with the first shock of liquor in his tongue, punctuated by a random phrase ("Indians!"... "Firefly!"), an act a little reminiscent of "Nick Va-Va-Voom" in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) but apparently inspired by a mechanic working on the film bikes. When told where the bikers are heading, George muses on how he's often started off for Mardi Gras but never got further than the state line, and brandishes a card given to him by the Governor of Louisiana, advertising a brothel in New Orleans called Madame Tinkertoy's House of Blue Lights: "Now this is supposed to be the finest whorehouse in the South. These ain't no pork chops, these are US prime."



Nicholson's performance as Hanson immediately paved the way for him becoming a mainstream star, playing a vivid character role that's also a perfect springboard to show star quality, as a complimentary but also antithetical personality to the two leads. George like them is a substance abuser, moreover a heavy, self-destructive one, but his drug of choice is legal and socially acceptable, and it fuels his sociable and charming streak: George seems like the kind of guy who's a hell of a lot of fun to be around at least until his liver packs it in. George contains aspects of Wyatt's thoughtfulness and Billy's rowdiness and gifted with articulateness all his own, musing on the meaning of the constantly encountered hostility the bikers encounter constantly. It's easy to assume George is something of a self-portrait from Southern injected into the movie, as a perma-sozzled Texan wag both attracted to but also fatefully alien to the counterculture, translating the more allusive intent of Hopper and Fonda into something the viewer can readily digest. It's George who spells out the uneasy nature of modern freedom in America, the two bikers embodying it and noting it's easy to be jealous when "You're bought and sold on the marketplace." When George admits he wishes he was going with the bikers, Wyatt asks if he has a helmet, to which George slyly replies he does: cut to the bikers roaring down the highway, now with George riding with Wyatt, wearing his old high school football helmet. The three men have a blast as George enjoys his first motorcycle ride, his childlike gestures inspiring Billy to perform tricks on his bike, and waving to the people they pass.



George is also the star of the film's one real lengthy dialogue scene and moment of comic bravura. As they camp out for the night, Wyatt offers him a joint, which George has also never done before, assuming at first it's a normal cigarette. George is uncertain at first, reciting the much-mocked square line that it leads to harder stuff, and when he does take his first few puffs doubts it's doing anything to him. Nonetheless, after Billy reports seeing an object in the sky like a satellite grazing the atmosphere, George declares it's probably a UFO, explaining that's seen them before, and launches into an explanation of how Venusians have been infiltrating human society for years, aiming to help it evolve into a state like theirs, devoid of "antiquated systems." "How's your joint, George?" Wyatt asks when he's finally done. The basic gag of the neophyte dope smoker falling under its influence without realising is good, but more interesting and substantial is the way the scene extends the driving notion that the psyche of the average, ordinary person is a deeply weird place filled with startling assumptions and only needs a little pharmaceutical coaxing to reveal. George's rant presages the oncoming New Age crazes of the 1970s and on, retreating from open confrontation with the modern world's hard borders into fantasias of alternate realities and a search for new incarnations of old spiritual urges, of which UFOs would be a singular example. And yet also offers a bizarre yet on-point brand of social satire as George notes that human beings with their social hierarchies and "leaders upon whom we rely for the release of this information" would be completely inimical to the Venusians because "each man is a leader." In this regard *Easy Rider* becomes a kind of science fiction film.



Hopper's initial edit of *Easy Rider* was very long, and at the request of executive Burt Schneider Henry Jaglom, a young filmmaker and future cult director in his own right, was brought in to reedit the film, much to Hopper's initial aggravation, and he later commented that others, including Nicholson and Bob Rafelson, also made editing contributions. To Jaglom's credit, he seems to have understood the movie Hopper wanted to make, excising elements more like other films of the type, including an early scene of Wyatt and Billy outrunning cops when bringing their drug haul over the border from Mexico, and instead lingering on the journey, creating an exemplar of a mode of picaresque storytelling soon dubbed the road movie. Whilst hardly the first road movie made (Francis Ford Coppola had, for instance, released his *The Rain People* a year earlier), *Easy Rider* nonetheless created a craze for the subgenre over the next few years, with such movies like the also Fonda-starring *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry* (1974), Richard C. Sarafian's *Vanishing Point* (1971), and Michael Cimino's *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974), as well as gentler variants like *Paper Moon* (1974), and Monte Hellman's even more reticent and allusive take *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971). Meanwhile it wielded immediate sway over filmmakers like Rafelson himself and Terrence Malick, and even David Lynch likely took some inspiration from the trip scene for the churning dreamworld industrialism of *Eraserhead* (1977) and *The Elephant Man* (1980). *Easy Rider's* impact on the independent American film scene can barely be overstated, either, still reverberating in the films of Kelly Reichardt, David Lowery, Chloe Zhao, Debra Granik, Jeremy Saulnier, and Nia DaCosta.



The first of the film's two wrenching pivots of tragedy is set up when the trio roll into a small Southern town and go into a diner. There they find themselves objects of fervent fascination from some girls, but also of aggressive and contemptuous appraisal by some men, including the local sheriff. To get the desired effect out of the regional men he had hired for the scene, Hopper told them these longhair blow-ins were paedophiles and murderers. The palpable sense of exposure and imminent violence in the scene and indeed the film's last third helped birth another subgenre over the next few years, particularly with the release of *Deliverance* (1972), as murderous and depraved rednecks would become a favourite movie monster. Hopper, Fonda, and Southern were channelling the very real rough treatment often turned on hippies in such locales but also reflected the uneasy spectacle and earned infamy of the previous decade a more of racial strife. The irony of it all, as George muses, is that it reflects, in a country so devoted to the idea of freedom, how the actual exercise of it deeply offends and frustrates some. Also inferred here is Hopper's mediation on the uneasy relationship between the actual America and its mythologies, particularly the cinematic kind, a theme he would become more explicit in expressing in *The Last Movie*.



One sharp irony for Hopper was that his other acting role of 1969 was in Hathaway's *True Grit* (1969), a film that gained John Wayne an Oscar at last and neatly summarised that American mythos in its most classical form, the Western film. In an America weaned on tales of expansion and progress, of enterprise and self-reliance, of gun-wielding heroes bringing order to the wilderness, to encounter any kind of stymie in terms of class, milieu, and education is to be cheated, a loss which cannot be expressed without questioning the holy national mythos, and so must be turned on anyone trying to move on. *Easy Rider* diagnoses a great American ill, the pain of the loss of the pioneer spirit and its attendant ideals and illusions. Without heroic roles to play, however distantly, when immersed in such a mythos, people starve spiritually; guns meant to take out varmints instead are itchily trained on anything that offends, that gives testimony to one's actual impotence. The further east they travel, the more Billy and Wyatt contend with the losers of history, the places left behind in the great westward sprawl and the great northern victory, experiencing devolution. "This used to be a helluva good country," George avows sadly, although of course such nostalgia for the old weird America comes laced with ironies: not so much if you were Black or Native American, but then they were part of the same ecstatic flux too. Billy and Wyatt try to skip the problem through their own variety of alternative capitalism, and their original sin is not so much purveying illegal narcotics than of imagining that in some way could excuse them from dealing with the world.



It's in engaging with this theme that *Easy Rider* becomes something near-unique, leading to its disturbing final scenes that see the thesis crystallised in increasingly dark fashion. Camping out for the last time in their journey to New Orleans, George says his piece about the problems of freedom. After the men fall asleep and their fire burns down, a number of men, likely many of the same ones from the diner, sneak up on the camp and begin beating the sleeping men with bats and branches. Billy manages to wrestle out his knife and slash out whilst screaming wildly, sending the attackers scurrying away, but he finds Wyatt dazed and bloodied and George dead, killed seemingly whilst still dead asleep, saved the pain of waking to the cruellest disillusion. Once Wyatt recovers they bundle George up in his blanket and search through his belongings, which prove scant. In the most blunt and bravura of his jump-cuts, Hopper leaps Billy and Wyatt eating in a swank New Orleans restaurant the next day, still wearing the bruises of their beating: as they eat, Billy talks Wyatt into going to Madame Tinkertoy's as George wanted. The surreal segue from the scene of death to the place of fine dining elides just what the two bikers did about George's death: did they report it to the cops, and take the chance of having it pinned on them, or did they leave him by the road?



Madame Tinkertoy's, when Billy and Wyatt arrive there, proves to be a plush but tacky space replete with kitschy religious décor, fake baroque trimmings, and other trappings of an Old World inheritance, including paintings of obscure personages of another age. Many of the "US prime" stable of prostitutes are aging women with too much makeup on, others are plainly bored and zoned out, whilst others ply desperate attempts to be with-it, like one of the hookers shimmying on a table-top. Billy tries to live up to his kid-in-a-candy-store fantasies as he gets boozy and clingy with some of the women. Wyatt turns evermore inward and melancholy, surveying the fake religious trappings and painted philosophical missives on the walls and musing on Voltaire's maxim, "If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him." Billy and Wyatt are stashed in an antechamber to await their selected partners for the night. The Madam (Lea Marmer) ushers in Karen (Karen Black) and Mary (Toni Basil), two attractive young women who nonetheless suggest doppelgangers of Lisa and Sarah, those women's free-and-easy vivacity exchanged for blowsy working sexiness. "Do you mind if I take the tall one?" Billy asks his pal. Wyatt, at a loss for what to do, eventually suggests they all head outside to experience Mardi Gras. They wander amidst the contrived spectacle and controlled weirdness of the holiday, the foursome desperately trying to alchemise their random association into some semblance of fun and connection and orgiastic flux.



At last they take refuge in the Basin Street Cemetery with its famous above-ground sepulchres, and there Wyatt has an inspiration, breaking out the acid tab the Stranger gave him and sharing between the four of them with the advice, "Just shut up and take it." But the acid proves bad, and the foursome are stricken with an array of violently alternating states amidst the graves. The graveyard trip is one of my favourite scenes in cinema, as the rhythmic thump of a steam drill operating nearby is transformed into a doom-laden toll and pumping heartbeat of a monster whilst the bad trip is illustrated in a free-fall extravaganza of fisheye and zoom lensing, flash cuts and handheld shots, images ghostly and washed-out alternating with patches of damaged, colour-blotched film. Wyatt and Mary jam themselves between sepulchres, Mary stripping off and sprawling in the rain like a sylph whilst Wyatt arranges himself into a blank pop-art placard, the American flag on his jacket turned as a frightened placard; Karen moans about having a child and Billy excitedly caresses her thighs and bangs her over a tombstone. The technique in this scene owes much to experimental filmmakers, but achieves its own fresh, fascinating power in a new context, communicating the depth of a squall of interior feeling in a system of images that manage to avoid the by-then-already familiar clichés of on-screen trippiness and enter in a state remote, surreal, recessive, punctuated by flashes of intense and inchoate emotion, from Karen wailing to Wyatt clinging to a statue and experiencing a powerful wave of sorrow mingled with anger for his mother – emotions which came from Fonda himself in musing on his own late mother.



Watching this scene now reminds me that perhaps I've met more young women these days than young men on voyages like Wyatt and Billy – young men today find it far too easy to slip back into the amniotic illusions of gaming, for instance. Again, Hopper leaves the scene pointedly unresolved in any traditional sense, the maelstrom of emotion and disorientation suddenly left behind like the city, as Wyatt and Billy return to the road, this time more with the look of men fleeing than moving towards something. A great part of *Easy Rider's* impact then and now, although I think has sometimes overstated, comes from the mostly pitch-perfect use of pop music on the soundtrack, including the Steppenwolf and Byrds songs mentioned and also pointed use of Jimi Hendrix's troubled individualist anthem "If 6 Was 9," The Band's elegy to pay-it-forward fellowship "The Weight," and the Electric Prunes' eerie "Kyrie Elieson" used as an ironically eerie and spiritual counterpoint to the shots in the restaurant just after George's death. Finally, as Wyatt and Billy flee up along the levees of the Mississippi, Hopper uses Roger McGuinn's cover of Bob Dylan's troubled surreal epic "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding," with its famous line "He not busy being born is busy dying" imbuing a final hint of new existential quest for the bikers.



During their next campout, whilst Billy tries to maintain his enthusiastic outlook, Wyatt finally verbalises what he's been thinking for some time as he comments, with great succinctness, "We blew it." That line has often been taken to be the essential summation of the entire 1960s project. At least in the terms of Billy and Wyatt's journey, it suggests Wyatt's final conclusion that they didn't just chase the wrong dream but leapt off from a bad beginning and then failed to understand everything of value they found on the way. The film's infamous ending is then almost a mere coup-de-grace, as the two bikers ride along a road by a levee, passed by two rednecks in a pick-up who, like the diner customers, take delight in harassing Billy: one levels a pump action shotgun at him to nominally frighten him, but when Billy ignores him the redneck shoots him, swatting him off his bike and leaving him sprawled and bloody on the verge. Wyatt stops and checks him out: whilst Billy grunts out fragmented words, Wyatt dashes back to bike to get help.



Only to meet the men in the pickup again, turned about to leave no witnesses: the blast of the gun and a near-subliminal flash of red gives way to Wyatt's bike, front wheel spinning away wildly, flying across the curb-side ditch and crashlanding. The image of the wrecked and burning motorcycle, surveyed in a helicopter shot rushing away into the sky, conflates multiple frames of symbolic resonance, the crashing, riderless bike an image of some dream desperately trying to keep soaring, a bitter lampoon of a failed space shot in the year of the moon landing, and a conflation of the assassinations that had befallen American political life in the previous year with the epic carnage of Vietnam, all crystallising in internalised blowback, sparking madness on the home front. Hopper was likely inspired in part by the imagery of roadway carnage in Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-End* (1967), but the sense of connection with a parable for the war is exacerbated by the way Hopper concludes the film with a visual quote from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) in the long, final helicopter shot that rises high above the madness to survey the wrecked bikes and sprawled bodies and the languorous course of the Mississippi, the flowing river evoked in the theme song written by Dylan and McGuinn that plays over the end credits. The end of *Easy Rider* retains such force in this disparity of jagged tragedy and elegiac yearning, the grand promise of the world still open to those brave enough to seek it even as the failed seekers lie dead on the green grass.

For A Few Dollars More (1965)

Per qualche dollaro in più

this island rod



Bridging the corrida fanfare of *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and the symphonic grandeur of *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966), *For A Few Dollars More* is Sergio Leone's Western style similarly perched between the terse and scurrilous approach to genre niceties deployed in the former and the neomythological setpieces of the latter. For which it's often described as the awkward middle child of the "Dollars" trilogy, but *For A Few Dollars More* is, in its own particular, lumpy way, a panorama of all the pleasures of the Leone style. The opening credits immediately deliver a grim joke, announcing the age of the bounty hunter out on the American plains: a man on horseback is shot from a distance and falls to the parched earth. This is filmed from a vast, almost deistic remove – a shot rhymed later as Leone offers a villain overseeing the death throes of a partly squashed insect – before segueing to a huge close-up of a black Bible cover to invoke and tease the ritual sprawl of ashes to ashes. The heroes sustain their own lives by taking those of bandits and cutthroats.



Lee Van Cleef, making his Italian Western debut and immediately transforming his career after it had been virtually halted by a car accident, is the dapper Colonel Mortimer, former Southern soldier and gentleman driven to a wandering life of violence. A hawk-nosed patrician who hovers in black overcoat and flat-crowned hat, a great bird of prey ready to snatch away sinners to a very hot place, Mortimer finds himself up against a rival for claiming big bounties. This is Manco, played of course by Clint Eastwood, swathed in the pueblo shades of his geometrically decorated poncho, a dark dream breathed out of the dust of the borderlands specifically to terrorise the iniquitous and convert their cruelty into cash. El Indio (Gian Maria Volonte) is the feared and wily bandit chieftain with a small army of followers and big plans to rob the largest bank in the region, the Bank of El Paso: when he's rescued from a jail cell by his men, Indio makes sure to gun down his cellmate, the luckless carpenter who told him of the bank's peculiar secret, a vault crammed with cash hidden within a deceptive labour of artisanal love – Leone's smirking comment on his own relationship to genre film success. Naturally both Manco and Mortimer set their sights on obtaining the reward for El Indio's downfall, and the two bounty hunters eventually make an uneasy alliance.



The plot is just as mean and twisty as *A Fistful of Dollars*, although this time Leone is contemplating revenge as an honourable motive amidst the mercenary goldbricking and legally sanctioned murder, as embodied by Mortimer, whose deeper personal motive for stalking the wasteland is sketched out in the marijuana-stoked dreams of his ultimate quarry El Indio. The incident that obsesses both men is glimpsed in fragmented and hallucination-flecked flashback, as El Indio recalls hovering at the bedroom woman of the

woman (Rosemary Dexter) who obsesses him rain tumbling down his face and the glass whilst she cavorts happily within with her Aryan husband. The dead woman proves to have been Mortimer's sister, who shot herself to cheat El Indio of her body, and instead has latched onto his mind like a shade out of the Gothic Horror films that Mario Bava was making at the same time as Leone was emerging as the premier voice of Spaghetti Westerns. Dario Argento, sometime Leone collaborator and Bava follower, would try to fully unite their traditions on *Deep Red*, 1975), although it's El Indio himself at the window who resembles the ghostly child of *Operazione Paura* (1966), the malevolent personification of fate peering in on hearth and home with evil intent. Now El Indio constantly provokes fate by forcing foes and subordinates to submit to his stacked rituals of challenge and slaughter, such as that imposed on an underling who betrayed him, Tomaso (Lorenzo Robledo), as scored by the tinkling tune emanating from *sorella* Mortimer's captured keepsake, an ornate fob watch. The watch's identical twin lurks within Mortimer's overcoat, with her photo framed in the lid.



Leone's west is place where comedy and tragedy violently alternate and unexpectedly alchemise one into the other, full of timorous, diminutive men easily pushed around by the lanky killers. One runs a hotel and puts up with his globular wife lusting after the male guests, another flees his room after a brief visit from Manco to chase him out, and yet another finishes up tied to a chair in his office and his breakfast of fried eggs appropriated, after being forced to send a telegraph message at gunpoint. Mortimer on the train at the outset, all dissembling awareness and poise when surrounded by bored and slouching sojourners, makes notes for the opening of *Duck, You Sucker* (1971). The jokes are worth of classic Hollywood and the silent greats, like the old coot who loathes the railroad and refuses to move away from it, suffering through having his house shaken constantly by the passing leviathans, and Mortimer pausing to strike a match on the neck of a sleazy hoodlum, played with bristling verve by Klaus Kinski. Most definitely and declaratively Leone is the slam cut from El Indio's theatrical laughter to the frozen image of him in the same pose as featured on his Wanted poster. Only for the joke to immediately segue into a first hint of deep purpose as Mortimer sets his eyes on the poster and Leone cuts with increasing speed and ferocity between Van Cleef's squinting fury and the poster's mocking defiance.



The first encounter between the nominal heroes is posed as a schoolyard ritual of bratty taunting and shows of bravura – “Just like the games we play,” one onlooking tyke notes – as Manco treads on Mortimer’s toes and keeps blasting his hat on down the street with his awesome aim in an elaborate game of keepaway, only for Mortimer to repay the favour by launching Manco’s hat moonwards. Bunuelian motifs lurk as the ruthless killer idly inspects a bug with dispassionate interest in between snuffing out human lives and later settles down to gaze on the corpse of a victim with the same bewildered fascination. The elaborate games of dominance and defiance also inflects El Indio tormenting his personal Judas, provoking Tomaso by having his wife and child shot so that Tomaso will be angry enough to try and defy the odds, but is still finally blown away by El Indio’s indolent hand. Like Leone himself, El Indio manufactures situations to explore his weird, brutal, mysteriously invested art, fascinated by the contrast of the innocently tinkling tune of the watch and his own theatre of cruelty, the intensity of despairing love truly registering only in being threatened.



El Indio dominates as a villain to a degree in Leone only rivalled by Frank in *Once Upon A Time In The West* (1968), but as opposed to that clinically dispassionate rogue trying to play company man, El Indio has the traits of a Leone antihero, the shadow of his heroes pushed over a Conradian edge to become mad chieftain. His habits of druggy, wistful reminiscence on favourite depravities nods forward to Noodles dissolving into his opiated reveries in *Once Upon A Time In America* (1984) as well as the sun-drenched, remembered idylls of *Duck, You Sucker*. El Indio’s bored, cut-above intelligence leads him to choose selling

out his own band of cutthroats sets the scene for Max's machinations in *Once Upon A Time In America*, whilst Manco's encounters with an on-the-make lad prefigure the urchins in the early scenes of that film. Manco's supernaturally good shooting aimed at the apples on a tree – dropping as manna to a peon lad trying haplessly to swat them down – scares away a gang of ruffians but alerts the keen eye of the villain that he has warriors of renown in his midst. This vignette ticks off multiple purposes, as a visualisation of the heroes' prowess laced with humour that also nods to Leone's increasingly urgent correlation of Western and Classical myth – Hercules after the apples of the Hesperides – whilst also offering a tip of the hat to Akira Kurosawa's camellia tree in *Sanjuro* (1963), the sequel to *Yojimbo* (1961), which Leone had merrily ripped off, in a last salute before heading off into his own, unique mythos.



That Leone's imagination quickly becomes more deeply invested in his secondary hero's quest and his dissociated villain than the repeat innings for Eastwood's trusty, lanky form at once unbalances the narrative, particularly in the third quarter which uneasily weaves between the cheeky narrative macramé of *A Fistful of Dollars* and the evolving Leone aesthetic, but also enriches proceedings tremendously. Manco is the most talkative of Eastwood's Leone heroes, aggravated by his incapacity to shake Mortimer as if grumpy someone else is butting into his movie, before learning to relax and look on as the older badass does his thing. Manco and Mortimer become a study in contrasts, "Boy" and "Old Man," the black-clad and spindly gentleman and the frontier rogue eventually finding an understanding thanks to an opportune act of pickpocketing, their faces carved with charismatic wrinkles rendered epic in the Almeria sun. Mortimer is the surgeon, always going into battle with a selection of crafted tools wielded with cunning, like the carefully fitted pistol with attached shooting stock he uses to pick off a foe, gunning him down with the same well-oiled care as he offers chivalrous politeness to the prostitute whose bath with one his quarries he has interrupted. Manco is the magician, taking a bounty in hand at the gaming table ("What was the bet?" "Your life."), blasting away a trio of confrontational thugs, and then finally, casually shooting his quarry when he insists on crawling for his gun whilst barely bothering to look.



Leone was still gathering his essential collaborators – of course, Ennio Morricone provides the score, in particular his infuriatingly catchy whistle-laced main theme – and Leone splits writing duties with Luciano Vincenzoni for the first time, although his salutary team-up with cinematographer Tonino Delli Colli would wait one more movie, with Massimo Dallamano providing his own, earthy, fleshy palette. Leone's gift for creating settings that seem at once uniquely palpable and physical and also ethereal and dreamlike is at a height in this entry. If the plains and mountains are mysterious sprawls out of Dali, the prison El Indio is rescued from, where the cells seem to float in the sky before a primal landscape and the stairwells curve in anatomical intricacy, is reminiscent of a De Chirico or Delvaux surrealist landscape, before plunging down into cubist twists and turns, men gunned down within frames within frames, crushed within whorls of stone and energy. El Indio lounging amidst his gang by contrast sarcastically evokes Jesus with disciples in Renaissance murals; him tormenting Tomaso and his veiled wife and baby becomes a sick parody of a crucifixion scene. The El Paso bank is a crude and whitewashed Luxor temple dedicated to the worship of money, where the foregrounded heads of sleazy bandits counting off the footfall of patrolling guards are the colossi and sphinxes keeping watch.



Leone's satire on profit as product of death and thievery is meanwhile pervasive. The bounty hunters are gifted a kind of crude nobility at least, as they risk life and limb, as well as their own super-professional credibility and sense of craft, in order to convert bodies still warm or cooling into cash. Meanwhile El Indio for all his barbarian khan affectations is ready to elevate himself to capitalist swine ready to sacrifice his

men to his own enrichment. The film's pacing flows into an uncomfortable eddy after the bank robbery as Leone wonders what to do with his two heroes, whilst his villain makes other plans and Volonte's marvellous performance almost displaces the two Yankees. Kinski too makes an indelible mark as the outraged hunchback gang member who tries to get Mortimer back for his match trick only to fall foul of a sneakily wielded derringer – a flourish Altman, Scorsese, and Tarantino would all treasure. El Indio is philosophically accepting when his first choice of confederate in the double-cross Niño (Mario Brega), is killed and supplanted by the sharper, less malleable Groggy (Luigi Pistilli), and settles down to drink, muse, and torment a limping bug whilst his men battle it out with the two legendary fighters. Leone rebounds from any uncertainty in the climax, as Mortimer and Manco cut a swathe through the eerily deserted town with whitewashed pueblos resembling sepulchres, enemies glimpsed as darkly scurrying infestation before meeting their makers, and the two loner gunmen are quietly moved to realise they've found not just a rival or an equal but someone worth venturing into the valley of death with.



The climactic shootout is obviously a dress rehearsal for the more grandly worked version at the end of *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*. Leone here first presents the conceit of the duel as a bullfight or gladiatorial contest occurring in an area, albeit here in a smaller, cruder circle, not entirely isolated from the world but abutting the stark, empty town. But its details – the winding-down chimes of two duelling watches that recount the same sad legend in slightly different and then successive tunes, the hovering image of the dead and grieved woman enclosed within the sentimental Victoriana of the fob watch – might actually make it a more emotional and evocative experience than the purified rite of the subsequent film. The bitterly funny punchline – Manco making a count of his bounties in terms of stacked human corpses noting he's missing one and pivoting just in time to put down Groggy, the last, wounded but still deadly foe. Mortimer, punishment exacted and mere financial reward turned down, rides literally into the sunset with a friendly grin turned back to his collaborator; Manco for his part rolls away with a car full of dead and pendulous booty, counting up his reward. An honest day's work for an honest day's pay.



Foxhole In Cairo (1960)

this island rod



The second feature film from John Llewellyn Moxey, after his debut with the wonderful shoestring Horror film *City of the Dead* (1960), *Foxhole In Cairo* shares that film's qualities of brevity, snappy drama, and visual force, and generally exemplifying the sly strengths of the good old little B-movie. But it's quite a different piece of work, a tale where more complexities unfold and intermesh in 77 minutes than in a vast number of big movies then and now. The word "subversive" is very often overused in contemporary criticism, but it's hard to avoid when it comes to *Foxhole In Cairo*, which stands nominally as one of the last of the great flood of heroic British war movies so popular during the 1950s. Moxey tackles a true episode of the war, known officially by the German brass as Operation Condor, that's also been touched on in material as diverse as pulp thriller writer Ken Follett's novel *The Key To Rebecca* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, adapted 1997 by Anthony Minghella into the Oscar-winning film. But *Foxhole In Cairo* has an eye on post-war problems and the great wane and imperial break-up that would define that era for Britain, and casts an acerbic eye on the character and motives of various players in the game of war and geopolitics in a manner anticipatory of the style brought to bear by John Le Carré, allowing operatives both German and otherwise a certain roguish integrity. The film commences in 1942 as the British Eighth Army is on the run from Erwin Rommel and the German Afrika Corps after the Fall of

Tobruk, and both sides see the battle coming to Egypt, which had been under British colonial control since the First World War.



James Robertson Justice brings his familiar bullish energy to a particularly well-tailored part, that of British intelligence chieftain Robertson. Robertson knows the oncoming wrestle for the country will begin with a duel of spies, as the Germans will be anxious to get effective agents into Cairo to find learn the British will make their stand, and warns his right-hand-man Roger (John Westbrook) to be on the lookout. Meanwhile, Rommel (Albert Lieven) approves a plan to achieve exactly this end: agents John Eppler (Adrian Hoven) and Peter 'Sandy' Monkaster (Neil McCullum) will be shuttled across two thousand miles of open Saharan desert by Count László de Almásy (Peter Van Eyck), a Hungarian explorer who knows the terrain thanks to his pre-war expeditions, and deposited at a corner of the Egyptian border where no-one would think to be on the lookout for spies. The Germans use captured British trucks so their column will seem innocuous even if it's spotted, and the great desert trek goes off without a hitch. Except that Robertson, shown aerial reconnaissance photos of the convoy moving across the godforsaken desert expanse and establishing it isn't an actual British operation, immediately realises its purpose and begins sending out feelers into the demimonde of Cairo, hoping to identify and pin down the agents when they arrive, but not immediately arrest them. Meanwhile the agents relay messages back to a pair of interlocutors stationed back at a desert oasis, Aberle (Lee Montague) and Weber (Michael Caine), who have, in a flourish of Teutonic wit by the masterminds of the operation, been given a copy of Daphne Du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* to use as the decoding manual for the coded transmissions.



The desert trek, an epic enough event in itself to build a movie around, perhaps in something like the expansive, dreamy approach of *The English Patient*, nonetheless only takes up the first twenty minutes of *Foxhole In Cairo*. The title itself has nested ironies in both evoking the prospect of soldiers opening another theatre of war deep within a great city and also hiding from it. The rest of the narrative is devoted to the peculiar tangle of personalities and their drives defining the rival camps of interested parties, which includes not just the British and Germans, but also Egyptians and agents of a Zionist intelligence network, who have sworn to aid the British for the war's course whilst also positioning to make their nationalist break after its end. Rommel and Robertson are the gods of war manipulating pieces on their maps, but the actual players in the game have their own little causes and desires: what makes the gods gods is their ability to herd the pawns by manipulating such individual wills. Eppler, half-German, half-Egyptian, and his Egyptian dancer girlfriend and operative Amina (Gloria Mestre), both state their desire to throw off the British colonial yoke; so, ironically, are the proto-Israeli pseudo-heroes, the Zionist spy boss Maurice Radek (Niall McGinnis) and his top agent, Yvette (Fenella Fielding), who specialises very simply in getting men talkative in bars. Robertson approaches Radek and asks him to set his network to action because he knows Radek's bevy of beauties operates closer to the heart of the Cairo floating world. Radek agrees because at the moment his own political project's success depends on the British winning.



What ultimately makes *Foxhole In Cairo* an odd and interesting artefact is its unsentimental, borderline cynical tone, with flashes dark humour and subplot touching upon erotic obsession. Beneath the official, honourable-sounding motives simmer others. Eppler confesses he's doing it for "money, girls, risk, the excitement," a James Bond wannabe whose actual talents are as a panderer. *Foxhole In Cairo* proposes that in matters of espionage sex and alcohol are worth battalions on the battlefield, when so many human animals are, even in the midst of great events and cataclysmic death, constantly gnawed at by their needs and their lacks. Both Amina and Yvette are willing to prostitute themselves for glorious causes. Amina also seeks to please Eppler and to have her own pleasure in tantalising men she despises, her nightly dance of the two-and-a-half veils in a popular tavern enticing and repelling British officers in a kind of reverse colonialist game, most particularly with staff officer Major Wilson (Robert Urquhart), who both desperately lusts after Amina whilst also fuelling his dissolution. The film regards Wilson as the most representative Englishman, crippled by sexual repression and sliding as a result into morally bankrupt self-pity, in a linkage of psycho-sexual hang-up and political decline worthy of Graham Greene. Eppler soon fixes on Wilson as low-hanging fruit, as the drunken but good-natured officer reveals to Amina he's being sent off to join the army in the desert soon with important plans.



Moxey himself, scion of a coal and steel magnate born in Argentina and a Sandhurst graduate who fought the war and came out an exhausted and disillusioned 20-year-old, sows the drama here with a distinctively acerbic perspective appropriate to someone with such an intense and scattered upbringing and initiation into manhood, and in tone and outlook *Foxhole In Cairo* feels several years ahead of its time. It's is a stringent affair in look and form, with Moxey's curt direction reaching to the opposite stylistic extreme from *City of the Dead* with its dry ice-smothered expressionist environs, here going for functional, often harshly lit realism, with location shooting alternating with some cheap-looking sets, particularly the oasis locale Caine and Montague hang out at. Nonetheless blockings and compositions are often clever, tight, and visually engaging, with some flourishes of noirish shadow and with Moxey making use of looming deep-focus and forceful perspective play much as he did on *City of the Dead*. Moxey utilises wartime documentary footage at the start and end to bracket the fictionalised drama with its authentic big stuff, whilst the music score wields ironically jaunty jazz theme throughout that seems to be teasing the drama as much as augmenting it. Despite the compactness of it all Moxey wrings the material for a mounting ambivalence and sense of character reminiscent of Otto Preminger, giving everyone their little length of rope to hang themselves, and well as some squiggles of humour like Roger's habit of making facetious jokes that draw Robertson's most fearsomely irritable glares.



Foxhole In Cairo was evidently also a mildly racy affair for 1960, with Mestre's long belly-dance routine and the frank sexuality of her relationship with Eppler. "Got a nice assorted collection of girls and pimps, that sort of thing," Roger reports wearily after a night scouring the fleshpots for concealed Nazis. The cast is interesting enough to note, including the stalwarts Robertson and MacGinnis, the German actor Hoven who went on to become a director of famously brutal continental Horror films, future *Carry On* movie regular Fielding, and Howard Marion Crawford as a lax border crossing guardian who offers a drink to the incoming spies. And of course Caine, giving the light German accent he'd later wheel out for *The Last Valley* (1970) and *The Eagle Has Landed* (1977) its first outing, and radiating the same, perversely insouciant star quality even in playing a minor role that would finally take him places a couple of years later. Robertson, always a galvanising performer, is great as his namesake character, striding into the film like a human tank and deriding the radio broadcasts assuring that the latest British withdrawal to prepare positions does not constitute a retreat: "What do they constitute then, an advance?" Van Eyck's appearance goes rather peculiarly unbilled, and he had already played Almásy in a German recounting of the same story, *Rommel ruft Kairo* (1959).



The piquancy of the actual Operation Condor with its Saharan adventure, its reliance on *Rebecca* of all things as a private raspberry blown at the British, and sleights of hand like a wireless hidden underneath a flip-top phonograph and the spies' eventual choice of a hideout on a riverboat, is touched on with a sense of detail and also consequence. The very daring quality of the cross-desert dash is symptomatic of a self-sabotaging elaborateness, extending to lapses like the actual copy of *Rebecca*, a seemingly trifling object and yet one that betrays a senseless outlay of time and effort to utilise, and counterfeit money included with the cash the spies take into Egypt with them for payroll that quickly sets the bloodhounds working. When the receiving team are ambushed and captured by British troops after the broadcasts to and fro are intercepted and tracked, the presence of the book tantalises the spymasters with its totemic meaning. The film employs some dramatic licence including in the final plot stakes and the rabbit Robertson pulls out of the hat, as Wilson, successfully lured in and left in a drunken daze by Amina whilst Eppler starts broadcasting the contents of the documents he was carrying, detailing where the British will make their fateful stand against Rommel.

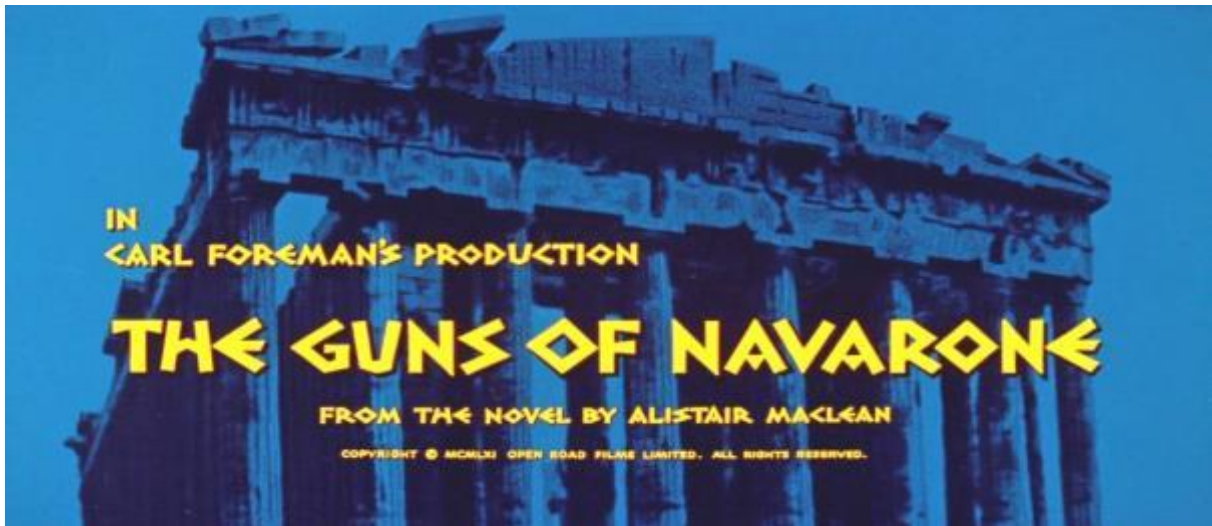


The cynical quality extends to touches like Roger casually threatening the captured radiomen with “a shooting party” when they refuse to talk to him, and Robertson’s generally dismissive attitude towards the people he uses to win through, illustrated in the climax as the differences between him and Radek become apparent: Radek is bewildered when Robertson refuses to move when the spies seem to be sending out the crucial plans, and moves to help save Yvette, who’s become holed up with them, and Wilson. Intimate violence erupts, as the battle between nations becomes one of people with immediate loyalties. Wilson’s suddenly galvanised attempt to redeem himself sees him almost immediately and accidentally shot dead, and Moxey delivers one cruelly impressive shot of the two female spies, good and bad, fighting desperately for a gun whilst nudging Wilson’s splayed, rolled-eyed, very dead body. “Do you really think we’d put vital information into the hands of a weakling like that?” Robertson retorts to Radek as he points down at Wilson’s corpse as it’s being covered, before allowing a token, “Poor devil, I’m sorry he’s dead.” All is forgiven, apparently, because Robertson is able to happily report the success of his decoy plan, laying seeds for the oncoming ambush at El Alamein.



The Guns of Navarone (1961)

film freedonia



Director: J. Lee Thompson

Screenwriter: Carl Foreman

The Guns of Navarone began life as a story penned by Scottish writer Alistair MacLean, a former Royal Navy officer and World War II veteran. MacLean debuted as a writer with *H.M.S. Ulysses*, a gritty and nightmarish portrait of a doomed warship attached to one of the infamous Allied convoys supplying the Soviet Union during the war, based on some personal experiences. The success of his debut inspired MacLean to write another war story, but this time in a more adventurous and commercial mode. His story this time was loosely inspired by the Battle of Leros in the Dodecanese campaign, but also perhaps drew on memories of movies made during the war like *Secret Mission* (1942), *Desperate Journey* (1942), and *The Adventures of Tartu* (1943), slightly matured Boy's Own tales about stranded warriors, secret agents and commandos eluding evil Nazis and destroying secret bases. *The Guns of Navarone* proved another bestseller when it was published in 1957, cementing MacLean as a preeminent popular writer of gamy thrillers until his death in 1987, with many movies good and bad adapted from his works. Enter Carl Foreman, screenwriter and film entrepreneur who had found fame writing *High Noon* (1952) just before being blacklisted and co-wrote *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) with Michael Wilson uncredited, only to see the Oscar they could have received for it given to the author of the source novel, Pierre Boulle, despite him not speaking English.



Foreman began leveraging his epic Hollywood comeback by signing a production deal with Columbia Pictures as the blacklist was breaking down, and was given the book by an enthusiastic studio executive. Foreman was uneasy at first knowing it would be a hard movie to make, but he eventually pulled it off in grand fashion and made damn sure the movie was emblazoned as “Carl Foreman’s Production of *The Guns of Navarone*” in the credits and on posters. In adapting the novel, Foreman reshaped the material into something more ambitious and not so dissimilar to *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, introducing notes of ambivalence about war and greater depth to the characters as well as an emphasis on moral quandary that finally ends with a spectacular act of sabotage. Foreman also wanted to direct the movie, but Columbia refused, so he hired the great Alexander Mackendrick, of Ealing comedies and *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) fame, who was on board with Foreman’s desire to make something more substantial out of MacLean’s material. But Mackendrick was fated to suffer repeated agonies in Hollywood, and a week before filming Mackendrick was fired with the evergreen “creative differences” excuse. On star Gregory Peck’s suggestion, Foreman then hurriedly hired J. Lee Thompson. Thompson was a rising star of British film with an array of recent, admired, superbly made films including the proto-feminist drama *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957), the nuanced thriller *Tiger Bay* (1959) and blending war stories with adventure in *North West Frontier* (1958) and *Ice Cold In Alex* (1960).



The Guns of Navarone proved Thompson's Hollywood debut and gained a Best Picture Oscar nomination, a highpoint of a long and violently uneven career. Foreman for his part bankrolled the success into his own, more overtly antiwar survey *The Victors* (1963), which fell afoul of studio interference. Viewed from today, *The Guns of Navarone* seems chiefly notable as a movie that mediated the evolution of the relatively straitlaced and realistic war movie popular through the 1950s towards the birth of the modern blockbuster action movie. *The Guns of Navarone* anticipated and perhaps helped leverage the following year's debut of James Bond in *Dr. No*, and later presented an obvious template for *Star Wars* (1977), with its select band of specialist heroes setting out to assault a seemingly impregnable enemy base and destroy a deadly war machine, as well offering a specific blend of cliffhanger action sequences kneaded into a larger story building to a pyrotechnic climax. But what distinguishes *The Guns of Navarone* from the myriad films its influence is stamped on is that more elevated element Foreman wanted to explore. In that regard Thompson was an ideal collaborator for Foreman, as he was extremely good at balancing action with tight, tense interpersonal stories. The sort of thing more recent Hollywood event movies dismiss as a tedious chore Foreman and Thompson took very seriously and essential to such storytelling, and the result defies the idea that a potent adventure film can't also be thoughtful.



The opening moments of *The Guns of Navarone* promise a hell of a ride, whilst also presenting itself as a work of contemporary mythologising, “the legend of Navarone” that perhaps excuses some embellishing and larger-than-life details. Dimitri Tiomkin's grand score, perhaps the best of his career, surges over a pre-credits prologue whilst the Scottish actor James Robertson Justice, who within the film proper plays the M-like spymaster Jensen, provides narration. Jensen explicitly describes the events as akin to the ancient myths of heroes and monsters born of the Greek islands, a modern echo of Achilles and Odysseus and Hercules, whilst the camera explores the ruins of classical temples overlooking Aegean-washed islands. The legend as he describes it begins when Hitler, trying to bully neutral Turkey into repeating history and joining the war on his side, orders a small garrison of 2000 British soldiers who have been holding out on the Aegean island of Kheros to be obliterated in a show of purposefully absurd force. The British decide to send in a flotilla to rescue them, but face one deadly roadblock: the Germans have installed two, colossal 15-inch naval guns in an old citadel on the neighbouring island of Navarone, controlling the only open strait to Kheros.



With the clock ticking down fast and all other efforts failing, including a disastrous bombing raid that costs many airmen their lives, Jensen pulls together an infiltration team to land on Navarone and find a way to sabotage the guns. Jensen selects Major Roy Franklin (Anthony Quayle) to lead the team, assigning him demolitions expert Corporal Miller (David Niven) whose job it will be to destroy the guns, with partisan Spyros Pappadimos (James Darren), and Chief Petty Officer Brown (Stanley Baker) along for added deadly force. To get them to Navarone and help scale the seemingly impassable cliff face on the island's southern coast, the only unpatrolled landing point, Jensen flies in Captain Keith Mallory (Gregory Peck), a former, renowned mountaineer who's been leading partisan operations in Crete. Mallory arrives at Jensen's HQ in North Africa just as one of the Lancaster bombers sent on the raid crash-lands. Mallory, surveying photos of the cliff, feels it's a virtually impossible task, but still agrees to do his bit and asks for Andreas Stavros (Anthony Quinn), his uneasy ally on Crete and a ranking Colonel in the Greek army, to be brought out to help him, only for Jensen to assure him they've already done so. Jensen, Mallory, and Franklin listen to the crews of the failed air raid, including their truculent Australian squadron leader Barnsby (Richard Harris, in a memorable, even star-making cameo) who punctuates his tirade against the planners of the raid with saying "ruddy" every other word. Jensen admits to Mallory that he's the one who put them up to the raid, knowing it was pointless but still had to be tried.



What war costs on both the most personal level and on the macrocosmic chart of human endeavour is a constant motif of *The Guns of Navarone* even as it sets up an officially heroic, thrill-a-minute story. Jensen muses with his adjutant Cohn (Bryan Forbes) on the grim necessity of someone in his job sending men off to die, fully expecting Franklin's team to also be lost, the ships sent to rescue the men on Kheros to be sunk, and the garrison wiped out, whilst still being committed to try everything to prevent such ends. Jensen muses on the quality of the unexpected in such situations, the surprising, rarefied quality of the human that ironically requires such straits to emerge: "Slap in the middle of absolute insanity, people pull out the most extraordinary resources. Ingenuity. Courage. Self-sacrifice." "With every one of us a genius, how can we fail?" Mallory frames it more ironically as he considers the team with all their particular talents, knowing well what a shit-show they're heading into, in a war that generally seems inimical to individual identity and ability. Mallory finds Andreas waiting in his hotel room, a peculiar tension persisting between them despite being comrades who've been fighting alongside each-other for months. Later it emerges that Mallory gave a safe conduct to a German patrol to get their wounded taken care of after a skirmish on Crete, only for the Germans, desperate to kill Stavro as one of their most ferocious enemies, to shoot their wounded, go to Andreas' house, and blow it up along with his wife and children. Andreas blames Mallory's "stupid Anglo-Saxon decency" for his family's death and has told Mallory he will kill him when the war is won.



Mallory also encounters Miller, who has a line in forced joviality and has long refused officer rank despite his many famous missions, through his deep scepticism for authority and the kind of moral calculus men like Jensen indulge. Spyros was born on Navarone and knows the island, but emigrated to America where he learned deadly arts as a petty hoodlum. Brown meanwhile specialises in killing at close quarters with a knife and has antifascist credentials going back to the Spanish Civil War, where he gained his colourful nickname "The Butcher of Barcelona". "I've been killing Germans since 1937," Brown tells Mallory, "There's no end to them." Trouble is Brown is suffering burnout from such Sisyphean labours, and can't bring himself to kill anymore: "You shoot a man at two hundred yards he's just a moving target. You kill him with a knife, you're close enough to smell him." Mallory also describes Franklin to Andreas as a man "who still needs to prove to himself he's a hero." Whatever attitude problems and neuroses are lurking under the surface of the omniscient team are nonetheless of little consequence at first as they're gathered on the island of Castelrosso, halfway between Cyprus and Rhodes. On Castelrosso, the team are briefly billeted with the garrison commanded by Major Baker (Allan Cuthbertson), a snootily officious British officer.



When the team are installed in a grimy room in Baker's army post, Andreas' survival wits are illustrated as he insists on searching for microphones. Nor is he unjustly paranoid: whilst they discuss their plans, Andreas catches them being spied on by a young man (Tutte Lemkow). Baker is fetched and he tells them the eavesdropper is the HQ laundry boy Nicolai, who supposedly doesn't speak English and only talks to Andrea in an obscure dialect, to which Miller casually but acutely queries, "Then why was he listening?" Franklin tells Baker he wants Nicolai held incommunicado until the mission is complete, but Baker insists Nicolai be released. In response Franklin tells Spyros to shoot Nicolai and Baker too "if he gets in your way." When the aghast Baker realises they means it, he backs down and has Nicolai locked up. This tense scene sets in motion a theme that winnows through what follows, noting the different kinds of command displayed by Baker's empty, privileged bluster, versus Franklin's generally easy-going manner that masks that he knows exactly when to take ruthless action and apply pressure when it comes to fulfilling his mission, even if it's likely just to make Baker pay heed. Mallory's different brand of cool poise and sense of impact is also sketched out. When Baker makes appeal to Mallory, he replies that he agrees with Franklin, but also doesn't need to have Baker shot, just speedily shipped home as a private with one call to Jensen, a threat that makes a more subtle but possibly deeper impact on Baker.



The next morning the team boards an appropriately banged-up fishing boat procured for them to voyage to Navarone, per Mallory's request, a vessel that so alarms Miller that he keeps reminding Mallory he can't

swim. On the way they're intercepted by a German patrol boat in an unexpected area, making Franklin suspect Baker let Nicolai go anyway. The team maintain their parts as poor fishermen until the right moment when they unleash with hidden weapons, slaying all the Germans and blowing up their boat. After the fight Mallory notices when Baker flinches from stabbing a German he didn't quite finish up and gets up with his gun, only for Spyros to blow him away. Later Baker explains how tired he is of killing and tries to avoid it when he can, only to earn Mallory's rebuke that none of them has the right to be making a private peace, not least because it makes him untrustworthy to the rest of the team. "I do my job sir," Brown protests, to Mallory's retort: "Your job is to kill enemy soldiers." Mallory's learned that the hard way, as he explains Andreas' threat to him and the reason for it to Franklin, as they sail at night to Navarone. As they near the island coast, a vicious storm whips up, driving the boat onto rocks. The team laboriously rescue as much of their equipment as they can before a rogue wave rolls in, dislodges the boat, and sinks it.



This tremendous piece of staging, accomplished with all the physical craft and energy required of moviemaking in those long-gone pre-CGI days, comes in a dizzy flurry of pounding white water and even in the relatively safe confines of a studio tank looks dangerous for the actors. And it's only the start of the team's true ordeal. The boat's destruction forces Mallory, who had been promised a spell of leave after delivering the men, and Andreas to integrate with the team for the duration. Mallory succeeds in the agonising climb up the rock face, meticulously hammering in pitons and finding rock forms to make the ascent easier. Andreas ascends to help him, cueing a tense moment when Mallory slips and Andreas catches him holding dangling over a vast drop, awareness of a perfect opportunity for Andreas to carry out his threat, but instead helping Mallory get his grip again. Reaching the top, Mallory and Andreas are surprised by a German on patrol: they kill him, but when Mallory tries to bluff his way through a conversation on a field telephone with the German HQ, he doesn't succeed, with soldiers dispatched. Whilst climbing the cliff, Franklin slips and breaks his leg. Whilst the others bring him aloft, Mallory, now ranking officer and so forced into command, considers the options of leaving Franklin for the Germans, carrying with them, or, as Andreas suggests, shooting him: "Better for him, better for us." Mallory elects to bring Franklin along on an improvised stretcher, knowing they can rendezvous with local contacts at a nearby ruin and get them to look after him. As they trek into rugged, snow-clad mountains, they're pursued by German patrols. Franklin tries to shoot himself, only to be stopped by Mallory, who tells him that Jensen has said on the radio that commandos are going to invade Navarone in two days' time. Whilst the two men talk, Miller anxiously fingers his own pistol, ready to draw it if it appears Mallory is going to kill Franklin.



From the outset of *The Guns of Navarone* we're assured every member of the team has something to contribute, some skillset that makes them invaluable, even if this assurance is picked apart as the story unfolds. As every plan is tested and found wanting by both enemy connivance, covert treachery, and bad luck, every character is bent in a direction they don't want, improvisation is constantly required, and the real worth of all those skills is tested. In this regard the underpinnings of the story recall heist movies like *The Asphalt Jungle* (1949) and *Rififi* (1955), and indeed that's exactly what the story is at heart. This aspect also distinguishes it from Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) and its Hollywood remake *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), films that by and large invented the basic modern blueprint for action movies about a team of warriors. *The Guns of Navarone* feels to me like the more immediate influence on most subsequent men-on-a-mission tales, a mode that would be taken to variously strange and hyperbolic places by the likes of Richard Brooks' *The Professionals* (1966), Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), Jack Cardiff's *Dark of the Sun* (1968), Andrew V. McLaglen's *The Wild Geese* (1978), and both Enzo Castellari's *Inglorious Bastards* (1977) and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), as well as the likes of the TV series *Mission: Impossible* and subsequent movie adaptations. The film's success also encouraged MacLean himself to recycle many elements for the script of Brian G. Hutton's more serial-like *Where Eagles Dare* (1968). *The Guns of Navarone's* influence even echoes in the early scenes of John McTiernan's *Predator* (1987) and in Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones* films and pervasively in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Its impact on *Star Wars* was reiterated by Gareth Edwards' *Rogue One* (2016). And, of course, Jim Abrahams and Jerry and David Zucker's *Top Secret!* (1984) couldn't exist without it.



The vignette of Mallory trying to fake his way through the phone conversation with a German was the obvious inspiration for the famous scene of Han Solo doing the same in *Star Wars*, although the model plays it in a cagier manner, the German on the other end of the line slightly puzzled by not hearing the right code words, but not giving anything away until after the call is ended and then hitting the alarm. Whilst the climactic scenes surge with swashbuckling vigour, Thompson also does his best to keep the film grounded in realistic physicality and problem-solving wit from its heroes: nobody ever gets too clever, and when the characters take damage it's hurt they feel. The characters are also treated with rare seriousness, in a careful set-up of dramatic stakes that don't combust until the last third. The triangulation of Andreas' sternly pragmatic, even ruthless sensibility, Miller's humane and antiauthoritarian streak, and Mallory's attempts to walk a centre path however crooked, provides a backbone of drama, amplified by less consequential but still substantial elements as Brown's moral exhaustion and Spyros' wild, almost berserker aspect when let loose in war, contrasting his rather boyish façade. His sister Maria (Irene Papas) proves to be their partisan contact on Navarone, catching the men unaware when they're distracted by another female partisan, Anna (Gia Scala), who Spyros knocks out when they catch her flitting around their camp in a ruined monastery. Upon recognising her brother, Maria walks up to him with a smile of surprised delight, and then, remembering she's angry at him for being away so long, slaps him in the face – a moment Spielberg conspicuously lifted for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).



Papas enters the film with her usual, leonine presence, a promissory note for a future generation of action heroines, holding the team at bay for a few moments with a machine gun before admitting they're obviously not Germans. She cares for her friend Anna, who, as she explains to the team, was recently captured and brutalised by the Nazis – “They whipped her until the white of her bones showed” – but survived the ordeal without breaking and is now one of the partisans' assets, although she hasn't spoken a word since her captivity and has never shown anyone her scars. The two women join the team as they hike towards the town of Mandrakos, in the hope they can get medical aid for Franklin there. During a rest pause in an olive grove, Miller tells Mallory that Franklin's leg has become gangrenous and needs amputation. Brown also asks Mallory to give him another chance as a fighter, as Mallory's been relegating him to menial tasks. German soldiers roll up and start firing mortars at them, and Stukas bomb them as they flee up a canyon and find refuge in a cave. At last they manage to enter Mandrakos, Andreas, Maria, and Brown taking Franklin to a doctor, whilst the others sit quietly in a café where a wedding party is being held. But both groups are quickly captured by Germans, who zero in on them with suspicious exactitude.



Thompson's career arc wasn't a pretty one on the face of things, moving from being considered one of 1950s British cinema's most exciting and truly cinematic talents to one often dismissed as downright bad by the time in the 1980s when he finished up making potboilers for the beloved/infamous Cannon Films in the 1980s. Thompson's aura of professionalism was both a problem and a virtue when it comes to summing up his career, but his rock-solid visual force never degraded even when making Charles Bronson shoot-'em-ups. Thompson was known for his peculiar, loose, almost improvisatory approach to filming, all leveraged on set through such force of personality that Peck called him "Mighty Mouse." Thompson certainly made a lot of unremarkable movies during his career, as well as many that were terrific and more than a few that became worthy cult films. Thompson was particularly confident and innovative in using the widescreen frame, apparent throughout *The Guns of Navarone* in his constant attempts to keep the relations between the members of the team enclosed within his frames on the churn, and use of looming actions against deep focus shots. One great example of this comes when Spyros starts enthusiastically fixing a silencer to his pistol when Franklin orders him to kill Nikolai, Spyros in the foreground, Baker standing in between him and his prey with puckered anxiety, with Mallory gazing on impassively to one side: there's painterly precision to Thompson's images and yet they contain energy and barely stifled movement as well.



Thompson also displayed a consistent fascination with interactions with sharply diverging worldviews, whose collisions ultimately drive his best films. *Tiger Bay* revolved around the disparity between its child

heroine's perspective on a fugitive she falls in with and the reality of his situation. *North West Frontier*, nominally a straightforward imperial-era chase yarn, spared a deal of time and depth exploring its microcosmic characters and evoking the motives of its villain, a biracial Muslim desperate to prove his identity, clashing with the more officially humane but also smug personalities around him. *Cape Fear* (1962) was a film that anticipated both later slasher films and concerns with violence and vigilante reprisal in 1970s and '80s thrillers, as it portrayed a sleazy psychopath intimidating a prosperous lawyer and family man, trying to provoke him into abandoning his civilised ideals. Thompson would go on with his unexpectedly strong foray into Horror cinema proper, *Eye of the Devil* (1966), to a similar theme of a man sacrificing himself in a dark religious rite for the sake of fulfilling his role as lord of the manor. His perverse thriller *Return From The Ashes* (1965) hinged on the incomprehension of a holocaust survivor trying to resume ordinary life with the more petty brand of murderous zeal she encounters. Even oddities like his two entries in the *Planet of the Apes* series and the unique horror-western *The White Buffalo* (1977) would spend time allowing iconic representatives of warring factions in the American West to argue through their different perspectives on history and society. In *The Guns of Navarone* this proclivity found exactly the right material, as Thompson weaves the more serious concerns of Foreman's script throughout, finally combusting when Mallory reveals to the team, after they've been forced to finally leave Franklin with the Germans, that the story he told him about the upcoming invasion was false, and he hopes the Germans will give him a dose of scopolamine to extract it from him, on the theory that it will spare Franklin torture but also to make the Germans commit their forces in distraction. Miller is appalled nonetheless when Mallory tells him this, questioning what would happen if they skipped the scopolamine and just went with torture: "Oh, I misjudged you – you're really rather a ruthless character aren't you, Captain Mallory?"



The obvious riposte is that all those things would happen to Franklin anyway and indeed the only way to save his life, but Mallory doesn't take that out, instead stating it was the only way to get the job done, his way of living up Jensen and Franklin's credo as a leader. "I just hope that before this job is over I get the chance to use you the way you used him," Miller declares, and you just know he'll get his wish. Thompson and Foreman also allow some hue of moral complexity to enter from the German side of things too. After the team is captured in Mandrakos, they're interrogated by a cool, clinical officer, Muesel (Walter Gotell), who nonetheless disdains brutality. He is quickly supplanted by SS man Sessler (George Mikell), a more familiar kind of evil Nazi, who slaps Andreas when he claims to be a poor Cypriot fisherman forced into the team's company, and provokes not just the heroes when he threatens to hit Franklin's injured leg with his sidearm but also sparks Muesel's angry outburst. "We're not all like Hauptman Sessler," Muesel comments to Mallory later, and also deftly stands up to Mallory's threat to have him shot if he doesn't give up information, "You would not hesitate to shoot me for any number of reasons – in any event I will not tell you." Andreas proves the key to the team escape this seemingly impossible situation, with his fisherman act.

He pretends to be violently ill and rolling around the floor when Sessler starts tormenting Franklin, angering Sessler and distracting the Germans sufficiently for the team to attack suddenly and overpower their captors. A terrific little part for Quinn that deftly conflates different kinds of improvisation: “What a performance,” Miller comments, to Andreas only waving his hand in a so-so gesture.



The team’s visit to Mandrakos also allows a slightly corny but tone-varying vignette of the men, all ill-shaven, hunched-over mystery, suddenly enjoying an idyllic moment with the townsfolk during the wedding celebrations, the island’s native culture and love of life still sustained amidst occupation. Spyros reveals a decent voice as he sings a verse of a folk song for village musicians (actually written by Tiomkin), and a small girl comes over to the team to hand them some flowers, unfortunately at the same moment Muesel leads in a detachment of Germans and levels guns at them, a moment of vaguely surreal contrast that crystallises the imminence of indiscriminate bloodshed. The team surrender, but Mandrakos suffers an ugly fate anyway, as the Germans destroy the town in reprisal for the team’s escape, an act of vandalism and contempt that eventually drives Spyros to wildly self-destructive acts. The narrative encompasses such constant knock-on effects of choices and aims even as the urgency of the mission and the moral imperative behind it aren’t forgotten, but different people have different ways of feeling their way through the murk, as Miller summarises when he angrily upbraids Mallory, “I don’t know the men in Kheros, I do know the man on Navarone.”



Spyros' eventual death in combat in the climactic scenes provides self-satire aimed at the kind of shootout scene Foreman so memorably formulated on *High Noon*. Amidst the chaos unleashed by the team and their local allies as the climax unfolds, Spyros and a German officer confront each-other with glazed, fanatical facades after Spyros has killed the German's men with a grenade and Spyros is looking for revenge for Mandrakos. The two enemies march at one another, letting spray with their machine guns until they kill each-other. "He forgot why we came here," Andreas tells Maria when she asks him how her brother died. The scene reads as a moment of self-critique from Foreman, as if dismayed by some of the more straightforwardly reactionary readings of *High Noon*. Meanwhile the sort of love interest often jammed into such a story is presented only to eventually be given a ruthless twist. Andreas faces the slightly blindsiding confession by Maria that "I like you," a marvellously oblique moment of courtship befitting two hard and worldly survivors nonetheless finding a connection. Mallory on the other hand has a passionate tryst with Anna when she sneaks out of the monastery chamber they spend the night in whilst he's on guard duty, and she approaches him, growing teary-eyed as he communicates his angst to her after Miller's tirade over Franklin, before they kiss. But when the presence of a traitor in the team's midst becomes undeniable after Miller finds all his explosive detonators sabotaged just before they're going to take their all-or-nothing assault on the citadel, Miller quickly winnows the likely culprit down to just one person – Anna.



The scene that follows is quite epic in its depiction of moral responsibility and brutally clashing viewpoints that close off all options but the worst. Miller is proven right when Andreas strips Anna to show she has no scars and she weepily confesses to having turned to collaborating because "I cannot stand pain," and seduced Mallory because she needed to cover up her foiled attempt to sneak away. Miller argues forcibly that Anna can't be left alive because she knows all their plans, and with relentless relish argues to Mallory that he should be the one to execute her, as the officer and gentleman who gets to make the hard decisions but leaves it to the little men to actually perform: "Why don't you let us off for once? Come down off that cross of your, close your eyes, and pull the trigger." Mallory, facing up to the challenge despite its ugliness, stands over Anna and pulls out his pistol: Miller moves to make a last-second intervention, but both men are forestalled when Anna is shot dead by her comrade Maria, whose execution is at once more truly fitting and even more painful. Quinn and Papas make a brilliant little moment of Andreas reaching out to comfort Maria as she's hit by a squall of feeling after her stone-faced execution, only for him to not quite be able to meet her eyes. Of course Quinn and Papas would be reunited a couple of years later in *Zorba The Greek* (1964).



Niven and Peck are also at their best here, with Niven's Miller given the crucial scene of theatrical bravura, first pacing through a pastiche of a detective's drawing room exposure of a criminal, before being called upon to articulate Foreman's scepticism with his signature spindly, hangdog charm turned to angry purpose. Mallory finally works up to a fine pitch of anger as the smoke clears, informing Miller that his free ride in terms of responsibility are at an end, waving his pistol at him and telling him to find some way of setting off his explosives: "You're in it now up to your neck... You get me in the mood to use this thing, or by god if you don't think of something I'll use it on you!" A notable moment if not least for seeing Peck, who would win an Oscar a year later for playing the most equable of personalities, playing one here driven to a pitch of ferocity that is also focused enough to literally level a mountain rather than expend itself fruitlessly. At other points in the film Peck is more awkward: Mallory, who was a New Zealander in the novel, is also supposed to be fluent in Greek and German, but Peck obviously couldn't quite manage that, but nonetheless he has just the right gravitas to play a thoughtful but grimly committed hero.



Despite all the quarrels Mallory's gamble pays off: the commandant of the citadel garrison orders Franklin injected with scopolamine after Sessler's had some fun torturing him, and with Franklin giving up the details in his subsequent daze, the Germans scramble the bulk of their forces out of the citadel and down to the shore, whilst Mallory and Miller drive in in a captured ambulance, almost getting crushed by tanks in

the frantic activity. Meanwhile Maria and Brown head off to steal a boat to ferry them off the island whilst Andreas and Spyro set out to create havoc amongst the remaining garrison troops, gaining some help from locals who shuffle out of a tavern and start pulling tricks like using fishing nets to dismount motorcyclists. Mallory coolly kills a couple of guards overlooking the doors to the cavern where the guns are mounted, and he and Miller manage to get inside, locking the doors at the cost of setting off an alarm. Whilst the Germans outside try everything from sledgehammers to jackhammers and finally a welding torch to penetrate the doors, Miller plants several explosive devices, including one hidden under an elevator designed to be set off by the descending lift's runner, as well as one disguised as a rat and hidden under one of the guns: when a soldier plucks it out, the device proves only to be a fizzing firecracker, burning out harmless to the soldier's heavy breath of relief.



Of course, all discursion and complication in the film are only part of a long arc building relentlessly to a climax, which unfolds on multiple stages and finds punctuating tragic ironies in Spyros and Brown's deaths. Brown meets his end as he again holds back from killing a German guard on the motorboat he and Maria set about stealing. When the guard begins shouting for help, Brown finally stabs him and muffles his cries, but the German retains enough life to pull the knife out of his gut and stick it in Brown, who expires on a note of desperate pathos. Miller and Mallory flee the gun cavern by sliding down ropes into the ocean and are picked up by Anna, whilst Mallory helps pluck the wounded and exhausted Andreas out of the ocean with a boathook, Andreas hesitating as he sees the deadly implement wielded at him by the man he threatened to kill, but finally grabs it and is rescued. Meanwhile a flotilla of British destroyers come sailing up the strait. Thompson saves special relish for building tension as the guns are finally glimpsed up close by the heroes, with Tiomkin's music underlining the awe and fear of these weapons of mass destruction, Mallory and Miller dwarfed by them. After they escape, the Germans reclaim the guns and dig out all of Miller's devices save the one in the elevator shaft, and tension mounts mischievously as Thompson keeps noting the lifts descending but stopping short of the trigger wires, whilst the guns let loose with all their hellfire and start straddling the British warships, forcing them to start manoeuvring.



George Lucas would directly pinch the moment of special relish here for *Star Wars* as the German commander speak the command to fire, this time certainly to hit and sink one of the destroyers, just before the lift makes contact and sets off the blast. The resulting explosion of the magazine rips the top off the mountain and the two mighty guns plunge into the ocean, whereupon the warships release whooping siren sounds and the sailors cheer the heroes riding to join them. Franklin in his hospital bed, roused by the sound of the explosion shattering the ward window glass, is gripped by tears of joy. Success breeds peace for the surviving heroes: Andreas and Miller both make their peace with Mallory, and Andreas offering his hand to Mallory to shake as he announces he's heading back to Navarone with Maria to fight with the partisans. Even here the film doesn't forget its diastolic quality, shifting to a mood of weary and stunned reflection, finding strange, post-apocalyptic beauty in the sight of the burning citadel of Navarone, a Pharos for the sailors seeking out their comrades. Miller and Mallory exhaustedly confess they didn't think it could be done, viewing their titanic handiwork with the glaze of tired men, earth-shakers worthy of myth and just two more shit-kickers in the grand and impersonal business of war. Thompson interpolates ghostly images of the dead and absent members of the team over the ships passing by the burning mountain, with Tiomkin offering a gentle choral requiem on the soundtrack, and the film fades out with evocation of loss as well as triumph. A last flourish to remind that *The Guns of Navarone* is the quintessential wartime adventure film, and also more than that.

Ice Station Zebra (1968)

this island rod



Usually disparaged as a dull and top-heavy misfire, John Sturges' *Ice Station Zebra* can still prove a pleasurable film for those who can adjust to its particular brand of slow-burn suspense-mongering, and surprisingly dry and ironic take on the vicissitudes of Cold War-era confrontation. The film's low general reputation isn't that hard to understand, as a movie that came equipped with a heavy-hitter cast, drawn from a novel by one of the most popular thriller and adventure writers of his day, and directed by one of Hollywood's most successful yet perpetually underrated talents, and yet the result seems determined to work just a little off the expected beat. Sturges had already adapted one of Alistair MacLean's novels, *The Satan Bug* (1965), and for his second tilt at the author took on his 1963 bestseller, freely adapted for the screen by some impressive screenwriting talent including *Little Caesar* (1930) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) scribe W.R. Burnett, future *Dirty Harry* (1971) co-creator Harry Julian Fink, and *Kitten With A Whip* (1964) director Douglas Heyes. It's also compulsory to mention that Howard Hughes apparently spent his last years watching *Ice Station Zebra* on a loop, likely because it served his twinned fetishes of advanced technology under stress and contention with Communism. The film opens with an initially enigmatic depiction of rival teams of American and Soviet space technicians and military personnel, monitoring the progress of a satellite revolving around the Earth in seemingly serene remoteness, with radio telescopes and binoculars alike tilted to the heavens in their efforts to keep a close watch on this work of technical wizardry.



Soon the satellite's retrorockets are fired, causing it to fall towards the planet below, a detached capsule eventually parachuting down into boiling cloud over the Arctic and landing close to the eponymous station Zebra, a scientific research facility. A few days later, Commander James Ferraday (Rock Hudson), captain of the American nuclear submarine USS *Tigerfish*, currently stationed at Holy Loch, Scotland, is met in his hotel room by Commodore Garvey (Lloyd Nolan). Garvey assigns him to take his sub up to Zebra on a rescue mission, as the base has been afflicted by a terrible fire amidst a raging blizzard, but also as a pretext to recover the capsule. Ferraday is obliged to take along for the ride a British intelligence officer, whose name may or may not be Jones (Patrick McGoohan), and a detachment of US Marines, being led by the young and earnest Lt Walker (Tony Bill). En route at high speed through the North Atlantic, the sub makes a rendezvous to take aboard two more passengers, Marines Captain Anders (Jim Brown), sent to take over from Walker because he has combat experience, and Jones's colleague Boris Vaslov (Ernest Borgnine), a defector and counterespionage agent Jones describes as the "darndest anti-Russian Russian you'll ever meet." As the submarine tries to find a point in the ice near Zebra thin enough to crack through with the sail and surface, an act of sabotage almost sinks the *Tigerfish*, but thanks to Ferraday's leadership and the quick action by others including Jones and Anders, the ship is saved. Finally the *Tigerfish* manages to smash through the ice, and Ferraday leads a march to the station through the most furious Arctic billows.



Filmed in the vast expanse of Super Panavision, a 70mm format, and screened in Cinerama during its initial release, *Ice Station Zebra* certainly shows off its big-budget wares with plentiful, awesome shots of the real USS *Tigerfish* knifing through rolling deep ocean, usually punctuated by composer Michel Legrand's majestic if over-used, horn-heavy main theme. Sturges has fun with shots taken with cameras attached to the outside of the sub to capture the daunting imminence of submergence and the spectacle of surfacing again. In this regard *Ice Station Zebra* bridges the old-school submarine movie and future examples like *The Hunt For Red October* (1990) and *Crimson Tide* (1995), with Sturges applying a finicky-detailed directorial method to portraying the nuclear submariners with their meticulous approach to traversing the Earth's extremes. Later, once the rescuers make their way to Zebra, the scene shifts to the weather-scourged Arctic mantle, complete with great plates of ice tearing apart and crashing together at risk to man and machine. The station itself, once reached, proves a disaster zone, and more urgently as far as Jones is concerned at least, he can't find the capsule, which, he explains to Ferraday, contained a British camera and experimental American film stolen and put to use by the Soviets photographing American ICBM bases, but also their own, making the prize one of supreme value to both sides.



Despite the blockbuster infrastructure, the bulk of the film is far more intense and interpersonal than expected, and hinges upon the carefully diagrammed tensions between the main players and uncertainty as to just who the lurking traitor in their midst could be. The stalwart Yanks stiffen at the presence of the Russky Vaslov on their ship, but Jones's trust in the man he brought across the Iron Curtain himself is deep, and he instead latches onto Anders as the one unknown quantity aboard, one who might well have taken the place of another Anders at any point on his journey from what Anders himself will only describe as "South East Asia." Much of the film's entertainment value stems from the innate strain manifesting when a number of high-powered characters, and the actors playing them, are forced to play nice in cramped and provocative settings, playing a game for stakes few of them entirely understand. The idea is that each of these players on the Cold War chess board has been set where they are to fulfil a specific function, much as Ferraday's crew is a well-oiled gang of ultra-professionals who know well and wisely how to stick to their specific function in the machine. The difference being that the interlopers are not entirely sure what use they'll be put to when the moment of necessity arrives.



That the script is punctuated by some excellent, very wry humour helps greatly, much of it delivered by a particularly cagey Hudson and a McGoohan in top form, in a movie he shot on a brief break from making his TV series *The Prisoner* and bringing his characterisation from that show over almost intact, although Jones isn't as unflappable as Number 6. Jones deftly manages to patronise Ferraday soon after meeting even whilst affecting to not want to patronise him, in the course of fending off his queries about what the actual object of their mission is. A few minutes later, when Jones enquires, "Might I ask when we'll be arriving?", Ferraday replies with a tight drawl, "Yes – you may ask." "I've never been on a submarine before," a nervous Marine confesses to Ferraday, who replies with assurance, "Don't worry son – I have." Anders' stern attitude to command, and particularly his insistence on playing the martinet with officers he feels are too popular, registers upon first being introduced to Walker. Anders fixes the young lieutenant with a take-a-bite-out-of-your-lily-white-ass look and warns him there will be an inspection of the troops: "And Lieutenant – it will be a bitch." Later, when Vaslov asks Anders during a particularly tense moment what he would like his epitaph to be, Anders barks, "Knock it off," which Vaslov accepts with amused pleasure as an ideal answer to his question.



Anders is nonetheless cut down to size by Jones with casual aplomb: “A bullet travels just as fast up here as it does there,” he tells Jones, meaning in the Arctic compared to Vietnam, only for Jones to comment with smug exactitude how it doesn’t actually because of the different air density, leaving the formidable Marine smouldering in speechless discontent. Brown, with his impervious-looking physique and .45 calibre glare, was rapidly maturing as a serious screen presence, and he’s cast with a sense of ambiguity as the kind of authority figure who cheers nobody up, and yet saves lives: it only becomes clear what a potentially great asset he should have been when he’s removed from the equation. Hudson and McGoohan meanwhile maintain a fascinating tension of persona and acting style that suits their characters to the bone, both men grasping Sturges’ directorial patience as a guiding principle. Sturges, a former editor turned director, applied his hand to many genres in the 1950s, but really made his name with a string of successful Westerns and action movies, culminating in two perennial favourites for spending a weekend afternoon, the breezy, colourful *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *The Great Escape* (1962). In his best work however Sturges displayed a fine talent for slow, careful, insistently ratcheting suspense narratives, particularly with his greatest film, *Bad Day at Black Rock* (1955). In the 1960s he began exploring a more elastic sense of time and pacing whilst specialising in mechanistic thrillers that depend on precise detail and an agonising intensity wrung from those details, culminating with his space drama *Marooned* (1969).



Ice Station Zebra is similarly obsessed with portraying arch-professional cool and concentration, stretched like a thin, taut membrane over imminent chaos and danger, and the only thing keeping those forces at bay, more vital by far than steel or jet engines or even nuclear power. McGoohan’s Jones is the personification of this: tackling every conversation with a judo expert’s blend of force and suppleness, he fends off his companions with acerbic and cynical humour and an air of driven, almost neurotic immersion in his strange little corner of life. His reflexive self-preserving talent sees him awaken from sleep and jam a pistol in the face of a luckless submariner. He finally explodes after the attempted sinking of the boat, shivering from immersion in icy water and sucking down coffee laced with medicinal brandy and bellowing at Ferraday a demand to “Get me there!” Vaslov exploring the interior of the submarine by contrast floats within a quiet, almost dreamy texture, and Ferraday, called in to keep an eye on the wandering exile, introduces him to the blazing power of the nuclear reactor: “It seems...almost benevolent,” Vaslov comments with awe, gazing into the Gorgon’s glare.



The rescuers' arrival at Zebra itself shifts the scene to a blasted, burned-out place littered by bedraggled and traumatised survivors and stiff corpses, anticipating Mikhail Kalatozov's similar evocation of a world of the dead and frozen beyond the limits of the proper human realm in *The Red Tent* (1969), as well as the cold-sculpted wreckage of *The Thing's* (1982) Norwegian outpost. Goodwin and Halliwell, the British and Soviet agents who were present in the station, have killed each-other in a localised outbreak of hot war amidst the cold, both physical and political, now only to be described in confused reminiscences and the general scene of carnage they wrought. Meanwhile our heroes find the location of the particular McGuffin they seek a mystery they don't have enough time to solve. McGoohan delivers a master class in turning an often unhappy actor chore, delivering the crucial exposition about the camera and the satellite and its role in the plot, into an aria of verbal and intellectual dexterity: noting that Halliwell came to the camp with "impeccable qualifications" it was immediately obvious he was the inevitable Soviet plant at the base precisely because he "became impeccable."



Ice Station Zebra is punctuated with outbreaks of violence and high drama but actively resists becoming a shoot-'em-up, playing through an interesting and purposeful anticlimax. The near-sinking of

the *Tigerfish* is a terrific variation on a pretty familiar situation, justifying the seemingly dispassionate realism Sturges applies for much of the film's first half, as Ferraday and crew attempt the laborious process of feeling out the ice pack for a gap, tense patience suddenly supplanted by nightmarish frenzy and urgency, and the honed calm of the submariners collides with life-and-death pressure. A young sailor, checking the torpedo tubes before Ferraday takes the measure of blowing a hole in the ice with a torpedo, is swatted in the face by a jet of water exploding from the tube, the torrent quickly starting to flood the craft: the flood is quickly held at bay but the submarine keeps sinking, reactor pushed to the edge of meltdown in a desperate effort to control the plunge. Ferraday, at his command post with his boat sinking into the crushing depths, gently requests one of anxious praying sailors to be quiet: "Some of us are trying to think." Meanwhile Vatsov and Jones are trapped in the torpedo room where the leak began, Vaslov screaming in panic as his claustrophobic streak activates, whilst Anders with the Marines, trapped in the next compartment, wait for a levelling-out with white-knuckle anxiety, the mixture of killing cold water and blasting air pressure tormenting all.



Just as strong but in a completely different key is the film's only other real action sequence, when the hidden agent finally reveals himself to be Vaslov, having been engaged in a long game of deception for just such a moment of necessity: Jones, having located Halliwell's hidden tracking device that can lead him to the hidden capsule, stashed in the petrol tank of a snowplough, is ambushed and walloped in the face by Vaslov with a crowbar. Anders comes upon the scene but Vaslov gets a gun on him first and, with a lilt of challenging humour, demands Anders try to save his own life by attacking him with the crowbar, hoping Anders will make it look convincingly like a real fight before he inevitably gets plugged. Anders puts up a better fight than expected however, almost defeating Vaslov, but is gunned down by the dazed Jones, reawakening and thinking his friend being overpowered by the traitor. The penny nonetheless drops for Jones later when Soviet paratroopers, led by the glacier-browed and menacing Colonel Ostrovksy (Alf Kjellin), are dropped around Zebra when the blizzard lets up, leading to a stand-off between the two factions just as Ferraday and his men locate and begin extracting the booby-trapped capsule.



It's here that *Ice Station Zebra* writes itself into a corner, and fails to deliver a pay-off that feels worthy of the patient construction, even if it's coherent as a mini-myth about the oncoming era of détente that would lurch on until the end of the Soviet era. Finding no advantage possible in the emerging epoch of space exploration and nuclear Armageddon when the world has become dominated by abstract political theatre and technological amanuenses, the two warrior leaders hold off starting carnage even though, as Ostrovsky admits, "My personal nature is a violent one," meeting his equal and opposite in Ferraday in the flesh. Lingering shots of Soviet MiG fighters roaring across the Arctic wastes strongly recall the flight of the *Leper Colony* in *Dr. Strangelove, or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) (particularly given the rather obvious model work), whilst the setting and toe-to-toe confrontation recalls *The Bedford Incident* (1965), and yet Sturges' film offers a pointed counteractive to those films' fearful embrace of apocalypse, concluding that in the end sanity still rules human affairs. Both Ferraday and Jones promise and threaten Ostrovsky at the end that one day they will meet again: "Dosvedanya." But the cover story, in a sardonic signature, is a paean to the appearance of cooperation, a newsroom ticker scroll hailing a successful joint NATO-Soviet rescue operation, when in fact men have died on both sides, and the prize offering advantage in the great game of mutually assured destruction goes up in flames when Ferraday sets off its self-destruct right on the point of falling into his opponents' hands – a flourish of deflation recycled by *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). *Ice Station Zebra* certainly isn't as exciting or epic as its pretences so hopefully trumpet, but, like the submarine slinking under the ice, there is a good film underneath them.



Shane (1953)

film freedonia



Director: George Stevens

Screenwriter: A.B. Guthrie Jr

The word 'iconic' is certainly overused, but if any film deserves the appellation it would be George Stevens' *Shane*, a film that became an instant reference point for a specific branch of modern cinematic storytelling. If *Seven Samurai* (1954) laid down the essential blueprint for genre films about a diverse team of heroes banding together to fight an enemy, *Shane* did the same for any movie about a solitary hero with a violent past trying and failing to find a new life, eventually forced to pull the guns out again in the name of a righteous new cause. Plenty of movies had dealt with similar themes before, of course, but *Shane* set out to distill the theme on a level of perfect representation, mythologising a genre and placing it in a vital dialectic with its audience, presenting the very idea of cinema heroism in a mythic cartouche, enclosed by elemental moral drama. Perhaps *Shane* is self-conscious almost to fault, one reason why its reputation in some quarters has declined in recent years, but it's hard to get away from how exactly Stevens read both the audience of the 1950s and the imagination of other filmmakers. A grand sprawl of screen heroes from The Man With No Name to John Rambo to Robocop and Wolverine and beyond have *Shane* in their genes, even if so many of them discarded the original meaning of the character.



Stevens' emergence as a maker of serious, thoughtful, often epic films in the 1950s stood in stark contrast to his reputation as a great comedy filmmaker in the 1930s and '40s. Stevens, a California native born in 1904, had dabbled in photography since he was 10 years old, and his expertise by the time he hit his late teens quickly landed him working as an assistant cameraman for the independent impresario Hal Roach. Stevens helped make comedian Stan Laurel a movie star by applying his photographic ken to make Laurel's eyes register on film, as their light blue hue was hard to pick up on standard film at the time. This proved the key to Stevens' career, as he subsequently shot dozens of Laurel and Hardy shorts, as well as writing gags for them. Finally breaking with Roach as he was itching to make more substantial films, Stevens got his first shot at directing a feature at Universal, with *The Cohens and Kellys in Trouble* (1933), but it was *Alice Adams* (1935), starring Katharine Hepburn, which made his name. He followed it with the much-loved Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers vehicle *Swing Time* (1936) and other musical-comedies, and ventured into historical adventure film with 1939's *Gunga Din*, a costly production that still proved a major hit.



Stevens ran into trouble on *Penny Serenade* (1941) and *Woman of the Year* (1942), both of which were subjected to heavy interference and reshoots, but had further success with *The Talk of the Town* (1942) and *The More The Merrier* (1943). *The Talk of the Town*, whilst still a comedy, offered commentary on mob rule and the meaning of justice, signalling Stevens was already turning more serious-minded at a time when he was planning to join the war effort and was becoming fervently anti-Nazi. Stevens joined the US Army Signal Corps and was sent to Europe to shoot documentary footage. Stevens' camera was turned on important events like D-Day and the meeting of US and Soviet forces at the Elbe River, but the experience that permanently marked Stevens was participating in the liberation of Dachau, capturing vital primary evidence of the Holocaust used at the Nuremberg Trials. When he returned from the war and resumed his Hollywood career, his first movie was the comedy-drama *I Remember Mama* (1948), whilst resisting the reactionary movement gripping Hollywood during the Red Scare. He had a major success with an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, retitled *A Place In The Sun* (1951), winning him the first of two Oscars for directing, with his second coming for 1956's *Giant*. Stevens' cinematic technique evolved along with his ambitions, sharing something of William Wyler's penchant for carefully unfolding scenes and strenuously developed dramatic rhythm.



Shane, the film Stevens made in between his two Oscar-winners, is still likely his most famous work but gained no such distinction as Westerns were still considered a bit beneath Oscars. Stevens in making *Shane* had similar motivations to Fred Zinneman in making the previous year's *High Noon*: Zinneman had lost family in the Holocaust, and both films present potent allegories about drawing a line in the sand against evil, purposefully reconstructing the traditional Western hero into metaphors for individual, masculine quality in relation to society at large. And yet *Shane* articulates a subtly different ethos to *High Noon*. Stevens' disgust with war and bloodshed was articulated through a film profoundly uneasy about the mythos of the gunslinger even as it seems to hone that mythos to a perfect form. *Shane* was based on a novel by Jack Schaefer, a former journalist and student of both American history and Greco-Roman mythology, fusing the two interests when he decided to follow in the footsteps of his favourite writer as a boy, Zane Grey. Schaefer had a long career as a Western novelist after *Shane* made his reputation, also providing the source material for the films *Tribute to a Bad Man* (1957) and *Monte Walsh* (1970) before becoming an impassioned conservationist, and he later sourly noted that *Shane* was a story about defending civilisation when he felt increasingly opposed to it. Whilst he liked the film of *Shane*, he didn't like the star it chose, Alan Ladd, a notoriously short and spare actor, where Schaefer had imagined a type with an aura of incipient darkness and violence about him, citing George Raft.



It's not that hard to see Schaefer's point, but Ladd nonetheless becomes inseparable from the role within the opening scene. Ladd's Shane is first glimpsed under the title card declaring his name at the very start, alone and on horseback, riding down through mountain forest and descending towards the plain below. Stevens' mythmaking approach is evinced in his establishing evocations of the location where most of the film plays out, underneath the soaring, jagged, snow and cloud-bedecked Grand Teton Mountains, the plain a fertile, muddy region lingering under the spiritual reaches of the peaks. This setting becomes a natural amphitheatre for the drama about to unfold, as young Joey (Brandon deWilde), son of farming couple Joe (Van Heflin) and Marian Starrett (Jean Arthur), stalks a deer with an unloaded rifle. He spies Shane riding across the plain, momentarily framed by the deer's antlers as the animal lifts its head in curiosity. That shot betrays both Stevens' newly exacting visual method, and also a ghostly echo of his old comic felicity, except the visual joke is servicing an already-accruing air of legend around Shane. When seen up close, Shane proves armed with Ladd's charismatic smile and wavy blonde hair, a particularly American, lightly weathered version of a knight errant out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting, appearing like a guardian angel sent to the Starretts at the outset of great tribulation. Clint Eastwood, evidently a major fan of *Shane*, would invert this mystique for his *High Plains Drifter* (1973) where the lone intruder proves to be a demonic punisher, and then twist it back to a darker, harder but once more heroic take for *Pale Rider* (1984).



Shane's image is further enhanced by his clothing, clad in light-brown buckskins that at once evoke the white knight but also his status as an emanation of the Western landscape, a figure from the frontier age, already brushing anachronism compared to the flannel-wearing Joe Starrett, who represents the oncoming age of settlement and stolid values. Shane's hat is also light, although not white, lest things get too Roy Rogers. His pistol hangs from a holster on his hip linked to a black belt with silver decorations, his livery mythic but also like a stain girdling his clothes. He spins about, ready to draw in a flash when he hears Joey cocking the unloaded rifle, but also displays precise self-control, only fingering the handle of the gun. Starrett greets Shane with casual decency as he offers him a drink of water, whilst Marian watches warily from a window in their cabin. A number of men on horseback come towards the farm, and Starrett's manner changes, taking the gun of Joey and holding it to Shane and telling him to leave. Shane, bewildered, asks Starrett to lower the gun and then he'll go: "I'd like it to be my idea." Starrett does so and Shane rides away, only to return and listen to the confrontation between the farmer and the riders, who prove to be cattleman Rufus Ryker (Emile Meyer) and a gang of heavies in his employ. Ryker has been intimidating Starrett and the other farmers in the area, who have claimed land under a new law, because they're blocking his cattle's access to water, and now that he's landed a large contract to supply meat he tells Starrett he means to drive all the farmers out.



Ryker is rattled when Shane reappears and declares himself “a friend of Starrett’s,” and he and his gang ride off. Starrett, grateful for Shane’s support, sheepishly reveals the rifle wasn’t loaded, and invites Shane to dinner. During the meal Shane is again startled by an unexpected noise and reaches for his gun, which Joey has been gawking at in fascination, with startling reflexive speed: Joey retreats against the wall in alarm. Starrett declares the only way he’ll ever leave his claim is in a pine box, but also laments not having anyone to help do the work on the farm after his last hand was roughed up by Rykers’ men. Shane, to pay the family back for their hospitality, takes up the task that Starrett was labouring at when he arrived, trying to laboriously chop out an insistent tree stump near the house. Starrett comes to aid him and the two men cement their fast friendship on the job, Stevens turning hard work into an essential ritual with montage as the rhythmic axe strokes gouge through the wood. Finally, at dusk, the two men finally snap the stump free of its roots: “Sometimes nothin’ll do but your own sweat and muscle,” Starrett comments after refusing to use horses to perform the last, most arduous task.



Shane sleeps out the night in the stable, and the next day agrees to take a wagon out to fetch some wire for Starrett from Grafton's, a combination of store and saloon and the centre of commerce in the area: Shane makes a point of going to town without wearing his gun. Shane passes through two more rituals that knit him into the life of the homesteaders: he buys some working ordinary clothes from Grafton's, and gets a quick lesson in the travails of the farmers when he's bullied by one of Rykers' men, Chris Calloway (Ben Johnson), who mocks Shane for ordering soda pop –actually for Joey – and tosses a glass of liquor over him. Shane stoically takes the treatment, and his apparent placidity is reported by Frank 'Stonewall' Torrey (Elisha Cook Jr) with disdain when he joins a meeting of several farmers in Starrett's cabin: Shane's apparent cowardice reflects badly on them all, and Shane bows out of the meeting. The farmers argue about how to respond to Ryker's coercion, with Starrett plainly their natural leader, able to articulate his passion for his land and only matched in his steadfastness by Torrey, who, as a former Confederate still shot through with fighting spirit, is a figure of some fun amongst the farmers. The farmers eventually elect to next go to town together for safety and mutual assurance.



Stevens' visual language constantly depicts Shane as a fringe figure in this scene, glimpsed sitting on the floor as if not allowed to sit at the grown-ups table, and after retreating outside appearing at the window of a room with Joey and Marian in it, lit from within, rendered a shadowy and slightly eerie figure, even as Marian suggests she understands his motives for avoiding a fight and offers the implicit belonging of the house interior. "Don't get to liking Shane too much," Marian tells Joey, knowing well Joey is already fixating on Shane as the embodiment of everything his young boy's brain needs and desires, an image of omniscient heroism, much more than his tough but mudbound and terminally responsible father. Meanwhile Marian is both wary of Shane but also plainly intrigued by him, entirely understandably; after all, he looks like a movie star. Stevens might get just a little too insistent as he shows Marian literally serving up apple pie as the original and archetypal American matriarch, a status emphasised early in the film as she looks out from within the Starrett cabin at the approaching Shane whilst young and old Joe Starrett are ranged without, even as the choice of casting Arthur sees her old sense of chirpy humour and sly sexiness glinting through the silt of domestic nurturing and mundanity.



Most genre storytelling depends on a degree of good faith in assuming a discrepancy between what such storytelling portrays and real life, utilising heightened metaphors that occur all the time in fiction but which if actually happened in the world we live would seem bizarre and perverse. This was true as far back as when *The Odyssey* presented its hyperbolic survey of battling monsters and slaying ruffians as a reflection of more banal but no less agonising travails in keeping house and home, as it is now when young moviegoers find parental figures in movie heroes. It's true of romantic melodrama, which finds ways of heightening the very familiar travails of love, and is particularly true of genres like the Western and other action films, which enact on a mythic level very ordinary human problems and processes: few of us have ever marched down a street at high noon for a gunfight, but most of us have gathered together the guts for some moment in life that damn well felt like it. I remember as a boy watching James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) with a friend in the movie theatre – Cameron's film being another inescapably indebted to *Shane*. During the climactic scene of the Terminator destroying itself, my friend wept hot tears. At the time I was bewildered, but later I realised that the Terminator, having evolved into a perfectly selfless and protective father figure, was a dream figure in such contrast to my friend's own petty, abusive father.



On the other hand, only fools and psychopaths try to live their lives like a gunslinger in the contemporary world, and there's an age when kids are growing up when parents are especially watchful of what lessons children learn from what they see and hear and read, to make sure they understand this essential disparity. *Shane* draws much of its power from dramatizing this problem of art and life rather than merely agreeing to convention, by presenting Shane as the intrusion of the movies into life. On the one hand *Shane* ever more heavily towards the mythic in its visual and plot cues, with Shane as seen and remembered by Joey a figure out an almost Jungian unconsciousness, emblazoned with virtuous traits and superhuman talents, the mystically refined version of his father: a version seen more from his father or mother's viewpoints might have quite a different cast. At the same time Stevens applies realistic interrogation of the meaning of violence and the nature of those who, regardless of their reasons, wield violence. Shane is explicitly conceived a hero but also a terrifying person, made clear early in the film with his repeated reaching for his gun, even the mere manifestation of such quick and anxious impulses a violation of the usual pace of things on the Starrett farm. As Shane tells Ryker in the climactic scene, he knows his day is ending, but unlike the feudal lord-playing Ryker, he knows it. This wasn't entirely original territory for the Western. John Ford for instance had with *My Darling Clementine* (1946) mused with the force of parable on the tide of settlement and civilisation urging along the swashbuckling heroes and villains of the frontier. Henry King's artful *The Gunfighter* (1949) portrayed a famous fast draw whose life has been ruined by his prowess, reaching the end of the line almost maliciously grateful to pass his infamy off onto a deserving inheritor.



Shane nonetheless took this a step further in considering its relationship with the viewer watching it, particularly kids who went off to the movies to cheer on heroes like the Lone Ranger. Joey, from the moment he sees Shane, knows he's the embodiment of all the things he urgently wants as a boy – a source of excitement, a yardstick of ultimate ability, a fearless protector. Joey delivers a barrage of questions at his father as Starrett chops woods, like kids all through history, pondering whether his father can shoot better than Shane or whip him in a fight, in a manner pretty much the same as wondering if Superman can outrun The Flash. These questions prove eventually pertinent to the drama of *Shane*, which also presents its title character as an historical prototype for a different, nascent kind of hero, belonging to a genre branching off from the Western and often today seen as having supplanted it: the superhero, as Shane is depicted as consciously removing his uniform and adopting a kind of secret identity, suppressing his true, world-shaking abilities for the sake fitting in with others, much like Superman, and much like Superman, as per Quentin Tarantino's dictum, for Shane the alter ego is the false self, the peaceable farmhand, an impression of normality that can't be sustained. Shane's choice of remaining pacifist when Calloway bullies him and Torrey accuses him of cowardice is comparable to moments in films like *Superman II* (1980) and *Black Panther* (2017) where the superhero is robbed of their powers and must face the roundelay of humiliation and coercion that ordinary life.



The massed farmers' trip to town provides a fulcrum of both story and behaviour, as this time, whilst newfound friends shop, Shane again visits the saloon. Calloway again starts bullying him, but this time Shane buys two whiskey, tosses them in his face, and punches him so hard Calloway goes crashing through into the neighbouring store. Joey watches all the action whilst munching on striped candy with wide-eyed fascination. When Ryker and all his men gang up on Shane, he's able to fight them off only so long, and finally they have him at bay with Ryker punching him. This finally drives Starrett to grab a pickaxe handle and wade into the action, walloping Ryker and his brother Morgan (John Dierkes), and the brawl becomes more even. Again, any number of Westerns had sported a saloon fight before *Shane*, but Stevens' specific choices distinguish it, presenting the explosion of violence as more a statement of character than a mere jolt of colourful action. Shane's choice of weapons, fists, confirms he's a tough man even without his pistols, his choice of going it alone that he has guts, but his choice of mixing up this time is also calculated, a show of solidarity, showing the farmers that the Rykers can be stood up to. A pissed-off Starrett is proven an effective force in his own right, and the cementing of Starrett and Shane's friendship is signalled in one of the great fleeting moments in cinema, as they fight back to back and swap grins as they realise they're winning and, more importantly, they each have a genuine friend.



The staging is worth noting too: most other such fights in movie saloons take place in large expanses of space, but Stevens emphasises the cramped, crude, unrefined state of Grafton's by often filming the action from behind stanchions and railings. Shane turns the lack of space to his advantage in preventing the Ryker heavies from using their numbers too readily. All with Joey and Marian looking on with awe and delight. Finally Grafton (Paul McVey) himself demands the fight stop and tells Shane and Ryker to back out of the saloon, assuring them that they're won. The brawl confirms to Joey that Shane is every inch the hero he hoped, and leaves Marian rattled on some profound level as she begs her husband to hold her as they all settle down for the night. The fight also proves not an effective pushback against Ryker but a goad that makes the cattleman up the ante. He hires a gunman, Jack Wilson, who enters the film at a slow canter on a horse: that choice was apparently the result of the actor playing Wilson not being very good on a horse. The actor, Jack Palance, had made his name as Marlon Brando's understudy in the stage production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and was billed here as Walter Jack Palance. His lack of confidence on a horse nonetheless played to his advantage, immediately giving the impression that Wilson doesn't need to move fast for anyone.



Palance's Wilson moves through the rest of the film like some man-sized and bipedal lizard, swathed in black-on-white clothes, dark eyes flicking about as he halts at the doors of Grafton's and looks within, his lips seemingly perpetually locked in a faint smirk. Stevens, in an unusual touch for the time, breaks up the single shot of Wilson's entrance into the saloon with a dissolve, resuming study of his almost insolently patient stride as he moves up close to the camera: Wilson bends cinematic as well as human time around him by sheer force of intimidation, his presence ghostly as Shane's inevitable nemesis and representative of evil. As if sensing the changed mood of the valley, Shane meanwhile gives in to Joey's cajoling and starts giving him a lesson in the basics of gunslinging technique and shooting, noting ruefully that most gunfighters have their own little tricks and modifications of the basic rules of thumb, whilst Shane himself comments that if you're good you only need one gun. Finally, he gives a display of his ability, Joey's eyes almost bulging out of their sockets as he beholds Shane's amazing speed and precision, the blasts of his pistol a cannonade shaking the mountains, his Olympian promise finally confirmed.



Marian, watching on unnoticed for much of the lesson, regards the scene with a palpable mixture of admiration and delight in Shane playing the mentor and also deep unease at the dark magic he's teaching her son. She calls an end to it when he does finally shoot, and confesses to Shane she thinks the valley would be better off without a single gun in it. "A gun is a tool, no better and no worse than any other tool," Shane comments, "A gun is as good or bad as the man using it." Which today sounds way too much like standard-issue gun-nut apologia, but in terms of Shane's character and the entrance of Wilson, an essential, Manichaeian opposition, is immediately illustrated, whilst Marian's point is also, more subtly borne out: good and bad men may square off at any time and place, but when said good and bad men do it with guns, one or both will end up dead. At Grafton's the storekeeper argues with Ryker, who notes that up until now he's avoided gunfighting in accordance with the new laws, but Wilson's presence confirms that's now at an end. Ryker's actual desire, which Wilson is all too happy to make tactical reality, is to perform a few acts of targeted terrorism and assassination to scare the homesteaders off. Wilson finds an ideal target in Torrey, who angrily berates Ryker when he stops for a drink at Grafton's and declares he won't be driven off.



Wilson first arrives early on the Fourth of July, his charged first meeting with his new employers and the tense Grafton contrasting the knockabout rowdiness of the men celebrating outside with horse racing and bareback riding. The homesteaders meanwhile gather at one farmhouse for more genteel celebration, and the day proves to also be the anniversary of the Starretts' marriage. Starrett happily lets Shane dance with Marian, but becomes downcast in watching their well-matched movements: Shane is a self-projection figure for Starrett as much as he's a hero figure for Joey and a romantic fantasy for Marian, inhabiting the version of himself he wants to be with Marian. The confluence of Independence Day and the Starretts' marriage identifies them as the essential Americans, but Wilson himself is also therefore as quintessentially American. Torrey brings the farmers news of the newcomer, and Shane confirms that he's heard of Wilson and his prowess as a gunman. The shadow of menace pervades the celebration even as nothing happens yet. Wilson waits until Torrey next comes to town with his friend and fellow farmer Swede (Douglas Spencer), this time wearing a gun to show his lack of fear. Wilson baits him into drawing: Torrey reaches for his gun but is astounded to see Wilson whip his out far faster, catching him with barrel half-raised. Wilson grins in delight and shoots Torrey dead.



Shane's style contains multitudes. The build-up to Torrey's killing, emphasizing the squelchy, muddy ground around the roughhewn structures, with a thunderstorm rumbling on the horizon, lays down the basis for 1970s "mud and blood" Westerns, the aesthetic mooted here powerfully informing the likes of Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971) and Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980): the Altman film would make the debt more obvious in quoting Torrey's killing when Keith Carradine's young cowpoke is similarly murdered. Sam Peckinpah credited this scene as also setting the scene for more realistic and bloody violence in the genre, as Stevens broke the old Production Code rule about a gun and its victim not being in the same shot, and in the cold, unremitting nature of the scene, with Torrey collapsing in the muck, immediately dead. Wilson draws Torrey into conversation from the wooden sidewalk whilst Torrey remains with feet in the mud, so mesmerised despite his big talk that he even walks backwards as Wilson struts along, before insulting the memory of 'Stonewall' Torrey's namesake, finally making the anointed victim jerk out his gun. Cook had long cornered the market for playing overcompensating men, and Torrey fits him to a tee, the actor suggesting the simmering fear and alienation of the former Rebel (*Shane* being made a time when such movies often depicted Confederates as figures of ornery pathos as historical losers, a notion we ironically have no time for today) who puts up with being razed by his fellow farmers in part because of big front. He is at once both an essential representation of the ordinary farmers, with more tenacity than sense, a big-talking and pugnacious fool who gets himself killed stupidly, and also just a normal man who finds himself the target of a pure sadist because some other man wants to make money and restore his realm.



The shock of death ripples through the locality, and most of the “sodbusters” as Morgan derisively calls them, want to leave after Swede brings his body around to each farm in testimony and warning. Still, when the farmers gather to bury Torrey in a solemn ceremony on the cemetery hill above the town, Starrett makes a plea for sticking things out, and when one of the homesteaders’ just-vacated house is set on fire by Ryker’s men, they rush reflexively to save the house, and all agree to help rebuild it. Stevens’ attentive visual exposition sees him briefly noting Calloway’s face as he and the other Ryker men watch from the town below, Calloway’s dark and troubled expression suggesting he’s sickened by the murder and also has been positively influenced by Shane’s rectitude. Cinematographer Loyal Griggs’ remarkable work here captured him an Oscar. Stevens’ carefully ritualistic filming of the funeral and careful use of the landscape to imbue it with spiritual import suggests, like his slow-burn violent scenes, Stevens had learnt something from Ford, although Ford might have been clucking his tongue a little with the funeral scene in *The Searchers* (1956), where John Wayne’s Ethan Edwards is itching to shatter the composition and get back on the hunt: Ethan himself in Ford’s film has Shane-like characteristics but also as a character pointedly despoils them.



This points perhaps to the way Stevens' exacting artistry throughout *Shane* can be seen as both a great strength and a liability. He laboured hard to create a beautiful and thematically intelligible work, but the glossy Technicolor idealisation of both the location shooting and the studio work, and of the actors' faces, fights to a certain extent with his grittier impulses, apparent in Stevens' carefully wrought historical detail and realism of setting and costuming, save the Manichaeian clothing of *Shane* and Wilson, and the more textured and foreboding imagery Griggs captures, particularly in Torrey's death and at the very end. If *Shane* has sunk in some modern critical estimation compared to the seething human drama and neurotic antiheroes of Anthony Mann and Samuel Fuller, or the terse, tough contemplations of Budd Boetticher, as well as Ford and Howard Hawks in the annals of 1950s Westerns, and their general avoidance of the kind of simple good-vs-evil battle Stevens depicts, it's for this. Shane enters the lives of the Starretts in a manner not all that different from the antiheroine of Luis Bunuel's *Susana* (1951), provoking them all to displays of unruly need and accidentally assaulting the underpinnings of the kind of settled, conventional prosperity the Starretts, despite their relatively rough current circumstances, are plainly destined to spawn progeny into. The concluding passages of the plot indeed hinge entirely on *Shane* heading out to battle specifically to protect the family and keep them intact. The exchange between Shane and Calloway in their first saloon encounter – "You speaking to me?" "I don't see nobody else standing there." – would be lifted and freely quoted by Robert De Niro for *Taxi Driver* (1976), in partial homage and partial despoiling of the macho ritual.



On the other hand, *Shane* is far from flat in obeying its myth-making and allegorical urges. Ryker, visiting Starrett to try one last time to urge him to leave and making conciliatory gestures to buy his farm and run his cattle, expresses his viewpoint with surprising passion and authority, rendering him more than just a plot device. His frustration at having once been master of all he surveyed after taking all the risks of establishing the region and being pinched and cut down to size by Johnny-come-latelys, his memories of dead companions and old, niggling wounds, all emerge with intriguing depth, even it doesn't alter Ryker's implacable purpose and willing to unleash Wilson, and Ryker continues to mouth self-justifications to the end. Whilst Ryker's argument goes nowhere, Shane and Wilson lay eyes on each-other for the first time, each man sizing the other up and knowing exactly where this situation is going to end. Stevens' attentiveness to detail often still carries hints of the old humourist, as in that gag with the antlers at the outset, and later touches, like noting a young girl at the July 4 dance hoisting her skirt up over her head in delight, or Morgan, shot by Shane, mimicking the posture of stuffed and mounted owl with splayed wings just below his vantage in Grafton's store.



Torrey's death and the burned homestead finally drive Starrett to what he feels is an inevitable confrontation with Ryker, which is exactly what the rancher now wants and expects, knowing Starrett must die to finally dislodge the other farmers. Calloway, overhearing this, goes to the Starrett farm and tells Shane Starrett is being set up for death: the two men shake hands, and Calloway flees. Marian's pleas to her husband that the farm isn't worth anyone's life inevitably collides with the basic proposition that, well, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. Starrett however finds the door blocked by Shane, wearing his buckskins, hat, and guns once more. Shane coolly states his intention to stop Starrett, and the two men start brawling: initially Stevens keeps the viewpoint inside the cabin with Marian and Joey as they spring from window to window, catching glimpses of the two men amidst whorls of dust and swinging limbs, before they dash out and watch the furious tussle as it literally stirs the farm to chaos with animals frightened and struggling to escape whilst Marian screams unnoticed. The scene mirrors the episode with the tree stump, and the stump itself lies as a silent witness to the fight, with Starrett pinioning Shane against it. Starrett does indeed as Joey once asked prove every bit Shane's physical equal, forcing Shane to knock his friend out with the butt of his gun. This shocks and briefly earns Joey's anger, but that's already forgotten by the time Shane runs out, having taken leave of Marian in a vignette charged with undercurrents even as it plays out with perfect formality.



The music score by the usually great Victor Young often sounds a little overbearing during *Shane*, particularly in the awkwardly florid patches after the saloon fight scene, whereas the absence of music from the scene of Torrey's death is part of what makes it so strong: the familiar codes of adornment for Hollywood cinema hadn't quite caught up with what Stevens was doing with his visual rhythms. But Young certainly gets it together as Shane rides down to the town and his scoring goes for grand, percussive effect as Shane makes his fateful ride and Ryker and his men silently and sullenly prepare for their planned assassination: the thudding music is matched to the trot of Shane's horse, moving at a steady, remorseless pace down through the hills, the jagged mountains above now dark sentinels. Stevens cuts to fast-moving tracking shots of Joey and his dog chasing after him in an urgent effort to catch up, to gain the testament of Shane. Stevens' shots close in on three trees just outside the town until they become the archway greeting Shane's appearance at the place of battle. Joey's pursuit takes him through the graveyard, Stevens dissolving slowly to Shane on the last leg of his journey to suggest death hanging over him.



Shane finds Starrett sitting calmly at a table at one extreme of the saloon and with Wilson quietly drinking coffee at the other, and Morgan is hiding above with a rifle. The most interesting aspect of this as far as climactic gunfights go is the determinedly modest scale of it, retreating once again within the cramped confines of Grafton's, which only amplifies the intensity of Shane's level glare at the boding, grinning Wilson, finally declaring his unswerving intent as he straightens from his posture leaning against the bar to one matching Wilson's, giving him the taunt Torrey would have – "I've heard that you're a low-down Yankee liar," that signals game on, much to Wilson's immense pleasure. Wilson draws first, but Shane of course is faster, his gun out and blasting Wilson away in the blink of an eye with a thunderous cannonade. Shane then pivots and shoots Ryker as he tries to pull his gun but only succeeds in shooting the lampshade over his head. Shane surveys the dead, and, in a gesture that cementing his aura (and an eternal reference point for filmmakers), spins his pistol on his finger and slots it back in the holster, his gunslinging no mere violent labour but the work of an artist, placing his signature on the finished masterpiece.



But Shane fails to notice Morgan, and Joey's warning shout doesn't stop Shane being hit by Morgan's bullet before Shane plugs him. Wounded but seemingly alright, Shane takes his leave of Joey, explaining as gently as he can why he can't return to the farm and pick up as if he didn't just kill three men, and also passes on fateful advice to Joey to take care of his parents, anticipating the fateful moment when Joey becomes the carer. Cue one of the most famous scenes in cinema as Joey continues to cry for Shane to come back as he rides off, his path taking up through the cemetery and under the mountains and soaring clouds. A scene rightly exalted and endlessly mimicked for the beauty and concision of Stevens' images and sounds, and the eerie, almost primal longing expressed through them, the boy crying out for his hero even as he passes over the horizon into legend, someone to be remembered as the incarnation of an ideal. The old argument about whether or not Shane dies misses the very point of what Shane achieves with his last gesture. So long as he can stay upright in his saddle and keep moving on until he exits Joey's sight, and that of the movie audience, he can't ever die.

Extraction II (2023)

this island rod



Sam Hargrave's *Extraction* was the sort of movie that once would have been a lock to debut on the big screen, and would have been seen to best effect there, but instead came along as ideal streaming fodder of the COVID pandemic moment in 2020. It was superbly-made if generically conceived, straightforward to a fault but muscular and gritty in seeking to blend several different templates in recent genre moviemaking. Like any number of action flicks and spy movies of the past twenty years or so, *Extraction* was set in a demi-world of swashbuckling mercenaries and slums controlled by hordes of disposable villains, complete with lots of lip service to the moral ambiguity of the modern world whilst celebrating raw masculine heroism in a quasi-paternal mould, willing to ply its mission of protection up to and over the edge of death. The film revolved around nobly suffering, damage-taking and carnage inflicting hero Tyler Rake (Chris Hemsworth), a former member of the Australian SAS and veteran of the Afghanistan War turned mercenary specialising in pinpoint missions to snatch people out of danger. Rake's omniscient bravado and rather masochistic grit in combat proved to be sourced in his personal demons, connected less to war than in his guilt over leaving his young son, who was dying of leukaemia, to go on deployment, a choice he made over being forced to watch his son die, but now haunts him and inevitably destroyed his marriage.



In the first film Rake battled his way out of the alleys of Dhaka with the son of an imprisoned drug dealer, keeping him from the clutches of a rival, but was shot and fell off a road bridge into a river at the climax. An epilogue to the first film hinted Rake had survived as he was glimpsed out of focus in the background of a shot of the boy he saved. The sequel insists on depicting how Rake endured, showing him being dragged out of the river and nursed in a hospital back to something like fully-functional health. The other members of his tiny but well-honed cadre – his agent and guardian angel with a big rifle, Nik Kahn (Golshifteh Farahani) and her young brother Yaz (Adam Bessa), who specialises in tech surveillance and intel – fetch him from hospital and install him in a cabin in the Austrian Alps to complete his convalescence. He's visited one day by a man (Idris Elba) who doesn't give his name but has big wheel energy, and dangles a mission before him. The mission, should he choose to accept it, is to extract Ketevan (Tinatin Dalakishvili), the wife of an imprisoned Georgian drug lord, Davit (Tornike Bziava), along with her teenage son Sandro (Andro Japaridze) and daughter Nina (Miriam and Marta Kovziashvili). This mission has immediate personal appeal to Rake, given that Ketevan is sister to Rake's ex-wife Mia (Olga Kurylenko): she gave Rake's name to the mystery man as the operative best suited to the job.



Davit and his brother Zurab (Tornike Gogrichiani) control a cartel dubbed the Nagazi. Both men are hardened and merciless enforcers, brought up with an unforgiving hand by their thug father after fleeing Georgia's civil strife as children, whilst their uncle Avtandil (Dato Bakhtadze), who took them in as

refugees, manages their day-to-day operations. Zurab is introduced expressing his displeasure with a pet government minister, who has failed to prevent Davit's sentence being extended by ten years at the behest of the US, by ramming a garden fork through his throat and casting his body into a ready-dug pit. The immediate problem with grabbing Ketevan and kids is they've been forced to reside with Davit in the ultra-tough Tkachiri Prison with him, an arrangement that suits Davit given that he knows Ketevan would flee him otherwise. After Davit is killed during the raid by the combined efforts of Rake and Ketevan, the fugitives suffer the wrath of Zurab, determined to repay any damage to his clan with the force of an irate Jehovah, whom he believes to be on his side. Sandro, who's been brainwashed by the rhetoric of his father and uncle and now distraught over his father's death, contacts Zurab and gives him their location once Rake and company have reached the peace and security of Vienna. Not that Zurab and the Nagazi give a damn about the peace and security of Vienna, assaulting the hotel where the heroes are holed up with attack helicopters and a squad of masked, armoured goons.



The plot of *Extraction II* is of course essentially a pretext to hang dazzling action set-pieces from like so much fresh-washed, whiter-whites laundry. It doesn't bother going through the motions of nudging the compulsory note of cynicism over the lot and reliability of the intelligence community and the frayed figures if the War on Terror the first film indulged, where Rake sought refuge with his former intelligence officer pal, played by David Harbour, who proved rather less than stalwart in his aid. *Extraction II* instead goes for interludes of familial melodrama in between the ferocious fight scenes. The first film, which was drawn from Ande Parks' graphic novel *Ciudad*, was deliberate in the way it contended with multiple forms of father figure, ranging from the most evil and corrupt to the most selfless and dedicated. The latter position was filled by Rake, albeit one perpetually driven to try and burn out the memory of his transfiguring loss and his own weakness before it. *Extraction II's* choice then to bend the arc of its story concerns towards making family business and responsibility risks getting too cute, but also makes some more thematic capital through the question as to whether Sandro's soul can be saved from the malignant clutches of his uncle. Sandro is torn by conflicting urges to protect his mother but also embrace the conviction of the family credo that only igneous toughness can fend off the evil of the world. Which is a proposition Rake and the film entirely agree with, albeit preferring Rake's gallantly defensive version.



The film takes on the unfinished business in Rake's life whilst trying not offer too easy and complete a point of closure for it, with Kurylenko showing up two-thirds through to give a face to the lost wife and mother who persists in a deeply ambivalent place, the war of feelings for her former husband all too apparent in her stricken expression. In a coda that goes for something I didn't entirely expect, Mia gifts Rake a last piece of salving knowledge before saying her permanent goodbyes. The pain of Rake and Mia's shared loss is an event that charges all the savage and self-martyring frays Rake puts himself through with the quality of a Sisyphean load, and also makes these films akin to a modern version of A.E.W. Mason's *The Four Feathers*: no act of death-dealing and destiny-mastering imposed on the world's evildoers or flesh-tearing and blood-gushing suffered himself can make up for Rake's one, definitive moment of cowardice, but he can still damn well try. It is at once reassuring if a bit frustrating that, after a decade trying to prove himself a flexible leading man in a classic Hollywood mode, ranging from glaze-eyed Michael Mann protagonist to goofball comic relief, Hemsworth seems to have finally found a part other than Thor people want to see him in (albeit one where he channels elements of those earlier performances), only for it to be a basic action hero with requisite good muscle tone and a name that sounds like an eight-year-old came up with it whilst inventing a schoolyard game. But it's a role Hemsworth inhabits exceedingly well, particularly given his choice of playing him as Australian, which here allows a moment watching Aussie Rules on TV, which helps Rake seem a little more specific amidst the ranks of such screen berserkers, and his capacity to capture Rake's soulfully macho suffering even in the midst of bashing skulls with a pipe.



The first film's guiding principle was to take a story and situation easy enough to imagine any number of action stars from days of yore taking on and mating it with the close-quarter kung-fu and gun-fu tussles of the *John Wick* films, pivoting around an extended single-take (or, rather, the digitally contrived approximation of such) fight scene that saw Rake rampaging through Dhaka. Naturally, in making a sequel Hargrave had to accept the challenge of outdoing that bit of showmanship, and so here deploys a 22 minute sequence that caps off the film's first third, following Rake as he crashes into the prison, battles his way out again with his charges and team, and all flee by car and train, fighting guards, prisoners, and Nagazi toughs all the way. I've long been inured to the supposedly visceral but actually, usually laboured pseudo-realism of most one-take scenes, but fair's fair: here Hargrave, his crew, and his cast go utterly for broke in a sequence filled with wild, brutal, intricately staged battles and chases, and come up with instant classic of the genre. Particularly good is the portion when Rake and Ketevan are forced to fight their way through a prison yard where a riot between rival prisoner gangs and guards is already in hearty progress. Ketevan proves quite handy in a fight herself as she swats cons with a shovel and Rake performs his patented close-quarters combat, even catching fire at one point but not letting it slow him down.



This gives way to the vicious immediacy of Rake's fight with Davit, resolving with both him and Davit's less-than-loving wife smashing the life out of him, and then a delirious chase in cars and a commandeered train, all without dropping the pretence of being one, long shot. Even if the seams are apparent at many intervals with signs of digital compositing and masked cuts, this scene succeeds at the essential mission of such a sequence, achieving a wild, crazy, relentless energy and immersive enthusiasm, in one of the most spectacular and entertaining action sequences offered in recent moviemaking. It also helps that where the first film was tightly focused on Rake as the essential human punching bag, whilst its intriguing supporting figures (and actors) remained a bit vague, *Extraction II's* more free-flowing and expansive brand of mayhem gives them all something to do. Hargrave particularly gives Farahani a great opportunity to get in on the deadly tussles in a show-stopping combat in a train control room. Farahani isn't just asked to suddenly play a blank, karate-kicking she-badass either, as Nik has to face her own hard loss in the course of the film as well as gruelling physical damage, driving her to take just as deep a personal interest in the mission as Rake, and frustrated by his constant choice to go off alone without consultation.



The rest of the film's battles after the central set-piece are more prosaic if still well-done, particularly when Rake finishes up dangling off the awning of the Vienna hotel, trying desperately to hang onto the unconscious Nik whilst Zurab takes coldblooded delight in shooting him between the knuckles. Like its precursor, *Extraction II* was written by Joe Russo, I presume bashed out during a lunch break between zillion dollar Netflix deals for him and his brother Anthony. The duo have, at least, tried to turn the vast hitmaking leverage they worked up with their Marvel films to making elaborate but relatively down-to-earth genre fare. Certainly the *Extraction* films so far have been infinitely more rewarding than the ridiculously expensive and utterly soulless entry in this mode the Russos did themselves, *The Gray Man* (2022), but *Extraction II* doesn't escape some of the more pernicious problems with this kind of movie either. Contemporary action thrillers all seem to unfold these days in a zone of supposedly globetrotting locales that are all filmed in the most blandly anonymous fashions, centring the contemporary language of utterly interchangeable signifiers of international swank, particularly in architecture, that manage to make the most far-flung capital look like a corner of Toronto. It all makes me ache more than a little for the kinds of 1970s thrillers made by directors who knew how to make something of local flavour: John Frankenheimer's *Ronin* (1998) might have been the last gasp of that kind as well as the first of the new. My attention here began to drift when Hargrave teed up the one billionth recent shoot-out and run-about scene staged around the environs of a swanky but boring-looking and flavourless modern building, in this case the hotel where our heroes are besieged by the attack Nagazis.



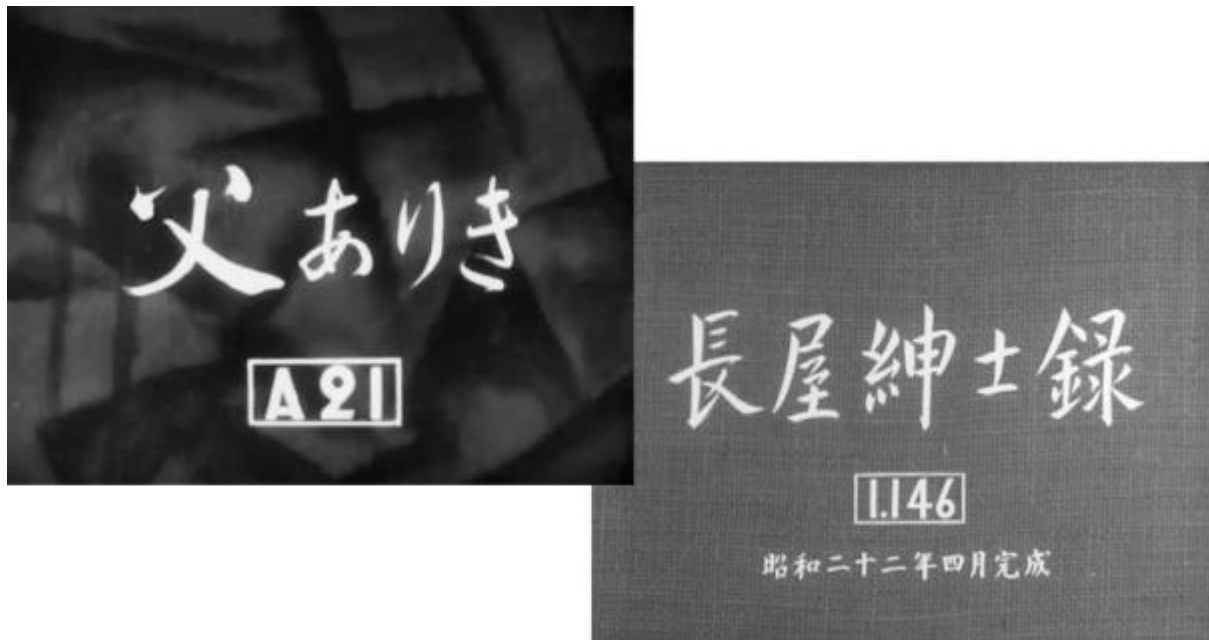
Extraction II also still, taken overall, suffers from the same basic problem as its precursor and too many other movies like it, in mistaking mere sufficiency on a dramatic level for efficiency. But Hargrave's talent for action staging keeps shocking it to life, as well as Hemsworth and Farahani's talents for playing people who only stop hurting, ironically, when they're deep in the eye of adrenalized death-dealing, a state between life and death that relieves all the agonies of the former but is distinct from the latter in that you're still moving. Hargrave keeps managing to toss up jolts of gruesome delight, like a henchman having his head bashed in by a falling barbell, and building to that excellent suspense moment with Rake and Nik hanging off the building, the very definition of a cliffhanger where I waited with real pleasure to see how, and even if, they could be plucked from the situation. It's also aggravating that the film can't be bothered thinking up a good narrative pretext to draw Rake and the Nagazis together for a showdown: Hargrave and Russo just have Zurab call Rake and invite him to a punch-up, and Rake obliges, albeit with more firepower than Zurab expects. The grand battle resolves however in an effectively intimate and gleefully brutal bout, before the raging monster gets a coolly punitive comeuppance. *Extraction II* was a movie perfect for the mood I was in whilst watching it, granted, but I feel it moved this franchise to the head of the pack when it comes to current action series on its own merits. The very end sees Elba return in a setup for another sequel that for once I felt pretty happy to anticipate, and only hope the filmmakers continue to have the courage to keep letting their material evolve. Oh, and bring it out in movie theatres, you wimps.



There Was A Father (1942) / Record Of A Tenement Gentleman (1947)

Chichi Ariki / Nagaya Shinshiroku

film freedonia



Director: Yasujirō Ozu

Screenwriters: Takao Anai, Tadao Ikeda, Yasujirō Ozu / Tadao Ikeda, Yasujirō Ozu

Yasujirō Ozu is one of the great and singular figures of cinema. He also has a reputation as being a figure most fit for advanced studies by cineastes, one of rarefied and formidable heft, a reputation that belies in large part the straightforward intimacy and lucid style of his movies. Ozu can perhaps be called the most Japanese of Japanese filmmakers, at least as far as a certain perspective on the national spirit might hold, but Ozu's indifference to the usual niceties of cinematic grammar as it grew out of other filmmaking powerhouses like Hollywood and Europe was hardly the attitude of an anti-cosmopolitan reactionary, but a considered and personal aesthetic that evolved with him. Ozu's life was defined by the lunatic extremes of an age, but his art resisted all that to a remarkable degree: for a man who survived being hurled into battle by the Imperial Japanese war machine and weathered its downfall, Ozu remained committed to describing life as it was lived on a far more intimate, even petty scale. Ozu's most famous and exalted film is 1953's *Tokyo Story*, although I'll admit it's my least favourite of his films that I've seen – perhaps it doesn't pluck my guilty heartstrings as precisely as it does many.



Ozu was born in the Fukagawa district of Tokyo in 1903, and came from a long line of merchants, a stolidly bourgeois background. He barely survived a bout of meningitis when still an infant, and at the age of nine was sent with his siblings to live at his father's provincial home town, before attending a boarding school. As a teenager Ozu whiled away free time watching movies, including Italian peplum epics and Thomas Ince's *Civilization* (1917), sparking his ambition to become a filmmaker. At 17, after writing a love letter to another boy in the school, he was thrown out of his dormitory, and thereafter had to commute by train to and from school until he graduated in 1921. After failing to gain a place at Kobe University, he became a substitute teacher, but soon, with the help of his uncle, got a job in the cinematography department at Shochiku Film Company. Although his career at Shochiku was repeatedly interrupted by military service, he became an assistant director. When, after a punch-up with a fellow employee in the studio cafeteria, he was called before the studio director, Ozu displayed remarkable nerve and wit in using the dressing-down session to show the director a script he'd written. A year later, he was placed in charge of the studio's department dedicated to making *jidai geki* or historically-set films, and made his directorial debut with *Sword of Penitence*, a drama Ozu penned with screenwriter Kogo Noda, who would become his regular collaborator. The film had to be finished by another director when Ozu was again called to military service.



Like many of Ozu's early works, *Sword of Penitence* is today a lost film. Ozu weathered several changes in direction from Shochiku's management over the kinds of films they made, swerving from only making name actor-free short comedies and then back to splashy star vehicles, even as he first adopted his famous directorial visual signature of only shooting from a low angle, which would later often be described as being filmed from the perspective of the familiar Japanese habit of sitting on a tatami mat, although as Ozu refined the shot it was actually, usually rather lower than that. He really made his name with 1932's *I Was Born, But...*, a comedy about childhood that nonetheless contained strong notes of social critique, winning him wide and positive critical attention, and 1933's *A Story of Floating Weeds*, a portrait of life on a small Japanese island. Ozu would remake both films in the late 1950s. Like some fellow greats of Japanese film, including Kenji Mizoguchi and Teinosuke Kinogasa, Ozu's career was rooted in the silent era, and silent films didn't pass out of fashion in the country until well after much of the rest of the world, so he didn't make his first talkie until 1936's *The Only Son*. The price Ozu paid for his burgeoning critical standing was a lack of box office success, so Shochiku wasn't that sorry when Ozu was drafted into the army and shipped off to fight in China.



Ozu's wartime experiences, which he recorded in diaries, included participating in pitched battles, being placed in command of a squad detailed with using chemical weapons, and visiting brothels staffed by enslaved Korean and Chinese comfort women. After he was mustered out in 1939, Ozu had troubles returning to filmmaking as scripts he wrote were turned down by government censors, but he resurged with a popular success, *Brothers and Sisters of the Toda Family* (1941), and *There Was A Father*. Drafted again in 1943 and this time assigned to make propaganda documentaries, Ozu hung around Singapore, engaged in determined loafing and watching captured foreign movies, and only working piecemeal on a film project, which he destroyed at the war's end. Detained by authorities and placed on a work gang on a rubber plantation, Ozu didn't get back to Japan for a year, and his next film, *Record Of A Tenement Gentleman*, a year later, contending with the social and civic disruption he found at home in the war's wake in a manner that echoed the concerns of the Italian neorealists whilst also reflecting a move in the kinds of movies made during the occupation period towards a more sentimental, Hollywoodised approach.



The irony of all this is where it's not at all hard to see the imprint Ozu's early experience would have on his mature art, his adult experiences are more carefully kneaded into his work. Ozu's immersion in the grimmest facts of the Imperialist wars was followed by a superficially bewildering and resolute turn towards quiet domestic subjects as a filmmaker. Many have characterised it as a personal reaction and resistance, adopting a bone-deep humanism that would inflect the rest of his oeuvre, and a disinterest in grandiose fantasies of national myth and political sirens. One interesting contradiction of the darkest days of Imperial marauding was that where, say, Nazi Germany all but throttled the creative life out of its film industry whilst trying to make it a tool, Japanese cinema retained a flourishing artistic zeal, and it was possible for directors like Mizoguchi and Ozu to present films nominally obeying the wartime call for positive patriotic messaging whilst subtly undercutting it. Much as Mizoguchi's two-part take on *The Loyal 47 Ronin* (1944) depicted the most famous Japanese tale of warrior fidelity and honour but dealt with it on a purely personal level and staunchly avoiding depicting actual violence, Ozu, with *There Was A Father*, quietly and assiduously portrays characters who adhere to ideals of duty and role, and watches with merciless calm and melancholy as it destroys them.



Ozu's ambivalence over his wartime service permeates *There Was A Father* on a near-subliminal level even as it seems to tell an entirely distinct story. A story filled with allusions to Ozu's own youth and formative experiences, to the point of resembling a splintered self-portrait, with parental alienation, teaching, and the disparity between personal and public identity all figuring in the story, and tethered together by the functional and emblematic presence of trains and bridges, connections and the lack of them. The preoccupation with relationships between family members and generations would dominate the bulk of Ozu's films, and here the central meditation on a father-son relationship has a broad similarity to Harry Chapin's famous song "Cat's In The Cradle," if avoiding its mawkish aspect. Ozu was never afraid of repeating themes and basic situations in his movies, and *There Was A Father* took up the same motif as *The Only Son*, portraying a parent sacrificing much to ensure their child grows up well and has a chance to get ahead, whilst swapping the mother in his first talkie for a father. *The Only Son* was ultimately ironic as the object of all the sacrifice proved only a middling success. *There Was A Father* takes a slightly different tack: the dutiful son does pretty much all the father can ask of him, at the expense of cheating them both of any sustained emotional satisfaction in their lives.



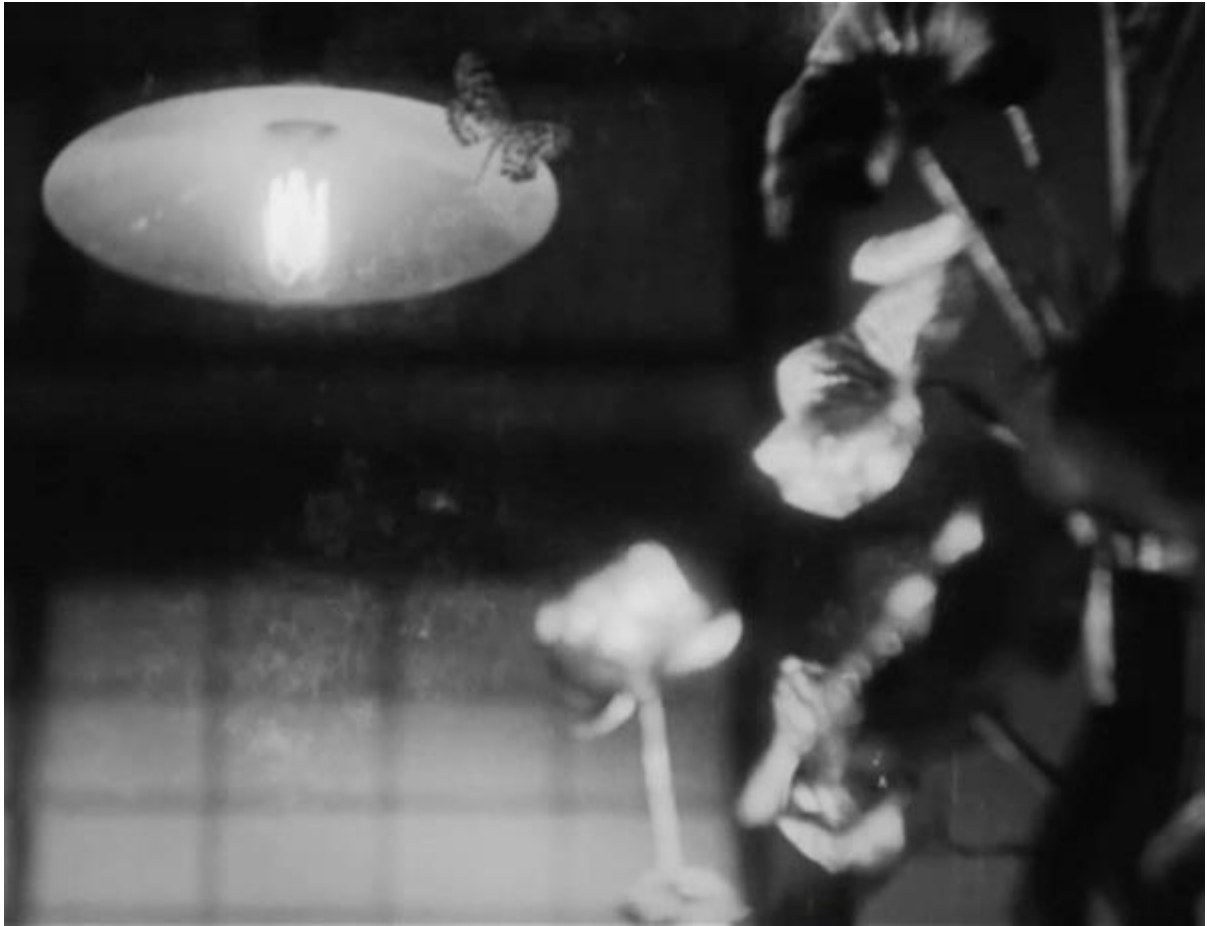
The title character is Shuhei Horikawa (Chishū Ryū), a math teacher who works at an all-boys high school in a town near Tokyo, and also has a ten-year-old son, Ryohei (Haruhiko Tsuda), who attends the same school in a lower class. Shuhei is a good if dry and demanding teacher, prodding his class on their path through understanding the mathematical and geometrical problems he sets, and also casually quizzing his son on mathematical problems as they get ready in the morning and set off together. The closeness of the father and son is inevitable product of Shuhei's widowhood, and it's plain that the impact of the death of his wife still lingers on him like an early frost. Shuhei works at being a teacher and a father with a fastidious care, blending warmth and purposeful restraint, but hints he isn't particularly cut out for the more rigorously engaged responsibilities of his twinned roles flit by: his penchant is for quietly relaxing with games is noted as he likes playing Gō with fellow teacher Makoto Hirata (Takeshi Sakamoto), and the most profound moments he has with his son for their rest of their lives are when they go fishing together, a pastime spent in silence if also in sublime accord, their rods swaying in synchronisation.



The opening shot lingers on a seemingly placid but actually, tightly composed view of students at Shuhei's school walking across and off a bridge to the embankment beyond. In one stroke Ozu immediately setting in motion the film's metaphors and concerns – youth passing on to the shore of adulthood, the steel-and-stone engineering of the bridge and the presence of nature with fringing trees presenting those different zones, the artificial and the natural, the rural and the urban, the intellect and the emotional, all in specific aesthetic balance, even as the rest of the movie will find them fatefully unreconciled. Despite the apparently blasé gaze of his low-set, peering camera, Ozu makes it astonishingly flexible in expression: as he portrays Shuhei teaching his class, he peers down through the ranks of attentive students and discovers an aspect of the regimented, almost abstracted in their interchangeable dress and tight-packed rows – a quality he'll reiterate throughout the film. After swiftly sketching his main characters in early vignettes, Ozu begins to make his subtext clearer, as he films the high schoolers as a quasi-military unit, posing for a class photo before a colossal Buddha statue with their teacher all done up in their discomfotingly military-like uniforms, caught in a frieze of their youthful promise and perfection, and singing patriotic anthems about “stalwart warriors travelling the land” and protecting the nation from armies as they march up a road into the Hakone highlands.



As the class takes their rest in a resort by a mountain lake, Shuhei and Hirata idly play one of their games whilst some of the lads, ignoring Shuhei's command not to try venturing out onto the lake, take off in some rowboats. Just as some other boys alert the teachers, one of the boats capsizes, and a student named Yoshida drowns. After weathering a funeral service for the dead lad in evident shame and chagrin, as well as a meeting with the dead boy's parents, Shuhei announces to Hirata that he's quitting teaching, as he considers the boy's death his fault, feeling that if he'd been more forceful in his commands to the boys they wouldn't have risked taking the boats. "I know you consider yourself responsible, but you did your best as a leader," Hirata tells him, but fails to change Shuhei's mind, for, as he confesses to Hirata, "The responsibility of taking care of other people's children frightens me." That Ozu is thinking about his own time trying to be a leader of young men and feeling responsible for those he lost here feels impossible to ignore, transmuting the furore of wartime experience into a more humdrum but keenly felt likeness.



Ozu's approach to the connective tissue of his scenes, now fairly commonplace but at the time extremely idiosyncratic, sees him moving between scenes with interludes of still-life-like cutaway shots, and also advancing through time periods without the kinds of familiar devices to signal those shifts in time. Ozu's intervening images instead come charged with suggestive qualities that also serve the function of bracketing the individual scenes, and find expressive possibilities in moments where, in the more standard Hollywood approach, more usually turned merely grammatical. Early on Ozu returns to the regimentation motif with a new edge of foreboding as he notes the students' umbrellas, which they carried like rifles on their march up the mountain, now left in leaning ranks in the corridor of the resort, with one reading boy glimpsed through an open doorway, face hidden by the frame, rendered anonymous and mysterious. After the funeral service, Ozu notes a butterfly resting upon a lampshade with a ceremonial tree's petals reaching into the frame, a picture laced with hints of spiritual and emotional delicacy even as the real emotion under Shuhei's stoic façade is churning away with bitter gall and regret. Throughout the film's first third Ozu returns repeatedly to images of stone shrines that similarly bear boding witness to the haunting sense of mortal and moral responsibility clinging to Shuhei as he tries to find a bearable way-station in life.



After quitting teaching, Shuhei takes Ryohei on a trip back to his home town of Ueda, where Shuhei's father once worked as a teacher of Chinese classics, and who sold the family home there to put Shuhei through school. Upon arrival in town, the pair eat in a bistro where Shuhei solicitously gives Ryohei a cloth to wipe away the sweat of journeying from his brow, a gesture repeated towards the end of the film in reverse as Ryohei urgently dabs away at his sick father's forehead. Whilst seated on an ancient stonework rampart above the town, Shuhei quietly informs his son they'll be living here from now on, and reside for a time in a temple. Shuhei makes a living for a while working as a registrar of births in the town hall whilst Ryohei attends a local school, living a stringent but fairly happy life alongside the temple's priest (Seiji Nishimura), including their ritual fishing expeditions. "He went hunting dragonflies with a friend," Shuhei tells the priest one day when the priest asks him where Ryohei is. "So he's making friends?" the priest asks. "No, he prefers killing creatures." The days of boyhood sadisms are not long: Shuhei soon tells Ryohei he wants to send Ryohei to a boarding school where he'll receive a more advantageous education, with an eye towards getting Ryohei a university placing. Ryohei accepts this, but when his father tells him once he's been placed in a school that he intends to find a better-paying job, requiring he go live in Tokyo, meaning he'll be far away, Ryohei is left glum and dejected by the news, and refuses his father's entreaties to stop crying and make friends.



The efficiency of Ozu's visual storytelling, which in its way resembles a subtler, more inferring and suggestive version of Soviet editing methods, relies upon wielding an emblematic, ideogram-like impression. This is particularly apparent when he communicates the impact of Shuhei's move to Tokyo and his new line of work, by cutting from an image of the exterior of a traditional country house with neighbouring tree, recalling the idealised balance glimpsed in the opening shot, to a survey of machinery and workers in a textile mill where Shuhei has become a supervisor. The scene shifts violently in time as well as locale, as is revealed when Shuhei speaks with the factory manager who asks about Ryohei's successful graduation. Shuhei tells him his son will be attending Sendai University. Ozu then cuts from the whirring factory machinery to shots of boxy urban architecture, as Shuhei moves on to another job, this time in an office. Shuhei, now with grey creeping into his hair, maintains his fondness for relaxing playing Go, now in a gaming parlour in the city. Here he runs into Hirata for the first time since he quit teaching, and the two men catch up eagerly: Shuhei tells Hirata Ryohei is now working as a teacher at an industrial college in Akita, in the north of Honshū. Hirata invites Shuhei to his home, where Shuhei is amazed to encounter Hirata's daughter Fumiko (Mitsuko Mito), a child when he last saw her but now twenty-one; he also meets Hirata's much younger son Seiichi (Masayoshi Ôtsuka), one of the many distractible and rambunctious boys in Ozu's films who refuses to meet Shuhei and demands money to go to the movies from his sister.



Ryohei himself (played by Shūji Sano as an adult) has become the man his father was and wanted him to be, teaching students chemistry. The sense of generational succession is underlined, but Ozu evokes Ryohei's own frustrated sense of lost home and childhood through the boys who are now his students at the Akita school, who sit on a bridge watching trains rolling by, gripped by feelings of homesickness. One of the boys asks Ryohei to let him return home for the second weekend in a row, as his mother's just given birth to his baby brother, and Ryohei, with a slight grimace of awareness of his own solitary lot as a son, gives the boy a pass. When he next makes it to Tokyo to visit his father, they go for a weekend sojourn together to a hot spring hotel. Whilst there Ryohei tells Shuhei he wants to quit his post in Akita and come to Tokyo so they can live together again, as he still has an unresolved heartache from being separated from his father. But Shuhei tells his son, in the film's dramatic crux, that he must continue doing what he's doing and remain in Akita because it's his duty as both a man and a teacher: "It's your calling life...our personal feelings don't come into it...I failed in my responsibility, so you must succeed." Ryohei absorbs this insistent instruction, as Ozu evokes the strange blend of presence and absence that defines the father-son relationships by cutting back to the hot bath they were sharing together earlier, now empty, steam wafting in the air.



It's bordering on the banal to state that Ozu was preoccupied with generational connections, a theme with universal implications but also a specific place at the very heart of the classical Japanese social ethos. And also one palpably close to Ozu's own heart – he lived with his mother until her death only two years before he himself succumbed to lung cancer, and *There Was A Father*, in echoing elements of his biography, suggests the causes for his particularly keen need for such connection and its place in his mature art. *Tokyo Story* of course dealt most overtly with the breakdown of the family unit and the chain-links of identity and its attendant charges in the face of a rapidly altering society, but Ozu more usually dealt with individuals contending with their own peculiar struggle with those things. *Late Spring* (1949), the film that finally secured him real audience following and signalled the salutary start of collaboration with his other famous star, Setsuko Hara, featured Ryu as an aging father who encourages his daughter, played by Hara, to get married when she's been dedicated to looking after him, constantly urging her on and assuring her he'll be alright. That entire film hinged on Ryu's ability in the giveaway moment when, having finally contrived his daughter's departure, the father release a bereft sigh that confirms he's been labouring to give away the one thing he cherishes in life, a tiny gesture that is nonetheless the climax of the film and the heart of its meaning.



In *There Was A Father*, Ozu's sense of generational responsibility and in-the-parental-footsteps order of progress is, on the surface of things, laid out in a manner it's easy imagine was pleasing to the conservative nabobs of the regime of Japan in 1942. The story reads superficially as a hymn to Shuhei's selfless dedication, his feelings of failure as a teacher making it therefore doubly incumbent he fulfil his obligations as a father to help his son take the great family project a step further, much as Shuhei likewise benefited from the same legacy. Shuhei's explicit description of their roles as one of duty makes more explicit the early connection between the teachers and students as a mirror to military service, and his forceful insistence that Ryohei keep up his duty makes subtext pretty blatant. And, indeed, there is the exalted position of the teacher in Japanese society, much more respected and exalted than in most western countries, which makes this sense of duty and obligation more coherent unto itself. But Ozu's precise feel for emotional expression constantly locates beneath the officially sentimental veneer, the one that would hold all this as indeed worthily necessary for the sake of a better nation, and the more individual, personal sense of necessity felt by Shuhei and Ryohei.



Ryohei's pining desire to spend more time with his father is met by Shuhei's constant rebuffs, driven not by coldness or a lack of love for his son, at least not that's made explicit: the affection they feel for each-other is the one constant in their lives, even as fate keeps dealing out its wild cards. There is a hint that Shuhei prefers solitude, as the only place where he can subsist with his sense of loss and culpability, and he urges Ryohei on to be the man he never quite managed to be as a kind of elaborate sacrifice to that ideal. But the emphasis is more on the urge to keep the familial project going in a manner that has honourable roots as the natural urge of propagation. When father and son compare their physiques in the spring bath, Shuhei notes, "You've more meat on you than I have," indicating Ryohei is the beneficiary of incremental improvement. With the insistent upshot that this also more than a little resembles one of the machines churning out cloth in the factory Shuhei works in, churning out product without much actual sense of purpose. Shuhei wants Ryohei to make something of himself, and seems well satisfied when he essentially becomes the same man Shuhei was, albeit with a different teaching discipline, one can, supposedly, succeed where Shuhei himself did not.



The moments we see of the two men together meanwhile are ultimately revealed to constitute the actual marrow of their lives, snatched interludes of togetherness that give actual meaning and substance to what is otherwise mere existence. Shuhei's presence in Hirata's house, which is similarly defined by the absence of a matriarch – Hirata, like him, is a widower – highlights his own retreat from family life even as Fumiko offers the suggestive mirror to Ryohei, and later in the film the two fathers conspire to marry their progeny to each-other, another, slightly wryer commentary on generational chains in which individuals blur into a more generic biological function. Ryohei for his part readily acquiesces to his father proposing to arrange the match, perhaps feeling ultimately, like many other decisions made throughout the film, it's as much a deliverance from chance and eddying uncertainty as it is something onerous, at the cost of actual, authentic, motivating passion. Ryohei's displays of tears, when his father tells him about their upcoming separation when he'll move to Tokyo, and at the end when he dies, are both criticised as unmanly, and yet Ryohei doesn't pay much heed to such criticisms – his one sliver of personal identity is, indeed, to be a man who cries over the things that pain him. Meanwhile Ryohei teaches his students about the composition of TNT, once more associating one form of duty with another, the role of leadership with destructive potential.



Shuhei is played by Ozu's constant star Ryu, who had been acting in films for the director since 1928, and would act in all but two of Ozu's films, including his last, *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962). Ryu came from a district on Kyushu, and had studied to be a Buddhist priest before turning to acting – he never entirely lost his accent, which had vaguely bumpkin qualities for the local audience as much as the foreign viewer is unaware of it, but this, in a manner that can perhaps be likened a little to an actor like James Stewart, Ryu's regional accent gave him a special quality amongst Japanese stars of his generation. His connection with Ozu was virtually umbilical, with Ryu's ability to play the kinds of characters Ozu loved – polite in a faintly dissembling way, a little bit dry, essentially good-hearted but often very human individuals who, whether through craft or weakness avoid dealing with the world head-on. The younger Shuhei has an old-before-his-time quality, the older sustaining a force field of separateness around himself that is both the price and, it seems, reward for sublimating his identity into his work and his paternal function.



The film's later scenes consider Shuhei's legacy as he and Hirada are visited by some now-grown former students who, appreciative of their work, decide to hold a banquet in their honour. The celebration is a poignant vignette of a legacy's impact as the teachers behold the successful men they've helped along in the world. Ozu carefully evokes the earlier visual pattern of regimentation in noting the older students in their ranked lines at the banquet, but now softened, a sense of polite order rather than depersonalising rule described in a moment that's supposed to be about giving age and wisdom its due. But the honouring is also laced with quiet ironies. The two aging teachers realise they're the only non-married men in the room, and Shuhei's abandonment of his calling is never brought up. Ryohei is absent from the celebration, and when the tipsy Shuhei returns to his home where Ryohei is staying, Shuhei first broaches the idea of Ryohei marrying Fumiko, to Ryohei's abashedly smiling acquiescence. It's the last of the many boons Shuhei tries to give his son, as, a few days later, Shuhei, whilst getting dressed to go to an art exhibition, suffers a stroke, an incredible piece of acting from Ryu.



Shuhei later passes away in his hospital bed after expressing final satisfaction with his life and achievement, an ending Hitari tells Ryohei means something, and he should feel cheered: “Only people who do their utmost while alive can die with such dignity.” Later, as the now-married Ryohei and Fumiko ride on the train to Akita with his father’s ashes in an urn on the luggage rack, Ryohei’s pensive meditation matches the dark-hanging sky over the train’s journey. Ryohei suggests they bring her father and brother to live with them, the end of one, perpetually frustrated family at least allowing the formation of another. Fumiko for her part gives a gift to Ryohei as she starts weeping profusely at the pathos she finds in him and his gentle reverie and comment, “He was such a good father.” Perhaps it’s the sheer pathos that sparks her reaction, or the surreal turn of their newborn life together, or perhaps Fumiko has brought a specific feminine gift to Ryohei – she’s allowed to weep so he doesn’t have to. But that’s a loss too, as Ryohei’s ambivalent expression suggests. The last shot, of the train disappearing into the distance with white smoke reaching up to meet a darkly hanging sky, evokes a world of hurt, but also one that keeps rolling, always bearing us onward.



By the time he released *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* five years later, Ozu was confronting a broken world, something he communicates immediately in his opening shots that survey with deadpan awareness a Tokyo that's been gutted and left with yawning gaps by wartime damage, but human life has sprouted still like weeds in the blast zones. Again, the theme is struggling adults contending with the burden of children, this time in a world shot all to hell, but finding bonds of community and family persisting amidst the disorder and disruption. *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* unfolds in much the same realm as Mizoguchi's *Women of the Night* (1948) and Akira Kurosawa's *One Wonderful Sunday* (1947), *Drunken Angel* (1948), and *Stray Dog* (1949), not just in portraying the desolate and uprooted state of Japan immediately post-war but in its new edge of more overt social conscientiousness and flickers of sentimentality, which could equally reflect a certain Hollywood influence creeping in but also a new freedom to directly engage the audience in a historical moment when the urge to do so was powerful and general. The title *Record of a Tenement Gentleman*, whilst literal enough, is amusingly off the point in a couple of regards, with the Japanese title translating as something more like "A Who's Who of the Housing Row."



Ozu's deadpan opening shots, endlessly mimicked by followers ranging from Michelangelo Antonioni to Jim Jarmusch, consider the new landscape of post-war Tokyo, buildings that survived the war like islands amidst patches of cleared wasteland. New housing has sprung up in between, cosily crooked rows of homes built in the old Japanese style with some crude street lighting rigged up. Ozu's images follow his familiarly suggestive pattern as he shifts from placid exterior shots to investigate interiors, settings without presences but with the labours of the day noted – tools and implements sitting idle, a kettle steaming away on a stovetop. The gentleman of the title, Tamekichi (Reikichi Kawamura), recites poetic notions to himself as he drinks alone, providing an incidental narration: "The moon has shadows once in a while. So do human beings, who are easily led into the darkness." Ryu this time plays a major supporting role, albeit again one laced with aspects of hapless paternalism: he plays Tashiro, one of Tamekichi's neighbours who makes his living as a travelling palmistry seer.



Tashiro visits Tamekichi with a kid in tow: the lad, about six years old, is named Kohei, and Tashiro explains he found the lad wandering around Chigasaki, south of Tokyo on the coast. Tashiro however has no intention of playing father to the boy, instead trying to palm him off onto his middle-aged neighbours, Tamekichi and O-tane (Chōko Iida). Tamekichi repairs pots and pans, whilst his direct opposite neighbour O-tane, or Tane as everyone calls her, sells knickknacks. Despite the title, Tane is the focal point of the narrative, as she's the one who, unwillingly at first, finds herself stuck with looking after Kohei, giving him a place to sleep for the night. Kohei is initially entirely silent, glum-looking and uncertain. He wets his bedding the first night, and Tane irritably hangs up his blanket on the clothesline and makes him fan it dry. She and Tamekichi try to find someone in the neighbourhood who can take the kid in, approaching Kawayoshi (Sakamoto again), a cloth dyer and the president of the local residents committee, arguing, "You have three kids already – one more won't make any difference."



When Kawayoshi is reluctant to take on the burden, it's suggested somebody take Kohei back to Chigasaki and look for his parents. Tamekichi proposes drawing lots for the task, preparing three slips of paper, one with an X on it. Tane grumbles when she draws the X, but when she leaves Kawayoshi tells Tamekichi his slip also had an X, and Tamekichi admits he marked all three and the job went to whoever spoke out first. Tane and Kohei travel to the coastal town and Tane learns from a local that Kohei's father, a carpenter, left the boy behind whilst he made a trek to Tokyo looking for work, and hasn't come back for him. Tane assumes Kohei has been abandoned, muttering to the lad, "Your father's a hardhearted man too. You didn't get lost, you were deserted." Tane herself still doesn't want the burden: tramping the shoreline dunes, she shares some food with the boy, but when she asks him to go pick up some seashells, she takes the opportunity to run off. But her trail across the dunes isn't hard to follow, and Kohei catches up with her, blankly ignoring her efforts to shoo him away and cringing when she threatens to hurl a rock at him, until she finally chases after him and he flees her wrath. Nonetheless, when returns to the tenement, she still has him tow, now burdened with a load of potatoes she buys at the railways station: "I was damned if I was coming back home empty-handed," she tells the men, before sending Kohei to bed.



Record of a Tenement Gentleman tells an exceptionally simple story, one that suggests Ozu paying some tribute to Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) in its straightforward dynamic of the fringe-dwelling and curmudgeonly Tane eventually coming to cherish her new ward and stepping up to the role of playing parent. The film also has some evident similarities to the works of the Italian neorealists with their similar concentration on the fate of children lost amidst broken post-war cities around the same time, particularly Luchino Visconti's *Shoeshine* (1946) and Robert Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1948), although Ozu's lucid cinematic exactitude contrasts their raw aesthetic just as his film's seriocomic touch cuts against their down-and-dirty realism. True to his own creed of contemplating human life on its most apparently banally personal level, Ozu looks to the wastelands and finds very ordinary people getting by in very ordinary ways, and the path out of the epoch of rubble is simply that of those people forging their quotidian connections.



Around the simple core Ozu therefore weaves a trove of character asides and vignettes, like Kohei, when Tane leaves him alone after they return from Chigasaki, constantly catching himself on the edge of nodding off in his exhaustion and anxiety about wetting the bed again: Ozu wryly notes the sight of his blanket, soiled again, hanging on the line the next morning. Many such vignettes accumulate into a portrait of the small community and its denizens, all of them perfectly ordinary, mostly aging people who get by day to day with the little bits of art and craft they know. Tashiro, showing off the tools of his fortune telling trade to Tamekichi, is met with the other man's scepticism: "I saw you go out wearing gumboots but it turned out to be a beautiful, sunny day." To which Tashiro retorts, "Weather isn't my business. The radio can tell you that." Tamekichi's industriousness is applied to a less studious business, noting to Tane when she asks if he's hard at work when she finds him working on a pot, "This isn't work, it's too easy. It's like passing the time with something to do," and lamenting that his skill is being wasted. Ozu spares a few moments to watch Kawayoshi and his wife (Kiko Takamatsu) at work, daubing down cloth they've dyed, a rather more vigorous trade but one in some demand for these denizens of the community who have to make a lot of very little.



Perhaps the film's best scene is one with virtually nothing to do with the rest, depicting a meeting of the residents' committee, during which Kawayoshi is reelected its president. The committee get tipsy on sake served up by Kawayoshi's attending wife and daughter (Fujiyo Nagafune), whilst his anxious-looking son (Yūichi Kaga) watches from the sidelines as he tries to be studious. Haroshi is cajoled into singing the gathering a song in a moment of impromptu communal entertainment. The song Haroshi sings has a jaunty rhythm, which the residents tap out on their sake cups with chopsticks, despite recounting the tragic story of an aristocratic naval ensign who leaves his young bride to go off to war and doesn't return. Here, as well as giving Ryu a chance to show off his chops in a traditional Japanese singing style, Ozu captures a moment of social union and pleasure for the residents, where the reflexively ingrained feel for the song's metre and rhythm for the people manifests a lingering sense of identity and communality in a time when those things have been relentlessly tested. There's a similarity of spirit here too if not cultural specifics to Howard Hawks' use of sequences of his actors playing and singing together. More subtly, too, Haroshi's choice of song points to the dichotomy of the moment, the lingering awareness of an age of tragedy that ironically manifests as a moment of frivolity.



This vignette also hinges on a gag as one of the male residents drunkenly tries to describe Haroshi's former job as a narrator for a travelling picture show, but mistakenly calls it a "peep show," momentarily shocking Tane until the details are clarified. Ozu returns to his opening motif as his camera surveys the residents' empty homes without them present – a cat licks milk from a saucer on Tane's bench, Haroshi's palmistry charts stretched out on the floor, the kettle simmering away on Tamekichi's stove. As much as he did in *There Was A Father*, and perhaps even more keenly in being less immediately inferring, Ozu's use of these shots evokes the stuff of life with the registered absence of it, an awareness of how or lives are lived through the objects around us, and certain, specific objects betray where the real substance of lives are located. Despite the seeming minimalism of his shooting approach, Ozu knew well the near-endless malleability of his style, with all his shots are as carefully arranged as any old master paintings in his camera placements and framings, the carefully utilised space of even the small and ramshackle homes where his characters live with their tangle of hard geometry and crammed-in stuff of life and commerce. The description of absence here also leads into another joke, as Tane stumbles tipsily into her house and pulls a pipe to smoke, only to realise Kyohei is awake and waiting for her, the forgotten and unbidden presence.



The next morning sees visitors in the neighbouring houses. Otane is visited by her childhood friend Kiku (Hideko Mimura), who's the mistress of a geisha house, and brings some sweet cakes. Otane lovingly gobbles down some, and reluctantly gives one to the hovering, dejected Kyohei. Kiku gives the boy a ten yen note, and Otane has an inspiration, telling him to go and buy a lottery ticket, on the theory, espoused by other residents at the meeting, that luck only comes to the pure-minded. Turns out luck doesn't come to them either, as Kyohei's ticket proves a loser, and Tane grumbles, "You lost ten yen for nothing? You're stupid! It's your bad attitude!" Meanwhile Tamekichi is visited by his daughter Yukiko (Hideko Mimura), who works in a beauty parlour, and swans in decked up in the full regalia of a young generation who's been Americanised, complete with trousers, sunglasses, and headscarf, like Gene Tierney on a day off. "You've put on weight," Tane notes, to Tamekichi's droll comment, "That's hard to do these days." Yukiko's glamorous look proves to be entirely a guise, however, as she's come to scrounge a meal off her annoyed father.



Tane's gruffness with Kyohei begins to wear as she accuses the lad of stealing some of her dried persimmons, a crime Haroshi admits to committing – "I felt like they wanted me to eat them!" – after Kyohei has resisted Tane's demands for a confession with a downcast smoulder. Finally, after Ozu again notes Kyohei's blanket hung up with another stain from wetting it the following morning, Tane finds Kyohei has fled her house in assuming he's in for punishment. Finding the boy absent, Tane, gripped with guilt and the first glimmerings of a maternal care, roams the streets in searching for him, a luckless search that sees Ozu's "empty" shots put to a systematic use as Tane's explorations survey a Tokyo that's drab, battered, and populated by other orphan boys and flitting scraps of paper. Returning home, Tane muses fretfully as Kiku observes she's become fond of the boy. Ryohei finally up again in the company of Haroki once more, having found him in the same place he picked him up before, and Tane is now glad to give the boy food, asking him if he wants her to be his mother, and Kyohei readily agrees. The following day she and Kiku take the boy to the zoo, and Tane has her photo taken with him: Ozu's patient gaze registers the efforts of the two to get comfortable and keep still for the photographer, their deepening bond communicated through a visual joke as Ozu, adopting the still photographer's point of view, shoots them first upside down as within the camera, and continues to listen to them talking in the darkness of developing.



Despite the more gently humorous and overtly warm exploration of the theme of family and belonging evinced here, Ozu nonetheless nudges similar ideas to those explored in *There Was A Father*. Namely, the way the most specific bond celebrated by our wayward species, that of parent and child, is riven with contradictions, including its own kind of pragmatism which can leave both at the mercy of the role they play. Ryohei essentially attaches himself to the first person who both feeds him and doesn't violently run him off; despite trying to subsist as a one-person economic unit, Tane finds parts of herself switching on automatically and unconsciously to respond to Kyohei's presence in her life, their relationship reaching a highpoint when Tane is able to get Kyohei to drum on her stiff back. This is however interrupted by a man's voice at the door, which proves, of course, to be Kyohei's father (Eitaro Ozawa, who would be an ubiquitous character actor in Japanese cinema including films by Mizoguchi, Ishiro Honda, and Mikio Naruse), who has followed the trail from Chigasaki to Tane. Tane, despite her evident shock, politely gives charge of Kyohei back to his father, who explains the way they became separated, making clear he didn't intend to abandon the boy at all. Tane even gives the man the bag of potatoes Kyohei carried for her.



The bittersweet pleasure of reuniting the family drives Tane to tears, not in self-pity but at the thought of ultimately playing a role in giving happiness to the father and son in their reunion, and when Tamekichi and Kawayoshi come to check on her, she muses on the way their lives seem to be eroding their sense of compassion and civility, and resolves to play a part in counteracting the new, bustling greediness and pushiness she sees manifesting around them. Deciding she wants to find another boy to adopt, Tane asks Haroki's advice according to his zodiacal knowledge: he gives her a heading for a search, which takes her to Ueno Park, where orphan boys by the score hang about under a statue of Takamori Saigō, a figure of great folk heroic stature in modern Japan and as symbolically resonant as, say, a statue of Abe Lincoln. The message here is patent, associating the healing of the national identity and the regaining of heroic stature with acts of everyday kindness and embracing the lost children of the nation.



And yet Ozu, with his fastidiously discursive touch, avoids mawkish underlining in the way he handles this conclusion, depicting not Tane connecting with a new boy, but offering documentary footage of the dozens of boys hanging around the statue, engaged in their own, grown-up-fast behaviours like puffing on cigarettes, and otherwise simply waiting for something to happen. As a heartstring-plucking punchline for the film, this provides an answering image to Ozu's interior shots of houses defined by absence, finding the streets filled with urchins, displaced from those interiors. It also recalls the famously barbed gag from Luis Buñuel's *Viridiana* (1961) where a character buys one mistreated dog but fails to notice another in a world of the abused and injured. Tane might indeed find the right boy for her to take in, but it would take an army of women like her to deal with the problem, the whole of the little world she lives in as the housing row starts to look beyond mere survival and subsistence and see the society they belong to. In this coda Ozu caps the diastolic exploration that connects this film with *There Was A Father*. Where the previous work considered both the undeniably positive and ambivalent aspects of family identity and mutual duty, reflecting a coded and uneasy reflection on the official mythology of order and duty, *Record of a Tenement Gentleman* states more bluntly and urgently that the saddest thing in a world of sad things is a child without a home – whilst also succinctly noting that the cure for the problem is quite literally everywhere.

Wait Until Dark (1967)

this island rod



A genuinely exciting, nimbly mounted thriller, Terence Young's *Wait Until Dark* is one of those movies that gives being based on a stage play a good name, and also one that anticipates where the darker fantasies of popular cinema were drifting by the late 1960s, with particularly important impact on the thriller and horror genres. The source material was written by Frederick Knott, whose other best-known work, *Dial M For Murder*, was adapted with full ingenuity by Alfred Hitchcock in 1954. As with that precursor, *Wait Until Dark* unfolds almost entirely within the confines of an ordinary city apartment, with a brief prologue setting up the stakes of the drama. Lisa (Samantha Jones) is the young and comely drug trafficker who cleverly arranges for a shipment of heroin to be smuggled inside a vintage doll, watching with impatience as an elderly toymaker (Jean Del Val) secrets the dope, before she brings it to New York on the plane from Montreal. Spying a sinister-looking man in dark glasses watching her intently from the airport observation deck, Lisa asks a man who was on the flight with her, Sam Hendrix (Efrem Zimbalist Jr), to look after the doll for her on a speedily invented pretext. A few days later, two con artists, Mike Talman (Richard Crenna) and Carlino (Jack Weston) are attracted to Hendrix's apartment by a note supposedly written by Lisa, who they both know.



In the Hendrix apartment they encounter Lisa's corpse, and the man who killed her, the same menacing watcher from the airport. He gives his name as Roat (Alan Arkin): a slick, confident, ruthlessly intelligent ruffian, Roat explains with icy deliberation that Lisa worked for him but tried to go into business for herself, demanding his punitive reprisal and seizure of the spoils. But he can't find the doll Hendrix brought home with him, having searched everywhere except for a very secure safe, leading him to conclude the doll is kept inside it. After the three criminals expend all ritual shows of pride and distrust, the con men agree to help Roat in his plan to procure the doll. Sam shares his apartment with his blind wife Susy (Audrey Hepburn), and the trio count on manipulating her into opening the safe. Talman poses as a former army buddy of Sam's, having seen his service photos on the wall, whilst Roat playacts as both an aggrieved father and his sheepish son, whose wife they try to make Susy think Sam has been having an affair with and then killed, with the doll constituting proof. Susy responds just as the villains want, her devotion to Sam expressed in an urgent search for the moppet, but she doesn't know it's been borrowed by upstairs neighbour Gloria (Julie Herrod), a girl of about twelve who's both something of a friend and bratty nemesis for Susy.



Wait Until Dark is first and foremost a tailor-made starring vehicle for Hepburn, who necessarily dominates although she's barely glimpsed for nearly the first half-hour, which instead is devoted to portraying the trio of criminals as they're forced together and negotiate their uneasy alliance, and privileging the audience to the mechanics of their operation. The offbeat casting of Arkin, in one of his first roles after making an eye-catching starring debut in *The Russians Are Coming The Russians Are Coming* (1966), is particularly cunning, and one I tend to think of before any other of the actor's. Roat's penchant for guise-changing suits Arkin's usually comedy-courted talents, particularly as he has evident fun playing both the meshuggener patriarch and his milquetoast offspring. But the version of Roat that really makes the impression is his professional appearance, which has a quality of the emblematic not just for this film but the whole realm of thriller movie sadistic masterminds: with a crown of black, fashionlessly cropped hair, black leather jacket, and eyes hidden behind round-lensed sunglasses, his accent betraying plebeian Noo Yawk roots but used in a clipped and imperative manner that confirms his sense of being special and elect in his criminal genius, Roat is instantly established as the devil in this particular dark. By comparison, Crenna's Talman is asked to inhabit the idea of ever-so-helpful, possibly romantically appealing nice guy, something he can do to a tee. Weston's Carlino is a former policeman turfed out for unstated bad behaviour who now merely playacts a cop in the stings he stages with Talman, and is asked to do so again in Roat's scheme.



After a couple of decades as a jobbing screenwriter turned director in the British film industry, including flashy Technicolor action dramas like *Storm Over The Nile* (1955) and *Action of the Tiger* (1957) alternated with personal dramas, Young had made himself a hot property with his work on the first two James Bond films, *Dr. No* (1962) and *From Russia With Love* (1963). The style Young applied to those two films, with a slow-burn brand of tension alternating elastically with explosions of action and pop art-inflected showmanship, laid the groundwork for the Bond brand's vast success, even if Guy Hamilton's slicker approach on *Goldfinger* (1964) helped steer it off on a gaudier path. Here Young gets to deliver just about an entire movie in the key of intense, claustrophobic gamesmanship he brought to the Orient Express scenes in *From Russia With Love*, hinging on the same sense of incipient violence and entrapment. This is first evoked in the lengthy early scene that sees Roat applying a precise variety of intimidation through assumed authority over Talman and Carlino. That pair resort to adopting household objects as gladiatorial weapons to face down Roat's wickedly proffered jackknife and even more wickedly proffered aura of all-knowing smarts, eventually pushing Roat to a smirking surrender, even as he actually pulls off the feat of drawing the two men even more securely onto the hook he's snared them with.



By contrast, Hepburn's Susy as a figure of pathos and insecurity, whose reflexive desire to shield her husband, stoked by the criminals, is as much a sign of her dependency as her ardour. It's made clear as the film unfolds that Susy met Sam not long after being blinded in a car accident as she stumbled on through her new existence. This anecdote is touched with significance as a character metaphor, as Susy has to contend with the falsity of appearances even when officially oblivious to them. Talman in particular recreates the allure of her husband as a supposed comrade in arms but retouched with an aura of romantic mystery rather than the working photographer who has to occasionally leave her for his labours, whilst Carlino impersonates authority and Roat provokes the spectre of infidelity, deception, and even murder. Meanwhile Gloria reflects Susy's infantilisation back at her as an angry, wilful girl frustrated by her absent parents and attached adoringly to Sam and, in more fraught but also finally more genuinely loyal fashion, to Susy herself. Gloria makes a peevish display of temper as she terrorises Susy in throwing her dishes around after a brief verbal argument, only to then start ashamedly help Susy in picking everything up again. "I only threw unbreakables," Gloria comments, "I learned it from Daddy." Sam himself constantly prods Susy to keep pushing herself even as it wears on both of them, "Do I have to be the world's champion blind person?" Susy demands at one point, to his vehement declaration, "Yes!"



Which Susy soon begins to prove herself, as her finite grasp on details that others think they've successfully masked, like the way they keep trying to quietly work her blinds to signal to their confederates, and the way Roat's shoes make the same sounds when he's dressed as both father and son, begins to fray the web of deceit. Gloria eventually lends her invaluable aid after she tries to sneak the doll she purloined back into the apartment, only for its telltale music chime to go off: Gloria's observations reported through rings of the telephone eventually tips Susy off to conspiracy. The connection between Susy and Gloria is very much the heart of the movie on an emotional level, each of them consumed by anxiety and feelings of being adrift but finally becoming a functional unit when working together. When Susy has her leave the house to try and intercept Sam, Gloria not only successfully dissembles her way through the criminal cordon but jauntily rattles their cage by insisting on departing with as much insolent noisemaking as possible, dragging a stick along the iron barred railings along the street. Of course the narrative would have been infinitely briefer if Roat and the others simply held Susy up and threatened intimate violence upon her unless she opened the safe for them, and likely more effective. But also rather less like a good story.



As a film, *Wait Until Dark's* creative reflexes move in interesting if slightly misaligned directions. On the one hand it's classically stagy kind of material, built around exploiting the limitations of the setting and invested with a meta-theatrical edge reminiscent of Peter Shaffer's more overt work in that frame, *Sleuth* (filmed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz in 1972). Roles are played within roles, all aspects of an act of elaborate theatre within theatre, particularly as Roat dresses up as both father and son for the nominal sake of fooling not the sightless Susy but anyone else in her building, but serving chiefly to engage actors and audience in a dance of dramatic and performance sleight-of-hand. More immediately and with a more intriguing influence, however, *Wait Until Dark* works keenly as cinema. The film was released at a moment when stories about luckless, helpless people at the mercy of vicious outlaws and crazies were starting to become popular and was about to permanently nudge horror cinema off on a new tangent, when the giallo style was evolving towards its breakout moment with Dario Argento's debut three years later. *Wait Until Dark* has notable similarities to "The Telephone" episode of Mario Bava's *I Tre Volti della Paura* (1963), likewise unfolding entirely in an apartment with a lone woman terrorised by a lurking killer. The crucial moment of Susy realising her telephone line has been cut and that she's at the mercy of the killer, experiencing a brief squall of total despair, would be remixed by Argento in *The Bird With The Crystal Plumage* (1970) for the killer's assault on Suzy Kendall in her flat, and also echo in *Black Christmas* (1974).



Arkin's Roat, with apparel that seems to fit right in with the demimonde but also makes him seem like a dead-eyed serpent in human guise, wields a clinical approach to home invasion – he wears cheap plastic gloves to prevent fingerprints, which finally gleam and rustle with perverse menace as he threatens Susy in the climax. He feels like an intermediary between a film noir type of criminal and the disembodied anxiety projection not just of giallo villains with their signature black gloves but also of the later slasher movie killers. *Wait Until Dark* feels like it was at least as strong an influence on John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) as Bava and Argento, most obviously in its focus on a solitary, imperilled woman with only a child for company, but also apparent in the finale's shock resurgence of the seemingly mortally wounded villain, as Roat, stabbed in the gut by Susy, suddenly springs out of the dark in attempt to tackle her. Ditto the jarring early moment when Talman finds Susy's body where Roat left it, stuffed into a plastic suit bag and left hanging inside a cupboard as a particularly ghoulish surprise for the interloping conman to locate – a moment that prefigures the common finding-the-bodies scene in later slashers. This nascent emphasis on cinematic dexterity and game-playing feels slightly detached from the theatrical reflexes of the plot even as one grows from the other. The film is also slightly hampered by unnecessary sidelong gestures, like a cameo by a twit neighbour (Frank O'Brien) who offers a brief jot of comic relief as he heads off on a skiing holiday for "chasing stretch pants," and composer Henry Mancini segueing from the kind of menace he was good at into jazz-pop sounds in a modish manner for when the film was made.



And yet *Wait Until Dark* is never less than hugely entertaining, particularly when the games finally give way to the raw, close-quarters, immediately thrilling spectacle of Susy defending herself against Roat, who steps to the fore once the other two men eventually prove expendable assets. Hepburn's quality of flighty fragility and accompanying emotional exposure serves her particularly well here (Lee Remick debuted the role on the stage) and the film, produced by her husband Mel Ferrer, was a significant hit, but it proved nonetheless her last screen role for nine years. The climax's compulsive force stems not just from the familiar fight for survival by the good but vulnerable against the heedlessly evil, but in the way Susy's cleverness is matched against Roat's in a sort of life-scaled chess match of challenge and response, each move countering the last. When Roat makes clear he intends to rape Susy before killing her, she is driven to use deadly force. In a battle that seems to be an open-and-shut scenario for Roat, Susy cleverly uses her advantages, knocking out every light bulb in the apartment save one, and that one used to carefully herd and then disorientate her foes, whilst she herself knows every inch of this tiny kingdom. But Roat responds with his own coldly dextrous wit and inspiration, throwing obstacles her way including Talman's corpse and the contents of a tank of gasoline tossed about in abandon, to cower Susy with her greatest fear, fire, as well as deducing and utilising the one source of light left to him. The film builds to a relentless suspense crescendo, which echoes through to *The Terminator* (1984), as Roat, injured but still driven by malign will and determination to prevail, drags himself across the floor in a murderous spell as Susy tries with her last, desperate recourse to find a last redoubt to defend. It's terrific stuff.



Indiana Jones And The Dial of Destiny (2023)

film freedonia



Director: James Mangold

Screenwriters: Jez Butterworth, John-Henry Butterworth, David Koepp, James Mangold

Sometimes, like desperate lovers, substance abusers, or obsessive questers, we cineastes know very well we should stay away from certain things, but can't. Some journeys have been too long, too bound up with the way we think and see and feel. I've been an Indiana Jones fan since I was about five years old, when I first saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) in a cinema on a university campus close to where my family lived and where my mother was studying at the time. It was a memorable occasion because I also saw *Jaws* (1975) on the same bill, and caught lice from some filthy undergraduate. But enough about my formative traumas. Cut to present day. Long after the successful but divisively received fourth instalment, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008). Long after George Lucas sold his company Lucasfilm and the rights to all his brainchildren to Disney. That sale is long enough ago, the fruit of it so copious in amount if not so much in quality, that it counts as its own epoch now, including five *Star Wars* films of sharply declining returns, and a grab-bag of TV series. *Indiana Jones* was the last of their major properties to tap, and the idea of a fifth film featuring everyone's favourite archaeological swashbuckler likely gained a new lease of life after everyone was surprised at Harrison Ford's strong turn in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). Even that was nearly a decade ago now.



Trouble was, Steven Spielberg eventually abandoned the idea of making the film himself. That was, to be blunt, the actual end of Indiana Jones. First and foremost, of course, the character of Dr Henry 'Indiana' Jones Jr and his adventures were inspired by B-movies and matinee serials devoured through a misspent youth. But Indy, as forged by a gang of filmmakers also including Lucas, Philip Kaufman, and Lawrence Kasdan and extended through his sequels, had nonetheless become Spielberg's fictional avatar and foremost autobiographical figure. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) contained a wry, teeth-gritted portrait of Spielberg's disintegrating first marriage and also proved an allegory about growing a social and historical conscience. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) offered at its heart an idealised expression of a father and son reunion, and *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* saw its hero find himself a family man at advancing age. The personal investment in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* only became more blatantly obvious after Spielberg's more recent *The Fabelmans* (2022). The way he and Lucas wound their childhoods and their manhoods, their fantasies and their experiences, into their adventurer's maturation and aging was part of the inimitable texture of those films.



Without their direct creative participation, only two original, authentic elements remain to testify some of the deeper personality persisting with this extension to the series: composer John Williams, still able to forge a rousing score, and Ford himself, who, at age 80, can definitely say it's both the years and the mileage. Back when Indy first appeared movie screens were pretty starved for old-fashioned heroes. Today there's any number of other rock-'em sock-'em action heroes of many creeds and callings riding on his

bullwhip's tail across movie screens. Even in his very specific line of work now there's Lara Croft and Nathan Drake as heroes springing out the video game world, whilst still owing everything to Indy. But Indy still has a rare stature, a specificity elusive and taunting to the vast swathe of imitators and inheritors, with his trademark outfit and weapons of choice, his amusingly blended traits of rock-ribbed bravado and intellectual curiosity, of toughness and academic quaintness, his general fearlessness and needling weak points, and particularly his romantic streak, all put him at odds with contemporary taste for strictly delineated alphas and betas amongst macho protagonists, or, at the other extreme, the crowded field of physically impervious but utterly neurotic superheroes. In any event, Indy as played by Ford as an officially and undeniably old man has inevitably left many things behind.



Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny also arrives during a rather brutal season for blockbuster Hollywood cinema, with tired franchises staggering and dropping to their knees out of breath and out of inspiration, and the whole ecosystem of such movies in dismay. A large part of this undoubtedly can be put down to the damage wrought by concessions to the streaming age: when you know you can watch an event movie in your living room a month or even less after it hits movie screens, then it's not an event movie. The corrosive effect of so little new, real imagination is also pertinent too. Nostalgia, familiarity, branding – all have been worked until the gears have started seizing up. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) signalled an easy way of wringing the drying sponge a little more by unifying diverse strands of franchise history, but it did so in a clever manner and exploited some conceptual conceits open to a sci-fi/fantasy crossbreed. The price paid has been several of these movies quickly working the appeal of seeing some old, beloved faces crash into some new, mildly liked faces into the ground. Digital filmmaking technology has evoked the spectre of big-budget cinema possibly devolving into an endless succession of intellectual properties and their original component players forced to persist forever, like the filmmaking equivalent of the eternal torture box of Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth But I Must Scream." Quite a few of these recent flailing movies have also been delayed and heavily reshot at exhausting expense in efforts to mollify multiple voices including presumed audience desire, and finish up looking exactly like the fairground chimeras they are. By all reports, *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* is one of them.



The Dial of Destiny is for its part relatively straightforward in exploiting that new realm by utilising digital de-aging technology to make Ford look once again like his forty-something self, in a lengthy prologue designed to offer the audience, at least for a portion of the new film, the illusion of an Indiana Jones restored to his glory days. At the very peak and end of his glory days, in fact, as the opening unfolds in 1945, just as the Nazi regime he fought so long and so well staggers on its last legs. This choice is at once salutary and annoying, bespeaking as it does the same assumptions by the Disney-backed Lucasfilm regime that made the revived *Star Wars* films so initially popular and left them so very quickly left without any steam at all. *Star Wars* is about Rebels versus the Empire, and Indiana Jones is a hero who fights Nazis – not just Nazis in spirit but the actual, literal Third Reich. At least in this opening portion there is a feeling of unfinished business being laid to rest. The object of contest here is the head of the Spear of Destiny, the weapon used to pierce the body of Jesus on the cross, supposedly a genuine relic of interest for Hitler and mentioned in Campbell Black's novelisation of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, giving this element an aspect of deep series lore as well as a pretext for the usual, thunderous action.



Indy is introduced, in the first of many ideas here rather too obviously recycled from the previous entry, held at bay by his enemies and with face hidden under a hood, as he's dragged into a castle used as a Nazi headquarters. On the track of the spearhead, Indy is accompanied by his rather less formidable partner in this particular mission, Basil Shaw (Toby Jones), an Oxford scholar without any adventurer chops but who still gets himself captured because he couldn't bear the thought of just leaving his friend to his fate. Indy

manages to escape, with the help of an allied bomb that plunges through the castle roof, and after various feats of derring-do and deception, boards a train loaded with plundered art and historical relics, commended by the scar-faced Colonel Weber (Thomas Kretschmann) and with physicist and rocket developer Dr Jürgen Voller (Mads Mikkelsen) also on board. Voller has already noticed something Indy only learns when he gets hold of the spearhead, that it's a fake. But something else on the train genuinely thrills Voller: a portion of the Antikythera, a device sources hold to have been invented by Archimedes and capable of using mathematical calculation to deduce where fissures in time will appear. Indy frees Basil, who's been beaten and tortured by Weber, and during a tussle on the train roof Weber is shot by Basil after accidentally nicking Indy with a bullet. Voller, trying to recover the Antikythera device from them, is knocked off the train by a water pipe. Allied bombers knock out the train's path and Indy and Basil leap to a safe landing in a river.



This sequence is well-done in most respects, with Mangold mimicking Spielberg's action style to the utmost, but with a few niggling aspects off to a consequential degree, not least of which is that for people who complained about all the CGI in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, well, here's a scene that seems to be about 95% digitally forged or enhanced. The de-aging for Ford is convincing as long as no specific emotion is required, and noticeably inexpressive otherwise. One of Ford's great gifts as an action star, the one that helped make Indy so popular, was his ability to draw the audience in and along with Indy's spasms of pain, rage, astonishment, and fear during the fights and cliffhangers. But I never asked for perfection in that regard. More aggravating is Mangold's stop-start rhythm, never quite nailing down the uncanny sense of pace and flow that defined what Spielberg can manage at his height, and indeed, whatever else one might think about his tastes as a dramaturge, something Lucas was particularly canny in fostering in works he produced. The filmmakers repeat the same joke several times, of Indy advancing on to the next car of the train to be confronted by the next bunch of oblivious German soldiers, who seem to be deaf to all the gunplay down the hall. The casting is wearily obvious, with Mikkelsen, Kretschmann, and Jones playing exactly the same parts they have in other, recent blockbusters. That can be seen as honouring the old Hollywood creed of character actor typecasting, but that's a blade that cuts two ways, as it also suggests a lack of any interest in fresh thinking.



When it comes to giving *The Dial of Destiny* some charge of personal meaning, Ford steps up to the plate. As the film moves forward to 1969, where most of the story unfolds, Ford allows us to see his body, creased and saggy and patently that of an old man if still some sign of fine muscle under it all, in a manner that's surprisingly honest, even raw. Ford is now making a movie about his own aging process even as the CGI gods dangle the possibility of eternal buffness and beauty before him – a more interesting and potent Faustian allegory of the kind this series has long specialised in than anything in the actual script. The film's official leitmotif is time, opening with the sound of a ticking clock and returning to it as Mangold notes Indy's apartment in downtown New York. Later Indy is given a clock by his faculty fellows in celebrating his imminent retirement. Oh, and yes, the Antikythera and fissures in time and all that. Indy is out of place in a city now filled with those damn young hippies with their rock music and their long hair, a note Mangold hits in the blandest and most basic fashion as he has Indy bellowing at a neighbour to turn the music he's blaring out – The Beatles' "Magical Mystery Tour," natch – down, only to be dismissed because everyone's spending the day partying, as the astronauts from the recent moon landing are being celebrated in a tickertape parade. Indy shuffles through a day of lame-duck suffering, trying to give a lecture to a bunch of students, whose boredom is comically overwrought in comparison to the rapt attention Indy once commanded of his students, particularly the female ones. Was Indy always a bad teacher only rescued by sex appeal? Why are his students taking his class if they're so uninterested in what he's teaching? Why did he leave the leafy groves of Marshall College for this place? He's put out of his misery when someone wheels in a TV so they can watch the parade, whilst Indy's attention is momentarily grabbed by a young woman who seems keen and to actually know what he's talking about.



The young woman proves to be Basil's daughter, and Indy's goddaughter, Helena (Phoebe Waller-Bridge). She's lost her father, who developed an obsessive and destructive interest in the Antikythera, and she comes offering friendly reminiscence and a flash of connection with the past to Indy. Indy otherwise is suffering. His son Mutt has died after joining up to fight in Vietnam – first suggested when Mangold pans past photos of Indy's father and son next to a folded American flag, which is nicely subtle, but of course it's reiterated more baldly later – to annoy him, and the grief of that has corroded his marriage to Marion (Karen Allen) to the point where he has their separation papers on his kitchen table. This aspect of *The Dial of Destiny* is easily its most contemptible, treating the ideal place the last film left Indy in as a chore to be undone, tossed aside for franchise extension purposes and for some easy pathos on the fly, and having gotten wind of it before watching the film, it made me downright mad. But given my ethos of trying to take every movie as something deserving of assessment on its own terms, if not in isolation, I forced myself to move past that. Still: certainly Shia LaBeouf never took off as a star and has gotten in trouble since, but the part might easily have been recast. Meanwhile, with Short Round himself, Ke Huy Quan, having won an Oscar for *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022) with a performance that showed off amongst other things that his martial arts skills are prodigious, we ought to have had one or both of Indy's sons in this film, to take on the heavy action lifting and continue the family motif of the series.



Instead, we get Waller-Bridge's Helena. After initially playing the agreeable, gentle history savant with a soft spot for her dad's old friend, Helena is eventually revealed to be a character very much like Indy was himself at her age. Or, at least, that's what the filmmakers want us to say, as Helena is shown to be bit of a bad lot, affecting an attitude of cynical and money-hungry swagger, casting lustful glances at any good-looking dolt that passes by, and trying to sell off the portion of the Antikythera which she steals from Indy rather than honouring her father as she claimed. She also leaves him in the lurch when some goons on her tail barge through, slaying two of Indy's work colleagues and pinning the crime on him. These goons include Klaber (Boyd Holbrook, basically repeating his role and performance from *Logan*, 2016, for Mangold), and Hauke (Olivier Richters), who presents the compulsory hulk opponent for Indy but, this time around, our hero just never quite packs enough punch to take down anymore. In one of several highly confused plot strands, these men are working in liaison with at least one CIA agent, but have decided to go rogue in working with Professor Schmidt, one of the crucial scientists involved in the moon landing. Whaddaya know, it's Dr Voller, a little greyer but still, under the skin, a fervent Nazi. The pseudonymous Voller has used his new leverage with the government to get all his ideological friends assigned to help him get the Antikythera piece back. Klaber's casual murders upset Mason (Shaunette Renée Wilson), a member of the agent team and the film's stand-in for Cleopatra Jones, or maybe Foxy Cleopatra, and one who

hasn't been converted to Voller's renascent fascist credo. She still tries to bring Indy to heel and argues with her nominal colleagues until she's shot for, well, because the movie doesn't need her.



Hiring Mangold to take over from Spielberg is one of those choices that seem, on the face of things, to be a safe bet. Mangold has dipped his toe in indie dramas, historical films, biopics, genre revivals, gimmick thrillers, and special effects-heavy franchise films since his directing debut with *Heavy* (1995). He likely got the job for making *Logan*, an incredibly overrated film that was nonetheless taken by many as the gold standard for delivering a weathered hero his righteous swansong. Some of Mangold's better credentials for making this movie might be found in the rigorous period atmosphere and feel for star turns playing iconic figures evinced in *Walk The Line* (2005) and *Ford v Ferrari* (2019): the latter film in particular saw Mangold mating technical punch with storytelling and human values with real verve. But Mangold isn't particularly imaginative as a stager of action scenes, and lacks that special talent for interlacing human matters with the necessary highwire dance of high adventure cinema. He's the kind of solid, smart, sufficient director Hollywood always needed and needs more of today, but not a visionary, or even, really, a niche expert. He does a cover band job in reproducing Spielberg's aesthetic, but despite the sharpness of the editing and shooting on display, no scene here takes on the wild and relentless joy of movement achieved in the desert pursuit in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the mining cart ride in *Temple of Doom*, or the jungle chase in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. In fact, there is no special set-piece here despite the many would-be thrilling and very expensive action sequences. A mid-film chase through the streets of Tangiers, for instance, goes on so long I forgot exactly what was supposed to be at stake in it.



Indy's escape from the goon squad in the midst of the astronauts' parade comes closest to recapturing the precise conceptual and staging zest of the classic model films, particularly in the conceit of having the action ever so close to the eye of real history. But like the earlier train sequence, this bit peters out somewhere along the line without any grand comic or violent punchline, save the astronauts themselves glancing in bewilderment at the sight of Indy dashing by on a commandeered cop's horse whilst he's chased by Klaber and others. This feeling of exasperation becomes even more amplified as the film unfolds through a leisurely, clumsy middle act which, far from repairing the perceived faults of *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* in that regard, actually doubles down on them, and even gets worse as the film careens towards a splashy, spectacular, yet perversely anticlimactic and borderline senseless climax. Meanwhile the film only goes through the motions of detailing an Indy adrift in the 1960s zeitgeist, taking the laziest route of making him a grumpy grandpa and not someone who, say, has naturally evolved his passion for antiquities and their meaning for humanity into any kind of advocate or activist stance, which would have been in line with his personal growth. Whilst the cultural reference points in the previous films were deliberately cartoonish, they at least had meaning, most particularly in the ironic survey of 1950s in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, with its pasteboard, mannequin-populated, atomic bomb-decimated town and its roaring hotroaders oblivious to the authentic dramas and deep-riven legacies still permeating the brave new world. *The Dial of Destiny* barely cares about its social backdrop.



At first glance, Helena doesn't strike me as a bad concept at all – if the filmmakers could decide on which concept of her they want. Given the period and casting choice, Helena might have been characterised as a fiery young radical full of pith and vinegar attitude. But actually she's entirely indifferent to her generational cadre, her affectation going no further than the rather groovy ensemble with a red velvet jacket and scarf she wears in her early scenes, and her liberated lustiness which, of course, cannot be indulged or illustrated in today's movie climate, either from the pseudo-feminist perspective of not making her a sex object and fallible before men, or from the reactionary side of not making her seem overtly slutty. So, she will be nothing. Her traits are all over the place, as if the battery of hands involved in writing the script all had a different idea of what she should be. Shoehorned in at one point is the Moroccan gangster Rahim (Alaa Safi), whom Helena apparently promised to marry at some point and now is on the rampage when she and Indy stir things up in Tangiers. This is all played out in the midst of a frenetic action scene, as is just about every effort to characterise Helena, also including random shouting about her gambling debts. Marion's introduction in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was brilliant in the way it immediately outlined her as the ideal Hawksian woman to inhabit Indy's world, tough, worldly, funny, and, most important, saying much in a considered but still very amusing way. Indy's childhood nickname for Helena, Wombat, is a charming aside, but the way Helena seems to nurse resentment for Indy in failing to rescue her father from his spiralling obsession and later tardiness in looking out for his goddaughter again deserves some substantial treatment and never really gets it: similarly, her relationship with her own father, again intended to evoke Indy's with his, is noted but never grappled with. The closest this film gets to the old romanticism, by the way, comes right at the end, between two senior citizens.



The script further pads Helena's likeness to young Indy by sticking her with a young partner in crime, Teddy (Ethann Isidore), whose backstory is the same as Short Round's was and is attached in loyalty to Helena. Trouble is, whilst Teddy isn't as excitable as Short Round was to some people's annoyance, he is annoying in the opposite way, always acting sullen, impatient, and generally like a lead balloon, present more as a box to be ticked in the narrative doubling and easy plot workarounds, including to be someone whose life can be made a dramatic stake since no-one's around to be damsel in distress anymore. Waller-Bridge's casting is one of those choices that can either make or break this kind of film. Casting an actress best-known as a comedy performer had a relative boldness I appreciated, and Waller-Bridge has a spry, off-beat energy that serves her well in the right parts. But here I quickly came to the conclusion she's rather badly miscast. I dare say she'll attract plenty of hyperbole henceforth from people sour at the entire idea of her role and presence, and from those with the opposite reflex. But the real frustration is that the film doesn't entirely know what it wants from Helena as a character or Waller-Bridge as a performer. It wants her to be daring and thrilling, but not too much. It wants her to be a bit naughty, but not too much. It wants her to be a potential replacement for Indy himself, but she just doesn't have the necessary brand of

star energy or sexy charisma, and any contrasting, eccentric backbeat she might have wielded is smothered through incompetence. At least in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* any deficiencies LaBeouf had as a potential successor were kneaded into the story itself, in the fact Mutt was still a very young man with much to learn, his bluster and tough guy act tested and fractured even as his true grit began to emerge.



More immediately, Waller-Bridge doesn't convince in any form as an action heroine, leading to a downright silly moment when she strips the torn arms off her fab red silk blouse to get down and dirty, but only revealing her pasty posh London guns. I wished the film had taken the different tack of making her more of her father's daughter, a timid nerd who has to rapidly find her inner adventurer when thrown into Indy's world, as mooted during her very first meeting with Indy. Indy, Helena, and Teddy, after a lot of dashing about in Tangiers, move on to the Aegean in search of a relic which can give a clue to the location of the other half of the Antikythera, which Basil apparently deduced was lost in a shipwreck. Indy seeks out old pal Renaldo, a great diver, played by Antonio Banderas in a role that defines the phrase "criminally wasted." Indy, Helena, and Renaldo descend to the shipwreck and retrieve the code-etched tablet, only to find Voller and goons waiting above for them. Voller shoots Renaldo as a warning and Helena elects to go through the motions of translating the code whilst plotting leverage their escape with a stick of dynamite. Once the heroes flee on Voller's faster boat, Indy identifies the deeper secret contained by the tablet. This sequence nods to several likenesses in the series, but stretches everything out to near-tedium.



Mangold has no feel for the comic aspects of this template, and the script gives little to work with. One or two jokes do land, like the inevitable twist on the old shooting-the-swordsman gag which this time sees Indy trying to pacify a room full of heavies by lashing his whip around, only for everyone to pull a gun and blast away, requiring him to duck with speed. Not much else hits the target however: I lost count of the number of quips that failed to elicit a response from the audience I saw this with. Meanwhile Mangold shoehorns in Sallah (John Rhys-Davies), who's moved to New York and lives with his extended family, for a scene that teases an interesting note of cultural evolution – Sallah is happy his kids have multicultural awareness – which momentarily makes something of an otherwise awkward and random cameo present for little more than a few easy nostalgia frissons. Rhys-Davies looks even older and far less spry than Ford, even if he seems to still have his singing voice as the refrain heard right at the end suggests. Despite its boldness out of the gate in dealing with the subject, *The Dial of Destiny* after that does little to really grapple with Indy's feelings of being too old, too out of the loop to matter, and the ending, which seems to be aiming for a specific resolution, veers away from it in a manner redolent of cold feet. The ideal ending that came into my head for Indy would have been to see him find new stage, some new generation requiring his gifts, his knowledge, the aspects of him distinct from his physicality. But the film's chosen arc steers firmly away from that.



Indiana Jones as a property is in an awkward position. Indy's iconic name brand value, and the lustre of all the black ink in the old accounts books, are the sort of thing movie studios love banking on these days – the only thing they know how bank on. But this is one series that can't be easily rebooted, too dependent on one star actor, the through-line of his life story specifically rooted in both historical setting and essential motifs, to result in any easy hand-off or new beginning. The *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* already ticked off Indy's youth in detail. *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* had trouble weaving a fresh and satisfying narrative around all its compulsory tropes and refrains, but it had many other qualities to compensate. In that regard Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), very much the lightning rod for an increasingly heated war between franchise-reliant filmmakers and easily annoyed fans whose cash is being presumed upon, had the right idea in insisting the imprimatur had to evolve and change or die. The problem with Johnson's film was that whilst it talked the talk, it didn't walk the walk, settling for merely reordering and remixing previous ideas and scenes of the series rather than finding new ground, except in the most superficial ways. *The Dial of Destiny* is less ambitious, but it suffers then from a problem of wanting to get back to basics, and then forgetting what those basics mean.



As for the actual motivating element in the drama, the Antikythera itself, I liked that it was established by Voller as neither supernatural nor science fiction McGuffin as in earlier entries, but simply the product of Archimedes' mathematical genius, capable of calculating the hidden weak points in reality itself. How the dial is put to actual use however is again clumsily developed. Voller wants to use it to travel back to before World War II and guide Hitler around all his mistakes, to ensure Nazism's ultimate victory. Such selective travel proves impossible, however, with every fissure leading back to Archimedes' time, with the scientist himself (Nasser Memarzia) desperate to attract any kind of intervention save his beloved Syracuse from the invading Romans. Which made me wonder why Voller thought he could set it so selectively in the first place: surely if the device's algorithms are firmly encoded in its workings, someone with his mathematical skills should have deduced that when he was setting it. I might also still argue that the Antikythera, which is a real artefact though its use is still conjectural, has no known connection with Archimedes, and betrays the series tradition of utilising story-driving objects rooted in strong historical, religious, and mythical bases, rather than just being a fancy doodad attached to a famous historical name designed to work the necessary plot for the filmmakers.



The general mechanics of the plot are weak, too, in a way that sometimes borders on the truly excruciating. Indy following Helena to Tangiers requires a prompt from Sallah, entirely depending on his mysteriously good connections; somehow, also, Indy is able to simply catch a plane out of the country despite being a wanted fugitive. Voller and squad are able to locate Renaldo's boat on the ocean for some reason. Voller's

method for deducing where Indy and company are heading after giving him the slip is a very long bow, and he later simply gets extraordinarily lucky in stumbling across Teddy. An important aspect of the climax depends on Helena prompting Teddy to try and fly a specific type of plane, only to let slip that she knows he's never flown a plane. And yet Teddy is able to get this one in the air, the kind of smirking absurdity that seems to have stumbled in out a Jerry Lewis movie, and truly makes me wonder what the filmmakers thought they were doing. Even with that aside, the daisy-chain of quests to land the next piece of the puzzle is drawn out and substitutes too often for actual story. Spielberg and Williams proved in the map room scene of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* that what might have been a dull interlude between action scenes could be turned into an aria of dramatic intensity, weaving music and visuals together to supreme effect. To say that Mangold shows no such capacity for constructing something like that would be being kind. Or anything as majestic and intricate in thematic linkage linked as the twinned shots of the rising mushroom cloud and the lifting alien craft in *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.



There is at least a nice, fleeting nod to *Secret of the Incas* (1954), one of the singular early influences on the series, when Indy and Helena find Archimedes' tomb, lit with sun-reflecting mirrors. A moment like Indy gently taking the gun from Basil's hand as the timid scholar is stricken with powerful and clashing emotions after shooting Weber, his first act of violence, reminded me that Mangold has a real feel for picking out moments of finite emotional impact, and there isn't enough of this. A brief flashback incorporated to illustrate a crucial moment shared by Indy, Basil, and the child Helena (Holly Lawton), revealing how wild Basil was being driven by his preoccupation with the Antikythera and the sight of the two father figures Helena had and lost, might have wielded some emotional grace, but instead just slows the film down and breaks up its structure. It shouldn't be surprising that Ford would prove the best thing about the film, but then again he's long been underrated, on top of his age seeming to prohibit against him adventuring too strenuously. Nonetheless he has a soulful quality now, and with the help of a few stuntmen and some calculated digital trickery, his Indy still passes muster. But I still felt the film would have been better if he was left a bit more like John Wayne in his late vehicles, content to sit with a big gun to bring to bear as required and leave the rough-and-tumble to the kids. Again, the film interprets its mission statement with annoying literalness: *Indiana Jones* films are about Indiana Jones doing adventures, dammit. *The Dial of Destiny* nonetheless comes on armed with all the production might and gloss that Lucasfilm with Disney's money behind it seem alone able to wield now, and this gloss almost singlehandedly makes the film a compelling experiment, apparent in brilliantly filmed moments like a hapless diver under Renaldo's boat seeing Voller's boat arrive above on the surface before his air hose is cut, and the sheer screen-filling vistas of the finale.



But it's all for nought without an authentic sense of story drive and some genuine sense of what new world it wants to conquer. Perhaps the lamest element of the whole enterprise is one of potentially strongest: Mikkelsen as Voller. Mikkelsen is a terrific actor, and yet, as he did with his last-minute substitution as the villain in *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022), he walks scornfully through yet another icy Nordic bad guy role. The film offers one faintly bewildering moment when Voller quizzes an African-American steward in his downtown New York residence whether he is happy in his nation's victory in the war, to the steward's slight demur. This is the sort of moment that reeks of the filmmakers thinking themselves daring and thought-provoking, but what it really provokes is deep cynicism: ah yes, genocidal fascists and struggling racial minorities, always finding the common ground. Voller is otherwise so listless a placeholder villain that I can think of nothing to say about him. He has none of Belloq's status as the hero's dark double, Mola Ram's devilish glee, Walter Donovan's deceptive charm, or Irina Spalko's charismatic arrogance. Whilst daring to take different paths is as I've said generally a good thing, I couldn't help but feel the way Mangold and his battery of fellow screenwriters fail to deliver the kind of memorably nasty comeuppance laced with Faustian overtones, that constant series motif, to Voller, betrayed their obliviousness to the kinds of morality plays that underpin the material. I'm not even sure how Kluger met his end: it all gets lost in a churn of stuff happening, something Spielberg and Lucas would never have allowed.



At no point in the film does it feel like Indy's old spirit is being jogged back to life, no sense of him deciding to grapple with evil and take down new representatives of his old, hated foes: instead he's dragged along for the ride, often with a downcast and disapproving tilt in dealing with Helena's antics. Late in the film Indy is shot in the shoulder by the fascists and taken with them on the plane they intend to use to pass through a time fissure. This gunshot is rather more than a flesh wound but apparently rather less than mortal, and seems intended to evoke the one Indy's father took in *The Last Crusade* – a wound that was indeed delivered to be fatal but only slowly so, giving Indy time to find the Holy Grail and save his dad. But, in a manner that again betrays reediting and changed intentions, Indy moves between being at death's door and still strong enough to fight and then parachute jump. Meanwhile Helena chases after the Nazi plane and climbs aboard the landing gear, which would be a fun action movie moment if it wasn't so obviously fake (and after *Shadow in the Cloud*, 2021, and *Sisu*, 2023, hanging off the underside of a plane fuselage has already become the new ultimate movie badass trick — come to think of it, those two movies actually did quite a few things this one tries, but better), whilst Teddy pursues in a stolen plane, ridiculous as already discussed. In what is actually quite a nice touch, the arrival of the planes during the siege of Syracuse by the Romans sees the attackers launching missiles at the aircraft, thinking they're dragons, whilst Archimedes and his aides rally their defences. Trouble was, here again I could see in my mind how Spielberg would have handled the system of reveals required here for maximum effect.



For Mangold, well, it's all just laid out, more random buzzes delivered more to the audience's backsides than their brains. That the neo-Nazis insist on fighting it out with the seaborne Roman horde is incredibly silly. There never seems to be any urgent or immediate hazard to our heroes: Indy even repeatedly points out that Teddy isn't in any danger, and the gallivanting isn't sustained or ingenious enough to make this a non-issue. There are no stakes to drive a sense of down-to-the-wire drama: by arriving in this moment of history, Voller's plan is already kaput. This leads to the amazingly frustrating punchline to all this, when Indy actually meets Archimedes. This is supposed to be the most incredible moment in a lifetime of incredible moments for Indiana Jones, our hero, our beloved movie protagonist and franchise linchpin. Here he is, acting out the ultimate dream of every historian who ever lived, encountering a man he would have read and learned about his entire life, a figure of legend permeating the history of western science. But there's barely any conversation between them. No revelation, no idea, no exchange of emotion or meditation on time, fate, humanity, anything. Not even some pathos for Archimedes himself who will die at the end of the siege. As a scene I think this concluding encounter is supposed to echo the same flourish of melancholy grandeur as Indy's encounter with the knight in *The Last Crusade*, an encounter that, as well as defying nature and the ages, saw Indy meeting his own ironic doppelganger, the anointed knight errant in the Grail Quest. No such likeness is found between Indy and Archimedes, who stares rather dully at the two time interlopers. And this is the worst crime of *The Dial of Destiny*, far overshadowing all others. It

betrays its own, innermost kernel of potential richness. Instead we get Helena sticking herself between the two men and trying to wave away the moment, telling Indy he has to get himself back in time or he'll foul things up. Helena seems determined to act out the worst caricature of a common fan complaint, the weakly inserted substitute hero literally inserting herself, telling everyone in loud and certain terms where their proper places are, before punching Indy unconscious to cart him back to the future, somehow wielding enough clout to knock out a man giant bull Nazis and Thugees and Stalinists could never muster.



The film's coda, with Indy and Marion reunited back in '69, is the only part of the film that actually made me feel anything: dependent as it is on a direct call-back to the great "Where doesn't it hurt?" scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, nonetheless here *The Dial of Destiny* captures some genuine connection and depth, particularly as both Ford and Allen handle the mix of powerful emotions apparent in Indy and Marion with masterful concision, only to be despoiled but another set of awkward gestures, as and Helena accompanies Sallah and his grandkids off for ice cream with a my-work-is-done-here backward glance, whilst Indy for some reason snatches his hat off the clothesline. Not to mention the brusque treatment to the actual resolution of the story. There's no feeling of discovery, or even rediscovery, but instead an awareness of the filmmakers channelling through the characters their desperate clinging to the last thread of this franchise's popularity. I never thought an *Indiana Jones* film would leave me feeling more depressed than thrilled, but here we are. The odd thing is that for its manifold deficiencies and disappointments, *The Dial of Destiny* is only a very ordinary movie, not a bad one, and only inadequate in being forced to compare itself to some of the greatest movies of their kind ever made. In visual lustre and production heft it's certainly well ahead of *Jungle Cruise* (2021) or *Uncharted* (2022) and some of the other garbage served up in a vaguely similar style in the past decade or so. But it's also a film that will likely prove the poster child for diminishing returns in modern entertainment, an overstuffed, indecisive, anonymously-made iteration of a property that came roaring out of a moment of supreme revivalist confidence. In archaeological terms, it's a fake. You can tell by the cross-sections.

The Message (1976)

aka Mohammed, Messenger of God

this island rod



Moustapha Akkad's *The Message* holds the truly arresting claim to being possibly the most viewed film in history, and the film's mere existence is worth remarking on. Akkad was a Syrian filmmaker who moved to the US in the 1950s to study at UCLA. Akkad came under the wing of Sam Peckinpah who served as a mentor figure, before he started working for CBS as a producer. He's best-known, to cineastes in the west at least, for producing John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and umpteen sequels, but he also directed two feature films, *The Message* and *Lion of the Desert* (1981). Both were passionate, expensive throwbacks to the days of epic cinema as practiced by the likes of David Lean and Anthony Mann, at a time when such movies were entirely out of fashion. The subject matter of *The Message*, the early days of Islam and the proselytising of Mohammed and his first disciples, was fired by Akkad's zeal and desire to communicate the essence and history of his religion to the world, but was also bound to cause problems. He faced enormous trials to get the film made, in the face of indifference from Hollywood backers and outright aggression from the various Middle Eastern countries he tried to make it in, because, whilst Akkad consulted with Islamic scholars to keep the film as accurate to both history and religious doctrine as possible, many still thought he was risking an act of blasphemy.



Such were Akkad's labours indeed that they provide instant subtext for the movie, mirroring the travails of the early Muslims as portrayed. Eventually, after being forced out of several countries he was filming in and failing to get enough financing to finish the movie, Akkad secured funding from Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who would later also back *Lion of the Desert*, leading to both films being critically dismissed upon release in the west, whilst misunderstandings about the film sparked violent threats and incidents in both its UK and US releases. After a few early screenings under the title of *Mohammed, Messenger of God*, Akkad changed it to the more benign *The Message*. The central problem of making a movie about Mohammed and the source of much of the disquiet the film met is a thorny one indeed, given the long Islamic tradition of not portraying the Prophet in likeness or performance, one Akkad obeyed. *The Message* gets around this convention by having Mohammed's presence continually suggested through point-of-view shots, with other actors addressing the camera, or carefully blocked out in wide shots. Otherwise his words and deeds are reported by others.



Despite being largely dismissed in the west for their status as “petrochemical epics” and sporting some similarity to other ego-empire products around the same time like the Moonie-produced *Inchon* (1981), both *The Message* and *Lion of the Desert* are good if lumpy and stylistically unambitious movies. Akkad’s straightforwardness as a filmmaker is for both films at once a drag and a strength: even if the films shuffle along earnestly at points, Akkad nonetheless applied expansive talent for spectacle that harkens back to those old epics but fuses them with the gritty and tactile intensity of ‘70s filmmaking. It also has a dose of rather less elevated emotional drama and dark passion to sustain it. Come for the historical, religious, and ethical meditations, and stay for Irene Papas as a raging, heart-devouring avenger. So blatant were Akkad’s desires to emulate Lean and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) in particular that he hired one of that film’s stars, Anthony Quinn, and its composer Maurice Jarre, as well as regular Lean collaborator Jack Hildyard as cinematographer. The script for the English-language version was written by H.A.L. Craig, who amongst other things had written another epic international boondoggle, Sergei Bondarchuk’s *Waterloo* (1970). For the international release, in contrast to contemporary demands for ethnic authenticity in casting, Akkad had no problem populating the scenes filmed in English with international actors (whilst Arabic actors played the major roles in the Arabic version) including Quinn and his *The Guns of Navarone* (1961) and *Zorba The Greek* (1964) costar Papas, alongside a battery of good British character actors and the familiar Hollywood actor Michael Ansara, who like Akkad was Syrian.



Akkad avoids any kind of portrayal of mystic experience, inevitable in part because the Prophet himself is off camera and his divine communings abstract, although he does offer one strong visual metaphor early on as his camera zooms in on the mouth of the cave where Mohammed's divine revelation is supposed to have occurred, until the screen is filled with blackness, with the flame of a burning oil lamp then slowly rising into view. Otherwise Akkad maintains an entirely tangible portrayal of history and the verified events of Islam's early days: the subject here rather is the transformative power of faith itself, as both a source of persecution and suffering but also, finally, world-reordering power. The film opens with messengers on horseback bringing Mohammed's call to follow his new faith to the Byzantine and Persian Emperors and the Alexandrian Patriarch, met with scoffs and bewilderment by the great men and their entourages. The film then steps back a decade or so, to depict the Mecca of the time, making its money from pilgrims coming to visit its many shrines and idols of a variety of gods which have accumulated around the Kaaba, a holy place instituted according to tradition by Abraham.



Ansara plays Abu Sufyan, one of the city's regime of potentates. Akkad scores an early, rueful point about the perpetually diplomatic lot of the artist as he depicts Sinan (Gerard Hely), a marketplace poet and reciter, who carefully changes the satirical lilt of his jests about Abu Safyan when the potentate himself strays close to listen. Papas is Safyan's wife, Hind bint Utbah, and her father is Utbah ibn Rabi'ah (Robert Brown), another of the city bigwigs. The potentates get their collective noses out of joint when the upstart Mohammed begins preaching his new monotheistic creed, a threat to their theology and, more importantly, their economy. Mohammed's gathering adherents, mostly ardent young relatives, like his adopted son Zayd (Damien Thomas), and his uncle and protector Abu Talib (Andre Morell), are persuaded by the ardency of his reports from the edge of creation, and the fact he came away with a book of knowledge despite being illiterate. Mohammed's message however quickly starts stirring discontent, including amidst Utbah's house as Hind, her father, and brother Walid (George Camiller) clash with another, converted brother, Hodayfa (Habib Ageli), a conflict that quickly typifies a war of generations and outlooks the city overlords soon decide must be stamped out.



When Mohammed and his followers march on the Kaaba to “declare” themselves, they find themselves up against an angry mob who think they intend an iconoclast rampage, and the devotees defend Mohammed from assault. Another of Mohammed’s uncles, the tough and much-respected Hamza (Anthony Quinn), riding into the riot after a hunt, challenges the elder Abu Jahl (Martin Benson), who’s whipped up the crowd, and slaps him when he calls Mohammed a fraud before affirming his nephew’s religion. Bilal (Johnny Sekka), the Black African slave of Umayyah ibn Khalaf (Bruno Barnabe), refuses to whip one of the new faithful on his master’s behalf and instead announces his interest in the religion. Bilal is brutally tested with whips and heavy rocks laid on his torso to make him recant, but Zayd successfully buys Bilal’s freedom from his frustrated owner. Another of Mohammed’s new followers, Ammar (Garrick Hagon), is confronted by his fretful parents, Yasir (Ewen Solon) and Sumayyah (Rosalie Crutchley), only for him to convert them. Later the family achieve the grim honour of being some of the first martyrs to the cause, parents tortured to death by the potentate Abu Jahl (Martin Benson) before the gaze of their bound and screaming son. Coming across the bodies of them and other martyrs left strewn by Abu Jahl, Hamza advises Mohammed and his flock to flee, and soon all of the new faithful are hunted by Meccan authorities whilst their property seized. Some of the faithful, including Mohammed himself, find refuge in Medina, whilst Ammar and others head to Abyssinia, where they appeal to the Christian king, Al-Najashi (Earl Cameron), to protect them.



Despite the sober, realistic approach Akkad takes for the most part, *The Message* tries in an ungainly manner to bridge the divide between a serious historical film and a work with a proselytising bent, meaning it's afflicted by some familiar flaws of religious epics. This includes the general, doe-eyed solemnity in portraying Mohammed's young adherents, who are virtually interchangeable in portrayal with any number of depictions of Jesus's apostles with their ardent appealing and noble rectitude in the face of persecution, and the awkward effect of having characters constantly discuss or complain about Mohammed's choices and actions. And yet this last aspect, an offshoot of the need to keep the Prophet himself abstract, does to a certain extent highlight the potential power of that attitude: rather than offering a mere presence, the weight falls on the poetry and moral force of the Koran's reported words. There's also one of those mildly amusing moments of improbable, instant perfection in depicting a moment of crucial invention, when Bilal, called upon to perform the first ever Muezzin's call to prayer after the adherents debate how best to do it and decide on the human voice, does so in flawless fashion. More successfully, Akkad strains to emphasise the liberal and egalitarian influence of the emerging religion, particularly in standing against the common practice of burying newborn female children alive as an unwanted burden, and forms of slavery that treat the slave as a mere thing, as part of his overall project of trying to portray his religion with both sympathy for his brethren and elucidation for everyone else. Muhammad Ali, who at the time was dabbling in work as an actor in between boxing bouts, supposedly expressed an interest in playing Bilal, only to be turned down by Akkad, who said the audience wouldn't be able to believe Ali as a meekly suffering martyr.



Akkad is more able to apply an artist's touch around the edges. Hamza, played by Quinn with well-calculated macho bravura and star charisma, turns his aura of bristling, bullish force to a holy purpose, drawn initially into declaring his support for Mohammed and his creed out of purely personal, familial loyalty but soon becoming the elder statesman and military leader of the fledgling movement. Morell is also strong as Abu Talib, already an old man when the story begins, lamenting the end of the great religious festival Mecca sees every year because he might not live to see the next, and eventually left broke and bereft by popular disgrace, dying in gasping pain even as he still tries to reconcile Mohammed and the Meccan rulers. One of the most compelling scenes depicts Cameron's Al-Najashi holding court to decide on the fate of the Muslims who have come to him for shelter, with some Meccan diplomats demanding they be imprisoned and surrendered to them. Al-Najashi gives the Muslims a chance to defend themselves and questions them on their matters of faith, including the role of Jesus in their religion, and concluding, as he draws his cruciform staff across the floor at Ammar's feet, "the difference between us and you is no bigger than this line," and refuses to hand them over.



Akkad finds ritual and human energy in depicting the Muslims build their first Mosque in Medina, initially a simple, hand-crafted structure which Mohammed contributes to despite frail health and Hamza's entreaties to sit it out. When the exiled Muslims hear that their personal possessions are being carried by a caravan, accompanied by an escorting army led by Utbah, Walid, and others, they appeal to Mohammed for permission to attack, and whilst counselling peace declares they have the right to go to war to reclaim what's theirs. Hamza leads the Muslims in a deft series of manoeuvres to catch their foes at the well of Badr, where Bilal tells the army the discipline the Prophet demands of them. Hamza and some other Muslim accept a challenge for a fight of champions, during which Hamza kills Utbah, and the furious Meccans attack en masse only to be soundly defeated. A year later, Walid returns and bests the Muslims at the Battle of Uhud after the ill-discipline of some of the Muslim warriors leaves a flank vulnerable to cavalry.



The upshot of this vigorous yet pointless to and fro of success in war carries symbolic inference – in the end the moral abacus balances out, both sides suffering hard losses, victory proving in essence illusory. Bilal gains personal satisfaction in slaying his former owner in the fray, but the scene is also set for Hind's desire for payback on Hamza. The more immediate and consequential result of inspiring the factions to agree to a ten year truce, which gives the Muslims time to really gain a foothold, their numbers soon grown exponentially. Papas's Hind, the exemplary pagan, gives the film its real juice, conceived as a scornful, implacable antiheroine not far from the kinds of Attic tragedienne roles she played in *Antigone* (1961) and *The Trojan Women* (1971). Hind proves an even more vehement enemy of the first Muslims than even her father and brother, decrying Mohammed as a man who "starves himself into dreams." When Hamza kills her father, Hind vows bloody revenge – "With my nails, Hamza!" she snarls, curling her fingers into leonine claws, "I'll give you measure for measure with my nails!" She commissions a warrior slave for the job after he gives a display of his prowess with a spear in a routine with a dancer, and he slays Hamza in a cold assassination during the Battle of Uhud. Hind gloats over Hamza's corpse before desecrating it by having the warrior cut him open so, it's implied, she can literally consume his innards.



By comparison, the film proves disappointingly cursory in portraying the Meccan elders' capitulation to the Muslims once their grip on popular opinion becomes too strong to resist. Abu Safyan and Hind accept that "the way we lived was wrong" whilst expecting to be massacred when Mohammed and his people enter Mecca, only to find they're left in peace, a moment that ought to pack more punch than it does. Finally the Kaaba is cleansed, and the sight of Bilal climbing atop the shrine to give the call to prayer earns a powerful shot from Hildyard, Sekka's gleaming black skin and jubilant expression contrasted with the swathing white robes of the crowd below, before fading into real footage of the Hajj, and surveys of the faith's vast international and multicultural reach in the modern world. Long, orthodox, and occasionally preachy as it is, *The Message* is still a solid, interesting film that does something not enough movies have done, and the possibility that it is, indeed, the most watched film of all time suggests it did eventually find its place. In a final tragic irony, Akkad was killed along with his daughter in the 2005 Amman, Jordan bombings, at the age of 75.



Independence Day (1996) / Independence Day: Resurgence (2016)

film freedonia



Director: Roland Emmerich

Screenwriters: Dean Devlin, Roland Emmerich / Dean Devlin, Roland Emmerich, James Vanderbilt, James A. Woods, Nicolas Wright

Roland Emmerich was an unlikely candidate to become one of Hollywood's biggest directors. Born in Stuttgart in 1955, the son of a wealthy manufacturer of garden machinery, Emmerich spent much of his youth swanning about Europe and North America before knuckling down and attending Munich's University of Film and Television, initially intending to become a production designer. After watching *Star Wars* (1977) he decided to try directing too. Required to make a short film as his thesis project, Emmerich instead made a complete feature, the science fiction film *The Noah's Ark Principle*, which gained a theatrical release in 1984, followed by two more German-language genre films, *Joey* (aka *Making Contact*, 1985) and *Hollywood-Monster* (aka *Ghost Chase*, 1987). Emmerich's fast-evolving reputation as a technically skilled and visually impressive filmmaker soon landed him the job of directing *Moon 44* (1990), a West German-produced, English-language feature about prisoners pressganged into serving a nefarious space mining company. *Moon 44*, not for the last time in Emmerich's career, was critically derided for its derivative story and clunky dramatics, but it proved an international calling card. One member of the cast, Dean Devlin, would become Emmerich's producing and writing partner, and it also gained Emmerich offers from Hollywood, making his debut there with 1992's *Universal Soldier*.



The surprise success of *Universal Soldier*, a flashily-filmed tale about warring cyborg supersoldiers, helped Emmerich and Devlin get their next project off the ground. *Stargate* (1994) depicted a team of Earth soldiers, and one nerdy scientist, who travel via a wormhole opened up by a recovered piece of alien technology to a distant desert planet. There they find human inhabitants enslaved by spacefaring, body-swapping aliens resembling ancient Egyptian gods. *Stargate* proved a big hit with its blend of hoary sci-fi ranging from *Doctor Who* to Edgar Rice Burroughs and Erich Von Daniken, and old-fashioned action-adventure movie sweep realised with Emmerich's colourful eye. It also climaxed with a consistent motif in Emmerich's films, with the oppressed rising up against tyrannous and genocidal powers. From this point on Emmerich and Devlin adopted the adage "go big or go home" like a personal religion, and in obedience came up with *Independence Day*. Upon release in July 1996, *Independence Day* seemed a logical extension of the evolving special effects blockbuster style, but also proved the truest curtain-raiser for the next wave of that style, as it rapidly became the second highest-grossing film in history just behind *Jurassic Park* (1992), and made former rapper and TV comic actor Will Smith into a major movie star.



Emmerich and Devlin quickly moved to repeat the film's success with their Hollywoodised take on *Godzilla* (1998), a goofy, mindlessly entertaining film that proved a weak box office performer, and one infamous to fans of the great kaiju for its disrespectful take on the creature's lore and traits. Whilst Emmerich made segues into historical tales for *The Patriot* (2000) and *Anonymous* (2011), straight-up action filmmaking on *White House Down* (2013), and even the personal and relatively low-key activist

drama with *Stonewall* (2015), he nonetheless remained synonymous with, and even infamous for, his continuing string of expensive, flashy, absurd, and variably popular blockbusters, including *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *10,000 BC* (2007), and *2012* (2009), to a creeping feeling of diminishing returns on an entertainment level, but sufficiently sustained financial success. Emmerich remained happily tuned out of the tide of fashion in Hollywood aesthetics. Whilst his major rival in the '90s blockbuster stakes Michael Bay made his flashy, Ritalin-jagged, cubist-edited, advertising-and-video clip-derived style a new standard, and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) made vivid, unstable camerawork and immersive realism a hallmark of serious intent, Emmerich maintained his unerringly clean, visually legible visual approach, and preferred to keep his edge by constantly upping the game of CGI-era special effects and preposterously big thinking to go with them.



Emmerich resembles no lesser classic Hollywood forebear than Cecil B. DeMille in his both his love of grand scale in his subjects and filmmaking, and broad, stylised approach to the dramatic level of his movies, in trying to appeal to the biggest possible audience. DeMille's quip that every time he made a movie critics' estimation of the audience's IQ dropped by ten points could well have been made about Emmerich. Both *Anonymous* and *Stonewall* were sharply rejected because despite shifting into material demanding more finesse Emmerich maintained his unsubtle and glossy approach, and the considerable virtues of *The Patriot*, with its astounding action scenes and more thoughtful concerns, were smothered in dubiously manipulative depictions of history and cornball sentiment. On the other hand, Emmerich's films also have a habit as coming on as cartoonish at first but eventually revealing more interesting things going on under the surface. Devlin meanwhile sank much money and clout into the awful 2006 film *Flyboys*. In any event, after a few failures, Emmerich and Devlin finally reunited to make a signal to their biggest hit, and in 2016 *Independence Day: Resurgence* was released. But its reception, to say the least, was not a case of history repeating.



The first *Independence Day* remains one of the signal pop culture events of its moment, and indeed stands now as perhaps the most essential relic of the mid-'90s mood, that time when modern history was taking a breather between the Cold War and 9/11, between fear of nuclear holocaust and fear of global warming, and when Hollywood was urgently looking about for sources of danger and threat for genre films whilst special effects were going through a rapid evolution. 1996's *Twister* had already announced a string of disaster movies as new showcases for those effects delivered as event movie fare, of which *Titanic* (1997) would prove the zenith, and in many ways *Independence Day* belongs to that movement too. But *Independence Day* is also a sci-fi movie, a war movie, a buddy movie, a comedy, and a freewheeling travelogue through the whole idea of pop culture as it had congealed by 1996. Whilst the style and pitch of *Independence Day* rejected edgy alternative culture trends in independent film and music, nonetheless it took much permission from TV shows like *The Simpsons* in ticking off pop culture reference points in jokey, knowing, audience-conspiring fashion, and exacerbated the Quentin Tarantino-era post-modern craze in merrily assembling assorted bits of a few dozen older movies into one big moveable feast, or as Devlin happily called it, a "movie movie."



Independence Day is essentially a supersized remake of Byron Haskin's *The War of the Worlds* (1953), stealing the basic proposition of an invasion of the Earth by blankly malevolent alien foes protected by energy shields that prove impenetrable whilst wielding annihilating force of their own. But where Haskin's film maintained to some degree the thesis of H.G. Wells in portraying with vicious irony a mirror to the

Western colonialist mindset and updated it with new atomic age logic as humanity is found completely helpless before the exterminating invaders, *Independence Day* is a paean to fighting pith turned on uppity enemies, turning towards *Star Wars* and old war movies in its last act. The film comes on with its pop culture referentialism carefully cross-indexed and counterweighted for maximum appeal. REM's "It's the End of the World As We Know It" heard near the outset box-ticks Gen X whilst a shout-out to John Lennon – "Smart man. Shot in the back, very sad." – serves the Boomers. A gag based in a quote from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and a clip from *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951) establish genre cred. The plot meanwhile is rooted in modern esoterica once restricted to obsessive fringe scenes but popularised in the decade by the hugely popular TV series *The X-Files*, like the 1947 Roswell "UFO" crash and Area 51, and the show is mentioned in the dialogue. The image of the Apollo 11 site being despoiled by alien intrusion signals the onset of millennium angst, breaking down the triumphal achievements of the Twentieth century zeitgeist in the face of an uneasy new historical nexus. Soft-target cultural satire drops like soaking drizzle, with gags about Los Angelinos firing their guns at the spaceship over their city, daffy onlookers hoping the aliens are going to bring back Elvis, and a character listing all the people he has to call and warn about the aliens including his lawyer – "Ah, screw my lawyer."



This element of *Independence Day*, given its relative sparseness in Emmerich's other movies, surely was Devlin's special contribution, and whilst it hinders *Independence Day* from being the urgent genre classic it might have been, it also certainly helped mediate Emmerich's delight in broad gestures and rooted his approach in a contemporary pop argot that even when dated still has an amusing crackle. It also recalls the way a '50s sci-fi movie could convince you a grand worldwide event was taking place on a shoestring budget with shots of extras supposedly in different places around the world listening to PA and radio broadcasts about the frightening new event. Emmerich pays heed to that tradition with a modern gloss, depicting the alien arrival through myriad TV news reports, and later including a montage of representative of different armed forces around the world craning their ears for low-tech Morse Code broadcasts setting up the last-ditch resistance. Emmerich's visual exposition wields just the right sense of truly awesome things occurring, from the menacing opening shot of a massive shadow passing over the moon surface and setting the debris of the Apollo 11 landing shuddering, and the mysterious and eerie alien signal heard over speakers in an astronomical observatory. *Independence Day* keeps one foot firmly planted in its '50s sci-fi roots, also recalling Rudolph Maté's *When Worlds Collide* (1951) and Fred F. Sears' *Earth Vs. The Flying Saucers* (1956). The images of the colossal, circular alien space ships descending on Earth and hovering over cities meanwhile blatantly pinches famous images from the 1980s TV miniseries *V*. Whilst *Independence Day* in many ways set the scene for the modern blockbuster to be less a proper narrative but rather a succession of gestures in spectacle grown out of intertextual awareness – or to put that more simply, a movie that counts on us all having seen a lot of movies and not minding – Emmerich still draws and

delivers pleasure in obeying the ritual narrative form. He would do a similarly good job depicting war coming close in eerie shots of gunfire flashing amongst trees in *The Patriot*.



Those spaceships, fifteen in number, are disgorged by a gigantic mother ship that parks a short distance from Earth, and take up position over major cities around the world. The heroes of *Independence Day* are meanwhile flung together in a manner very reminiscent of 1970s disaster movies like *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and *Earthquake* (1974), predestined to unite and fight for survival. Emmerich establishes each in turn. President Thomas J. Whitmore (Bill Pullman), ensconced in the White House, with his Communications Secretary Connie Spano (Margaret Colin) fretting over his sliding popularity, sourced in apparently vacillating performance. Her ex-husband David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum), an environmentally-conscious MIT graduate and satellite expert currently employed as a cable TV channel technician in Manhattan, plays chess in the park with his former rabbi father Julius (Jeff Hirsch), and is soon called in by his boss Marty Gilbert (Harvey Fierstein) when the alien signal starts playing havoc with the station's broadcasts. Marine F-18 fighter pilot Captain Steven Hiller (Smith) is on leave, sleeping in with his stripper girlfriend Jasmine Dubrow (Vivica A. Fox), oblivious to the gigantic spaceship floating over central LA, even as her son Dylan (Ross Bagley) plays at shooting them down. Russell Casse (Randy Quaid) is a crop-duster pilot and a hopeless alcoholic, constantly tormented by his neighbours for his claims of having been kidnapped by aliens ten years earlier and used in their experiments.



Emmerich invests most of these introductions with notes of comedy that also help in differentiating the players. He delivers a jolt of goofy slapstick as Russell lolls drunkenly against his plane, whilst his son Miguel (James Duval) berates him for dusting the wrong field. Whitmore dryly jokes on the phone with his wife Marilyn (Mary O'Connell) about confessing to sleeping with a beautiful brunette, actually his very young daughter Patricia (Mae Whitman) zonked out at his side. Levinson senior and junior talk with well-oiled, sarcastic New York Jewish humour. The joke of Hiller failing to notice the spaceship above is drawn out as he goes out to fetch his morning paper and slowly turns his head, seeing his neighbours packing in panic, at first assuming it's over-reaction to an earth tremor. In a manner that services a need for character arcs but specially tooled for the '90s era with both its generational scepticism and anxiety about a waning sense of purpose, just about all of the heroes in *Independence Day* are in some way or another underachievers. Even the war hero former pilot president is a bit of a slacker in need of a new spur to action. Hiller, another great pilot, seems to be facing the stymieing of his dream of becoming an astronaut through his choice of partner. David, a scientific genius, claims to be very happy doing what he does, presumably because he feels he's not participating in any worldly evil. Russell is redeemed from shambling wreck of a human to Christlike saviour of mankind.



David's special talent forces him soon to abandon his wilful obscurity when, analysing the alien signal shimmering underneath the TV satellite signal, realises it's coordinating between the positioning spaceships and its diminishing loop is more or less a countdown to something he guesses can't be good. Needing to warn someone in authority, David decides to dash to Washington and get Connie to secure him time with Whitmore, despite their uneasy past: David socked Whitmore back when he was a candidate and thought Connie was having an affair with him. He gets his father to drive him, and when Whitmore realises what David has discovered, immediately has all the White House staff including Connie and Secretary of Defense Albert Nimziki (James Rebhorn), as well as David and Julius, flown out of Washington on Air Force One. In LA, Jasmine's fellow exotic dancer Tiffany (Kiersten Warren) ventures onto the roof of a skyscraper to join a mob welcoming the aliens, whilst Jasmine and Dylan flee the city. Marty is advised to do the same by David. When the countdown reaches its end, powerful energy beams spume out of the spaceships and devastate vast patches of cityscape beneath them, killing Tiffany and Marty and everyone else within range in orgiastic spectacles of destruction.



Emmerich offers repeated references to Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), the preeminent example of a post-1960s countercultural viewpoint on the possibility of aliens as friendly and godlike, and the build-up to their arrival in a series of portentous, worldwide events. Emmerich depicts a vignette in a remote part of Iraq where the vast, boiling, blazing cloud around a descending ship is glimpsed, recalling Spielberg's locale-hopping and visual portent of Biblical awe, but later mischievously despoiling Spielberg's film when a helicopter is sent up to communicate with an alien ship with banks of flashing lights, only to be coldly blasted out of the air. A scene of Whitmore and his highest-ranking military leader, Marine General Grey (Robert Loggia), reluctantly agreeing to try using nuclear weapons on one alien craft, only for even that to fail against their energy shield, is a virtual carbon copy of the same scene in *The War of the Worlds*. The bluntly destructive and oblivious purpose of the aliens makes them perfect antagonists for an age crying out for a lack of moral complication in its big movies. One of the aliens, when Whitmore tries to communicate with it, tells him all they want humans to do is die. The images of the aliens blasting away at American cities, pounding the Empire State Building to rubble and blowing the White House to fiery smithereens, still have thunderous visual impact, and the latter was hailed as one of the key moments in modern special effects staging, as well as the movie's most instantly identifiable image.



These scenes also channel decades of nuclear angst in a manner most mainstream movies had avoided, now finally making the subject of blockbuster silliness, before 9/11 would make it all too real again. The only

victims of the annihilation we're introduced to are Tiffany and Marty, both of them likeable but silly people, and Marty's groan of "Oh, crap!" as he sees the fireball coming for him staves off the sense of horror with a note of absurdism. Meanwhile, David and Julius being hurriedly ushered onto Air Force One, which only just manages to take off ahead of the consuming fireball, nods to *When Worlds Collide* and its indulgence of a bleak but secretly thrilling fantasy, that of being near-pure luck catching a ride on the last flight out of the apocalypse. Jasmine and Dylan manage to find shelter off a road tunnel, with Emmerich making the chief point of suspense whether or not their pet dog can reach them in time to be saved. Spoiler: he does. Hiller and his fellow pilots are soon sent out to attack the ship over LA, but find the craft perfectly protected by a curtain of energy around it, against which both the missiles and hapless aircraft crash and explode.



The big ship disgorges a vast swarm of small fighters, also shield-protected, and the Earthling's planes are swiftly decimated. Hiller's pal Captain Jimmy Wilder (Harry Connick Jr) dies in failing to outmanoeuvre one alien fighter, and Hiller vengefully leads the alien craft into a swerving chase down the Grand Canyon: Hiller manages to contrive the alien's crashlanding by catching it in a detached parachute and ejecting just before his plane collides with the canyon wall, the alien ship striking the upper lips of the canyon and sliding to a halt on the ground above. Hiller lands, struts to the craft, and when the alien within suddenly squirms out of a hatch he promptly socks it, declaring with a vigour that instantly knits him into the pantheon of wisecracking movie heroes from James Bond to John McClane, "Welcome to Earth!" This scene of course inscribed Smith as an instant major movie star, in ways both familiar and new. Hiller is immediately confirmed as a classical all-American hero, utterly masculine and charged with swagger, reflexively daring, resourceful, afraid of nothing, and also African-American: indeed perhaps only a Black man could so thoroughly own such traits in an age officially sceptical of heroes.



Independence Day is filled with a specific sense of 1990s America as a newly multicultural place capable of absorbing once-radical elements and outsiders into its gestalt identity. Wilder, playing the role of the squadron's joker and morale-booster, performs an extended imitation of politician and civil rights leader Jesse Jackson by way of celebrating the squadron, not in a mocking way but instead anointing Jackson as a worthy leadership figure for heroes of all colours in the same way a character in a World War II movie might imitate FDR. The everything's-cool-now, end-of-history fantasising is extended to later scenes that depict warriors of all nations, including Brits, Israelis, Iraqis, and Russians all coming together under American leadership against the evil alien foe, and of course Whitmore's conceit in his famous pep speech of repurposing the Fourth of July as the world's Independence Day. Many of course outside of the US rolled their eyes very hard, but it also summarised something about the '90s island of stability in a Pax Americana, and most viewers simply went with the flow whilst jamming their mouths full of popcorn. Irony streaks *Independence Day* as a film made by a gay German immigrant with unabashedly progressive politics dedicating a hymn to American militarism and imperial standing, and yet Emmerich bends his sense of those virtues to a newly inclusive and broad-minded parabola. That unswervingly heroic concept of patriotic identity is counterbalanced by a familiar brand of shallow satire on bureaucracy and the more obnoxious side of government, represented saliently by Nimziki, keeper of national secrets.



Nimziki's name was a poke at a former studio executive who gave Emmerich and Devlin trouble on *Stargate*, a bad habit that would be more infamously repeated on *Godzilla* when they named a dipshit

Mayor after film critic Roger Ebert. The film's best line, one that delivers a drier joke than most and also sets up a crucial story pivot, works in very large part thanks to Rebhorn's delivery, as Julius harangues Whitmore and others for knowing about the aliens after the Roswell crash and hiding them at Area 51 per UFO lore: Whitmore says that's nonsense, but Nimziki suddenly decides it's time to let him know that, "Ah, Mr President...that's not *entirely* accurate." Turns out Area 51 really does conceal an underground base housing a crashed UFO, which proves to be one of the alien fighter craft, with its long-dead crew preserved. The site is overseen militarily by Maj. Mitchell (Adam Baldwin), a central casting soldier, and scientifically by the long-haired and kooky Dr Okun (Brent Spiner), who is so delighted by the President's arrival and the recent activation of the long-dormant alien technology thanks to the proximity of the new aliens that he's oblivious to the terror and destruction above. Theorising the craft crashed on some scouting mission, Okun also explains that the aliens' fearsome appearance, with cobra-like hood and vaguely humanoid build with squirming tentacular appendages, is actually a biomechanical suit around a smaller, rather squishier being with similar weaknesses to humans but communicate psychically rather than vocally.



Meanwhile Hiller drags the still-unconscious alien he's captured across a salt flat in Nevada. He encounters the Casses and other refugees in a huge fleet of mobile homes fleeing across the flats, and talks them into taking him to Area 51, which for some reason he's aware of. Jasmine, wandering a devastated LA, starts helping survivors, and she find Marilyn Whitmore lying injured and bedraggled by the wreckage of her helicopter. Jasmine requisitions a flatbed truck and loads survivors in the back, heading to Hiller's base and finding it destroyed, forcing her and her charges to camp out there. Along the way Jasmine bonds with the very different Marilyn – when she tells the First Lady she's a dancer, Marilyn beams, "Ballet," to Jasmine's sheepish reply, "Exotic." – and cares for her as her injuries take a toll, before they're finally picked up by the army. The character relationships in *Independence Day* are clever not just in offering cheer-along arcs for the zeroes-to-heroes, but in having them all physically converge and unify or reconcile as well, made most immediately literal when David and Connie share a loving gesture whilst watching Hiller and Jasmine get married, at a time when just about every big Hollywood movie had to revolve around a sundered couple reuniting.



Smith and Goldblum were basically hired to do slight variations on their already-familiar personas, with Smith transferring the likeably cocky braggadocio, mixed with just a little awareness of his own jive and determination to keep dancing anyway, of his character from the TV series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* to the big screen, with a new edge of more muscular and matured confidence (although it took his more nuanced variation on his persona presented in Fred Schepisi's *Six Degrees of Separation*, 1995, to establish his movie acting cred and sell him to Emmerich and DeWitt). David is another of Goldblum's rambling, gawky-sexy savants after *The Fly's* (1986) Seth Brundle and *Jurassic Park's* Ian Malcolm. Relieved from any need to get too inventive, the two actors are effortlessly charming, and when finally flung together prove to have truly fun chemistry ("Forget the fat lady! You're obsessed with fat lady!"). Pullman, who became a star for about ten minutes in the mid-'90s after ages on the periphery with the likes of *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1987) and finally gaining fans with the rom-com *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), gained easily his most well-remembered role even as I recall some critics calling his President Whitmore a loser. Given that Pullman's more recently found his true metier as a grizzled character actor, white-bread lead roles clearly never really tapped his deepest strengths, and yet his fightin' President Whitmore is a definite strength of *Independence Day*, projecting low-key charm and hints of a hawkish glint in his eye whilst plugging his stolid way through the work of being a politician.



The obvious but certainly effective casting continues down to Hirsch's arch, scene-stealing performance as Julius, Rebhorn to deliver antagonism, and Quaid's high comedy presence. Other actors like Loggia, Dan

Lauria as one of his underlings, and Baldwin are plainly required to evoke the old, tough, gruff or young, square-jawed military men of old war movies. One actor notably playing against his most familiar role is Spinner, his moon unit scientist Okun a total contrast to his part as the cyborg Data on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and he brings nutty energy to the film for his few scenes. The women in *Independence Day* have more thankless roles, by comparison, although they all do good work, particularly Colin, who never had such a high-profile part again. Where in late 1980 and '90s action cinema the figurative daughters of Ellen Ripley were becoming more prominent, *Independence Day* only points to Jasmine as a gutsy lady. The overall quality however is that the film absolutely requires every actor to walk a fine line, between total seriousness and a sense of crisp humour, avoiding campy knowing even as Emmerich and Devlin readily court that quality in their writing.



Whilst it sported plenty of known faces, *Independence Day* nonetheless didn't have a colossal star at its heart. That proved to its advantage as it helped mint a new one, and also emphasised the ensemble aspect of its story whilst helping keep costs down on a movie that, whilst very high-budget, still wasn't nearly as expensive as other blockbusters around the same time. The selling point of the film was its special effects, although, with a record number of effects shots required in the production, the end results are occasionally uneven. Still, images of the alien ships, streaked by fire in their descent through the atmosphere, hovering in banks of boiling cloud over cityscapes, retain their instantly transfixing sense of evil, epic beauty, and the dog fights between the human and alien fighter craft confirmed massive leaps in technical reach and know-how even since the grand space battle of *Star Wars – Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (1983). Emmerich's shots of American fighters massing high above the rocky forms of the American desert landscape in preparation for the desperate final showdown below have thrilling, epic force and an interesting visual lustre thanks to Karl Walter Lindenlaub's cinematography.



As so often in Emmerich's oeuvre, the mixture of cutting-edge technical skill and formal elegance in his filmmaking baldly contrasts his dramatic sensibility, his desire to enfold the movie theatre full of people in a manner that provokes their knowing whilst also quietly nullifying it. Emmerich does so with an aesthetic that can only be described as straight-faced camp, an attitude the film finally, joyfully exalts in the climactic scenes involving Russell, in which *Independence Day* succeeds in both delivering a grand thrill and also finally outing itself as a crazy comedy. If *Independence Day* offers the best example of that talent, if not his best film, it's largely because the light-hearted and serious elements are in the finest balance, chasing each other around much like the warring craft in the climactic scene, and have roots in that specific sensibility I've mentioned. Emmerich's arsenal of recurring motifs, particularly nerdy or weak-seeming men proving themselves valiant without needing to undercut the more traditionally heroic figures around them, are both reliable as crowd-pleasing flourishes but also seem to have genuinely obsessive meaning for Emmerich. Emmerich's follow-ups like *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012* have a more serious and nuanced tone, but that sits more uneasily with the increasingly silly, gotta-top-myself plotting and broader gestures, and Emmerich's most recent works like *Midway* (2019) and *Moonfall* (2022) seems airbrushed in every regard to appeal to a decentralised audience, particularly the Chinese market.



After getting their asses kicked seven ways from sunset, the humans finally start getting their act together in *Independence Day* after Hiller brings the alien to Area 51: Okun tries to surgically inspect the creature, only for it to awaken and go on a rampage. Confronting the alien via the glass wall of the operating room,

Whitmore communicates with it, as the creature has a tentacle wrapped around his throat to exploit Okun's vocal cords, and also when the creature links with Whitmore to share awareness of human only being the latest in a long line of exterminated foes of the rapacious, locust-like species. Whitmore collapses upon such psychic intrusion, and Mitchell, after asking if the glass is bulletproof, blows the alien away. When Whitmore decides to nuke the bastards, David vehemently protests and gets drunk, and after the bomb's failure he flails around in anger and disgust. When his father tries to convince him to get off the floor because he might catch a cold, David suddenly has an inspiration: testing his theory out on the captive fighter craft, he proves the alien systems can be briefly disabled with a computer virus, taking down their protective shields, but also says the only sure way to deliver the virus is to fly the captive craft up into the mother ship. Hiller volunteers to fly David up there, as he feels he has the best idea of the craft's capabilities.



Once launched in initially ungainly fashion, David and Hiller find themselves drawn into the enormous mother ship with a tractor beam and docked deep within it, with an alien controller glaring out at them, forcing them to hide whilst David works his magic. Wells' idea of the aliens brought down by a virus is updated for a digital age is an idea with a little wit but also tends to be one detail of the plot many object to as the aliens don't seem to have Norton Antivirus, although it can be explained in various ways; more irksome to me is the question as to why, when they were willing to a few hours earlier and even load up David and Hiller's ship with one, the humans don't have atomic missiles ready to hurl at the other ships rather than poking away at them with tiny payloads from their fighters. Whitmore elects to lead the hastily assembled squadron of aircraft to attack the craft rapidly zeroing in on Area 51, with Russell rapidly sobering himself up to join the assault and adapting awkwardly to a modern fighter. Before taking off, Whitmore gives the gathering pilots a pep talk from the back of a truck in pastiche of the St. Crispin's Day scene from Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), as Whitmore, with words not quite of Shakespearean beauty, nonetheless declares that "we will not go quietly into the night!", to thunderous appreciation, with Emmerich diving in with gleefully cornball eagerness to note a pilot giving a vehement salute. David meanwhile encourages his father to return to his metier as a rabbi, and proves urgently needed as the end seems nigh.



It goes without saying that *Independence Day* delivers on all it promises in its climax, with flashes of real storytelling savvy in touches like the first shot the fighters take at the approaching ship sees the shield still working, but Whitmore, with a cagey squint, decides to give it another go and this time hits home. David and Hiller settle down to light up the cigars as if in accepting defeat after they can't escape the dock, only to then become a pair of mischievous boys about to really ruin the aliens' day as they fire a nuclear missile into the control bay. They flee at speed, just managing, in time-honoured fashion, to beat the enormous closing doors. And, of course, the spectacle of Randy Quaid saving the world. After the fighters fail to bring down the ship and are forced to engage in a colossal dogfight with the alien craft, Whitmore fails with his last missile to hit the vulnerable-seeming energy cannon under the ship, and Russell finds his last missile won't launch, and so decides to ram the cannon with his plane, screaming in madcap and vengeful delight ("Hello boys, I'm back!") as he rides to oblivion and glory at the weapon, which is about to unleash exterminating force on Area 51 in a touch pilfered from *Star Wars* and that in turn pilfered from *The Guns of Navarone* (1961). It's the sort of scene that's impossible not to laugh at whilst watching, but that's only a part of its awesomeness. Russell's sacrifice succeeds, the ship explodes, and with the vulnerability exposed all the other assaults bring down their targets near such locales as Sydney and Giza. David and Hiller's payload also explodes, blasting the mother ship to smithereens.



Independence Day ends with another arch remix of very recognisable imagery, this time from Phillip Kaufman's *The Right Stuff* (1983), as David and Hiller are glimpsed leaving behind their crashed ship with a

strut of success, puffing away on their cigars and greeted by their adoring women whilst flaming wreckage of the mother ship streaks through the sky, providing the ultimate July Four fireworks display. *Independence Day* works because it conspires with the audience, seeking out that part of us that secretly loves the old goofy stuff, and indeed by now it might even be taken as goofy old stuff itself, as it has managed to outlive its chosen release window unlike many '90s hits. Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks* (1996) and Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) provided immediate ripostes with their infinitely more sarcastic and cynical ransacking of Earth-vs-the-aliens plots, but of course, neither was anywhere near so popular. After a long time in development hell, a proper sequel came along almost twenty years to the day later, but *Independence Day: Resurgence* was doomed to be just a footnote to the original film's success, particularly after Smith elected not to appear in it. *Resurgence* gained withering reviews at the time, but I mildly liked it: it certainly has a lot of problems, some sore lacks from the magic formula of the original, but some of those lacks ironically are woven in with aspects that are actually superior. Where the '96 film was sly and bouncy in its humour and general assurance to the audience that despite all the destruction and death this was just a fun bit of make-believe, *Resurgence* tries to take its ideas more seriously. This time Emmerich and his four (!) credited co-screenwriters including Devlin grapple with the notion of a rebuilt Earth, now armed with alien technology but having faced down an intervening two decades of disruption.



Where the original concludes on a note of unalloyed triumph and cheer, *Resurgence* states that parts of the world including central Africa faced years of vicious battle between humans and stranded aliens, and the landscape is still littered with the cavernous hulks of smashed alien death machines. The oncoming generation of warriors comprise orphans of the dead or those moulded by the conflict. Heroes like President Whitmore are now troubled and tormented by their encounters with the alien psychic ability, making them seem mentally unstable, whilst the imprisoned hordes of alien survivors, long catatonic, start waking up and celebrating when they sense more of their kind on the way. Most wrenching of all, Steven Hiller vanished during a trip to space, leaving his adopted son Dylan (Jessie T. Usher) as an anointed nepotistic hero in taking up his mantle as a pilot: bad blood persists between him and his former comrade Jake Morrison (Liam Hemsworth) as Jake tried desperately to prove himself a better pilot in training and almost caused Dylan's death. Jake, now flying transport craft in space, is at least still engaged to be married to Patricia Whitmore (Maika Monroe), who trained as a pilot alongside Jake and Dylan but now works as an aide to the current president, Elizabeth Lanford (Sela Ward), and cares for her father.



In the intervening twenty years Earth has known unparalleled peace and cooperation, with David Levinson (Goldblum again) having supervised exploitation of the alien tech to build defences and a controlling moonbase. As the twentieth anniversary of the assault looms, all hell breaks loose again when a spaceship approaches a moonbase and is shot down. Ignoring an order from Lanford to come home, David is helped to reach the moon crash site by Jake, who knows him through Patricia. The now-widowed David is accompanied by linguist and sometime lover Catherine Marceaux (Charlotte Gainsbourg), Floyd Rosenberg (Nicolas Wright), a government bureaucrat auditing David's operation, Dikembe Umбутu (DeObia Oparei), a Congolese warlord who battled the aliens on the ground and whose insights into the aliens David and Catherine were studying, and Jake's co-pilot Charlie Miller (Travis Tope), who grew up with Jake as orphans of the invasion. They retrieve a white spherical object from the moondust, just as a new, unimaginably large alien "Harvester" ship arrives and easily blows away the Earth's new defences, before sweeping in over Eurasia, its gravity wake scooping up cities and scattering the rubble far and wide. Barely surviving as they're dragged along for the ride, the team manage to get their find back to Area 51. David quickly recognises the Harvester intends to complete a process of drilling out the Earth's core started in the previous assault. The recovered sphere is revealed to be an emissary of a cybernetic intelligence of a race that long since shed physical bodies, with the last survivor now leading a resistance against the aliens on a hidden planet and wanting to recruit humans to the cause.



Emmerich managed to bring back Loggia for a brief cameo shortly before his death, and Hirsch, Fox, and Spiner for surprisingly substantial parts. Spiner's Okun awakens from a twenty-year coma, and after a little dazed stumbling around quickly turns his eccentric intelligence to the new invasion: like Whitmore, he finds he has an inchoate connection with the aliens. Emmerich had previously kept allowing his sexuality into the first film only in jokey asides like a fellow pilot throwing up his hands in disavowal when he catches Hiller and Wilder in a pose that looks like Wilder is proposing marriage, and in Fierstein's nelly performance. Here Emmerich made Okun more pointedly queer, having been assiduously cared for his assistant and romantic partner Dr Isaacs (John Storey) in his coma, and when Isaacs is killed by marauding aliens, Emmerich manages an engaging flicker of pathos before Okun goes nuts and starts gunning down the monsters. Julius, in a touch Emmerich recycled from *2012*, is making a paltry living selling his book called *How I Saved The World* in a tour of rest homes, in between kicking back on his boat, which gets washed ashore on a tsunami as the alien craft arrives.



Rescued from the rubble by some orphaned youngsters (including Joey King and Mckenna Grace) who are trying to drive out of the disaster area, Julius finishes up taking them and some other kids in hand and making for Area 51. Fox gets the least to do as Jasmine, who's become a doctor in the interim and dies whilst saving patients from her collapsing hospital. With the aliens' return stimulating Whitmore and Okun and others to new life much like the alien captives and the old machines, Whitmore tries to warn Lanford of the impending attack. Lanford and many others in the order of succession are killed when the aliens penetrate their bunker. William Fichtner is cast against his usually villainous type in playing the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Joshua Adams, who also becomes President, although he doesn't get any memorable speeches. Eventually the cyber-intelligence tells the humans that the aliens are actually ruled by queens, and no-one has ever managed to kill one of the queens that command the Harvesters, which are incredibly big, smart, and tough, and obsessively dedicated to exterminating all of its hated cybernetic enemies. Realising this obsession is a crucial weakness, David devises a trap to lure in the queen and blow it up with an enormously powerful bomb that must be contained by a shield device. Patricia volunteers to deliver the bomb, but her father takes the ship carrying it instead and she follows in a fighter.



The least thrilling part of *Resurgence* comes ironically when Emmerich tries ever so hard to top the original's city-levelling spectacle. He depicts the ridiculously large new alien ship, so big it spans about a fifth of the planet, tearing up cities and dropping pieces of Beijing and Kuala Lumpur on London, with the luckless heroes along for the ride. David sighs, "They like to get the landmarks," as Jake narrowly dodges one of the Petronas Towers as it falls on Tower Bridge. The reasonably judicious effects in the '96 film give way here to spectacular yet impersonal CGI and overlong sequences, and whilst the storyline throws up a range of intriguing new ideas and developments, the essential plot settles for an extended riff on the original. Both Hemsworth, who was being hyped at the time as his brother Chris's edgier rival but has nothing like the same screen presence, and Usher are merely okay, whilst Trope is stuck with the modern cliché role of the overly-talkative and insecure guy. The pair constantly fall afoul of moonbase commander Jiang (Chin Han), whose stern disapproval Jake accepts as a good-looking rebel playing by his own rules. Where the first film was fleet and witty in setting up its characters and processing their various hang-ups in ideograms, *Resurgence* keeps stopping for clunky heart-to-hearts in the more familiar recent screenwriting style.



Another problem is inseparable from one of the more intriguing new choices, as *Resurgence* conjures an alternative reality to the real 2016. This one is filled with technology augmented or entirely changed by utilising the alien salvage, and an equally altered social and political landscape, allowing Emmerich to indulge a little liberal fantasising about an age of more environmentally friendly tech and gender and racial

equity, even as he also works to darken the palette a little in noting the chaos reaped by the invasion. This development resembles some classic works of Japanese anime including *The Macross Saga* and *Space Battleship Yamato*, and the film overall sustains a live-action anime feel throughout. But the detail of this future is patchy, unsurprisingly given that Emmerich and Devlin's conceptual thinking was never that advanced, making one wonder why with hovercopters and moon-hopping spacecraft are available most people are still getting about in old-school planes and motor vehicles (then again, access to technology has always been a many-tiered thing). The result compounds a feeling of blandness, missing the merry jingoism (in a film that also kisses a lot of Chinese butt for the sake of both financing and release there) without anything to replace it. Where the original's humour drew so effectively from the zeitgeist of its making, Emmerich and Devlin have to use broader gags to try and fill the gap, like Okun wandering about with his rump showing through his hospital gown. The central trio of Jake, Dylan, and Patricia never get a chance to put their old camaraderie from training to work by coming together in battle.



What I feel the film does get right however is worth noting. Goldblum and Pullman slot right back into their roles as if no time had elapsed. Where many recent films extending old franchises have proven awkward and often infuriating to fans in bringing back old heroes, David and Whitmore, even with a lot more grey hairs and some rough times behind them, feel consistent with the people they were before, and are as vital to the story as the inheriting youngsters. There's a nice gag when Julius, driving up to Area 51 with his young charges in a school bus and unwittingly threatening the well-laid trap, is alerted to a "tall, dangling man" waving at him: "Tall? Dangling? That's my David!" Monroe, who had anchored the horror film *It Follows* (2015) and emerged as one of the most talented and interesting starlets of the moment, is the best new element as Patricia, more substantially conceived as a next-generation representative than Dylan and the others. Her heartfelt shows of caring for her father are balanced by a warlike edge that emerges in the climactic scenes as every inch her father's daughter. If the film had focused more squarely on her, it might not have been more popular, but it would have been stronger. One moment that feels equal to anything in the original comes when the Whitmores converse over radio as they fly towards battle, the old President telling Patricia, "I'm not saving the world, I'm saving you." Angelababy's Rain is another kick-ass woman pilot, but barely characterised beyond being exemplary and the awkward love interest for Charlie, although her first appearance amidst a flocking crowd of adoring fans offers a neat touch conflating different forms of celebrity worship.



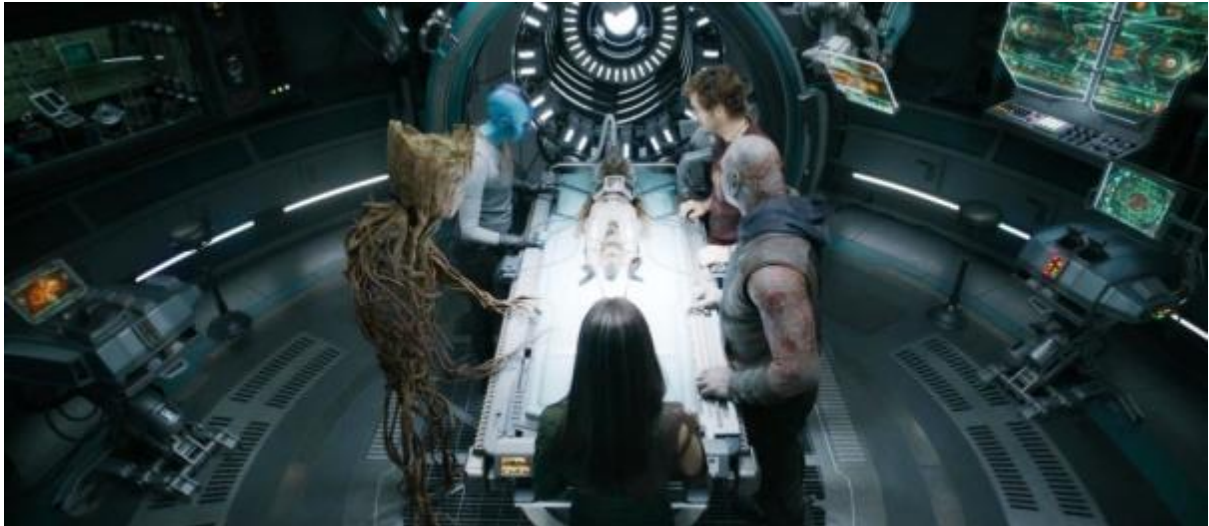
Emmerich interpolates what seems like an odd Vietnam allusion as Jake, Charlie, Dylan, and Rain fly inside the Harvester and try to blow it up, only to be foiled by cunning booby-traps and left tramping through the swampy undergrowth sustained within the vast hull's contained ecosystem. There they battle aliens, with a neat reversal as Jake conspicuously fails to pull off the elder Hiller's punch on an enemy. Finally they manage to escape in alien fighters, but find themselves locked into a swarm of such craft. Whitmore succeeds in penetrating the queen's ship, which detaches from the Harvester to hunt down the cyber-intelligence. Whitmore blows the ship and himself up, in a fitting echo of Russell in the original, but the queen survives thanks to a personal shield, and returns to relentlessly trying to destroy her foes. Emmerich seems to be taking a second shot at Godzilla with the sight of the enormous queen stalking our heroes. Patricia, vengefully blasting the queen from on high, manages to knock out her shield, and Dylan and Rain, taking an enormous risk on Jake's advice, manage to rip their craft out of the swarm and finish the queen off, causing the Harvester to depart. Okun excitedly tells the heroes that the cyber-intelligence is going to give them new technology including interstellar travel, and predicts, "We are gonna kick some serious alien ass!" just before the slam-cut ending. An amusing promise to leave off on, and one I wouldn't have minded delivered on, but also likely to remain unfulfilled given *Resurgence's* weak box office. Sometimes you just can't go home again.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3 (2023)

this island rod



With the strong feeling pervading the current cinema scene that the superhero movie epoch is, if not yet on life support, then certainly tailing off, perhaps likely to persist only in a few choice properties until some future resurgence, James Gunn's *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* feels both like a symptom of the causes of the wane and a curative for it. It's overlong and overstuffed, with whole portions of movie passing by as blurs of barely-motivated filler dotted with zany but pointless make-work. But in its best portions the film packs force rare in this mode at the best of times. Moreover, it gave me the feeling Gunn has finally managed something he's been trying to get at all through his directorial career, but never quite punched through the layers of hip cynicism and sarcastic schmaltz he purveyed in differing degrees in the previous entries in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* series and *The Suicide Squad* (2021), and precursor work like *Super* (2011) to articulate. The film kicks off in challenging manner for those of us who have rapidly fading memories of the last reels of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), where the Guardians salvaged the earlier-model Gamora (Zoe Saldana) from amongst the carnage of Thanos's forces. Now the younger, more ruthless Gamora has abandoned her rescuers and instead taken up with the populace of piratical Ravagers led by Stakar Ogood (Sylvester Stallone).



Now the Guardians have set up an office at Knowhere in officially hopeful terms, even as they're actually gripped with pervasive angst. Peter 'Star Lord' Quill (Chris Pratt) is drinking away his grief for losing the Gamora who loved him. Rocket Raccoon (voice of Bradley Cooper) struggles with his confused and tormenting identity. Nebula (Karen Gillan) is as truculent as ever and now also frustrated at carrying the load by dint of being the most functional member, much as Mantis (Pom Klementieff) bemoans her attempts to avoid manipulating the emotions of her friends whilst doling out ignored advice. Drax (Dave Bautista) is still cheerfully oblivious and Groot (voice of Vin Diesel) is, as ever, I Am Groot. Things are shaken up when the bedazzling superbabe Adam Warlock (Will Poulter) crashes into the Guardians' headquarters with the apparent object of kidnapping Rocket. The Guardians manage to fight off the insanely powerful but, being essentially a newborn, clumsy and overeager Warlock. But Rocket is badly injured and they find he cannot be treated with ordinary methods, as he has a safeguard in his cybernetic implants imposed as a sort of copyright protection by whoever first augmented him into the anthropomorphic chimera he is.



This proves to be a nefarious being known as the High Evolutionary (Chukwudi Iwuji), obsessed with mutating and augmenting animals into sentient beings, out of some faith this is the path to forging a flawlessly harmonious society, but doomed to constantly destroy everything he creates when it falls short of

his vision of perfection. The film unfolds in two strands for much of its length, cutting between the efforts of the Guardians to find the key to healing Rocket, and the injured Rocket's dream-conjured recollections of being forged in extremes of agony and heartbreak by the High Evolutionary. Rocket, it emerges eventually, was a by-product created only to work out some kinks in one of his projects, but instead proved the one creature he's made so far capable of genuine creative and independent will. The High Evolutionary is desperate to get him back, as much out of rage against his creation's defiance as for a need to understand what made him special. Rocket also meditates on the first of his accidental families, the otter Lylla (Linda Cardellini), walrus Teefs (Asim Chaudry), and rabbit Floor (Mikaela Hoover), all twisted yet lovable cyborgs made by the High Evolutionary, and killed finally by his heedlessly contemptuous machinations. This drove Rocket to rip his creator's face off and flee in a spaceship.



The most awkward and disordered parts of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* come in the first half, with a long quest by the Guardians to penetrate the space station called the Orgoscope, headquarters of one of the High Evolutionary's legitimate, money-spinning bioengineering enterprises, and steal the codes to Rocket's implants. This sequence, which sports Nathan Fillion as Master Karja, a dedicated but emotionally volatile security chief, and unfolding in a rather obscene-looking, organically-fashioned environ, is one Gunn tries to put to good use, with plentiful sidelong flashes of comedy and characterisation, like Mantis using her enthralling talents to make a security guard (Benjamin Byron Davis) fall in love with Drax, and Peter using his less fanciful but similar gifts to manipulate manager Ura (Daniela Melchior). But it's still an example of something that's endemic in contemporary screenwriting, a sequence full of twists and turns that finally add up to very little, with a specific objective that's easy to forget about as the scene drags on and proves to finally lead on only to another objective.



Poulter's Warlock is a vision of gilded masculine beauty in exterior but an overgrown, tumultuous brat in nature. But Warlock, well-regarded by comic book fans as one of the more interesting and ambiguous of esoteric Marvel characters, is done few favours by being introduced in hurried fashion as a comic relief antagonist. A hurriedly described backstory renders him the progeny of Ayesha (Elizabeth Debicki), whose race we learn was developed by the High Evolutionary and who fostered Warlock's creation as the zenith of their breed. The film rather oddly insists on playing Warlock's presence and persona for laughs when he's essentially the same as Rocket, with a redemption arc that's clumsily and randomly grazed before he's finally anointed as a member of the new iteration of the team that charges the screen in the epilogue. Gunn also has to awkwardly shoehorn Gamora, a familiar presence yet newly strange in persona and present in paradox-defying ways, into this narrative, which is officially about closure and resolution for a beloved gang of fractious comrades. Still, he does at least give Saldana a chance to play the role with an edge of brutal expedience and jerkwad zest, which is cool.



Gunn, who gained his start as a writer working for the beloved exploitation studio Troma, has long been obviously struggling to suppress one side of his creative imagination. That side is rooted in the gritty climes of underground comic books and seamy video store shelf fodder aimed at stoned collegians, rather than the bright, shiny halls of mass-market pop culture his talents have landed him in. Gunn's evident desire to

introduce some of that darker, harder, weirder edge into a movie subgenre pitched on the safest possible wavelength obviously paid off to a degree in first *Guardians of the Galaxy* film, which proved a surprise smash hit, standing as both the first real evidence that the Marvel Cinematic Universe brand was growing strong enough to launch hitherto obscure properties to blockbuster prominence, but also one that in some ways really made the brand what it became for the next few years. Gunn's film gave it a breadth it didn't really have before when it was just iterating familiar heroes like Thor and Captain America, and opened up zones of space opera, connecting the earthbound with the high fantasy of Thor's world. Arguably it also laid seeds for the brand's implosion by making goofy, jaunty comedy and flashy spectacle a more overt part of the style, leading out to utter miscalculations like *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) and tepid CGI-fests like *Ant-Man and The Wasp: Quantumania* (2023).



But in his well-made and amusing but dramatically limp sequel, and in the randomly reflexive, terminally adolescent *The Suicide Squad*, Gunn felt to me like a guy putting on an act, playing at emotional largesse and trying to evoke the feeling of being a ten-year-old watching oddball 1980s movies but without conviction, and has dashes of nastiness felt as a consequence ill-at-ease, even a bit offensive. In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, at least, he proves far bolder in making a movie that feels, at least in portions, like a pure account of a sensibility he's never quite managed truly expressed before, not even in the self-conscious desecrations of something like *Super* and its attempts to portray weirdoes clinging on to self-actualising fantasies, a notion Gunn reiterates here in both of Rocket's "families." Purveying images of small, cute animals being mistreated is arguably a pretty cheap way of forcing audience involvement, but I admit it worked for me. That's in part because Gunn actually treads pretty damn close to territory he courts, one part *Frankenstein*, one part *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, with an appropriate sense of proper horror and existential menace just over the margins. So he lets himself indulge utterly perverse creations of the High Evolutionary, including a twisted pig-man (one for the Seinfeld fans, perhaps) and some mutant-animal-cyborg henchmen, like Judy Greer's War-Pig, who look exactly like they might have sprung off the pages of some outré alternative graphic novel of the late 1980s. The textures of Henry Braham's cinematography, Judianna Makovsky's costumes, and Beth Mickle's production design exploit the Orgoscope scenes to leave behind the hard, steely contours of the earlier films in exchange for bulbous biomechanical forms straight out of Moebius.



Gunn contrasts this to whiplash effect with the jolly innocence of the younger Rocket and his friends from the laboratory cages, oblivious to the cruelty of their cybernetic attachments and biological enhancements, their mistake-of-a-cruel-god self-awareness actually, thankfully facilitated by their blindness in Plato's Cave. Rocket, the only one of them to be made aware of why he's been made and of the precariousness of their position, has the tools to save himself, but is also fatefully prey to emotional torment and fear, a fear he then tries to expel through his more familiar attitude of bravado, before he's saved by his more recently-acquired friends and declares finally, "I'm done running." The Guardians catch up with the High Evolutionary on a planet known as Counter-Earth, where the mastermind has constructed one of his intended model societies. This proves to be a veritable lampoon of middle America with sprawling suburbs populated by mutated animal people, those who haven't backslid into crime and drug use leading pointlessly humdrum lives. This could have been a grand satiric coup, but it's one Gunn isn't allowed to do much with. The High Evolutionary, disappointed by yet another project, destroys Counter-Earth in a feat of apocalyptic carnage that Gunn is obliged to keep as bloodless and terror-free as possible, in one of his plainer concessions to his Disney paymasters.



Subtext is all over the place here, of course. As in Ridley Scott's *Alien: Covenant* (2017), the theme of the gene-rewriting mad scientist is replete with reflections on creativity itself. That's conjoined with a writ-

large, very acidic attitude towards the studios Gunn and other hapless filmmakers have signed on with to make their blockbusters in recent years, Faustian bargains that are supposed to deliver greater freedom but have instead only made such filmmaker increasingly subjugated as the pool of one-for-me, one-for-them financing dries up. Gunn, who infamously was fired by Disney-Marvel for old online outrageousness, then re-embraced to deliver one more cash-cow, reflects with simmering anger on a landscape of creative by-products that emerge as cynically misshapen chimeras without purpose beyond moving onto the next grand act of investor portfolio service masquerading as creativity. The High Evolutionary's fury with Rocket's recalcitrant insistence upon having an identity is Gunn's portrait of the franchise and its overlords' urgent attempts to keep tight leashes on the upstart creatives actually asked to make the individual movies. As a metaphor for what's going wrong at the moment Hollywood, with a recent release landscape littered with such endlessly reshot, release schedule date-filling, cobbled-together calamities as *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023) and *The Flash* (2023), this all proves Gunn has been paying attention, and is damn near as slyly yet boldly vicious as Tim Burton was with his *Dumbo* (2019), a film that, under the cover of providing yet another IP makeover, portrayed dismayed artists and performers selling out to a soulless, all-consuming corporate behemoth and then burning it all down.



On a more prosaic level, the lead performances are good if cramped for space. Bautista and Klementieff prove the truly valuable players this time, the former landing the lion's share of good lines and the latter given witty ways of playing her character's efforts to avoid being little more than the tide pool for and barometer of her companions' traits. Pratt plays a shaggier, disconsolate Quill, one whose mind starts to wander off to lives unlived as he considers where the one he's leading has left him, but still clicking back into cocky heroic gear when needed. By contrast, Gillan's Nebula, previously just about my favourite character in the MCU, here feels a little jammed as a character, still brusque and raging and having not quite escaped the realm of colourful support figure lacking a significant dynamic with another character. Whilst he arguably doesn't get enough chance to convey much nuance in the role, Iwuji also impressed me with his mixture of elegance and ferocity, his High Evolutionary doomed to perpetual cycles of hope and frustration, constantly suffering for keeping his eyes fixed on a prize so nebulous and ideal that every other form of suffering is incidental and unbecoming to him.



The scene shifts to the High Evolutionary's spaceship from a frantic climax that interestingly if a little clumsily tries to avoid easy outs: Gunn shows Rocket as the more evolved creature in his confrontation with the High Evolutionary by refusing to kill the man, who is finally revealed as pathetically damaged, but what actually happens to the High Evolutionary is left frustratingly vague in the madcap parade of the conclusion. Still, there's a merry vehemence to the film's insistence on animal rights, and the emphasis on the Guardians finding their collective parental reflexes stirred in regard to all sorts of creatures, ranging from monstrous-looking but actually non-carnivorous squid-like creatures used as guards, and a race of Star Children the High Evolutionary has fostered. One of the children, a girl called Phylla (Kai Zen), joins Warlock, Rocket, Groot, Cosmo, and Kraglin (Sean Gunn) as the next version of the Guardians, as the others all heed the call of new missions and responsibilities. It's certainly all too busy, with Stallone just around to be a mascot again. And yet this frenetic aspect actually helps Gunn finally weave together something of the messy, characterful quality of the kinds of '80s B-movies he tries to channel. Seemingly random flourishes, like Cosmo the telekinetic Soviet space dog (voice of Maria Bakalova), are sometimes put to some proper use. Speaking of '80s references, this time around Gunn nods often to *RoboCop* (1987), including in the High Evolutionary's bionic attachments and an interpolated theme in John Murphy's score that mimics Basil Poledouris.



That Peter has moved on from his old Walkman to a retrieved Zune after his last visit to Earth allows a shift from the previous films' super-'70s-hits vibe to a more eclectic survey. The opening use of Radiohead's 'Creep' is surprisingly deft in setting the movie's emotional tone and thematic reach, and the concluding whorls of Florence and the Machine's 'Dog Days' hit exactly the right triumphal tone, in a concluding chapter for a trilogy that muses in sidelong fashion on the alternations of angst and escapism, authentic emotion and hip irony, dotting the history of modern pop music and well as pop cinema. And it's this constantly toggling aspect of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* that finally sold me on it. The sharply careening alternation of the grotesque and the cheery, the seething and the whimsical, achieved a kind of critical mass, aesthetically speaking. Even if Gunn's science fiction motifs still lack any genuine cleverness in the way they interact with his stories, he at least uses his clout to make something challenging in the blandest of blockbuster imprimaturs. He doesn't shy away from Rocket's loss of his first family, and as a result actually, finally made me feel something in relation to the MCU for the first time in a while, and indeed the first time from Gunn in anything beyond mild amusement or queasiness. That's because, where in Gunn's earlier films the darkness and the whimsy felt disparate and cynically melded, here they work in something like concert – the hard tone shifts are not a bug but the point of the movie. For the first time I felt like Gunn was really getting close to something genuinely meaningful in his movies, a sense of the common and perhaps necessary proximity terrible, transfiguring pain has to the eventual possibility of wild joy. Despite its problems, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* would be a fine and proper end for the MCU as it stands. But it won't be.



Napoleon (1927)

film.freedonia



Director / Screenwriter / Actor: Abel Gance

There is no other film like Abel Gance's *Napoleon*. Though nearly a century has intervened since its release, scarcely any work of feature filmmaking has so completely revised and expanded what the form is capable of in terms of artistic invention and range of technique. With *Napoleon* cinema finally gained the complete expressive freedom open to other art forms, even if it was cursed to emerge at a moment when a new and dominant orthodoxy was taking a firm grip over what audiences would expect for the new thirty or more years – and, indeed, still persists for the most part. Gance's innovations, including split-screen effects, handheld camerawork, associative montage and passages of non-linear technique, and the legendary eruption of widescreen, actually a kind of prototypical Cinerama, used in its climax, and doing so throughout with an entirely sovereign purpose in expressing a personal vision, make *Napoleon* an eternally modern and challenging as well as intoxicating in its cinematic impact. Few filmmakers have dared anything like what Gance attempted in even a vaguely similar context, in freely and furiously blending classical narrative and experimental film technique. And, like many of the major pioneering works from the age of cinema's fitful adolescence, *Napoleon* has never been an uncontroversial film.



Gance had made himself the toast of French cinema with his international hit *J'accuse* in 1919, an earnest and blistering broadside against the recently ended First World War and the sullen attitude of the peacetime atmosphere, transmuted into a bizarre stew of message movie, melodrama, war film, domestic tragedy, and postmodern horror flick. Whilst not his first epic, *J'accuse* saw Gance embracing the better example of D.W. Griffith and applying to the screen every expressive and technical trick at his disposal, roving through aesthetic textures from harsh realism and high melodrama to the surreal and poetic. Sergei Eisenstein took inspiration from Gance's electrifying editing. Gance stood resolute in his belief film as a maturing art form would become something much like opera, something an audience could devote a whole day to and become lost within its expressive universe. He pushed that belief to the utmost with his 1921 epic *La Roue*. Gance's longest cut ran for nearly nine hours. He followed that colossus with the relatively small-scale but still ingeniously directed comedy-horror film *Au Secours!* (1924), starring the popular silent comic Max Linder, a film that nonetheless didn't see release for many years. After dashing it off, Gance began gearing up for what he intended to be the project of his lifetime, a projected six-part biopic about Napoleon Bonaparte.



After laboriously piecing together financing for this project, not so much a white elephant as an actual, proper, trampling woolly mammoth of cinematic ambition, Gance produced his film in a whirlwind of enthusiasm and energy, and the result was nearly six hours long. The shortened version Gance screened at the film's official premiere to a distinguished audience was met with great approval, but the film's ultimate box office never quite justified the enormous expense, in part because it came out just as talkies were talking over, an innovation exhibitors would rather pay to accommodate than wider screens to fit Gance's technical coup. So the planned follow-ups never eventuated. Gance instead ploughed all his energy into his talkie debut, the apocalyptic epic *La Fin du monde* (1931), another of his fugue-like sagas, but one that this time proved a huge disaster. Gance set about trying to play nice with the more conservative style setting in through the 1930s, if still producing major works like *Un Grand Amour de Beethoven* (1937) and a remake of *J'accuse!* (1938) that proved fateful in the countdown to another war's outbreak. During World War II Gance earned some lasting enmity when he briefly supported Philippe Petain's Vichy government as a potential saviour for the beaten and occupied nation, but eventually fled to Spain as the Nazi yoke became severe.



After the war Gance had a lot of trouble gaining backing for movies, but a revival of the much-edited and tattered *Napoleon* in the mid-1950s helped spark the imaginations of the young soon-to-be French New Wave film movement. Francois Truffaut worked to revive his critical reputation, Gance eventually made a sputtering comeback, with late films including *Austerlitz* (1960), a belated pseudo-extension of Napoleonic saga, and *Cyrano and d'Artagnan* (1963). But it's chiefly thanks to the work of the English film historian (and sometime director) Kevin Brownlow that *Napoleon* is today in anything like the shape Gance originally intended. Brownlow, after purchasing some 9.5 mm prints of portions of the film he bought as an already movie-mad kid, was startled by the energy of the material he viewed, and began a grand quest to restore the movie. His first restored edition was unveiled for public screening in 1979. Francis Ford Coppola exhibited an edited version of Brownlow's restoration in 1981, equipped with a score by Coppola's father Carmine, with the old and sick Gance able to listen in to the audience's rapturous reception of that cut's premiere by telephone. Brownlow released an expanded edition with newly rediscovered footage was screened in 2000. Like many others, I expect, Coppola's version is the first I saw, but Brownlow's second edit, with a score by Carl Davis, is the gold standard. Most importantly, this version does justice to Gance's intensely concerted storytelling rhythms as well as the spectacle of his style and story, even if today, with our well-honed notions of how long a movie should be, it's hard to absorb in a single viewing.



Just how one feels about the men at the eye of this maelstrom inevitably colours response to *Napoleon*. The General turned Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte undoubtedly did much to put the ailing French Republic on its feet, granting it political stability, a radically modern governing code, and vast wealth. His swathe of conquest brought liberation and liberalisation to populaces still living under medieval regimes and worldviews, whereas the radical gravity of the French Revolution only devolved into spasmodic factional slaughter. Bonaparte's campaigns also caused the deaths of millions, involved the plunder of wealth from around Europe, saw the crucial betrayal of core tenets of the revolutionary cause he affected to spread, and brought eventual disaster to so many who placed faith in him, even if that faith continued to burn through the stolid, repressive epoch that followed. These are the essential contradictions historians, artists, politicians, and philosophers have argued about for the last two centuries and will do so for at least two more. Ludwig van Beethoven famously offered Napoleon initial admiration and eventual, furious repudiation. Friedrich Nietzsche succinctly described him as a chimeric blend of his ideas of the *übermensch*, the super-man, and its opposite, the *üntermensch*, the monster.



The most sublime and perturbing aspect of *Napoleon* then is the degree to which it is a study in its own vehement, rapturous creative energy, a portrait of a grand visionary accomplished by a man determined to prove himself a grand visionary. Gance worked in merry ignorance of Berthold Brecht's dismissal and revision of the idea of the epic, instead attaching the engine of his imagination and talent to a suitably enormous subject. Gance's concept-cum-assimilation of Napoleon is also a successor to *J'accuse's* main character, the wounded warrior-poet Jean Diaz, swapping the tattered, morally exhausted, if still yearning, beauty-seeking spirit expressed through that character for Gance's idealised Napoleon, the emblem and sharp leading edge of a great, potentially transformational moment in history. More concretely, there seems to be a jarring gap between *J'accuse's* antimilitarist statement, and Gance's lifelong expressions of pacifist and apolitical feeling, with his celebration of a man who was the quintessence of military leadership, one who, at the film's climax, begins the great rampage of his career. Much of this can be simply explained as a refuge in historical dreaming, a ready attachment of positive feeling onto something safely gone and swathed in legend, but some have felt Gance's idea and images strayed too close to a quasi-fascist celebration and apologia for dictatorship at a time when those forces were gathering strength across Europe.



One key to all this is the degree to which Gance essentially refashions the erstwhile Emperor in his own image, as a pure incarnation of poetic faith in an idea of France in particular and human possibility in general, but also more specifically as an artist working in his own special medium. So, Gance's Napoleon becomes a man often glimpsed wandering and meditating, steadily gathering his powers for dramatic gestures. His gaze cuts through illusions of strength and distracting clamour to get constantly at the essence of matters, and applying a world-sweeping vision with decisive strokes. But his vision is often misunderstood or ignored by lesser people lacking such conceptual zest. The film's famous opening scene depicts the boy Napoleon (Vladimir Roudenko) residing as a student of Brienne College, a religiously-run military school for the sons of prominent families. Napoleon trails his Corsican roots prominently with his surname styled as Buonaparte and given name he pronounces as "Nap-eye-ony," mocked by the instructor Pichegru (René Jeanne) as "Paille-au-nez" or straw-in-the-nose. The school has a regular winter ritual, a huge snowball fight blended with a game of capture-the-flag, where the students are encouraged to bring their nascent combat wit and tactical guile to bear.



Napoleon, leading a small and assailed band against a force that includes the bullies Phélippeaux (Petit Vidal) and Peccaduc (Roblin), two future battlefield opponents, proves his emerging, unflappable grit even as he foes pelt him with snowballs with rocks hidden within. Warned of this dirty trick by the cry of the school's sympathetic everyman cook Tristan Fleuri (Nicolas Koline), the enraged Napoleon leads a successful charge and captures his opponents' flag, bringing it back to his redoubt in the snow. Despite his mockery of his name, Pichegru pronounces the proud and fiery lad will go far. For revenge, Phélippeaux and Peccaduc release the pet eagle Napoleon keeps, sent to him by a relative back in Corsica. Napoleon is so upset by this he starts fighting the entire dormitory of fellow students in a frantic melee. He's locked away in a classroom by the staff to quell his furore, and the eagle flies back in through the window, becoming his symbolic familiar for the rest of the film. Gance immediately defines Napoleon through his practically preternatural gifts for leadership and combat coupled with a disconcerting otherness that tends to irritate and provoke rivals and authority, character traits that will earn either ruthless condemnation oblivion or a chance to revel in greatness: the historical moment will provide plenty of chances for the former but also a singular opening for the latter.



During the snowball fight sequence, Gance wields the intensifying cinematic technique that flows throughout the film, including split-screen effects displaying multiple actions simultaneously, shots taken with a handheld camera for lunging, immersive physical immediacy, and double-exposures that place the young Napoleon's face and reactions to the battle at the centre of a dizzying, more than faintly ironic sprawl of images that evoke his later successes: within the first fifteen minutes of the film, Gance has already executed one of his signature sequences building from deadpan to ecstatic flux of style and story. The boyish purity of this victory is immediately contrasted with the overtones of ethnic condescension for the Corsican boy and the disdain for his pride and ability. Tristan's fondness for young Napoleon is signalled when he warns him during the snowball fight and later brings him his cap and coat during his exile to a cold attic of the military school, as Napoleon lounges despondently on a cannon. This moment, an almost paternal gesture from the cook to the gutsy lad, is also touched with symbolic inference: Napoleon's future metier and speciality as an artilleryman is described, the essential common man Tristan vesting him with his warrior garb as the select hero for the people. One of the lines of tension within *Napoleon* as a film then is the way the film views its hero as, simultaneously, an outsider and patriotic paradigm, artist and authority. Rather than trying to reconcile these tensions or set them in argument, Gance accepts them as part of the florid, dizzying, contradictory energy of the epoch he portrays, one where the line between heroism and monstrosity are easy to trammel.



This wild, protean quality is manifest not just in Napoleon but also in the mighty figures of the Revolution, including Georges-Jacques Danton (Alexandre Koubitzky), Maximilien Robespierre (Edmond Van Daële), and Jean-Paul Marat (Antonin Artaud), who are collectively described with a parched level of irony as “The Three Gods” in the revolutionary climes, as well as attendant figures like Louis de Saint-Just (Gance himself). The opening depiction of the boy Napoleon segues immediately into the headiest moments of world-changing excitement during the Revolution, with the Three Gods ensconced in a private chamber adjoining the great hall of the Club de Cordeliers, a centre of the revolution’s ferment, where the ardent free-thinkers and rebels gather, whilst the real power is gathered in the hands of the three machinating minds within. A young officer, Claude de Lisle (Harry Krimer), arrives on a peculiar mission, assigned to perform the new song he’s written as a patriotic anthem, “La Marseillaise,” and Camille Desmoulins (Robert Vidalin), calls Danton out to hear it. The song goes over a treat, to the point where Napoleon (Albert Dieudonné), now grown and a Lieutenant of artillery in the army who’s been perched in boding solitude amidst the audience, approaches De Lisle and thanks him: “Your hymn will save many a cannon.” In this scene Gance introduces one of his flightiest flights of fancy, one that recurs throughout the film, as he slowly dissolves from the sight of Danton belting the song out lustily to a vision of the song itself personified as a figure akin to Delacroix’s conception of liberty, a sword-waving, flame-wreathed shield-maiden (Damia).



As with much of the film that follows, Gance alternates such imagery of high patriotic pomp and poetic licence with a mischievous sense of humour and oddball detail that evokes the texture of Charles Dickens and Gance's favourite writer Victor Hugo, and artwork of the period, if closer to the grotesque and madcap human sprawls of Hogarth than the noble classicism of Jacques-Louis David, although he later recreates David's painting of the dead Marat in his bath. Gance's conceits range from the shirtless strongman standing guard to the Three Gods' chamber with "Mort au Tirans" scrawled on his chest, the earthier, plebeian counterpart as the fist of liberty to the mystical shield-maiden, to a slovenly sans-culotte asleep with face nuzzled against a classical sculpture, and with vignettes of historical curiosity that evince the strange new possibilities of the revolution, like Desmoulins working alongside his wife Lucile (Francine Mussey), and a woman in the crowd wiping her thrilled tears on the *tricolore*. The Three Gods meanwhile are identified one by one in sharply composed portraits, Danton all wild-haired, brusquely muscular energy, Marat with eyes alight in obsessive fervour, and Robespierre with round, dark glasses on, a black-eyed raptor with smooth white face awaiting the purification of the faith.



Gance notes Robespierre and Marat conversing with evidently foreboding meaning whilst Danton is outside leading the song, Marat musing on the decapitated head of a statue of Jesus lying on the floor, whilst Robespierre lounges on a chair which has been carved into the film's recurring eagle symbol, a false and wooden edition, the light of communal excitement falling in slanting rays behind him that slowly fade out. Meanwhile without Gance cuts between close-ups of the singers with increasing speed and a sense of virtually orgasmic climax. It's likely impossible to know if Michael Curtiz ever saw this scene, but it certainly anticipates the famous "La Marseillaise" scene in *Casablanca* (1942). Gance views Napoleon as one of the crowd and yet also peculiar and singular with his slouching posture, turned initially from the performance but revealed to have been paying keen attention. It's signalled here that Napoleon, as well as appreciating the song for itself, is also a key to something important and power, the patriotic idealism that can be harnessed but which be wasted in the course of the Revolution's darkest turns. Napoleon weathers one of those when, in his cheap and grotty little room, he tries to write whilst the deposing of the monarchy is celebrated by a jubilant crowd, who entertain themselves by hanging a few luckless royalists from lampposts and even from the bars on Napoleon's balcony.



“Fragments of a great event, seen from a tiny room,” reads a title card, as the tumult of banners and raised, severed heads on pikes against the light out in the street casts a strange, eerily flickering glow on Napoleon’s face, before the surreal mixture of gaiety and violence come close. Napoleon considers grabbing a pistol as the revolutionaries tie a hanging rope to the balcony, tempted to intervene with fruitless heroism or perhaps kill himself in the face of such cruelty, but snatches his hand back before doing either. Following Napoleon’s sad and knowing gaze, Gance cuts with an ironic power Eisenstein would surely have appreciated from a shot of a revolutionary’s hand, covered in blood, to the copy of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* he has pinned to his wall, and then shifting into a slight camera pan off the Declaration to view the howling mob and bloody hangmen without. Glimpses are also offered of King Louis (Louis Sance) and Queen Marie (Suzanne Bianchetti) on trial, and Danton whipping up an audience by a blacksmith’s workshop, tearing a horseshoe in half: “This is what you have done to the monarchy!” Gance punctuates the scene with another startling spasm of near-subliminal cuts between the images of the wild night and Danton’s exultant audience, punctuated by the pounding of the blacksmith’s hammer driving sparks and fire.



The monarchy's downfall is the cue for kindling Napoleon's sense of mission, "a light growing within him" that turns him into the vessel for Gance's poetic meditation on the wild, awful scene. Napoleon has already encountered one important element of his future. Walking to his pension with holes in his shoes stuffed with paper, he is recompensed by a mesmerising glimpse of Joséphine de Beauharnais (Gina Manès), in the company of her gentleman friend Paul Barras (Max Maxudian), described by a title card as "the idle rich," as they call on the fortune teller Mademoiselle Lenormand (Carrie Carvalho), the fortune teller. Likewise Josephine's eye is briefly caught by the bedraggled but piercing-eyed young lieutenant. Soon the fortune teller informs Josephine she will become a queen. Meanwhile Napoleon's journey is counterpointed, and sometimes influenced, by odd acquaintances. Tristan is his Everyman familiar, the French average Joe, often changing jobs with the shifting tides of national fortune, becomes first a tavern owner in Toulon and then a clerk charged with processing death warrants during the Reign of Terror. If Tristan is spiritual father and emblematic common man attached to Napoleon, his daughter Violine (Annabella), who first catches sight of Napoleon when he comes to their inn at Toulon, thereafter dogs Napoleon's trail with an ever-growing and obsessive ardour, becoming his priestess, his idolater, his wretched admirer and spiritually communing lover.



Napoleon's life in Paris as an anonymous and poverty-stricken young officer is described chiefly in a comic vignette, as Napoleon is infuriated when a street cleaning cart rolls by, the spurting water soaking his legs and dissolving the paper stuffed in his holed shoes, earning a glare of pathetic wrath from the future emperor. This throwaway moment shows that Gance's encounter with Linder and the silent slapstick tradition with its fine feel for everyday frustration and the human comedy wasn't entirely lost. In a scene still missing from the reconstructed film, Gance also introduced Napoleon's fellow Corsicans, Saliceti (Philippe Hériat) and Pozzo di Borgo (Acho Chakatouny), who lived in the same boarding house as him in Paris but didn't like him, and the two become perpetual antagonists. When Napoleon is sent to Corsica as an official emissary of the National Convention, where he soon finds himself and his family in danger when he learns that the island's president, Pasquale Paoli (Maurice Schutz), with Di Borgo in league, is plotting to let the English invade and occupy Corsica, and Napoleon is marked for arrest or assassination because of his direct connection to the Convention. Saliceti whips up a crowd in condemnation of Napoleon, who's been warned of the plotting by aged shepherd Santo-Ricci (Henri Baudin). Napoleon's brothers Joseph (Georges Lampin) and Lucien Sylvio Cavicchia) sail to Calvi to fetch French intervention, whilst Napoleon elects to confront his foes and make an escape whilst the rest of the family, including mother Letizia (Eugénie Buffet) and sisters Éliisa (Yvette Dieudonné) and Pauline (Simone Genevois) flee to the forest.



“From this moment until his return to France, the life of this young officer becomes the most incredible of adventure stories,” Gance’s title card promises. The Corsican vignette, whilst a tiny, barely-known episode in terms of Napoleon’s whole life, in many ways becomes the scene of Gance’s most lucidly composed and executed vision, again structured as a slowly but remorselessly building cinematic crescendo. It’s also Gance’s most idealised in dealing with his hero as a figure of almost mystical power and vision to a point bordering on the absurd, viewing it as the first true challenge to his survival talent and personal courage, one that provokes his innermost potential to finally hatch out. Early shots in the chapter depict Napoleon as a solitary figure communing with the Corsican landscape and the sweep of the ocean, a warrior-poet in touch with the elements and awaiting his moment away from the pettiness of the world already gathering forces to destroy him. In the course of his flight he becomes a figure to no small degree like Jesus in Cecil B. DeMille’s *King of Kings* (1926), inspiring awe and flinching caution from people who nominally want to kill or imprison him, as he boldly appears in a tavern filled with men from rival political factions, each demanding a different foreign political alliance and whose one point of agreement is “Death to Napoleon Bonaparte!”, until Napoleon reveals himself and declares, with mystic light in his eyes, that only France can be their future.



Napoleon extends his daring spectacle of defiance by riding into Ajaccio, stealing the tricolor hanging on Paoli's house, and raising it as a sail on a skiff he commandeers to try and sail to France, bellowing defiantly at his pursuers left back on the shore, "I shall bring it back to you!" Like so much of *Napoleon*, this bisects the zone between inspired artistry and gilding the lily, redeemed by cunning, thrilling flourishes like Napoleon spotting a rope strung up to topple him from his horse and casually hacking it through with his sabre with the poise of a great movie swashbuckler. Back in Paris, Robespierre, in counterpoint to Di Borgo's rabble-rousing, denounces the Girondin faction along with Danton. Taking as his cue descriptions from the heady days of the National Convention that it was like riding out a storm at sea, Gance intercuts between Napoleon weathering a furious gale on the ocean with the tumult unleashed by the denunciation in the Convention, the lash of waves on the boat intercut with a camera mounted on a swing to evoke the sensation of furious, rolling energy. Other, less spectacular shots still wield astonishing art, like a silhouetted Napoleon on his horse, riding for freedom along the Corsican coast, a threatened but still glowing sun piercing through stormy clouds above. The first of the film's three parts ends as Napoleon is picked up by a ship bringing his brothers back, they fetch the rest of the family from the shore, and head for France, which Napoleon now declares will be their only home.



Gance's overarching aesthetic desire, to communicate the thrill of his concept of the history he portrays as if he can manifest a sense of physical force through raw filmmaking, also depends on Dieudonné's capacity to work against his project, insofar as Napoleon is so often envisioned as the stoic pillar at the centre of it all. And yet despite Gance's idealisation, the character emerges as anything but a waxwork impersonation. In his late thirties when he making the film, Dieudonné was older than the man he was portraying, apparently a sticking point for his friend Gance when he was casting the film, but he reportedly convinced the director to cast him by donning a long black wig. Dieudonné proves readily able to shift between the various stances in the role Gance demands of him – zealous patriotic oracle, terse and tough warrior, musing witness of ugly history, playful would-be father, and a fiery but uncertain lover in a manner reminiscent of Shakespeare's conception of Henry V – he hires an actor to coach him when he sets out to woo Josephine in the film's last part. So strong is Dieudonné in inhabiting the character's body language that when a title card reports him demanding of Tristan, "Bread, olives, and silence!", you can virtually hear how Dieudonné delivered the line. Dieudonné apparently, eventually took the role and its singular status in his long career so much to heart he had himself buried in his costume, when he died at the age of 87.



His performance is particularly impressive in its vivacity and cohesion given that Gance hesitates to psychologise the future Emperor. Gance views him rather as one of those people who simply is what they are, born with a certain character and capacity, and whilst buffeted by events eventually proves able to master them. His Napoleon is in fact blissfully free of the traits of the modern world whose ugliest birth pangs Gance had already dealt with, a last gasp of the reflexive human before the age of the analytical human. It's worth comparing the film's portrait of Napoleon to the one in Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* (1970), where Rod Steiger captured aspects of mercurial genius and applied energy balanced by monstrous ego and almost childish entitlement, and riddled with flashes of pathos as he knows his time is running out. Gance, by contrast, prints the legend, but in his own, personalised way. He zeroes in on moments that certainly temper something in the man, from weathering school bullying and ethnic resentment, to holding back from grabbing up his gun to shoot the lynchers, in vignettes that demand and receive his circumspect restraint. These imbue him with a good sense of when exactly he should act, as he declares immediately before going on the offensive in Corsica. Gance communicates the speed of Napoleon's mind with touches like an illustration of the map of Toulon with equations and manoeuvres speeding across it, cut in with the furious churn of montage.



The traits that make Napoleon interesting and singular are nonetheless those that constantly provoke different, mostly lesser personalities and minds, like his first commander at Toulon, General Carteaux (Léon Courtois), and his rivals Di Borgo and Saliceti, contrasting worldly leisure and pleasure with his brand of discipline and focus, as well as a genius for perceiving military matters incomprehensible to them. Carteaux dismisses his clear and essential insight when it comes to driving the British out of Toulon, whilst the commander of the French Army in Army, currently stuck hovering in the Alps General Schérer (Alexandre Mathillon), sends back his suggested plan for invasion with a note stating they were drafted by a madman who should try implementing them himself. Gance's obvious pride at working in many a line and note taken directly from historical sources sees every authentic quote marked as "historical," even the slightly dubious moment when a young Horatio Nelson (Olaf Fjord) sailing as a Lieutenant on a British warship, spies and wants to sink the ship carrying the Bonapartes away from Corsica, only to be told by his captain not to bother.



The battle for Toulon takes up the first half of the middle third but also cap the “First Epoch” as Gance’s title cards have it. The general replacing the incompetent Carteaux, Dugommier (Alexandre Bernard), makes Napoleon commander of the artillery and gives him the go-ahead to implement his plan to drive out the British, who control the city and the bottled-up French fleet, which involves capturing a specific bastion. Napoleon, putting together a force of soldiers he dubs the “Battery of Men Without Fear.” Launching his attack at night during a pummeling rain shower that soon becomes a hail storm, Napoleon battles both the English and opponents in the French ranks including Saliceti, who berate him for taking such an enormous risk, but Napoleon’s brusque confidence reinforces Dugommier’s trust, and the commander lets him continue. In a brutal, hand-to-hand fight, the French capture the bastion. In retaliation, Admiral Hood (W. Percy Day), commander of the British naval squadron, orders the French fleet burned.



The battle for Toulon is another amazing bit of filmmaking as Gance successfully recreates the chaos of such a struggle, an onrush of manpower and frantic, almost crazed violence, men grappling in the muck and duelling with sabres. Mixed in are flourishes again touching the surreal, as men are swallowed by torrents of mud, their hands reaching out of the squirming muck like zombies in a horror film, and a bizarre tattoo beat out on the regimental drums by the falling hail. Again, Gance weaves in relieving vignettes of humour and piquant detail, including Tristan cheering Napoleon on from the window of his tavern just as he did back at the military college. His young son Marcellin (Serge Freddy-Karl), now the Battery's young drummer boy, sneaks into the fray hidden under his drum, which seems to undulate self-willed across the muddy battlefield, so he can strike at Redcoats, only to be swept up and spirited away by Violine. Gance presages the concluding shift into widescreen triptych images as the more traditional ratio splits into three to evoke the *tricolore* whilst offering vantages on Napoleon standing resolute amidst the carnage. Despite the exaltation of Napoleon's military prowess, Gance returns to the ambivalent mode of *J'accuse* when, the battle finished, his camera pans across the field littered with dead and wounded men, with Napoleon standing a vigil in the rain in appreciating the cost of victory. Finally, after falling asleep on the battlefield, his men plant standards around his sleeping form, whilst the eagle perches atop a post, now fully fledged as the emblem of martial glory.



Napoleon of course deals with historical events that are the stuff drilled into the heads of French schoolchildren, but otherwise the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras are phenomenon is largely known through the viewpoints of other nations, particularly Great Britain with its resolute resistance and counter-mythology as expressed through the likes of *A Tale of Two Cities* and the imagery of Wellington and Nelson, or for the Russian slant, *War and Peace*. In this regard Gance's decision to focus on the early part of Napoleon's career allows him to highlight less-known moments, and to encompass what he sees as the necessary backdrop for the man's rise in the slide from exultant energy to petty tyranny that was the Revolution's course. Whilst not particularly interested in the issues of the moment and emphasising the pointlessness of internecine strife, Gance's demarcations of the leading personas like Danton and Marat lead of course to their deaths come on with a zest blending a newspaper caricaturist's electric sense character essence and flashes of poetic extrapolation. Danton's fate under the guillotine is prefigured when Gance superimposes a shot of a plunging guillotine during the downfall of the Girondins.



Artaud's Marat, with eyes that almost seem to burn a hole in the movie screen (just as he did in a different if no less fanatical role in the following year's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*), gets his comeuppance from Charlotte Corday (Gance's then-wife Marguerite) in the bath. The denunciation of Robespierre, Saint-Just, and the other bigwigs of the hated Jacobin faction sees Gance give himself a flashy moment that also dares make room for sympathy for the devil, his face offered in close-up as Saint-Just defends their labours with his own visionary tilt of the head and flash of the eyes – "Have you forgotten that we have forged for you a new France, fit to be lived in?... We have achieved all this with that vulture La Vendee at our flanks, and on our back that pack of tigers – the Kings!" That Napoleon's own life was briefly in danger from the Terror is something that's been debated by historians, but Gance readily offers it as another unit of drama in the tale. When Napoleon refuses to do the regime's dirty work by fighting the bloody insurrection in the Vendee region, which he considers a disgraceful case of French killing each-other, Salaceti is able to easily convince Robespierre to condemn him.



Tristan, taking a job as a clerk in an office charged with the Reign of Terror's bureaucratic niceties, finds himself charged with processing the death sentences of both Napoleon and Josephine, the latter tossed into prison by Saint-Just. In one of Gance's inspired Dickensian touches, the office also includes an aged clerk mounted on a hoist constantly ascending and descending a towering filing cabinet upon which court verdicts, mostly sentences to be decapitated, pile up, described as "the Thermometer of the Guillotine." Tristan gets clerks Bonnet (Boris Fastovich-Kovanko) and La Bussière (Jean d'Yd), two real historical personages renowned for disposing of some death sentences by literally eating them surreptitiously, to consume Napoleon's warrant. Josephine meanwhile is saved from the tumbril first by her ex-husband, Alexandre de Beauharnais (Georges Cahuzac), who elects to be the one person of that name called to the guillotine – "For once, madame, let me take precedence," he suggests to Josephine. Later, in a fit of sobbing despair, Josephine encounters Lazare Hoche (Pierre Batcheff), a young and romantic aristocratic general also imprisoned and expecting to die, and they help each-other weather the storm until the Jacobin downfall. Soldiers barge into the "Thermometer" office, the old clerk bobbing on his hoist with amusing pathos, and soon all the prisoners are released.



In the eruption of gaiety that follows the end of the Reign of Terror, where the survivors of the Terror or the dead's relatives gather to celebrate survival and indulge the orgiastic pleasures of living with some accomplished debauchery in an event they call the Victims' Ball, Napoleon once more encounters Josephine as one of three beauties chosen to be exalted at the party. Deeply smitten, he sets out to woo her, with Hoche removing himself from the equation when he realises the fierceness of their attraction. Dejected and without a role following his plan to invade Italy is rejected, Napoleon nonetheless finds himself positioned to play the hero again when he's fetched by the National Convention to defend them when a mob of resurgent royalists gathers to attack them: Napoleon, arming all the members of the Convention and having his first, fateful encounter with Joachim Murat (Genica Missirio), displays his casual expertise in dispersing the horde. Josephine in turn brings to bear her influence on Barras, now one of the main inheritors of power in France, to get Napoleon appointed commander of the army in Italy. Napoleon, upon hearing this news, takes down the rejected plan he had used to cover a hole in his garret window, determined now to implement it, and elects to quickly marry Josephine. Napoleon has already, incidentally charmed Josephine's son Eugène (Georges Hénin) by letting him keep his executed father's sword, and he resolves to play father to him and sister Hortense (Jeanne Pen). Meanwhile Josephine takes in Violine, after finding her collapsed and unconscious outside the house after spending so long lurking around in a lovestruck daze for Napoleon: after being restored to health, Violine helps get her father a job in the household.



Napoleon is of course a portrayal of a historical epoch and also a product of one. Gance's delirious visions of the debaucheries of the Victims' Ball, including female guests swanning around in increasingly provocative gowns and ending the night with bared breasts, is as much a portrait of the excess of the Jazz Age following hard upon the Great War as it is a depiction of the liberated mood of after weathering the Reign of Terror, and also an interlude of naughty hype. Gance delivers a good joke Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton would've been proud of, in presenting, after a menacing title card reading "The Reaction," the sight of a man dressed as a jailer passing through a throng of people dressed in prison clothes and barred gates, and beginning to read from a list as if announcing the condemned, only for this to prove to be the start of the Victims' Ball, the list a menu of the delicacies on hand. Gance even indulges a little gender-bending as Tristan starts flirting with a laughing woman only to realise it's a man in drag. Something of the imminent grimness of the Depression is also presaged too as Napoleon notes he poor around his neighbourhood, desperately cold and cueing for charity, and seeing it in terms of a larger project: "If the Revolution hasn't found its leader by the end of the week, it's finished."



Napoleon also intervenes to save Saliceti and Di Borgo from being hung by a republican mob, after they try to assassinate Napoleon as he fends off the Royalists: he's saved by accident thanks to Tristan, serving as a volunteer, discharging his gun and distracting Saliceti's own aim. Napoleon, whilst noting that he cannot forget the compatriot duo's wrongdoings, he does forgive them. It's odd that Gance singled Saliceti out to be the central antagonist to Napoleon in his account, given that the real Saliceti helped Napoleon's career and, whilst opposed to his eventual coup to become dictator, served under his brother Joseph's regime in Italy. I feel like Gance wanted an opponent who was close to a doppelganger for the character, springing from the same background, same soil, but doomed to play in constant, stumbling lockstep with his omniscient foe. Meanwhile the man himself remains locked within his own genius, one that imbues tunnel-visioned focus. That focus is capable of landing anything he sets his mind to from an enemy redoubt to Josephine's heart to trying to cure national and international ills, but too oblivious to rival wills and projects.



Perhaps the greatest hesitation *Napoleon* inspires as a film is that it's too much – too much dazzling technique, too much genius, too much enthusiasm, too much movie in all. It's a film that feels like the product of a choice on Gance's part, after indulging his deepest tragic sensibility in *J'accuse*, to refuse tragedy and instead embrace a winner, to chase an image of achievement that transcends the barriers of mere strife and warmongering, and rather borders on crusade – a choice, perhaps, too many were willing to make around the same time. Gance nonetheless mediates on his choice in odd ways. He gives sympathy to the devil, as with Saint-Just's self-defence, and contends with the way the idea of Napoleon as much or more than his actuality becomes a cult for the French. He wields *Violine* as the emblem of a France enraptured by the emerging Napoleon, buying a figurine of him from a street vendor when he's hailed as a saviour after helping the Convention, and later installing a shrine to him including such memorabilia and keepsakes, turning him into a living god, in a way that intuits something important about the way the Revolution's secular and atheistic tendencies nonetheless gave birth to a kind of demigod ideal that needed Napoleon to embody it.



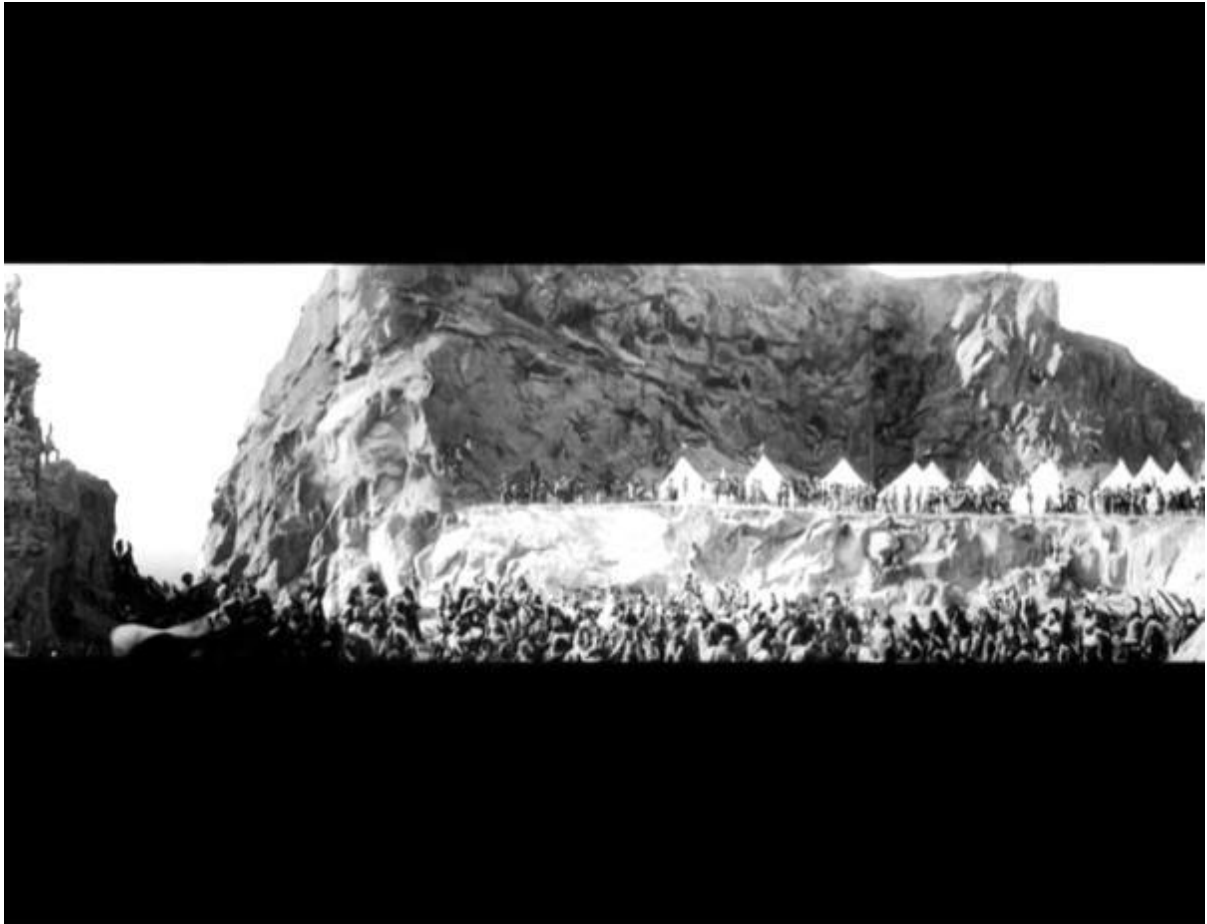
In the film's last quarter Gance takes this fascination with personal interpretations of faith, ardour, and destiny to some odd but revealing places, analysing his own compulsive project even whilst indulging its highest flights of fancy. Napoleon himself, when being taught by his actor friend how to make overtures to Josephine, imagines her face projected onto a globe and nuzzles against it as if to make love to beloved. This flourish of delightful, rather fetishistic illusory passion also includes Gance's cumulating irony, as he notes the promise and threat of Napoleon's desire to conquer his lady as conflating already with a desire to conquer the world at large. Violine, practising her secret faith, mirrors Napoleon's indulgence of illusion, as she goes through her own mock wedding ceremony in the privacy of the room Josephine has given her, having adopted Josephine's curled hairstyle in an effort to remake herself in the image of her idol's lucky lady. Violine positions the Napoleon figurine she bought with shadow projected on the wall so can have the illusion of embracing her beloved for the nuptials-sealing kiss. Late in the film, Josephine comes into Violine's room and finds her praying at her shrine, but rather than getting angry, understands the impulse well and succumbs to the same urge, kneeling by her friend-sister-rival-comrade to join in her vigil.



The dreamy texture of these scenes are arresting as a stylistic antistrophe from the history-written-with-lightning verve of the rest of the film. In a lot of ways the vigil of Josephine and Violine is its proper ending and punchline, certainly its interest in the zeitgeist of France in the time and metaphorical engagement with the Napoleonic idyll, having cycled through a portrait of the various, failed saviours of the nation giving way to the last, best hope, a virtual religion sparked. Here Gance's depiction of obsessive ardour is twinned in a swooningly evoked but actually irony-flecked manner, watching as these people begin to get lost in the mists of their personal dream-visions and obsessive objects, even whilst affecting to deal with reality, their fantasias of longing bound to collide with less comforting results. This is taken a step further in a vital scene, which sees Napoleon, before heading off to take command of the Italian campaign, stops to visit the National Convention, deserted in the middle of the night. Taking to the rostrum, Napoleon now conjures up an audience and the shades, real or imagined, of the various, dead Revolutionary leaders, particularly the Three Gods but also many others. The shades feed him a succession of oaths, including to take over as the Revolution's leader and to take it into Europe to forge the Universal Republic, all of which Napoleon swears to. The spectres are satisfied, but Danton's warns him that if he ever betrays the Revolution they will turn against him.



This vignette is exceedingly important, in terms of the film's overall meaning, and in indicating where Gance might have headed if he had made further instalments in his epic cycle. Perhaps he intended a rise-and-fall arc that would have seen Napoleon increasingly drifting within a bubble bound to pop and realise his mistakes too late. Gance uses this sequence regardless to place an important precondition on the very end's depiction of Napoleon marching into Italy: so long as it's being done in the name of a vital, humanistic cause, and with an ultimate eye towards dispensing with warfare as a necessary end, rather than making it a self-sustaining paradigm and Moloch-like dark god demanding victims, Napoleon's purpose is righteous. The sight of the ghostly Convention singing "La Marseillaise" before fading from Napoleon's vision meanwhile revisits the army of the dead at the end of *J'accuse*, and containing not merely patriotic triumphalism but fear too, an anxiety of a cause terribly wrung and battered by events, but subsisting still. Gance might well ultimately have been glad he never had to make the other films, that said. How could he have sustained the same creative pitch, and how deeply might he have wrestled with the hero-worship he indulges here when forced to? It seems as if the subplots involving Saliceti and Di Borgo, Violine and Tristan, were meant to extend into future movies, but all of them find a satisfying conclusion within this narrative, playing out their contrapuntal roles whilst finally all feeding into the core legend.



In any event, Gance shifts from the sight of Josephine and Violine praying to their man-god together to the man himself riding in a coach to join his new army, handing out messages to riders alongside in a first display of whirlwind command and decisiveness when freed to it, before finally abandoning the coach itself for horseback to speed more quickly to his goal. Finally he reaches the army, encamped in the Alpine foothills at Albenga, where he's confronted by a rag-wearing, slovenly, entirely demoralised force led by a collective of grumpy and resentful officers who have resolved to cold-shoulder the popinjay being foisted on them. But Napoleon looks over officers and men alike with his formidable gaze – cueing another memorable historical quote from one onlooker, “With his piercing looks, this little stump of a man frightens me.” Napoleon breathes fire into the ragged force that will “awaken with the spirit of the Grand Army” and announces he's going to lead them down to “the most fertile plains in the world.” Here Gance executes his ultimate moment of cinematic largesse, as the film erupts into what was called Polyvision by its developers – a widescreen vista captured by three cameras mounted together. This technique allows Gance to swap between panoramic shots, beholding the mass of men and the expensive scale of his staging in a way many a later Hollywood director would gleefully reproduce, and also split-screen imagery in returning to the *tricolore* motif. The best aspect of this is that Gance is still trying here to use his innovation with definite artistic purpose rather than merely showing off – although he's certainly doing that too.



Here, much like his protagonist finally gaining the keys to the kingdom, Gance revels in being able to step between grandiose surveys of massed human potential and closer, simultaneous views of individuals reacting in fascination and wonder, and both at once. The sight of the men on the march with Napoleon racing forth on his steed on either side of them like an unleashed world spirit gives way to the army storming a town as their first outpost of conquest, whilst their general stands on a hilltop and “plays with the clouds at building and destroying worlds.” Gance finally leaves off with the image of the resurgent eagle, swooping over the heads of the advancing force as they escape on a spree across the world. It’s impossible to deny the power and aesthetic brilliance of all this, even if it is possible to argue with Gance’s romantic vision, his unadorned appeal to French nationalistic propaganda and embrace of his titanic conqueror, despite the interesting and considered codicils he offers before it. A few years later the worst people on earth were on the march under eagle banners, but then again the best were doing much the same thing, and the spirit *Napoleon* as a film is far more like the latter than the former. In the end the most certain truth is that *Napoleon* is a relic, a diary, a manifesto, a monument, all depicting a creator acting just like his hero – playing with clouds at building and destroying worlds.

Glory (1989)

this island rod



Recounting the true story of the formation of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry regiment, the first fully regular African-American fighting force deployed the Union Army during the American Civil War, Edward Zwick's *Glory* holds an important if awkward place today in terms of films grappling with a great historical event and an important moment in American social evolution. It can be argued that *Glory* helped spark a great upswing in interest in the Civil War, compounded by Ken Burns' famous documentary series the following year. Indeed, *Glory* might finally have lodged the war firmly today as the great Homeric experience of US history, chiefly by dealing squarely with the racial dimension of the conflict, which had up until that point often been awkwardly downplayed in movies tackling it. *Glory* explicitly recast the drama of freed slaves and other Black fighters as the innermost core of the war's meaning, about which everything else was essentially drapery, and the empowerment of those people anointing them as not merely historical bit players but the essential, mythical patriotic heroes of the business. The film also helped propel a remarkable cast to prominence, most particularly Denzel Washington, who captured a Best Supporting Actor Oscar and gained his path to major stardom, as well as Morgan Freeman (in concert with his role in Bruce Beresford's *Driving Miss Daisy* the same year) and Matthew Broderick, who was trying to leave behind his Ferris Bueller days.



Today, nonetheless, *Glory* might be a bit unfashionable. Zwick's directorial career hasn't produced anything one-quarter as good, with follow-ups like *Legends of the Fall* (1993), *The Last Samurai* (2003), and *Defiance* (2008) proving overripe even when trying to recapture the same tone and force. *Glory's* emphasis on emerging racial and soldierly solidarity, as told at least initially from the viewpoint of a white character, doesn't mesh that well with contemporary intersectional concerns. On the other hand, the story of that character, Robert Gould Shaw, is certainly worth telling. Shaw, played by Broderick, is the fresh-faced young Captain who, in the brutal opening depiction of the Battle of Antietam, sees many of his men killed, and he himself is wounded. Shaw is found alive after the battle by gravedigger John Rawlins (Freeman), and after stumbling to a medical tent, where he's regaled by the screams of men having limbs amputated, he's told by a medic that Lincoln's going to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Returning home to wealthy, abolitionist and progressive home in Boston, Shaw encounters Frederick Douglass (Raymond St. Jacques), and is asked by his father (Peter Michael Goetz) and his friend the state governor, Andrew (Alan North) to consider leading a "Colored" regiment now being formed. Shaw gains immediate volunteers from two childhood friends, Cabot Forbes (Cary Elwes), already a serving Major, and Thomas Searles (Braugher).



But the problems of building the new regiment prove strenuous for all concerned. As a cultured and intellectual man, Thomas is held in disdain by both most of his comrades and the rough white soldiers training them, including the hulking Irish hardass Sgt Mulcahy (John Finn), and Shaw, groping his way through his new position of authority as Colonel, insists Thomas and the other recruits take all the hard knocks as he knows what's waiting for them is worse. This is an attitude Forbes starts to resent, although Thomas seems to accept it despite his suffering. Thomas lives in a tent at close quarters with both Rawlins, who proves so able and stalwart a leader that he's made a Sergeant-Major, and Trip (Washington), a provocative and resentful former slave who has a problem with all authority. Trip is whipped after absconding from the camp, but Rawlins alerts Shaw to the problem that drove him off, a lack of decent footwear, so the Colonel goes on the warpath to get his men properly outfitted and paid as the War Department keeps proving slack in supporting them. Finally, when the regiment is ready, it's shipped south, but detailed to behind-the-lines duties, including essentially working as armed looters for a cabal of Northern officers enriching themselves during the campaign.



One of my favourite films when growing up, *Glory* is still an excellent film, even if some of the tricks of Kevin Jarre's screenplay in wringing the drama for a certain level of reassuring, cheer-along audience feeling seem a bit tired now. Such tricks include repeatedly stressing how Shaw's lack of superficial confidence nonetheless sees him finally bring to bear a confrontational cleverness to bear against pompous jerks in the chain of command. Zwick handles those moments with the savvy of a pro, like having a number of tough Black soldiers form a guarding ruck outside a quartermaster's office whilst Shaw wreaks havoc within. It also seems plainer now that the Oscar-winning cinematography by the veteran Freddie Francis and the self-consciously epic score by James Horner do much of Zwick's work for him in touching the drama with the gleaming lustre of the mythic. Zwick nonetheless does a fine job, particularly in the early scenes as he communicates Shaw's shell-shocked state after the battle, drifting through his parents' mansion and partygoers, the visuals turned languid and dreamy. The film gains much authority from directly quoting Shaw's letters to form Broderick's narration, allowing it to maintain a unifying vision even as the story quickly becomes more of a communal portrait, with characters like Trip, Rawlins, Thomas, Cabot, and the stuttering Private Jupiter Sharts (Jihmi Kennedy) also earn narrative focus.



Moreover, whilst it's overtly a film about racial and social justice, *Glory* never reduces its characters – its main characters, at any rate – to placards or clichés, allowing the psychological and interpersonal travails of the men of the 54th to entwine with their external journey, with a keen feel for social divides. The tension between Trip and Thomas in particular has a sharp feel for painfully contrasting personalities, as Trip constantly tries to provoke and express disdain for Thomas' education and expectations for their lot, where Trip has been taught in the cruellest possible terms how alone he is in the world. The lashing scene most likely won Washington his Oscar as he angrily takes off his shirt to reveal a back entirely gilded by whip scars, holding his gaze on Shaw all through it and not making a sound even as tears stream down his face: it's an electrifying moment of acting and filmmaking that condenses an entire historical complex into a single image. But Washington's excellence throughout can't be understated, as he evokes both Trip's simmering rage even in seemingly easy conversational situations, and also his lurking desire to discover something, anything, worth fighting for. "Ain't none of us clean," he tells Shaw when the Colonel offers to make him the bearer of the regimental colours, something Shaw quietly agrees with, and Trip turns the offer down. That said, Braugher is equally brilliant in a less spectacular part, as a man contending with bitter and constant humiliation and hurt, particularly when he's beaten up by Mulcahy during a bayonet drill and writhes in shame and anger, whilst on a similar path towards discovering a more complete version of himself.



Freeman's customary aura of authority, soon to be leaned on like a crutch by half the directors in Hollywood, is also invaluable in playing Rawlins as the ideal elder figure for the mostly young soldiers, particularly when he rounds on Trip and tells him off for deriding his comrades. Broderick's performance was by contrast a topic of criticism at the time of release, with some noting he seemed to accidentally make Shaw look weak. That's a point I don't think entirely fair – Zwick and Jarre emphasise that Shaw feels out of his depth, even if proves himself ultimately not to be, and it's plain that Zwick cast him precisely to exploit his boyish persona to emphasise that in wars even the leader tend to be quite young men, but this choice came with a risk: if Broderick, as the contemporary quip goes, doesn't have a face that knows what an iPhone is, he at least seems to know what a Walkman is. And yet many of the strongest scenes deal with the way Shaw's attempt to remain stern and stolid throughout the training, much to the aggravation of Forbes, who starts sarcastically addressing him like a slave master, and Thomas, who's stricken with need of his old friend's help and humanity, but also knows he's lost them for the duration of service. "Let him grow up some more," Mulcahy advises Shaw after Thomas receives another hard lesson. Shaw himself tries to evoke something of the terror of combat for his men with angry purpose: when Sharts is too pleased with his own shooting prowess upon first receiving his rifle, Shaw discharges a pistol repeatedly behind Sharts' back as the rattled man tries to reload his rifle. Broderick also handles the more idealistic side of Shaw well, the ring of high-flown rhetoric heard in his voiceover, the glint in his eyes when he prepares to lead his men into a fateful charge, even if he never quite convinces in depicting the damaged and frightened aspect of the man.



The 54th's story wasn't entirely obscured to the haze of history: Walt Whitman wrote his rather more inferring and restrained tribute with the famous poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and Shaw and his men commemorated in a bas-relief sculpture on a memorial on Boston Common by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, which is featured under *Glory's* closing credits (also, in one of those sharp twists of history, Shaw's son was later, disastrously married to Nancy Astor, who would become Britain's first female MP). Nor was it entirely the first film to deal directly with the idea of former slaves fighting in the way, as Raoul Walsh's *Band of Angels* (1957) and Andrew V. McLaglen's *Shenandoah* (1965) had both offered interesting stabs at the theme, but *Glory* was the first to deal outright and properly with an historical example. The guiding stylistic choice of *Glory* was to evoke the religious imagery and motifs draped around so much of the Civil War's action and moral drama and utilise it for its own act of contemporary canonisation. Jarre drew the title from a report by a war correspondent who reported on the 54th in action, and as if in obedience to this association, the blend of Horner's chorus-heavy scoring and Francis's images, so often glimpsed through veils of smoke, steam, and fog, imbues a constant edge of the numinous and leans into the notion what we're seeing is a kind of extended ritual of praise and mourning. Which is indeed fitting, given its end. This note is sounded when Shaw roams through the reception in his house, the gently warbling chorus on the soundtrack evoking Shaw's estrangement and feeling of being caught between life and death, and reaches an apogee in the practically operatic lead-in to the concluding battle scene.



It might be said this choice is both an indivisible part of *Glory's* power and a debatable aspect, so determined it is to sanctify the action and cause of the protagonists. If as Edmund Wilson said so much of the classic American cultural exploration of the war was, as he called his cynical book on it, "patriotic gore," then *Glory* exemplifies that description. The climactic depiction of the 54th's ill-fated assault on the Confederate Fort Wagner, a formidable redoubt on the coast outside Charleston, might have been pitched as sad and ugly, even absurdly wasteful, but Zwick depicts as a moment of titanic apotheosis. The film grazes more complex perspectives in its third quarter, when the action shifts from Massachusetts to the Carolinas, and the 54th find themselves seconded to service with a sleazy zealot, Colonel Montgomery (Cliff DeYoung), a Southerner who sided with the Union and leads his own band of conscripted, lawless former slaves merrily loot a town on his behest. He pauses to gun down on one his men when he gets too free with a white woman even as he blames the woman for starting it, before commenting, "Secesh's got to be swept away by the hand of God like the Jews of old." Here Zwick seems to be shifting into territory vaguely reminiscent of *Little Big Man* (1970) and another generation of eccentric and scabrous portraits of American history, but he quickly swerves back to the noble struggle again. Montgomery and his kleptocrat commander General Harker (Bob Gunton) prove to be mere racist and larcenous paper tigers for Shaw to manoeuvre around, repeating the move he pulled with the quartermaster in threatening to report their illicit activities. There are also plenty of hallowed war movie clichés, like the inevitable scene of the tough drillmaster goading a luckless neophyte into trying to jab him with a bayonet – in this case the scene plays out between Thomas and Mulcahy, who's interestingly characterised as a man ready and willing to utilise base abuse to galvanise his men but also suggests genuine respect for real effort, but unfortunately vanishes from the film before something meaty can be developed.



The film is on its surest ground when dealing with combat as the ultimate arena of masculine rectitude, albeit finding that an idea already starting to crack open in the face of a new age of warfare. A flash-edit depiction of a Union officer's head being smashed to a bloody pulp by a cannon ball seems to have inspired a similar, more cartoonish moment in Roland Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000) and, more agreeably, anticipates the jaggedly, horridly glimpsed corporeal mangling of the D-Day sequence in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). The 54th's first proper battle action sees them putting up a fearsome show against an attack of Rebels in an eerie forest setting, where the smoke of the blazing muskets and miasmic haze commingle and the enemy charges out of the murk to do battle. Thomas is wounded in the melee but recovers to save Trip's life with his hard-won bayoneting skill. Zwick and his cast pull off a quiet but marvellous scene as the soldiers sing a spiritual with a clapped-out, insistent beat, giving each man a chance to voice a testament before their last battle. The "Ain't nobody clean" scene is very much the moral and thematic linchpin of the drama as the film allows Shaw and Trip a vignette of serious contention in their values and worldview voiced in a manner that sounds convincing for two men of their stations in the era, with also a low-burning fire of admiration growing in each man for the other. This gains its proper resolution only at the end, when Shaw is killed trying to rally the men with the company flag, and Trip dashes forth to take up the mantle, only to be mortally wounded himself.



The climactic assault on Fort Wagner is an awesome unit of filmmaking, whilst also exemplifying Zwick's self-consciously momentous and mythologising approach that risks turning cornball in its earnestness, with the ranked soldiers caught in the low sun, Shaw chasing off his trusty steed before pulling his sabre and ordering the advance, Horner's surging, mournfully heroic theme shifting into martial pounding. The actual combat is truly something, the staging, captured with Francis's crisp and pictorial colour, his care in lighting and Zwick's staging, blending with the score to create a zone of the truly hellish and heroic. Zwick manages to keep it visceral without descending into the jumbled and incoherent, as the 54th's most determined fighters, including Thomas and Forbes, charge into the fort's interior only to find themselves confronted by a deadly fusillade that blasts them out of the world. The concluding, slow-motion shot of Shaw and Trip's bodies being tossed into a common burial pit, a true flourish, turns the intended Confederate insult into an icon of salutary honour, and the tragically failed assault an American Thermopylae that inspires a vast wave of Black soldiers to follow in their wake. At its least, *Glory* is a fine, slick, intelligent entertainment; at its best it's worthy of the men it portrays.



Key Largo (1948)

film.freedonia



Director: John Huston

Screenwriters: Richard Brooks, John Huston

When the ranks of Hollywood directors who left the sound stage to contribute to the World War II effort returned home to their careers, many had made a personal promise to strike out with a more independent and purposeful brand of cinema. John Huston was one of them. Huston, already long-weathered as a screenwriter who rode into that career on the coattails of his actor father Walter, had been lucky to survive some of his wild and oft-inebriated adventures in the 1930s: not everyone in his company did. He recovered to make a startling directorial debut with 1941's *The Maltese Falcon*, a work of machine-tooled efficiency that managed the impossible task of giving *Citizen Kane* a run for its money as the most significant debut film of the year. Huston was immediately ensconced as a major filmmaker. But he only managed two more movies – the Bette Davis vehicle *In This Our Life* (1942) and *Across The Pacific* (1942), a lumpy espionage thriller with the reunited stars of *The Maltese Falcon* – before he left to join the US Army Signal Corps as a filmmaker. He made three highly regarded documentaries during the war, *Report From The Aleutians* (1943), *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), and the study of psychiatric treatment for shell-

shocked veterans *Let There Be Light* (1946). But he fought losing battles to keep more critical elements in the second film, and the third was suppressed altogether.



When Huston finally returned to the fold at Warner Bros. he successfully battled a dubious Jack Warner to make *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948). His comeback feature only gained mild box office success at first, but won plaudits including Oscars for himself and his father, and quickly became an anointed classic. More than that, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* was a vital moment for American film. In style, Huston melded aspects of the pre-war working class melodramas Warners had specialised in, the French Poetic Realist tradition, post-war noir, and neorealist and docudrama elements. In terms of subject, it depicted the perpetually nagging and destructive nature of seeking wealth, into a mixture singular in its moment and near-endlessly influential, particular in the New Hollywood era: it's been said that filmmakers from Sam Peckinpah to Robert Altman devoted themselves to remaking it again and again. The run of work Huston accomplished in the first five years of his resumed Hollywood career – *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Key Largo*, *We Were Strangers* (1949), *The Asphalt Jungle*, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), and *The African Queen* (1952), is one of the strongest from any filmmaker of any time, even if not every film was appreciated in the moment. *Key Largo* was the price Warner exacted from Huston for backing *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*: in a classic “one for me, one for them” trade-off, Huston was obligated to take on a less expensive and arduous property for a follow-up.



But *Key Largo* provided an ideal blueprint that let Huston find new stages to work through the preoccupations had winnowed on *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, and kicked off a triptych of films concerned with claustrophobic criminal enterprise and group dynamics. Huston immediately followed it with *We Were Strangers*, a highly underrated study in revolutionary terrorism only really hindered by the miscasting of Jennifer Jones, and *The Asphalt Jungle*, a film that was to inflect 1950s crime cinema as much or more than *The Maltese Falcon* had set the scene for film noir in the '40s. Huston, never the most easy-going of personalities, was struggling through divorce and the lingering effects of wartime experience at the time, and was also facing a rapidly curdling peacetime zeitgeist. By 1948, the optimistic and reforming zeal instilled by victory in the war was slowly devolving into the tense and paranoid early days of the Cold War and the Red Scare. Huston and favoured collaborator Humphrey Bogart, despite their reputation as macho, hard-drinking hell-raisers, also represented the leading edge of the Hollywood progressive ethos at the time, and with Bogart's wife and frequent co-star Lauren Bacall, William Wyler, Sterling Hayden, and others helped form a protests and resistance organisation aimed at defending the "Hollywood Ten" called as witnesses before HUAC. That resistance fell apart in the face of the orchestrated political aggression and, some of their defenders felt, the misjudged and showboating attitude of the Ten themselves.



As if rubbing salt into the wounds, Warner was making Huston film, in *Key Largo*, a play by the politically reactionary dramatist Maxwell Anderson, first performed in 1939. Anderson was a peculiar talent, fond of writing dramas blending hardboiled contemporary topics and personalities with a rarefied theatrical approach, sometimes even employing blank verse dialogue: his work was something of a bridge between the American theatre of Eugene O'Neill and that of Tennessee Williams. Anderson's play *Key Largo* was ostensibly a chamber piece melodrama about motley characters, including a band of vicious gangsters, locked up in a hotel on the titular island together during a hurricane. The play was filled with dated geopolitical motifs by the time it was handed to Huston. Anderson was a noted political enemy of Franklin Roosevelt, whereas Huston was a committed New Dealer. As if by compensation, Huston got to work with Bogart and Bacall together for the first time, as well as another fiercely liberal actor, Edward G. Robinson, one of the many actors who had to pass on the Huston-written, Raoul Walsh-directed *High Sierra* (1941) before Bogart landed his star-making role in it. Huston worked on the script with Richard Brooks, another dynamic, hardboiled screenwriter about to become a director of note, and the creative team began to reknit Anderson's play into a thriller with an edge of parable closer to their own bent. That Huston invested much of his own experience and perspective into the rewritten storyline is apparent as he makes the protagonist a veteran of the San Pietro campaign he had documented. *Key Largo* became one of the most famous Hollywood films of its time, not least for capturing Bogart and Bacall in their fourth and final on-screen pairing, a moment of movie star mystique dubiously celebrated in a hit 1982 pop song.



For Bogart, the project might have contained extra dimensions of irony. His first attempt to go Hollywood after a successful stage career floundered in the early sound days, and it wasn't until he played the gangster Duke Mantee in Robert Sherwood's play *The Petrified Forest* that he gained a vehicle that changed him from an actor typecast as Joe College types to a fearsome tough guy on either side of the law, the persona that would make him one of cinema's perennial stars. Mantee had held up a diner in the middle of the desert. *Key Largo* saw Bogart now playing the hero in a similar situation (he would revert to the villain again in a third visit to the theme, 1955's *The Desperate Hours*). He was also cast opposite Robinson, one of several stars who once had to pass on a script before Bogart could get it, and with whom he'd acted in films like *Kid Galahad* (1937) and *Brother Orchid* (1938), always playing heavies to Robinson's protagonists. Anderson's play might well have taken some licence from Sherwood's, which presented the anxiety, all too keen and justified in the mid-'30s zeitgeist, that the world was being taken over by bullies, thugs, and crude avatars of a brutish age. Anderson's play more explored the fears that cripple otherwise good people, preventing them from taking positive action in the face of such evil. Huston's take angrily revised this to encompass a study of the fate of the wartime confidence in the face of old evils and lingering ghosts.



So, Anderson's hero, who had served in the Spanish Civil War, became the former Major Frank McCloud (Bogart), whose life since VE Day has been unsettled, nomadic, and increasingly, cynically alienated. He can be seen as a version of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre's* Fred C. Dobbs who weathered the awfulness of life on the bottom and has gotten his act together, but hasn't quite kicked the slow poison of cynicism. Anderson's protagonist was a deserter; Huston's became a hero who shuns spotlights and finds himself resentful in being presented with yet another great moral quandary and demand for sacrificial heroism. The opening shots swoop down from a godlike remove to sweaty intimacy, setting in motion a movie laced with visual and thematic hints of the spiritual clashing with the all too earthbound. The camera eventually locates McCloud listening in as the police who pull over the bus he's riding over warn the driver about a pair of brothers from a local Seminole tribe, the Osceola boys, who have escaped custody and are now on the loose. Huston pulls off a neat unit of visual economy in this scene, McCloud's attentive face visible in a rear-view mirror whilst cop and driver talk, introducing McCloud via Bogart's unmistakable mug without a word, giving the sense immediately that he's an attentive and canny person who knows when to keep his mouth shut and his ears open.



Already McCloud is being drawn into the peculiar mesh of events about to unfold as he nears Key Largo itself, the largest of the islands off the South Florida coast. The apparent note of threat sounded by the escaped convicts on the scene proves a red herring that also encompasses ironies that permeate the rest of the film: Tom (Rodd Redwing) and John (Jay Silverheels) Osceola are essentially harmless, young men who got drunk and “decided to take Florida back for the Indians,” but the law is wasting manpower and energy chasing them when far greater criminals are lurking in the wings. McCloud has come to the island on a personal mission, to visit the family of one of his former soldiers, George Temple, who died in combat but captured a medal for gallantry in the process. James Temple (Lionel Barrymore), George’s father, owns a large hotel on the Key Largo beachfront, and George’s widow Nora (Bacall) lives with him, helping run the place. Barrymore, because of leg injuries he had suffered in a fall, was by this time mostly acting in a wheelchair, and Huston exploits this to make Temple essentially an avatar for Roosevelt in the drama, the ailing but nobly humane paterfamilias whose house is invaded by the iniquitous.



In this regard *Key Largo* deals overtly with a theme usually left more abstract or suggestive in other noir films, in dealing directly with the problem of battling social evil on the home front upon return for ex-soldiers, and the lingering, disconsolate spirit of the war hanging over their lives. The cost of that war is still inflecting the lives of people who fought it and lost loved-ones in it. McCloud recounts to Nora and Temple the circumstances of George's death, still vague to them as they subsist in a forlorn stasis. This vignette contains flashes of strange and numinous poetry, as McCloud mentions a story George told him about how he knew all the secrets of life and death before birth, but an angel left the dimple under the nose placing his lips there to silence him. McCloud also mentions listening to George throughout a long and terrible night under fire, listening to George rave on the field telephone from a forward post during bombardment. Later Nora tells McCloud George wrote to her about the same event, only with their positions reversed; which man was where is ultimately unimportant, for the hallowed George and the grimly overwhelmed and restless McCloud present a dioptr vision of those who served, and as the story unfolds they become increasingly blurred. McCloud also recounts his own experiences since the cessation of hostilities, following which he couldn't stand his old profession as a newspaperman and has since then burned through jobs, including stints as a day labourer. Eventually McCloud steps into the vacated place of George as son and husband, but he has to pass through a rite of death and rebirth to do so.



McCloud and Nora converse as Nora gets McCloud's help to tie up Temple's cabin cruiser, the two treading out to the dock jutting before the hotel, as McCloud tells Nora about his wanderings and many jobs since demobilisation, "including day labour." *Key Largo* has a score by one of the most employed and likely the most famous of Old Hollywood's stalwart composers, Max Steiner, who was rarely exactly subtle in creating aural textures but also helped invest so many movies that rarefied quality of mythic grandeur that distinguished the era's Hollywood product. Steiner's swooning touch is particularly apparent in a seemingly minor moment, when Nora helps McCloud secure the cruiser for the oncoming storm, McCloud heaving the boat in close to the dock and making it safe with his nautical skill on display. Steiner makes the subtext of the scene, of the bond already forming between the former soldier and war widow, rather more overt with this florid scoring. The Osceolas and their Seminole nation clan row up as McCloud and Nora work, with a marvellous vignette of Nora introducing McCloud to Mama Ochobe (Felipa Gómez), an incredibly old matriarch of the clan whose age nobody knows: "She admits to being a hundred and eight years old, but she has a son who's a hundred and twelve, so we suspect Mama doesn't tell the truth about her age."



McCloud, upon first entering the hotel, encounters a range of uneasy, sweaty men who seem about as much at home as a polar bear in the same locale, and are split between making their distaste for company plain or seeming a little too eager play nice. There's the talkative Curly (Thomas Gomez), the nervously sniggering, funny papers-reading Toots (Harry Lewis), the silent, hulking Ralph (William Haade), and the glumly servile Angel (Dan Seymour). Also hanging around is Gaye Dawn (Claire Trevor), a wilted former nightclub singer who loves drinking and betting on horse races, in that order. McCloud tries to avoid the men, but is happy to partake of a few drinks once Gaye forces Angel to serve. Curly insists on dogging McCloud's footsteps and explaining their presence as the miserable result of a holiday gone bad, which Curley blames on one of their party insisting on bringing Gaye. The local sheriff Ben Wade (Monte Blue) and his deputy Clyde Sawyer (John Rodney) visit the hotel, seeking out the Osceolas, who arrive a little later with members of their nation looking to give themselves up. Not long after, Sawyer's car is seen parked near the hotel, but Sawyer himself is nowhere to be found. Soon enough the truth emerges: the men hiring out the hotel are all members of a criminal gang headed by the former mob boss Johnny Rocco (Edward G. Robinson), who was deported from the United States but now has risked a return on an illicit venture, and McCloud, Temple, and Nora are all taken hostage at gunpoint, and hustled into Rocco's room, where Sawyer is held at bay.



The first glimpse of Rocco is a quintessentially Hustonian shot that nudges abstraction and harsh and oddball realism simultaneously: he's found immersed in a bath, a rotating fan obscuring his features before a careful dolly in to reveal him as a bulbous and bullfrog-mouthed ogre rising up to take control of the land he once played feudal lord over. Huston repeats the impression of queasy intimacy with a Dickensian grotesque later when Rocco launches on an extended rant waxing nostalgic and frustrated about his one-time capacity to easily manipulate the processes of democracy and officials. Rocco delivers this whilst he's being given a shave with a straight razor by Angel, who seems well used to such contortions whilst performing such duties, filmed in a long, epic close-up that also provides a showcase for Robinson's virtuosity. Rocco's emergence from his lair once his gang have detained the others in the hotel sets in motion the central drama, which is defined by the way the three entangled innocents react in their own special ways to the situation. Temple is defiantly disdainful of Rocco once McCloud tells him who he is. Nora is fretful but driven to glaze-eyed and clawing resistance when Rocco makes repeated sexual advances on her, whispering in her ear with insidious purpose. McCloud for his part vehemently declares his lack of interest in the gangster's presence: "Who difference does it make if there's one more or less Johnny Rocco in the world? What do I care if he lives or dies?"



And yet McCloud's inability to dampen down his acerbic phrasing and aura of hard-shelled sufficiency riles Rocco, to the point where he tries to bully the man he mocking calls "Soldier" into taking a gun he gives him and using it to make a break. McCloud refuses the chance; Sawyer instead eagerly snatches up the gun, only to find no bullets in it, but plenty in the one in Rocco's hand. Sawyer's body is dumped in the ocean as the hurricane rages. This drama is invested with a patently symbolic element, made overt when he has McCloud quote Franklin Roosevelt in commenting that the war wasn't fought to go back to the kind of a world there was before it. Temple's resemblance to the recently deceased president makes the connection even more explicit, whilst Rocco is identified not only with a bygone era of tabloid hero gangsters but also a sort of barbarianism associate with assaults on democracy and general civic corruption. Huston makes Rocco echo not just Lucky Luciano, who infamously helped keep the Nazis out of the docklands for the US government during the war only to then be turfed out of the country, but also political fixers like 'Boss' Tom Pendergast. McCloud prompts Rocco with the question of what he wants out of life, seeing as he's still a rich and influential figure even in exile, and then answers for him: "More." Rocco readily and enthusiastically concurs, imbuing the feeling that Rocco represents not just lingering barbarianism but also depicts the old-fashioned racketeer morphing into the modern entrepreneur.



Rocco's deceit also results in the Osceola brothers being gunned down by the Sheriff, when Wade finds Sawyer's dead body and Rocco slyly takes advantage by telling the Sheriff the two fugitives did it. This in turn sparks furious blame flung at Temple from both the Sheriff and the Osceolas' tribe, nodding to a metaphor for the way all sorts of conniving and malfeasance gets laid at the door of the nation despite its best and most elevated intentions. The deaths of the Osceolas also proves a breaking point for McCloud: Huston moves for an electrifying close-up of McCloud after he learns of it, registering his virulent, oh-you-absolute-bastard offence and suddenly re-emerging fighting will to take on evil. Huston wrings Rocco's gang for queasy humour: the gang regarded individually and without Rocco around have a quality reminiscent of a Disney animated film supporting cast in their variably oddball personas and tetchy relations, particularly Toots' habit of reading out gags from comic strips to Curly's irritation: "Explain it to us Toots," Curly sneers after one too many, to Toots' narrow-eyed irritation: "A wise guy, eh?", a moment that writes a very rough sketch for the psychopathic brinkmanship of *Goodfellas* (1990). Only with Rocco marshalling this lot do they become anything more than a bunch of petty hoods, their varying talents, like Toots' way with torture, given focus and purpose: here are shades of the oft-stated conviction many had that most of Hitler's underlings were barely more than petty thugs and gangster poured into uniforms and roles of statecraft thanks to hitching their wagon to a great motivator.



Huston would return often to chamber-piece dramas with fare like *Night of the Iguana* (1964) and *The Dead* (1987), but *Key Largo* is a slightly ungainly film in negotiating all this stagy talk, nor ideal for a thriller. Yet *Key Largo* remains riveting despite its lumpier pretensions, in part because those pretensions have substance, and also because the metaphorical drama is plugged into something raw and human, as Rocco's various sadistic provocations land – goading Temple into trying to stand up from his wheelchair and punch him, baiting McCloud with the gun, and trying it on with Nora until she gouges ruts in his face with her fingernails. Trevor won an Oscar for her part as Gaye, who's been living with the aftereffects of Rocco's cruel charisma all her life, left a nerve-shot alcoholic who nonetheless recovers some of her character when she's made a spectacle of, particularly in front of Nora, who Rocco says reminds him of the young Gaye before he successfully subjugated her. Gaye is indeed the kind of attention-getting supporting turn it's easy to imagine any waning star leaping to land. Trevor strikes an initially overblown note in the way she hollers "Give him a drink!", as if we're in for an extended piece of showy hamola, but quickly settles into a sustained performance filled with brittle pathos. The scene that likely won her the Oscar is extended display of both that pathos and Rocco's sadism, as he urges her into singing the tune she used to warble in her glory days, on the promise of a drink at the end. Gaye complies and after an initially impressive start falters and becomes increasingly frayed in voice and manner, Rocco unhappily shaking his head at the spectacle and finally refusing her the drink for her poor performance, leaving Gaye shivering and broken. This however stirs a show of deliberate defiance from McCloud that's also an act of mercy as he pours a drink for Gaye and gives it to her: he accepts Rocco's rebuking slap to his face with barely a blink.



Key Largo constantly points out its own status as a work conscious of its genre and the tradition it's both revisiting and helping evolve into something new. Huston offers many nods to the mystique of the 1930s gangster film, many of which he helped to write, through the presences of Bogart, Robinson, and Barrymore, who had won a Best Actor Oscar defending Leslie Howard for shooting Clark Gable's hoodlum in *A Free Soul* (1932). *Key Largo* counts on the immediate recognition of Robinson as the ghost of *Little Caesar* (1930) as Huston confronts that familiar if dated mode with the post-war moment, Rocco the spectre of returning iniquity and tolerated evil, slipping almost literally in the back door. Walsh's *White Heat* (1949) from the following year would take that further in climaxing with a miniature atomic holocaust that is also the apotheosis of the revelling gangster-barbarian king. Lewis's performance as Toots nods to the impact of the previous year's *Kiss of Death* as a variant on Richard Widmark's tittering psychopath in that film, using that characterisation as a touchstone to note the evolution of the genre and the entrance into a rather more maniacal and unnerving age. Casting Bogart as a disillusioned and wounded warrior who regains his fighting pith obviously nods back to his role in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), where he was essentially asked to play a symbolic actualisation of the hardboiled, cynical America of the 1930s, still feeling burned by involvement in World War I but eventually recognising the current fight really needed its involvement. Here Huston adapts this emblematic standing, noting that peacetime needs as much commitment and passion as war.



Trevor's role nods less to her parts in noir and gangster films, where she often played femmes fatale, than her other most famous role as the hapless prostitute in *Stagecoach* (1939). The way Huston's casting plays on established personas and the elusive factor of audience recognition is to a certain extent subverted in Bacall's casting, although she certainly serves the obvious purpose of providing Bogart's love interest. But Bacall, so often called upon to play premature worldliness and audacious poise, here is cast as a relatively innocent figure, one who, whilst no naïf, is still recovering from tragic loss and lodged in the small world she keeps with the elder Temple. Nora is nonetheless no naïf, nor passive: far from reacting coolly to provocations from bullies as her character did in *To Have And Have Not* (1944), after Rocco and his men push Temple around Nora is stoked to glaze-eyed fury by the spectacle, launching on Rocco and slapping and scratching him, until grabs her and forces a kiss on her, calling her "little wildcat" in his delighted and aroused reaction, "Smell blood huh? Got your appetite up huh?", in his conviction that such anger contains also the seeds of erotic excitement, that the diastolic relation of the two is a secret truth of life flowing under its staid surfaces, much like the simultaneous loathing of and desire for the dictatorial strength Rocco embodies. Interesting stuff, even if Huston can't chase any of it as far as he might have.



Other aspects of the film however have a strongly anticipatory quality of where popular storytelling was going. *Key Largo* is an ancestor of *First Blood* (1982), where the embittered veteran and the hunted criminal would collapse into the same frame. The duel of wills and finally guns between McCloud and Rocco anticipates the more expansive version in John McClane and Hans Gruber in John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), and the climactic scenes, where McCloud has to outwit and annihilate the criminal band, lays groundwork for that film and a slew of others in the action genre. The approach to Rocco and his gang, as embodiments not of a transitory barbarian phenomenon in American social life as they were usually viewed in the '30s gangster films but of something more insidious and perpetual and bound in with a sedimentary layer of venality and corruption, lays the groundwork for the mob films of Coppola and Scorsese. Whilst the actual purpose of Rocco's invasion of the Keys is revealed to be peddling counterfeit cash, the location and the portrait of criminal traffic looks forward to the great days of the cocaine trade and the many cinematic portrayals of it, including Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (1982) and Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* (2006). In this regard, a running joke in the film – the conviction of the gangsters that one day pretty soon they'll have a new form of Prohibition to make them rich and powerful again – feels alarmingly accurate.



Huston's reputation as a screenwriter turned director evidently who was fascinated by translating literary qualities into the cinematic has to a large extent hindered critical regard for him as a filmmaker proper. The play-like compression of his debut on *The Maltese Falcon* belied the edge of strangeness he was able to invest that space with, his as a character that encloses the humans, frames within frames that become strange portals, particularly the marvellous moment where his camera tracks over and above Bogart's Sam Spade kissing Mary Astor's Brigid O'Shaughnessy through a billowing curtain-framed window to glare down at Elisha Cook Jr's lurking killer in the street, the impish embodiment of the falsity and danger in the relationship as if viewed through a portal into the psyche. Huston, as he told Michael Caine decades later, laboured hard to remove his filmmaking from the audience's consciousness, which is a very different thing to not doing much of it. Through the 1950s and '60s, a time of thematic as well as artistic restlessness for the director that suggests personal connection with McCloud's rootless search for new purpose, Huston experimented constantly with expressive modes in his moviemaking, including the earthy palette of *Moby Dick* (1956) and the saturated colours of *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1966), the interplay of realism and surrealism in *Freud* (1962), and the shabby chic of *The Misfits* (1961), all of which would help set the scene for New Hollywood style in the 1970s. If *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* had seen Huston perfectly fuse elements of film noir and neorealism, *Key Largo* asked for something very different given its tight and stagy focus.



Huston turned to the veteran cinematographer Karl Freund, who had shot films for F.W. Murnau and Tod Browning and made his own legendary horror movie *The Mummy* (1932). Freund's familiar, unique way with visual textures, using chiaroscuro sparingly and with a curiously soft and powdery feel for light and shadow, help Huston imbue overtones of the mystical in the otherwise clammy drama. The furore of the hurricane crashing down on the keys anticipates the war-with-chaotic-nature metaphors of *Moby Dick* and *The Bible*...In *The Beginning* (1966), as the gangsters squirm through the night of its blasting force, scared by something larger than themselves and heedless of their insectoid infestation, even as the storm is also correlated with their brief reign of power. The death of the Osceolas is the film's most vital visual interlude and one that also, given the socio-historical slant Huston has invested throughout, wields a deliberate associative power. The Seminoles have been waiting out the storm, shown earlier by Huston as the people wither and cringe under the onslaught of the weather, itself a powerfully suggestive image of those neglected and left out of the political process. The Sheriff, on the warpath after finding Sawyer's body and reacting to Rocco's wily miscue, marches out to the dock with his torch shining and gun drawn, picking out the grim faces of the tribe until catching sight of the Osceolas, who dash off into the dark only for the sheriff to gun them down.



Huston here manages to conflate many lines of enquiry. The image of the man of authority, picking out the faces of the insulted and injured gazing back sullenly with his torch, evokes both the imagery of the just-repressed fascist yolk, and of a more immediate, local, and ever-ongoing test of will between those imposing order and those seeking a chance. The ease with which the otherwise easy-going and liberal-minded sheriff is turned into murderous weapon by Rocco's quick-witted exploitation of an existing tension is also just as pointed, as the association of Rocco with the dark side of politics is extended to make him a skilful in distraction through scapegoating. Finally the buyer for Rocco's counterfeit dosh, Ziggy (Marc Lawrence), turns up and the trade is made, although Rocco is happy to let Ziggy get scooped up by the cops. When morning finally comes with the storm wilted and the shore a morass of rubbish and corpses, Rocco finds the captain of the yacht (Alberto Morin) who was supposed to take the gangsters back to Cuba has fled in fright not of the storm but of Rocco, so McCloud is obliged, under pain of threatened torture ("You'll start asking yourself questions like – 'What if I come out of this a cripple?'" Rocco assures McCloud), to take command of Temple's cabin cruiser. The voyage means sailing through murky fog, again charged with a certain symbolic import – after the chaos, uncertainty – that is then transmuted into something transcendental at the very end, when Nora opens the hotel windows to let in streaming, revivifying sunlight, and McCloud sails back to her, emerging from the glistening fog.



The climactic scenes of *Key Largo* can be said to in part play as Huston's tribute to two friends, Bogart and Ernest Hemingway: Huston nods to Howard Hawks' loose adaptation of Hemingway's *To Have And Have Not*, which also starred Bogart, whilst also suggesting what his own take on it would have looked like — closer, sweatier, more intricate and intimate in the violence and interplay of dangerous men, and with a similar emphasis on Bogart's character finally being pushed way too far by the thugs with their acts of violence and prejudice. The deadly confrontation unfolds on the confines of the cruiser out on the Caribbean brine. McCloud cunningly picks apart the criminal gang, luring Ralph into falling off the boat by faking a seaweed snare on the propeller, and gunning down Toots, who manages to wing McCloud himself before expiring. McCloud, though wounded, manages to kill Curly, and McCloud does the work of shooting Angel himself when the underling won't venture out under fire. Rocco tries to buy McCloud off whilst trying to trick him again, but finishes up riddled with McCloud's bullets when McCloud outwits his attempted doublecross, allowing McCloud to head back home, alerting Nora and Temple of his survival over the radio. It's one of the great thriller film climaxes, highly influential on the later emergence of the action genre and also more immediately ripped off by many films, most egregiously by Andrew V. McLaglen's *Mitchell* (1975), whilst the climax of Arthur Penn's *Night Moves* (1975) can be characterised as a tragicomic lampoon. As a whole, *Key Largo* holds an odd status, at once a flawed and hesitant compromise for its director but also one of the great studio-era films, Hollywood par excellence but also already fighting to keep itself defined in the face of new ways of making cinema.

The Furies (1950)

this island rod



The Furies sits at a crossroads in director Anthony Mann's career, as well as marking the sunset of the great Walter Huston's. Mann had already signalled his shift from noir films to Westerns as his essential genre speciality, having nimbly blended the two on *Border Incident* (1949), and *The Furies* immediately preceded his defining "adult" Western *Winchester '73* (1950). *The Furies* is also officially a Western, but one that signals disparate streams of evolution in the genre over the next few years as well as in Mann's own oeuvre, but its fertility is also a source of jarring unevenness. The title refers to a colossal cattle ranch owned by T.C. Jeffords (Huston), a property he assembled piece by piece with relentless, empire-building verve. Now aging but still charged with vim and vigour, T.C. has mortgaged his property through the San Francisco-based Anaheim Bank to the tune of \$100,000, partly to give his fiery daughter Vance (Barbara Stanwyck) a dowry, whilst his acerbic but docile son Clay (John Bromfield) is marrying a local heiress, and T.C. is glad to be rid of him. T.C. decides to let Vance manage *The Furies*, admitting that he has no talent for management, particularly with money: he usually pays people he does business with in IOUs he calls "T.C.s" and has even had specially printed up to look like a form of currency.



T.C. fends off trouble securing his bank loans over the issue of both his “trifling” IOU debts – which Clay calculatedly lets slip to Anaheim’s agent Reynolds (Albert Dekker) – and also the large number of squatters on The Furies, all seemingly Mestizo families, and Vance, whilst happy enough to drive off most of the squatters, insists on letting the family of her childhood friend Juan Herrera (Gilbert Roland) stay. When it comes to masculine affection Vance oscillates between Juan and gambling house owner Rip Darrow (Wendell Corey), the son of a rancher whose former property is now the core jewel of The Furies, and T.C. and Darrow maintain a smouldering enmity over the topic. Rip is uneasy about getting involved with Vance despite her strong interest in him, and eventually, cynically accepts T.C.’s offer of half the money he got on loan to leave her alone. Vance is left stung and broken-hearted whilst Rip uses the cash to leverage becoming a banker, acting as local agent for Anaheim. But the most potent conflict in the Jeffords’ life arrives in the form of Flo Burnett (Judith Anderson), a San Francisco widow and mistress of T.C.’s, who soon makes it plain she intends to marry the old coot and leverage Vance out of her role at The Furies, a development that soon leads to dark and perverse places for both father and daughter.



The Furies was adapted by Charles Schnee from Niven Busch's novel, and it retains a peculiarly novelistic density in its storytelling, twisting and turning in telling a family saga in a manner that anticipates *The Godfather* (1972) as much as *Giant* (1956) in the course of assimilating classical Grecian and Shakespearean themes and melding them with familiar genre tropes. Mann himself felt the story had strong kinship with Dostoyevsky, particularly *The Idiot*, and indeed the characters have a similarly, intensely divided nature very much like those of the Russian master. The imagery of the grand Victorian homestead built amidst the expanses of the heartland but rife with secret desires looks forward to Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). Mann's film also seems to have mooted an interest in strong, strident female characters in the genre leading to the likes of *Rancho Notorious* (1951) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954), as well as further starring roles for Stanwyck in *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1955) and *Forty Guns* (1957). More immediately for Mann it marks not just his noir concerns shading into the Western but also, more unexpectedly, an overture for concerns he would pursue more exactly in his later historical epics. In particular, the fatefully close coexistence of love and hate in *El Cid* (1961) and flickers of madness and incest in an imperial family, as well as the battles between dispossessed and angry outsiders raging at the new hegemony, he would pursue in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964).



The Furies anticipates the waning of the Western even as it arrived at the beginning of the genre's era of greatest popularity, in the way it subverts the familiar morality play structure of the genre and instead contemplates the endless perversity of human beings. Mann offers T.C. as emblem of white American manhood, containing multitudes – avuncular and ruthless, physically powerful but emotionally reckless, alternating magnanimity and exploitative zeal in equal measure. *The Furies* is, despite being eagerly rediscovered after decades of relative obscurity, an extremely uneven and frustrating film. That unevenness is however wound in with some of the unusual things it tries to pull off. The Jeffords, in their relations with each-other and those who fall into their orbit, inhabit realms of emotional extremes that verge on the surreal, the film profoundly ambivalent about T.C.'s waning, titanic masculinity and Vance's surging, vengeful femininity as they enact a generational drama that feels like it ought to have been simplified a little or explored in a grand, sprawling epic, which in particular might have encompassed the story's larger canvas in dealing with the squatters and the legacy of the Jefford hegemony in more depth.



The film breaks roughly into thirds, with the first third depicting Vance getting jilted by Rip, and the second seeing T.C. bringing Flo into the mix, and the third with Vance's campaign of revenge on her father. The resulting episodic quality is awkward, and some major characters are sent off to the margins and forgotten, including Flo and 'El Tigre' (Thomas Gomez), the fearsome old Mexican frontier scourge who now serves as T.C.'s enforcer. Corey, a good actor but not usually one who played romantic leads, is interestingly cast as Rip, with his low and cynical drawl and hard gaze charging his scenes with Vance with a quality of two asteroids made of iron drawn into an orbit and periodically colliding in sparks and rubble. T.C. disdains Rip both as a natural enemy as the son of a former rival and as a man without principle. T.C. eventually seems to prove his point when he buys Rip off, but this proves only an incident in a longer game that eventually sees Rip funding Vance's efforts to bankrupt her old man whilst their old attraction, and loathing, bubbles away merrily.



The deep-woven kinkiness in *The Furies* goes a long way to making up for the spasmodic quality of its story, and gives the film its subterranean cohesion as a portrait seething sexual natures underneath the familiar, imperial grandiosity of the Western. Mann makes as clear as he possibly can, given the constraints of the era's censorship, that T.C. and Vance have a relationship that borders on the incestuous – and the metaphorical vignette of T.C. requesting that Vance massage an old wound in his back, indeed indicates pretty plainly that they've gone over the border and annexed the continent beyond. "I've spoiled most of 'em for ya," T.C. tells Vance when she announces she's going husband-hunting. Later, Vance is confronted by her ultimate displacement by Flo, who T.C. now gets to massage the offending vertebra, sparking Vance's Electra complex to singular heights of frenzy. An early scene depicting Vance and Juan climbing a mountain together and sharing pieces of bread – they place them in each-other's mouths – as the rest all sweaty and puffing after their exertions also presents a perfect instance of Old Hollywood's method of communicating sex. Shades of sadomasochism inflect Vance's attraction to Rip underneath the official search for a chauvinist he-man, as she seeks a man strong enough to dominate her where she's well-used to dominating all comers: Vance groans that Rip is the only man who ever dared hit her, and after they break she tells Juan she needs him: "There's no-one else to pull the bit on me when I'm wrong."



The drama unfolds amidst Mann's customarily awesome sense of landscape, inscribed in monochrome sweep – even John Ford wasn't as confident as Mann in capturing landscape in black and white – with surging dusk skies and craggy rock forms looming with primeval weight, captured by cinematographer Victor Milner. The name of the ranch brings both the seething emotions that pervade the place to the fore as well as the realm of mythical concept the storyline raids, and *The Furies* as a physical space encompasses all the little worlds also contained within its people. At the centre, the homestead, surrounded by grand vistas for domain-dreaming, rivalled only by the Herreras' pueblo home, built like a small fortress built atop a rocky hill. Over there, a favoured glade for lovers to meet, there, a muddy pit where T.C. gets stuck early in the film whilst trying to save a stranded calf, watched by an amused Vance, El Tigre, and Reynolds. Juan and some other pueblitos see him stuck, and, Juan has to dissuade his fellows from taking the best chance to assassinate their hated overlord when he has his feet literally stuck in the mud. When Vance first visits the Herreras' pueblo she is cold-shouldered by Juan's silent, boding mother (Blanche Yurka) as she polishes up a rifle, awaiting the inevitable day when the pueblitos will fight back against the gringos with the savage relish of the insulted and injured. Despite the fragmented story Mann builds up to his signature brand of intimate brutality with a remarkable slow-burn of emotional tension. After Rip vacates the scene for the time being, that tension is evinced in the evolving rivalry between Flo and Vance, defined by Vance's unusual feeling of impotence against Flo's breezy, utterly reasonable-seeming but unswerving purpose in steering Vance out of her place at *The Furies* and as first in T.C.'s heart. Finally, Vance lashes out maniacally, stabbing Flo in the face with a pair of scissors, leaving her badly scarred. "If she dies, I'll kill you," T.C. tells Vance before pushing her out of the room, and she descends the stairs and leaves the homestead with slow, impassive tread.



Vance leaves the homestead and takes refuge with the Herreras, whilst her father goes on the warpath, laying siege to the pueblo with El Tigre and his ranch hands, whilst the Herreras, violently insists, including the mother now blasting her foes with her rifle with unpeeled, Madame Defarge-like relish. After T.C. and his men start hurling dynamite at the fortress, Juan finally insists they all surrender with a promise to vacate The Furies, but T.C. finds a pretext to hang Juan nonetheless, mostly to hurt Vance, who then declares her undying hate for T.C. and intention to find a way to “take your world away from you.” These two scenes are some of the best work of Mann’s career, shifting gears from the intimate tension and sudden explosion of interpersonal violence in Vance’s assault on Flo, and the thunder of the siege on the pueblo, in which both sides are happy to abandon all pretence of civility and make war. All played out in Mann’s most starkly architectural compositions, rock forms, human bodies, and twisting thorny branches all contending and battling, the twinned crucifixions of Flo’s scarring and Juan’s hangings expressions of . The brilliant diptych of scenes concludes with the wildly emotional zenith of Vance’s threat to T.C. Casting Huston as T.C. was an interesting choice, because whilst Huston could play villains and hard-asses, he had an onscreen likeableness that was difficult to quell, much as Stanwyck’s innate aura of independence is capitalised on in playing Vance: both characters, and indeed just about everyone in the film except for the self-defeatingly honourable Juan, act awfully and do terrible things throughout the story. And yet Mann also finds them fascinating and all too human in their extremes, and still wants by the end for the audience to see their finer qualities. T.C. provides a show late in the day of his still-guttering physical prowess as he wrestles a wild-living bull on his property to the ground, to prove that he is still king of The Furies. Meanwhile Vance sets about her revenge with assiduous dedication, using first her own money and then financing provided by Rip to buy up all of T.C.’s IOUs, and finally uses them to pay him off after tricking him into thinking he has buyers for all his cattle, which T.C. needs to pay back the bank loan.



The Furies' ultimately feminine, if not quite feminist, focus is also emphasised when Vance, after setting out to seduce the Anaheim Bank's eponymous owner to win an extension for T.C.'s loan just long enough for her conclude her plot, she instead talks to his wife (Beulah Bondi), who rules over him, and gets her to manipulate him into the extension: "I like a clever woman," Mrs Anaheim comments. This flash of solidarity and mutual understanding contrasts a pathetic vignette of T.C. asking Flo for money he gave her as a dowry to stave off foreclosure and the scarred and heavily drinking Flor refusing, explaining that he would eventually get rid of her and leave her penniless and so needs all she has: "Money is the only thing that makes loneliness bearable." The trouble with Mann's readiness to indulge his characters is ultimately that *The Furies* seems to building to, and cries out for, a finale as equally maniacal as *Duel In The Sun* (1946) and indeed the pueblo siege sequence. But the film instead shies away from pushing the generational conflict too far. Vance is finally moved by T.C.'s ultimate, almost incidental acceptance of being outmanoeuvred by his daughter, just before he's gunned down in the street by Mother Herrera, a concluding twist that's certainly fitting but also a bit of an afterthought. *The Furies* wants its critical, subversive cake, and to eat it too, in exalting of the old bristling frontier-taming he-man and his haughty progeny. But that clash of impulses is truly fascinating, an admission of the deep crack running through American soul. The film's most overt flaw is that Franz Waxman's score is a little too florid and intrusive.



The Asphalt Jungle (1950)

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Director: John Huston

Screenwriters: John Huston, Ben Maddow, W.R. Burnett (uncredited)

If *Key Largo* (1948) saw John Huston at once honouring and laying to rest the classic Warner Bros. gangster movie whilst wrestling with the new social and political realities of the post-World War II moment, *The Asphalt Jungle* was Huston looking forward, incidentally creating new styles and subgenres, whilst still also analysing the present, however dismal the survey. *The Asphalt Jungle* was, with a level of irony fitting for the director's wont, a portrait of losers and lowlifes that would prove a high point for Huston's cinema he would never really recover again, even as his directing career stretched on for another thirty-seven years and saw a serious resurgence in his reputation, beginning with *Fat City* (1972), a film that notably fused Huston's old fascination with losers and illusory pursuits with the new filmmaking lexicon of the era he had helped set the scene for. By contrast, Huston's problems making *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), notwithstanding his fast bounce back with his biggest hit, *The African Queen* (1951), set in motion years when his prestige would be tested and many of his movies written off as feckless working holidays or misjudged experiments. But much of that work is actually rich or at the very least interesting, and from a

slightly more considered perspective, Huston's aesthetic and personal restlessness in that phase perhaps reveals a kinship with his characters and their constant struggle to remake themselves.



The Asphalt Jungle extends many concerns found in *Key Largo*, but also purposefully breaks with other aspects, swapping the earlier film's cordoned reality and sense of resurgent heroic purpose for a return to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre's* (1948) evocation of reality in locale and disillusioned sympathy for social bottom-dwellers, bound for a bumner end. Huston avoided well-known stars (albeit creating or boosting several rising ones), and adopted the viewpoint of the criminals rather than representatives of conventional society and its tasked guardians. Huston's opening shot, doubling partly as credits sequence, pans across a great American city (the setting is left deliberately vague; location shooting was done around Cincinnati) as a panorama of industrial gloom and grit. The shot finally settles on a patrolling cop car cruising above a slanting, alien-looking embankment, with the battlements of skyscrapers draped in smog far beyond.



Immediately, Huston encapsulates the film's title with its promise of gritty poetry in a visual diagram, establishing a world that's hard, forbidding, and defined by authority: the cop car is not envisioned as a gallant, reassuring sight, but as something much like the peering, patrolling glare of a searchlight in a World War II POW film, a cyclopean glare to be eluded and outfoxed. The film's most salient antihero amidst the rogues gallery it portrays, 'Dix' Hanley (Hayden), is trying to avoid being picked up with a gun on him after committing one of a string of petty hold-ups. He gets his friend, the spinally misshapen diner proprietor Gus Manissi (James Whitmore), to stash the gun in his cash register just before cops enter the diner and arrest Dix. Meanwhile Erwin 'Doc' Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe), renowned in the criminal demimonde for his creative daring in organising heists, is released from prison after a seven-year stretch, and immediately visits bookie Cobby (Marc Lawrence), whose shady offices are something of a town square and hiring hall for lowlifes. Doc needs men to pull off an intended heist, the plans for which he's been nursing whilst inside – the robbery of a jewellery store he expects to net over half a million dollars in loot from.



In the meantime Doc needs \$50,000 to set up the job, as he wants to pay the criminals flat fees for their services, rather than hang around waiting to give them a cut of the robbery proceeds, a wait that always gives the cops time to close in. Cobby connects Doc with lawyer Alonzo P. Emmerich (Louis Calhern), who has become rich and famous defending high-profile hoodlums. Whilst maintaining a respectable front, Emmerich doesn't seem averse to dabbling in the world he's come to know: after his wife worries about him hanging around dangerous people, Emmerich muses, "After all, crime is only a...left-handed form of human endeavour." Cobby approaches Emmerich to back Doc in his enterprise, and Emmerich agrees, only for the lawyer to admit to Bob Brannom (Brad Dexter), a private detective who does various jobs for him, he's actually almost bankrupt. Emmerich commissions Brannom to collect the many debts owed him so he can front the money, telling Brannom he plans to rip off Doc by proposing to act as fence for the loot himself and then flee with the goods. When the private eye returns virtually empty-handed, Brannom suggests he talk Cobby into advancing the \$50,000 on his behalf, as Cobby totally believes Emmerich is good for the cash. Cobby complies, and helps Doc hire his team, bringing in safecracker Louis Ciavelli (Anthony Caruso), and Gus is hired in turn as getaway driver on Louis's insistence. Doc is impressed by Dix's force and odd pride when he angrily confronts Cobby over a debt, so he hires him to work as the necessary muscle in the operation. The actual robbery goes as planned, except for when Dix has to knock out an intruding cop, but that proves, of course, when things start to get complicated.



The protagonists of *The Asphalt Jungle* recall those of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* in their enterprising desperation – both Dix and Emmerich can be said to be further variations upon that film’s antihero Fred C. Dobbs, and Doc echoes the figure of Walter Huston’s Howard as the man of experience and sureness who nonetheless needs to collaborate with younger and stronger men to hit pay-dirt as well as sharing their dream-riddled desire to improve their lot. But they also recall the protagonists of *We Were Strangers*, the film Huston made between the two crime dramas – political terrorists united on a quest to attack the forces they feel oppress them where they live by drilling through the underbelly of their world. The thieves of *The Asphalt Jungle* have no such elevated purpose in mind, but they do have the same unrelenting fixity of purpose, sense of assailed fellowship, and a personal of the world being in conspiracy against them. This sense is also recapitulated from the police side, envisioning their role as something akin to an occupying army, and there are double agents – corrupt cops – in their midst. Lt Ditrich (Barry Kelley) is one who alternates between strongarming and copping kickbacks from the underworld types he mixes with depending on what he needs in the moment. He’s counterbalanced by Commissioner Hardy (John McIntire), the gruff, tough boss cop who brings down the hammer hard on wrongdoers, and goads Ditrich into putting on a display of getting tough on vice. “Experience has taught me never to trust a policeman,” Doc comments after Cobby assures him Ditrich is malleable, “Just when you think one’s all right, he turns legit.”



Dix and Doc are carefully drawn as a pair of apparent opposites who nonetheless share crucial traits, drawn together in the course of their enterprise into mutual trust and reliance that offers some compensation and security in this evil corner of life, but ultimately can't hold that evil off. Dix is called upon to operate as the muscle, the barbarian in this particular jungle employed to bash on through problems, where Doc is the brains, the planner, an expert in deconstructing seemingly impregnable facades who's only flummoxed when people refuse to act as rationally as he does. Doc is an immigrant, well-used to the society he's been grafted onto but not quite properly fused. Dix is a country boy from Kentucky, haunted by reveries on the family farm his family used to own but lost and the horses they once bred. Both men are tormented to differing degrees by what they've lost, the identity they've been forced to abandon, as much as they're motivated by simple desire to get ahead. Doc reacts with the glimmer of a man saved when he encounters a cabbie who speaks German (Henry Rowland), whilst Dix is sorely gnawed at by his lost Eden and emblems of promise that grew on its seemingly evergreen pastures. Both have weaknesses that destroy them at different speeds: Dix is a gambling addict, whilst Doc is readily mesmerised by anything young and curvy.



Like *Key Largo*, *The Asphalt Jungle* is a Huston film that connects eras in Hollywood crime cinema, but also a film that feels charged with a sense of newness detectable even today. The chief connection to the old school comes through being based on a novel by W.R. Burnett, who had also written the source novels for *Little Caesar* and *High Sierra*. Burnett, who was also a well-employed screenwriter, had staked his own territory in crime fiction by emphasising his criminal characters as people with qualities of pathos and their own forms of aspiration, an element of his writing in perfect concert with Huston's fascination with people with errant and transgressive urges. Where *Little Caesar* helped cement the gangster movie as a familiar mode, *The Asphalt Jungle* presented a blueprint for another shift in the genre. Whilst it was hardly the first film to depict a heist committed by a band of criminals, *The Asphalt Jungle* has nonetheless proven endlessly influential in taking that notion as the guiding structural concept, with the emphasis on the method of the robbery and anatomising the criminal subculture engaging in this project as something rich and peculiar in and of itself rather than as a mere emblem of social ills. Where the 1940s noir film was riven by elements of expressionism and psychological anxiety, preoccupied by character and the psyche responding to the distorting field of existential mayhem, *The Asphalt Jungle* zoomed out a little to knit together noir with aspects of neorealism and procedural and sociological interests, helping birth the 1950s crime film style with an interest in hard, realistic procedure, the nuts and bolts of criminal enterprise and its social context.



The heist movie as a subgenre also, basically begins here, as other filmmakers would augment the same basic proposition over the next seventy years of cinema. Shifts in both screen censorship and audience taste in the 1960s would mean that criminals could then at least theoretically, occasionally get away with their loot where there were still hard rules against that sort of thing when Huston made his film, but most subsequent variations follow the same basic moral scheme as well: there's either a theme of fatalistic struggle or some reason given to vote the thieves some sort of sympathy or moral pass. In this regard *The Asphalt Jungle's* descendants also include TV shows like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. As well as contending with MGM boss Louis B. Mayer's antipathy for the material, Huston had to really push against censorship constraints to get the film made in even suggesting things that are now commonplace genre elements. At a time when there were firm rules in the Production Code about depicting dishonest police and suicide as a plot solution, Huston managed to deal with both. *The Asphalt Jungle* also extends Huston's wry and disillusioned commentary on post-war America, with its collective of tunnel-visioned dreamers who ultimately learn their fantasies of independence are only that, and who only, briefly gain something like strength effectiveness when drawn together for an enterprise, however seamy.



For his part Emmerich, whilst granted a strong dose of sympathy, is the representative capitalist, planning to use his reserves of finance to ensnare the actual labourers to work for his enrichment and then rip them off, although he's also invested with aspects of a tragic antihero: rather than standing aloof from the human drama he plans to exploit, Emmerich makes the fateful choice of becoming an active player in it, as both villain and a victim. Greed was a subject of perpetual interest for Huston, particularly the way the hunt for wealth, like most any other quest but with a particularly urgent piquancy, serves mostly as a vehicle of character, not just as an aim but a defining method, shape, leitmotif for life; that indeed perhaps the whole of human society is built around corralling and facilitating such urges. Whilst it drops the overt political references of *Key Largo* and *We Were Strangers*, *The Asphalt Jungle* delves into this notion in a manner that's possibly more illuminating. Just about every character is motivated by a private idyll, a desire, an objective that cannot be met by ordinary labour but also commits them to courses of action that dooms them. Dix wants to buy back the old farm. Doc wants a comfortable retirement. Emmerich wants not to save his considerable face with his fortune, but to flee it entirely and abscond with his young mistress Angela Phinlay (Marilyn Monroe).



Such motives are, far from being considered as mere counterweights to their down-and-dirty actions, variation on the old “everybody has their reasons” song, actually considered as part of a whole tapestry: personal sentimentality manifests as a larger social nihilism, the what’s-in-it-for-me mentality expressed on a raw and urgent level. None of the characters especially care what damage is left in their wake, so long as they emerge better off, their own needs met. “One way or another, we all work for our vice,” Doc comments at one point, as Huston utilises Doc as something of a self-projection figure as a man with a deep interest in human nature and a full awareness of his own weaknesses, which doesn’t keep him from falling prey to them at all; Huston’s own wry sense of fortune, informed as much by the surreal twists of his life in the 1930s as by politics, partly concealed a total lack of illusion, in the sense that he knew very well that it’s better to be rich and happy than poor and miserable. Emmerich can also be read as a portrait of a Hollywood mogul, playing the upstanding arbiter but with his lovely piece on the side and his sweeping awareness of both the top and bottom of his business. Huston frames Angela as gazed upon by Emmerich from above, curled in a supine state on his couch, swathed in white silk pyjamas, poised at the intersection of adult and child, lust object and status symbol, human connection and deliverance from the merely human.



Monroe owed her subsequent career to the film not just for the way it gave her a chance to hook eyes in a small role, but for the character it gave her play. It was to be the same one she would basically be asked to play over and over again and spend years trying to transcend without true success: the cute, daffy blonde appealing at once to the adult needs and childish mentality of certain men, punctuating her flights of verbal fancies with exclamations of “Yipe!” and pleasing Emmerich by calling him “Uncle Lon,” until suddenly that name gets on his nerves. Meanwhile Emmerich’s true, aging, ailing status is symbolised by his wife May (Dorothy Tree), who’s in poor health and bedbound, a forlorn figure who tries to get her husband to play cards with her. Some bond still persists between them, but one Emmerich wants to cut, trying desperately to resist gravity. Cobby, conned into fronting the cash Emmerich cannot, is actually the most prosperous character in the film, a lowlife who prospers from quietly servicing the needs and fantasies of others but also often becomes the object of their conniving and bullying, living with a constant sheen of uncomfortable perspiration on his face (“Money makes me sweat that’s all – that’s the way I am.”), but he also comes undone when he’s pressured into breaking what semblance of a code exists in his world by Ditrich, and earns a near-strangling from Gus when he’s caught in a round-up.



Dix for his part is briefly if semi-willingly drawn out of his fine-pitched fugue of existential fury when a hapless lady friend, 'Doll' Conovan (Jean Hagen) begs him to let her sleep on his couch for a night, in part because she needs a place to stay after the clip-joint club she worked in was raided and closed, and in part to try and get closer to Dix, as she's strongly attracted to him. Dix lets her stay, but not only refuses to take advantage of her but warns her with a hint of humour, "Don't you go getting any ideas, Doll." Dix, caricatured as a loose-screw monster by both criminal allies and law enforcement enemies, is actually the character with the most romantic and old-fashioned ideals, recalling with a blend of nostalgia and simmering anger how everything went to shit for his family when his father died not long after selling a promising young colt Dix was rearing, and Dix still idealises the colt as the emblem of all the potential and position he once had and lost. Later Dix is wounded when Bannom, realising Doc and Dix aren't falling for Emmerich's attempt to talk them into parting with the loot, holds them at gunpoint. Dix kills Bannom, but takes a bullet in the side himself, so he flees the town with Doll, determined to make it to his old farm. Louis has a wife, Maria (Teresa Celli), and a baby, crowded into a small flat; his settled family life offers a contrast to the other characters in that for him criminal enterprise isn't a vehicle for fanciful dreams but equivalent to any other job he might go off on during the day, his methodical approach to safecracking an artisanal skill he purveys, and his chief objective is up his provider game.



The Asphalt Jungle wields a murderers' row of some of the era's best screen actors. Some of them, like Hayden, Hagen, Monroe, and Whitmore, were emerging as stars and familiar faces in '50s cinema. Where in *Singin' In The Rain* (1952) Hagen's most famous characterisation was pitched as a harsh mockery of the strain of glamor-touched but barely-talented starlets the cinema had seen over the years, shrieking suburban voice entirely out of whack with the illusory sophistication of the maturing art form, here she plays the demimonde echo of Monroe's already-gilded and selected beauty, first appearing with eyeliner smeared like war-paint. Others, like Jaffe, Lawrence, and Dexter, employ their genre film and character actor abilities at the finest pitch. Dexter's cobra-eyed glare was never better exploited in a movie; nor was Lawrence's gift for playing terminally shifty lowlifes. Jaffe, employing a lightly German whistle like a scalpel, is the real star of the movie, asserting his air of honed intelligence and calm in the midst of the most chaotic events and almost steering a course through it all. Arguably though, it's the seasoned Calhern, who once specialised in playing smooth lotharios and pompous bigwigs, who steals the film with the blend of fraying, anxious sympathy and self-serving duplicity he taps in Emmerich. Calhern's line delivery and cagey physicality constantly hints at the highwire act of flimflam he's used to living as he airily talks his way out of his mistakes, or rather tries to, unaware that the level of conviction he was once able to pack into his dazzling bullshit has deserted him.



Huston swapped out the glossy yet faintly mysterious texture of Karl Freund's photography for *Key Largo* for Harold Rosson's, aiming for a zone somewhere between the shadow-drenched style of classic noir and something harder-edged and starker, anticipating the turn towards docudrama and televisual realism just about to take over much of 1950s cinema. Rosson, another of the greats of classic Hollywood cinematography, had worked over twenty years earlier on *The Docks of New York* (1928), Josef Von Sternberg's ambitious attempt to blend the effects of high German Expressionist cinema with American realism, and Huston employed him to do something of a subtler blending of stylistic approaches. In this regard Huston was moving in concert with directors like Anthony Mann and Dassin in applying artfully contrived filming to location shooting and filming interiors with careful use of source lighting. Huston pushes to a limit his love of depth of field and tension between figures in his compositions, usually manifesting in disparities between vividly looming and small and crowded figures, in a manner that visually realises the push and pull between status and insignificance that constantly dogs the characters and their endeavours. The characters might like to imagine themselves equivalent to Johnny Rocco or Frank McCloud, but mostly they're crowded into dingy, dirty, poorly lit spaces. A shot of Dix awakening with Doll on the telephone in his small and seamy flat is interestingly photographed with depth of field but with neither person in focus, as if to capture the ambivalence of their connection. The nocturnal landscape the band of thieves invade for the heist is a place of space and shadow, deserted and silent yet populated by enigmatic demons in the form of alarms and infrared beams.



The actual robbery comes mid-film and unfolds with care for the mechanics of the operation, as the thieves descend into a sewer, bash through a brick wall, carefully work their way around a watchful electric eye, and finally blow open the jewellery store's safe. Here Huston purveys a stylistic approach driven by a sense of detail and calm regard for process, one that would be taken up by other filmmakers and augmented in many different ways. Jules Dassin would apply an even more patient and methodical touch for his variations on the theme in *Rififi* (1955) and *Topkapi* (1964). Stanley Kubrick would make his name with an extended riff on the film as a whole, with *The Killing* (1956). Michael Mann would inflate the fascination with technical aspects of crime into a personal aesthetic (*Thief*, 1981, *Heat*, 1995, *Blackhat*, 2015). Quentin Tarantino would rifle it amongst other films for *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), although ironically he had to avoid an actual robbery scene. Huston's other great running theme, of pure chance and the ruthless way it interacts with human scheming, also comes to the surface here. When Dix knocks out the cop who catches the gang in the act, his gun falls to the floor and discharges, lodging a bullet in Louie's gut. Dix gets shot not quite so accidentally but with bad luck also playing a part. The film's long, patient first half builds to a startling moment of camera movement matched to physical action that both caps the eventual rupture in the story/plan and the beginning of the next: Doc takes the chance of tossing the bag of loot at Bannom when he has him and Dix at gunpoint, giving Dix a crucial split-second chance to draw his own gun, and shoot Bannom dead: Rosson jerks the camera to one side in a move as deft as Dix's, using Hayden's body to momentarily block view of Dexter as he falls back to reveal a bloody bullet wound.



This might well be the most perfect example in all his movies of Huston's desire for simultaneously potent and seamless cinema, achieved with simple yet bravura technique, and despite its brevity, I can't help but feel it laid seeds for the obsession with modern, tracking-shot-dominated "long-take" cinema in erasing the sense of filmmaking grammar and delivering an immersive effect. The sight of Bannom dead sends Emmerich into a fit of cringing and sobbing, making clear that for all his affectations he's never seen a man killed nor been in the presence of a dead one. "Are you a man or what - tryin' gyp and double-cross with no guts for it?" Dix demands in queasy rage, "What's inside of you, what's keeping you alive?" Emmerich stands up and suggests Dix kill him too, but Doc asserts his razor-sharp intelligence once more and, after extracting a confession from Emmerich, then commissioning the lawyer to act go-between with the jewellers' insurance company to sell the jewels back for a percentage of their value. Emmerich is also left to dispose of Bannom's body, which dumps off a bridge into the river. He gets Angela to provide him an alibi, but she proves a weak bulwark, as Hardy comes to visit. Emmerich maintains his clipped defiance until nearly the end, telling Hardy of his accusations, "You might be able to make one of them stand up if you get an imbecile jury and the right judge." But some element of personal fatalism, some exhaustion of mind and spirit, kicks in as he realises Angela can't stand up to Hardy's hard gaze, and gives her permission to not lie. Whereupon Emmerich shoots himself before he can be taken in.



Emmerich's death finally reveals him as another of Huston's characters doomed by his dreams, and indeed worst of all, as he has something to lose whilst aspiring to something else, something at once plaintive and sordid, to slip out of the truths that actually define him and take refuge in a private never-never. The price he pays for indulging his taste of immaturity in sex is his great amour reacting to the law as a big stern daddy. Emmerich's attempt to write a farewell note to his wife, which he abandons and tears up before plucking the gun from his desk drawer, was a touch obliged in trying to get around the Production Code – supposedly, this revealed his suicide not as a rational choice but the product of a fraying mind, but really serves to give the scene an interesting ambiguity – does Emmerich stop writing the letter because his failures overwhelms him, or because he doesn't think it finally explicable in any fashion?" "He wouldn't have gotten more than two years," Doc comments when he hears of Emmerich's suicide, his cool-headed practicality contemplating the chaotic stew of actual human motives and reactions. Huston's thesis about the infectiousness of such fantasies, lewd and otherwise, is noted in semi-comedic fashion as Angela contends with the more flirtatious cops sent to talk to her.



By contrast Doc is perhaps all too keenly aware that whilst he still dreams of an old age of luxury, he coped well with life in prison, having landed himself a job in the prison library. His own final downfall is one he regards with a similarly scientific bewilderment, as the motif repeats moving from tragedy to farce. Doc's furtive fascination with sex and young women has already been signalled when he takes an excessive interest in a patrol cop's accounts of shenanigans in the railroad yards, when he and Dix are supposed to be quietly sneaking to the safe harbour of Dix's bedsit: Doc's interest allows the cop to catch the policeman's eye, forcing Dix to knock him out. After hiring the fellow German expat cabbie to drive him out of town and pausing for a rest at a roadside diner, Doc becomes fascinated by a teenage girl (Helene Stanley) jiving away to the jukebox, even giving her a fistful of coins to keep dancing when her cheap boyfriends can't pay. It's a moment of self-indulgence for Doc that gives a pair of cops on patrol to spot and identify him. This scene is one of Huston's quintessential islets of intense, perhaps overemphatic dramatic sardonicism, leavened by its wry encapsulation of the human condition, the intellect prostrate before the body, the old-timer, weathered survivor of depressions and wars and prison, mesmerised by the elusive dawn of the post-war youth culture, rock 'n' roll still a few years away but the essence of the moment already in place – freedom and sex – as a siren call.



Meanwhile Hardy is nominally the face of social morality and its mythology of grimly committed praetorians at watch on the ramparts guarding against the dark forces. His attitude is highlighted in the film's penultimate scene, when, after being quizzed about Ditrich's conduct and the problem of corrupt and thuggish cops, he turns on multiple radios for the edification of reporters, regaling them with all the radio traffic reporting all the human misery and tragedy constantly unfolding and which the police are expected to deal with, and asking what would happen if they simply stopped responding: "The predatory beasts take over." Huston lets Hardy make a nominally good point, but also turns to the appeasement of official morality to his purpose as he subtly indicts Hardy's attitude as detached from the actual reality of the people he's casting judgement upon, as Hardy refers to Dix as "the most dangerous of them all... a man without human feeling or human mercy." This tension is one that's become increasingly central to the crime genre in film and TV ever since, irreconcilable and insidious, the tension between our simultaneous reliance upon and instinctual hatred of authority and sympathy for but also final rejection of the outsider, the loser, the rogue element.



Louis' wounding during the robbery demands that Gus get him back to his apartment where he lies dying in his bed, with Gus and Maria waiting until the heat dies down a little until a doctor can be called in. Maria unleashes her anger and fear on the luckless Gus as she calls him a "filthy cripple" in blaming him for always being involved with any trouble Louis gets into, much to Gus's bug-eyed anger, each of them retreating to their pools of sullen frustration and dread as a police siren recalls to Maria's ear "a soul in Hell." Gus, whose intense loyalty to his friends and allies is a staple trait everyone relies on, embodies the social anxiety the other characters in the film contend with, the stamp of the abnormal part of his very body, allowing him no illusions, only an easily stoked but ultimately impotent brand of hysterical anger. Late in the film the cops, in a vignette of malicious if sombre dark comedy, the cops close in on Louis after Cobby rats out the gang knock on the door to his flat, only to find themselves just in time to find Maria keeping a pitiable vigil over his coffin and a solicitous priest presiding.



The film's concluding moments belong to the pathetic coupling of Dix and Doll, Dix still maniacally trying to reach the object of his quest, even as he faints from blood loss whilst waiting at a railway crossing, the churning noise of the passing train and Doll's frantic concern contrasting Dix's lapse into insensibility. Doll takes him to see a small town doctor (John Maxwell), but Dix, awakening, gathers up enough strength to lurch out the door and get back behind the wheel. "He hasn't got enough blood left in him to keep a chicken alive," the doctor mutters, seeing no point in raising the alarm. The theme of the fugitive lovers reaching their predestined end in death and despair recalls Fritz Lang's *You Only Live Once* (1937) and Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* (1949), but less sentimentally than either. Dix is puzzled by Doll's insistence on sticking with him, blind to anything beyond the specific fantasy that keeps him moving, whilst Doll wields the one version of irrational fixation found in the film – that is, actual love – that is, in its way, positive, even as it pulls Doll along with Dix to his end. Finally, as dawn breaks, Dix makes it to the old family farm, only to collapse under an Ansel Adams sky and lying on the rolling grass where the horses he longed for nuzzle his expiring body with curiosity. A bleak final shot that nonetheless contains one saving grace for Dix, seeing him returned to the earth that bore him and the breed he loved.

The Razor's Edge (1946)

this island rod



W. Somerset Maugham's novel *The Razor's Edge* is a work of literature at once classical in style and narrative, much as one would expect from that author who held aloof from most modernist show, but also one that's prototypical, in depicting a young seeker of experience, wisdom, and immaterial fulfilment contending with a venal world, for later generations from the Beats to the Counterculture, New Age, and Green movements. As such, it's one of those literary works best read at a certain age, and can make a real mark when you have much the same open, seeking mindset as its central character. Maugham's writing, as smoothly textured as a bottle of good brandy, laced his fascinating story of a young World War I veteran whose efforts at seeking enlightenment and positive use in the world are contrasted with his variably snobbish relatives and variably life-battered, mammon-worshipping, or basely instinctual generational companions. The novel's huge success when published in 1945, at a moment when the world at large was starting to look forward to the end of World War II and pondering where to go from there, set the seal on Maugham's reputation and was also swiftly adapted into a film despite being an extremely difficult story to adapt. Not least because a great deal of its action takes place off-stage, so to speak, away from the viewpoint character, who happens to be Maugham himself, at once indulging his literary celebrity and using it as

angle to sell his story as something from the blurred ground between fact and fiction, whilst also exploiting it cleverly as a state from which to meditate on the drama.



Twentieth Century Fox honcho Darryl F. Zanuck spun the adaptation into a major production, hiring the esteemed Edmund Goulding, one of Hollywood's A-list directors. Born in Middlesex, England, Goulding was already a successful playwright, actor, and director in the theatre before he braved a move to Tinseltown after one of his plays, *The Quest of Life*, was filmed in 1916. After years working as a top screenwriter and sometime actor, he made his directorial debut with 1925's *Sun-Up*, and with 1927's *Love*, a starring vehicle for John Gilbert and Greta Garbo, established his unique talent for working with high-powered stars. So adept did Goulding become at this he was nicknamed "the lion tamer" about Tinseltown. *The Razor's Edge* also saw Goulding forming a brief but potent partnership with star Tyrone Power, which they would carry over a year later for *Nightmare Alley*. In his early directing career Goulding was hired to finish *Queen Kelly* (1929) for Gloria Swanson after she sacked Erich Von Stroheim, and directed the dramatic sequences in Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* (1930) when it was still a silent production. In the 1930s he made two heavyweight classics, *Grand Hotel* (1932) and *Dark Victory* (1939), both of which, like *The Razor's Edge*, were nominated for Best Picture Oscars but Goulding himself was not nominated for Best Director.



Power plays Maugham's protagonist Larry Darrell, scion of the American Midwest's upper crust, who, after returning from service in the Great War, finds he has an entirely altered perception of life and purpose compared to the surging confidence and worldliness his old friends and relations are developing, as the United States experiences a post-war boom. Maugham himself (played, in an ingenious bit of casting, by Herbert Marshall) meets Larry at a party at a Chicago country club he's been invited to, alongside one of his great friends from Paris, the expatriate art dealer Elliott Templeton (Clifton Webb). Templeton is disdainful of Larry, who refuses to play along with Templeton's gleefully snobbish and Francophile ideas of how to be a civilised man. Larry's engagement to Templeton's niece, the beautiful socialite Isabel Bradley (Gene Tierney), ultimately founders when he proves equally unwilling to adapt to her ideal of a go-get-'em American. Isabel instead marries the eligibly stolid Gray Maturin (John Payne). Maugham also meets Larry's childhood friend Sophie Nelson (Baxter) and her boyfriend, Bob MacDonald (Frank Latimore), who later get married, but Bob and their young child are killed in a car crash, leaving Sophie a bereft and ruined survivor.



Larry moves to Paris to live on his small inheritance and get his head sorted, but his bohemian lifestyle there causes final breaks with Isabel and Templeton, and he instead begins an odyssey that leads him first to labouring jobs, including in a French coal mine, and then on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas. There he obtains the first glimmerings of enlightenment during a retreat into the mountains, and also becomes adept at hypnotic therapies. When he returns to Paris, Larry eagerly tells Maugham of his experiences, and applies his new knowledge to helping Gray, who's been stricken with tortuous headaches since being left penniless in the 1927 Stock Market crash, and now lives with Isabel and their children in Templeton's Paris apartment. Isabel still feels a possessive prerogative towards Larry. When Larry encounters Sophie, now an alcoholic and working as a prostitute in an extended self-destruction trip, he helps her stop drinking with his therapy and resolves to marry her, a choice Isabel finds so objectionable she carefully crafts a situation that drives Sophie back to drinking, and later turns up dead, murdered in her voyage through the Marseilles gutter.



Larry's account of travelling to the outer precincts of human ken is a place beyond Maugham's wryly cultured status as an epitome of the worldly: "I am of the earth, earthy; I can only admire the radiance of such a rare creature." Unlike the film's 1984 remake by John Byrum, Goulding's version doesn't try to depict Larry's wartime experience. Larry instead tells Isabel about how a comrade sacrificed himself to save his life, an act that constantly haunts and motivates him. Goulding however does illustrate some of his seeker's journey, including brief, atmospheric depictions of Larry's spells in the coal mine and a Tibetan ashram. The vignette at the mine sees Larry as one of many grime-covered men trudging through the rain by carts crammed with soaked ore, and taking refuge in a steamy-windowed bistro where Larry converses with the guilt-ridden former priest turned worldly wise miner Kosti (former Pabst and Lang actor Fritz Kortner), who puts him on the path to Tibet. There he converses with a (nominally) Hindu holy man (Cecil Humphries), before retreating to a shack high in the mountains, eventually reporting to the old mystic his brief, transcendental feeling that "you and God were one," and departs soon after with a sense of purpose.



The film is tellingly uneasy in contending with Larry's spiritual experience, with the Holy Man's doctrines and descriptions pitched to the fuzzy zone between Buddhist philosophy and standard-issue Christian thought so as not to upset the average parochial 1946 audience. The impulse explored in the narrative recalls the same zone as Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* (1937), but where that film offered its Himalayan never-never as a dream of escape, Larry returns to the world, hoping to seed it with the fruits of his learning. A flash of transcendental yearning is captured well enough in the image of Larry, a small and silhouetted figure, pausing for a moment on his path to wonder at the sun breaking through cloud above the soaring mountains. The most exasperating aspect of *The Razor's Edge* lies in Goulding's direction, but also some of its strongest elements, too. Goulding was always deeply engaged in all aspects of filmmaking, including writing and arranging the careful mise-en-scene of his sets and images, and, then as now judging by that Best Director Oscar neglect, what Goulding did was easy to underrate, but he was relatively indifferent to visual expression. Goulding's specific purview lay in his dexterity at orchestrating the kind of actor-centric, dialogue-heavy, theatrically-influenced style of movie that quickly became the mainstay of Hollywood's idea of prestige cinema in the talkie era, and giving it the dynamic sheen of a well-stitched tapestry. Particularly with *Dark Victory*, he got in close enough with his camera to make consciousness of its presence fade away.



The Razor's Edge is on the other hand genuinely hurt by his lack of a sense of expanse or expression, even if that also does make it feel reasonably consistent with Maugham's style, constantly grazing worlds of human drama and longing from the semi-safe recline of a chaise lounge in a friend's apartment. It's a long film at nearly two-and-a-half hours, with about ninety-five percent of it unfolding as purely conversational scenes in good-looking rooms. Not that there's no fun in that, particularly thanks to the keen eye displayed for design contrast via Arthur C. Miller's lush cinematography. Power and Tierney come swathed in chic monochrome clothing, a pair of angular, Art Deco cinema gods adrift within the riotous Rococo splendours of Templeton's apartment. Whilst the film tries to depict the urgent search for spiritual meaning, the closest it comes is to be found in the sublime pleasure of looking at beautiful movie stars. That said, as well as the vignettes mentioned above, there's a good passage of witty technique early in the movie, as Templeton tells Maugham about his intention for bringing Larry around to the delights of decadent civilisation. His voice continues to be heard over a montage of Larry's voyage to Paris and engagement with life amidst the proles, Templeton's promises of fine society and aristocratic lovers contrasted with Larry mixing with sailors and flaneurs and demimondaines. Later, Goulding provides the first movement of a motif, as he follows Larry and Isabel on a romantic night out in Paris, which Isabel intends as the prelude for a night of passion in the hope he'll get her pregnant and be forced to marry her: Goulding's camera weaves sinuous figures through the stages of their trawling through busy and riotous locales.



This is then echoed ironically which Larry ventures into a Parisian opium den to retrieve a doped-up Sophie and gets into a fight with several of her would-be paramours: Goulding's camera performs similar snaking moves through this smoky, grimy Hades in following the hysterical Sophie, capturing glimpses of the brutal fight she's accidentally provoked, before fleeing out into the rainy night and narrative oblivion, the unconscious Larry carried out bodily and dumped a moment later. Goulding combines a theatrical sense of space and staging with his camerawork here, with cumulatively ironic effect in the contrast of the two women who are Larry's loves and burdens in life, and the illusory difference between the swankier climes of Paris and its dankest den of vice. The second scene is in effect the real climax, the logical and tragic conclusion for Larry's efforts to save Sophie from herself, but the movie keep going for nearly another half-hour as Larry and Maugham are sadly reunited to identify Sophie's body once found, and contrive to do a good turn for Templeton when he's fallen out of social favour, a much worse death for him than the physical one he's experiencing. In a move the remake would also commit, Goulding contradicts a very particular point of the novel, in which Maugham takes it upon himself to confront Isabel with knowledge of her guilt in Sophie's downfall, which he keeps from Larry in his desire not to wound Larry's innocence as he resolves to head back to America and try to work good in his own particular way.



Both adaptations instead have Larry make the confrontation instead, as if to satisfy a need for the hero rather than the author, inserting himself as both viewpoint and actor in the drama, to settle the account before moving on with his life, but changing this essentially removes the very point of Maugham's presence in the book as a fillip of metafictional morality. Marshall is nonetheless excellent in a way that suggests he knew the writer well enough to capture his mannerisms, and he and Tierney have a great scene in which the writer disarms and charms her when she's on the warpath with a teasing succession of compliments of her physique, including her "exquisite legs...I can't cease to be surprised because they were thick and lumpy when I first saw you – I can't imagine how you're managed it." "An iron will!" she retorts. Marshall helps Goulding in retaining something of the novel's air of *savoir faire*, mixed ever so gently with definite hues of camp. So does Webb, who is essentially asked to give the same performance he got famous with in *Laura* (1944) but it's a good act, particularly when the withering Templeton is tormented by his pathetic but authentic need for validation from a Countess who, like him, is another American expat posturing as a European aristocrat. Elsa Lanchester has a strong cameo as the Countess's secretary who's fond enough of Larry to let him steal some of her stationery to forge a salving letter of invitation to a swank soiree. Templeton is then gaspingly able to send his regrets over before expiring.



Power's aura of earnestness suits the character, the light of mystical experience in his eyes as he speak with the Holy Man, and even if he can't quite capture the depth of a man who's had a tragic and transfiguring experience that drives him to ever more subliminal explorations of existence, he does nonetheless put over a difficult role without seeming at all naïve or deluded. Tierney has one of those parts she seemed born to play, the lethally callow and entitled lover-killer poised under a guise of magazine chic. The main problem is that her character, essentially the villain of the piece, is given a bit too much attention when it's Baxter who ultimately owns the film, which made her career and captured a Supporting Actress Oscar in playing Sophie. It's the kind of role any young, hungry actress would give a limb for, and in strong contrast to her later, now better-known roles in *All About Eve* (1950) and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) where she brought shows of calculated, high camp bravura to the fore, here she expertly walks a line between naturalism and heightened display in a manner that contrasts the other actors in acting style and register, in her way anticipating the oncoming era of the Method actors in shaking up the Hollywood style. It also feels telling that Goulding and Power immediately moved on to make *Nightmare Alley*, as that film looks so much like *The Razor's Edge's* evil twin, similar preoccupied with a roving hero seeking esoteric knowledge and wielding spiritual powers, albeit with the earlier film's earnestness swapped out for a ruthless portrait of flimflam, whilst Tierney went on to star in *Leave Her To Heaven*, a more outright exploitation of her talent for playing beautiful psychopaths. Much like its hero, *The Razor's Edge* is a flickering flame of higher yearning and fading art before the oncoming age of doubt and angst. But in its own right, *The Razor's Edge*, whilst a lumbering nugget of ambition in theme and scope and a bit too straightforward in handling it all, ultimately does succeed at telling a story with manifold layers and literate depth.



Fitzcarraldo (1982)

film freedonia



Director / Screenwriter: Werner Herzog

Werner Herzog's career has been one of the strangest of great living filmmakers, fitting for a director always aware of the absurd element of existence and rapt by collisions of life and art. The young talent of the New German Cinema movement emergent in the late 1960s who caught the eye of critics like Pauline Kael even with his short films. The alien auteur on the international film scene in the 1970s and '80s. The incessant documentary maker. The internet age ironic pop culture meme, guerrilla film school guru, professional iconoclast, and latter-day character actor, careers sustained while still turning out unique but often ignored movies. All the same man, all displaying different facets of the same great talent and restless creative zest. Herzog, born Werner Stipetić in Munich to a German father and Austro-Croatian mother in 1942, was a child of a bleak age and a country defined by surreal disparities. His mother fled Munich to a remote Bavarian village when Herzog was only two weeks old, after the house next to theirs was hit by an Allied bomb. Even in their new, remote locale Herzog could see the flicker of burning cities lighting the horizon.



Herzog grew up over the next few years in a household without common utilities like running water or a telephone, in the company of other children who ran wild with their fathers off at war. He didn't see his first film until a travelling projectionist showed on in the local schoolhouse. Although his father eventually abandoned the family, Herzog adopted his father's surname because it sounded more impressive, returned to Munich with his mother and siblings, and when father and son were reunited many years later they literally didn't speak the same language. As a teenager Herzog developed passionate interests, but the idea of becoming a filmmaker soon overtook all else. He stole a 35 mm camera from the Munich Film School, which he later characterised not as a theft but an act of necessity. He also developed a reflexive resistance to authority as manifested by bullying schoolteachers, and worked as a steelworker at night to finance his student film projects. Amidst various, sometimes near-fatal travels, he spent stints living in Manchester, where he followed a girlfriend and first started learning English, and in the United States as a student, the latter experience one he would channel into his notoriously caustic portrait of the immigrant experience, *Stroszek* (1977). He founded his own production company in the early 1960s, around the time he forged his first short film, *Herakles* (1962).



After several more shorts, Herzog produced his debut feature, *Signs of Life* (1968). His follow-up, *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), gained attention for its evocation of the physically unusual and grotesque in portraying the disabled denizens of an institution taking it over, whilst *Fata Morgana* (1971), built around footage he took in the Sahara desert recording mirages, established his habit of casually collapsing the distance between poetic and documentary filmmaking. *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) really put Herzog on the map, however, with its unsettling, perverse, inexorable portrait of the ill-fated Spanish Conquistador who vanishes in the Amazon Jungle after succumbing to ever-deeper delusions of grandeur, a process Herzog identified as the logical end of the imperialist project, in the face of a vast, inimical natural landscape. Herzog's stylistic vigour, with his lunging, wide-angle lensing on hypermobile and often handheld camerawork, and his blending of the immersive and happenstance method of documentary shooting with a defined artistic viewpoint, left a permanent mark on artistically ambitious filmmakers henceforth, particularly on the likes of Peter Weir and Terrence Malick.



Every Man For Himself And God Against All, aka *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1974), *Stroszek*, and *Woyzeck* (1979), continued to contemplate oddballs and misfits completely at odds with societies so alien to them they might as well have been parachuted in or otherwise drive them to crazed acts, all approached by the director with a blend of sickly estrangement and woozy compassion. *Heart of Glass* (1976) offered a bizarre portrait of the rural Germany he had grown up in and its medieval past that ultimately shaded into a fractured parable for the human condition. *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) allowed Herzog to work through his obsession with F.W. Murnau's original film and its oneiric imagery, converting its visual and thematic lexicon into his own as he blended high Expressionist style with his own cool blend of the naturalistic and the hallucinatory. When Herzog unearthed a scrap of historical information about the adventures of a Peruvian-Irish rubber baron named Brian Sweeney Fitzcarrald, a typical figure from the age of the "rubber boom" that gripped the Amazon basin from around 1890 to 1920, Herzog was fascinated enough to make his personal take on that story the subject of a film.



This one that would revisit the territory of *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*, specifically the jungle setting and a new investigation of Herzog's preoccupation with the impossible effort of being human. He embarked on *Fitzcarraldo* but found his project metastasising into a test of determination and physical, fiscal, and artistic effort as he shot it on location in the Peruvian Amazon, locked in a hall of mirrors with the very subject of the film, the autobiographical dimensions of which emerged inevitably. Herzog weathered the departure of his first star, Jason Robards, and several supporting players, including Mick Jagger, who was playing a supporting role Herzog decided to excise completely once the singer-turned-actor left to go back on tour with the Rolling Stones. Klaus Kinski, who had worked with Herzog on *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* and *Nosferatu the Vampyre* and later became perceived by many as Herzog's great creative muse, was eventually hired to replace Robards, but his and Herzog's collaborations, always volatile despite the quality of their work together, became so fractious that Herzog later reported that one local tribal leader proposed killing Kinski for him.



Herzog himself didn't escape the anger of the locals: one of his film sets was burned down by angry people of the Aguaruna nation, on whose land the movie was being made and who were working on the shoot, after several of their people were injured. Herzog found himself following in the footsteps of filmmakers like Erich von Stroheim, with *Greed* (1924) and Fritz Lang, with *Metropolis* (1927), and keeping company with contemporaries like Michael Cimino and Francis Coppola, as a filmmaker walking the tightrope of vision above the chasm of career suicide, as he might have well have been burning money to drive the engine of the steamship that features in the movie. The experience as a whole was recorded by the late Les Blank in his famous documentary *Burden of Dreams* (1982). Whether all that agony was worth the result is one of those grey zones of artistic effort, but the film itself is its own affirmation: the very crux of *Fitzcarraldo* as a story is that all human effort is, to some degree or another, a magnificently pointless expression of need, an urge that has no rational explanation, other to tilt against the scale and triviality of the universe. If *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* was the death dream concomitant to that viewpoint, with its voyage to the conqueror's oblivion, *Fitzcarraldo* offers the mythical counterweight, a hymn to raging life and the enigmatic power of human energy.



Central to the film and its hero's quest is an obsession with Grand Opera as the pure stuff of life, analogue to Herzog's passion for cinema on the most obvious level but also persisting in weird and fascinating counterpoint to his actual efforts: how much effort humans expend to indulge the habits of the fantasies they weave with their minds in near-obliviousness to the actual world about them, the conviction that life without that extra level of the fantastic, the creative, the dream-enfolding, is without point, without differentiation from the old Hobbesian concept of the life as short, nasty, and brutish. Herzog's anointed hero is Brian Sweeney Fitzgerald (Kinski), son of an Irish adventurer, his name transliterated to Fitzcarraldo to suit the local lingua and known to the few people close to him as Fitz. As an ultimate personal ambition, Fitz is preoccupied with reproducing the grand conceit achieved to unique and surreal effect by the Brazilian Amazonian city of Manaus, which built a marvellous classical opera house, in his chosen home of Iquitos, a far cruder city further up the mighty river in Peru. So desperate is Fitz to attend a performance being given by Enrico Caruso in Manaus that he and his lover and partisan, the brothel madam Molly (Claudia Cardinale), travel the 1,000 miles for the performance, and manage to talk a doorman into letting them into the already packed opera house. When Caruso points across the crowd as part of his performance, both Fitz and Molly are certain he pointed at him, as if the very spirit of destiny has chosen Fitz out.



On a more immediate and concrete level, Fitz wants to make himself a success in business, not purely for the sake of wealth or social standing, but to achieve his specific obsessions. Having failed to build what he called the Trans-Andean Railway in a bid to open up the Peruvian Amazon, he's now set up an ice-producing concern utilising a well-known chemical process and which other entrepreneurs, like the immensely rich rubber baron Don Aquilino (José Lewgoy), mock him for, seeing no market in Iquitos for ice. Fitz's desire for opera is presented not as a bizarre fixation but as a natural urge, as urgent as any need for food or sex, one that fills his thoughts and lends shape to his many, often absurd enterprises, and the dream-world of the opera is the one that stirs him to such follies. Fitz's frustration climaxes with him regaling the townsfolk of Iquitos as he dangles from the spire of a city church, ringing the bell like a wannabe Quasimodo or some devolved ape of god, screaming, "I want my opera! I want my opera!" People stand far below, gazing up at the priest of art in bewilderment and irritation, whilst some policemen assemble and bash down the locked door of the church to drag him out, a moment Herzog invests with deadpan humour, as if with some part of his mind is back with the Keystone Kops.



The actual opera performance of Verdi's *Ernani* Fitz and Molly behold in rapture is on one level an absurd spectacle, famous names performing in a pasteboard world of delirious romanticism and where the only thing thicker than the artifice is the makeup. The portly Caruso plays the young romantic hero and Sarah Bernhardt, hired because of her fame, must mime her performance to an offstage singer, her wooden leg hidden beneath her costume but already the talk of the town. But it's also a world that has more reality to Fitz than the one he lives in, in a manner that corresponds to Herzog's own desire to seek in his cinema a truthfulness beyond mere realism of the kind he found in conventional *cinema verite* fare, and one dream-world feeds another. In this regard Herzog at once honours and subverts a fairly classical mode of movie based around the gallant visionary who sees far beyond the limits of the immediately practical to envision, well, new limits of the practical, whereas for Fitz, who always dresses in a white suit, the impracticality is the very point. In the course of his scheme he comes close nonetheless to unifying two largely irreconcilable realms, the world-building, world-trampling zeal of the businessman and the soul-nourishing if often just as tunnel-visioned influence of the artist. Fitz's fixation to a certain extent saves him even from the darker aspects of such compulsion, aspects Herzog would later meditate on with the mountain climber protagonists of *Scream of Stone* (1991), tormented by their own egos and pain before the gruelling challenge of a great rock spire in Patagonia, and more notoriously the animal lover eventually consumed by his 'friends' in *Grizzly Man* (2006).



Aquilano is the essential contrast to Fitz, a rotund vulgarian nonetheless entirely at his leisure in the palatial rococo interior of the Manaus Opera which he seems to have helped build and run, boasting of how it's been built on land worth ten times what real estate goes for New York with materials like imported Florentine marble. It's all an expression of the bristling demand for prestige on the behalf of his rich little town, raised suddenly out of a jungle outpost to become a great global hub of commerce and industry, and all of it flowing out the simplest labour and a natural bounty. Aquilano strikes matches on a bronze figurine decorating the opera house, declares the feeling of losing money when playing cards to be beautiful, and feeds a bundle of thousand dollar notes to a fish being reared in a pool on his estate, noting that his fish only seem to flourish in that taste. The fish, or one of its fellows, is itself later feed in turn to the assembled grandees of Iquitos. This last flourish presents a particularly inspired metaphor for the roundelay of capitalist endeavour, one that cuts out any aspect of adventure or vision of the kind Fitz purveys so relentlessly, the money seemingly wasted cycled back through the literal bellies of the rich. Here Herzog contemplates the relationship of artist and patron with a Dickensian sense of its absurdity, but the dynamic of supporter and supported is laced with contradictions: only the artist and the priest can break money out of the illustrated capitalist cycle of money spent to make more money. But priests failed to bring civilisation to the wild nations of the Pachitea: "Two padres finished up as shrunken heads," Aquilano tells Fitz.



Despite the differences between them, Aquilano likes Fitz for his energy and enterprise. Fitz also inspires passionate support from Molly, and a flock of children he's become a father figure to: they camp outside the jail where he's kept for two days after the church incident, one sawing away incessantly on a fiddle, presenting a spectacle so pathetic it moves the jailer to release Fitz. Fitz lives in a hovel with a pet pig for a companion, and it's the pig he promises to set up on a red velvet chair every night in his opera house. Meanwhile Molly's steadfast faith proves most valuable. Her stable of well-trained, well-dressed courtesanas makes them a social fixture in this crude town despite the pretences of the nobs, giving her leverage to wrangle a chance for Fitz to pitch to those nobs for support for his proposed opera house. When Fitz irritates the party by playing them one of his Caruso records, they try to throw him out, resulting in a display of angry pride from him as he gulps down glasses of champagne, dedicating each one to an opera composer, before offering his personal manifesto of defiance. "I will outgut you," Fitz declares: "I will outnumber you. I will outbillion you. I will outrubber you. I will outperform you. Sir, the reality of your world is nothing more than a rotten caricature of great opera." Molly promptly marches her girls out like a troop commander. "Only a dreamer can move mountains," she tells Aquilano when he interview them together in an office of the opera house, and later Fitz steps up to declare that his very object: "I shall move a mountain."



When Fitz decides on Molly's advice to follow up on Aquilano's offer to help him get set up in the rubber trade, seeing it as the only way to make his vision reality, he and Aquilano travel together up the Ucayali, a tributary river branching off the Amazon to the east of Iquitos, where Aquilano shows off both his own, immense holdings and the natural barrier that prevents anyone exploiting the land further on: a violent cataract called the Pongo das Mortes, so rough and fast that no boat can traverse it, let alone one large enough to transport loads of rubber, and no other transport route is feasible. "The Indians call the rapids 'Chirimagua,' Aquilano tells Fitz, "The Angry Spirits." Approaching the cataract gorge, they're urged to be silent by Aquilano's native guide: "We must be quiet," Aquilano tells Fitz with sceptical humour, "Whoever talks will be swallowed up by the evil spirits of the whirlpool...the bare-asses also said "The water has no hair to hold onto." Shown a map of the area by Don Aquilino, Fitz notices how another tributary, the Pachitea, runs parallel to the Ucayali on the western side of Iquitos and bends close to it at a point well above the cataract, with only a slim isthmus separating them. Fitz realises, without entirely explaining to anyone for a long time, that if he can transport a boat across the isthmus, he can then use it to bring rubber from his claim across the Ucayali, to then be shipped down the Pachitea. Despite the many immediate and theoretical obstacles such a plan entails, Fitz sets about chasing the scheme with new passion, taking advantage of government policy that seeks to develop unexploited land, but also warned by the notary (William Rose) who arranges the deal he must establish his control of the region "by deed and by proof" within nine months or lose the rights.



The real Fitzcarrald was not nearly as florid and ambitious as Herzog's poetically intensified equivalent. The boat he transported across land was only 30 tons, and was moved piece by disassembled piece, and he died at the age of 35 when his ship sank underneath him some years into his successful business operation. Fitzcarrald was no romantic figure either, instead typifying the kind of exploitative spirit more commonly associated with the rubber boom, much as Herzog portrays Aquilano and the other barons, wringing forced labour out of the native peoples whilst treating them with contempt. Herzog avoids rhetorical asides in contending with this aspect of the story, allowing it to take care of itself, whilst noting his Fitzcarraldo's efforts as an odd mix of tentative connections and mutual use. The symbolic menace invested in the Pongo das Mortes by Aquilano proves not just to be a folkloric aside in a story where the cataract is a plot element and a practical foe, but a motif of genuine consequence both in terms of his great need to take on the universe and come out the victor, and in terms of the alliances and understandings – even if no one actually, entirely understands them – he forges along the way. Molly loans him enough money to buy a ship, purchasing one off Aquilano that sits decaying and mudbound on the Amazon shore, but with a little hard work from cheap local labour the vessel, renamed the *Molly Aida* after the two special women in Fitz's life, is quickly spruced up and painted white in mimicry of her owner's sartorial splendour. Fitz takes on a captain, a Dutchman known as "Orinoco Paul" (Paul Hittscher) for his long experience sailing on that rival great river, and a crew, including the boozy, licentious cook Huerequeque (Huerequeque Enrique Bohórquez), and a hulking engineer, Cholo (Miguel Ángel Fuentes).



The fully repaired and manned *Molly Aida* sets out up the Pachitea, but all aboard soon know that's when the real trouble will start, as the Pachitea is a wild territory controlled by a nation known as the Jivaros, who killed most of the last expedition of missionaries and mapmakers who ventured up there. On the way to the Pachitea, Fitz stops at the one station he managed to build for his busted railroad because he wants to pull up some of the iron rails for use later. He finds one employee, the Station Master (Grande Othelo), still on duty despite not having been paid or visited for six years, and who's formed a family whilst remaining on the job. The Master is jubilant to see Fitz, who's utterly bewildered by the man's presence, as he thought all the employees had been sent home. This tragicomic vignette this time dovetails the Dickensian with the Kafkaesque, in the image of the tattily officious master, forgotten by the vision that placed him there, lording it over a rusting, rotting outpost of failed industry. The Master becomes panicked when Fitz's men start ripping up the tracks, worried they're going to leave the one, rusting, already practically immobile steam engine stranded without even the pretence of its dignity, so Fitz spares him that mortification. Herzog's camera finds an essential cartouche for his aesthetic in surveying the civilised pretences of the station and its stable of mechanical white elephants, quickly being swallowed up again by the jungle's relentless and careless encroach.



Once they procure the rails, the *Molly Aida* and its crew start on for the Mission of Saramariza, where some missionaries are teaching natives, who, they claim, now irritably reject the title of “Indians:” an older missionary tells Fitz, “They said to me, ‘Indians are people who can’t read and who don’t know how to wash their clothes.’ Nonetheless, another, younger priest notes quietly as he recounts their ill-fate encounters with the Jivaros, “We can’t seem to cure them of the idea that our everyday life is only an illusion, behind which lies the reality of dreams.” Fitz immediately states that, with his love of opera, he feels kinship with that viewpoint. This sense of kinship becomes a weapon he wields as he travels up the Pachitea. Fitz hears that the Jivaros have been wandering in the jungle for a couple of centuries, searching for the fulfilment of a prophecy, later clarified as involving a “sacred boat with a white god” who will help them lift a curse blighting the whole land. The *Molly Aida’s* progress is initially greeted by the din of omnipresent drumming, echoing out of the dense foliage and mists clinging to the surrounding hills, indicating the Jivaros are watching their voyage with a sense of defensive threat. The *Molly Aida’s* crew present a gallery of vivid grotesques who might as well have stumbled out of a classic Hollywood adventure film as made by John Ford or John Huston, particularly the perma-soused Huerequeque, who brings along his two female assistants/concubines to feel up along the way.



Aquilino obliges Fitz to take Cholo along to act, as the tycoon readily admits, as a spy, to make sure he doesn't poach on any other planter's preserve. Cholo is initially hostile and cynical towards Fitz's efforts, is nonetheless entirely won over to his cause when he realises how inspired Fitz's idea is. Cholo, a towering incarnation of the physical strength of the native peoples, has nonetheless adopted the hard and expedient attitude of one converted to the methods and philosophies of his colonialist masters, with that degree of extra faith that such converts often wield – Herzog would extend this fascination for such a divided character in *Where The Green Ants Dream* (1984) – nursing his bundles of dynamite to throw at the hostiles in the jungle and bluntly telling Fitz he wants to take the boat back to his usual employer when the time comes. The rest of the crew snatch up rifles and listen with hair-trigger tension before deserting, leaving only Fitz, the Captain, Huerequeque, and Cholo. Fitz's answer to the frightening enigma is to start blaring out Verdi from his trusty gramophone, *bel canto* streaming off into the forest, bewitching the forest peoples with a power that's neither an offence to their beliefs nor a threat to their lives, but simply a strange and beautiful conjuration of worlds beyond the world. The drumming stops, and the Jivaros begin daring to show themselves on the river in boats. Until, finally, they mass together in canoes and block off retreat down the Pachitea by felling huge trees.



Fitzcarraldo can be described in its way as a companion piece and riposte to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), a film owed more than a little to *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* in the first place. Both films depict a journey upriver and a messianic foreign overlord manipulating local peoples into fulfilling his mission. But where Colonel Kurtz embodied a similar quality to Aguirre, the maniacal will to power wielded in the name of some nominal cause that finally becomes its own, self-consuming logic, embodying a dream of death, Fitz brings music, laced with overtones of connection and invocation for life-bringing that's all the more powerful for having no actual substance, even if Fitz himself doesn't entirely comprehend the resonances of his actions until the end. Fitz, learning about the Jivaros' myths through the translations of Huerequeque, realises how he can place the Jivaros in service of his own ambition, without quite considering that they might do the same thing to him. The apparent leader of the Jivaros agrees to help Fitz in his scheme, which he finally unveils in the most thrilling way possible by having a platform built high in a tree, so he and the remnants of his crew can behold the small corner of the Earth they need to make subject to a manmade miracle.



Herzog's early films had made a deep impact on the world film scene with his often beautiful yet unease-provoking imagery, his fascination and bewilderment before extreme natural landscapes, and sense of ironic contrast between the efforts of the human and the scale and impudence of the world. *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* famously opens with shots of the conquistadors and their native servants slogging through the teeming jungle like streams of soldier ants, making their inroads only with extraordinary effort. The blaring heroism of older films portraying social, political, and industrial conquest of the New World like, say, *How The West Was Won* (1962), was swapped out by Herzog's acerbic conviction that such subjugation was both horrible and largely illusory, and if not illusory, then distinctly Faustian. At the same time, this was balanced by a conviction, half-appalled, half-admiring, that this was still the human mission, a mission communicated with the parable-like coda of *Heart of Glass* that reduced the human species to a race clinging to a rocky island, challenging the ocean in a boat. The boat motif, returned to here in the evident form of the *Molly Aida*, becomes the transfixing central metaphor and visual conceit of the film as Fitz and his helmates begin the arduous ritual of dragging up and over the isthmus between the rivers. Herzog's viewpoint wielded a sense of the intransigence of modernity and western civilisation as crashing into other peoples as well as the natural, whilst harbouring its own neurotic and insidious forces within, like the accursed strain of vampirism that finally escapes into the world in *Nosferatu the Vampyre*.



Fitzcarraldo, with its portrait of the Amazon being disrupted by industry and portrait of the antipathetic attitudes of modern capitalism and ancient social and religious concepts, was fit for a time in the early 1980s when environmentalist concerns were becoming mainstream and worries over the Amazon in particular were heightened, and sparked a small clutch of films with similar concerns, including John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* (1984), Roland Joffe's *The Mission* (1986), and John McTiernan's *Medicine Man* (1991). Herzog's woozily mesmerised fascination for the dark mark humanity leaves often on the Earth would climax in the documentary *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), with its awesome contemplations of the environmental havoc wreaks during the Gulf War with burning oil wells dotting the desert landscape. The side of Herzog's art rooted in the approach of a documentary filmmaker is vital throughout *Fitzcarraldo* but also infused to the very root with its symbolic and aesthetic dimensions: Herzog's capacity to film the real as, well, real – palpably, even pungently immediate, from its famous core image of the ship working its way with agonising effort up a slope on down to the backdrop of Iquitos with its plethora of rusting corrugated iron rooftops and the stains of authentic sweat and grime on Fitz's white suit. Herzog pushed his immersive method of filming he espoused to its absolute limit, virtually forcing himself to live out the mania of his main character. Thomas Mauch's cinematography, utilising the clear, lush, if slightly inexpressive palette of early 1980s film stock which aids the feeling of immediacy, particularly in the pivotal sequences of the ship-dragging, which collapses the boundary between record of an event and the conjuration of it for a fictional narrative.



Fitzcarraldo can in its way be described as a particularly eccentric variation of the Greek myth of Sisyphus, which Albert Camus had also taken as the essential symbol of the existentialist concept of human endeavour, although it can also be argued that Herzog partly dismantles the metaphor in the unseen levels of drama he engages with, the world that his protagonists live in being one where effort isn't necessarily commensurate with desired result. The film also, despite its setting and contemporary concerns, belongs to a very German artistic tradition. The figuration of the pristine, primal river and its guardians facing disruption by an intruding figure looking to steal the horde of gods reiterates and revises Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold* – Herzog had already used that opera's famous opening strains in *Nosferatu the Vampyre* so here makes do with Verdi whilst contrasting the grandiosity of the vocals with the alternations of momentous strenuousness and rudderless pathos Fitz's story involves – whilst the early scenes of Aquilano explaining his empire to Fitz and presenting his own temptation whilst looking down on a ripe world from a high vantage evokes Goethe's Mephistopheles seducing his version of Faust. Herzog would go on in *Where The Green Ants Dream* to pit the atavistic, as embodied by his take on Australian Indigenous people with a similarly boding and taciturn self-sufficiency to the Jivaros, against the technological and the apocalyptic, ending with a similar act of appropriation of a vehicle – in the latter film's case a warplane – to achieve an act of spiritual rebirth. *Scream of Stone* portrayed the rock climbers' efforts as at once a profane, media-age act riven with elements of ego and glory-chasing, and a sublime, almost ritual challenge to primal forces.



Fitz's labours similarly persist on the two levels of cynical get-rich-quick scheme and expression of overriding need of the soul, and his and the Jivaros' aims, which seem to be fatefully and tragically out of alignment, finally prove to be two different versions of the same thing. Herzog's inspiration for the image of the ship being pulled over the isthmus was the works of ancient builders of Neolithic monuments, ziggurats and pyramids, who often dragged colossal stones great distances for their seemingly irrational projects, most often inspired by a form of mystic and religious zeal that converted into a permanent physical expression to posterity. This makes Fitz Herzog's ironic priest-king, and the director as enraptured by the act of human forging colossal, nature-defying works with muscle and a bizarre blend abstract faith and practical commitment as Cecil B. DeMille was on *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and Andréi Tarkovsky in the bell-making chapter of *Andréi Rublev* (1969). In spite of the great stylistic and philosophical gap between the two filmmakers, Herzog and DeMille both behold the splendour of human ingenuity and will whilst also suggesting it's all for nought in the face of immutable forces; like Tarkovsky, Herzog finds the meaning nonetheless in the act of creation itself.



But Fitz's efforts are also destructive, requiring not just that he suborn the Jivaros to his project, but for a great path to be gouged through the heart of the jungle and the crown of the isthmus' heights with relentless labour of axe and explosive, even before the real test of the possible can occur. When the *Molly Aida* starts its ponderous journey up the slope, Fitz tries using some hewn logs as a slipway, after the Captain dismisses the idea of using the rails, but veers about and crushes some of the Jivaros. The locals promptly walk off the job and begin their own act of mourning and reckoning with the forces they feel they're challenging in this bizarre labour, standing and gazing for days on the flowing river, before briefly vanishing and then returning – all of it entirely enigmatic to Fitz and his fellows, although Fitz understands a gesture from the Jivaros, hovering at the edge of the field of light from the crew's dinner table lanterns with their hands reaching into the brightness, as one of mysterious but intuitive assurance, even blessing. Fitz exploits the resources of the world he bashes through, utilising trees he knows to be as hard as steel to create a windlass to aid the ship's progress, but it's Huerequeque who comes up with the ingeniously simple plan of using the steam winch for the anchor, as powered by the main engine, to simply haul the ship up the slope under its own power.



The entire film winnows down to the singular, awesome, hilarious shot of the *Molly Aida* moving at a virtual forty-five degree angle up the mountainside, diagonally bisecting the cinema frame, a sight all the more compelling with the knowledge that Herzog took no shortcuts in achieving it, the ultimate expression of his desire to find a point where the authentic and the poetic collide. The task of bringing the ship down on the far side of the Isthmus is comparatively easy, the craft slithering down to the riverbank mud and, after a sick lurch close to capsizing settling into the water, sparks rejoicing. Fitz and crew get blotto as they celebrate with the Jivaros with their woozily rhythmic music, dancing upon the mud. That the native peoples have a deeply ingrained poetic sensibility is noted with sarcasm by Aquilano early in the film when he comments, "They call the rubber tree *caoutchou*, 'tree that weeps.' These bare-asses love flowery language. Gold, they call 'sweat of the sun.' Bees, 'fathers of honey.'" This sensibility again coincides with Fitz's obsessions, the sense of the physical world and its ethereal counterpoints, whether one conceives of them as purely products of the human mind's subtleties or incarnate on a spiritual plain, are always in flowing dialogue.



The chief, ironic consequence of this is to bring about the ruination of Fitz's efforts. During the night, with Fitz, Pete, Cholo, and Huerequeque all asleep on board, the Jivaro leaders cut the *Molly Aida's* hawser, allowing the ship to float downstream. This deed, far from being malicious, fulfils their particular object in all this, the part they've felt anointed to play in a cosmic drama. This is their gesture to the furious spirits of the Pongo das Morte, a rite they hope will lift the curse on a benighted land, white god and sacred ship riding the waters of chaos. The men aboard the ship only awaken when the *Molly Aida* starts bashing against the stone walls of the canyon around the Pongo das Morte, too late to get the engine going in time to make headway, and they're forced to ride out the churning, surging waters and hope the craft hangs together. Whether by miraculous grace or merely good engineering, the ship does survive the ride with a few cracked and stove-in timbers. The few inserts of model work interpolated in this scene do violate the carefully wrought veneer of the undeniably actual, although these are cut in amidst the genuine footage Herzog and a small crew dared to film on the freely drifting ship, Herzog's gaze applied with a sort of punch-drunk wonder to footage of the ship thumping listlessly against rocky shores with operatic arias surging in disconsolate fashion on the soundtrack.



The quieter irony here is that whilst the Jivaros wreck Fitz's worldly scheme, they help him fulfil his aims on other levels. They set the seal on a legend that binds them together in a manner Wagner would have delighted in, proving the primacy of the dream-world over the actual. The voyage over land and the pacification of the troubled waters two entwined deeds that perform literal acts of beneficence, exhausting the obsession on Fitz and rendering, or at least proving, the Pongo das Mortes just another run of rapids, and providing an absurd contrast to the reign of greed over the land. Fitz, abashed and tired, nonetheless finds his own way of setting the seal on the story and fulfilling his ambition at the same time, accepting Aquilano's offer to buy back the Molly Aida and using the funds to hire a visiting opera troupe to enact their rendition of Verdi's *The Puritans* atop the steamer, with Fitz himself playing the proud impresario, cigar in mouth, a red velvet chair for his pig on hand, and Molly awaiting him with a large crowd at the Iquitos dock. Mere success is the purview of business, but where incredibly laborious acts are undone with incredibly simple deeds and total failures are alchemised into grand victories, there lies the continent of the artist.

Gold (1974)

this island rod



Peter R. Hunt's *Gold* comes at you with all the flashy, bristling paraphernalia of the very 1970s-style, based-on-the-best-selling-novel blockbuster is so shamelessly wants to be. There's Roger Moore, his tanned chin big and dimpled enough to be taken for a jutting butte of the rolling African landscape. Susannah York at her most beautiful and spunky. Corporate intrigue and conspiracy, sabotage, explosions, assassinations, floods, slimy corporate villains, irascible but decent tycoon patriarchs, and stalwart African miners singing in pitch-perfect harmony. Elmer Bernstein's florid, hyping score infuses images as mundane as a plane flying over Manhattan with an aura of legendary significance, backed up by Ousama Rawi's gritty-glistening cinematography. A pretence towards aping the style template of the James Bond films extends to opening and closing credits by Bond designer Maurice Binder scrolling by whilst some Tom Jones clone warbles a bluesy theme tune. But from today's perspective that most refreshing aspect of *Gold* as an aspiring popular entertainment is that it's set in a demonstrably real world, tapping a scene of actual, gruelling work for the setting of a swaggering action-adventure movie, employing a coherent and reasonably intelligent plot, and sporting characters who embody romantic fantasies but are also definitely imperfect.



Gold's also one of those movies where the making was a thorny proposition. Hunt had been an important and lauded editor in British filmmaking even before he became the secret weapon of the Bond series' production team. Starting with *Dr. No* (1962), Hunt's fast cutting style and willingness to include camera motion and blur in the midst of action scenes helped give the Bond films their signature kinetic, almost avant-garde impact, and eventually Hunt lobbied for a directing promotion, which he received for *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1969). The blend of rollicking verve and visual and emotional elegance he invested in that film is perhaps the chief reason it's often bandied now as the best Bond film. Nonetheless Hunt didn't get to direct for another five years as he determined to leave the series behind, and altogether his directing career proved an unfortunate bust, and yet *Gold* does at least prove *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* wasn't a fluke. Hunt was hired by independent movie mogul Michael Klinger, who had scored a success producing *Get Carter* (1971). Klinger had bought the rights to two novels by the northern Rhodesian-born (now Zambia) writer Wilbur Smith, and first tried to hire Steven Spielberg to make the movie, having been impressed with *Duel* (1971). When Klinger then nabbed Moore, the fresh-minted Bond himself just off *Live And Let Die* (1973), as the film's lead, he then seemed determined to drape the film in as much Bond-esque paraphernalia as he could, hiring more personnel involved with the series including Hunt and Binder.



Smith's books were hugely popular (the author died at the end of 2021) for their forceful melodrama and depiction of the African landscape as an ideal cradle of epic undertakings still possible in the stolid modern world, and one of his novels had previously been filmed as Jack Cardiff's pithy *Dark of the Sun* (1968). Smith actually laboured in a mine for a time to research his book, which was entitled *Gold Mine*. But actually shooting the film on location in South Africa proved extremely troublesome, at a time when international opinion was turning decisively towards isolating the country culturally, as the filmmakers had to contend with union bans and York's vehement activism for the length of the shoot. The film was chiefly financed by South African businessmen, and there's a definite overtone of appeasement in the tourist board-approved discursions to things like staged Zulu dance ceremonies and lush shots of bushland and cityscapes, including a drippy sequence of Moore and York flying over the outback to the strains of Bernstein and Don Black's Oscar-nominated ballad "Wherever Love Takes Me." Despite all this ballast, however, *Gold* is for the most part stylish and full-blooded. Moore is Rod Slater, underground work boss of the huge Sonderditch gold mine outside Johannesburg: in the opening scene he and work crew head Johnny N'kulu, known to everyone as 'Big King' (Simon Sabela), lead a rescue of some miners trapped by a roof collapse, including the mine's general manager Frank Lemmer (Norman Coombes), who dies of injuries before he can be brought to the surface. Confusion is rife as to just what Lemmer was doing tunnelling in the place he was working, near a thick natural dyke the miners believe holds back an underground lake.



Slater is approached by the mine director, Manfred Steyner (Bradford Dillman) to take Lemmer's place, over the objections of the actual owner Hurry Hirschfeld (Ray Milland), an aging but forceful entrepreneur who wants a more experienced hand for the job, but Steyner gets his wish through some manoeuvres. Dirty feet are at work, of course: Steyner, who is married to Hirschfeld's daughter Terry (York) but really loathes both them both, is working in league with a syndicate of greedy European investors, headed by the silken-sleazy Farrell (John Gielgud), to sabotage mining operations at Sonderditch. Knowing full well thanks to his surveyors that the dyke holds back a reservoir, Steyner has sold the investors on a plan to sneakily breach the barrier and flood Sonderditch, with the desired end of causing a huge spike in gold prices which will circumvent pricing regulations and make them all billions. Steyner shows Slater a falsified report showing gold behind the dyke, and instructs him to dig straight for it. Slater obeys but proves cautious, preparing explosive charges that can seal off any unleashed torrent. Steyner's plan soon factors in attraction between Slater and Terry, contriving to let them have the clandestine affair they're so plainly itching to indulge. He gives them a chance to head off for a dirty weekend whilst he secretly orders the dyke breached, so Slater won't be around to run disaster control and will cop the blame.



Hunt grounds the thriller and trashy bestseller elements with a blend of big movie hype and documentary realism in shooting around authentic mine locales. The first descent into the mine depths is conveyed with a lengthy shot staring back up a shaft from a descending lift, the small rectangle of light and connection with the surface dwindling to a tiny gleam, capturing both claustrophobia and a sense of atavistic awe inherent in digging deep into the earth. Hunt films ranks of authentic miners undergoing a health inspection whilst singing a work song, and films the actual mining operations with a feel for the extreme physical straits of such labour. Hunt segues into a long montage about a half-hour in that's close to being a visual essay, scored over by one of the tribal work songs, depicting in fascinating detail the actual processes of the mining from rock face to ingot smelting (as well as incidentally revealing the class and racial politics with the uniformly Black miners and their white bosses). The early scene where the rescuers try to extricate the trapped and mangled Lemmer proceeds with restrained drama right up until the mine surgeon starting to cut off Lemmer's leg, when Hunt cuts with cold wit to a screeching alarm whistle topside.



A great deal of the fun to be had here lies in the way *Gold* rifles every layer of the mining operation and the plot to undo it all, relating the highest level to the lowest with a conceptual zest that is, in its way, reminiscent of Upton Sinclair, and quite biting in its cynical understanding of big business, even if the characterisation of the coarse but essentially noble Hurry bleeds off some of the Marxist steam. Coldblooded boardroom decisions made on another continent spell death to who knows how many

workers, and the players in the game utilise whatever tools and tactics required from letter bombs to intimate psychology. At one point, realising that one of his cabal is threatening the conspiracy by selling stock too early, Farrell sends him a letter bomb that he cuts open whilst at breakfast with his family: the bomb goes off and kills them all. Farrell also arranges for Manfred's underling Stephen Marais (Tony Beckley, competing with Dillman to register maximum sleaze) to help Manfred accomplish the plot but then assassinate him at the end of it. Dillman all but cornered the market on playing smarmy creeps in movies around this time, but he's particularly fun here playing the kind of man who uses his wife to work on his behalf with her father and then dangles her out as live bait for Slater. Whatever erotic offence he countenances in the romance, which isn't much, is readily dwarfed by the anticipated pleasure of revenge over his father-in-law, who so often reminds him of his subordinate place. This is played out in a stinging aside of characterisation as Hurry lights up a cigar in Manfred's presence despite his dislike of smoke and tells him to get over it, only for Manfred to later snap sharply at Slater to not light up in his presence.



Moore needed more roles like the one he has in *Gold* in his career. He plays a self-made man uncertain on the corporate ladder although he's exactly the kind of smart, virile, hands-dirty operator necessary for actually running the show, and whose playboy lifestyle on downtime proves as much a source of trouble as pleasure. As with his later role in *The Wild Geese* (1978), Moore revels in getting to play a more substantial, rougher hero than his version of Bond was generally allowed to be. Slater confesses to feelings of resentment towards Terry and anyone else who came upon what they had easily, and lays down the law in his work with forceful words when required and even fists on occasions, as when he harshly chastises one of his crew bosses, Kowalski (Bernard Horsfall), for assaulting one of the Black miners. "It's why they do it that beats me," the Sonderditch physician says to Slater, referring to the miners: Slater answers with curt humour, "For the money, like the rest of us." His romance with Terry is at once a necessary aspect of the plot and a time-out from it, invested with some flesh, in both senses of the term, by Moore and York. Terry is the kind of blueblood who whiles away time without her limp-dick husband reading the collected letters of Anton Chekhov and flying her Cessna fearlessly, a talent that also proves vital by the film's end. Moore gets one of his best moments of acting in as he looks back at Terry whilst about to descend into the disaster-stricken mine, knowing full well it will likely be the last time he sees her, and even if he does return, the consequences could be worse than the hell below.



Despite soft-shoeing around the apartheid-era setting *Gold* is firm in branding the villains as racist creeps and the heroes as egalitarian. Slater wallops the bigoted and violent Kowalski, who soon proves to be in on the deal with Manfred. King is more or less the film's real hero, awarded a gold-plated mining helmet by Hurry for his role in rescuing the trapped miners at the start, and becoming Slater's strong right hand underground. He's characterised as indomitable and determined and, finally, self-sacrificing, and he finishes up drowning Kowalski in a puddle when he intervenes in his skulduggery. Slater is allowed a degree of vulnerability, as when he brings Terry to his bachelor pad apartment and, after first trying to play it cool, then sheepishly admitting he doesn't want her to be another one-night-stand, just a hair too late to stop her leaving. Manfred plays the lovers like an organ, as they flee to one of her father's properties out in the veldt where they can't be contacted, only for Manfred to let the hammer drop on, ordering drilling to recommence, which results in a drowning deluge exploding into the depths of Sonderditch. Tension ratchets as Hurry fumes at the poppet head and radio broadcasts are interrupted by appeals for Slater to contact the mine. Finally one of these broadcasts manages to penetrate the lovey-dovey bubble around the couple, whereupon they fly directly to the mine.



Terry, stung by Slater's angry belief she deliberately drew him away on Manfred's bidding, performs the risky trick of landing her plane on a road through the mine: "What have you got to say now, bigmouth?" she demands upon pulling up. The underground climax really makes the film, as Slater and King venture

together on a rubber dinghy through the mine tunnels, and agonisingly labour to reconnect the explosives Slater set up to seal off the flood, which Kowalski sabotaged before getting his clock cleaned by King. This unfolds in a phobic space filled with churning water flow, collapsing piping, and raining debris. Whilst certainly filmed on the Pinewood soundstage, this sequence is convincing to the point where you feel genuinely concerned for Moore and Sabela's safety, and they really are taking risks, and indeed the complexity of staging it pushed the film well over budget. The heroes are battered and bloodied to the point where Slater's arms are crushed by a suddenly shifting hatch, and King sets his friend adrift on the dinghy so he's not around when King sets off the explosive and dies for the sake of him and the other trapped miners. Meanwhile the conspirators get their just deserts as they turn on each-other in a wryly malicious manner, a scene that achieves a weird beauty thanks to Hunt's trademark editing ferocity. *Gold* certainly isn't a deep philosophical experience, but it's the kind of movie that satisfies me deeply, particularly after watching some CGI-infested contemporary product. Moore and Hunt reunited for Klinger's second Smith adaptation, *Shout At The Devil* (1976), to much lesser effect.



Barbie (2023)

film freedonia



Director: Greta Gerwig

Screenwriters: Noah Baumbach, Greta Gerwig

Future cineastes and cultural scholars – and everyone else in a year’s time – might need to be told just exactly what the “Barbenheimer” phenomenon was, so much like Helen Mirren’s dulcet-toned narrator as sported by Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*, I will explain in brief. *Barbie* and Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*, two big-budget, high-profile films were scheduled for release on the same day in A.D. 2023. Such was the stark schism of the opposition – one, so advertising made clear, a bright, brash take on a very girly property, the other an epic exploration of really serious history stuff directed by millennial males’ anointed god-king auteur – that it formed a perfect diptych of pop cultural stances, aesthetics, and audiences. This became, as so many things do these days, a topic of internet fun, and this in turn evolved into a semi-accidental viral marketing campaign, revolving around the way many potential viewers refused to choose between them, and instead went to see both. The result was propitious for the box office, after a dismal season for both audiences and Hollywood studios whose liberal servings of burned-out franchises and genres met only general apathy. *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* were both big hits, although as to be expected the former proved by far the bigger. You can’t argue with success, as the old saying goes – and yet the very existence of art criticism as an intellectual process is predicated around doing just that – and *Barbie*’s success might preclude contemplating just what it succeeds at: the film obviously hit home, so what’s the problem?



Personally, I felt it beholden on me to sit out such a phenomenon as the “Barbenheimer” craze, both on general principle, because it was just goddamn embarrassing, and given my lack of great interest in either movie, although I knew well I’d get around to both eventually. So, finally I watched *Barbie*, and whilst it’s undeniably been a pop cultural phenomenon, what a peculiar one it is. Firstly, there’s the amusing and slightly bewildering fact that one of the biggest financial successes of recent times has been made by Greta Gerwig, the one-time muse of mumblecore, in writing collaboration with her romantic and professional partner Noah Baumbach. To be fair, their last behind-the-camera collaboration, the Baumbach-directed, Gerwig-written *Mistress America* (2015), is for me by far the best work either has done – indeed, the only time I’ve been able to stomach Baumbach at all. Gerwig debuted as director with 2017’s *Lady Bird*, and followed it with 2019’s *Little Women*, both swiftly lauded by a movie culture urgently hungry for an American female director to celebrate, particularly one who, despite her roots in a fastidiously quirky and anti-populist wing of independent film, emerged with a desire to make films with largesse of style and feeling befitting mainstream appeal whilst retaining an artist’s finesse. *Lady Bird* was a well-done if familiar portrait of a teenaged girl blessed with an outsized if not unjustified conviction of her own anointed destiny, the second a revisionist-tinged take on the ever-popular Louisa May Alcott novel.



The connection between Gerwig's script for *Mistress America* and her two films as director was a focus on energetic, self-willed young women with creative spark and a determination to make something of it rather than get sucked down into the vortex of petty relationships. In *Lady Bird* and *Little Women*, the price paid for indulging such vision was a painful realisation of childhood's end and the opening gateway of real adult difficulty, where nobody else gives much of a damn about your talent or ambition, and indeed some might well take delight in destroying them out of spite in the eternal snooker match of individual will and ego – a match that so often feels, at least as it's constantly framed, indivisible from male-female relations. *Barbie* essentially takes up these fundamental concerns too, even as it seems to swap out the human focus of the indie *bildungsroman* and the classic literary adaptation for a cross-pollinating marketing event and corporate synergy spectacle. The doll known as Barbie was released 1959, the creation of Ruth Handler, whose husband was an executive at the toy company Mattel. Although hardly the first adult female doll created and marketed – Handler found a model for her idea in the German “Bild Lilli” – Barbie nonetheless hit a bullseye with a changing culture in offering girls a figure to project adult roles onto, and their own perception of themselves in those roles, via a fantasy extrapolation of a mid-20th century Californian lifestyle ideal, where the women are tall and glossy, the cars shiny and fast, the houses open-plan, and the men all surf.



Gerwig's *Barbie* mythologises this advent in broadly satirical terms at the outset by enacting Barbie's first appearance as a lampoon of the opening scenes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and narrated by Mirren. Barbie, as personified by Margot Robbie, taking the place of the Black Monolith and a collection of girls, dressed like Depression-era waifs, joyously embracing the new doll and savagely smashing their old, childlike dolls. A broadly amusing opening that nonetheless set my teeth on edge, as Gerwig leans on possibly the most over-used satirical reference point in modern culture, already done to death in few hundred different ways, and yet has still been lauded by much of the commentariat at the product of a fresh vision. The most interesting and disconcerting thing about the way Gerwig and Baumbach take on their task, which, in their own terms, can be happily seen in Schrodinger-esque terms simultaneously as a sell-out and a heroic grasp at connection with the largest audience deserved and possible. They have not made *Barbie* the story of the character represented by the dolls: what single character could conflate the legion that is Barbie? Instead, the film is a study of the idea of Barbie, its place in the modern psyche and the complexity of her legacy. Later in the film Handler herself, or rather her inhabiting spirit as personified by Rhea Perlman, is introduced as a kind of sensei for her creation as she faces evolution.



Broadly it can be said the story's chief objective is to put Barbie as both heroine and concept through all the tortures of cultural doubt before re-enshrining her as that vital expression of modern femininity. Granted, there was inherent difficulty in taking on *Barbie*, which required some sort of imaginative and conceptual frame being applied to her. Barbie has long had a fictional biography in which certain elements are set despite all the varieties of her marketed over the intervening 60-plus years: her full name is Barbara Millicent Roberts, and her on-again-off-again boyfriend has been Kenneth Sean 'Ken' Carson (there was a brief interregnum in the early 2010s when she was paired with an Aussie surfer named Blaine). But Barbie isn't a figurine that comes armed with some awesome sci-fi or fantasy backstory like the Transformers or He-Man or the panoply of *Star Wars* action figures I grew up with. In actual function, Barbie is a tabula rasa of projection, identified by her interchangeable identity, persona expressed through lifestyle accessorising. When I was but a lad, Barbie was a yucky girly thing, of course, but also intrigued me. Barbie was so multitudinous, so free, whereas, say, the Transformers were designated, even trapped by their appointed roles and guises. *Barbie* the film meditates on the double-edged sword that is this scope, seeing that very endless possibility as also a desert of actuality. In terms of modern feminist iconography, Barbie is a taunting figure, at once integral and vilified, the perfect expression of one version of its ideals and the Judas goat of others.



Gerwig casts Margot Robbie as Barbie, a piece of casting so obvious it seems predestined – Robbie has not just the ideal looks but the right cleverness as a performer to simultaneously capture the gleam of beatific self-containment in Barbie’s smile and eyes and the shimmer of panic Gerwig seeks. The film jumps off from similar precepts to many recent movies dealing with porous boundaries between the real and imagined. Close kin is Phil Lord and Christopher Miller’s *The LEGO Movie* (2016), to which *Barbie* can indeed be taken as a kind of franchise extension – the presence of Will Ferrell in both as closer to a mascot than a comedy actor highlights the connection – in that it takes the messiness of commercial character canons as not something to be avoided but a source of merriment in and of itself, in an age when arguments over canons are the stuff of both endless fan complaint and urgent intellectual contention. There are nods to discontinued or barely remembered brand offshoots, realised with stunt casting: director Emerald Fennell is glimpsed as Midge, a short-lived pregnant doll marketed by Mattel, and Michael Cera, exiled for some time now as a semi-star whom audiences liked but couldn’t find a niche as a performer, plays Allan, the one non-Ken male in Barbieland (who, as is incidentally noted in the end credits in a manner that’s funnier than anything the actual movie does with him, was featured in vintage advertising starkly and questionably as “Ken’s friend.”) Oh, and Barbieland? Well, it subsists in a sort of Platonic void connected to the Real World in a nebulous way, with travelling between the two requiring a multi-stage, ritualistic commute involving driving and then rollerblading.



Barbieland is the product of the Real World's collective consciousness, willed into existence and reacting to pressures from the Real World in a barometric manner. Barbies who have been played with too much or in a perverse and destructive manner, represented specifically by "Weird Barbie" (Kate McKinnon), show the wear and tear inflicted by their owners. Robbie specifically plays "Stereotypical Barbie," blonde and statuesque, the original gangsta, what she herself describes as "the Barbie you think of when someone says 'Think of a Barbie'" (notwithstanding that a black-haired Barbie was released simultaneous to the blonde one at the beginning; popular proclivity decided which was the most desired). After the *2001* riff, the film segues into an amusingly campy-jaunty depiction of Barbie awakening in her Dream House, waving to all her fellow Barbies, who are actualisations of the many variants put out by Mattel. They all reside in their similar Dream Houses which have no walls and go through the motions of preparing for the day, including showers with no actual water and breakfast with no actual food. The day-glo sprawl is scored with an upbeat anthem by costar Issa Rae, who also plays President Barbie. The Barbies fill every role of government and society, whilst the populace of Kens all dedicate themselves to the mysterious profession referred to as "Beach" – that is, well, hanging out on the beach and occasionally taking the risk of venturing into the plastic surf.



Barbie is at its best here in conjuring a cartoonish, wryly question-deflecting extrapolation of the existence of Barbieland as sustained by the average 7-year-old girl's imaginative impositions on her dolls, and the fantasy concept of adult life realised through that playing. Far from representing a total rejection of maternal instinct in girls, Barbie and her ilk allow a simultaneous existence as mother and child, constructor of identity and construction, and recognition of how that process is essentially one of a lifetime. The film of course puckishly defies viewers to make any kind of logical sense out of the relationship between Barbieland and reality (if Stereotypical Barbie is perverted by a real-world owner, does that turn her into Weird Barbie? Or does she join with Weird Barbie in a kind of gestalt? Does a new Stereotypical Barbie arise to take her place like a pod person?...okay Rod, stop. Leave it to whichever YouTuber is dedicating themselves to that sort of pondering). But one subtly pervasive problem with *Barbie* also quickly emerges as the classical Ken (Ryan Gosling), Stereotypical Barbie's sort-of boyfriend, confronts one of his rival variants (Simu Liu), and the two provoke each-other into having a "beach-off," repeating the joke a half a dozen times to make sure we catch the likeness to "beat off." This signals the level on which many of the actual, proper jokes in the film will be pitched on, as well as also evincing its sarcastically reductive take on the Kens as representative boy-men who are really only happy when playing with themselves.



Mirren's narration explicitly sums up Gosling-Ken in one voiceover line, noting that he "only has a great day when Barbie looks at him." The irony of this element of *Barbie* proves to not be an aside but central to the movie's whole proposal. In *Barbieland* the usual pattern of classical masculine and feminine relations – or at least the rhetorical, sentimental, Victorian version thereof as still seems to persist in the mind of the imagined collective grandmothers of today's women (and Mike Pence) – are inverted. The Kens are essentially pretty, idle objects who only have identity in relation to the Barbies. That's always been pretty true of the doll line, Ken a perpetually present but emasculated (notwithstanding his infamous lack of anatomy) adjunct to the mystique of Barbie, one whose fluctuations of identity and relevance to her has changed according to the whim of the moment's messaging. That pattern is continued here when the climax denies any kind of romantic liaison for the pair. The film might have had a certain amount of sport with the inversion whilst also commenting ironically on it, whilst portraying a stumble towards a more egalitarian world in a wryly inverted portrait of modern gender politics. And yet the actual social make-up of *Barbieland* is kept entirely vague, despite the latter part of the plot hinging on the Kens' efforts to change its constitution to enshrine male power whilst never defining its version of female power. There's an odd kind of defensive hypocrisy hiding in here, in a film that might well argue it's not worth interrogating in that manner, which then raises the question on why it feels the need to comment on such things at all if it doesn't want to be taken seriously on them.



Meanwhile life in Barbieland proceeds through an endless roundelay of joyous frivolity and wishful thinking, evenings usually capped by dance parties and girls' nights that inevitably see Ken chagrined to be urged on homeward after failing to woo Barbie. However, Stereotypical Barbie, who I will just call Barbie henceforth, who has already started to mysteriously suffer her feet suddenly refusing to conform to their usual, tippy-toed, high-heel-ready posture, starts randomly expressing morbid thoughts whilst burning up the dance floor. This moment instantly became an online meme, a remarkable feat for a film is itself already almost entirely comprised of harvested memes. This moment for instance replicates a common online hipster posture already pretty familiar in pop culture. *Barbie's* biggest rival at the 2023 box office thus far, Aaron Horvath and Michael Jelenic's *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, had a cute cartoon character locked in a prison uttering statements of morbid and depressive import to the chagrin of fellow captives. Granted, modern Hollywood is usually at a long, long lag behind contemporary pop culture mutations, which can literally wax and wane in the space of days, even hours thanks to online life, which means that trying to chase those trends, whilst programmed deep in Hollywood's DNA, is just about always a losing proposition. Unless, like Barbie, you try to become the Point of Singularity for memes. Almost all of the film's jokes and flourishes of social commentary depend on some variety instant assimilation factor that's key to the way memes work. A rhetorical set-piece comes when Gloria goes off in a rant about the impossibility of being a woman, a speech that's supposed to have the power of radicalising the Barbies but feels like it was accumulated with an AI filter. It reminded me of when I tapped out of *Charlie's Angels* (2019), when the film deployed a commonly shared joke on Facebook involving women's supposed slavish love of cheese.



Anyway: Barbie's disconcerted new awareness of mortality, dysmorphia, and indulgence of morbid trains of thought drives her into a crisis. She consults with a coterie of fellow Barbies, including President Barbie (Rae), Lawyer Barbie (Sharon Rooney), Writer Barbie (Alexandra Shipp), and Physicist Barbie (Emma Mackey), and they direct her to Weird Barbie. Weird Barbie, who has a bad haircut and texta scrawl on her face and is usually to be found with legs perpetually splayed in the splits, explains what's going down: Barbie is being affected by being played with in an unusual fashion by someone in the Real World. Barbie resolves to travel there and contact whoever this person is, and Gosling-Ken sneaks into the boot of her car to tag along. Going through the ritual process of commuting, which also involves transferring from car to rollerblades, Barbie and Ken arrive on Venice Beach, where Barbie immediately encounters sexism, being leered at and pawed by various jerky men, including some construction workers who nonetheless prove bewildered and acquiescent when she admits to lacking private parts, whilst Ken boasts of having "all the genitalia." Both are arrested repeatedly for their odd behaviour and try to adopt a low profile by changing clothes – although the garish new outfits they put on, including Barbie's hot pink cowgirl outfit, fail badly at the job.



Barbie manages, by forcing herself to settle down and mind-meld with the psyche influencing her, to zero in on a teenaged girl named Sasha (Ariana Greenblatt), daughter of Gloria (America Ferrera), who works at Mattel's corporate headquarters, manning a desk that guards the boardroom. When Barbie tracks Sasha to her high school and introduces herself, expecting to immediately set everything in the girl's mind to rights, Sasha, whilst assuming "Barbie" is some nut, then unleashes a spray of invective against the entire concept and function of her character, concluding with that most would-be devastating of punch-lines: calling her a fascist. The Mattel executives, headed by a gruff but hapless CEO (Ferrell), learn of the arrival of the two dolls and go on the alert, setting out to recapture them and restore them to the fictional realm before, well, something happens. Meanwhile Ken, startled when someone gives him a show of casual respect, soon realises the inverted status he possesses in the Real World. He immediately resolves to nab himself a job that suits his newfound sense of self-importance, only to find that he can't simply become a doctor or even a lifeguard – the closest thing to Beach he can find – without some sort of qualifications. So, he decides instead to learn all he can about patriarchy and take it to Barbieland, where he can indulge its assumed pleasures without any of its commensurate demands.



Barbie is interestingly confused when it comes to its take on patriarchy, a buzzword it leans on with all the relentless of a 14-year-old blogger. It's something Gerwig and Baumbach simultaneously portray as so intoxicating that it readily subsumes Barbieland, and as a paradigm rooted in things that still must be earned and strived for, which somewhat ironically contrasts the easy-peasy gleam of fantasy achievement in Barbieland. Certainly interesting territory to dig into, but also something *Barbie* shies away from, instead turning towards a lampoon of blokey obsessions as long parsed by folks on Twitt-er, X: the film crams in jokes about guys who love Pavement and *The Godfather* and will explain them at length. Of course, I'm not the target audience for all this (then again I don't particularly like the idea of target audiences either; a work of art should theoretically be capable of holding anyone) and indeed I might well be the target, period: am I not an opinionated guy who likes over-explaining things on the internet? But I was less aggravated by the tenor of all this then I was by the obviousness of it, the meme-ness of it. And the problem indeed that keeps prodding me about *Barbie* and its overall intellectual project, if it isn't gilding the lily on a biblical scale to call it that, is that it proposes to make a movie about a beloved feminine figure, and makes her story about men. Not simply that, given the plethora of directions it might have taken, it chose to be driven by the clash between the girly things and boy stuff, but in that it makes Barbie herself, and by extension Robbie in playing the role, an inert, hapless, buffeted figure. Barbie gives nothing to the Real World as it's portrayed, not even getting a chance to spice up the lives of the poor, Beach-less proles of reality. Her greatest dramatic feat is to start crying when she connects with Sasha in the Real World.



Meanwhile the movie farms out all the fun stuff to Gosling. He gets the song and dance numbers, the absurdly intense and inchoate emotions to play, the excitably yammered meditations on the things that stir his fantasies and provoke him to enact them. Certainly there's a variety of female gazing apparent here, delighting in Gosling and the other actors playing Kens parading themselves in self-consciously hot-silly play. Barbie does by the end come up with a plan to reconquer her fiefdom, but only in a way that exemplifies a particular sexist cliché – women manipulate men through stirring their jealousy and playing upon their emotions, a trap that prove as defenceless before as the women of Barbieland were to their newly, bullishly macho ways. The film does strain to say something interesting about the kind of ultra-macho reflexes of a certain coterie of modern young men as represented by Gosling-Ken in angrily and frustratedly seeking a version of masculinity that rejects need for female attention and yet down deep inside actually represents another hoped-for way of gaining that attention. But to follow the same logic, the movie's messaging in regards to this about the status of women actually suggests that unless they're supervising themselves with a rule of rigid iron, women are fatally predisposed to being willingly dominated by men, which is surely not what was intended. Oh, no, wait the movie defines them as "brainwashed" by means unknown. Is the idea that any idea let loose in Barbieland just automatically persuades everyone there?



The story of my reaction to *Barbie* is bound up with the way it utilises two songs – Matchbox 20’s “Push” and Aqua’s “Barbie Girl.” The inclusion of the latter song was practically inevitable despite Mattel’s well-known aversion to the song. The company sued the Scandinavian dance-pop band over it back when, officially for infringing their copyright, but in truth more for their insidiously catchy defloration of the doll’s mystique. Aqua’s song plays up the sex object aspect of the doll’s allure, defining her as a “blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world” with whom one can “touch me hair, undress me everywhere...you can touch, you can play, you can say I’m always yours.” The inspiration for the song came for the band when its members visited an exhibition on camp culture, and they came up with an irrepressibly festive and horny song for the irrepressibly festive and horny late 1990s. The idea that a Barbie movie could come out in 2023 and not include the song would strike most audience members as entirely mystifying if not actively, outrageously disappointing. So the film, as it so often does, has its cake and eats it, sidestepping potential dissonance by including a sampled version of the song by with new, rapped lyrics by Rae.



I can sympathise with the filmmakers and their brand-protecting backers to a degree with this: it might seem a little incoherent to include a song that makes such sport of the character you're trying to celebrate in a manner that can be readily sold to children, and cuts against the grain of the whole idea that Barbie is more than just a dubious depiction of pulchritude. Trouble is, though, the song is cleverer and more multileveled than the film. In part that's thanks to singer Lene Nystrøm's phrasing, which invests a note of pathos to the character: her Barbie is at once appealing and forlorn, alternatively a minxy, celebratory figure and a construction offering thrills she knows and we know are cheap, transitory, illusory, a simulacrum accepted on the path to actually finding a true vessel of desire. This note gives way to the back and forth of her lyrics with fellow vocalist René Dif as the song's take on Ken, investing it with both its signature call-and-response delight in coupling and a strong hint of role-playing: the song's Ken and Barbie are adults projecting their mature sexuality onto their childhood avatars.



“Push”, on the other hand, seems like an entirely different kind of musical product, as a rock song from the same period with that genre’s more familiar masculine voice, with singer Rob Thomas voicing the story of an insecure and troubled young man who admits to the dark urge to bully and dominate his lover, recognising the forbidden emotional thrill of asserting power over another. Gerwig uses the song in a peculiar manner, at once sarcastic but also taking the song’s meaning in the most literal way: the Kens sing it to expostulate their project directly whilst affecting intimate crooning in a cold satire on the mystique of the male musician and his pliantly mesmerised partner, until Barbie explicitly encourages her fellows to “pretend you’re interested in the song” long enough to get what they want. Granted, there was something highly calculated about Matchbox 20’s version, affecting raw and edgy expression of verboten feeling whilst maintaining a veneer of slickness in sound and song structuring that made them ideal radio fodder at a time when rock was struggling to hold onto that niche. Possibly too it has some personal meaning for Gerwig – perhaps she associates with some douchey ex, or just annoys her.



But the film’s use of the song has the intrinsic effect of redefining the song in a particularly detestable way, robbing it of any stature in acknowledging that real art usually requires pushing against the comfort of polite society to some degree. That’s not uncommon today when the concept of “poptimism” often exalts upbeat messages and aesthetics and decries the cult of transgression as simply giving professional jerks space to mask and justify themselves. Gerwig tries to have it both ways in this regard: *Barbie*, despite its occasionally sardonic swipes at a popoptimist culture duty-bound to dole out positive bromides, is nonetheless a pure product of it, diagnosing the aggression in other paradigms whilst wielding its own specific wavelength of passive-aggression. Both “Push” and “Barbie Girl” are then both still actually much more subversive than *Barbie* as pop culture artefacts. Yes, *Barbie* put me in the position of defending Matchbox 20, and I’ll never forgive it for that.



More immediately, casting Gosling as Ken was a stroke of genius, at least from a commercial angle, and to a degree artistically as well. Gosling is a rare commodity in current film: an intelligent actor, he's one who affects a baseline persona of blasé cool that does much to make him popular but which he can play with like a master musician, and his attractiveness to the opposite sex is so potent it has long sustained a sort of imaginative universe of its own not unlike Barbieland. A popular series of online memes from the mid-2010s sported images of Gosling with text mixing feminist rhetoric and romantic overtures, in a simultaneous mockery and indulgence of Gosling's dreamboat appeal and its destabilising effect on female cognisance. Gerwig knows this well, and as well as anchoring the film with a beloved star wittily cast, she accesses this astral plane of meme energy and adds it to the many others the film consists of. Thing is, Gosling-Ken is the film's motivating character, both protagonist and antagonist. Ninety percent of the film's humour, story, and general all-round affectation of good vibes depend entirely on Gosling and his capacity to sell the dichotomy at the film's aesthetic and thematic heart. There's something bitterly, hilariously apt about a film that sets out to celebrate a female icon instead chiefly rendering itself a vehicle for a male star's charisma and comic chops through its constant second-guessing and attempts to be ahead of the curve.



And yet Gosling is also miscast. He readily projects his take on Ken's mix of boyish eagerness and sullenness when he realises he's been sucking on the hind teat all his existence, and he sports a decent six-pack. But he's far too cool and cagey a presence to play a character who's famous as a vacuous placeholder for masculinity in an otherwise gynocratic universe: he doesn't just let us in on the joke but smothers us with it. Perhaps the ideal Ken would have been an actor of another age, someone like Rock Hudson or Tab Hunter, experts at concealing their actual identities whilst projecting exteriors of igneous fantasy masculinity and just occasionally letting that actual identity show through with a flash of knowing humour and existential panic. I wondered if Channing Tatum, who's made a career out of deftly exploiting and mocking his external adherence to a stereotype of good-natured, rather dim male sexiness, might have been a more apt modern equivalent.



Meanwhile the film happily indulges a purely liberal-left feminist fantasy, like its depiction of a how it thinks justice should work, with women lawyers appealing to women judges and gaining perfect progressive results. Lawyer Barbie deftly hacks apart arguments about corporations having personal rights, defining that as mere plutocracy, and the Judge Barbie (Ana Cruz Kayne) readily agree. If I was feeling particularly cynical – and I am – I might say this beautifully describes the mindset of online life as it relates to politics today, a world where one can engage in a perfect version of political, legal, and social thought where one does not have to contend with a rival perspective, save to take safe-distance swipes at it. The wish-fulfilment aspect of this scene is worn on the sleeve, and the appeal is obvious enough. Feminism – or at least, feminism in the American political paradigm, which is the only kind Hollywood recognises despite its pretences to speaking to the world – is in a rather glum if hardly defeated place following the striking down of Roe vs Wade by the reactionary-packed US Supreme Court, and indeed has been in mounting convulsions ever since Hillary Clinton was beaten by Barack Obama in the identity politics-as-actual politics stakes, let alone when Donald Trump came along. The entire philosophical essence of progressivism is that it's supposed to, well, progress, so what is called when change is backwards?



I note this because *Barbie* is a film that wants to be bitingly ironic, under all the froth and pastels, about the relationship between personal fantasy and social reality, whilst falling into its own trap. The film's plot extends this concept and problem on multiple levels. When Barbie and Ken finally travel to the real world, Barbie is shocked to find that the existence of her role-model universe has not impacted the real one, and in fact the opposite ultimately proves true: the insidious influence of maleness is especially virulent when released in the un-inoculated climes of Barbieland. I could take this as the film's most inspired satirical tilt at our contemporary tendency to flat within bubbles of curated content and feedback loops of self-approved messaging, and the way it offers a kind of illusory buttress community that too often proves extremely vulnerable. I'm not actually sure if the film is aware of this element, but I'll still credit it as such. Trouble is, Gerwig communicates all this through the dramatic version of memes – tropes, many of which, like leering, catcalling construction workers, have a rather backdated feel. It's satire, but it commits one of the worst potential crimes of satire in being essentially reassuring, taking refuge in familiar caricatures of problems and enemies.



What should be the true core of the film's emotional and thematic energy – the relationship of Gloria and Sasha and the way their mutual encounter with Barbie helps them all transform each-other, isn't just neglected but basically forgotten in the clumsiness of the second half. Sasha is presented as a veritable caricature of an angry, accusatory teen, one who actively disdains her mother, but by movie's end they're reconciled because, well, the movie says so. Eventually it emerges that it's actually Gloria who's been playing with Sasha's old Barbie and thus has inflicted her own adult dubiety on Barbie – this making her in essence a stand-in for Gerwig herself. Gloria herself likes sketching new Barbie concepts at work. Later Sasha tells Gloria she's weird and wild or some crap, but her concepts as put on paper are banal and merely have oddball names attached. At the climax Gloria offers her singular great idea to the Mattel honchos – Ordinary Barbie, an idea the CEO scoffs at until one of his team tells him it will make money based on some obscure bit of number-crunching, a moment that feels again like a bit of self-reference from Gerwig to the movie's development, but in context feels entirely limp, almost making fun of its own lack of some genuinely inspired and clever way of resolving its plot and ideas, of wrestling with the difficulty of creation.



Stylistically, *Barbie* leans extremely heavily on aesthetics borrowed from Wes Anderson, with the deliberately flat, almost cartoon-illustration-like visuals in the Barbieland scenes, and stylised, declarative performing a la Whit Stillman, for whom Gerwig did sterling service as an actor back in *Damsels In Distress* (2011). Touches like Allan opening a can of whoop-ass on some Kens to give Gloria and Sasha time to pull off an escape, only for the action to fade into the inconsequential background, likewise replicate similar touches in knockabout comedy of the last 20 years. As mentioned, *Barbie* does at least extend Gerwig's oeuvre coherently, particularly in its loss-of-childhood aspect. Like the vast number of actors-turned-filmmakers, Gerwig had previously displayed a masterful touch with actors. The best moments of *Little Women*, like Jo and Laurie dancing up a storm or the alternations of pathos and fury enacted by Jo and Amy, depended on a precise sense of what her performers could achieve, the way their liveliness can infuse a seemingly staid project and shock it with new life, in a manner I found more effective than its more overt attempts to get openly post-modern in its approach to a well-known work of fiction (Alcott's openness to a different version of marriage for Jo was more transgressive and relevant today than Gerwig's snobbery about it). Regardless, *Barbie* doesn't have the same precision in performance. The film pushes the alternations of silliness and sourness in the second half in depicting Ken's campaign often gave me the feeling of a slightly mismatched rhythm, Gosling called upon to deliver chain-lightning quips in a way that often makes them garbled, almost as if the film kind of wants to hurry past them so we won't think too hard about what's actually happening.



I could forgive every topic of tetchy kvetching I've brought up here if I found *Barbie* fun and funny often enough to make it all inconsequential. But the aspects of *Barbie* that are genuinely fun are disposed of pretty early, and the movie goes on for another hour and a half. I found something kept bleeding the humour value out of it, something beyond the way a lot of its gags are borrowed from other sources. Part of the problem is the awkwardness of pacing and staging the humour I've noted. The one really good laugh I got came from the "Depression Barbie" ad that plays when Barbie is at her lowest: whilst it is in many ways only the umpteenth variation on the same joke in the film, it came as such a brilliantly deployed moment of stylistic lampooning that it hit the mark, even if it still comes with the codicil that it plays at making fun of the advertising the movie is actually, ultimately merely a very long version of. Gerwig later stages a song-and-dance number for the Kens where they struggle with their identity, pushing through the conflict the Barbies have stirred them to and arriving back at a point of collective reconciliation only to find they've been outmanoeuvred in the meantime.



The battle of the Kens on the beach is a gleefully ridiculous spectacle that doesn't so much embrace campiness as bunk down with it, file a joint tax return, and buy a house in Malibu with it, even it's that modern, scrubbed-clean, Instagram-filter-esque idea of campiness that has no edge of danger or actual sexuality to it. The subsequent musical sequence, with Gosling leading the other Ken actors – their ranks also include the likes of Kingsley Ben-Adir and Ncuti Gatwa – do much to return the movie to its early, cartoonish style, and indeed it makes me wonder why Gerwig didn't extend the neo-musical conceit. Given that *Barbie* is about the five millionth recent movie to betray the influence of *The Simpsons* TV series, I felt the film ought to have patterned itself more overtly on the "Wild Barts Can't Be Broken" episode with its climactic musical number of clashing social groups and their articulated gripes managed to perfectly dovetail satire and character. Instead, the film resolves in interminable fashion, rambling on for some fifteen minutes or so once the actual plot has ended, that is, the Kens have been outwitted by the Barbies, giving way to a long coda where everyone stands around talking about stuff – Ken confesses the insecurities that drove him to his insurrection, Gloria makes her product pitch, and Barbie is visited by the shade of Handler.



All this leads to Barbie choosing humanity, an assimilation Gerwig illustrates with a reel of home movies from members of her cast and crew – another interesting idea rendered fuzzy in effect, in part because there's no clear connection between these images and what's supposed to be happening, and because there's a thematic incoherence in here the film remains blithely indifferent to. The film insists Barbie must become a real woman for no other reason than its need that to be its ending: surely, it implies, being a real woman must in the end be preferable to being a fantasy one. The nature of Barbie's transition is rammed home in its punchline as Barbie visits a gynaecologist for the first time before a shock cut to black, the filmmaking equivalent of an ain't-I-naughty smirk. The point here is plain enough: being a real woman is something that revolves a basic fact of biological structure (notwithstanding trans experience, but let's not open up that can of worms), and that basic fact is a gift that also comes with responsibility, a notion that resonates again with definite political ramifications. But this point again floats free of the actual story being told, which has stuck up for the ultimate necessity of imagined ideals in contrast to the mess of reality, and Barbie's stature as a representative ideal, on top of the fact that the film gives no comprehensible reason why she wants to choose reality, which is presented as antithetical to everyone she is and desires to defend.



If I've talked more about ideas and artefacts encircling *Barbie* more than the film itself, well, my justification for this is that's what the film itself does. As an actual narrative film, *Barbie* is so thin as to barely exist. Not that there's anything wrong with that – some of the greatest films ever made, particularly the classic musicals Gerwig sometimes channels in her stylisation, basically float like soft and shimmering clouds of ethereal expression. But those film commune with the ethereal; *Barbie* gropes through it. The trouble is, *Barbie* wants oh so hard to be about something, but its about-something-ness trumps what it's actually about, its own narrative and stylistic gestures barely adding up to more than an extended pastiche and a list of thematic bullet points, self-awareness without a self to be aware of. The nominal plot and characters, the emotional and conceptual sinews of the movie – these are helplessly garbled and sporadic, its cumulative expression of meaning contradictory. All of this is churlish on so many levels, I know. For those who just came to get the sugar rush of bright colours, pleasant nostalgia blended with a light spice of ironic awareness, and the sight of the Kens dancing, I'm sure *Barbie* was and is sufficient. And the very fact it's provoked so much response from me certainly indicates that what it attempts is interesting, if only that it makes me more aware of just how tired I am of meta play in current pop culture. It highlights a profound void in that culture despite of, and in fact perhaps because of, its constituent, foregrounded conceptualism, its "cleverness." It wants to be about reality and fantasy, but it resists realness, and whilst it has much to say about the infrastructure of our fantasies, it remains detached from those fantasies, even scornful of them. And finally this leaves a problem that's both artistic and business-related: this is a toy that can be sold once, and not again.

The Magician (1926)

this island rod



Rex Ingram's *The Magician* is a cinema relic replete with potent and fascinating elements, and even if the film as a whole doesn't quite cohere into a total classic, it's hard to ignore its influence, direct and indirect, on so much fantastic cinema that followed. The source was a novel by W. Somerset Maugham, who, desiring to write a money-spinning work after his first few literary efforts gave him a name but not much else, drew on his acquaintance with the writer and mystic Aleister Crowley, who was just starting to emerge as a self-invented figure worth of modern folklore and proto-tabloid execration exploring forbidden realms of mysticism and sexuality. Maugham's fictionalised portrait helped make Crowley a figure of popular infamy, embodying all that was decadent and wicked about bohemia in the public imagination when *The Magician* was first published in 1908. Crowley himself was apparently amused and likely benefited from the notoriety, but also irked that Maugham had drawn so blatantly on his works and life. The novel was considered unusually strong stuff at the time, and when Ingram came to film it, he delivered one of the relatively few serious-minded horror films produced and released by a Hollywood studio in the late silent era.



The Magician opens with a striking sequence in which young and ardent artist Margaret Dauncey (Alice Terry) is working on a huge, teetering clay sculpture of a devilishly contorted figure, as if conjuring out the depths of her psyche an image of perversity and corruption. To give form to such a dream immediately exacts a price, as the statue slowly splits and tears, crashing down upon Margaret and breaking her back. Margaret's damaged spine is repaired by an equally exacting if more practical kind of artist, Dr Arthur Burdon (Iván Petrovich), in a feat of prolonged surgery. This medical miracle is watched by many in a scene contrived to evoke an otherworldly chorus looking on at this delicate drama of life and death, with surgical team and witnesses all swathed in white coats. Amongst the audience is Oliver Haddo (Paul Wegener), who represents rather the Devil's minority report, gazing on with wide, bulbous eyes and an attitude of patronising indulgence, provoked when another viewer calls Burdon a magician: "The saving of a human life is a comparatively simple matter," Haddo retorts, "On the other hand, the scientific creation of life does indeed call for the powers of a magician." Burdon's surgery is successful, and he quickly falls in love with her, able to do what both Haddo and Margaret aspire to in romancing the product of his labour.



The couple, planning to marry, nonetheless keep crossing paths with the unsettling, enigmatic Haddo. When the three of them attend a performance by a snake charmer at a Parisian fairground, Haddo insists on demonstrating his ability to magically neutralise the snake's venom, by letting the serpent bite him. Haddo indeed doesn't die, but the snake bites one of the young female performers and she immediately expires – an incident Burdon and Margaret's uncle Dr Porhoët (Firmin Gémier) blame Haddo for. But Porhoët himself is intrigued by the esoteric arts that obsess Haddo, who gloatingly hands Porhoët a book he's looking for in the Library of the Arsenal, albeit after Haddo has already torn out the most vital page. Haddo wants to perform a ritual alchemist's experiment detailed on the stolen page, which claims that one can create a homunculus with the blood of a blonde maiden. And, of course, he sets his sights on Margaret: after mesmerising her and tricking her into thinking she's damaged goods after treating her to a bacchanalian hallucination, Haddo marries her and steals her away to Monte Carlo, near where he has constructed a laboratory in a medieval alchemist's tower.



Ingram, whilst today largely overshadowed by other greats of silent cinema, was considered one of the great stylists working in Hollywood throughout the 1920s, standing up with the likes of Erich Von Stroheim and Maurice Tourneur amongst the filmmakers who brought a new visual artistry and discipline to the vigorous young art form. The Irish-born Ingram was the son of a clergyman but gravitated to more free and artistic climes, first studying sculpture at Yale after immigrating to the US in 1911. He entered the movie industry as an actor and swiftly started working behind the camera, debuting as a director with 1916's *The Great Problem*. Ingram's rumoured lover, the MGM executive June Mathis, presented Ingram with her young would-be star discovery Rudolph Valentino, and Ingram directed Valentino's career-making vehicle *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), a hit that also cemented Ingram as a major director. Ingram chose to expend much of his clout in a bid for independence from studio executives, eloping with Terry, the female star of *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, and setting up his own small film studio under the MGM auspices outside Nice on the French Riviera. He made most of the rest of his films there, with a young up-and-coming director named Michael Powell working as his assistant.



Ingram's removal from watchful overlords gave him the freedom with *The Magician* to make a film closer in nature to the horror films being made in Germany at the time. That he had ambitions in this direction was signalled most clearly by hiring Wegener, who had helped make and starred in two movies about the Jewish legend of the Golem, *The Golem* (1914) and *The Golem: How It Came Into The World* (1922). Ingram reportedly had a lot of trouble with Wegener's unsubtle acting presence, and indeed his Haddo rather fatally lacks any kind of insidiously charming or seductive quality, instead occupying the screen with toadlike intensity that treads close to ham. That said, Wegener is effective in its way – his bulging eyes, as they had when he played the Golem, wield the same transfixing luminosity that makes them feel like emblems not just of the oneiric but of silent film itself, the gaze out of the darkness at the edge of the liminal enticing viewer and heroine. Ingram makes the disparity between his coolly stylised realism and the broad projected menace of the actor with a jolt of knowing humour: "He looks like he stepped out of a bad melodrama," Burdon comments after one uncomfortable encounter with the self-described sorcerer.



Despite the artistic emulation, Ingram's visual style skews away from the Expressionist approach then prevalent in European horror cinema, or rather moulds into a more naturalistic façade. Ingram specialised in lush sprawls of carefully contrived *misé-en-scène* nudging the real towards the stylised. This is apparent in the film's best scenes. That opening with the slowly cracking and collapsing statue. The otherworldly tint of the surgery scene. Haddo's first entrance into his medieval lair with alchemist's apparatus stretching like monuments across the frame and voluminous space lost in shadow. A survey of a Monte Carlo casino interior, a place teeming with lost souls and dirty pretty things. The climactic scenes are particularly potent in the way Ingram uses the colossal furnace in Haddo's laboratory, yawning open ready to receive Margaret's body once relieved of its heart, to cast infernal shades on the drama, the hellish counterpart to the angelic lustre of Burdon's surgery. The film's key and most famous dream sequence nods not to Lang or Murnau but to Benjamin Christensen's *Häxan* (1921) as a model. Haddo visits Margaret in her apartment and, after gazing upon the bust of a lusty fawn she's sculpted and grasping what it says about Margaret's sublimated desires, mesmerises her. The pair pass together through a hallucinatory zone, envisioning a bacchanalian orgy amidst twisted, bulbous, Boschian structures and spindly, wraith-like trees, overseen by Pan tooting his flute amidst semi-naked revellers. The living embodiment of Margaret's fawn bounds over to her and scoops her up in a blatantly erotic clinch. The fawn is played by Hubert Stowitts, an American dancer then working with the Folies Bergere, wearing only a scanty loincloth, in a vignette it's about as racy as mainstream silent cinema gets.



Ingram's careful, even standoffish approach as a filmmaker is indeed the source of both much of the pleasure and the frustration of *The Magician*. It's been said that Ingram was losing interest in cinema by this point and might only have overseen the production, indicated by the way he credits himself as "supervising" the film's shoot. And it's arguable that Ingram's emphasis on careful but distant composition betrays an eye that wasn't keeping up with what was happening in late silent film as montage was becoming more overt. But *The Magician* doesn't feel slapdash: indeed, there's a feeling of tense control throughout. Ingram seems to have invested himself in the film in reflective ways. Where in the novel Margaret was merely characterised as an art student, Ingram makes her a practitioner of his own, first art of choice. He makes the act of sculpture, the creation of simulacra that conjure the corners of the mind into the closest thing to tangible existence, into a motif that inevitably echoes in Haddo's desire to make a more perfect kind. Both are artists of perversity, but with Haddo a far more extreme realm. This connects in turn with the feeling that Ingram is using both to explore his own reported, compulsive fascination with the physically grotesque and misshapen. This fruitful idea is nonetheless robbed of some of its potential power by the script, which follows Maugham's lead in making Margaret otherwise a fairly gossamer, virginal damsel in distress, rather than someone tempted powerfully by the dark side, but Ingram traces out kinky contours nonetheless.



Margaret assures Burdon that Haddo has never actually slept with her, but Ingram signals something transformative and sexual in their relationship anyway when Burdon finds her in the casino and she's wearing a dark, translucent gown with a high collar. This garment reminded me of the one Mia Sara's heroine is given to wear in *Legend* (1985), enough to make me wonder if Ridley Scott ever saw this film. Likely the influence comes via Powell: Powell would transmit his experience working on this film through the fantasy sequences of *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940), *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951), and also arguably even echoes in his *Peeping Tom* (1960), only with the device of the alchemist's mad design transmuted into a film camera, a sliced-out heart exchanged for the captured image. Powell himself appears as a dopey audience member at the snake-charming show whose hat floats away atop of loose balloon, a jot of comic relief just odd and dreamy enough to suggest Powell himself might have come up with it. There's a lot of comic relief in the film despite its attempts to take the material seriously, some supplied by Gladys Hamer as Susie Boyd, a painter friend of Margaret's who in the opening scene, in a wry poke at the pretence of modern art, is observed changing the title of her new artwork, a cubist study of the Parisian skyline, to better suit her vague purpose. More intrusively silly is some stuff with Henry Wilson as Haddo's servant, who somehow survives a climactic explosion to be left dangling by his long-johns like a Buster Keaton character.



The film also hews to the general demystifying mood of '20s Hollywood horror in ultimately shying away from any confirmed concession to the supernatural, with Haddo revealed late in the story to be an escaped mental patient. Despite its hesitations and interludes of stolid nicety, the film maintains a simmering mood of menace, until finally combusting for a grand denouement. Burdon and Porhoët dash to the rescue whilst Margaret is strapped of course to a table at the maniacal villain's mercy as a slew of similarly decorous damsel would be in the next twenty years of horror films. Ingram's subtle approach pays off as his camera retreats before the grimly set, shadow-cleaved face of Haddo, marching towards Margaret with murder in mind. Haddo defends himself from the would-be rescuers with ferocity, wildly hurling alchemic concoctions and gleefully opening up the furnace to push Burdon into its maw – but guess who actually falls in. James Whale undoubtedly took great licence from these scenes for his *Frankenstein* films, in both the overall look of his laboratory scenes, and particularly the climactic explosion of Haddo's tower which he would restage in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). The laboratory's destruction takes all of Haddo's secrets with it, although Porhoët has by this point already burned up the stolen page, having decided that there are some things man is not meant to know, et cetera.



The Black Cat (1934)

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Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Screenwriter: Peter Ruric

Edgar G. Ulmer has long been renowned as something like the poet laureate of B-movies. The one-time fresh talent of Mittel European theatre and cinema who finished up labouring in the treadmill of low-budget Hollywood screen filler, but eventually found champions as the consummate auteur, bringing levels of ingenuity, passion, and invested creativity to even the most demeaned product he took on, with a late, salutary prayer to be granted absolution for all the work he'd taken on just to make a living. One of a seemingly endless rank of notable early filmmakers whose lives began in the about-to-crumble Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ulmer was born in 1904 in the city of Olomouc, today in Czechia. He lost his father in the First World War, a bleak turn of fate that left a perpetual mark on not just the man but his art, expressed most profoundly and directly in *The Black Cat*, his Hollywood debut and one of biggest hits from Universal Picture's legendary run of horror films in the 1930s. Some of the hazy mystique surround Ulmer's career is sourced in his own, often disputed claims about who he worked with and what he worked on, as he estimated he'd made some 127 films over the course of his nearly forty-year career. Weathering the grim

post-Great War years as he grew up, Ulmer faced hunger and anti-Semitism, but he soon busied himself by heading to Vienna and studying architecture and philosophy, whilst also dabbling in theatre work as an actor and set designer.



Ulmer found a mentor in the renowned theatrical director Max Reinhardt, who recognised the young man's design talent and employed him on several productions, including his first American sojourn. This gave Ulmer his ticket into the movie world, where he worked with an array of cinema talents including F.W. Murnau for certain and, more dubiously, Paul Wegener and Fritz Lang; he also later claimed to have gained his first directing experience doing uncredited work on some short Westerns, including *The Border Sheriff* (1926), around the same time he followed Murnau to Hollywood to work on *Sunrise: A Story of Two Humans* (1927). What is certain is that Ulmer returned to Europe to help make *People On Sunday* (1929), a sprawling portrait of late-Weimar Berlin's young people enjoying a weekend, and a work that was also a fascinating nexus of emerging, motivated movie talent: Ulmer codirected with Robert Siodmak, the film sported script input from Siodmak's brother Curt and Billy Wilder, and Fred Zinneman and Eugen Schüfftan were part of the cinematography team. Ulmer went back to Hollywood to make his official, solo feature debut, *Damaged Lives* (1933), a low-budget drama about the touchy subject of venereal disease. Ulmer's career seemed assured with the success of *The Black Cat*, but his life took another sharp turn when he fell in love with Shirley Castle (Kassler), who was at the time wife to producer Max Alexander, nephew of Universal honcho Carl Laemmle.



Ulmer's part in a major Hollywood scandal went down about as well as expected: Shirley divorced Alexander and fled with Ulmer to New York, leaving the young director in career purgatory. Ulmer found refuge making "ethnic" and "race" films. The former were movies for immigrant communities, shot in Yiddish and Ukrainian, including the well-regarded *Green Fields* (1937); the latter were for Black audiences, much like those Oscar Micheaux was making at the same time: Ulmer's *Moon Over Harlem* (1939), starred Cora Green, who was also in Micheaux's *Swing!* (1938). Proving himself able to work in such stifled and stringent circumstances, Ulmer was hired by the Producers Releasing Corporation or PRC, a fledgling studio somewhat unique in the Hollywood of the day in that it was "poverty row" production outfit, that is one specialising in very low-budget films without major stars, but had its own, small studio. Over the next few years Ulmer mastered the fine art of making potent movies on the lean PRC budgets. He became the studio's unofficial production chief as well as making his own films, for which he was often called "the King of PRC," whilst Shirley had become his constant collaborator, even writing several of his movies.



Ulmer's stringent yet artful and compelling works in this period, like *Bluebeard* (1944) and *Strange Illusion* (1945), set the scene for his other most famous film, the 1945 deadbeat-noir classic *Detour*, which, with its forlornly ironic portrait of a luckless pianist who finds himself victim of an increasingly cruel set of impossible circumstances, exemplified Ulmer's mordant mature perspective. The film's success helped Ulmer get bigger budgets, including the Hedy Lamarr vehicle *The Strange Woman* (1946) and the Zachary Scott-starring *Reckless* (1948), which some have called his proper masterpiece. After PRC broke up in the late '40s, Ulmer, rather than taking job offers at bigger studios, resumed a wandering career as an independent talent, including imbuing a bewitching visual mood and eccentric thoughtfulness upon the ultra-cheap and awkwardly written sci-fi thriller *The Man From Planet X* (1951), the rather less good but likeable *The Daughter of Dr. Jekyll* (1957), and a late attempt to get in on the late 1950s peplum film craze with *Hannibal* (1959), a film that unfortunately, thanks to producer interference, decided to casually rewrite history at the end, much to Ulmer's chagrin. His career finally ran out of steam just as he was receiving interest from the new generation of auteurist film critics, and after a debilitating stroke died in 1976.



As well as proving Ulmer's one moment of major Hollywood success and profile, *The Black Cat* was also a big deal as the first occasion the two big, fresh-minted stars of the 1930s horror movie craze and whose names still ring with the familiarity of genre legend, Béla Lugosi and Boris Karloff, starring together. Much irony was implicit in their oft-entwined careers: Karloff had received his big break playing the Frankenstein's Monster in James Whale's 1931 hit after Lugosi had turned it down, disliking the idea of being caked in makeup in a mute role, but Karloff, after proving what an actor could do in such a part, had quickly proven in films like *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), *Scarface* (1932), *The Mummy* (1932), and *The Ghoul* (1933) that he was an actor of great range, and was already being billed over Lugosi here. That a work as odd as *The Black Cat* could have been so popular feels a bit hallucinatory, rather like the film itself. It's an undoubted high water mark for the Universal horror brand, triangulated with the simmering poetic menace as *The Mummy* and the raucous virtuosity of *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). But where those films defined an era and a style that's now virtually vanished, Ulmer's film, whilst arguably more uneven, still feels potently modern, wielding a unique mixture of originality, aesthetic daring, and thematic depth that makes it virtually unique in the genre.



The Black Cat's deceptive title plainly stemmed from Universal wanting to extend its horror brand, reliant on famous authors in the genre like Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley. After the studio and Lugosi gained another hit with the Edgar Allen Poe adaptation *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1932), two more Poe-inspired movies would follow in the form of Ulmer's film and Lew Landers' *The Raven* (1936), both of which, instead of presenting straight adaptations of the author's stories, instead riffed on their themes and imagery. Ulmer came up with the story with Peter Ruric, a thriller writer who usually wrote under the name Paul Cain, who then penned the screenplay. An extra dimension of peculiarity invested in *The Black Cat* stems from Ulmer's simultaneous embrace of and self-conscious inversion of the already well-defined Gothic horror strain. The film revolves around the familiar genre motifs of the dread lord of the creepy manse with his cellar-full of dark secrets out in the Carpathian wilds. The holidaying everyday folk who find themselves trapped in a situation of macabre strangeness. The singleminded avenger pitting himself against the evil overlord. Ulmer subverts these motifs in turn, whilst rooting the drama as a whole in his lingering meditation on his own traumatic youth.



The explosion of Hollywood's horror cinema arrived after a decade or so of dark fantasias made in European cinema, when the Great Depression finally unlocked the same forlorn attitude in American audiences that had dogged the Continental crowds since the Great War. And yet *The Black Cat* was, oddly, the one genre film on either side of the Atlantic to make an explicit connection between the social and psychological fallout of the war. Abel Gance's *J'Accuse!* (1919), with its climactic imagery of the war dead crawling out of their graves to accuse the living, had touched on similar territory, and it wasn't really a horror film. *The Black Cat*, in its own, rarefied way, opened the door then for a type of horror movie that was still decades away from having its day, one more overtly intrigued by the connection between social and psychological horror, as well as its more grisly, sadistic, and erotically aware flourishes, kept muted with eliding devices though they are. Ulmer's film begins with the Orient Express departing Budapest (illustrated in part with recycled footage from *Shanghai Express*, 1932), carrying the newlywed couple Peter (David Manners) and Joan Alison (Jacqueline Wells, who would be known for most of her career under the name Julie Bishop), spending their honeymoon on a jaunt through Eastern Europe.



Owing to a ticketing mixup they find themselves sharing their compartment with a strange man who introduces himself as Dr Vitus Werdergast (Lugosi): in a cunning gesture that betrays both Ulmer's felicity of framing and Lugosi's sense of theatrical impact, Vitus first appears over the shoulder of the conductor, removing his hat with a smoothly enigmatic gesture before revealing his face. A sublime tension between reality and fantasy is mooted quickly as part of the texture of *The Black Cat*, similar in some respects to Whale's *The Old Dark House* (1932) but swerving from its satirical lilt, except in brief flashes of knowing humour deployed by the characters. Ulmer introduces a prototypical metatextual touch in making Peter a writer of mystery novels, or, as he describes himself, "One of America's greatest writers – of unimportant books." Where a more typical variation on that idea would present Peter with an odd version of his own kinds of story, Ulmer pushes a step further than many takes on such an idea in confronting Peter with a situation that renders his own potted tales ineffectual. A joke at the fadeout involves Peter being appalled to see a newspaper review of his new book being criticised as unbelievable, after the surreal experience he and Joan have just weathered. The ordinary, wholesome brand of romantic passion Peter and Joan are sharing is contrasted with undercurrents of simmering, morbid fetishism and strange mania that first manifest when Peter, nodding awake with Joan still asleep next to him in their compartment set, glimpsing Werdergast brushing a hand very delicately across Joan's hair in her oblivious state.



Vitus, rather than acting abashed in being caught at this, calmly tells Peter, “I beg your indulgence my friend. Eighteen years ago I left a girl, so like your lovely wife, to go to war. Kaiser and country, you know. She was my wife.” Vitus asks Peter if he ever heard of Kurgal, and when Peter shakes his head explains it’s a prison located above Lake Baikal, a perfect hellhole, and one he’s just, finally escaped from after being captured by the Russians during the war. “Many men have gone there,” Vitus notes with a purr of portentous meaning, “Few have returned.../I have returned.” Dissolve to the train arriving in the town of Wiezegrad, in a pouring rainstorm, where the Alisons, Vitus, and his hulking Siberian servant Thamal (Harry Cording) board a bus that will take them to a hotel at the resort town of Gömbös. The bus driver (George Davis) explains the road they’re on was built by the Austrian army and runs through an area that was, during the war, the battlefield of Marmorus, “The greatest graveyard in the world.” “Tens of thousands of men died here,” the driver recalls whilst the Alisons smile with tight scepticism, “The ravine down there was piled twelve deep with dead and wounded me. The little river below was swollen red, a raging torrent of blood.” Above the road is the ruin of old Fort Marmorus, the object of the great battles below: flashing lightning illuminates the new, Bauhaus-style house erected atop the ruin, which the driver says was built by “Engineer Poelzig,” a name that makes Werdergast wince.



The driver suddenly loses control on the muddy road and crashes through a guardrail. The driver is killed and Joan takes a gash to the chest, forcing the stranded passengers to grope their way through the stormy murk to the house. Ulmer's careful assault on familiar visual syntax first appears here as he cuts from the sight of the screaming passengers inside the bus to a shot of a small tree toppling as the bus hits it, and then fading a bewildering shot that, when lightning flashes again, proves to be the bus lying on its side with the driver's dead face seen through the shattered windscreen, hovering in a way that defies normal framing niceties. After the three remaining men start squelching their way up the hill whilst carrying the unconscious Joan and luggage, Ulmer offers one of the few (semi-) clear glimpses of Poelzig's house offered in the film, a weird block of rectilinear solidity atop the old fortress bastions, a crude road snaking up past a vast field of crucifixes. This is Ulmer's wilfully weird reimagining of the classic Gothic image of the ruined castle and eerie graveyard as an outpost of a very recent apocalypse. The hard, clean modernism of Poelzig's house is presented with perfect visual economy not, as such architecture would be a few years later in *Things To Come* (1936), as the spirit of the new supplanting the old and broken, but rather as a metaphor for a rebuilt post-war age and its sanitising pretences grafted haphazardly upon a still-raw scar in the world.



Ulmer's study of architecture when the Bauhaus movement was flourishing certainly inspired this twist on the familiar, as well as informing its symbolic meaning with very personal dimensions: Vitus would very well be Ulmer's own father, lost and thought dead in the endless carnage, come back to find his wife and child. First entrance to Poelzig's house sees the camera, cut free of any apparent escorting presence, instead becoming an animate presence in its own right in exploring the house with its gleaming, capacious interior, the sweeping, steely curve of the staircase cutting across a grid of white lattice, smooth metallic fixtures and glossy surfaces everywhere. Ulmer wasn't the first director to make something of a tension between traditional genre imagery and the nascent brand of modernist construction and technology – Michael Curtiz had touched on a similar disparity with *Doctor X* (1932) – but again took it a little further in investing the disparity with a level of immediate thematic import. Poelzig's house is exact opposite of the delicious cliché of the old dark house but in its way even more menacing and perverse.



The house proves to be a product of Poelzig's specific mind, rooms linked in unexpected ways, different identities kept in different spaces. The camera, courtesy of cinematographer John Mescall, begins the first of its many peculiar, roving movements without any focal character, the character instead becoming the character, suggesting a disembodied presence. Ulmer wasn't the first director to do this in a horror movie – Paul Leni had done it on *The Cat and the Canary* (1927), as had Karl Freund on *The Mummy* – but he does systematise the impulse and turn it into a proper cinematic motif that carries its own suggestive weight. Meanwhile Ulmer's vision of a bright and pretty ultra-modern hell includes the intercom in Poelzig's room that lights up as a voice comes through it, lingers in a kind of zone of menacing futurism that would later be fetishised in very different ways in the James Bond films and the more self-conscious blend of retro and high-tech tropes in movies like *Judex* (1963) and *Batman* (1989). Poelzig himself (Karloff), awakened from his slumber by the buzzing intercom, is first glimpsed through draped gauze around his bed. The curling blonde hair of a beautiful young woman, his wife Karen (Lucille Lund), is visible by his side. Poelzig sits up, black and stiff, like something that's already gone through some gate between life and death, part animate sphinx, part perverse homunculus, recalling the uncanny effect of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) vaulting erect from his coffin but in a less overt way. The union of Eros and Thanatos in one large, comfortable bed, and hard as it is to believe, the film only gets kinkier henceforth.



Poelzig's Majordomo (Egon Brecher), who greets the sodden and tattered visitors, looks like a newspaper cartoonist's particularly lurid caricature of Lugosi reflecting the actor's usual genre image back at him even as Ulmer installs the actor in a more restrained and peculiar type of role. Here Ulmer might be making a little sport of Lugosi's image, but also feeds into a motif of fragmented personas and doubled visages that resounds throughout the film. The Majordomo could be the aspect of Vitus that is a degraded thrall to Poelzig's satanic stature and imperious will, even as the rest of him arrives on a mission of vengeance that awaits the perfect moment to announce itself. Lugosi's capacity to project a sinister romanticism, crucial to the impact he made playing Dracula in Tod Browning's 1931 film, here is given a new tenor with Karloff instead playing the role of the demonically powerful enslaver of women. Vitus' lingering yearning is first evinced in that earlier moment of running his hand over Joan's hair, at once tender and intrusive, nostalgic and furiously mindful, wistfully longing and seething with ruined erotic need. Poelzig, after getting out of bed and coming down to meet his guests, maintains a tense, boding silence, only saying, "Of course" in response to Vitus' carefully eliding requests for aid and shelter for his hapless companions, and barely responding in the subsequent scene in which Vitus makes plain the stakes of the drama and the causes of his wrath.



That turns out to be sourced in his awareness that Poelzig sold out the fortress defences to the Russians, resulting its overthrow and the death and capture of an untold number of defenders. Vitus himself was taken prisoner, and is also aware that Poelzig at some point laid claim to Vitus' wife Karen, telling her Vitus had been killed, and his daughter of the same name. Poelzig's implacable attitude, restrained to commenting, "Vitus, you are mad," swivels on a dime towards generous politeness when Peter interrupts their confrontation, solicitously offering the clueless outsider a drink. Whilst the three men chat amiably about the atmosphere of death hanging about, Vitus's real, violently irrational streak is revealed when he sees a black cat, a pet of Poelzig, wander into the architect's office: so alarmed and repelled is he by the animal's presence Vitus snatches up a palette knife and hurls it at the cat, killing it. Joan enters in a state which Vitus describes as common to people under the influence of the sedative he gave her, rendering them in something like a mediumistic state of sensitivity to their surrounds, and Joan is briefly transformed by narcotic and situation into a darkly knowing priestess. Unfazed by the killing of the animal, she questions, with a hard lilt, "You are frightened doctor?" and looks to Poelzig with a gaze of strangely knowing, suppliant intensity. "He is the unfortunate victim of one of commoner phobias," Poelzig explains to her in regard to Vitus' act, with a lilt of sibilant satisfaction: "But in an extreme form. He has an intense and all-consuming horror...of cats." Peter's comment about Vitus's talk being redolent of "supernatural baloney" inspires one of Lugosi's most famous and excerpted lines of sinisterly accented dialogue: "Supernatural, perhaps...baloney? Perhaps not. There are many things...under the sun."



An open secret of *The Black Cat* was that Ulmer and Ruric, in essentially ignoring Poe's story, took heavy licence instead from that eternally inspirational figure for morbid fantasy, the mystic and artist Aleister Crowley (who amongst others inspired the villains in W. Somerset Maugham's *The Magician*, filmed by Rex Ingram in 1926, and Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*, filmed much later by Terence Fisher). Crowley had found recent, ruinous tabloid fame in the early 1930s after his unsuccessful attempt to sue the publishers of *Laughing Torso*, a memoir by his former acolyte, the Welsh writer Nina Hamnett. Poelzig's house is a fantastically reconceived take on Crowley's Abbey of Thelema, and reports by some former followers about the drinking of a black cat's blood in one of Crowley's ceremonies, seem to have inspired Vitus's horror before Poelzig's cat. Vitus mentions folk legends about the black cat being a deathless emblem of evil, endlessly reincarnated, perhaps hinting such fantasies are at the root of his phobia, or, perhaps, given what soon emerges about Poelzig's life and work, Vitus knows well the uses Poelzig puts his cats to in the alleged Crowley manner. Later, another appearance of a cat, likely just one more of the many Poelzig keeps or the same one resurrected by occult forces, again wrenches a violently spasmodic and humiliating reaction from Vitus. In the meantime, after Joan is safely put back to bed to be restored to chirpy obliviousness but not before planting a voraciously desirous kiss on her husband before passing out, Vitus contrives to swap assigned bedrooms with Peter and keep their connecting door open, something Peter is glad to agree to given how freaked out he's becoming in this place.



Poelzig meanwhile, now caressing that mysterious other cat, descends into old interior of Fort Marmorus, now the labyrinthine substructure of his house, where he keeps a most particular parlour of secrets. In what used to be the chart room for plotting the fire of the fort's long-range guns, he keeps a number of beautiful, dead women, all carefully preserved in pristine splendour, contained in glass cases and hung to seemingly hover, one with hair as if caught in a rush of air, as if caught between state of spirit and their actual, lifelessly corporeal states. These startling images finally tip the film into a realm of truly freakish perversity beyond the historic abstractions mentioned beforehand. Ulmer here substantiates the link with Poe, and his obsessively morbid and entombed fetish-lovers, but given a new spin by Ulmer and Ruric, seeing not a kind of inverted transcendental urge that sees love breaching the shoals of death but as something more actively malevolent. Poelzig, the self-appointed minister and midwife of death as religion, exists at the exact meeting place of sexual obsession and murderous annihilation, driven to suborn the things that tantalise and obsess a man to the degree that they can only exist in perfection in such a state.



One of the dead women is Vitus's wife Karen; his now-grown daughter is the Karen upstairs in Poelzig's bed, contained by his willpower and hypnotism, but that proves a fragile bond, and Poelzig eventually prefers to kill the thing he loves rather than lose it. He stashes the cat in a rotating turret, knowing well it will emerge when he later brings Vitus down. Poelzig storms into the bedroom he placed Vitus in to have their argument out further, only to find Peter in the bed, awakening in blinking bewilderment, whilst Vitus appears in the doorway, drawing the briefly embarrassed Poelzig away. Poelzig leads Vitus down through the warren of cement walls and ironwork to show him his peculiar collection. "She died," Poelzig explains, "Of pneumonia. She was never very strong, you know." Poelzig and Vitus gaze with the same expressions of tantalised ardour and pain at the freeze-dried Karen, but with the enormous disparity of a man who's tried to keep a grip on beauty and the one appalled to find her in such a state. Vitus, before he can shoot Poelzig with a gun he's kept handy, is terrified by the cat's appearance, Vitus recoiling and crashing back through one of the glass, wall-length plotting charts that contrast the grotesque collection with their own, cool calculus of Armageddon.



Ulmer delivers his most remarkable scene as Poelzig escorts Vitus back out of the fort, moving through doorways and up spiralling stairs, all conveyed by the camera's motion, now more firmly excising the living presence of the two men as Poelzig comments, "Are we both not the living dead?" The two men become spirits haunting the old fortress, acting out the still-unresolved spiritual side of the war they were hero and villain of. Karloff's unique voice heard on the sound as Poelzig expostulates, now with the sardonic confidence of a man who knows he has the upper hand, "Now you come here playing avenging angel, childishly thirsting for my blood... We shall play a game, you and I. A game of death if you like." Something about this scene, with Ulmer's directorial daring matched to a cunningly articulated theme, comes to close to some ideal of horror cinema the genre too rarely approaches, entering a rhapsodic zone of pure film allied to a sense of its own haunted nature.



Ulmer's peculiar directorial flourishes are elsewhere slipperier in their assiduous efforts to unmoor the viewer from the usually crisp confines of classical Hollywood technique. Poelzig's first sight of the Alisons, as Vitus dresses Joan's wound, sees Poelzig slowly push open the room door with a menacing crescendo on the soundtrack befitting the first time his uncanny visage is seen properly in the film. But Ulmer's subtler emphasis falls on the act of Poelzig seeing Joan: Ulmer punctuates the act of looking not with a cut but a dissolve, as if evoking the numinous power of both Poelzig's immediate realism, shared with Vitus, that Joan is another, eerily necessary doppelganger of the late Karen brought into this game for a fateful reason, and the mystic nature of attraction itself, something that pulls one in like gravity rather than allowing a quick, clean, rational edit. Ulmer lingers on a shot of Vitus washing his hands in a bowl of water brought to him by Poelzig's serving maid (Anna Duncan), allowing Lugosi to hint at Vitus's lingering medical skill and ethic, whilst also hinting at the ritualistic, a flourish of counteractive white magic, a cleansing moment to offset Poelzig's bottomless evil. When Peter elects to take Joan back to their room, Ulmer moves in for a close-up of Poelzig's hand suddenly clenching the arm on a nude art deco sculpture of a nubile young woman on a desk, making patent Poelzig's firming determination to lay claim to Joan in his manner, shot through with intimations of both erotic desire and monstrous will.



Poelzig's return to his bed after the basement tour illustrates the depth of that will as he easily pacifies the fretting young Karen. Evidently having long since suborned her mind with hypnotic effort, Poelzig drives her back into thoughtless slumber with a wave of his hand, ordering her to remain in the bedroom for all of the following day, to ensure her presence will not become known to her father. Poelzig marrying first mother and then daughter, the latter subsisting in a perpetually enthralled fugue with her mother's frigid corpse below, has a lode of seedy suggestiveness remarkably bold for a mainstream film of its time. "You are the very core and meaning of my life," Poelzig notes to the bewitched woman, before taking up his bedtime reading – the details of a black mass ritual. Karen maintains an air of the childlike, a fairy-tale orphan utterly entrapped by the dark sorcerer, and one who will not get a happy ending: when she stumbles into Joan's room, Joan, realising who she is, tells her that her father is alive and in the house at that moment. Karen isn't immediately credulous, but for Poelzig, overhearing the conversation, even that much violation of his imperium is inconsolable: he stalks into the room, urges Karen out via a connecting door, and Joan cringes in terror when she hears Karen's scream of pain echoing. Joan herself is elect to be the sacrifice at Poelzig's next black mass, with the architect accepting Vitus's challenge to play a game of chess with him with Joan's life the stake.



For all its ghoulishness and gravitas, *The Black Cat* is also riddled with comic asides. Some of them work well enough in the context, like Peter and Joan's shared jokes, emblazoning them as a couple stumbling into this scenario out of a different movie, including trying to pronounce Poelzig's name correctly. There are hints of a dry-ice vein of knowing elsewhere in Ulmer's simultaneous embrace of and games with familiar genre ideas and imagery. Less successful is an extended vignette with a pair of dim ethnic policemen (Albert Conti and Henry Armetta), sent to Poelzig's house to enquire about the bus crash, squabbling over which of their home towns is the nicer place to visit. The film suffers much less from the incessant comic relief often inserted into horror films of the period, but to a certain extent that makes this stuff stick out more sorely, particularly given the film's extremely brief running time at just over an hour. Similarly, Heinz Roemheld's almost incessant score, decorated with plentiful quotes from Schubert and Bruchner, is a little aggravating, albeit in a way many found effective at the time, lending the movie a neurotically insistent tenor similar to the score of the also Lugosi-starring *White Zombie* (1932).



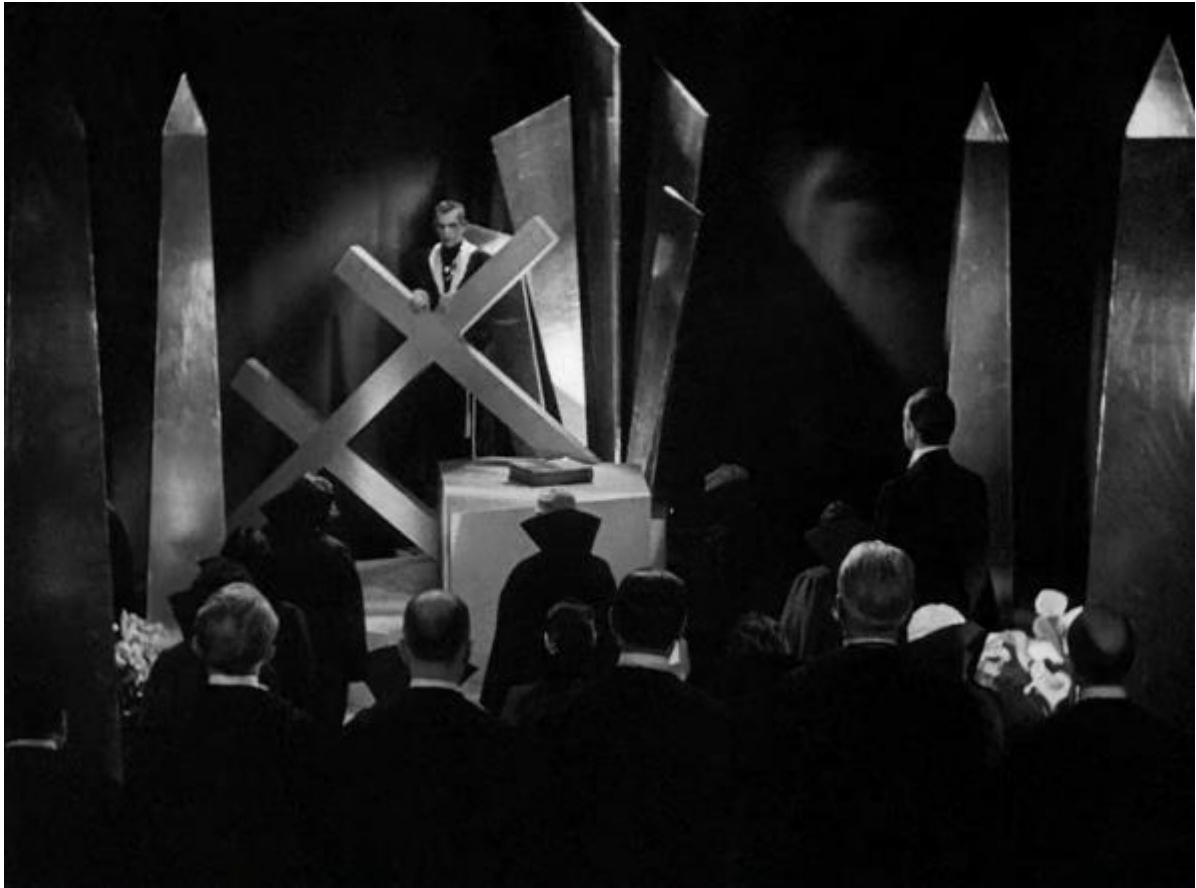
Ulmer would revisit and amend many of the concepts he explores in *The Black Cat*. *Detour* would hinge on its antihero's foolish act of identity theft and entrance into a netherworld, edging into the ambiguous zone where Poe and Ulmer's imagination met, where individuals become mere generational iterations, personas transient, identity porous. *Bluebeard* would return to the figure of the obsessive mastermind slaying his objects of desire and figuratively remaking them as the puppets under his control (notably, that film's star John Carradine has one of his many early bit parts here towards the end as the organist for Poelzig's cabal), whilst *The Strange Woman* would to a great extent invert the gender expectations in portraying an antiheroine with a similarly possessive streak, and *Ruthless* would present Zachary Scott's character as Poelzig-like in his overriding desire to possess everything belonging to a rival. The title character of *The Man From Planet X*, a film that would offer in its threadbare yet ingenious fashion make commentary on the emerging brand of 1950s alien invasion films, would like Vitus be a figure driven to destructive ends after being mistreated and betrayed.



Ulmer's influence and anticipations were likewise strong. Of all the great Old Hollywood directors with European backgrounds, Ulmer might well have been the one with the most immediate connections to avant garde artistic mind of the 1920s, and his films share a proto-existentialist sense of horror and alienation and unstable sense of genre. *Detour* would bridge the era of Kafka and the Theatre of the Absurd and the still-to-come moment of "alienation cinema" of Michelangelo Antonioni – indeed Antonioni would partly remake *Detour* as *The Passenger* (1975). Ingmar Bergman, a fan of Lugosi and the early Universal horror films, seems to have pretty blatantly lifted the notion of a game of chess played with life-and-death stakes for *The Seventh Seal* (1957). Whilst Ulmer's more lurid, outright violence and perversity contrasts the suggestive approach of Val Lewton, that other Eastern European poet of the macabre would take up elements of Ulmer's approach on *The Black Cat*, a film where by the usual horror standard virtually nothing happens, with both the Lewton-produced, Mark Robson-directed *The Seventh Victim* (1943) and *Isle of the Dead* (1945) betraying considerable influence. Later directors ranging from William Castle (*The House on Haunted Hill*, 1958) to Curtis Harrington (*Games*, 1967) and Michael Giacchino (*Werewolf By Night*, 2022) would pay homage to Ulmer's peculiar blend of Gothic and Modernist tropes. Michael Mann's *The Keep* (1983), with its neck-twisting cinematic geography and sculptural blend of the atavistic and the stylised, and *Manhunter* (1987) with its grinning, gentlemanly monster locked inside a glistening, sterile modern lunatic asylum, both owe something to Ulmer's example. In rather odder permutation, Lugosi's "Supernatural, perhaps" line would be sampled for use in songs and soundtracks in later decades, most particularly The Monkees' vehicle *Head* (1968).



That Vitus and Poelzig are two halves of one person is hinted in the hemispheric nature of their disciplines – Vitus a psychiatrist, Poelzig the architect, as if Ulmer was consciously setting the two sides of his education in combat, surgeon of the mind versus the artificer of concrete. Poelzig the ultimate sadist and Vitus the ultimate martyr, even to the point when their roles finally, gruesomely reverse: surely the ultimate sadist must harbour somewhere within a desire for the ultimate pain. Ulmer, like his characters, plays games where the stakes are sensed in that mediumistic way: nothing Poelzig does, for most of the narrative, is overtly threatening or hostile, and yet the strangeness rattles Peter, who becomes determined to leave the house with Joan. Poelzig's scene of settling into bed with Karen, which makes clear who she is, sees Ulmer cut away to Vitus in his room with Thamal, the servant drawing out a knife with an evident intention of fulfilling his employer's will and deal out a quick, bloody, well-deserved death to the architect, but Vitus stops him for reasons that are never entirely spelt out, but seem rooted in Vitus's desire to expose and destroy Poelzig's circle of fellow Satanists as well their priest, a game that needs to be played right to the brink: so Vitus tells his servant that until that brink moment arrives Thamal must act as Poelzig's servant rather than his own.



Vitus is the film's protagonist where both the Alisons are mere innocents abroad (although Manners, who had been stuck play proper, rather wet gentlemen in *Dracula* and *The Mummy*, here at least gets to be a much more vigorous, humorous presence), and yet Vitus is never a reassuring figure, with the suggestion that he like Poelzig has been left less than properly human by what's befallen him. Ulmer never makes explicit whether Poelzig's turn to Satanism preceded the war, making his act of betrayal a special, monumental sacrifice to dark forces, or whether he turned to it afterwards, as a way of imposing shape and sense upon his actions and the carnage of the war. That Ulmer was very likely musing on the rise of Nazism in Germany with *The Black Cat* is reflected in his ultimate conception of Poelzig, who can certainly work as a metaphor for Nazism both in root and outlook. Poelzig is the twisted branch grown off a blighted tree, one who can only be countered by an equal and opposite force. The architect offers an artist-impresario who tries to force his own experience of war into something coherent by becoming a would-be master of death and pain, and extending this special privilege to his followers, his strange, angular gestures communicating on some level beneath the rational and liminal. The double-X formed sculpture that serves as Poelzig's sacrificial altar and cult emblem, nominally a mockery of the Christian cross, can also then be taken as a lampoon of the Swastika.



That Vitus is well aware of Poelzig's proclivities seems to hint they were already developed when Vitus knew the architect pre-war. Finding the visiting policemen can't give them a lift because they ride bicycles, Peter resolves simply to walk to town, whilst Vitus and Poelzig play their game of chess with alien intensity. "I beg your pardon, but do you play chess?" Poelzig asks Peter at one point, as if in some coded language befitting a sport of those who truly engage with existence, to Peter's bemused answer of no. "Then we will go on with our game," Poelzig tells Peter after he announces his intention to leave, his customary politeness hardening into something more foreboding. Vitus loses the game, and Vitus fulfils his unspoken pledge by having Thamal knock Peter out and imprison Joan. Peter is cast into an odd prison, a rotating turret down in the fort, whilst Joan is prepared for the black mass, held in Poelzig's Satanic chapel, a space of angular metallic forms and that double-X standard, upon which Joan is hung for the climactic ritual.



The film's air of inexplicable menace never entirely dispels even as the stakes are laid out in entirely human and concrete terms: some enigmatic force makes itself apparent when one of Poelzig's female cultists, turning around during the ceremony and seeming to glimpse something, suddenly screams and faints. This distraction gives Vitus and Thamal their chance to snatch Joan from her cross and escape down into the fort with her. Whether this is the result of some contrivance from Vitus, even just the woman's alertness to the presence of his singular, vengeful will, or a random flash of hysterical reaction, or an actual manifestation of a supernatural or even divine influence, is left entirely ambiguous. Joan herself faints similarly under Poelzig's mesmeric gaze, and the way Ulmer frames her hanging on the cross, at the top of his frame hanging into it, with Poelzig looming out of focus beyond before turning and closing on her, extends his disconcerting sense of space and action. Ulmer cuts the black mass ceremony into odd shards of cubist action, cutting between Poelzig's ritualistic gestures and the cultists donning their robes and lifting their hoods in robotic lockstep, ranks dressed in patterns of white and black, like a mockery not so much of church ritual but military, framed in a way that renders them abstract. Then Ulmer moves in for delirious close-ups on their variously expectant, desirous, decadent expressions, the dedicated followers of evil fashion seen less as authentically wicked than as people seeking some proof, even in the negative, of a world beyond the world.



Meanwhile, down in the turret prison, Peter manages to find a control switch that lets him rotate the turret and escape into a locked antechamber, where he lies in wait for the Majordomo to enter, knocking him out and escaping. Poelzig, tossing away his priestly robe, chases Vitus and Thamal down into the fort, whilst the Majordomo recovers and shoots Thamal, but Thamal proves too tough to kill quickly, still overpowering and mortally injuring the Majordomo. Joan, reviving, is initially afraid of Vitus but he makes clear he's saved her, and she tells him about Karen's presence in the house. Vitus, trying to get information about her from the dying Majordomo finds her body under a sheet in Poelzig's taxidermy room. Poelzig bursts in on the sight and he and Vitus struggle, Vitus overpowering his foe with the bloody-mouthed Thamal's last effort of strength for help. They shackle Poelzig to his own embalming rack, as Vitus comments with mad exultation, with stripped shirt, and promises the most brutal revenge he can conceive of. Selecting a nice scalpel for the job, he begins slicing the skin off Poelzig to his writhing wails of agony, finally writing a sonnet of pain on the very flesh of the great evildoer in a ghastly but appropriate echo of medieval torture doled out upon the accused witch. Ulmer's coup here is in handing Vitus a revenge that is, in its way, deserved to the last skin flap, but also grotesque to an extreme. Of course, Ulmer can't show the kind of gore such a scene entails in a 1934 film, but gets as close as possible by portraying it in silhouette, Vitus merrily dabbing away at Poelzig's face with the blade, whilst his wails of pleading agony, though muted so as not to be too vivid, are still audible on the soundtrack.



Despite the distancing devices this is incredibly strong stuff, perhaps all the more so for suggesting rather than explicitly portraying, and whilst other horror films of the moment were playing just as rough, like the women being bled dry of blood in *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and the homoerotic torture in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, this one might have played its own part in auguring in the Production Code the following year. Vitus does pay a moralistic price for finally losing control. When Peter, having retrieved the Majordomo's pistol, shoots Vitus through the locked, barred door to the room when he thinks Vitus is attacking Joan when he actually tries to help her let her husband in. Vitus, seemingly barely perturbed by his own imminent death, warns the Alisons they have five minutes to escape the fort, before flipping a switch that will ignite the old dynamite charges still lodged under Marmorus, whilst narrating his actions to the apparently still-living Poelzig with a tone of mordant acceptance. The couple of course manage to get out just before the whole hilltop erupts in thunder, and flag down a vehicle, before finally being restored to the train on the way out of the nightmare zone again. The leave-'em-laughing coda tries to set jangled nerves to rest, but the dark dreams *The Black Cat* lets out proved impossible to put back in the box.

La Llorona (1933)

this island rod



Part of the unique texture and attraction of Mexican folklore lies in its peculiarly tragic and melancholy mystique, welling from a worldview borne of civilisations crashing together, of conquest and deprivation, in deep and significant conflict with the sprightlier fantasies of the nation to its north. The figure of *la Llorona*, the Weeping Woman, has deep roots in both Iberian and Mesoamerican cultures, was forged into modern form by their meeting, and persists across the Americas. The specifically Mexican version of *la Llorona* stands alongside the imagery of the Day of the Dead as the country's most famous folk cultural product. *La Llorona* is a ghostly woman, cursed to wander forever for the crime of killing her child after being betrayed by her husband. Always seeking her child in a tormented and distraught state, she visits indiscriminate vengeance on those unlucky enough to stray in her path. She has similarities to other mythic figures including Lilith from Talmudic tradition, Medea from the Greek, and the Irish banshee, in that her appearances supposedly portend death, particularly for children who stray too close to water, a function that places her in a long tradition of campfire tales designed to keep children close at hand.



One of Mexican cinema's first sound films when it was released in 1933, Ramón Peón's *La Llorona* is fascinating not least because of the way it tries to enfold an entire national historical paradigm into its narrative, simultaneously dramatizing and analysing its cultural roots, and illustrates those ideas with flashes of artfully composed imagery and layers of complex storytelling. Peón, a Cuban-born director and actor, made hundreds of films in a forty-year career, but *La Llorona* is easily the best-remembered. The script was co-written by Fernando de Fuentes, often described as the first great master of Mexican film in the sound era, and who would go on to make his own classic horror film, *El Fantasma del Convento* (1934). The opening vignette strikes an immediately creepy and mysterious note as a man hears a deeply unsettling spectral shriek, and promptly drops dead from a sudden heart attack. The body is brought to Dr Ricardo de Acuña (Ramón Pereda), who dismisses the supernatural report attached to it.



Ricardo soon learns, however, that he is the special heir to a peculiar curse, rooted in the great and terrible history of the nation, thanks to a literal and figurative spectre haunting his family, about to manifest on the fourth birthday of his son Juanito. Ricardo's father Don Fernando (Paco Martínez) takes him aside after the birthday party and cautions him that Juanito might be doomed to follow in the footsteps of Ricardo's older brother, who was knifed to death on his fourth birthday like many other first-born in the family. The Acuña, Don Fernando tells Ricardo, are connected to the heritage of Hernan Cortés, the conquistador of Mexico. The tangle of their inheritance is connected with the lingering trauma of both the larger national project and its microcosmic likeness, found in Cortés' relationship with Doña Marina (María Luisa Zea), the native Aztec woman remembered to history as La Malinche who served Cortés as translator and mistress. According to Don Fernando's recounting of folklore, Marina, after being stripped of her son by Cortés, fell into hopelessly insane wandering in the search for her missing child.



A few generations later, one of the conquistador's heirs, Marquis Rodrigo de Cortés (Alberto Martí), had a child by another mistress with a suggestively Aztec name, Ana Xicontécatl (Adriana Lamar), and hesitated at naming their son his official heir as he planned to marry an aristocratic woman. Set upon by robbers in the street, Rodrigo's sword battle with them attracted the attention of the gallant Captain Diego de Acuña (Pereda again), who aided him in fighting them off. Diego's immediate attraction to Ana and appalled reaction to learning of Rodrigo's deceptions inspired him to angrily intervene at Rodrigo's wedding, confronting the wedding party with Ana and child. Whilst Rodrigo and Diego met to duel to the death, Ana, in a fit of vengeful loathing, killed her child and then herself, only to be transformed into the shrieking wraith of *la llorona* to haunt the land ever since. The good modern doctor, Ricardo is sceptical after his father's recounting of this folklore, but is quickly confronted with evidence the curse is still in effect – if being executed by rather more earthbound interests.



Peón displays a touch similar to the likes of Tod Browning, Karl Freund, and Carl Dreyer, certainly on the same page as them in trying to evoke a sonorous atmosphere in the unfamiliar climes of newfangled talkie cinema. The opening is a marvellous little ideogram of visual mystique and symbolic punch, sketching a basic folkloric representation of an encounter with *la llorona*, with the solitary man walking down a city street at midnight and passing by an ornate old archway and barred gate, suggesting the irreconcilable nature of past and future, rich and common folk, Latin American heritage and modern urban cosmopolitanism. The man hears *la llorona's* fateful cry and slumps down. Peón cuts to a gruesome close-up of the man's pain-warped face and tracks down to observe his fingers curling up in death, then dissolving to the sight of them, now cold and stiff, jutting out from under the clinical white sheet covering his corpse in the hospital ward.



The dead hand is quickly hidden again under the gleaming linen, linen the same colour as the swathing white of surgical gowns worn by Ricardo and others on his medical team, and the bright lights overhead render everything lucid and tame, the product of mere biological phenomena. Peón presents the swathing white as emblematic not just of modern, antiseptic medical knowledge, but of a virtually angelic counterpoint to the grim nocturnal maledictions of *la llorona*. Ricardo, handsome, brilliant, and springing from an old and respected family, is the very exemplar of a modern Mexico, wielding both scalpel and scientific rationality with precision in dispelling any lingering ills in the bodies both physical and politic. Nonetheless Ricardo is soon drawn into the chamber of arcana that is his father's study, with all its amassed lore regarding the history of the family and its fatefully shared heritage with the founding figures of Mexico, to be regaled with legends of ancient loves and hates, life and death, passion and crime, each a stage in the evolution of a schismatic inheritance and also a repeating point in a cycle.



Peón's habit of letting his camera linger on the far side of capacious sets seems to betray a common uncertainty with early sound filmmaking on mediating style in the new medium, but as *La Llorona* unfolds the director proves to be trying hard to create a carefully manipulated sense of unity in space and sound, weaving a subtly haunting atmosphere. He offers brilliant flashes of camera invention, like the pivoting shot of the young children ensconced for Juanito's birthday feast, caught in the peculiar geometry of the ornate dining table. Later Peón offers a similarly, dreamily graceful survey of the Marquis Rodrigo's wedding guests, as if trying to emphasise his story as unfolding within a social-historical texture and meditating on a bygone age's expression of its values in a similar way to the early depiction of the modern medical ward: such are the way-stations of life and death in diverse epochs. The first scene of Rodrigo and Ana contains a fillip of desperate romanticism as the Viceroy finds he cannot leave Ana's presence without returning for another passionate embrace, Peón filming them with Jesus on the cross and flickering candle hovering hazily in the foreground in boding patience for their prospective union and caution against the imminent decisions that will destroy them.



Peón marvellously cordoned universe unexpectedly marries a distinctively Latin American type of gothic horror with aspects of the unstable, fiend-riddled secret worlds within worlds out of Louis Feuillade and early Fritz Lang. Peón's dreamily stylised evocation of colonial Mexico City is a survey of implacable brick walls with patches of florid design like outcrops of coral, a place of polarised interiors and exteriors, a civilisation arranged so twains do not meet, at least not until coincidences force new pollinations, as when Captain Diego saves Ricardo and so is ushered fatefully into his love nest. The flourish of swashbuckling action as the two men fight off the criminal gang proves ironic, given the next time the two men meet with swords in hands before Ana's house it's to kill each-other, as well as the sense of illusory action in a story actually about cyclical history and dogging truths that cannot be easily slain. Later Peón reveals the interiors of the castle-strong Acuna villa to be riddled with secret warrens, within which lurk the living reminders of historical legacy and guilt: a mysterious lurking figure, swathed in black robe and hood, gazes out from hidden nooks upon the hapless family, stone knife in hand and telltale signet ring carved with a skull motif on the knuckle.



The first flashback sequence sees Ana donning these trinkets before committing the slaying of her and Ricardo's son, a gesture that removes her crime from the realm of a pure spasm of maternal nihilism and instead inducting the killing into a ritual lineage stretching back to Aztec times, with Ana and her descendants at once victims and malefactors, avenging crimes done unto them but also riddling their nation with the literally manifest spirit of atavistic anti-reason and primal evil. The second flashback, depicting La Malinche's ordeals, is offered as an interlude of expressionistic pathos, Marina and her loyal maid hovering in desolation as the scene of being stripped of her son plays out in superimposed remembering, before the ill-starred woman wanders the streets, claspng at random children in her daze before being dragged before Cortes, who frees her, only for her to retort, "Free? Your offspring will suffer my revenge!" Marina is revealed to wear the skull ring and possess the stone knife, deliberately slaying herself in the ritual manner so her spirit emanates to reign over a benighted country.



Meanwhile the theme of superstition is more humorously mooted when the Acunas' aging servant Mario (Carlos Orellana), noting only thirteen children are sitting at the party table, adds himself to their number. Mario, whilst offering the film's comic relief, also nonetheless evinces another of the film's themes as one of the servants in the Acuna household who belong to a servile class that's been serving the family for generations, also including Nana Goya (Esperanza del Real): the type of aristocratic largesse and loyalty is ultimately revealed to have been the vehicle for the insidious curse to linger, as the generations of nominal servants have actually been sleeper agents claiming their sacrificial victims from the family's first-born sons. Ricardo foils the first attempt to snatch his son away by the lurking killer when he manages to penetrate the labyrinth under the house and win back the boy, but other attempts will be made.



This mischievous evocation of social hierarchy turned into a double-edged weapon feeds into the deliciously surreal sight of the robed killer, eyes gazing out amidst pale circles within black cloth, stalking out from secret passages in monkish garb with murderous intent to invade the plush environs of the Acuna manse with its fanciful décor, whilst down below the house an Aztec sacrificial temple has been installed, a sinister place complete with carved stone altar and billowing smoke from votive fires. The forces of modern lucidity and authority soon turn the tables as police join the Acunas in penetrating the hidden passages, bringing light and clarity to the seemingly fathomless mystery after the assassin slays Don Fernando and sets sights on young Juanito. Ricardo and the cops find a hidden book in this labyrinth, which gives up the details of the curse's roots in La Malinche's experience, and soon after catch the hooded killer poised in the temple over Juanito ready to deliver the sacrificial blow, only to be gunned down and revealed as Nana Goya. Pereda readily embodies both the classical, forthright Mexican gallant and his keen-eyed descendant, the sharp corners of his moustache enough to cut a swathe through all musty legends.



But it's Lamar who really invests the film with a compelling screen presence, projecting intense sensuality and a smouldering wilfulness redolent of a nature barely contained by the ornate trappings of Spanish imperial-era garb, provoking the most taboo reactions from the descendants of the conquistadors and turning the same capacity for livewire passion on herself in an auto-da-fe which births *a la llorona* shade. The ghost rises up from her splayed corpse and wafts out the villa window, releasing her weird and wild shriek, arresting the duel of her treacherous lover and her erstwhile defender, an exceptionally simple but peculiarly effective vignette. A similar spirit is also seen vacating the body of Doña Marina and, at the very end, from the felled corpse of Nana Goya, a concluding touch that delivers a particular sting. Where the majority of the film seems to be demystifying the whole idea of the eponymous shade, which is a veritable world-spirit, the emblem of woe and unstilled tragedy itself, and reducing it to something accountable to human agency, this conclusion finally reveals *la llorona* to be a perpetually reborn force, defying attempts to place such entities at the mercy of modern rationality, always to haunt the nation as the roving expression of its accumulating sins. Whilst not free of the creaky qualities of early sound cinema, *La Llorona* is a classic of world horror cinema that deserves to be much better known.



Night Tide (1961) / Queen Of Blood (1966)

film freedonia



Director / Screenwriter: Curtis Harrington

When I was a young boy, no more than six years old, my mother and I visited a funfair built on a pier, a place of fascinating if weary fantasias that would be demolished just a few years later. We ventured at one point into the hall of mirrors and after a while realised we simply couldn't find our way out. Eventually we did locate a door, which proved to emerge on the narrow gangway at the pier's edge, green seawater lapping around the pylons beneath, and we traversed that path back to the world. That incident has remained intense in my memory ever since. Only a couple of years later the pier would be demolished, replaced by nothing that would so thoroughly infiltrate a child's imagination. It is one reason I nonetheless feel a powerful personal connection with Curtis Harrington's *Night Tide*.



Harrington, born in Los Angeles in 1926, made his first short films when still a teenager. Around the same time he had his first sexual experience with a fellow, male student, a footballer, and in Harrington's art meditations on love and eroticism were so often to be wound in deeply with his art. Harrington's early work included a version of Edgar Allan Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1942), a subject he would return to with his last completed work, *Usher* (2000). After graduating college with a degree in film studies he immediately deepened his credibility as a cineaste by publishing a book on Josef von Sternberg at the age of 22, and he would retain his stature as an archivist through helping preserve James Whale's *The Old Dark House* (1932). He served as cinematographer on Kenneth Anger's *Puce Moment* (1948) and later played a role in his *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954). In this period he also became connected with the mystic Thelema movement founded by Aleister Crowley, which Anger was deeply involved with, and he encountered another acolyte, Marjorie Cameron, an artist and performer who would eventually have an important onscreen role in his feature film debut. Cameron had been married to Jack Parsons, a senior figure in the movement and also a rocket engineering pioneer who had helped found the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and Harrington made Cameron's artwork the subject of one of his documentary *The Wormwood Star* (1956).



Harrington also met and worked with fellow experimental film pioneer Maya Deren, who had her own esoteric religious creed as a practicing voodoo priestess, and spent a period working as an assistant to high-profile producer Jerry Wald, before venturing out to announce his emergence as a director of full-length films with *Night Tide*. Harrington's original screenplay for his debut, based on a short story he wrote and initially called *The Girl From Beneath The Sea*, was sold to Roger Corman in 1956, but also reportedly had a meeting with interested financiers connected to the gangster Mickey Cohen. The film was eventually produced by Aram Kantarian on a stringent budget of \$75,000. Completed in 1961, *Night Tide* had its premiere and appeared at film festivals, gaining plaudits in many quarters. But proper release was delayed for several reasons, including, according to star Dennis Hopper, the lack of a Hollywood filmmakers' union seal of approval, and because the production entity, Virgo, couldn't pay Pathé Films for their lab processing work, and it wasn't until Corman stepped in to negotiate a deal with Pathé and the film was taken up for distribution by American International Pictures, that it finally entered general release in 1963. Hopper credited the film's unusual journey as helping spark the American independent film movement, in proving that movies could be made and released outside the nominal system, leading on to the likes of his own *Easy Rider* (1969).



On the back of the film's modest success, Harrington signed a deal with Corman that saw him fashion two films, *Voyage to the Prehistoric Planet* (1965) and *Queen of Blood*, built around footage repurposed from Russian sci-fi films Corman had bought the international rights to. In this venture he followed Francis Ford Coppola, who had concocted *Battle Beyond The Sun* (1963), and preceding Peter Bogdanovich's foray with *Voyage to the Planet of Prehistoric Women* (1967). Harrington's small but fascinating oeuvre has long been a secret trove for movie lovers, not least because he rode at the vanguard of a generation of American filmmakers defined by an obsessive film buff background and not spawned by the studio system, laying groundwork for the emergence of the New Hollywood, Movie Brat, and later Indie Film movements. As a queer filmmaker, Harrington became a defining figure for a cinema overtly inflected with a camp sensibility. *Night Tide* meditates in a subtle way on the problems of finding love and contending with an inner nature that feels alien and aberrant in a world without guidance and care. His more overt works in that mode include *Queen of Blood*, which essentially depicts a monster drag queen from outer space. *What's the Matter with Helen?* (1971) and *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* (1971) emerged as a diptych extending a brand established by Robert Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1963), built around diva turns by aging star actresses, with Harrington adding his own, specific edge of absurd fetishism, fuelled by the screeching friction between a decayed age of Hollywood glamour screeching and fetid landscapes of small-timers and small-townners. *Games* (1967) began as a mischievously decadent and colourful portrait of a threesome enjoying sexual adventures and dangerous thrills, before devolving into a variation on *Les Diaboliques* (1955) in its second half. Harrington also did much work in television, whilst his last feature was 1985's Sylvia Kristel vehicle *Mata Hari*.



Even if Harrington's career was ultimately disappointing given his initial promise, few horror films wield the inscrutable allure and nigh-perfect exploration of a very specific mood as his early work, *Night Tide* in particular, a portrait in eerie disquiet and forlorn romanticism, with a lilt of fairy-tale charm. It can be easily described as a film nerd's remake-cum-personal assimilation of the Jacques Tourneur-directed, Val Lewton-produced *Cat People* (1942), offering a variation on that film's basic proposition of a lonely young woman obsessed by a monstrous identity she fears taking her over. But that doesn't entirely do it justice, as Harrington also renders it a portrait of a time, a place, a culture, a way of thinking and feeling. *Night Tide* is infused with a quality that, like much of the best low-budget genre film, adapts to circumstance to imbue happenstance realism with a carefully wrought stylisation, recorded in lucid black-and-white that edges into the suggestive and the surreal at calculated moments. By contrast, *Queen of Blood* is a cobbled chimera of a movie, one that can indeed be likened to the kind of sideshow attraction the mystique of which Harrington celebrated in his previous film, this one seeing Harrington move to a freaky fantasia of space exploration loaded with elements inescapably prefiguring *Alien* (1979) and charged with a sickly eroticism registering in its fervent colour photography. Both films nonetheless are charged with a virtually unique signature of dreamy atmosphere and perverse obsessions laced into their narratives.



Harrington's semi-underground connections are apparent in *Night Tide* not only in his visual textures, but also in the ideal poetic-realist locale he chose, the authentic-feeling evocation he offers of the seamy beauty and tacky magic of bohemian atmosphere of Venice, California, circa 1961. A housing development and resort locale built on the coast on the fringes of Los Angeles in the early 1900s, Venice was created in deliberate mimicry of the Italian city, complete with dug canals and manifold bridges. After being annexed as a suburb of LA in the 1920s, Venice fell upon hard times, and the cheapness of the housing began attracting immigrants and bohemians in droves, leading to its slow renaissance: today of course it's one of Los Angeles's most famous and pricey locales. When Harrington made his movie the subcultural enclave mixed with the remnants of the two-bit carnival culture that had once been the town's characteristic and the faux-Italianate architecture stood cheek-by-jowl with opportunistic oil drilling equipment and virtual slums, weaving an odd, more than faintly unreal atmosphere. That atmosphere had already been ingeniously exploited by Orson Welles as he had the town stand in for the fictional border town depicted in *Touch Of Evil* (1958), and *Night Tide* strongly suggests Harrington was working as much under Welles' influence as Val Lewton and *Cat People*, although arguably its sea-salts-and-tall-stories atmosphere is closer to *The Lady From Shanghai* (1946) and *The Immortal Story* (1968) than that of *Touch Of Evil's* sleazy virtuosity.



Hopper plays Johnny Drake, a young sailor from the Midwest who, on leave in Los Angeles, visits the Venice waterfront, and ventures into a coffee house called the Blue Grotto, where an excellent jazz combo plays. Johnny settles alone at a table and surveys his surrounds, the vista of his gaze filled with either couples out on dates or other solitary people, some of them looking a little scarily to a young man's eye like warnings of aging alone. Johnny's eye finally lights on Mora (Linda Lawson), a solitary, nervous young woman listening intently to the music. Johnny asks to sit with her on the pretext of a better view, and begins a fumbling effort to strike up a conversation despite her display of absorption in the jazz. A strange, haughty lady (Cameron) swans around the coffee house and addresses Mora in Greek, plainly disturbing her and causing her to leave the nightspot in a hurry. Johnny, bewildered, follows her out and walks with her to her place of residence, which proves to be an apartment over a funfair hall containing a merry-go-round, on a pier jutting out into the dark ocean. Johnny's attempt to kiss Mora is rebuffed, but when he makes an anxious appeal to see her again she agrees and tells him to come around for breakfast the following day. Johnny, joyful at making a connection, climbs onto the railing of the pier and walks its narrow way.



Harrington quickly places his two essential young lovers in a context at once palpable and dreamlike, touched with ethereal romanticism but also with a faint tremor of disquiet beneath it. Mora seems like Johnny's deepest fantasy made flesh at first glance, lovely and innocent-seeming, but curiously isolated, as distinct and adrift as he is despite being a familiar fixture in this place he's gravitated to, available but also trailed by some indefinable mystery that soon starts to resolve into something concrete. Her encounter with Cameron's strange woman recreates the scene in *Cat People* where Elizabeth Russell's mysterious beauty abruptly addresses Simone Simon's Irina as "Sister," and with a similar suggestion of some binding identity, some otherness, a quality that only those who share recognise. Although Harrington's variation has a slightly different emphasis, in part because Cameron is considerably older than Lawson and so there's less the crackle of forbidden sexuality being grazed and more of a conspiracy of elders, a slant that proves relevant as the film unfolds and the strange woman's role in the affair is left tantalising at the very end. Johnny's attempt to draw Mora in for a romantic clinch resolves with a similarly furtive and agonised note even as Johnny tries to be bold, only exposing his desperation.



The next day, when he shows up for breakfast, Johnny is treated to a meal of fresh mackerel Mora purchased, and they eat together in the balcony of her flat, which commands views of the ocean and the Venice beachfront, with only the presence of the raucous merry-go-round below as a price to pay, which Mora doesn't mind anyway. Johnny, when Mora asks what his story is, responds with heavy-footed humour, "I'm in the United States navy!" but then explains how he cared for his sickly mother until her death, and then joined the navy to see the world, but hasn't gotten any further than a sojourn in Hawaii and his current posting at the San Pedro Naval Base. Mora meanwhile is cagier about her background, but starts to reveal it as she introduces Johnny later to her adoptive father, Captain Samuel Murdock (Gavin Muir), who is also her employer in a peculiar means of living. Mora poses as a mermaid in a sideshow attraction, reclining in serene stasis, wearing a glittering fake tail and resting underneath a tank of water pretending to brush the hair of a long wig in listless fashion, hair which later seems to transform into the entrapping tentacles of a great octopus. Harrington's fondness for a fairy-tale like mood is further amplified by Mora's Snow White-like touch with animals, a seagull that hovers around the balcony interrupting breakfast by landing and allowing Mora to pet it lovingly. The notion that both Johnny and Mora have been trapped in a sort of delayed development, one part adult, one part still child, is signalled in both Johnny's sailor suit and Mora's abode.



“I guess we’re all a little afraid of what we love,” Johnny comments when Mora describes her simultaneous attraction to the ocean and her anxiety before it, offering the essential theme of both *Night Tide* and *Queen of Blood*, films in which desire and need blend with a death-urge as realised through alluring femmes fatale, and with the common quality apparent in both Mora and her alien counterpart in the subsequent film of being obliged through basic biological obligation to act in ways that may incidentally destroy others. With *Night Tide* Harrington found a perfect canvas to transfer over to commercial feature cinema ideas and preoccupations of the experimental film world he’d sprung from. The ticky-tacky wonderland of the fairground where Mora lives and works is a space where illusion reigns, falseness has its own reality, and childhood and adulthood can commune. Mora’s job is pitched exactly at the point where a childish delight in and need for transportation and simmering, nascent erotic longing converge in the image of the lounging mermaid, desirable and pathetic, alluring and amusing, fetishistic and untouchable, a vision resolving out the Jungian depths.



Similar in its sparse ambience and fetish for decaying public infrastructure, to Herk Harvey's incidental companion piece *Carnival of Souls* (1962), *Night Tide* is different to that film in its warmer, less moralistic tone. It also anticipates later work by George Romero, including *The Amusement Park* (1972) and *Martin* (1976) – particularly the latter, in explicitly contrasting the alienated anxieties of youthful characters with a repressive, imposed dread of their inner selves, creating a homicidal impulse in an otherwise innocent protagonist who can't find any other way out of their obsessions – a cunning metaphor for the way the past is always inescapable when the present is devoid of coherent alternative. In *Night Tide* this anxiety slowly coaxed out of Mora as she and Johnny draw close, but only becomes clear when Murdock finally tells Johnny that he found Mora as a child on a tiny Greek island, and believes she belongs to the race of legendary sirens, and, despite her superficial innocence inevitably gives in to urges to lure in and then kill men who want to be her lover. Johnny finds this idea offensively absurd, but quickly confirms Mora believes it to be true, wearing away at the fabric of her essentially placid psyche, even believing that the oceanic sound within a seashell is proof of her otherworldly connection.



Harrington pays tribute to Lewton's films not only in atmosphere and psychological tone but also in a humanist theme, with the eclectic swirl of weird but decent characters who Johnny encounters, essentially adopting the young man, and the evoked fragility of the psyche and the innocence of young people: small acts of kindness and cruelty count for a lot in this landscape. The villainy, which proves to stem from a distinctly earthly and immediate source, stems from a desperate desire to not be abandoned, but finally creates a situation that destroys exactly what it seeks to control. Harrington's sexuality offers a constant undercurrent, mediated and universalised through the threat of the younger man to the older in stealing away his object of adoration, and the dogged threat of total abandonment that haunts all. Another detectable influence on the film is the French artist and filmmaker Jean Cocteau, with his crisp yet treacherous visions of beautiful demon lovers and numinous portals riddling the mundane as expostulated in *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) and *Orphée* (1949), and Harrington even got a chance to make the connection plainer with a cameo in the Blue Grotto scene by Barbette, a former circus star who had appeared in Cocteau's debut, *Blood of a Poet* (1932). Hues of the surrealist interest in the dreamscape's horizon point where sex and death blend and unify, which Anger in particular had delighted, and the fascination with dark doubles and mysterious pursuers Deren had conjured in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1944), are repurposed as narratively functional by Harrington.



The figuration of Mora as a cursed destroyer of men is part and parcel with her unique awareness and connection to the natural world, the girl who can coax seagulls into her arms also claims to hear the denizens of the ocean calling to her. This in turn provokes Johnny to determined but ineffectual efforts to break this absurd chain of thinking. Johnny first hears hints of this enigma through people who know Mora, including the merry-go-round operator (Tom Dillon), his shy but helpful and slightly gossipy granddaughter Ellen Sands (Luana Anders), and charmingly batty fortune teller Madame Romanovitch (Marjorie Eaton), a trio he encounters one afternoon gathered in the hall below Mora's apartment. Ellen, perpetually helpful, brings coffee and tea – the latter for Madame Abramovitch, who laments the popularity of teabags impacts on her ability to read the leaves – whilst a friendly but dogged detective, Henderson (H.E. West), hovers around the pier, quizzed over an ongoing investigation. His visit finally gives the others an excuse to tell Johnny about how Mora's last two boyfriends, both young, pleasant men like himself, vanished without trace. When Johnny and Mora attend a beach party thrown by the local bohemian crowd, Mora's love of dancing is coaxed on by the encouraging musicians, her performances plainly a fixture of such gatherings.



This sequence is one Harrington's little treasures of mood-setting and style. Mora, with her delight in trance-like, almost incantatory dancing, her own pagan paranoia finding temporary shelter within the sensual, life-loving undercurrents in the bohemian nightlife as recorded by Harrington, Mora's alternations of spasmodic and elegant movements move from a steady, dreamy lilt in accord with the gently rapped bongo drums before building to ecstatic crescendos and back again. Harrington's camera adopts her point of view as she spins around. The strange woman appears in the distance on the beach, licked at by the bonfire light, and then suddenly close at hand like a taunting memento mori amidst the life and pleasure, scaring Mora out of her fugue and causing her to faint. Another illustration of Harrington's capacity to weave an uncanny atmosphere follows the scene of Johnny learning about the missing men from the trio by the merry-go-round. As he listens with extreme dubiousness to their accounts, a phone call comes through for him, who's surprised as nobody knows where he is, and the call cuts out as he answers.



But he then sees the mystery woman, wearing as always a black dress with a gossamer wrap and veil, walking swiftly and stiffly along the street outside, and begins tracking her. The woman's progress takes her into the decayed and industrially marked zones behind the waterfront, where the woman's silks swirl in the wind as she traverses a landscape of wooden canal bridges and oil derricks, entering a slum of whitewashed walls, unnervingly self-motivated rocking chairs, and fearful, unspeaking children, transforms an everyday landscape into something charged with exotic threat and ambiguity. She vanishes just as Johnny halts outside a large, quasi-Italianate house, plainly a relic of the neighbourhood's better days, that rocking chair still moving on the porch, a shadowy figure hovering in a high window, a young Latin girl playing nearby on the rubble-strewn ground who did not see the woman. Johnny knocks on the large house's door and finds to his surprise this is Murdock's house. The aging captain is glad to see Johnny and, inviting him in, starts knocking back stiff drinks with him, and then well ahead of him, as he explains how he encountered Mora and what he believes to be the truth of her.



Murdock's house, with its fake old world charisma and fortress-like affectation without and the old sea dog's trove of anecdotal experience, cherished mythos, and bizarre keepsakes within again, like Harrington's feel for the Venice fairground, captures a frisson welling from things draped in a folkloric and fantastical mystique, finding glee in what's improbable and tacky about it all, as well as what seems to withhold some actual, genuine, enticing mystery, that connection with a legendary pass when, without media to process and transmit it for us, the world really was as large and myth and the truths it contained were as variable as the minds that passed through it. Johnny recoils in shock and continues to squirm in disgust after finding a severed hand in a jar, a gift Murdock claims was given him by the Sultan of Marrakech as a curio, and came from a thief. Murdock's increasingly tipsy admonitions against getting close to Mora finally see him fade into boozy snoozing, after Murdock has pointed out the door of what used to be Mora's bedroom. Johnny ventures up there and finds the stuff of his lover's childhood – a mattress, a dangling fishing net, and an open window with billowing drapes, imagery straight out of surrealist art, with Harrington's camera moving forward into the darkness beyond the window and into the dreamy nothingness.



Harrington delights in compositions encompassing crude artworks painted on fairground walls and sprawling, intricate wallpaper patterns, carved motifs on furniture, and the pretentious yet run-down architecture and décor of the locale, all charged with a sense of awareness of the charm in seemingly the most casually noted and ephemeral expressions of finely detailed expression and a need for wonder – all qualities presented as a basic, binding aspect of the human story. The bric-a-brac scattered around Murdock and Mora's homes are keepsakes of lives lived in both roaming interest and biting solitude, filled with signifiers of another demi-world that haunts them at night, the call of the sea and ports beyond. The world under Harrington's eye is a place constantly defined and redefined by the finite delights of the human eye and soul at war with an entropic power eating away at the edges of this city by the sea. Madame Romanovitch, who tries to warn Johnny about ill-omens in his future, is worth comparing to the equally bogus figure Marlene Dietrich played in *Touch of Evil* in paying tribute to the delight inherent in such dubious mysticism: whilst Dietrich's character is all lazy-eyed, exotic sexuality and Eaton's is a chipper, tea-swilling bohemian, both present the notion that their flagrantly inauthentic magic contains something ever so teasingly real. Romanovitch, telling Johnny's fortune, identifies him with the Knight of Cups in the tarot, and like many a knight-errant out of myth, he is defined by his simultaneous purity and drive to penetrate the mysterious female at all costs.



Night Tide was a vital career moment for Hopper, as his first film acting work after being virtually blackballed by Hollywood following butting heads with veteran director Henry Hathaway on *From Hell to Texas* (1958). After spending time deepening his study of Method acting and plying his alternate trade as a photographer, Hopper was handed his first lead role by Harrington, and for an actor later so associated with displays of bravura ranging from earthy passion to livewire instability to arch monstrosity, his performance here is a thing of quiet, reflective, and empathetic beauty, projecting a naïve and vulnerable charm whilst also investing Johnny with a degree of angular eccentricity and protean awkwardness. His dialogue is delivered with a spasmodic lilt that suggests the lack of experience Johnny has communicating, his eyes alight with bewilderment and eagerness before the world even as he begins to develop a sense of determination in contending with the perversity presented to him, his instincts steering him true, but also contending with a situation he cannot entirely understand until it's almost too late. Brilliant flourishes abound in his performance, from the tiny double-take he does when laying eyes on a beautiful, solitary woman, to the panting, hysterical ball he folds into after surviving a near-homicide.



Harrington employs two striking dream sequences late in the film. The first sees Johnny, becoming discernibly paranoid and credulous with all the small, silly but niggling facts piling up about him, waiting in her apartment for Mora to come out of her bathroom. He falls asleep, and dreams of her emerging from the bathroom and approaching him with a decorous intensity to embrace him on her couch, but then transforming into her mermaid guise, her legs become a glittering, twitching mermaid tail, and then into an octopus that folds him a deadly, mothering grip, long tendrils of hair becoming entwining tentacles. Later, he dreams of a rendezvous with Mora in mermaid guise, seated on the rocks above surging surf, brushing her hair and regarding herself in a hand mirror with monstrous narcissism, becoming Johnny's own as he sees his own face in the mirror, before Mora is taken by a wave and swept out to sea despite his attempt to hold onto her hand, Mora laughing mockingly as she vanishes. Here Harrington gets to shift entirely into the realm of dream logic and a particular brand of cheapjack surrealism whilst effectively drawing out his deepest themes of the simultaneous danger and thrill of encountering a lover, the feeling of at once being completed and being annihilated in getting close to another being, a note he'd reiterate in a different tenor in *Queen Of Blood*.



Awakening with a scream from the first nightmare, Johnny finds Mora missing, and tracks her down below the pier where she stands against a pylon under the wharf, being swatted by the surf, gripped by hysteria in believing her seaborne sires and siblings are calling for her: Johnny dashes down to fetch her out. Harrington grazes explicitly queer territory with a sense of allusive humour as Johnny decides to head to a bathhouse whilst Mora sleeps off the ordeal, discovering another curious abode of twisted veils and winding sheets and shadowplay on walls. “Girlfriend ain’t treatin’ you all right?” the masseur Bruno (Ben Roseman) asks as he works over Johnny and notices his tension, before Murdock appears, and the masseur proposes to the older man, “Hello Captain – do you want me to pound you later?” Murdock questions Johnny about Mora’s behaviour, noting with foreboding import: “You must be especially careful now at the time of the full moon – because that’s when the tides pull the strongest.” Johnny is, despite his refusal of credulity, perturbed when Mora, after resolving to ignore her fit and attendant anxieties, proposes they go scuba diving together at a spot along the coast, but eventually she wins out.



As they swim together and inspect a shining object on the seafloor, Mora suddenly attacks Johnny, cutting his airhose with a knife and ripping away his mask. Johnny manages to flee to the surface and climbs into to their dinghy, whilst Mora swims away. Johnny, after recovering from a spasm of profound shock, waits for ages in the dinghy, but Mora doesn't return. Johnny retreats to a hotel in Venice where he squirms in his bed. The next morning, Johnny is puzzled when he sees in the paper no report of Mora being missing and the ad for the mermaid show still included. He heads to the carnival and finds Murdock still spruiking if without his usual zest, but upon venturing insides the show finds Mora's pathetic, staring corpse lying in the water of the tank. Murdock confronts him with a pistol, commenting, "The murderer always returns to the scene of his crime... You had to see the result of your monstrous act!" "But I loved her," Johnny murmurs, before ducking and shoving over the tank, which crashes against Murdock and disarms him, his wildly fired gun attracting two cops who intervene whilst Mora's body lies at the feet of both men who contended for her possession, but fatefully sprawled on her paltry fake patriarch.



The meaningful upshot of Harrington's little mythos here is the reveal that Mora eventually became entranced and convinced by Murdock's lies, which were intended to keep her close to him – Harrington's final, cunningly conceived metaphor for the way so many social paradigms are constructed. A postscript scene sees Murdock confess to inventing the whole siren story to keep Mora under his control and having killed her previous boyfriends, is reminiscent of the deflating tone of the psychiatrist's explanation in *Psycho* (1960). Like that scene, this one lets in the cleansing light of rationalism whilst still leaving the identity of the mystery woman unclear – most likely she was someone Murdock hired to help enforce his illusion, but nobody else remembers seeing her, contriving to retain an ever so slight note of lingering, oneiric threat. It's as if Harrington was paying heed to fashion but still giving a hint as to his truest faith. The authentic touch of romantic tragedy offered is leavened slightly by the promise Johnny faces a future with Ellen, who, with her more solicitous and practical touch, comes to the police station to give him a cup of coffee.



In his first work for Corman, Coppola had refashioned the Soviet film *Nebo Zovyot* (1959) into *Battle Beyond the Sun* (1962), a partial remake-cum-adaptation: Harrington was given *Planeta Bur* (1959) and did more or less the same thing, inserting new scenes with Faith Domergue and Basil Rathbone but following the original film. Harrington didn't think it worth putting his name to, instead crediting himself with the pseudonym John Sebastian. With *Queen of Blood*, Harrington grew bolder: utilising footage from *Mechte Navstrechu* (1963) as well *Nebo Zovyot* once more, he followed a similar procedure in the first half but then swerved into his own storyline. *Queen of Blood*, whilst inevitably fractured as an artefact, nonetheless proves eventually to achieve a strikingly similar mood of dreamlike immersion and near-subliminal strangeness to *Night Tide*, assimilating the inherited footage into itself as Harrington's new footage mimics design elements of the original but also submits the existing material to his audio effects and careful editing. Harrington applied a lush approach to making a colour film, more than a little strongly reminiscent of Mario Bava in the war of drenching, uncanny hues, suggesting Harrington had likely watched some of the Italian maestro's work. That said, *Queen of Blood* came out at virtually the same time as Bava's *Terrore nella Spazio* (1966), with both films often cited as evident influences on *Alien*, revealing how both directors came up with strikingly similar ideas for how to transfer the allure of Gothic horror into a science fiction setting independently.



Queen of Blood also takes on the basic notion of a literal femme fatale more directly than *Night Tide*. The plot involves humanity responding an overture from an alien race in the year 1990, a time when, in the film's timeline, space travel has become advanced and missions are increasingly far-flung. The International Institute of Space Technology provides a thriving hub for the assembled mental might and capability of the Earth, under the administration of Dr Farraday (Basil Rathbone). Astronaut and communications specialist Laura James (Judi Meredith) is the first to pick up the alien signals, which she lets her boyfriend and fellow astronaut Allan Brenner (John Saxon) listen to, resolving at first only as rhythmic noise. Farraday however successfully translates the signals, and informs the assembled personnel of the Institute of the nature of the aliens and their friendly intentions. The aliens successfully launch a probe to the Earth which streaks through the atmosphere and lands in the ocean, and soon after announce their intention to send an ambassadorial mission. Laura picks up a transmission from the ambassadorial craft however that reveals a disaster en route, forcing a crash-landing on Mars. Farraday elects to send the *Oceano I* and *II* craft on the mission of rescuing the ambassadors.



Farraday, Laura, and Allan all travel to a moonbase which controls the various deep space missions, along with the appointed commander for the *Oceano I*, Anders Brockman (Robert Boon) and crewman Paul Grant (Hopper): Laura is assigned to go with them by Farraday, whilst Allan is assigned to the *Oceano II*, which will set out several days later as backup. After weathering a sunburst, the *Oceano I*, lightly damaged, still makes it to Mars and lands, but upon finding the crashed alien ship only find one being aboard, and theorise others likely ejected on an escape craft. With the *Oceano II* unready for launch yet, Allan and Tony Barrata (Don Eitner) volunteer to take the smaller craft Meteor, which is ready, to deploy the satellite more quickly, but the Meteor's lack of fuel means they'll have to effect a crossing from Phobos to Mars with their own escape shuttle and return on the *Oceano I*. The two men reach Phobos and launch the satellite, only to find the alien lifeboat is actually marooned on Phobos. They rescue the one survivor on board, a weirdly beautiful woman (Florence Marly), and given their own escape shuttle can only take two people, one of the men has to stay with the Meteor to be picked up later by the *Oceano II*. Allan initially intends staying, but Tony demands they flip for it and loses, so Allan takes the woman down to Mars. He carries the alien woman across country to the *Oceano I*, met along the way by Anders and Paul after they weather out a storm. Finally, reassured that Tony will be rescued by Farraday, the *Oceano I* sets out for home.



Some of all this is definitely narrative make-work to utilise the inherited footage, and the film doesn't really, properly find its proper path until half-way through. Most of the work Coppola applied to *Battle Beyond The Sun* was hiding the Soviet markings and imagery in the movie he was revising; Harrington is much less fastidious, letting the Soviet red star appear on tail fins now and then and keeping a wide shot of a meeting, supposedly at the Space Institute, with Sputnik in a mural. But then again Harrington's vaguely internationalist governing setup perhaps isn't so averse to a bit of Commie influence. The disparity between the elaborate beauty and design care of the Soviet films, which were major productions for the time and place, and the cheap infrastructure of Harrington's footage, is amusing, but also tapped for interesting contrasts. The visions of the alien environs and personnel Harrington extrapolates from the older film, with their bold, flowing, spherical designs and buildings, their lush look with smoky greys and suturing reds, have a baroque flavour sharply different to the functional technocracy (and blatant cheapness) of the Earthlings' places and craft. The uneasy mating of harvested Soviet epic spectacle with ramshackle Hollywood make-do can be taken as its own subtext, a clash of cultural opposites, ironic given how usually it's seen the other way around, with other film cultures anxiously emulating the grandeur and slickness of Hollywood product: rather the Soviet films Corman was making use were better-produced than a great deal of Hollywood sci-fi.



Nonetheless, Harrington does something creative and memorable with the intercut footage, the visions of blazing retrorockets firing in the void, a plastic Mars glowing above the crags of Phobos, and furious winds rummaging the red planet's soil in seething waves. Harrington assimilates it all in a manner that renders it all similar to Johnny's wanderings in Venice in *Night Tide*, evoking a restless poetic desolation, a search for meaning and connection that is only to be granted in a specifically cruel way, the toing and froing of all the anxious astronauts and their hardware a wild goose chase that does, at the end, prove to be in service of something, but that something isn't what anyone but the aliens had in mind. Harrington's experimental film background undoubtedly was of use here, given the way filmmakers in that realm often mined old movies, disassembling them shot by shot and recombining them for flashes of mysterious art, like Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart* (1936), or Anger's use of footage from *The King of Kings* (1927) in *Scorpio Rising* (1963). Harrington manages to conjure an atmosphere similar to what Byron Haskin managed on his *Robinson Crusoe On Mars* (1964), finding a place where pulp adventuring and an elusive genre poetry mate. Harrington exacerbates the mood with the electronic sound effects and Leonard Moran's pulsing, shimmering electronic music, reminiscent of *Forbidden Planet* (1956), applied over the spacefaring footage and the early scenes of the aliens communicating with the humans and sending out their emissaries. In a linked manner, Harrington's film is preoccupied by cosmic ambition and the infinite possible, all heralded in the first half, giving way to a narrative that corkscrews inwards in portraying seething hunger, predatory desire, and the most primal truths of existence.



Harrington gets off on the arch joke of the two contrasting women at the film's heart, both of them with frost-blond hair, Meredith's ice-cream-scoop bob sculpted within an inch of its life but rounded to a feminine planetoid, where Marly's alien sports a thrusting beehive, queenly and vaguely phallic all at once. Amongst other things she's camp culture's ür-ancestor to the women in *The B-52's*, the Coneheads, and the fake Martian woman in Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* (1996). Meredith, a former ice skating star who turned to acting, had previously most notably played the sweetheart princess briefly but memorably transformed into a cackling, spectacularly dressed witch in Nathan Juran's *Jack The Giant Killer* (1962); here she's handed the regulation role of the one girl on the spaceship, but she's also gifted a reasonably unfussy role in the drama, with Ferraday mentioning his confidence in her, and Allan not voicing any sexist qualms about his woman heading off into danger, the two merely being frustrated when they find Ferraday's assigning them to different ships. Allan displays his quality when he readily volunteers to help out the *Oceano* mission with the risky flight to Phobos, and then immediately desists from his immediate object of reaching Laura when the situation changes, establishing his readiness to put the mission before his needs. In contrast to Laura, Marly's alien woman comes with green skin, rubbery-textured skin, blood-red lips, and bright blond hair jutting in a beehive crown: her eyes gain a phosphorescent glow when she asserts a powerful telepathic will that prove able to suborn the men around her, a marvellous actualisation of the metaphor for her sexual charisma and exotic allure.



Saxon, still relatively early in his days as an ubiquitous B-movie star, is called upon by Harrington to inhabit a quality very similar to Johnny in *Night Tide*, as Allan's sense of innate disgust and scepticism when faced with a set of new, disturbing truths becomes blatant even as others insist on a cover story that runs counter to good sense. Tony for his part gets off lightly even when it seems he's had bad luck in being stuck on Phobos, electing to spend his time taking and experimenting with soil samples. Anders and Paul are along, seemingly for scientific rationality and also for the presumed masculine variety, but actually prove to be food. In Harrington's central coup of darkly humorous-horrific irony, the rescued alien, first revived in the company of the four humans who have laboured so long and hard to save her, beholds Paul with delight, then Anders with even more evident appreciation, and then finally Allan with beaming ecstasy – only to then wilt with bitchy aggravation when she sees Laura. "Our visitor doesn't seem to get along too well her own sex," Anders comments as he assigns Paul to tending to her needs rather than Laura, and Paul coaxingly gets her to try drinking water, Paul's manner like a parent tending to a baby whilst the alien all but purrs with stirred quasi-erotic wont that's inseparable from a different kind of thirst. Harrington fought hard with Corman to cast Marly as his interstellar vampire, in part because she was a friend, and because he felt she had just the right, exotic allure required for the role. Marly, a French actress who had appeared in René Clement's *Les Maudits* (1947) nearly twenty years earlier but had suffered through accidental blacklist after coming to Hollywood, certainly had exotic allure in spades with her architectural cheekbones and eyes that almost seemed to glow like a big cat's even without the pencil spots Harrington trains on them when the alien is enthralled by her male prey.



Harrington finally puts over the icy-cold joke of his alien woman proving under the superficial humanity to be something different, as she waits for the right moment to get Paul alone. Paul, on watch with the other asleep, surveys his fellow astronauts and seeks out the alien woman in her room, a throbbing red beacon light bathing the set and a buzzing on the soundtrack that sounds suggestively like bees. Finally the alien woman emerges from the shadows, drenched in the blood-red light but the green of her skin undimmed as her hand climbs eagerly up his chest, her eyes glowing brilliant and cat-like, mesmerising her prey for an assault Harrington films as an intimate and eager clinch, but the next day Anders tries to wake Paul but finds him unresponsive, and realises he's cold and dead. Upon finding the woman blood-glutted, tell-tale trickles of crimson leaking from her mouth still, the three remaining astronauts recoil in horror, but Anders quickly determines to deal calmly and understandingly with the problem: "How can we expect her to conform to our ideas of proper behaviour?" he rebukes Allan and Laura who immediately brand her as a monster: "Is there such a difference between blood and a rare beefsteak?" he prods further whilst mentioning the unknown factors of the aliens' society and ideas of morality, given the woman might be as he calls her a "kind of intellectual insect," or even more plant-like than animal given the high chlorophyll content in her skin.



Here Harrington mischievously explores the ambiguities of social expectation and moral codes as expected of the individual in ignorance of their true nature, a topic of ever-fraught meaning, but also gives it his own sarcastic twist, presenting characters who don't have the good sense to realise their gut instincts are correct. Soon after Anders has his own deadly encounter with the alien, in one of Harrington's most cleverly executed, effectively hallucinatory scenes. Anders, moved by an intangible feeling in the eerily quiet and lit crew cabin as the weird buzzing noise builds, looks through an open bulkhead door towards the alien's chamber with the throbbing red beacon, as if perceiving something that refuses to resolve. At first he only seems to behold an empty room, but after blinking catches sight of the alien advancing on him in a sinuous prowl, with bright eyes and fixed, unsettling smile. Anders takes up his gun to defend himself, but with her mesmeric eyes ablaze he drops it and stands defenceless to her ravenous need, her hungry lips parting around her wickedly bared teeth. After finding Anders dead, Allan and Laura elect to try and hold the woman at bay for the rest of the voyage by tying her to a bunk, but she uses psychic power to burn through the rope holding her.



Queen Of Blood's release in the same year *Star Trek* premiered is another suggestive coincidence: film and series both betrayed a compulsive fascination with a future of space travel where the primeval often lurks under the technocratic surfaces and monstrosities lurk within deceptive exteriors, as illustrated by an episode of *Star Trek* like its official debut episode "The Man Trap," and illustrated with lurid, virtually fauvist colours that seem to be vivid and palpable but actually imbue everything on screen with the instability of surrealism. *Queen Of Blood* also connects to that other central fixture of modern sci-fi, *Star Wars* (1977), through the participation of Gary Kurtz as production manager: I can't help but wonder if something of Harrington's use of sound in specific to generate a weird and alien atmosphere might well have been transmitted on through Kurtz to the production ethos of George Lucas, who was, ironically, one of the relatively few Movie Brats to not spend a phase in the Corman apparatus. John Cline's artwork under the opening credits recall Corman's love for prefacing his films with paintings of a stylised modernist bent that helped announce his stripped-down textures, here promising outlandishly colourful blossoms on lunar landscapes under dark stars. Harrington's penchant for including cameo performances from friends and fellow aficionados, or charged with an air of meaning in connection to the subcultures he loved, extends to an appearance by the legendary author and archivist Forrest J. Ackerman as Farraday's aide.



As for Farraday himself, he's gifted with the still-imposing and innately sensible tones of Rathbone, who at the age of 74 was looking gaunt and tired even with enough dye in his hair to stain a river (this would prove Rathbone's second-last film), in playing the avuncular and wise authority figure, a status that suddenly comes into doubt right at the end. The Queen of Blood's reign ends in an anticlimactic fashion but Harrington still manages another marvellously creep moment as Laura awakens from a nap and searches for Allan, the spaceship interior weirdly quiet and deserted-feeling. At last she finds him lying prone and mesmerised in the control room, whilst the alien laps his blood with leisurely glee from a bite on his wrist. Laura grabs her and they have a tussle that Harrington wryly renders a catfight, Laura's nails leaving long oozing scratches in the alien's back, green blood leaking out. The alien shrieks in bewildering anguish and dashes away, and Laura revives Allan. They track the alien back to the crew cabin and find her dead, bled out from her seemingly paltry wounds. Allan's best theory is that she was a haemophiliac, associating that trait as on Earth with royalty. Then Laura discovers the most disturbing legacy of their adventure: the queen has left the spaceship infested with her bulbous, throbbing eggs, laid in nooks all about the interior.



Like the sad meditation on the nature of love and the things it drives people to do that caps *Night Tide*, here Harrington offers his skewed and mordant take on biological essentialism and the results of the urge to go forth and multiply, bringing the film to a shuddering halt with a sickly evocation of a different kind of propagation that is nonetheless merely a variant. This is also where the similarities to *Alien* and its sequels come most sharply to the fore, opening the door as it does to a new age of fantastical cinema with a compulsive fascination for physical perversity and a new survey of metaphor for an age where the body lies at the nexus of so many anxieties. Laura and Allan anticipate the ship having to be sterilised laboriously, but instead find Farraday, like the late Anders before him Farraday, is overjoyed to have these specimens survive for study, and has them collected. Harrington fades out on the sight of a tray full of the eggs – realised however amusingly as throbbing rubber bulbs set in green jell-o – containing all their potential danger and wonder for a human race whose curiosity is too often stronger than its good sense.

Hellraiser (1987)

this island rod



Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* has proven a work of modern horror filmmaking with a lasting legacy. It's also perhaps the only notable work of horror cinema directed by a major genre writer (pace fans of *Maximum Overdrive*, 1987). Barker established his particular brand of blood-soaked, angst-ridden horror writing in the late 1970s, his work permeated by nightmarish meditations whilst set in humdrum scenes of suburbia or housing projects, riffing on classical genre motifs but springboarding from modern, scalding perspectives on subjects ranging from the sexual to the sociological. Barker was from the beginning a multi-discipline artist, also working in theatre, painting, and short filmmaking, positioning him uniquely well for when he made the leap to adapting his own novella "The Hellbound Heart," as *Hellraiser*, as well as featuring actors he met in his avant garde theatre days, also betrays a focused and original visual imagination. Barker took his shot at directing a feature after he wrote the scripts of two films, *Underworld* (1985) and *Rawhead Rex* (1986), but finished up disliking the results. Barker still had to file down the edges on his own work in the process of adapting "The Hellbound Heart" with its unabashed sexual imagery and themes informed by Barker's time spent working as a prostitute, but even in doing so came up with an angle on familiar ideas like undead revenants and demonic tormentors that sent an electric thrill right to the synapses of horror lovers in the VHS age.



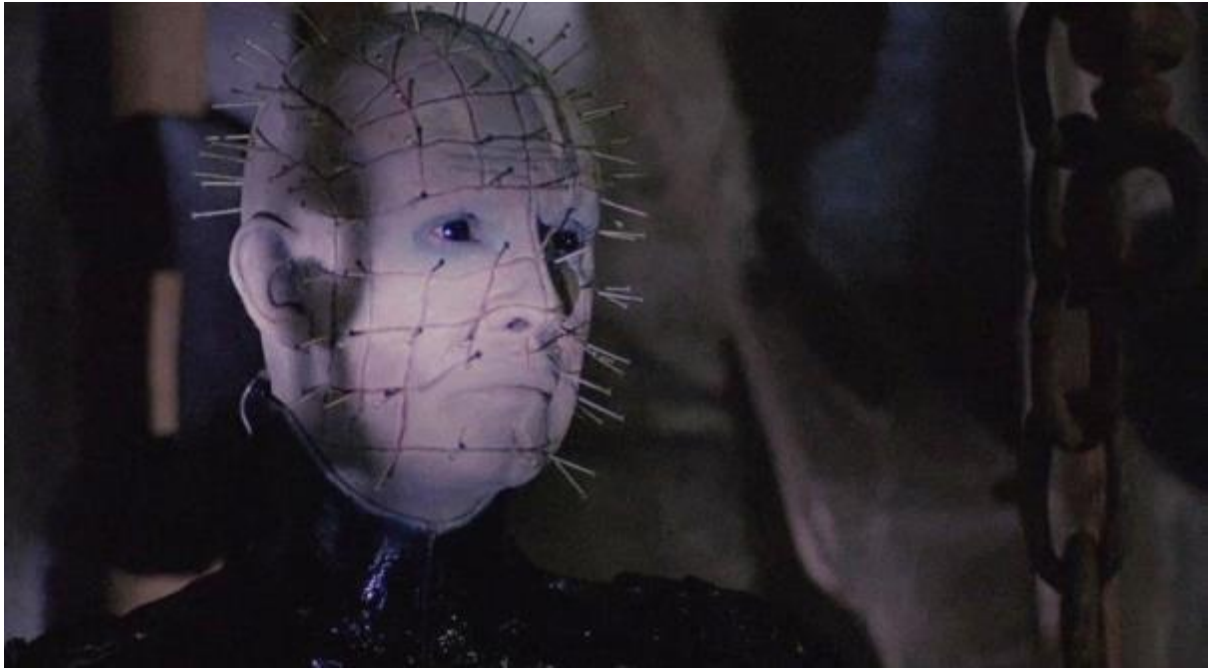
Barker's other famous creation in the contemporary landscape of horror franchising was the ghetto-haunting wraith called the Candyman, created for his story "The Forbidden," featured in one of the *Books of Blood* anthologies of his short works that popularised his writing, and would be filmed as *Candyman* in 1992 by Bernard Rose. Where Candyman was the embodiment of angst and malice reaching out of bores of social exclusion and oppression, *Hellraiser* situates its exploration of evil through a deliberate dichotomy, couched in humdrum suburbia and the pathos of ordinary emotions, invaded by emissaries of an unknowable realm beyond, who delight in transmuting petty human sensations into paradigms of existence blending both heaven and hell, pleasure and pain. The story hinges on a small, ornate puzzle box bought by the black sheep bohemian and wandering sensualist Frank Cotton (Sean Chapman) in a Middle Eastern café from a dealer who comments enigmatically, "Take it – it's yours. It always was." Frank returns to his empty family home in the United States and succeeds in opening the box. This proves to open a doorway to a netherworld from which emerges a quartet of entities bearing the imprints of physical torture and disfigurement, beings he later calls Cenobites, who tear him to bloody pieces after orgiastic torments. The lead Cenobite (Doug Bradley), with a flourish that turns Sadean humour into a form of both religion and art, arranges the pieces of Frank's split head like a jigsaw puzzle in a shadowy antechamber of Tartarus, as if all but daring someone to put him back together, and then leaves the puzzle box in Frank's house.



Sometime later, Frank's straight-arrow brother Larry (Andrew Robinson) decides to move into the house, which he technically co-owns with Frank, presuming his brother is still on the run after one of his sketchy adventures. Larry doesn't know that his wife Julia (Clare Higgins), who's been cold and distant with him for some time, had an affair with Frank. Her relationship with Larry's teenage daughter by another, deceased wife, Kirsty (Ashley Laurence), is equally strained, and has driven Kirsty to try living apart from her and Frank, despite her great affection for her father. When Frank scratches himself whilst moving in, the blood he spills in the room Frank died in is sucked up by the fine threads of his corporeal form left caked under the floorboards. A partly recomposed Frank tears himself loose to confront an initially terrified Julia, and he convinces her to start bringing men to the house and then kill them, so he can finish refashioning his body by soaking up their flesh. Frank explains that he escaped the captivity of the Cenobites and needs to flee before they realise it. When Kirsty becomes the horrified witness to her stepmother's homicides and her uncle's grotesque condition, she flees the house with the puzzle box. Opening it whilst being kept under observation in hospital, Kirsty encounters the Cenobites, who want her to be their next plaything, but she tells them of Frank's escape and strikes a tentative bargain to lead him back to them.



Some of the constituent parts of *Hellraiser* are certainly familiar enough to a genre fan. The motif of a normal person drawn into using sexual luring and murder to revive a supernatural being tied to a certain space, is very similar to “The Gatecrasher” by R. Chetwynd-Hayes, filmed as an episode in *From Beyond The Grave* (1973). Frank’s rebuilding of himself repeats the structure of *The Keep* (1983), as each killing restores partly towards completeness, and something of Mann’s stylistic influence is apparent elsewhere, like the sight of seemingly solid walls splitting to reveal menacing portals into dank labyrinths. Frank’s initial, agonising revival from gelatinous mass to partly-fleshed ghoul recalls visions of Christopher Lee’s Dracula being reborn in films like *Dracula*, *Prince of Darkness* (1966) with more sophisticated, in-your-face special effects. The visions of Frank in hell with its ritualistic and eternal dismemberment recall those in Nabuo Nakagawa’s *Jigoku* (1960). It’s more the way Barker decorates that template with his own special tweaks and perversities that elevates the material, including, most obviously, the sadomasochistic aspect to the Cenobites’ ethos and appearance. The lead Cenobite describes himself and his fellows by the ultimate bohemian catchphrase: “Explorers in the further reaches of experience – demons to some, angels to others.”



The lead Cenobite, face studded with nails driven in with geometric precision like some Dantean form of acupuncture, became the centrepiece of the film's marketing campaign. After being officially dubbed "Pinhead" in an opportunistically-produced if still Barker-based sequel, he became a recurring horror character to rival the likes of Jason Voorhees and Freddy Krueger – and arguably outdoing them by persisting without quite degenerating into the vaguely campy mainstays they did, in part because the character's origin, however much it was augmented away from Barker's control, remained rooted in something properly forbidding and alien. Regardless of the character's later life, the lead Cenobite is certainly incarnated with sepulchral authority by Bradley, with hints of relish of his role as impresario of delightful torture from a realm where all sensation is interwoven when there is no mortality to limit it – "We have such things to show you!" Barker also displays flashes of powerful visual imagination in sequences like Kirsty opening the box and accessing labyrinthine spaces guarded by a chimera that resembles a cross between a monstrous foetus and a scorpion.



Similarly arresting, if little more than decorative filler, is a portentous dream sequence in which Kirsty, in a room filled with swirling down, beholds blood welling through seemingly pristine blanket whilst the sound of a baby wailing fills the air. The very end sees Kirsty and her boyfriend Steve (Robert Hines) witness as a gnarled derelict (Frank Baker) transforms into a vision of a Satanic emissary straight out of medieval art, a skeletal dragon with wings, horns, and long swinging neck. This delivers a swerve into a far more traditional image of hellspawn, but feels contiguous with the rest, as if that echo from deep medieval lore and the modern variation of it based in rough trade from the piercing parlour and all other such imaginings are on a continuum, attempts by the human to understand things far beyond the limits of the senses. Barker can even be said to have picked up something implicit in his clear inspirations like the illustrations of Hieronymus Bosch and the pages of Dante's *Inferno* and done something with them no one else quite dared, in taking stock of all the utterly freakish and malefic tortures described in that medieval idea of hell and pondering whether they might constitute fun after a while, if one has been released from the familiar rules of corporeal existence.



Judged as an actual movie, as an animation of its concepts, however, *Hellraiser* isn't all that particularly good. Barker's choice of setting the movie in America despite being filmed in old Blighty might well have helped its box office, and is even integral to its thematic insistences – digging into the state of the family ideal in the age officially ruled by Reaganite forces but riddled with the fallout of feminism and the counterculture era. But the choice of setting also strains the mostly British cast to breaking point in trying to put on their best Yankee brogues, and the locations are similarly obvious, and the result feels more than a bit laboured. Which is a pity because both visually and in its preoccupations *Hellraiser* feels close to other British horror entries of the 1980s, including *The Appointment* (1981) with its bleak musing on fate and the family unit, and *Xtro* (1983) with its flesh-twisting rebirths. Echoes of *Blue Velvet* (1986) resound, and David Lynch in turn clearly remembered it for *Mulholland Drive* (2001). Barker's story builds to the crucial moment when Kirsty opens the box and encounters the Cenobites. The notion of the innocent, straightlaced young woman confronting the darkest threats and temptations of the universe is one that carries an obvious load of kinky potential, hinted at with Laurence's increasingly intense, shadow-eyed appearance redolent of dark knowing and corruption, and also offered dimensions of possibility for exploring just what the film thinks of good and evil and the million shades between.



Ultimately the story proves to be about Kirsty's capacity to resist corruption, confirmed when she consigns the box to a bonfire after banishing the Cenobites, only for the derelict-demon to rescue it and wing it away to the next, less scrupulous inheritor. And yet Barker is actually barely interested in Kirsty – she's basically present because the trends of horror storytelling in the 1980s had bent towards young female heroines (and the less said about her dim, cardigan-wearing boyfriend the better). Kirsty forges a deal with the Cenobites to deliver Frank back into their hands, the Faustian consequences of which the climactic scenes essentially drop in favour of some Ripley-isms: "You go to hell!" she screams at the Cenobites, which is ironic because, like, they're from hell. Laurence has some awkward moments as an ingenue, but eventually proves quite strong in the role, that said, and it feels chiefly thanks to her Kirsty registers as much as she does. Julia's transfixing erotic neediness, which drives her violate all limits of god and man, is much more interesting if not invested with any particular depth beyond having her incarnate inchoate sexual need unfulfilled by a normal life. The basic, almost preternatural nature of her urges are communicated fiercely through Barker's use of flashbacks to her affair with Frank. Julia's superficial staidness conceals an intensely transgressive passion for her brother-in-law, awoken just as she was facing domestic settlement with Larry. Frank in turn never quite got off the Hippy Trail. The two got it on behind the back of the almost comically oblivious decent but weak-willed daddy, even after death.



Frank is initially shy about his post-mortem appearance (“Don’t look at me!”) but Julia is eventually, obviously emboldened to suckle on his bloody fingers, whilst Frank coolly lights himself cigarettes to while away his skinless solitude. But the revived Frank is rather blankly and clunkily villainous, even if one interprets him as having been restored with some traits absorbed from the Cenobites. Julia’s enthrallment to his project is similarly given no shading after her initial fear. Still, to Barker’s credit he depicts Julia’s victims with surprising nuance – her first pick-up (Antony Allen) becomes angry and insulting when she suddenly seems to withdraw consent, but quickly turns apologetic – when it would have been all too easy to make them either disposably pathetic, or as uniformly deserving in some way, as Edgar Wright did a little too archly in *Last Night In Soho* (2021). The casting of Robinson is one of the wittier touches, playing on his reputation earned since *Dirty Harry* (1971) for playing psychos, even as his official role actually asks him for a level of floundering pathos as the unexpected avatar of besieged normality, as Larry, for all his plaintive desire to get his family back together and on solid footing, is cuckolded by his wife and brother and finally skinned and worn as a guise by the latter, who then gets indulge incestuous come-ons to Kirsty – “Come to Daddy!” Frank-as-Larry repeatedly hisses with glee, in a climax that lets Robinson suddenly pivot to his more familiar creep act whilst finding a wicked metaphor for the sudden transformation of the beloved father into abusive monster. Still, this twist isn’t executed with much bite or impact, in part Barker never quite establishes the emotional dynamic between father and daughter as convincing, and also because he makes the switch way too obvious – Kirsty doesn’t seem to notice her dad is all gnarled and covered in blood.

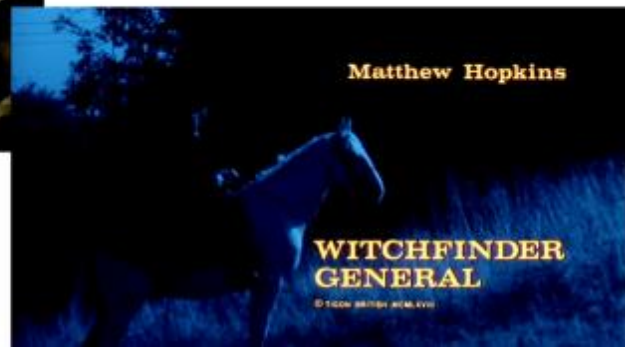


Barker pushes the performances to hover uneasily between naturalism and something more stylised, close to genre shtick, a problem that also manifests when Kirsty sees the derelict lurching on grasshoppers in the pet store she works in, a moment present because Barker feels things need another jolt of weirdness there. The deeper problem is that *Hellraiser*, whilst elevated well above the run of the average in the 1980s horror stakes, is nonetheless also to some extent an equally pertinent example of what for me was going wrong with the genre about this time. *Hellraiser* is bold and vivid, successfully skirting a low budget to suggest a vast complex of lore and strangeness just beyond the margins of what is seen, and what is seen is invested with a level of galvanising originality and impact. And yet whilst Barker's conceits are intriguing and sometimes confrontational, the speed with which they were assimilated into the general fabric of the genre points to how his approach to them saps their disquieting value. The meat of the story and its symbols invoke a level of existential angst and psychological unease the script never really digs into and Barker's direction can't convey, and whilst *Hellraiser* seems to inhabit the realm of surrealism, it actually betrays that artistic mode. Instead, the characters are presented on a level contiguous with the medieval morality plays the visuals reference. The Cenobites and the puzzle box wield genuine mystique, but their blatantness made it inevitable they would become the stuff of *Fangoria* magazine covers. As a result, *Hellraiser* isn't particularly frightening or exciting – the closest it comes is being impressively icky and morbidly fascinating. But *Hellraiser's* semi-classic status persists if only because it's a rare horror movie of its era that had authentic vision and edge. Other works from the '80s with similar impact, like *The Evil Dead* (1982), are comparatively playful, where *Hellraiser* manages a finer balance for the most part: whilst ambitious, it takes itself seriously and still delivers down-and-dirty goods.



The Sorcerers (1967) / Witchfinder General (1968)

film freedonia



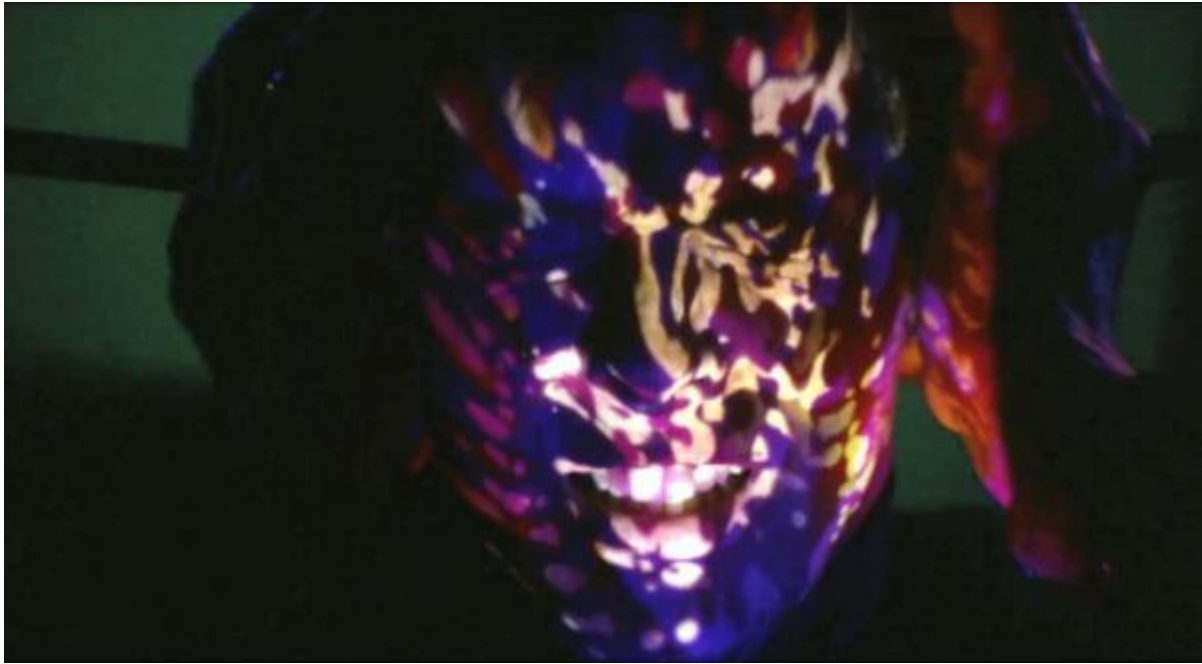
Director: Michael Reeves

Screenwriters: Tom Baker, Michael Reeves, John Burke (uncredited) / Tom Baker, Michael Reeves

Michael Reeves's death at the age of 25 is one of the rawest cheats and tragedies of film history. The English wunderkind, born in 1943, was connected to a wealthy family through his quite unwealthy mother, and the poor relations finally came in for an inheritance when Reeves was 17. By that time Reeves's cinephilia was already well advanced. At the age of 11 he had made his first home movie, roping in his friends and future collaborators Tom Baker and Ian Ogilvy to help him film and act in it: the result, *Carrion*, featured Ogilvy as a psycho who attacks a girl in a wheelchair, and sported tracking shots accomplished with a Super 8 camera set up on a tea trolley. An auspicious and forebodingly violence-themed ground zero for the budding director, who, upon coming into his aforementioned windfall, used it to catch a plane to Hollywood and seek out his favourite director, Don Siegel. Lavishing effusive praise on the bewildered but flattered old veteran proved a good way to help Reeves break into the movie industry.



A couple of years later, now barely in his twenties, Reeves's prodigious ability was first hinted when he was employed as an assistant director on the Italian horror film *Castle of the Living Dead* (1964), a film made under the typically stringent conditions of low-budget continental genre films of the day, when anything that could help speed up shooting was welcome. Reeves so quickly impressed the film's producer Paul Maslansky that he and the film's writer, Warren Keifer, were both invited to shoot portions of the movie themselves. Both of them went without credit, the movie credited instead to genre journeyman Luciano Ricci under his regular pseudonym Herbert Wise, but the interesting visual texture, alive to location filming in a manner rare for movies of the type usually weren't at the time, suggests the depth of Reeves's impact. That film also proved a starting point for another major talent, Donald Sutherland, employed in a dual acting role. Maslansky gave Reeves the chance to make his credited debut the following year, with *La Sorella di Satana*, usually known as *The She Beast* in English, the story of an executed witch returning from the dead, starring Barbara Steele, the English fetish object of Italian Gothic horror, and Ogilvy, now grown up into a starkly handsome potential star. An awkwardly produced and padded film, *La Sorella di Satana* nonetheless showed further flashes of Reeves's great talent in conjuring atmospheric visuals and articulating a radical sensibility interlaced with classical genre concerns and clichés.



Reeves's cult stature nonetheless rests firmly on the two subsequent films he made back in England, *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General*, works that saw Reeves moving into high gear, still working within the limits of the genre film world he had found his foothold in but also displaying uncommon ambition and intelligence. On each film Reeves was required to employ a legendary but ageing star deeply associated with the genre – Boris Karloff in *The Sorcerers*, and Vincent Price on *Witchfinder General*, and he helped them give performances amongst their very best. This involved some conflict with Price, who kept hitting the same grandiose and showy notes he was reputed for, only to be constantly coaxed to deliver a more reserved performance, which Price didn't entirely get the point of until he saw the completed film. On Karloff's part his work with Reeves helped prime him for the following year's salutary *Targets*. The success of *Witchfinder General*, which became one of the many *cause celebre* films dealing in bloody violence in the late 1960s, made Reeves a hot property, and he was bombarded with potential projects, and the one that really seemed to get him fired up was an offer to make *Easy Rider* (1969). But a tendency to depression Reeves had managed to keep fairly well-hidden up until that point now came upon him and proved paralysing, and he died in 1969 after taking antidepressants following a heavy night of drinking.



What Reeves might have become if he hadn't died has always been one of those what-if questions of movie lore. He might very well have melted down prematurely, as did so many promising young talents of the 1960s movie scene, particularly given the British film industry began to implode through the next decade. He might also have become a rival to Steven Spielberg or Ridley Scott, or, even if he wasn't bound for such exalted ranks, a figure equal to David Cronenberg and George Romero in the 1970s horror panoply, and one who could have found another path in a decade that ended with the doldrums of the slasher movie coming on, particularly considering most of the better British horror films of the period, like Piers Haggard's *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1971) and Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973), owe much to Reeves's template. The special genius of *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General* lies in the way they fulfil their basic genre film requirements but also bring a level of conceptual depth and critical awareness altogether rare at the time. *The Sorcerers* began life as a screenplay written by John Burke, but Reeves and Baker rewrote it so heavily Burke insisted on only taking a story credit.



Reeves appeared and worked in horror cinema at a time when the genre was moving towards a great shift in its basic stylistics, thematic preoccupations, and stock plotlines, from the revival of Gothic horror kicked off by Hammer Films towards the more substantial influence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Mario Bava's proto-giallo films, reorienting the genre's imagination to less metaphorical takes on personal and social anxieties, with vampires, werewolves, and various supernatural wraiths about to be generally supplanted by more human and substantial threats. Reeves's own career reflected that shift, moving from the variations on familiar Gothic horror imagery and malevolent spirits in *Castle of the Living Dead* and *La Sorella di Satana*, to find possibilities for dread in more immediate and realistic concerns, or, in the case of *The Sorcerers*, finding a new, pseudoscientific vehicle for exploring the old idea of possession. *The Sorcerers*, in dealing with an entirely contemporary landscape, and, despite its historical setting, *Witchfinder General* with its blankly beheld, unstylised violence and harsh, tangible filming approach where the landscapes feel palpable enough to smell, marked important moments in that genre shift. The two films are also notably similar not just in their common conceptual preoccupations, but by their rigorous sense of form. Each takes up a basic, driving concept as sufficient, proceeding with a near-relentless internal logic and scarcely wasting a frame in telling their stories.



The Sorcerers for instance proceeds from a simple but brilliant conceit, one that presents front and centre an essential metaphor for the cinematic experience itself. Indeed, the film's similarity to Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960) goes beyond their closeness as horror movies set amidst modern London's more mundane districts: both movies are preoccupied with the very nature of cinema. Burke, Reeves, and Baker nonetheless went a step further than Powell, in their idea of a psychiatrist's mind-bending invention. The psychiatrist in question is Professor Marcus Monserrat (Karloff), a once-renowned therapist and academic who's been reduced to treating nervous ailments like facial twitches in a trickle of patients. His clients are attracted by advertisements pinned in shops close to the shabby apartment he keeps with his wife Estelle (Catherine Lacey), where they've been subsisting for thirty years, ever since Marcus's career was destroyed by a succession of journalistic exposes on his outlandish ideas. Nonetheless, Marcus has, in a spare room of the apartment, painstakingly constructed an electronic apparatus that will allow him not only to induce a hypnotic state of unconscious control over a human subject, but that will allow the subject's controllers to share in his physical and emotional sensations remotely.



Connecting *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General* is a reflexive but considered fascination for violence delivered as a virtual spectator sport, provoking chaotic and primal emotions for both the objects of and wielders of that violence, but also manipulated as a vehicle for other, more insidious needs. In both, figures of authority impose their will on and gratify their needs through luckless innocents, a motif laced with bitter meditation on the “generation gap” often perceived at the heart of the 1960s social schisms, as well as political dimensions given the general concern stemming from the Vietnam War of young people being forced to go and fight old men’s wars. In *The Sorcerers* this angle of approach is given more ironic and sympathetic tilt at first, as Reeves presents the state of pathos the Monserrats live in, their old, creaking bodies and barren existence, find they have a tool in their grasp that allows them to escape the cage of their own flesh and experience. They gain their ideal subject in Mike Roscoe (Ogilvy), a superficially phlegmatic but exasperated hipster who seems to have evolved a resistance to the easy thrills of Swinging London’s nightspots: he only drinks Coca-Cola when out, seems to have tried every drug around and found it wanting, and is even antsy and distractible when out on a date with the beautiful continental woman Nicole (Elizabeth Ercy), who he ditches briefly to be entertained by his patronised pal Alan (Victor Henry) whilst seeking something indefinable.



What he finds is Marcus, who, his eye caught by the young man, follows him into a café and promises him a unique experience. “What are you selling?” Mike enquires testily: “Blue movies?” “Nothing as dull as that,” Marcus smiles with roguish assurance, and later promises, “Dazzling, indescribable experiences – complete abandonment with no thought of remorse.” Mike takes Marcus up on his veritable but obscure dare, and comes up to his apartment. Reeves has suggested the mysterious trove in Monserrat’s spare room earlier as the professor opens the door and surveys his creation without it actually being shown, menacing music instead hinting at the scene beyond. Mike then sees the room with the audience, beholding a space that looks like it beamed in directly from a *Star Trek* episode, with smooth white walls and weird devices festooning the space. Estelle helps her husband in coaxing the young subject to take his seat at the heart of the machine with headset in place. Marcus starts up the machine, his subject assailed with a torturous cacophony of electronic sounds and visual stimuli, which just happen to look a lot like the sorts of pulsating psychedelic imagery becoming a popular fixture projected at rock music shows in the late ‘60s. When the process concludes, Mike is in a mesmerised state, under the influence of both Marcus and Estelle, who experiment tentatively at making him obey their will, including sending him to the kitchen to crush an egg in his hand.



The Sorcerers suggests the immediate influence of two earlier, major, recent horror films – *Peeping Tom* and also Roman Polanski’s breakthrough hit *Repulsion* (1965), with its emphasis on an insidious breakdown of a personality in the seemingly placid and gritty surrounds of London; the casting of Ercy, a French-German actress, echoes both of those films’ use of European actors in leading roles, but with the twist here that the foreigner isn’t the one going nuts. Instead it’s Ogilvy, perfectly incarnating a brand of astringently phlegmatic but picture-perfect and coldly charismatic young male hipster, one whose brusque and insensate attitude to the people around him finally gains its exponentially worse comeuppance as the Monserrats make him their vehicle for exploring a world they’re entirely cut off from. “A boy who’s bored,” Marcus notes as he and Estelle discuss who their ideal subject should be, “Out looking for something.” Mike’s frustrated scorn for the tired pleasures of Swinging London nightlife and the women in his life contrasts the Monserrats’ desire to indulge those pleasures, and they push Mike to, amongst other things, pick up singer Laura Ladd (Sally Sheridan), a singer who belts out bluesy numbers in the club Mike, Alan, and Nicole frequent most, despite Mike not liking her. Mike explains to the increasingly exasperated Nicole that he keeps having blackouts and patches of amnesia.



For Monserrat, his invention means not just vindication for his ridiculed theories and years of obscurity, but also a device with enormous therapeutic and lifestyle potential, something that can help deliver other elderly people from their cages of their wearing bodies and limited experience, amongst other things. Once he proves his process works, Marcus wants to immediately present it to the world. Estelle however talks him into indulging their newfound power just a little, as a small recompense for all the privation they've suffered, a request that Marcus uneasily accedes to, allowing Estelle to use Mike as remote control agent to steal her a lush fur coat from a boutique: Mike smashes his way into the store and eludes an investigating Bobby. But the darker potential of this starts to assert itself as Estelle finds she has a deeper influence over Mike than her husband, proving her will superior to his and beginning to indulge more potent and illicit thrills, first pushing Mike to indulge the petty buzz of borrowing Alan's motorbike without asking, but then taking it to dangerous levels as she pushes him to speed, endangering both himself and Nicole as she clings on for dear life. When confronted by an irate Alan when returning the bike to the car mechanic shop where Alan works, Estelle urges Mike to hit Alan, sparking a rough fight, with Estelle then pushing Mike to bring ruthless violence to bear, swatting Alan's boss Ron (Alf Joint) with a wrench and leaving both men dazed and bloodied on the ground. Nicole is horrified and Mike bewildered by it all, flees.



The Sorcerers can be viewed as a particularly skewed and modern take on a string of movies Karloff had made in the early 1940s, which saw him cast as sympathetic but ill-fated scientists whose experiments go terribly wrong, of which *The Invisible Ray* (1936) and *The Devil Commands* (1941) are the best. Marcus plays the Mephistophelian lurer to Mike's callow Faust, but tries to back out of the logic of a situation he's contrived when he's appalled to realise he's unleashed the evil as well as healing potential of his invention. The unique cunning of *The Sorcerers* stems from the way Reeves utilises a not-uncommon idea in sci-fi and horror fiction, the device that allows some sort of puppet master influence, in a manner that nonetheless becomes an entirely coherent commentary on his movie itself, indeed of cinema itself, this machine that allows a viewer to share, for a spell, all the vicarious thrills of another life, and all that flows from that immersion, good and bad. Marcus's promise to Mike of "complete abandonment with no thought of remorse" is the promise every film makes to its audience. The narrative form may insist on purveying some brand of officially moral, artistic, and intellectual structure to what it portrays, but the fragments within it often provide nonetheless some reflection of and indulgence of the provocative and amoral acts, beyond the pale of everyday life, from rape to murder to drug use, or even far more mundane things, minor treacheries of faith and loyalty and right thinking. The spiralling path the Monserrats find themselves on becomes a partial metaphor on a game Reeves was already well aware he was playing, as cinema in the late 1960s was being pushed inexorably to provide more and more extreme thrills, as the last veils of censorship fell away and the need of filmmakers to attract audiences away from television found this the easiest way.



Whilst the specific social milieu of the late-1960s hip scene Reeves encompasses is inevitably dated, the tension between youth and age is an eternal one, and moreover Reeves makes ingenious use of the sociological inferences common in 1967 and now in that generational face-off, evoking the way the media gets off on reports of youthful bad behaviour and transmits it through to people simultaneously afraid and envious. In many ways *The Sorcerers* not only anticipates but outclasses Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) in the way it explores that tabloid obsession with the figure of the rampant young psycho on a spree by looking not just towards ineffectual ways of contending with such social problems but considering what purpose they serve, however incidentally, in that society, and also in filmed representations. The logical extreme Reeves takes it all too is also bound up with another phenomenon reemerging when he made the film – feminism, albeit given a characteristically acidic twist. Estelle, playing the dutiful and long-suffering wife to the wounded male genius, finds herself empowered to an incredible, superhuman degree, and upon realising that her willpower exceeds her husband's, begins not only to enjoy fighting and defeating him on a psychic level, but also indulging increasingly nefarious thrills without giving much of a damn for what Marcus or anyone thinks, particularly considering there's no way of connecting her to Mike's crimes, freed indeed from all need for remorse or moderation, only the pure pleasure of an unleashed will to power.



Witchfinder General approaches a similar preoccupation without the overt genre-enabled metaphor of Marcus's machine, instead using its historical setting to forge a world where such exploitation and monstrous enthrallment can be indulged. The narrative of the later film, adapted from a novel with the same title by Ronald Bassett, draws very broadly on a real historical figure, Matthew Hopkins, who stalked the byways of Civil War-era England seeking out and condemning those accused of witchcraft, in a campaign heavily coloured by religious and regional sectarianism: the film's title was also a popular nickname he was granted in those heady days of different brands of authority bestriding the normally becalmed fields of England, raining down death in all its guises. The real Hopkins died of consumption at the age of 27, after about three years of activity. Reeves however was not that interested in the usual angle on such figures, like that espoused in Benjamin Christensen's *Haxan* (1921) or Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, which analyse the heady stew of social prejudice, misunderstood psychological phenomena, and hysterical religious doctrines. *Witchfinder General* is more interested in analysing personal relations of power, and wielding a cogent metaphor for the zeitgeist of its making, being the increasingly fervent and angry tone of late 1960s where the youth culture revolved inescapably around the Vietnam War.



Reeves, originally wanted Donald Pleasance to play the heavily fictionalised take in the script he and Baker wrote, a reasonable choice that would have fit well with the portrait of the man, but when American International Pictures contributed financing they insisted on Price, then in haughty, hangdog middle age. Reeves opens the film with a sequence that coldly and starkly portrays the iniquitous brutality and social investment Reeves perceives in the tale of Hopkins and others like him, as an elderly woman, convicted of witchcraft, is dragged screaming and struggling out of a small town and hung from a gibbet on a windswept hillside, whilst Hopkins watches impassively from his horse at a distance from the actual machinery of the so-called justice. Hopkins travels from town to town on the invite of cliques in each locality, to accuse, process, and execute anyone who both provokes the fear and anger of their fellows but doesn't have the strength to ward off Hopkins and the mobs that meet and collaborate with him. Hopkins employs John Stearne (Robert Russell) as his extremely eager torturer: where Hopkins regards Stearne as a useful ruffian and minion and little else, Stearne refers to his and Hopkins' enterprise as a partnership. Hopkins also finds young women in each locale to force into sexual servitude for a time, using whatever leverage he has.



Even if Price wasn't quite sure what Reeves wanted of him, Reeves certainly got it: Price's Hopkins radiates a disdain for people that goes far beyond simple hypocrisy and into a realm of pure misanthropic attitude, considering everyone around to be some kind of useful stooge or temporary ally, a victim to be used and flung aside, or foe to be ruthlessly exterminated, and all of them sinners to one degree or another and so with no practical difference between the best and the worse. To a certain extent, indeed, landing Price rather than Pleasance in the part likely incidentally helped Reeves; Price's formidable appearance amplifies this quality of characterisation rather than making Hopkins merely a sleazy opportunist. Next on Hopkins' project of cleansing is the small Suffolk town of Brandeston, where he's been called to investigate the local priest, John Lowes (Rupert Davies), who is mostly suspected – with some justification – of still harbouring Roman Catholic loyalties and so is regarded as satanic agent by his neighbours. His niece Sara (Hilary Dwyer) is his ward and housekeeper, and she has a lover, Richard Marshall (Ogilvy), currently serving with the rank of Cornet in the Parliamentary Army. Given some leave after saving his commander Captain Gordon Michael Beint during a skirmish with some Royalists, he heads to Brandeston and stays with the Lowes, as the priest, worried about their safety, suggests Richard marry Sara and get her away from the locale. The match is set but Richard has to go back to his company for a spell.



In the meantime Hopkins and Stearne breeze into town, and with the aid of their contacts in Brandeston apprehend the priest. Stearne tortures him by pricking his back with a spike, seeking the invisible, insensitive “devil’s mark” supposedly left on the body to seal a satanic pact. Sara makes her own, more palpable deal with the devil as she makes plain to Hopkins she’ll give him sexual favours if he lets her uncle be. Hopkins agrees and tells Stearne to get busy with other suspects. Stearne, himself taken by Sara, rapes her in a field, and when Hopkins is told of this by a witness, the Witchfinder, readily resumes the torture of Lowes, and finally has him and another woman hung after a session of witch-ducking, a session that leaves one woman drowned, and, thus, declared innocent. Richard, sent out on a mission to buy horses for the army with a big battle expected soon, overhears from a trader about the trial and immediately goes AWOL, galloping to Brandeston. There he finds Sara alive but distraught and wracked with guilt and pain, whilst her father’s church has been desecrated. In the mess of the church Richard gets Sara to kneel with him and pledge themselves in marriage over his cavalry sabre, but also vows revenge on Hopkins, and cannot countenance anything else until he gains that revenge. He runs into Stearne in a tavern during his hunt whilst Hopkins is visiting another town, and gets into a brawl with him: the tavern keeper intervenes to let Stearne flee by knocking Richard out, and Stearne alerts Hopkins when they meet on the road.



Hopkins' charged and umbilical relationship with Stearne offers a new arrangement of the one evinced by the Monserrats, and also their connection to Mike in *The Sorcerers*. A chain of use and abuse, proxies and doppelgangers, amanuenses and dupes, victims and perpetrators, one constantly shading into the other. Stearne, a more plebeian, less strategically shrewd, if hardly more innocent figure than Hopkins, provides the relish for actually inflicting pain and suffering. Hopkins is happy to employ that pleasure taken in skill, but evidently considers himself superior to it. Hopkins knows well that part of his prestige comes from having layers of insulation, social, religious, and legal as well as in terms of dirty work, between him and the bloody actuality of his labours. They give not just a veneer of respectability, but also an even more pleasurable manifestation of it: even better than to torture someone without consequence is to prove one's power by motivating that torture. Hopkins nonetheless literally cannot leave Stearne behind, although the two men are separated at one point when they're stopped by a roundhead patrol: Hopkins, fleeing without a second thought for Stearne's fate, guns down a soldier to secure his getaway, whilst Stearne is briefly captured and only escapes after a more personal and vicious struggle that sees him stab a soldier to death with his spike for finding the devil's mark. Stearne vows a reckoning with Hopkins, but when he comes upon him again, Hopkins quickly and easily suborns him again without any concern by calling for him to resume his work.



As with *The Sorcerers*, Reeves's political subtexts in *Witchfinder General* skid in many directions. Hopkins resembles a pseudo-historical take on totalitarian state inquisitors and Stearne the kind of man who helps keep such people in their jobs, one unleashing the other. Given that relatively few films have dealt seriously with the milieu of the English Civil War, particularly with the jarring mixture of high moral purpose espoused by the people fighting it and the disruption and disorientation unleashed by it on the ground level, *Witchfinder General* is particularly keen to reflect a sort of folk history portrait of perhaps the most subtly ugly front of a war, one where neighbours turn on each-other and petty tyrants grow like weeds, an approach that also connects to the Vietnam War epoch. An early scene of Richard saving his captain from a Royalist soldier, who sneaks through the underbrush close to where the roundheads have converged in the sun-speckled woods, suggests a distant analogue for the constant game of hunt and ambush played in the Vietnamese forests. A little more facetiously, if arguably honouring the ancient traditions of English bawdiness, Reeves rhymes the increasingly liberated culture of the '60s era with that with the upturned apple carts of the Civil War as Richard and Sara abscond for a night of passion, with Richard ironically wielding her uncle's words as well as his tacit approval of their union: "Didn't you uncle just say you must early to bed? And isn't he a wise man?"



Reeves avoids the expected in presenting a clash between such premarital carnality and other such outbreaks of pagan practice amidst the chaos of war and the moral order Hopkins nominally maintains, in part because Hopkins himself is freely indulging his own sexual wont, with Reeves delivering his bitterest punchline when the Witchfinder, learning Stearne has soiled his private pleasure, moves on from Sara with icy lack of care. This sense of careless detachment from consequence and misanthropic divorcement is equally apparent as the by-product of Marcus Monserrat's invention in *The Sorcerers*, and the way it hands Estelle in particular a tool to indulge the darkest desires. Estelle makes Mike seek out a female acquaintance, Audrey Woods (Susan George), who's happy to see him, only for him to stab her to death with a pair of scissors in the most sublime/awful consummation of machine's potential: Estelle shivers with orgasmic pleasure in finally getting to indulge a long-suppressed desire to assault and destroy things that invite jealousy and longing, and she soon compels Mike to repeat the act with Laura. In both films, the membrane that keeps people civilised is tested and found easily broken, a point most famously made in the final scene of *Witchfinder General*, depicting as it does understandable thirst for revenge becoming lunatic bloodlust and frustration and the complete collapse of moral meaning. Are we good people because we are intrinsically peaceable and empathetic and wrongdoing is aberrant, or is that a state that can only exist so long as a rarefied balance of tensions defining the relationship of individual to group? This interest would also fuel much horror cinema in the future, particularly Wes Craven's films. In this way Reeves offers a loaded commentary on the logic not merely of the puritanical code of the witchfinder but, again, the nature of war as a corroder of all social values, reducing the best people to maniacal beasts.



Witchfinder General was retitled *The Conqueror Worm* for its initial US release, to make it seem like one of the Edgar Allan Poe films Price had made with Roger Corman and AIP, whilst different edits drifted around for decades afterwards, helping ironically to increase the film's mystique. The film nonetheless found significant success, grossing \$1.5 million in the US alone against its relatively miniscule £75,000 budget. As well as inflecting the Folk horror trend of the 1970s, Reeves's film begat a string of horror films about cruel inquisitors, most of them made in Germany. The look of *Witchfinder General*, accomplished in Reeves' collaboration with the great cinematographer John Coquillon, proved particularly influential. Coquillon would go on to collaborate regularly in that period with Sam Peckinpah. The feeling of connection between Reeves and Peckinpah goes beyond this, that said. *Witchfinder General* anticipates the same choleric, Sadean logic Peckinpah would bring to bear on *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Straw Dogs* (1971), with their determined depiction of the most violent and barbaric aspects of humanity, coexisting with a desperate effort to crawl out of the muck. At the end of an excruciating sequence of a woman being burned alive, Reeves delivers his most vicious joke in the sight of some village children roasting potatoes in the charcoal of the auto-da-fe, a vignette strongly reminiscent of the one Peckinpah offers at the opening of *The Wild Bunch*.



Witchfinder General also manages the rare feat of straddling genres easily. The bloody violence and air of slowly cranking, finally incipient lunacy certainly makes it count as horror, but it also shifts at points throughout into a war movie, historical drama, revenge thriller, and a sort of English Western, with Richard cast as the mounted avenger dashing on his noble steed across the fields, to the strains of Paul Ferris's score, which toggles between a sweeping romanticism and flourishes of folk music and more standard thriller scoring for the era. Reeves films his landscapes with a similarly ironic sensibility, a stylistic approach that would essentially birth the so-called "Folk horror" style that would similarly hinge on a deceptive blend of the bucolic and the menacing. It's worth comparing the heavily stylised approach Bava and John Llewellyn Moxey took a few years earlier, with *La Maschera del Demonio* (1960) and *The City of the Dead* (1960) respectively, in dealing with similar depictions of witch trials and executions and thematic territory. Instead, Reeves and Coquillon's camera sweep a very real world, capturing the rural pastures, the pools of mud and dancing horses, the grass-framed lanes and thorn-fringed woods, the grey-stone churches and pebble paths, with all the evocation of yeoman virtue and pastoral crudeness befitting the artistic exaltation of John Constable or William Blake. But these come edged with hints of menace and gathering darkness in surveys of gaunt trees, looming clouds over silhouetted gibbets and hanging trees, and low, flare-casting sunsets charged with romantic tristesse, all of which would become fixtures in the cinematography over the next decade. Moments of the grotesque are approached with the same deadpan sense of strange beauty – pocks of red blood spurting from the backs jabbed with Stearne's blade, fire wrapping around a screaming victim.



After failing to run the witchfinding duo down, Richard returns to his company and is lucky to avoid a court-martial through his captain's good graces. After distinguishing himself at the Battle of Naseby, Oliver Cromwell (Patrick Wymark) assigns Richard to chase down the king, who's rumoured to be fleeing to the East Anglia coast, and he sets off in the company of Troopers Swallow (Nicky Henson) and Harcourt (John Trenaman). Wymark's brief appearance as Cromwell – he also narrates the film at the outset – sees the film's fictional drama intersect cleverly with the history, with Wymark expertly capturing some essence of the future Lord Protector, professing his desire to have his success at Naseby remembered as a success for godliness and expressing delight in good food after a well-earned victory, all with the self-certified attitude of a man who knows what real power is and how to use it. Cromwell casually promotes Richard to Captain whilst assigning him to chase down the king, giving him a perfect window to also pursue Hopkins. After learning the king has managed to sail away, Richard heads for a rendezvous with Sara, who's staying in the town of Lavenham. Richard however is unaware that Hopkins has set up in that town as well, and, knowing Sara is there, lies in wait for him.



On closer inspection it's possible to view both *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General* as Reeves exploring and trying to come to grips with his own depressive streak. This feels particularly cogent with *The Sorcerers*, in its portrait of a young man who seems to have everything going for him yet finds himself at the mercy of a force that steals his time, fragments his thoughts, saps his sense of self, and drives him to irrational places. In *Witchfinder General* it registers more in the film's unflinching appraisal of infernal possibilities underlying the placid world, a world with its comforting trappings surgically cut away, where just about all that's good and noble is systematically ruined. Reeves also meditates wryly on the illusive nature of the hipster universe Mike drifts amidst in *The Sorcerers*, the gyrating youngsters all trying to look chic whilst holding down jobs like Mike in a shop and Alan as a car mechanic. The antique store Mike works in is called, with amusing double meaning, "The Glory Hole," where he is at one point faced with a testy customer (Gerald Champion) who comes in, pokes around the wares, and asks for a telephone, but doesn't want the antique kind Mike offers him: "In that case you're not much use to me are you?" This offhand but meaningful feel for social station is echoed again in *Witchfinder General*, where war has to a great extent benefited Richard in bringing him rank and connection, and also gives him the chance to marry Sara, a match that was unlikely before the war as Richard whilst a landowner only has a small farm. Indeed, the way the social disruption has benefitted him also applies to Hopkins and Stearne.



The innermost core of both *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General* is nonetheless the preoccupation with violence, not as a mere anomaly in human life but an entire paradigm, questioning what keeps it at bay as well as what unleashes it, and its eruption means for the world in small and at large. The most violent and horrific moment in *The Sorcerers* isn't Mike's murders, but the crucial scene in which Estelle, realising she can overpower her husband, responds to his decision to deprogram Mike by smashing his apparatus, the pleasure of release and violent action etched into her aged face. Marcus tries desperately to stop her, but she easily topples him by kicking his cane out from under him, using the cane as her implement of destruction on the machine before then walloping Marcus on the brow with it. Knocking Marcus out gives Estelle a chance to tie him with arms spread to a cabinet. Once she has him at bay, Estelle tries to feed nasty-looking forward purely to keep his strength up to engage in more "competitions." Here is a truly dark and evil vision of an old and exhausted marriage, the utter antithesis of the kind celebrated in a song from the same year, The Beatles' "When I'm Sixty-Four," finding its terminus in elder abuse and pure domestic violence and tragedy. Similarly, Hopkins utilising his sway to force women like Sara into his bed isn't the most spectacularly ugly of his acts, but it is in a way the most familiar and excruciating (and as good as Karloff and Ogilvy are, Lacey steals the film off them). Both *The Sorcerers* and *Witchfinder General* also climax with Reeves taking on a basic, goading problem for anyone writing an action thriller – that moment when a protagonist is tied up and entirely at bay, with Marcus tethered to a cupboard and Richard finally bound and captive at the mercy of Hopkins and Stearne, forced to watch as Sara is brutalised with malignant design and purpose.



Reeves, despite his diptych's forward-lunging approach to story, still inserts great little asides that let in jots of comic relief that aren't allowed to get distracting, like the scene in *The Sorcerers* with the antique storié customer and another vignette with an over-eager Jewish deli manager (Meier Tzelniker) that feel hastered from everyday life around London, and a cameo in *Witchfinder General* from Steptoe himself, Wilfrid Brambell, as Master Loach ("Witchfinding? Oh, that's nice, that's very nice!"), a rambling horse dealer who sells a nag to Stearne and accidentally helps him find Hopkins after their separation. Hopkins meanwhile, having set up in Lavenham, supervises the bleak spectacle of a young woman (Maggie Kimberly) being executed through Hopkins' new innovation of being lowered slowly and face-first into the blaze, whilst her husband is held at bay by some village men. This couple, whilst not even named on screen, are vital counterparts and mirrors to Richard and Sara, illustrating the worst end they could come to, and the husband is similarly driven to revenge against Hopkins, trying to attack him with a knife only to be shot in the gut by the quick-draw witchfinder. This however proves to be key to Hopkins and Stearnes' ultimate undoing, as the husband, not yet dead, manages to tell Swallow and Harcourt, on the search for their leader, that Richard and Sara, having been captured by Hopkins' connivance, have been taken to a nearby castle.



Swallow and Harcourt ultimately play the same role in *Witchfinder General* as Alan and Nicole in *The Sorcerers*: both duos try to intervene in a dismal situation but do so just a hair too late, and the story must end with the degradation and downfall of the nominally innocent as well as the self-consuming comeuppance of the villains. Alan and Nicole, realising after Laura's body is discovered that Mike was the last one with her and seeing the connection with Audrey's slaying too, decide to track Mike down and try to dispel their fears, even two detectives (Ivor Dean and Peter Fraser) are on the trail too, rummaging through Mike's flat. When Alan and Nicole confront Mike in the antique store, Estelle urges Mike to lash out violently and then flee in a stolen car. The police chase down Mike as he speeds recklessly through the London streets. But Marcus finally regains control not by trying to temper Estelle's destructive impulse but to take it to its greatest extreme, and knowing well that physical damage Mike takes will manifest on their bodies: Marcus compels Mike to drive pell-mell into a building sight, crashing the car and burning to death within it. Marcus manages to breathe a last apology to his wife as he performs the ultimate act of self-sacrifice and punishment, and Reeves caps the film, by dissolving from the licking flames of the burning car to the sight of Marcus and Estelle now charred corpses.



Witchfinder General's more famous, and notorious, climax is even darker, delivering the coldest possible parody of a situation most action films would present in heroic terms in depicting the turning of the worm and justified payback. Hopkins and Stearne relish having Richard and Sara at bay, Stearne now riddling Sara's back with the same bloody stigmata as he did her father, whilst Richard levels on Hopkins a dead-eyed glare and promise to kill him, a promise Hopkins has heard a hundred times already and takes smirking delight in. Meanwhile Swallow and Harcourt try to bluff their way past Hopkins' local ally (Peter Haigh) and finally bet fight him to gain access to the dungeon. Whilst Hopkins delights in threatening to burn Sara's flesh with a cruciform branding iron, he orders Stearne to untie Richard and bring him close to watch. The ruckus upstairs gives Richard a split-second chance to knock Stearne down and throw off his bonds, delivering the spur of his boot to Stearne's eye and leaving him writhing agony whilst advancing on Hopkins with an axe. Swallow and Harcourt arrive to behold another awful spectacle, that of Richard repeatedly swatting the agonised Hopkins with the axe, and Swallow shoots the witchfinder dead to put him out his misery. Richard, mad-eyed and distraught, begins to repeatedly bellow, "You took him from me! You took him from me!", whilst Sara begins to shriek in crazed shock. Whilst *The Sorcerers* in some ways develops its driving ideas in close concert with its narrative form more completely than *Witchfinder General*, it's not as full-blooded and delirium-producing as a work of directorial realisation, and in its climax *Witchfinder General* hits a truly raw nerve, capping the film with its haunting note of unresolved pain and spiralling madness. Sara's wail becomes an entire philosophical statement, the scream ever-echoing from all that's unresolved and unjust in the world's deep, dank history.

Mill of the Stone Women (1960)

Il Mulino delle Donne di Petra

this island rod



A small gem from the first great Italian horror wave, sparked by Riccardo Freda and Mario Bava's *I Vampiri* (1956), and which developed in counterpoint to the emergence of the Hammer style in Britain, Giorgio Ferroni's *Mill of the Stone Women* unfolds in a lushly-coloured, lithographic nineteenth century Flanders, where stark windmills sweep and slash against a perpetually gloomy sky and endless perversity is contained within the picture book climes. One windmill has become popularly known as the Mill of the Stone Women, because it's owned by art professor and sculptor Gregorious Wahl (Herbert A.E. Böhme), the interior filled with the many fruits of his sculptural labours. It also contains a remarkable mechanical carousel, built by Wahl's great-grandfather and maintained by his descendent and approaching its centennial. The carousel sports figures of historical female figures trundling around in a wobbly pageant, many of them in macabre poses and situations, including poisoners, hanging victims, and Joan of Arc on her pyre. Pierre Brice is Hans von Arnim, a young scholar and faculty assistant hired to write a monograph about the carousel. Staking out a chamber in the windmill as an office, Hans soon encounters Wahl's beautiful daughter Elfie (Scilla Gabel), and the enigmatic physician and researcher Dr Loren Bohlem (Wolfgang Preiss), who seems to be Wahl's perpetual guest.



Although Hans is romantically attached to his childhood friend, art student Liselotte Kornheim (Dany Carrel), he's soon ensnared by Elfie's urgently desirous advances, sneaking back into the windmill and spending a night of passion with her. Wahl later warns Hans about getting too close to Elfie, explaining that her health hangs by a thread and can't withstand any violent emotions. Hans tries to break the affair off, but after becoming irate Elfie collapses in a sudden fit. Hans, after carrying her limp form to her room, observes strange, ugly lesions breaking out on her apparently dead body. Stricken with guilt and convinced he's responsible, Hans, after wandering the nearby town, returns to the mill and takes a pill given to him by Bohlem to settle his nerves. Hans then confesses to Wahl, who berates Hans as the young man becomes increasingly feverish. Soon Hans is roaming around in a delirium. He breaks into the Wahl family crypt to see if Elfie has been placed there and finds her laid in a sarcophagus, and spots local model and chanteuse Annelore (Liana Orfei) bound to a chair through an open doorway in the mill, only for the door to slam shut and all trace of her to vanish when he finally gets it open again. Finally, in a completely distraught state, he confronts Wahl and Bohlem, but now finds them acting completely bewildered as if nothing strange has transpired, and Elfie appears just as alive as ever.



Mill of the Stone Women has the gall to come out of the gate with an opening credit stating it was based in a story in the book *Flemish Tales* by one Pieter van Weigen, although book and author are both completely fictitious. Ferroni's film is rather an eager mash-up of several then-recent, successful films, including Andre de Toth's *House of Wax* (1953), Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955), Georges Franju's *Eyes Without A Face* (1959), and Terence Fisher's Hammer films, with some nods to Carl Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932) inserted for good measure. Perhaps the film's most effectively atmospheric shot nods to one of Dreyer's signature images whilst evincing its own fresh artistry: Hans gazes upon a widow, swathed entirely in black, a bouquet of bright pink and yellow flowers in her lap, waiting at a ferry stage as a boy rings the bell and the ferry is rowed out of the vaporous mist cloaking the Flanders landscape. Ferroni deploys a coolly measured realism in the early scenes infected with only the faintest hint of something queasy registered by the trundling, herky-jerky progress of the carousel figures, their bodies and faces twisted and tweaked to enact macabre moments, and coterie of looming statues that decorate the mill, and the array of cogs and wheels constituting the machinery that drives the display.



Ferroni's eye remains inspired throughout, putting the Technicolor palette (and Pier Ludovico Pavoni's painterly photography) to use in forging poetic imagery that gains steadily in ghoulish intensity. The eerie off-white simulacra of the sculptures. The blazing red of a proffered rose left to Hans by Elfie and the yellow flowers surrounding her pale blue corpse in its grave. The peculiar flatness of the often grey-blue-soaked and deserted surrounds of the windmill, a fresh contrast to the usually jagged locales of Gothic horror films. Ferroni was an interesting, fitfully talented filmmaker who, like most jobbing Italian directors, tackled the full array of the standard national industry genres. Moving on from the short documentaries he made during World War II through post-war dramas, he made a brief horror dalliance with this film before then working on sword-and-sandal epics and Spaghetti Westerns, usually under his pseudonym Calvin Jackson Padget, which earned him a tip of the hat in Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon A Time...In Hollywood* (2019). Ferroni would bring something of the same bewitched fervour he achieves in *Mill of the Stone Women* to his peplum film *Hercules vs. Moloch* (1961), which wields similarly vibrant gothic imagery in its underground temple filled with animalistic priestesses and murderous tyrant who delights in scarring the beautiful. Ferroni would also make *The Trojan Horse* (1961), the first of a linked diptych of films starring Steve Reeves as Aeneas, and a movie that takes a surprisingly wry and antiheroic attitude to the Trojan legends and their mythical heroes. His last movie, *The Night of the Devils* (1972), would be a feature-length recapitulation of "The Wurdalak" episode in Mario Bava's *I Tre Volti Della Paura* (1963).



Mill of the Stone Women is hampered by its derivative storyline, and it doesn't quite deliver the dynamic, insistently forward-rolling force Bava or Fisher usually achieved. The biggest real problem in this regard is the long midsection depicting Wahl and Bohlem's efforts to make Hans unstable enough so he will cease being a distraction and temptation to Elfie and not be believed if he ever speaks out about the mill's inhabitants and their peculiar habits. The theme of an orchestrated plot to drive a protagonist off the rails or entirely mad with contrived hallucinations and inexplicable discoveries, set off by *Les Diaboliques*, was already a bit of a wearying cliché in the genre by this point – William Castle wouldn't have had a later career without it – and whilst Ferroni does his best to enliven it with his visual and sonic flourishes, the film ambles as long as it lasts. Brice is a more expressive handsome young hero than usual in this sort of thing, portraying Hans' increasingly crazed state well, but things become much more interesting once it focuses on the Wahls and Bohlem, and their game becomes clear.



Elfie's malady is eventually revealed to be a disease that manifests with her scabrous lesions and when advanced enough gives her the appearance of death. Her total degeneration can be held off and temporarily reversed, as Bohlem has found, with regular, total exchanges of blood with other women, who, alas, die from their new, poisonous blood supply. Wahl then hides the corpses in plain sight by caking them in plaster to exhibit as his statues, or swathing them in rubber and parading their bodies as statues on the carousel. Wahl keeps Bohlem, who's been drummed out of the medical profession, specifically to do this job, and Bohlem is particularly dedicated to it because he's in love with Elfie, though she despises him in turn. Whilst riffing on the theme of the compulsively driven and heedless patriarch trying to save his beloved daughter as borrowed from *Franju*, Ferroni presents his own, darkly tinted spin on it, transmuting it into an effective assault on the basic false promise of the classic Victorian social order, the exemplary men of different social bastions, Wahl the academic and artist, Bohmer the scientific healer, but both locked within their own, fetid regions of ego empire, with Elfie the nominal object of all their efforts. Ferroni ironically presents them early in the film acting out their roles with iconic perfection, Wahl sketching his daughter whilst she plays the piano with doll-like grace and Bohmer stands by as the gentleman suitor.



Under the surface, the reality: Wahl's overriding sense of paternal duty and authority simmers under a shallow veneer of bonhomie and bourgeois rectitude, but eventually making clear he's willing to indulge all kinds of perverse and vicious machinations to sustain Elfie's life. The daughter herself is no plaintive, fairy-tale waif or tragic victim, but an aptly Frankensteinian mirror to her father's obsessiveness, a case of repression turned into greedy, vampiric egotism, snatching onto Hans as a lover and gloating over the bound and gagged Lise with the knowledge that life and possessions of Hans can only belong to one of them. This in turn mimics and counters Bohmer's constantly frustrated efforts to coerce Elfie into loving him, failing that, he tries to blackmail her father into forcing the match. It's amusing to see Preiss, who more normally played gentlemanly German officers in war films and also the mastermind Dr Mabuse in some post-Fritz Lang entries in that legendary series, playing such a role, investing Bohmer with a blend of charmless entitlement, simmering erotic demand, and faintly ridiculous impotence. Gabel's startling beauty meanwhile is ideal for the genre in a way similar to Barbara Steele,



The film reaches its apogee as Ferroni maintains his coolly detached method even whilst tracing out potently sleazy imagery. Once they've killed Annelore to replenish Elfie, Wahl indulges his strange artistic bent and refashion her corpse into one of his figures. After pumping her full of preservative, he cakes her hands in plaster and poses her after a clay bust he's prepared, and then carefully fits a travesty of a rubber mask over her face. For the final, cynical touch, he suggestively outfits her as a shackled and appealing slave and martyr, before setting her up as a perpetual passenger on the carousel. Here, Ferroni hits upon a bizarre and effective metaphor for a particular kind of artistic misogyny, suborning the living to an ideal of the perpetual, and takes the core idea of *House of Wax*, the irony of the artist of death, the skip-the-middle-man approach to transforming models into art, to a new place, with the twinned imagery of the artificial simulacrum of life sustained by the carousel figures and Elfie herself in her unnaturally sustained persistence, as the narrative winnows its ideas down to a needling single point, that one person's existence is often paid for by another.



The script is obliged to split the rest of the narrative with another trio, Hans, Liselotte, and her fellow art student, the good-natured if slightly naughty Ralf (Marco Guglielmi), who fulfil the basic function of opposing the evil trio with their youthful, stolid goodness. Liselotte and Ralf are first introduced sketching Annelore, working as a live model in Wahl's class, stuck in a pose as Liberty in evil contrast to her later, enforced guise as a captive. Ferroni's efforts to capture the Hammer brand nostalgia for a Mittel Europa that never quite was extends to a scene of Annelore regaling a tavern crowd. When Bohmer discovers accidentally that Liselotte has exactly the right blood type to help him entirely cure Elfie, he and Wahl kidnap her, but when Bohmer tries to get the upper hand over Wahl, the professor stabs him the gut whilst declaring his total possession of his daughter. Hans and Ralf, driven to get to the bottom of things once Liselotte vanishes, learn that most of Hans' visions were faked, finding a sculpted dummy of Elfie in the Wahl crypt, and come to the rescue, whilst Wahl discovers his killing of Bohmer also cost the last chance of saving Elfie's life.



The mill catches on fire, the heroes fighting to escape the blazing building whilst Wahl tries to his last breath to drag Elfie's body to safety, but he is finally trapped. A note of brutal humour tolls as Annelore's severed head tumble from its post atop her rigid body on the carousel and rolls up to Wahl's feet whilst he accuses Hans and the others of killing his daughter. Ferroni dives in for close-ups of the carousel figures as they burn up, all loaned a special sick power in the awareness these aren't just artworks but the mortal remains of people. In his cruel punchline, Ferroni's camera slowly craning back and away from the sight of the glaze-eyed father petting his dead-weight daughter's hair as the flames whorl about them and the mill machinery creaks on, before offering a coda with the heroes standing at the ferry landing, Ralf ringing the bell to call the boat over and take them back to the land of the living whilst the mill is consumed. *Mill of the Stone Women* isn't quite consistent or original enough as a narrative to count as a true classic of the genre, but the truly perverse grandeur Ferroni delivers in the finale is a testimony to a talent that too rarely got to truly cut loose, delivering something here that lingers with a special, haunting frisson in the mind.

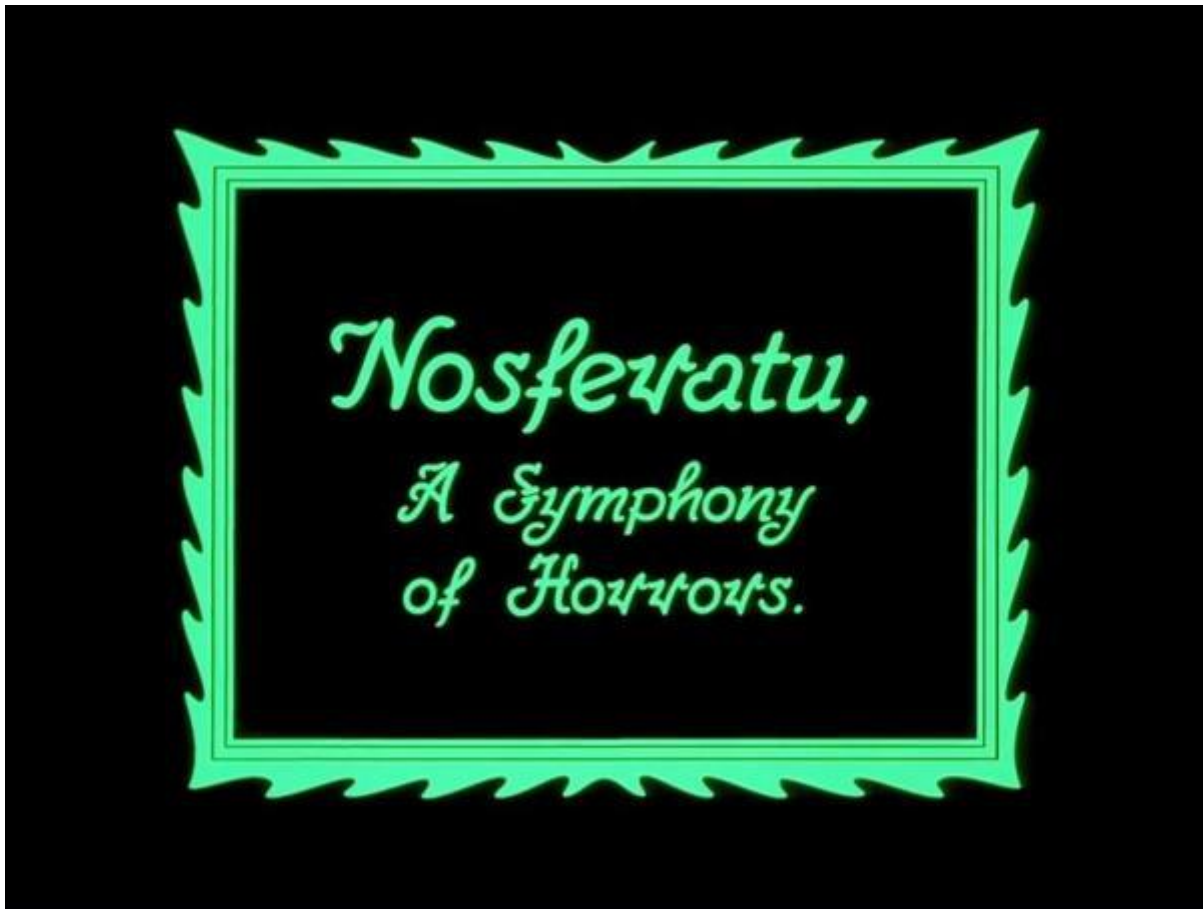


Nosferatu: A Symphony Of Horror (1922)

Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie Des Grauens

*aka Nosferatu ; Nosferatu: A Symphony Of Terror ; Nosferatu the Vampire ; The Twelfth Hour
– A Night of Horror; Dracula*

film freedonia

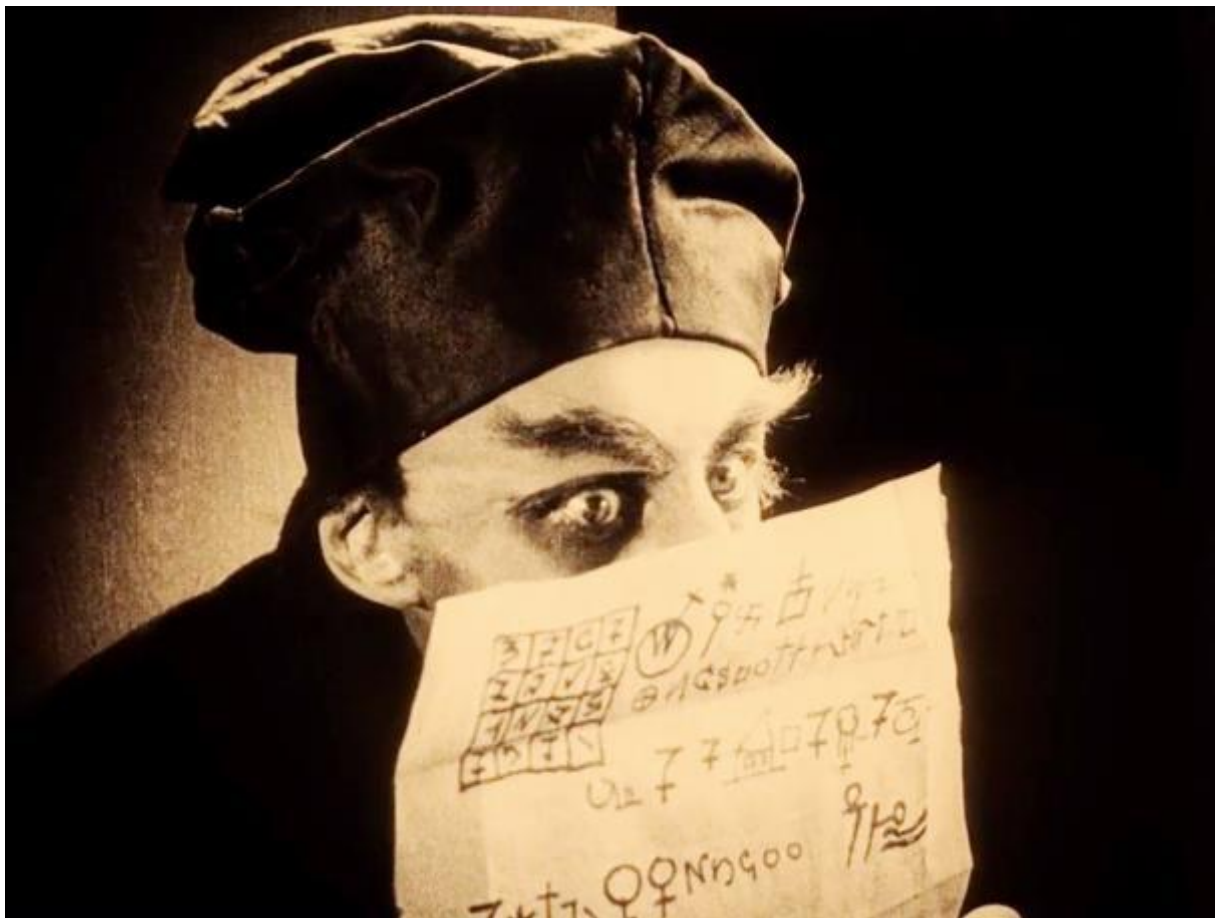


Director: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau

Screenwriter: Henrik Galeen

In the history of film only a few images are granted the rarefied status of becoming instantly recognisable and a lodestone of cinematic meaning. That sort of pop culture stature is particularly uncommon with movies over a century old. Those ranks might include Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, Buster Keaton's deadpan, and Rudolph Valentino in his sheik's habit, and little else. Oh, and the core images of *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, of the titular vampire, with spindly physique, pointed teeth, and bald pate, lurking in grainy footage that looks like it was filmed directly from someone's subconscious, his angular shadow sliding over walls like a nightmare, his hideous, mysteriously evil visage lurking over a woman in her bed. I remember the first time I saw it, which was not in the film itself but excerpted for the opening credits of a

TV show I used to watch when I was about five or six years old, with the vampire's image appearing under the grandly sonorous tones of the opening of Mahler's Fifth. The mere fact I can remember that conveys its haunting power. It wasn't until many years later that I actually got to see the whole film. Indeed, we're lucky that *Nosferatu* survives for us, given its notorious history as a film, but survive it did to have an essentially endless impact on Horror cinema in specific and cinema as a whole. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, born in Bielefeld, Germany, was 34 years old when *Nosferatu* was released. Murnau's father, Heinrich Plumpe, owned a cloth factory, giving his son and siblings a comfortable upbringing which they spent indulging literary and theatrical tastes. Friedrich, known for his coldly superior attitude even as a boy, grew up extremely tall and unapologetically queer, and took the name Murnau from a town near Lake Staffel he lived in for a time. Whilst studying at university Murnau became involved with student theatre productions, and the famed theatre director Max Reinhardt was impressed enough when he caught one of his performances that he invited him to train at his acting school.



Murnau's budding career was halted by World War I, serving at first in the infantry and then as a gunner and observer in the Imperial German Flying Corps, weathering several crashes until a forced landing in Switzerland saw him interned. Murnau spent the rest of the war directing prisoners in plays and writing his first film script. After the war Murnau started a film studio with actor Conrad Veidt, and made his filmmaking debut with *The Boy in Blue* (1919), a film inspired by Thomas Gainsborough's famous painting, and he quickly captured attention with a string of films in the next few years, many of them lost, including *The Haunted Castle* (1921) and *The Burning Soil* (1922). *Der Januskopf* (1920) first evinced Murnau's fascination for material in what would eventually be called the Horror genre, and his attraction to darkly psychological and oneiric overtones in a manner that would soon see him adopted as a hero for the fledgling Surrealist art movement. The film, which starred Veidt and featured a young Bela Lugosi in a

minor role, also proved the first of Murnau's attempts to film popular books without permission, as *Der Januskopf* was a thinly disguised variation on Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Murnau got away with that, in part because German storytelling was already rife with doppelgänger-themed stories, and German cinema had been merrily filching from British literary properties like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales for years already. But when Murnau made *Nosferatu*, this time a very slightly disguised adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, he found himself and his movie in trouble. Stoker had died a few years earlier, but his widow zealously protected his estate, and hearing about the movie had a British court move an injunction to seize and destroy every copy of Murnau's film.



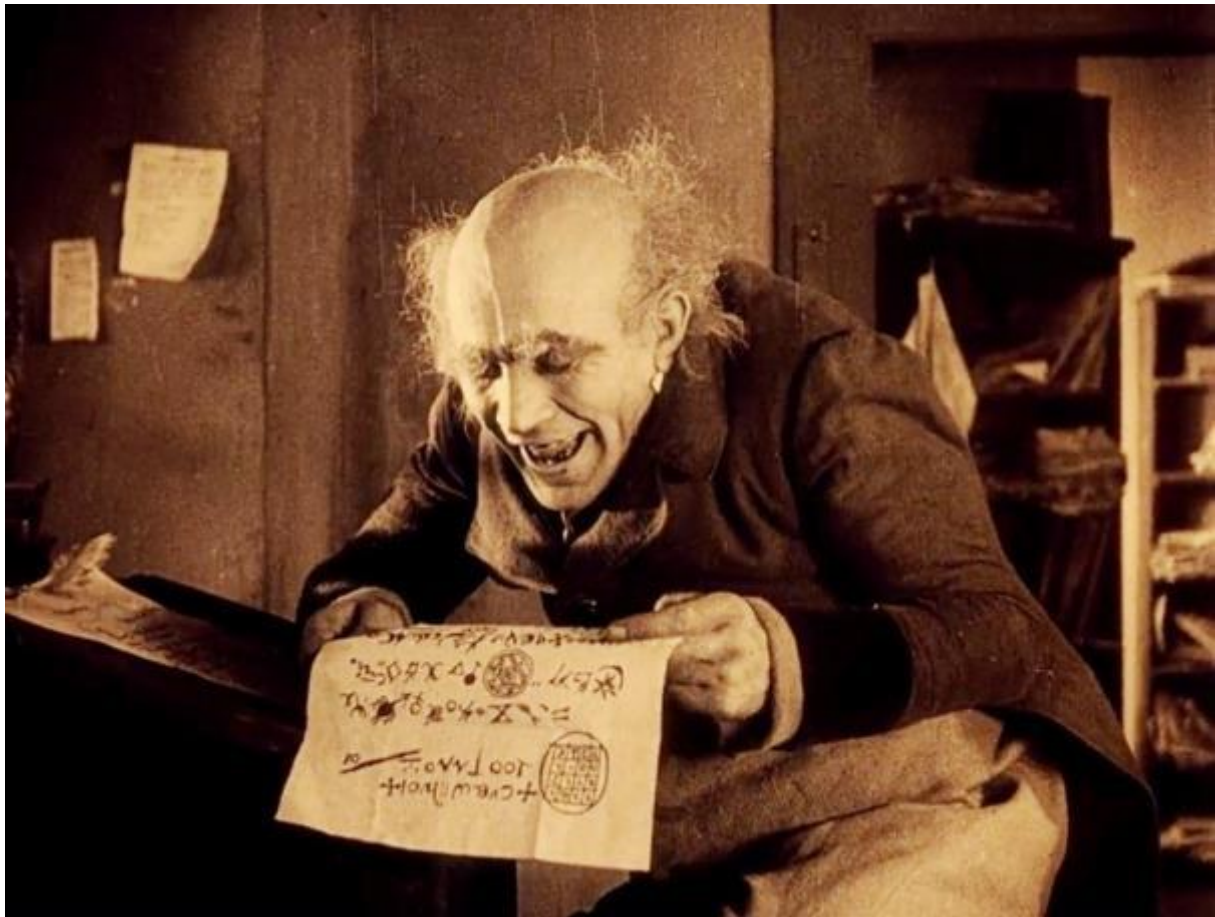
Fortunately, in the chaotic state of Germany in the early 1920s, this order was unenforceable, but it's one reason why *Nosferatu* only exists today in a curtailed and, despite restorations aplenty, still pretty rough form. And indeed, Murnau's oeuvre has greatly suffered from lost work, including his debut and his 1929 Hollywood film *4 Devils*. The film's persecution nonetheless helped make it the first and last production by Prana Film, a studio set up in part by artist and occultist Albin Grau, which went bankrupt. Murnau recovered from the experience of seeing his radical new artwork almost destroyed as those who did see it acclaimed him as a major new filmmaker. The *succes de scandale* led to him making his ambitious German masterworks *The Last Laugh* (1924) and *Faust* (1926), before a move to Hollywood. There he was greeted with the pomp and budgets of a prestige filmmaker, his movies there including *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), *City Girl* (1930), and *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931), before his sudden death in a car crash a week before the latter film premiered, at the age of 42.



Despite its skin-of-the-teeth survival, what survives of *Nosferatu* is still astonishingly powerful and mesmerising. It's a film that feels like a transmission from the secret, labyrinthine heart of cinema, a relic and a fount, from which the young but rapidly maturing art form split and forked in various directions, towards genre and art-house, narrative and experimental. Every other film of *Dracula* is after a fashion a remake of *Nosferatu*, with, more specifically, Werner Herzog's 1979 version offered as a specific, sometimes shot-for-shot recreation and reclamation; *The Witch* (2015) and *The Northman* (2022) director Robert Eggers is reportedly planning another. *Nosferatu* followed *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), the film that defined the German Expressionist cinema movement, and whilst it absorbed aspects of its example, particularly in exploiting the crude palette of cinematography at the time to use light and shadow as expressive tools and play with form as captured by the camera, but Murnau's signature choice was to adopt a more solid and realistic approach, shooting most of the film on location and explicitly contrasting solid, palpable places with infiltrations of the nightmarish.



Murnau's personal artistic preoccupations lay with evoking the most basic and primal side of human existence – love and hate in particular, and attending states from fear and desire to humiliation and greed. His later collaborations with the screenwriter Carl Mayer, who gained his break in movies as the cowriter of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, hinged on Mayer's feeling for far more everyday experience, and the two found their ideal place of expression in movies that allowed Murnau to extrapolate the extreme, the elemental, from the commonplace. *The Last Laugh* was a portrait of a hotel's impressively dressed doorman who finds himself relentless degraded after he gets too old, as a bitter portrait of a Germany battered to its knees after the war capped with a supremely sarcastic triumph. In *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, the central married couple step between extreme states of passion and murderous hate, and the queasy, tormenting mixture of lust and aspiration that almost drives the loving husband to kill his wife visualised as the ghostly wraith of the femme fatale plucking at his heart, and the final survival of the couple weathering literal stormy waters came touched with flashes of transcendental experience. For *Faust*, Murnau took on the most essential of German stories with a similarly extreme dichotomy whilst also following Goethe's redemptive arc for its hero, Faust's pact with the sardonic Mephistopheles finally cancelled and Faust reclaimed by a beautiful male angel. In Murnau's major films, chased with an obsessive intensity perhaps stemming from Murnau's obsessive reading of Nietzsche as a youth, the core characters are people who, whether titanic or insignificant in worldly terms, do battle with forces both inside themselves and beyond their control with the twinned promise of either annihilating them or rendering them immortal.



Nosferatu contrasts the later social and psychological analysis and sophistication of Murnau's films by taking on Stoker's story and partly revising it, whilst still leaning on its driving notion of evil in literal form, the dread-inducing vampire lurking in the fringes of civilisation and plotting his course to its heart: in *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* the demon lover is a psychic conjuration built around a much less impressive person, here it's real and wants to eat you up. Murnau, in freely adapting Stoker's storyline, also transcribed it into something more deeply and specifically German, via the script written by Henrik Galeen, who had already written Paul Wegener's first tilt at filming *The Golem* (1915) and would go on to write his second (1922) as well as other essential films of the German Expressionist Horror moment including *Waxworks* (1924), *The Student of Prague* (1926), and *Alraune* (1928). The storyline of their film more or less follows Stoker, but with changes that range from the superficial, with character names changed, to the suggestive and deeply consequential. Jonathan and Mina Harker become Thomas Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim) and wife Ellen (Greta Schröder). Renfield becomes Knock (Alexander Granach). Professor Van Helsing is split apart, one part becoming Professor Bulwer (Gustav Botz), a scientist influenced by Paracelsus, who gives learned, obscure lectures on life forms like the Venus Fly Trap that live on the bodily fluids of other life forms. Another part is blended with Dr Seward as Professor Sievers (John Gottowt), who serves somewhat unluckily as doctor to the Hutters. Count Dracula himself becomes Count Orlok (Max Schreck), also sometimes referred to as Nosferatu. That word, which has no clear linguistic root, was used in Stoker's novel as a folkloric Transylvanian term denoting the living dead. Shipowner Harding (Georg H. Schnell) and his sister Ruth (Ruth Landshoff) supplant several of the novel's supporting characters, with Ruth seeming to be nominated to fulfil the role of Lucy Westenra. What's most telling about some of this is that these adapted elements are present in a purely vestigial way, in a narrative that otherwise hones away distractions to focus on its central, bizarre romantic triangle – Orlok, Hutter, and Ellen.



So, young Hutter is the real estate agent, resident of the fictitious German city of Wisborg, a locale created with filming about Lubeck and Wismar, sometimes in the 1830s. Newly married to Ellen, Hutter wants to get on with upward mobility, and his employer, Knock, gives him a chance to get in on a major deal, if he'll travel to Transylvania and arrange a real estate purchase in Wisborg for Orlok. Knock suggests selling to Orlok the large, jagged-roofed structure which lies across a canal from Hutter's own residence. Hutter, thrilled, rushes home to tell Ellen about his mission and their eminent good fortune, but Ellen is stricken with foreboding which both put down to merely displeasure at being separated for so long. Hutter sets out on horseback and travels across central Europe to the fringe of the Carpathian Mountains, and spends a night in a tavern where the innkeeper (Guido Herzfeld) is disturbed Hutter's stated goal, and later Hutter finds a book placed in his room entitled, reassuringly, *Of Vampires, Monstrous Ghosts, Sorcery, and The Seven Deadly Sins*. Hutter starts reading the book and becomes increasingly disturbed, but awakens in the morning to the bucolic scenes of the rural area and forgets it all. After being abandoned by his coach driver, who refuses to go any further, Hutter tramps his way up a mountain path into the high, jagged reaches of the mountains, until he's picked up by a coach supposedly sent by Count Orlok.



Dracula was written as an epistolary novel – that is, a narrative presented through fake letters, diary entries, and other writings by the characters. This was essentially the classic literary equivalent of a modern found footage movie, designed to create a slightly more credulous attitude through the realistic texture of personal experience and eyewitness account. As if seeking their own device to induce a sense of distanced credulity, Murnau and Galeen present their narrative as an historical account as recorded in an obscure (and imaginary) book entitled *A Chronicle of the Great Plague of Wisborg – Anno Domini 1838*. The pages of the book provide many of the intertitles of the film, as if dramatizing the recorded events. Cinematographer Fritz Arno Wagner's photography evokes a mood of tranquillity and homey settlement in the environs of Wisborg, with its ivy-clad bourgeois houses and picturesque medieval streets. It's a vision of a lost Germany, indeed before Germany actually existed, perhaps charged with nostalgic longing for a presumed audience all too rueful of the price of modernity, and also allowing Murnau to skip around technological infrastructure like trains and dip into the last days of a world that travelled no fast than horse or wind. The only note of the unsettling struck in Wisborg comes from the old buildings Knock suggests Hutter sell, lurking across the way from Hutter's own house like a cancerous polyp amidst the civility.



Knock himself is similarly peculiar and uncomfortably out of place, a leering oddball playing at being the commanding burger, like a hangover from that medieval proto-Germany subsisting in the oncoming industrial age, much as Orlok will represent the intrusion of an even more ancient and alien zone in those sun-dappled streets. Knock is introduced eagerly reading Orlok's correspondence eagerly, scrawled over with Orlok's demotic letters and arcane symbols, which hint that Orlok has ensnared Knock's imagination with promises of cabalistic lore. As a variation on Renfield from Stoker's novel, where the character was simply an inmate of Seward's sanatorium randomly chosen to be Dracula's helpmate and emissary, Knock instead prefigured a common practice of later adaptations of making the character connected to, or sometimes even supplanting (as in the 1931 Tod Browning version), Harker himself as the luckless real estate agent sent to meet the Count. The Hardings are friends of the Hutterers who take Ellen in whilst her husband is away.



The film's first, most memorable title card declares: "Nosferatu. Does this word not sound like the midnight call of the Bird of Death? Do not utter it, or the images of life will fade – into pale shadows and ghostly dreams will rise from your heart and feed your Blood." The mood of gentle morbid menace immediately suggested her is reinforced as Hutter's journey becomes not merely a physical trip of so arduousness but one that will transgress some barrier of the liminal. "Go quickly, travel safely, my young friend, to the land of ghosts," Knock tells Hutter, and Hutter himself formulates his journey with enthusiasm to Ellen: "I am going far away to the land of robbers and ghosts." When Hutter reads the book left for him in the Transylvanian inn, he peruses a particularly vital passage: "From the seed of Belial came forth the Vampire – Nosferatu – which lieth and feedeth on the Blood of Mankind, and, unredeemed, maketh his abode in the frightful caves, graves and coffins filled with accursed earth from the fields of the Black Death." This passage becomes crucial to understanding the film's assimilation of Stoker's story and its twistings of the familiar story and imagery, recasting the vampire as a special kind of evil, connected with the fear not just of disease but of the darkest kind, the epidemic that swept through Europe and decimated its heartlands.



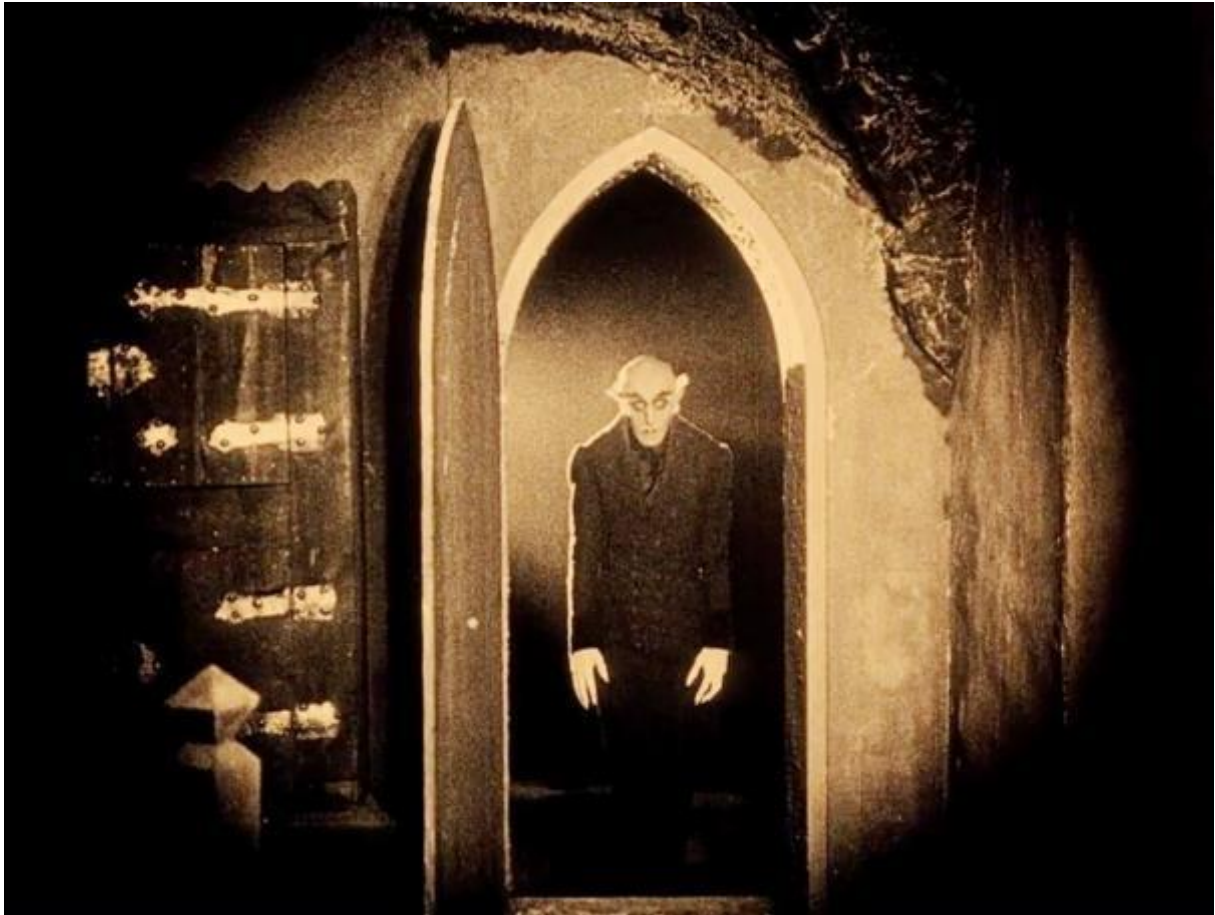
In his remake, Herzog would transmute Hutter's climb into the Carpathians into one of his rapturous interludes, complete with the opening of Wagner's "Das Rheingold" swirling on the soundtrack and Herzog's beloved rivers of mountain mist. Murnau's version is less spectacular but, in its way, more subtly disquieting, shooting in real, rugged peaks of raw stone. Once his coach driver forces him to alight, Hutter crosses a wooden bridge spanning a mountain stream, and a title card reads, "When he crossed the bridge, the phantoms came to meet him." Murnau immediately supplies the first of his cinematic coups as he cuts to Orlok's carriage leaving his high-perched castle and descending to meet Hutter. Murnau clips frame out of scenes of Orlok's actions to make them fast, stuttering, hallucinatory. He uses under-cranked film to make the advance of the coach unnaturally fast and jangly – which ironically is how just about every silent film would be forced to look when projected at the wrong speed for decades – whilst Orlok's sharp and startling features leer out from under his guise as the coachman. As it brings Hutter back towards Orlok's castle, Murnau interpolates a shot printed in negative, the foregrounded elements embossed with silver and the sky a pool of darkness: this is Hutter crossing the last, most profound barrier he's been destined to cross since leaving his home, the one between natural and unnatural, reality and dream, living and dead.



For extra weird effect, Murnau has driver, coach, and horses all wrapped in black cloth, and the horses wear hoods and masks, making them seem like living statues. Murnau's take on Stoker's motifs is illustrated in the barest terms when Hutter and Orlok first meet properly. Each is framed by an arching gateway at the castle entrance, presented as mirror images in effect, Hutter with the forest and daylight behind but with the doors slowly swinging shut once he passes through, Orlok with darkness at his back. Hutter representing the ordinary, the normal man, Orlok his dark antithesis, the twisted thing lurking within the psyche, usually kept at bay by ritual and social norms but reigning in this pocket of existence, and looking for his ticket to escape into the world. Orlok lurches into view, an uncanny figure with a stiff gait, huge, blazing eyes, jutting raptor's nose and tight-clenched hands with long, claw-like nails, his appearance made slightly more normal by insisting on wearing a cap that hides his nearly hairless scalp and jutting ears. Murnau's concept for Orlok makes him into a visual rhyme for the rats that follow his plague-ridden trail, a carrion-feeding rodent loaned vaguely human shape. When he's more completely revealed later to Hutter and others, with head and pointed teeth blatant, he abandons all pretence to moving or acting like a living thing, standing unnaturally straight, moving in spasmodic fashion, rising from his coffin bolt upright.



Orlok is, then, conceptually quite a different thing to Stoker's creation. Dracula, whilst visibly rejuvenated by supping blood in the course of Harker's visit to his castle, was nonetheless still a normal-looking being, charismatic and sociable, a vampire who could easily, once properly transplanted to Blighty, become a nocturnal guerrilla in a supernatural war, with the signifiers of his strangeness emerging more subtly if, at last, manifestly. Orlok rather represents a distinct continental take on the image of the vampire, something play-acting at being human, and not that competently. Some interpretations of *Nosferatu* have taken Orlok as an embodiment of anti-Semitic caricature, the image of the insidious foreign invader bringing filth and disease in his wake. Given Murnau's lack of any such prejudice, and the screenwriter himself being Jewish, that interpretation feels like a product of a desire to interpret just about anything out of Germany between the wars to be rife with signs of proto-Nazism. That said, there persists a discomforting grey zone where folkloric reference and socially prejudiced caricature can intersect, which one evolved from the other becoming blurred and hard to reckon.



Dracula as a story has always been a bit of a double-edged blade in terms of its reflection of social values, even if at the end of the day it exists more fully in the realm of psychological symbolism, a first frisson in a popular culture facing an evolving understanding of the forces lurking within the limits of the psyche thought previously to be immutable. *Dracula* can be said to at once record a British anxiety before a Europe where different, older, more repressive political paradigms were more the norm than democracy when Stoker wrote his book, with Dracula the spirit of a menacingly dominating and dictatorial spirit anticipatory of elements of German militarism, Nazism, and Stalinism, ideas that subjugate populaces and drain their vitality, just as much as he can be said to represent a more reactionary anxiety before the idea of foreignness itself, Dracula the emblematic foreigner moving in to steal our women. Murnau and Galeen's alteration to the story, bringing Orlok to German shores rather than English, required the earlier historical setting – in Stoker, Orlok had to reach an island by sea, where Transylvania, then in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was just a couple of days away by train – and provoked, as if by association, a different sense of social-historical meaning, one invoked by the references to the Black Death. This also connects with the radically different way Murnau approaches the oncoming contest of Orlok, Hutter, and Ellen.



Murnau lets an edge of peculiar comedy, bordering on the satirical, permeate his adaptation, particularly in Hutter's general obliviousness to the bewildering things all around him. Orlok tells Hutter he's late, having kept him waiting until after midnight. Hutter eats at Orlok's dining table whilst the Count leafs through Hutter's documentation. Hutter perceives the oddness of his host as Orlok peers over the top of a letter from Knock, written in the same esoteric hand as his own, whilst a medieval clock, sporting a figurine in the form of a skeleton raising a cup in sardonic toasting whilst its other hand holds the hammer that rings the bell, strikes midnight. "Your wife has a beautiful neck..." Orlok coos when he beholds Ellen's portrait, accidentally dropped on the dining table by Hutter, admiration of physical form and raw bloodlust converging in manner that's wryly blatant in outlining Orlok's tastes. Hutter's own cringing before Orlok's overeager alarm and interest when he cuts his finger whilst slicing bread again nudges comic exaggeration, and later Hutter finishes up literally hiding under the covers of bed when he spies Orlok waiting outside his room, his monstrosity now patent, marching like an automaton with stiff legs and arms, eyes swivelling in their sockets with unnatural focus, his two, rodent-like fangs now exposed in his mouth.



This vignette, whilst touched with black humour, is at the same time one of Murnau's coups of creepiness, with the first look at Orlok at his most ghoulish generating a sense of the inexorable, Hutter stricken by his defenceless position to the point where he's reduced to a cringing child before this menace advancing on his room. Hutter's credulity has already been stoked by further readings of the book from the inn, which describes the monster called Nosferatu who drinks blood, "his hellish elixir of life." He's only saved by the finest filament of mystical and emotional connection to a counteracting and salving force – his bond with Ellen, who awakens screaming in her bedroom as Orlok's shadow falls upon her husband, causing the vampire to retreat. The edge of comedy resurges towards the film's end when Knock, having gone completely lunatic as Orlok comes into proximity, leading the townsfolk of Wisborg in a wild chase around the city, finally straddling a rooftop to mock and jeer them whilst stones are flung up him in an effort to dislodge him. Here Murnau lets an edge of perverse delight in his representatives of evil, upending the superficial calm of his period setting in a manner that contrasts the ultimate celebration of authority over the lunatic asylum in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: in Murnau the loonies are loose and play.



Perhaps the most mystique-shrouded aspect of *Nosferatu* for a long time star Schreck: given that the word schreck means “sudden scare” or “fright” in German, many took it to be a stage name for another, perhaps well-known actor in heavy disguise. The combination of the film’s aura of the inscrutable and the obscurity of the actor helped give rise to a hardly serious but amusing urban legend that Murnau had in fact employed a real vampire, an idea filmmaker E. Elias Merhige took as the seed for his *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000): Merhige’s film sported Willem Dafoe as the conniving vampire and John Malkovich as a Murnau too distracted by his art to care about his cast and crew. As silly as the myth was, watching *Nosferatu* it’s not that impossible to understand. But Schreck was in fact the actor’s real name, a hard-working actor who was by all accounts a bit of an oddball who liked playing grotesques, and whose wife Fanny also appears in the film as a nurse who cares for Hutter. Schreck’s incarnation of this notion of the vampire is emblazoned on the imagination



Murnau dissolves from a suggestive shot of Orlok advancing on Hutter after he cuts his finger to the next morning as “the shadows of the night left Hutter,” to Hutter asleep and slumped in the same chair. He awakens, cheered by the sun if bewildered by his apparent, total solitude in the cavernous castle, and dismissing the two small holes he finds on his throat as the bites of mosquitos. He writes a letter to Ellen mentioning this, and manages to wave down a cautious horseman riding past the castle to take the letter and post it. During the night he has his terrifying encounter with Orlok, and, after Ellen’s awakening somehow wards off the vampire, Hutter survives to the following morning when he goes in search of where the fiend hides during the day. He locates Orlok, stretched out in a sarcophagus in the castle basement, and flees back to his room. From there he looks down into the castle courtyard, witnessing as Orlok loads up a wagon with coffins filled with earth, his labours rendered uncanny by Murnau’s film tricks, combining sped-up motion and skipped frames to render his actions impossibly fast and hallucinatory.



The greater part of *Nosferatu's* singular, lingering spell on filmmakers in particular might well stem from these moments when Murnau wields a self-conscious sense of film technique as the essence of the uncanny. To be a film lover is to always be communing with the past, even if only the past of last year, to be seeing the dead. The further one delves back through the ages of cinema, through the high silent era to the earliest, flickering examples of the art captured by the likes of Thomas Edison and the Lumiere brothers on their tinker-toy cameras, the more powerful and undeniable a feeling comes of gazing at the edge of the liminal, of the recorded, of the captured impression of time, illusory and yet also powerfully real. People long dead, moving, talking, laughing dancing, looking back at the camera to the eye of the operator, the artist, the inventor, the audience, held in the frames of celluloid and transmitted by however many intervening mediums. *Nosferatu* is likely the oldest film most people who watch it have ever seen, and the way Murnau stamped his imagination on the film courts that sense of communion, that magic encoded in the film's form: *Nosferatu* beams out to us from the edge of memory, of the psyche. The images of Orlok reinforce that impression – his shadow slinking across walls, his crepuscular visage looming over hapless, arrested victims or catching moonlight as he gazes out of the dark manse across the water, as if the incarnation of the collective id for all of bourgeois civilisation.



More practically, Murnau's use of pure camera effect to communicate Orlok's supernatural power removes the film out of the realm of the theatrical and places it entirely in a cinematic realm. Murnau's approach recalls the lingering example of Georges Méliès' mischievous sense of film's reality-shaping capacity, able to conjure and erase at will, rather than using props or special effects. Even Orlok's ultimate destruction is finally wrought not with makeup effects or pyrotechnics, but erasing from the film itself, via double-exposure, as if rejected by the subliminal rationality of film, which does after all turn money into light: no room for dream-beings in that equation. This also makes *Nosferatu* feel like a crucial crossroads for cinema as a whole, marking a moment when playing freely with the very stuff of film could expand the way narrative is communicated and received, and also be done for its own sake. If the first age of cinema, a little less than three decades, of commercial cinema had been a process where the essence of narrative cinema and its most essential devices were invented and pieced together, *Nosferatu* is an iconographic moment of the third, where that expressive potential could be warped and widened and finally led off down other paths, towards the purely abstract and experimental, the surreal and the associative.



Nosferatu is also a film haunted by history itself, made by people who just weathered a terrible war in a country going through a deep economic and social shock, made all the more subtly terrible in grappling with the horrible persistence of a morbid atmosphere pervading everything, infesting everything. In this regard it connects as much with Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919), which more directly tackled the theme of the renescent war dead haunting the living, as it does to than with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which portrayed a thrall captive to a manipulative will and the world as an insane asylum. In *Nosferatu* Murnau and Galeen place far most emphasis on the first quarter of *Dracula*, turning it into almost the whole movie. That's understandable given an evergreen complaint about the novel is that it never matches the menacing splendour of Harker's journey to *Dracula*'s castle and his experiences there. This is in part because of Murnau's new emphasis on Orlok as a voyager, setting out from his Carpathian lair to arrive at the Wisborg waterfront – an arrival Murnau declares in the most effectively deadpan way as he notes the derelict, disease-ridden, monster-carrying ship Orlok has come in drifting into view against those quaint Gothic buildings and clean, orderly streets. And Orlok's voyage has a singular purpose as immediate goal, a rendezvous with Ellen, a meeting both know on some level must come.



So, Murnau shows Orlok's coffins being borne down river on a wooden raft, a vignette that feels like an incidental rough draft for the folkloric world of Sergei Paradjanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1964). One of Murnau's most potent choices throughout the film, in contrast to the stylised and setbound evocations of Browning's *Dracula* or the ironically humdrum realism of Terence Fisher's 1958 version, was to film as much in real locales, so the mountains are authentically jagged and the river wild-looking rather than conjurations of the matte artist, and it helps rather than hinders the creation of his rarefied atmosphere, contrasting the oneiric with the realistic but finding ways to make each bleed into the other, perhaps reaching a zenith with that shot of the ship arriving in Wisborg. Orlok's voyage is staged on a real vessel, as Murnau includes the most famous and essential image Stoker provided of the dead captain tied to the steering wheel, portraying the captain (Max Nemetz) making this fearful choice, one charged with the quality of both accepting and defying fate and evil, after seeing two of his sailors (Wolfgang Heinz and Albert Venohr) leap overboard in abject terror. The sailors, knowing something on board the ship, here called the *Empusa*, is killing their comrades, descend into the hull to uncover whatever is lurking. One brave man starts hacking at one of Orlok's caskets with a hatchet, only to stir a horde of rats to pour out. Orlok himself stands up like a flagpole being erected and waves one of his clawed fingers like a chiding schoolteacher, his unreal and malignant physical presence enough to turn stolid men mad.



The *Empusa* leaves disease in its wake as the rats that slip out from Orlok's boxes infect the port of embarkation, and once it makes landfall as its destination Wisborg too falls under the plague's spell, an arrival denoted, in another of Murnau's visual coups, by a column of mourners carrying coffins of the dead through the town centre. Another hint of Murnau's deadpan humour arises with the sight of Orlok, poking his head out of the *Empusa*'s cargo hold with a grin of famished delight, then carries a coffin in awkward fashion away from the waterfront to the domicile Hutter has furnished him with. The next day Harding and other representatives from a maritime association investigate the mystery of the ship and its gruesome crew, and quickly realise that a deadly gift the vessel has left in their town, too late to prevent the plague taking holding in the city. This is another element of the story Murnau and Galeen subtly emphasise, with Orlok either ensnaring the imagination of the petty power seekers of Wisborg, in the form of Knock, or humiliating and entrapping them, like Hutter, or turning their business into a disease-trafficking parody of itself, as he does to Harding and the other shipowners.



Hutter for his part manages to escape Orlok's castle by tying bedclothes together and lowering himself down the vertiginous wall beyond his chamber window, dropping to the ground below with a combined moan of pain and relief. He spends a spell being cared for in a hospital before setting out in pursuit of the Count. On the way Hutter is tormented by fevers and spectral lunacies, his inner being in turmoil that must last until his dark mirror is finally exorcised, and that can only happen through Hutter losing his beloved, a motif touched with fervent if anxious and reactionary erotic undertones. It's only in the film's last portion that Murnau's intention in his personalised digestion of the Dracula mythos is, and that is to transform it into something redolent far more of a specific German art tradition: that of "Death and the Maiden." That motif grew out of the classic medieval artistic idea of the Tötetanz, or Dance of Death. The "Death and the Maiden" motif zeroed in the eternal clash of life and death, as visualised through the quintessence of life, a young, beautiful, fertile woman, and the personification of Death, often skeletal, hideous, or at least gaunt and draped in black, and usually male. This association carried a powerful if sickly sexual dimension. Many "Death and the Maiden" artworks were produced in the 1500s, but found a revival in the waning Romantic period of the 1800s and the early Modernist era, as the most well-known today likely being two musical pieces by Franz Schubert, a song he wrote based on a poem with that title, later incorporated into a longer string quartet piece.



Thus, rather than the ironically romantic aspect of Dracula as a seductive presence, that fierce and sexy love child of Bronte's Heathcliff and Richardson's Lovelace with a bit of Eurotrash chic thrown in, Murnau presents Orlok as a version of death incarnate, hideous and wizened, setting his sights on Ellen as the embodiment of feminine virtue and selfless good. But she also sets her sights on Orlok, once she begins to perceive the true nature of the tragedy eating at Wisborg and her own marriage, after a shattered and sickly Hutter returns home. One of Murnau's greatest images is of Ellen waiting on the shoreline for a ship bearing Hutter home, her resting tired and faint on a bench, with ornate crucifixes of a burial ground for those drowned at sea studding the sand about her. Once Hutter is home and the plague spreading in Wisborg, Ellen points out a sight she has become privy to, perhaps Murnau's most genuinely eerie and disturbing, all the more so for its almost subliminal effect: Ellen gestures out of the marital bedroom window to the house across the canal, where Orlok's white, wedge-shaped head can be seen peering relentlessly out of a high window. "That is how I see it every night!" Ellen declares to Hutter, who tries to laugh off the sight, but cringes in terror when alone, knowing very well who is staring at his window.



A level of clumsiness manifests in *Nosferatu* on a pure story level, as the film never seems to quite find what all of its characters and their gestures are present for. There are vignettes of Ruth being frightened and Harding being investigative. The introduction of Professor Bulwer, giving his inferring lectures about likenesses in nature, sees him become not a potential Van Helsing but Murnau's ironic emblem of science as ineffectual in contending with profound problems, locked in a zone of winnowing out miniscule facts. These loose threads still give Murnau space to keep evolving his ideas and deploy sonorous imagery, like Ruth awakening in terror in the night after a breeze rustles her curtains and knocks out a window. A title card notes that "the panic stricken town was looking for a scape-goat: it chose Knock" before the chase for the mad agent begins, suggesting a truly fascinating segue in theme as *Nosferatu* could become more completely a portrait of a society disintegrating in the face of fear and disruption, even if this doesn't really lead to much more than Knock's comic rampage. A rampage which, at least, seems to have left a seed in the mind of both Lang, for *Metropolis* (1927), and maybe even the makers of *King Kong* (1933), the rooftops become a battleground where embodiments of anarchy rule and mock the hoipolloi below.



Some of this might have resulted from the film's many, crude reedits, but most fundamentally it's because of where Murnau finally drags the storyline. Ellen, having read in her husband's trusty Transylvanian book that the only way to halt a vampire's reign of terror is for an innocent woman to willingly offer herself as prey to the monster and keep it enraptured until dawn destroys it. Surveying the columns of the dead out in the street and knowing well the carnage will continue until Orlok is destroyed, and feeling the constant pull of his mesmeric gaze from the windows across, decides that she must be the one to do it. Pretending to be ill, she has Hutter go to fetch Professor Sievers. Most of the film's most famous and endlessly excerpted images come from its last five minutes, as Ellen prostrates herself on her bed and waits for Orlok to enter, the vampire sneaking up the stairwell into her room and hovering over her: where earlier her lover's connection to Hutter and the thread of evil fate linking her to Orlok forestalled his attack, now Orlok's shadow falls over her and the projected form of his outreached hand covers her heart and clenches, Ellen withering under the malign influence. Orlok stoops to drink his fill of his "elixir," only to slowly raise his head in anxious realisation when he hears the cock crow. Orlok stands just in time for the dawn light to fall in through the window and cause him to fade away like a dream of the night. He's mourned only by Knock, his pathetic and once again imprisoned disciple, whilst a wisp of smoke wafts up from where Orlok stood.



But Orlok was no dream, and the force of dark knowledge he represented, the antithetical side of passion, draining and corrupting, claims its last victim in Ellen herself, who dies in Hutter's arms whilst the old and bewildered Sievers muses on the scene of pathos. A last title comes from the framing chronicle which notes that the plague vanished along with Orlok, and Murnau offers a last glimpse of Orlok's castle, freed from whatever illusory enchantment held it, now revealed as a broken ruin. The resolution is, even for 1922, old-fashioned, almost antiquarian in its enshrining of a classically sentimental view of female sexuality and self-sacrifice. Ellen passively offers herself up as the monster's love object and food, and dies from poison of dark sexuality Orlok left her infested with. With the important corollary that this is also Ellen's form of strength brought to bear. Nobody else in *Nosferatu* is even so faintly determined, clear-headed and aware as Ellen, who sits night after night with the demon staring at her and grows in conviction that only a ritual, a display of infinite good, can counter infinite evil. Ellen's sacrificial gesture is one held profound in Murnau's art, where the redemptive power of love is constantly reiterated, whether it be for friends in *The Last Laugh* or Gretchen for Faust and in the ultimate reunion of the couple in *Sunrise*. Murnau always reveals this crucial sliver of idealistic conviction without any shred of irony, dark as his imagination could become. *Nosferatu's* ultimate message is that only love can exorcise the demons of war, pestilence, and ruination gripping Murnau's homeland. Of course, unfortunately, many chose the very opposite emotion for the task.

A Haunting In Venice (2023)

this island rod



The year is 1947: Hercule Poirot (Kenneth Branagh) has moved to the canal-veined city of Venice and entirely given up detective work. He's even hired a former local cop, Portfoglio (Riccardo Scamarcio), as a bodyguard to fend off people petitioning for his aid. But Poirot is drawn out of his routine when an old friend, the novelist Ariadne Oliver (Tina Fey), comes to visit and asks him to train his ingenious eye on the spirit medium Mrs. Reynolds (Michelle Yeoh), whose apparently genuine talents for communing with the dead have flummoxed even Ariadne's expert scepticism. Ariadne brings Poirot to a Halloween party being thrown by former opera singer Rowena Drake (Kelly Reilly) in the crumbling Venetian palazzo she owns, as Reynolds is going to conduct a séance after the party. The Palazzo has a reputation for being rich with spirits for contact, as a former hospital supposedly haunted by child patients abandoned to their fate by medical staff during a plague outbreak, a tale that's given rise to the tale of the "Children's Vendetta," which holds the spirits of the dead attack anyone belonging to the healing professions who dares stray into the building. This legend is recounted to a flock of children invited to the party in the Palazzo, which breaks up when until a chandelier plunges with eerie timing to the floor.



A more recent and palpable death hangs over the house: Rowena's daughter Alicia died there a year earlier after being beset by terrifying visions supposedly of the Palazzo's haunting ranks. Also present for the séance are Alicia's former fiancé Maxime Gerard (Kyle Allen), who Rowena writes off as a venal fortune hunter; Dr Leslie Ferrier (Jamie Dornan), Alicia's former doctor and a man all but destroyed by his role in liberating a concentration camp; and Rowena's housekeeper, the former nun Olga Seminoff (Camille Cottin). Dr Ferrier's bookish and precocious son Leopold (Jude Hill) has a penchant for quoting the well-thumbed volume of Poe he prefers reading to playing games with the other kids. Poirot quickly reveals confederates who help to amplify the uncanny impact of Reynolds' performances, in the form of the Holland siblings, Desdemona (Emma Laird) and Nicholas (Ali Khan), only for Reynolds to be gripped by a more urgent and believable manifestation of forces beyond. Poirot remains unconvinced, and after a charged confrontation with the medium, who mockingly drapes him in the creepy mask and cape she arrived in, he decides to follow her advice to dare a playful act: he tries his luck at apple bobbing, only for someone to try and drown him in the water-filled basin. Reynolds is flung from a high balcony soon after and impaled on a statue before the Palazzo, and Poirot locks the cast of suspects within the building as a mounting storm shakes the structure. But Poirot finds his familiar gifts impeded and his perceptions muddled, possibly by the Palazzo's malign spectres – or possibly by some more concrete enemy's connivance.



As Branagh's third trip to the well of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot tales, *A Haunting in Venice* is the loosest as adaptation: Branagh and his regular screenwriter for these films, Michael Green, improvise freely on the template that is Christie's 1969 novel *Hallowe'en Party*. As well as shifting the setting from the homey climes of rural England to the titular Italian city, the timeframe now beholds a world also just starting to recover from the dread of war. The film starts a bit awkwardly in this regard – I swear if I see another movie or TV show that tells me it's the happier end of the World War II zeitgeist by cueing up "In The Mood" I might rip my teeth out – and in justifying Halloween shenanigans in Venice through the presence of American servicemen. More cunningly deployed at the outset and end is Vera Lynn's version of "When The Lights Go On Again," with its languorously romantic wartime anticipation of peace and frivolity returning, but posited in the context of a peace where the recent past, both in the macrocosmic and personal senses, just will not be easily shaken off. Branagh is one filmmaker who, for all his oft-erratic energy, knows well the value of cultural signposts in that regard. Plainly the shift in setting is down to trying to keep up the brand after *Murder On The Orient Express* (2017) and *Death On The Nile* (2022), and besides, who can begrudge a filmmaker wanting to film in Venice? The choice of locale is also, in its way, just as bold and theatrically fruitful as, say, Branagh shifting the setting of his *As You Like It* (2006) to Meiji Japan. *A Haunting in Venice* has gained notably better reviews at large than its waywardly interesting precursors. Doubtless that's because, as well as being shorter and snappier, it sticks to one chosen genre style, with a more sombre tone, and Branagh's florid impulses seem particularly at home in a realm bordering the fantastical.



The Poirot films have nonetheless so far given Branagh licence to be far more ebulliently himself than with the soberly earnest, if also rather calculated, memoir of *Belfast* (2021), taking on the well-worn paths of a popular mode – Branagh remains brusque when it comes to the ritual structure of the whodunit, if not bored by it – and turning it into a theatre for his excitable creation and passion of taking cross-sections of cultural inheritance. *A Haunting In Venice* isn't as fascinatingly chaotic as a curate's egg containing Branagh's artistic touchstones, stylistic peccadilloes, and self-critiquing gestures as *Death On The Nile* was, and doesn't offer anything as arresting and, yes, haunting as that film's coda. But the compensation is that, after the lumpy if efficient early scenes, this one proves his most effective and dovetailed blend of style and story in a long time, venturing back into the lurching, looming, floridly gothic zone he traced out to great effect in *Dead Again* (1991) and *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994): it's a zone Branagh clearly relishes but hasn't braved since the latter of those two films bombed. Cineaste nods aplenty, too, with *Don't Look Now* (1973) is the most obvious. Branagh also signalled his affection for the stylistic cavorting of giallo cinema as long ago as *Dead Again*. Such expected touchstones collide with nods to John Hough's *The Legend of Hell House* (1972), Augusto Caminito's *Vampire In Venice* (1988), Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), and Roy William Neill's Basil Rathbone-as-Sherlock Holmes classic *The Scarlet Claw* (1945): the latter in particular, with the motif of the slashing wounds of the Children's Vendetta and the misdirection of seemingly supernatural forces. There's even a little tip of the hat to *The Thing* (1982) as the Holland siblings are tied to a chair when suspicion falls on them, only to freak out as the building starts to shudder and resound during the storm: Desdemona delivers a furious slap to Portfoglio when he finally releases them.



A Haunting In Venice also returns to what is now certainly the linking motif in Branagh's Poirot films, in trying to approach the detective as a proper dramatic character rather than a collection of foibles and facilitator of plot. The theme of the great detective forced to work through his own demons to solve the case could become tiresome, but it's leavened by Branagh and Green's choice to visit the detective at various set intervals in his biography. Each entry in what now stands as a trilogy has posited pivotal moments for Poirot, whose career has been described as a constant struggle with abhorrence of horror and anarchy born of one war, and gains a fresh catalyst in the wake of another. Here, the detective is struggling again to escape his essential identity as the proverbial mind like a steel trap that has the actual function of ensnaring the nefarious, this time with a pervasive sense of foreboding and impending mortality. If Poirot is trying to work out how to live a life free of other people's crimes and failings, then Branagh is perhaps musing on, for better or worse, finally straying well past his *enfant terrible* days, even at a moment when his creative vitality seems to be on one of its periodic upswings. Branagh casts Hill, his alter ego from *Belfast*, as the boy who is both in effect his damaged father's carer and Poirot's youthful counterpart, anointed and excluded for having heightened awareness of the dark and sad things of the world as a by-product of uncommon intelligence and curiosity.



The notion of haunting is, of course, pursued literally and psychologically, but with a surprisingly multileveled approach – crimes of history, of war, and of human intimacy are all in play. Branagh has an absolute ball convening his cast in the crumbling reaches of Rowena’s Palazzo with its mouldering murals and décor, its dank and secretive corners stuffed with the refuse of forgotten crimes and permeated by creepy dolls and mouldering skeletons disgorging swarms of bees, as we’ve stumbled out of the Christie into the world of Poe. After the early stutters, the film settles down for gloriously eerie scene-setting as Poirot and the other guests for the party are brought to the Palazzo by gondola. Later Reynolds arrives by the same method but wrapped in robe and mask in a piece of theatre calculated to declare herself the queen of worlds beyond. Soon he’s cutting loose with increasingly feverish camerawork – with Haris Zambarloukos doing grand work as cinematographer again – as Dutch angles proliferate, wide-angle lensing transforms the house into a system of spatial traps and Pirnesian labyrinths, overhead shots spin upside-down, and Scorsesean tied-to-the-actor shots register Poirot’s dizzied state. The slow build from general creepiness culminates in a spasm of hysterical action two-thirds through as a surging storm swell sets the lagoon into chaos and sends menacing echoes up through the bowels of the building. Poirot and Portfoglio penetrate rooms long sealed off from the light and find evidence the house’s legends are largely true. Dr Ferrier has “nerve storm” and gets into a brutal fight with the angrily sarcastic Maxime, who regards him as complicit in Alicia’s death through incompetence, and the fisticuffs almost end with Ferrier giving Maxime a meal of broken glass until his son coaxes him out frenzy. Even Poirot starts glimpsing ghostly little girls.



Branagh delights in extremes of gothic gusto we get tragically little of in contemporary film, and the way he uses the stolid grounding of whodunit structuring to sway way out and then snap back in towards the sensible centre is genuinely clever. I did hope Branagh would really go for sturm-und-drang in the climactic scenes and have the Palazzo collapse in the storm, but, alas, in this subgenre the centre always holds. Another aspect of the script contends with a seed of metafiction Christie planted in her later Poirot stories, expanding it into a motif that engages with Branagh's take on the character and the uneasy relationship of art and life, which he also parsed in *Belfast*, and which takes sly aim at some of the common gripes about Branagh's earlier Poirot entries. Christie introduced the recurring character of Ariadne into her creation's world as a wry and recurring self-portrait. Branagh and Green take it a step further in making Ariadne a detective story writer who feels a degree of entitled dominion over Poirot's mystique, as she claims to have made him famous with her thinly veiled depiction of him in one of her early books. Even as she seems to be pressganged into playing Girl Friday to Poirot's efforts, Ariadne proves to have an entirely different agenda in mind.



Ariadne herself is struggling with a recent run of failures after dozens of bestsellers, and, as emerges in the course of the movie, tries to contrive a way of writing a scenario for Poirot to enact and regain her creative spark in the process – to write him, in effect, to assert a form of authorial propriety and so recharge her career. This connects in turn with the more urgent drama as Poirot experiences disorientation and hallucination to a degree that makes him genuinely consider not just the waning of his detecting gifts but the possibility his little grey cells have deteriorated and he's lost all sense of what's real and what isn't. But there's also the possibility someone is trying in turn to manipulate him – also, in effect, trying write him. And of course Poirot is also contending with the filmmakers presenting him as the vehicle for their psychologising portrait. And they really are writing him, into something Christie never quite did, and the tension lends an edge of mischief to the whole affair: Ariadne's self-congratulation as Poirot's discoverer and populariser then becomes Branagh's ironic manner of acknowledging the assimilation and personalisation of a hallowed figure in the pop culture character pantheon.



Branagh's casting is less self-consciously star-studded than the previous two entries, with the bigger names more balanced by newer performers and character actors. Newcomer Laird in particular has a striking face, elfin in look but with a steel-welding glare, ideal for a character revealed to be, along with her sibling, a survivor of the age of rubble who fell into creating ghosts for a living. Yeoh has some fun in an unusual part as Reynolds, the expert mediumistic performer charged with sly, feline energy when she feels the weight of Poirot's falling on her, comprehending that they both exist to mediate between living and the dead: it's a pity she's necessarily dealt out of proceedings so early. Fey isn't quite as convincing in a role that requires a jolt of hard and bullying egotism underlying the superficial sophistication, but she does well enough. Dornan for his part continues to impress as he stretches his talents, deftly inhabiting a febrile character, and his moments with Hill, reuniting them after *Belfast* as father and son but with the lines between each role blurred, wield rare emotional immediacy. Young master Leopold proves by movie's end to have made a fateful foray into trying to take a hand in manipulating the people around him and the ambiguities of life – again, to try writing them – with ultimately tragic consequences, as it proves he has unwittingly caused the whole murderous business.



The actual mystery is pretty straightforward in comparison to its baroque decoration, with the mechanics, like a jar of honey that doesn't taste quite right, rather easy to spot. That said, I liked that the story this time around takes aim at one of the usual, peculiar niceties of the whodunit style, where the killer seems indifferent to the presence of a great detective or operates only to foil them, rather than take them out of the picture: here the way the film plays out is defined in both story and form by the efforts made to hobble Poirot's faculties, all sense of sure moorings and the solidity of forms battered from without by the storm and within by moral ruckus and hallucinogenic dosing. Killer gets their comeuppance, possibly with some supernatural aid, and sinks into the calm of depths under the raging water. The cold grey light of dawn illuminates bodies carried away, a sight invested with a surprising sense of mournful, dumbstruck weight – the solving of the mystery is only ever a comparative afterthought in comparison to the way events have destroyed lives. But Poirot's sense of efficacy is ironically restored through receiving hints that existence still has aspects of mystery and that not everything is reducible to intellectual formulae. In the same way, the best quality about *A Haunting In Venice* is that it's a rare modern movie that fully grasps the lesson of any good Halloween party, knowing well that to really have fun sometimes requires getting more than a little dark and serious.



Oppenheimer (2023)

film.freedonia



Director / Screenwriter: Christopher Nolan

The other half of a one-time-only marketing synergy event that drove both it and Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* to vast profitability in mid-2023, Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* has an aura of special aptness, even inevitability, as an extension of Nolan's oeuvre. *Oppenheimer* sees Nolan delving back into the same epic World War II climes as *Dunkirk* (2017), safe grist for prestige filmmaking whilst allowing Nolan to apply his particular branded aesthetic to material pitched right at a particular cusp, still powerful enough to be common folklore, whilst also taking on the lustre of an immediate past slipping into legend, ripe for the benefits from being defamiliarised with his specific style. With *Oppenheimer* Nolan swaps out the survivalist exigencies of *Dunkirk's* focal point, on the common-as-muck soldier's perspective on events of grand magnitude, for one that feels closer to Nolan's heart as a filmmaker so often concerned with conceptual largesse and variably antiheroic protagonists whose drives and distorted perspectives can scarcely be understood by the world and its whims, and whose solutions to problems often beget new problems. For Nolan *Oppenheimer's* success was a particular vindication after he broke with his former stalwart backers at Warner Bros., following his anger at their treatment of his 2020 film *Tenet*, an absurd if mildly enjoyable sci-fi thriller hodgepodge.



Nolan's *The Prestige* (2006), held by many fans to be perhaps his best film, is indeed his only movie to completely dovetail the aspects of his creative mind – the historian battling with the modernist, the fabulist with the realist, moralist and systemic analyst, the conceptual artist with the clever showman. But *Oppenheimer's* subject matter also comes close in its way to offering a unified field for Nolan's preoccupations. *The Prestige's* idealised, fictionalised vision of Nikolai Tesla as a man opening up frontiers of reality-reshaping technology gives way to Julius Robert Oppenheimer as a figure guarding another frontier, the stropped and chagrined prophet of the atomic age contrasting the much-beatified, grandfatherly eccentricity of Albert Einstein. Aware of this disparity, Nolan makes conversations between Oppenheimer and Einstein (Tom Conti) dramatic linchpins, including providing the very end: early in the film Oppenheimer dismisses Einstein as a genius who nonetheless shrank back for the implications of his discovery and so long outlasted his worth, only to find himself in a similar state by tale's end, both men cringing before the fruits of their intellectual efforts and the dubiety of the world's reception of them. *Oppenheimer* is also, as tacky as the comparison threatens to sound, an extension and variation on Nolan's take on both Batman and the Joker, living out the arc summarised by the famous line from *The Dark Knight* (2008), "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain," illustrated, or so Nolan plainly feels, this time with direct, drawn-from-life acuteness.



A brief biography of Oppenheimer could also serve as a synopsis of the movie, but there's a lot about the man we don't learn at all during its three-hour runtime. Oppenheimer was the son of a German-Jewish father who migrated to the United States and made a fortune as a textile importer, and a mother who was a painter – the practical and the artistic were to remain poles of Oppenheimer's rarefied genius in rich and contradictory ways. Oppenheimer, born in 1904, proved a gifted student with talent in many fields, and after recovering from a bout of colitis as a teenager – which, to recover from, he and his family visited New Mexico for the first time, giving him a love of the region and of horseback riding – he studied chemistry at Harvard. Through the 1920s and '30s Oppenheimer was a prodigious student and teacher shuttling between Europe and the US in various scientific fields until he latched onto the emerging field of quantum physics, a period in which he met with many leading figures of physics and some future collaborators and rivals, including Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Enrico Fermi, and Edward Teller. Nolan's vision of Oppenheimer carving paths through the illusions of physical reality through to its inner mechanics rhymes with his own approach to storytelling, seeking out new substructures to weave the essential melodrama cues around.



Nolan adopts an initially odd framing device to delve into Oppenheimer's life, recounting it partly from the perspective of Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr), a former head of the Atomic Energy Commission angling for a place on President Eisenhower's cabinet in the late 1950s, but who finds his thorny relationship with Oppenheimer coming back to haunt him. Nolan differentiates between past and present and also Strauss's perspective and a more neutral one by swapping between black-and-white and colour, in a manner reminiscent of Oliver Stone's *J.F.K.* (1991) and *Nixon* (1995) (and Stone was briefly interested in filming this movie's official source material, the biography *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin). But where Stone used his stock shifts to render his sense of perspective unstable, with fried-in-cocaine-batter impact, chaotic and palpitating in aesthetic effect, Nolan is for better or worse more methodical and prosaic in intent. Eventually it becomes clear that Strauss is highly paranoid about Oppenheimer and bears him a deep-seated grudge stemming back to various slights, including mocking issues he raised during a Senate testimony, and for allegedly turning Einstein against him when both men were working for Strauss in the late 1940s. The viewpoint shifts to Oppenheimer's (Cillian Murphy) to recount his excitable student days at Cambridge, when his perverse, tunnel-visioned streak led him to try poisoning his teacher at the time, Patrick Blackett (James D'Arcy) by injecting an apple with cyanide, only

narrowly avoiding a calamity when Blackett introduces him to Bohr (Kenneth Branagh) and he pretends to see a worm hole in the apple.



Later Oppenheimer encounters Heisenberg (Matthias Schweighöfer), later to be charged with heading the Nazi atomic bomb effort, and strikes up a friendship with fellow American physicist Isidor Isaac Rabi (David Krumholtz), who, at least in Nolan's portrait, practically incarnates the more earthy and Jewish side of himself Oppenheimer denies as suave man of the world. Oppenheimer returns to the US and splits his time between teaching at Caltech and Berkeley, working at the latter alongside the Nobel Prize-winner Ernest Lawrence (Josh Hartnett). Lawrence's cagey sense of politics contrasts Oppenheimer's embrace of left-wing causes, even as he's criticised by many in his social circle for remaining aloof from the Communist Party, unlike his brother and fellow physicist Frank (Dylan Arnold), psychologist lover Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh), his eventual wife Kitty (Emily Blunt), and friend Haakon Chevalier (Jefferson Hall). As nuclear fission abruptly becomes a practical reality, as well as the notion it can be used to make bombs, Oppenheimer is initially excluded from Lawrence's circle discussing the matter with intent, but is later approached by General Leslie Groves (Matt Damon), an army engineer who recently completed building the Pentagon, as he looks for a scientific leader for the Manhattan Project, the US effort to build an atomic bomb in urgent rivalry with Nazi Germany. Groves quickly realises Oppenheimer has just the right mind and personality to oversee the project, and at Oppenheimer's suggestion, the Project sets up shop in the sparse surrounds of Los Alamos, a part of New Mexico he knows well.



Nolan takes pains to capture something of Oppenheimer's mercurial brilliance, as well as a sadomasochistic streak suggested by the poisoned apple episode, an inchoate need for punishment that he later turns on himself, with vignettes that confirm his unexpected gift with language, able to learn enough Dutch to give an entire lecture in it in a few weeks when visiting the Netherlands, and to read one of the defining texts of his life, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, in the Sanskrit. We get snapshots of the heady climes of academia in the 1930s, a hotbed of both radical sympathies and, well, hot beds: Oppenheimer and future wife Kitty flirt up a storm even as she professes to being still married. Oppenheimer's passions converge as Tatlock gets him to read a passage of the *Bhagavad-Gita* whilst she screws him – and, of course, it's the "I am become Death" passage he picks out. This moment is peculiar, and crucial for the way *Oppenheimer* sees Nolan trying to open up new ground for himself, and the ways he fails it at. Nolan lets some adult sexuality into his oft-airless and emotionally sublimated creative palette – this is, after all, the guy who explored a dream realm without any hint of the erotic in *Inception* (2010) – and affects to set in motion a motif that sees a connection between the creative and destructive urges manifest in Oppenheimer's work, although really he goes nowhere with that motif. On another level, it's a bit silly, making me think of *Young Frankenstein* (1974) when a bit of good rogering wrings pristine operatic arias out of Madeline Khan. Nolan's touch of the erotic is also stilted and carefully posed – dear lord, Florence Pugh's breasts! – as well as the attempt to humanise these people, considering he's dealing here with two randy, messy, nonconformist intellectuals who share, in their different fashions, a self-immolating streak.



Also, Oppenheimer and Tatlock's relationship proves to be an exact model for Nolan's recurring conceit of man haunted by a former lover whose death he feels complicit in, as previously described in *Memento* (2001), *The Dark Knight*, and *Inception*. But the real meat of *Oppenheimer* as a narrative is Nolan's preoccupation with the tension between Oppenheimer's stature as leader of a great national mission of war and the mistrust turned on people like him – those with a confluence of progressive political opinions and Jewish names – held in check in a marriage of political convenience but soon enough allowed to play out as the Cold War takes hold. *Oppenheimer* can be characterised in this theme, and in common concern with winning award season favour, as a kind of spiritual sequel to Morten Tyldum's *The Imitation Game* (2014), and whilst Oppenheimer's personal peccadilloes didn't let the establishment destroy him as thoroughly as Alan Turing's did, there was a similar logic to both men's careers, as savants whose talents were utilised and then cast aside once they weren't needed any more and the communal action of the war gave way to new fiefdoms of the square insiders re-erecting fences against the unruly outsiders.



What's most telling about this film's approach to that idea is however the lengths it goes to to deny the similarity. Nolan charts in incessant, frenetic detail Oppenheimer's grazes with security protocols and

enforcers, like Boris Pash (Casey Affleck), a serpentine army intelligence officer with a perfect, personal hatred of Communists, to whom Oppenheimer lies in an effort to cover for his friend Chevalier, in the kind of stumble his foes make the most of in his efforts post-war to destroy him. Hysteria kicks in once the Soviets start detonating their own bombs, and one member of the Los Alamos team, Klaus Fuchs (Christopher Denham), is revealed to have been funnelling secrets to them. The film eventually draws out Teller (Bennie Safdie) as a particular Judas figure, with his greater interest in developing the hydrogen bomb, or the 'Super' as the Manhattan Project honchos start to call the idea: Oppenheimer goes out of his way to accommodate Teller in letting him pursue the idea to avoid having him walk out. But when Oppenheimer starts resisting actually building it as needless and dangerous escalation after the Soviets develop their own bomb, Teller's frustration, a frustration Strauss shares as head of the AEC, as they see a need for a new edge over the Soviets, is eventually expressed before a review board looking at cancelling Oppenheimer's security clearance.



When I was a small boy my father had some reprinted front page editions of old newspapers including one reporting the 'Trinity' test, featuring the famous images of the test captured in fractions of seconds I poured over with deep fascination and disquiet – those protoplasmic bulges of energy expanding and congealing in the initial phase of ignition, captured in strangely textured black-and-white, a medium I associated as most of us do when young with things that are antique and safely bygone, but yet with colour seeming to want to burst out along with the atomic hellfire that would within moments of the photos being taken plume high into the sky. Those images capture an event at once awe-inspiring and terrifying, as, for the first time, human ingenuity worried around the very edges of stable reality and physical existence – and, indeed, as the film dedicates some time to noting, the possibility that the fission process might just keep going and fry up the entire planet's atmosphere wasn't entirely discounted up until the ignition of the Trinity bomb. Nolan bends the historical record a tad by having Oppenheimer take Teller's calculations which suggest that possibility to Einstein – he showed them to someone else, but Nolan can't resist the idea of Oppenheimer, for all his bravura as the next generational chieftain, running back to daddy Albert for reassurance.



Other films and TV series have tackled this material before, of course. The mystique of the Manhattan Project and its leader permeated 1950s science fiction. For instance, Gene Barry's Dr Clayton Forrester in Byron Haskin's *The War of the Worlds* (1953) is a thinly veiled version of Oppenheimer, complete with similar biographical details and stature as scientific hero, and a figure who is finally left roaming around shattered cities amidst an apocalypse, desperately seeking spiritual and romantic recourse as the age of "super-science" brings down deadly rain, in what amounts to the most ingenious and vivid picturing of the mental landscape of those who lived through the birth of the atomic age. More directly, the 1980 BBC series *Oppenheimer* and two rival productions from 1989, the feature film *Fat Man and Little Boy* and the telemovie *Day One*, depicted Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project in varying levels of depth. *Fat Man and Little Boy* featured Dwight Schultz as Oppenheimer and Paul Newman as Groves, and was directed by Roland Joffé, then still riding high as the maker of the prestigious hits *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *The Mission* (1986). His film actually went into a lot more depth and effort to make the problems of building the bomb coherent than Nolan's does, as well as considering the culture and ethical arguments of the team of scientists who worked on it. But that movie had its own serious problems, including an awkward attempt to personalise the danger of the bomb for the project team by casting John Cusack as an everyman scientist who gets fatally irradiated, based on events that happened well after the bomb's first uses.



Not many people remember the 1952 film *Above and Beyond*, a biopic directed by Melvin Frank and based on the memoirs of Paul Tibbets and likely the first film to actually depict the Manhattan Project. Robert Taylor played Tibbets, the US Army Air Force pilot whose job it became to actually drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In the film, Tibbets is ushered into a meeting with a superior, handed a disconnected bombsight button, and presented with a question that is supposedly abstract, but both men know very well that given the job they're doing and the age they live in, surely is anything but: would he push the button if he understood that by doing so he could end the war, but at the cost of killing 50,000 people. Tibbets, after musing for a moment on the question, decisively presses the button. That scene often jumps back into my thoughts, not least as the most potent possible real-world example of the kind of "trolley problem" moral question that's usually presented to us in far more benign terms – in some classroom, or even in an online meme, but which more usually we tend to skate around in the name of a more free-floating humanism. What's most striking from today's perspective about this scene from Frank's film of Tibbets' story is the complete lack of conscientious handwringing, sourced it feels in the far greater proximity, culturally, historically, and philosophically to the war that produced it. Tibbets, in short, chose his side, come what may.



That can of course be seen as stemming from the way the film obviously was made in the afterglow by the victorious, but there's something truly galvanising and perturbing there, reflecting the way war, much like a black hole, distorts all moral gravity, but a certain calculus remains in play. Things that would seem utterly unthinkable to an ordinary person at other times seem entirely natural, even inevitable. And war is another country, unknowable and scarcely mappable for those living outside its borders of imperative. That's an idea *Oppenheimer* tries to engage with, but finishes up fumbling timidly, much as it does with Oppenheimer himself and his plainly complex feelings about his great achievement. Nolan, to his credit, does try to get at some disparity in our way of thinking about those things, when Strauss accuses Oppenheimer of manoeuvring so his name would be associated with Trinity, great moment in science, and not Hiroshima, terrible moment in history. One of Nolan's more coherent and pervasive points iterated through the film comes as Oppenheimer and his fellows repeatedly confront the problem of not being able to predict everything, such as the possibility of unstoppable chain reaction: the only real proof, the only way of knowing, can come through the successful detonation of atomic bombs, both in test and in war. And this is bound up with the way the bomb is as much a weapon of spectacle, the ultimate blockbuster

attraction, to instil fear and caution in the enemy, as it is one of actual military application – perhaps really far more so.



Nolan quickly puts in motion his by-now very familiar stylistic ploy of trying to relentlessly push his narrative forward with a combination of fast editing and high-pressure music scoring, as if, in much the same way Oppenheimer and the Manhattan Project weaponises theoretical physics, he's weaponised the artistic style of Godfrey Reggio's poetic documentary *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), in mimicking the way its propulsive Philip Glass score entwines with visual flourishes, mimicked here in shots like surveying a row of jutting nuclear missiles in quasi-abstract profile. Although this time his regular collaborator Hans Zimmer has been replaced by Ludwig Göransson, the score still comes in the same constantly ratcheting style that gives the impression we're reaching the end of some ticking bomb countdown with every few minutes of screen time, even if we've only been watching a bunch of scientists talking. It's this ploy that's key to both Nolan's success and my own deep distrust of it: Nolan's films so often feel like extremely long trailers advertising themselves, and *Oppenheimer* is no exception even with its more measured qualities. Breaking down the elements of *Oppenheimer* reveals it as actually a very safe and familiar type of biopic, complete with furnished antagonist in a manner that reveals not much has changed in this realm of award bait since William Dieterle's *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1936). That film pitted Paul Muni's heroic, visionary Pasteur against a fictional antagonist meant to represent the hidebound medical establishment of the day and general resistance to changed thinking. Strauss serves basically the same function here, but reiterated in a manner closer to Nolan's take on the Joker as a vengeful schemer playing multidimensional chess, working to destroy Oppenheimer with backroom machinations. Strauss is also used to introduce more accusatory comments on Oppenheimer, as exemplified by that line about being remembered for Trinity and not Hiroshima, but on the proviso that they're emerging from a poisoned well.



So, much of the film, particularly the last, post-Trinity third, is dedicated to portraying the method of that destruction, mostly played out in a security review hearing in 1954 that resulted in Oppenheimer losing his security clearance, with Oppenheimer sitting through a relentless process of humiliation and disavowal, some of it delivered however guiltily or conditionally by colleagues like Groves and Teller, and the aggressively slanted grilling of prosecutor Roger Robb (Jason Clarke). Nolan strongly hints that all of this can be seen as Oppenheimer's personal, endured punishment, a caning he takes to expiate his own lingering feelings of distress and guilt, a process that will one day lead back to renewed stature as a maltreated hero: Oppenheimer's multidimensional chess is better than Strauss's. This is easily the worst part of *Oppenheimer*, grinding on and on for little actual result and using up a great hunk of screen time, coming on with Nolan's stylistic cues assuring us constantly that we're watching some kind of taut and compelling political drama here, with secrets within secrets to be uncovered when really we're seeing the writer-director doing his absolute level best to win an Oscar by marrying biopic conventions with his own method for making everything play like a high-pressure thriller.



The standard critical phraseology for Nolan's storytelling method here is to say it's like a mosaic, accumulating piece by piece into a finished picture. But Nolan's choices, as I often find with his films, often strikes me more like an act of covering over than revelation; Nolan deploys detail in a way that feels like an avoidance of meditation, and he's a filmmaker who somehow manages something entirely counterintuitive in the way he constantly chases pace and snappiness but at the cost of genuine efficiency. The choice of telling a chunk of the story through Strauss's eyes also allows Nolan to deliver a great deal of exposition under the guise of one character's slanted opining, particularly in Strauss's laboured exchanges drawing out details with a fictional staffer played by Alden Ehrenreich, who gradually realises what a shit Strauss is. The emphasis on Strauss's conniving also gives Nolan an excuse, firstly, to avoid more generally reckoning with the way the 1950s government establishment turned on Oppenheimer and his ilk as part of the general Red Scare moment, and also to not otherwise devote his copious running time to offering a more in-depth portrait of the Los Alamos scene and its players. The startling roster of familiar and talented actors trudges by in blink-and-miss parts, names out of scientific legend like Heisenberg and Bohr and Fermi (Danny Deferrari) and Einstein, and other, less famous but historical interesting personages like Lilli Hornig (Olivia Thirlby) and J. Ernest Wilkins Jr (Ronald Auguste), filling out the margins and given one or two lines of dialogue.



At least one of these slightly bewildering semi-cameos proves germane: Rami Malek as David Hill, one of Fermi's colleagues glimpsed hovering wordlessly around Fermi when he shows Oppenheimer his atomic pile and later when he tries to get him to sign a petition against the bomb's use. This proves to be another cheap suspense-generating device, as Hill's name is mentioned because of that context as a likely witness for Strauss's benefit during his confirmation hearing, only for Hill to testify with brutal directness about how the scientific community came to despise Strauss for his vindictiveness: we know it's serious when Freddy Mercury comes to the rescue. Another use Nolan has for the emphasis on Strauss's plotting and Oppenheimer's masochism is to avoid engaging too deeply with the protagonist's psychological reaction to his accomplishment and new discovery of moral terror, a burden indeed for a man who previously looked upon his own brilliance and fascination with the most elusive textures of existence as both equally benign. Surely Oppenheimer must have been in a unique position as the man who feels a touch of the godlike in his act of creation, an emotion implicit in his legendary private quoting of the *Bhagavad-Gita* when the Trinity bomb was ignited, but which saw him rather shrink back from that horizon, his humanity instead forced as new truth upon him.



But as with *Dunkirk's* fussed-over recreations of a historical moment defined by chaotically unmoored humanity, Nolan works around having to engage convincingly with any sense of milieu: only men in suits standing around hashing out big issues interests him as focal points for his fast, fleeting exposition. To be fair, Nolan tries to stretch the limits of his usual veneer of clipped, chic, slightly abstracted imagery with some expressive risks – indeed, arguably the best, or at least the most arresting moments in the film spring from this. The first comes when Oppenheimer, trying to deliver a victorious speech to the Los Alamos crew after the Hiroshima bombing, starts imagining in the results of the bombing as impacting upon the people around him – brilliant light scorching the skin from a young woman's face, the cheers of the crowd becoming Jovian thunder ringing in his ears, and everyone present vanishing as if scorched from existence. The second is a similar but far more intimate moment of conjured envisioning, as Oppenheimer is forced to speak about his sporadic affair with Tetlock in front of Kitty to the security tribunal, and the image of Tetlock welded naked to his lap momentarily fills everyone's mind. Both of these moments wield flashes of the hallucinatory to tray and convey the headspace of the characters, with the former particularly vital given the earlier musings upon the gap between theory and reality: Oppenheimer has more than a little notion of what exactly an atomic bomb going off over a city entails, and he can apply that to his surrounds with a sense of horror, but still only abstractly, an anxious clawing at the mask of things.



Trouble is, one could accuse both of these moments as substituting for dealing more directly with important aspects of the story Nolan is supposedly telling, and highlight something tentative and pretentious in Nolan. He won't get too violent, too horrible, in conveying Oppenheimer's imagining of nuclear extermination, lest it violate his aesthetic poise and censorship rating. He drops in the vision of Tetlock screwing Oppenheimer as an adjunct to a more blatantly obvious moment when Oppenheimer is seen as sitting naked before the board during their grilling: get it?! The nudity can be described with that most embarrassing of critical words, "tasteful." Despite quickly sketching out the free-and-easy quasi-bohemian climes the Oppenheims met in and belonged to, the film goes out of its way to define them in more traditional, mass audience morality-friendly ways. Nolan nods to Oppenheimer's louche sex life, which extended to carrying on his affair with the spiky Tetlock after marrying Kitty. That led to him being briefly devastated when she kills herself some time after he breaks off with her, a shock Nolan portrays Kitty as forcefully pulling him out of. Oppenheimer will be punished one way or another for his affairs, and despite the fact that Kitty's first connection with Oppenheimer is at least nominally adulterous, nonetheless she will be defined as the suffering partner.



Nolan goes out of his way to convince that Kitty is nonetheless a tough and loyal customer watching out for her husband's back, reacting with blistering anger when she finds her husband still shook Teller's hand after his testimony to the review board, and alone out of all their friends easily resists and outmanoeuvres Robb. Towards the end, Kitty gets a dose of revenge when she refuses to shake Teller's hand when everyone's playing hunky-dory again as Oppenheimer gets a medal from Lyndon Johnson. All well and good, but despite this attempt to portray her vitality, Kitty is actually, barely in the movie, the hymns to her hard-nosed practicality only present as a sidelong affectations: the rhythms and meaning of their relationship remains out of focus. One of the film's more interesting sidelong moments explores the choice of the Oppenheims to get Chevalier to look after their infant child as they find they just don't have the stuff of being parents in them at that point in their lives, a scene that sees Nolan avoiding the usual with surprising felicity.



Meanwhile, Nolan's emphasis on the distance between the experience of building the atomic bomb and the use of it is an approach that actually makes sense as an extension of the theory-vs-reality disparity that hangs over the enterprise, and with the actual devastation of the blast only recorded for the scientists via documentary footage. Much of the controversy around the film, such as it is, has revolved around the avoidance of showing the atomic bombs exploding, most of it coming from a quarter demanding a sort of atomic blast porn to ensure everyone watching all this knows that, yeah, not cool. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are events that will likely never, and should never, cease to be a topic of argument, standing as they as the most pivotal moments of modern history, when the potential to annihilate our own species and every other suddenly became possible. It exists on a faultline of all moral question, a dark ritual act that cruelly but decisively ended one war and opened the gates to the perpetual fear of another. Most discussions of the bomb want to invoke one, specific viewpoint on its meaning, where Nolan seems to obey Oppenheimer's own ambivalence: my own problem is that film only investigates that ambivalence in the most skimmed and superficial manner, and nobody ever gets down and dirty in their arguments.



Despite this being a film about extremely intelligent and articulate people, Nolan resists engaging the material on that level. That the scientists who built the bomb, many of them Jewish, did so in a sense of frantic rivalry with the Nazis and an eye to it being used on them, only to find it then used on Japan, is a point raised in *Oppenheimer*, although again discussed in less depth than in *Fat Man and Little Boy*, and it raises its own questions: was it better to drop the atomic bomb on German city than a Japanese? Is there a presumption of asymmetry in culpability there – say, the Holocaust versus Imperial Japan’s genocidal rampages in China and treatment of slave labour and POWs, leaving out the question of actually invading Japan? David S. Ward’s excellent 1995 TV movie *Truman* depicted that President’s weighing of the bomb’s use with one of his friends with a level of attentive seriousness, whereas Nolan only engages with the disparity between Truman and Oppenheimer in an odd scene where the scientist visits the President (Gary Oldman, in one of the film’s more stunt-like bits of casting), only to be quickly shuffled off again when he admits his troubled conscience, with Truman calling him a crybaby behind his back: Truman, like Tibbets, picked his side (for an interesting flipside to all this, I recommend Kihachi Okamoto’s *Japan’s Longest Day*, 1967, a film that depicts the crucial moment when those shocked out of all patriotic daydreams by the bombings looked on beggared by the fanatics who remain unyielding and eventually choose self-immolation over surrender). And, well, perhaps today the thought of nuclear apocalypse now has some flavour of romanticism compared to being slowly starved and parboiled by global warming.



Nolan feels for Oppenheimer because his own movies often reflect on the ambiguities of heroism, but I’ve often wondered if he has any real idea of the concept, any more than he grasps the nature of terrorism. Nolan’s perspective on sociopolitics has practically inflected an entire era now – such lines from *The Dark Knight* have sunk into the consciousness of the generation that’s come of age on his movies, and become maxims: oh, how many times people who don’t want to engage with geopolitics have recited that “Some people just want to watch the world burn” line from *The Dark Knight* in the past 15 years, or that aforementioned “live long enough to become the villain” bit, whilst *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) raised the spectacle of the French Revolution redux but copped out of engaging with the political spectres he dredged up. *Oppenheimer* certainly enlarges upon elements of those films’ concept of strife and terror, but Nolan can’t wheedle his way out of the moral problem he sets himself like he did with the Joker’s bombs. Nolan instead notes Oppenheimer’s opinion that the mere existence of the bomb can be a way of enforcing peace, the notion of nuclear deterrence held in perpetual anxiety by many but also, thus far, one that has arguably had some truth to it: the reality of nuclear weapons undoubtedly helped crank the Cold War to its most perverse and nauseating heights, but also can be argued to have prevented its boilover – a motivating idea ironically shared not just by Oppenheimer in inventing the bomb but by some people who passed on

nuclear secrets to the Soviets. The best we get by way of musing on such questions is Oppenheimer mumbling something about hearing Japan was an enemy more or less defeated already. That said, Nolan devotes a chunk of time to depicting Oppenheimer and others arguing the cases for and against the dropping of the bomb with Henry Stimson (James Remar), a scene that tries to fairly encompass the apocalyptic violence already wrought and the politicking involved, including the desire to have tested the bomb by the time of the Potsdam Conference so Truman can warn, and perhaps intimidate, the other Allies with news of the bomb's imminent tactical use.



Back on the more immediate level, Nolan's foregrounding of conceptualism in his movies – by which I mean they're all dominated by some overt gimmick, or concert of gimmicks, based in some scientific or storytelling conceit both within and without the narrative, with perhaps the careful rhyming of the backwards-roving plot and protagonist's amnesia in *Memento* is still his most overt example – wields an apparently powerful appeal to an audience reared in an age of being wowed and herded by the products of algorithms. That's the name he gave to the time-hacking weapon of mass destruction in *Tenet* perhaps with just that irony in focus, given that film played in large part as Nolan's sarcastic self-parody under the guise of servicing his brand, with Robert Pattinson's second-string hero essentially a version of his creator, airily coming up with ideas like using a plane crash to break open a safe. With *Oppenheimer* the driving concept is more obvious: to play the entire film as a political thriller and dotted with sleight-of-hand flourishes of dramatic emphasis, like the reveal of Malek's Hill as the man who save the day. And, dare I say it, Nolan's choice there paid dividends in box office success, as he did succeed in selling the story of a nuclear physicist who died over fifty years ago to a mass audience. He even, in his way, makes Oppenheimer into a sort of superhero: the first time he dons his signature grey suit and flat-crowned hat, after being advised to lose the army uniform Groves makes him wear, is the film's equivalent of Batman appearing in costume for the first time. There might be some detectable sarcasm in this – some onlookers have taken the film in part to be Nolan's *mea culpa* over his role in sparking the superhero movie frenzy, but in this aspect I felt the similarity feels more sourced in a similar sense of a heroic identity being constructed, again with a sense of spectacle as weapon.



The excellence of the film's cast goes a long way towards making up the dramatic shortcomings. Murphy's been an actor awaiting his true moment in the sun since his startling emergence in Neil Jordan's *Breakfast On Pluto* (2004), although his first work with Nolan, *Batman Begins* (2005), seemed to stymie his chances as a leading man through playing a fey and creepy villains. He's entirely convincing recreating Oppenheimer's burr and mannerisms, easily holding the film together playing a difficult role that doesn't really have any major cathartic moments and where Nolan never really finds a key to the character, leaving Murphy to instead play like shivering wavelengths on an oscilloscope. Because the film is so utterly determined to keep lunging forward that scarcely any character registers as more than a basic trait, the specifics of the casting mean a lot, and Nolan proves his canniness at that tactic for the most part: Hartnett, for instance, is intriguing playing the kind of role I'd never have expected to see him in, and Safdie, who's rapidly proving one of the most interesting actors of the age as well as a fine filmmaker, expertly registers Teller's glum, singleminded gravitas in an almost comical tangent from Oppenheimer's charismatic zeal. Pugh does a remarkable amount with very little, registering the kind of personality who simultaneously pushes away those who gets close – tossing out Oppenheimer's gifts of flowers with irritable contempt – but also finds peculiar ways to bind their fates to hers, whilst Blunt, poorly served as she is by the movie, bends it about her regardless. Only Damon felt a bit awkwardly cast to me, making Groves seem like another of Damon's customary awkward everymen. Downey's performance as Strauss is well-pitched in the shows of paranoid rage under the surface cool, but I couldn't separate it from the film's facetious use of him.



The build-up to the testing of the Trinity bomb and its detonation could well count on many levels as the ultimate Nolan sequence. It's delivered as an urgent running montage with Göransson's music ratcheting up the arpeggios, in what has officially become the official movie music for suggesting intellectual and cultural import and life-on-earth surveys, as if the coils of music are the streams of water and thought driving the turbines of human thought and spirit, etc. Nolan's filmmaking here actually feels nimble and attentive in ways it's never been before, rounding up such vignettes that feel absolutely true in their undertones of eccentricity, like Teller slathering himself with sunscreen until he resembles some Lynchian grotesque leering at the blast, and Richard Feynman (Jack Quaid) trusting in his car windshield to shield him from the UV. The bomb goes off and Nolan wrings it for every morsel of epic awe and menace he can, Oppenheimer with his goggles on looking like a budding aviator, still clinging to the Earth but about to be flung into space in mind if not body, all sound cutting out as the explosion climbs and the fire boils in the long, floating moment before the shockwave arrives. It's a great unit of filmmaking for the most part, even if Nolan's much-hyped practical effects doesn't really capture the texture of the real Trinity photos. Joffé in *Fat Man and Little Boy* might well have been cannier in his handling, only showing the reflection of the blast in Oppenheimer's goggles, instead registering the infernal power and impact on the scientist.



Hard as it is to believe, *Oppenheimer* otherwise actually made me pine for the days when somebody like Stone actually had a chance of making this kind of unwieldy, expensive modern historical epic, and to which Nolan pays a certain amount of emulation and tribute: Stone, a far messier filmmaker than Nolan and often deeply aggravating as an artist, nonetheless always came at his subjects with a deeply felt and sensed perspective, a feeling for the immediacy of cause and consequence and the furore of personality engaged with larger reality. Even if you never bought into the conspiracy theories in *J.F.K.*, the film nonetheless articulated something far more nebulous but also urgent, as a spiritual portrait of the craziness that both caused the President's death and became epidemic after it, and the sense Stone had that something went badly spiritually wrong with his country in that time and expressed itself in destroying leaders and fighting vicious, Sisyphean wars. Nolan, by contrast, doesn't seem to think much of anything beyond the well-trodden – the way the film zeroes in on Clarke's Robb grilling Oppenheimer, demanding a clear-cut response from him over matters that roil and churn within, eventually proves not Nolan's stand-in trying to wring some truth from his subject but instead the reverse, a confession of bewilderment before all such matters. It's very tempting for me to say that *Oppenheimer* is the ideal film to represent Nolan's career and the current age in popular culture – detail without depth, aesthetic without art, context without meaning. And yet it's trying ever so hard to do more, give more. It's Nolan's most controlled film to date and perhaps his best altogether, but it's also one that ultimately demonstrates why I, like Teller with Oppenheimer, would just rather see someone else in his position.

God Is A Bullet (2023)

this island rod



Nick Cassavetes' *God Is A Bullet* feels like a labour at once abandoned in a huff and unleashed with impunity, operating according to some damaged inner ear of aesthetic concept, gritty, hyperbolically violent, and truly off-kilter. A throwback to an age of scuzz-flecked neo-noir that proliferated in the mid-1990s, movies that dug into the drugged-up, yahoo-reigned underbelly of American life with a transfusion of peyote trip intensity and gruesome delight, *God Is A Bullet* has epic and philosophical pretences attached to pulp thriller fare whilst indulging its disreputable streak with a white-fanged leer. Adapting a well-regarded novel by the pseudonymous author Boston Teran, which was in turn allegedly drawn from real experiences of the post-Charles Manson freak scene, Cassavetes delves into a netherworld populated by child-raping, drug-dealing Satanist scumbags and the Dostoyevskian antiheroes who battle them, made in a key that suggests what Scorsese might have become if he hadn't kicked his coke habit and fell into making flicks for Cannon Films, or if Sam Peckinpah had been born a few years later and spent a stint in a death metal band. Nikolaj Coster-Waldau is curiously but not badly cast as Bob Hightower, a Texan cop who, despite being divorced, feels well-settled in his community and church.



The home of Bob's ex-wife Sarah (Lindsay Hanzl), which she shares with her new husband Sam (Kola Olasiji) and her daughter by Bob, Gabi (Chloe Guy), is invaded by members of a particularly evil gang headed by the nefarious Cyrus (Karl Glusman): Sarah is gunned down, Sam crucified and tortured to death, and Gabi taken into a nightmarish netherworld of child prostitution and eventual human sacrifice to satisfy Cyrus's utterly nihilistic and crazed proclivities. Bob resolves to track Gabi down by any means necessary, ignoring the cautioning of fellow officers, but knows he needs to understand the nature of the truly rare beast he's going to duel with, leering as it does out of a zone of existence he scarcely comprehends. He approaches 'Case' (Maika Monroe) – a nickname short for "Headcase," currently living in a halfway house. She was once kidnapped as a child and used by the gang just as they intend with Gabi, but passed some obscure, torturous test, and so rather than sacrificed was indoctrinated. Case's peculiar variety of grit, evolved to become indifferent to such brutality, allowed her to walk out on the gang and kick their inculcated drug habit, even if she still lingers in a state of simmering fear and pessimistic detachment from anything resembling normality.



Bob is her opposite to a near-comic degree, generally regarded as well-meaning but naïve, dismissed as a desk jockey by his colleagues. In forming an alliance with Case he begins a hard schooling into her world and its cruel philosophy. Case takes him to see a one-armed, professional tattooist dubbed 'The Ferryman' (co-producer Jamie Foxx), who decorates the gang's bodies with their elaborate cabalistic symbols and

quasi-tribal livery, and decorates Bob similarly so he won't look out of place when they approach their hangouts: Case adds a spider tattoo to his cheek herself as a finishing touch. This proves to be a calculated calling card, as her ex-girlfriend in the satanic brood, Lena (Gina Cassavetes), has the same tattoo. Coster-Waldau's role echoes his part in Brian De Palma's *Domino* (2019) where he similarly conspired to pull apart his own screen persona and played a character whose role as social centurion with certain faiths breaks down, forcing him to rebuild himself and his worldview in a battle with real evil, although in Bob's case he emerges as scarred literally and figuratively. The Ferryman himself has his skin marked with his own art, including strange pale traces on his face that render him even more fervently strange and otherworldly than the more usual white-boy hides he decorates, and he gives a safe harbour for the dyspeptic duo when they need it.



When Cassavetes became a filmmaker back in the mid-1990s, he seemed bent on following in the footsteps of his father John, as a maker of movies shot through with shaggy realism and jagged intimacy as realised through an open-ended feel for actors deploying behaviour, as hinted by his debut, *Unhook The Stars* (1996), and more fully developed with *She's So Lovely* (1997), adapted from one of his father's unproduced scripts. Then he started swerving with breakneck intent, making the slick, silly social issue thriller *John Q* (2002), before scoring a massive popular hit with the well-made romantic drama *The Notebook* (2004). A second detour into mass-market weepie fare didn't pay off when he adapted Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* (2009), and the couple of films he released after that made no trace. *God Is A Bullet* is a defiant swerve back to Cassavetes' roots in squirrely studies of shambolic wanderers and lowlifes, with a new gloss of trash-art ambition. The narrative shape feels close to one of Paul Schrader's early odysseys of revenge nursed through jaunts in grimy underworlds, blended with a desire to capture a perverse subculture.



God Is A Bullet contemplates, deep down amidst all the rifled squalor, a genuinely interesting and troubling concern: what if our enemies deserve our most unremitting wrath, having plumbed the limits of evil through choice and predilection, but have invaded our minds, raped our dreams, perverted our thoughts so perfectly, that we cannot expel them or exist without them, for their extremism was designed to remove all sure sense of moral structure around them and us, so even blowing their fucking head off feels like an impotent gesture? Monroe, whose presence in a movie usually suggests something interesting in the offing, goes to town playing Case, whose early shakiness when Bob first presents her with the path back to the underground quickly gives way to a flinty embrace of her own anarchic will, stalking with bandy-legged bravado into the fray as she comes to perceive her destiny as indivisible from a reckoning with Cyrus and his dirtbag crew. She sets about playing both her new self-appointed shepherd for the Lord and the old one under Satan against each-other, sowing seeds of distrust in Cyrus's gang, including against the perma-wired nightclub owner Errol (Jonathan Tucker), with Cyrus later making a deal with her and Bob to give them a chance to get back Gabi if they'll kill Errol.



Flashbacks depict the young Case (Elise Guzowski) being snatched by the Satanists and later being served up, under blue flapper wig and smothering make-up, as jailbait morsel for various perverts, just as she glimpses Gabi similarly enthralled by Cyrus when she zeroes in on his gang. The title comes from a nihilistic exegesis Case delivers to Bob over a diner booth, an anti-philosophy she proclaims in contrast to

both Bob and Cyrus's polar-opposite faiths, both of which she holds to be an illusory search for meaning in the chaos of existence. Bob, who early on clumsily suggests to Case she might have held on to herself more effectively if she'd had a better foundation in religious schooling, quickly finds his formerly smug sense of security rattled as he's obliged to grapple with truly invidious evil, abandoning all the yardsticks of his old life and literally becoming marked with the signifiers of the enemy, forced quickly to blow off an array of body parts as he's forced to extract Chase and himself from a succession of sticky situations, including a gang-rape Cyrus sets up down in a hellish carnival zone populated by zombified meth fiends and skinhead fucktards. Cyrus and crew retaliate by dosing a rattlesnake with a little cocaine and placing it in Bob's truck.



Cassavetes mixes in a subplot that suggests the “normal” world Bob feels he’s falling out of isn’t that much less amoral and awful. Bob’s colleagues and supposedly concerned pals John Lee Blayken (Paul Johansson) and Arthur Naci (David Thornton) were responsible for Gabi’s taking in the first place, having long ago employed Cyrus and his taste in violence as a standover man in a crooked land deal – he simply shot the old woman they were leaning on and faked her signature on necessary documents. Then they hired him to dispose of, who was having an affair with John Lee’s lusty wife Maureen (January Jones), the kind of woman who idles away the time drunkenly provoking her husband into walloping her and laughing at the results as his proof of impotence: eventually she turns the tables and blows her creep of hubby away with cold impunity. Cassavetes’ weird approach to telling his surprisingly involved story alternates brute-force storytelling with languorous road movie cues complete with the odd Bob Dylan and David Bowie song on the soundtrack for hues of wispy poetic pathos offsetting the down-and-dirty savagery of the rest.



And to be fair, Cassavetes actually comes close to offering a visual companion piece to the kinds of feverishly hallucinated, city-on-the-edge-of-forever narratives Dylan often manages to paint. At the heart of *God Is A Bullet* proves eventually to be the peculiar evolving relationship between Case and Bob, with their nominal roles as victim and saviour, elder and protégé, warrior and damsel often blurring and sometimes totally inverting: it's Case who coaches Bob through his heartsick confrontations with his own violence and temptations to total moral nullity, taking him into her bed to play maternal soother. In a vignette of purified neo-noir mystique Bob, whilst gazing out the window of the ratty hotel room he shares with Case, muses on his own reactions to his ex-wife marrying a Black man and realises now he doesn't like what that says about him.



Cassavetes' careening approach with his editing, jumping back and forth in chronology practically at random, is trying at times, but also feels in its own kind of synchronisation with the drama it's portraying and the fractured headspaces of his heroes, and the lawless zone where they stumble about. One jaggedly impressive scene sees Case and Bob venture into a house in the middle of nowhere the gang use as a site for their drug deals and satanic rituals, the wildest reaches of Case's memories and Bob's imaginings illustrated in flash-cut visions of dank rituals and gory aftermaths. I dare say the material here would too strong a meat for many people, although Cassavetes manages to circumnavigate the truly obscene. The wonder of *God Is A Bullet* that whilst Case's brand of philosophy is only the inverse of a bumper-sticker and meme culture,

the film itself does actually manage to convey the stuff of a dark moral fairytale. The Satanists call anyone they don't like, but particularly anyone reeking of normality, "sheep", and Bob's passage from lamb to wolf isn't pretty but he comes out of it having made a case for the objective of good even if he's forced to flirt with primeval savagery to get it done.



Case's tests of herself eventually confirm she never quite lost her humanity in Cyrus's soul-killing world even as she expounds her bleak philosophy, a truth she first proves in cunning fashion when Cyrus, having broken her nose upon first seeing her again after her exile, orders her to kill Errol to prove her loyalty. Case performs a writhing dance and points the gun at the quaking target before jamming the gun in her mouth and pulling the trigger, displaying not just her own bravado but also the strange juice she gets from re-entering Cyrus's world, a world where she can play the wild shamanka who guards the gates of heaven and hell. She gets lucky in her assumption it was all a ruse, although whether she actually thinks it's lucky is ambiguous: she expects at some point in the drama to finish up as a brutalised corpse, and is merely looking for the path that might bring her some small, salutary grace before that end and save Gabi from sharing her fate. Case brings the same dancer-of-death bravura to combat, as she gets in close with a shiv and slices throats and stomachs. And of course there's another part of her that's still an utterly lost and bereft little girl, seeking out her mother amongst random shoppers but terrified of actually tracking the real woman down. Finally Bob and Case agree to kill Errol for Cyrus to steal his cash in a bogus drug deal in exchange for Gabi's return, and Bob has no problem now employing the Satanists' argot for death – "You're crossing over" – before shooting another lowlife.



The film barrels into an absolutely madcap action climax as Cyrus fulfils his promise to reunite Bob with a brutalised and tattooed but still intact Gabi, whilst also contriving to trap them and Case in a quarry where they can be massacred in their own personal wild hunt, spraying-and-praying with assault weapons and flamethrowers. But Bob and Case prove ruthlessly effective hunters, and battle goes down with a ferocity of violence that achieves the lunatic purgative effect it seeks, particularly when Bob blows off the jaw of one of Cyrus's sleaziest enforcers. The story doesn't even end there, but extends to a coda as Case goes it alone to track Cyrus down to his last hiding place for their own, particular reckoning, before wrapping up with a reunion for two damaged and screwed-up people that is nonetheless one of the most oddly romantic in any recent movie. I can understand the harsh reviews *God Is A Bullet* copped in most quarters – it's a film that feels enacted in defiance of just about every maxim of current cinema taste, and I don't even know if it will eventually find cultish favour. But in a modern movie scene littered with desperately phony efforts to dress up clichés of genre film with gimmicky pseudo-art, and excruciatingly shallow touchy-feely game-playing, *God Is A Bullet* retains, a little like its villains, a truly peculiar integrity in the way it embraces its fetid little universe, whilst also proving, ultimately and bracingly, rather old-school as story. Hail Satan, baby.



Napoleon (2023)

film freedonia



Director: Ridley Scott

Screenwriter: David Scarpa

It feels obvious, even inevitable, that at some point Ridley Scott would make a film about Napoleon Bonaparte. As subject matter it sees him circling back to where his feature film career began with 1977's *The Duellists*, an adaptation of a Joseph Conrad story which explored the particular zeitgeist of the Napoleonic era through a microcosmic example of human absurdity. Now Scott returns to the era with all the muscle of experience and budget he's accrued in the intervening forty-six years. It's also odds-on that any filmmaker tackling Napoleon as a subject will find themselves compared to him at some point. The director of a film shoot and a military commander have their similarities in marshalling and focusing massed human and technical resources as well as perceived requirements of vigorous personality and authority, and the kind of artistic personality drawn to studying a personality like the Emperor's may, onlookers suspect, already be inclined to feel glimmers of self-recognition. *The Duellists* saw Scott offering the first of many genuflections to Stanley Kubrick with a movie made under the immediate spell of *Barry Lyndon* (1975), but which, subtly and simultaneously, carved out his own niche with very different storytelling rhythms, setting the scene for Scott's long, violently uneven, yet eternally fascinating and restless career. And of course Kubrick himself wanted to make a film about Napoleon.



Napoleon has, of course, already attracted many and varied movie portraits over the years. Standing above all is Abel Gance's mammoth 1927 film, a pinnacle of cinematic vision attached to a romanticised portrait of a boding Homeric hero, dusted with the guilt of destiny, even as human pettiness and the illusive power of his own vast dreams, and those others pin upon him, reach out to promise eventual ruin. Clarence Brown's *Conquest* (1937), which sported Charles Boyer as Napoleon and Greta Garbo as his lover Maria Walewska, saw the man as a smouldering crusader eaten up by the temptations of megalomania. Sacha Guitry's *Napoleon* (1955) presented a sardonic swashbuckler out of place and in revolt against a world of politicking that eventually brings him down. King Vidor's version of him, inhabited by Herbert Lom in *War and Peace* (1956), was a swaggering imp for whom martial glory is a religion, and the realities of warfare enacted on the level of blood feud he encounters in invading Russia prove at first humiliating and then relentlessly, ruthlessly tragic. Rod Steiger's characterisation in Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* (1970) saw the genius of war and politics inseparable from a cast iron-hard chunk of ego and the nurtured volatility of a cantankerous brat, the need for constant, provoking movement in his mind sometimes meshing properly with gears of effect and sometimes grinding awfully, even as his body begins to let him down. Ian Holm's edition in Terry Gilliam's *Time Bandits* (1981) was the ultimate takedown based on certain psychological theories, presenting him as a literal and figurative small man expressing his frustration and inferiority complex through a passion for the theatre of violence: "Little things hurting each-other – that's what I like!"



That Scott would not make a film about old Bony at all like Gance's should be no surprise, but what's most initially unexpected about his *Napoleon* is that it's not really like any of the others, either. Scott's *Napoleon* stands in defiance of expectations of what a modern, big-budget prestige film or TV series recounting popular history should act like, when the pseudo-analytic self-seriousness and instant tabloid news-to-profound testament approach of the Peter Morgan school of writing has inflected an entire era of such fare. Rather than revisiting the straightforward martial tragic-heroic pitch of *Gladiator* (2000), the film that brought Scott back to Oscar-garlanded glory after one of his periodic adventures in distractible genre-hopping, or the ambitious and rarefied mix of old-fashioned epic and new-fashioned flux found in *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *Napoleon* is an extension of what Scott's been up to in his late phase, which I trace to starting with *American Gangster* (2007), to which his *Napoleon* has no small number of similarities. Like that film, it follows the rise and fall of a cunning but amoral man who, seeing a vacuum of authority, decides to fill it. Like *The Last Duel* (2021), it mercilessly dissects and mocks the historical action man mythos Scott did so much to exalt in *Gladiator*. Like *House of Gucci* (2021), it's an oddball blend of true crime detail deployment and distorting dark comedy, a portrait of egos and appetites and fractious love-hate expressed through the nominally serious business of business. It even nods back to his revisionist recounting of the legends of *Robin Hood* (2010) and Moses in *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), seeking new facets left unexplored by earlier versions and an equally new sense of what such figures mean in terms of the cultures that produced them versus our culture today.



Scott casts Joaquin Phoenix as Napoleon, a clear move to reunite a winning team: Scott helped boost Phoenix to stardom with *Gladiator*, and whilst Phoenix is nearly as old now as Bonaparte was when he died, he has a quality as an actor that always seems to retain some perpetual quality of the childlike, playing as he so often does insular weirdoes and volatile antiheroes. It's a quality Scott puts to work with calculation in *Napoleon*, to sap the eponymous man of the mystique imbued not simply by his achievements but the layers of mythologising and propagandising that started to work even before he became France's political as well as military commander with a conscious effort to make him a larger-than-life personage. That Scott has this in mind is made very clear when he notes Jacques-Louis David (Sam Crane) sketching out the scene of Napoleon's crowning as Emperor whilst it's occurring, leaving out the mischievous, tall-poppy-felling details Scott invests, like Napoleon discovering that the crown he tries to put on his own head won't fit over the wrought-gold laurel wreath he's already wearing, and tries to smoothly pass it off as a choreographed move. This is entirely in keeping with some of the more sarcastic observations of the time, like one of Napoleon's acquaintances who saw David's painting of Napoleon crossing the Alps and commented "It looks as much like him as I do."



Later in the film, when Napoleon meets Tsar Alexander (Édouard Philpinnat), the young and seemingly malleable leader of Russia in a peace overture, Napoleon rattles off an anecdote about a witty remark he's supposed to have made, only for Alexander to recognise it as a fairly common piece of military folklore, one that's found in Napoleon a suitable figure to drape itself on, and someone entirely willing to claim it as his own brilliance. The basic proposition of *Napoleon* is that the man himself wasn't that much better, nobler, pithier, or more efficacious than contemporary politicians, but he had better taste in self-propagandising. A tension lies in this, of course: recounting the life of a man at once celebrated and reviled as conqueror and liberator, thief and fount, tyrant and hero, murderer and champion, demands contending with those conflicting visions. Scott has plumbed this territory before. His *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (1992) approached the sharply, almost surreally contrasting viewpoints on Christopher Columbus as visionary world-expander and brutal emissary of nascent colonial exploitation. Scott illustrated the schism through one of his familiar duellist figurations – dubious history, perhaps, but it captured something dramatically meaningful as idealist explorer and cynical profiteer battled on the cusp of a new epoch and continent.



Scott touches on something similar with *Napoleon*, positing the Duke of Wellington (Rupert Everett) as the Emperor's ultimate nemesis. But Scott resists exalting him as Achilles to Napoleon's Hector, instead offering Wellington as the revenge of the specifically English kind of snob on a no-class scrub who's been getting up in everyone's business for far too long. Indeed, one could say this is precisely Scott's take on Napoleon: what Wellington did to the Emperor at Waterloo, Scott does with his deflating English scepticism. And yet

Bonaparte fits squarely into a mode of hero Scott's been exploring since Gabriel Feraud and Roy Batty and extending to the likes of Thelma and Louise and Maximus and Frank Lucas – the angry, revanchist antihero clawing a path towards what they imagine is rightful apotheosis and deliverance from degradation, charged with an innate sense of being the rebel angel in a Miltonian universe, but often doomed through failure to think sufficiently and seriously about other, opposing powers and their representatives. Except that Scott and screenwriter David Scarpa do their level best to strip this latest example of any hint of romanticism, whilst still keeping an eye on what he did well.



Tackling a subject as large as Napoleon's career is, it goes virtually without saying, close to being the very definition of biting off more than a feature filmmaker can chew, just as Alexander the Great's has proved more than once. Such careers encompass not just dizzying shifts of personal fortune and dramatic attitude for their focal figures, but entire epochs and sensibilities within their thematic gizzards. Tales of ruined and curtailed grandeur understandably resound with Scott: one distinctive aspect of his career has the degree to which so many of his movies have been misshapen by studio interference and editing. Scott's career has arguably been as much helped by this as hindered: the first reedit of *Blade Runner* (1982) released in the mid-1990s did much to give him new attention and standing and saw the film promoted from failed blockbuster and cult object to major classic, and the vastly extended version of *Kingdom of Heaven* similarly enlarged its reputation. Scott, working this time around with the bottomless money pit of Apple's new filmmaking branch, has finally weaponised this phenomenon, as a much longer version of *Napoleon* is in the offing for streaming release. The unfortunate side-effect of this sees the theatrical release version is immediately identified as a compromise offering, an incomplete artefact. But this is the one Scott has offered to those who go see it in a movie theatre so damn it, that's the one I'll take him up on.



Scott's opening sequence immediately strikes an off-kilter, aesthetically provocative note, as he depicts the guillotining of Marie Antoinette (Catherine Walker) set to Edith Piaf. This sequence immediately treads the finest of line between earnest historical theatre and puckish lampoon, the choice of song evoking a sense of linked eras in French folklore and art through creative anachronism. The Queen's white-painted face and gore-dripping neck are proffered to the crowd: are you not entertained? Some overlap here too with Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), a film that resisted showing the Queen's execution, and also took strong stylistic licence from Scott's son Jake's *Plunkett and Macleane* (1999). Scott and Scarpa, who also wrote the script for Scott's highly undervalued *All The Money In The World* (2017), immediately stake the drama in terms of the French Revolution's punitive mythos, a pageant of chopped heads and felled, effete aristocrats long since transmuted by retelling from the frightening counter-myth wielded by reactionaries for the following century or so into modern pop culture shtick, in our era of online "Eat the Rich" sloganeering from people who'd get suicidal at the thought of going a week without their smart phone. Maximilian Robespierre (Sam Troughton) is identified as a pompous showboat, who will when the Thermidorian reaction comes around try to shoot himself to avoid indignity only to leave himself with a hole in his face for his enemy to prod with pleasure.



Napoleon is first glimpsed, as he was in Gance's film, as a man in the crowd, but without the special dint of aloof charisma and potency in reserve. For Scott, Bonaparte is less transcendent warrior-poet than an on-the-make man of a specific moment, a sort of historical entrepreneur who sees a gap in the market and fills

it with a needed product, that product being military success. Scott's fascination for detail in process is perfectly attuned to communicating Napoleon's cunning as a fighter, illustrated in the first of the film's major battle set-pieces with a depiction of him leading the assault on the British garrison in Toulon, which he first scouts out personally under the guise of a shepherd. During the assault, in which he takes advantage of the general British disdain for the current state of the French as well as displaying all the technical nuance and effectiveness a well-trained soldierly mind and body can bring to bear, Napoleon survives having his horse shot out from under him by a cannon ball – a jarring, effectively gruesome moment – and after victory digs out the ball from the horse's corpse as a memento for his mother. Napoleon earns admiring, even awestruck looks from his men, signalling the institution of a reputation that completely inverts the same image of Marie Antoinette being dragged through the cleaved, disdainful crowd: here is popular leadership sourced in success and esteem, the most solid possible basis for political fortune, and the most dangerous.



Expanding on this idea, Scott portrays events usually skimmed or elided in other such portraits, in the way Napoleon first became a political operator as well as military hero, or rather, turned politics into a military arena, in vignettes sketched out with a dark and unexpected comic sensibility. Napoleon's role in putting down the Royalist Vendémiaire insurrection of 1795 is portrayed with Scott's unblinking eye for his subject's unblinking eye: Napoleon's ripe willingness to use direct, merciless force to suppress the uprising with the infamous "whiff of grapeshot." For Scott this episode is as important as it is often skimmed over – Gance, for instance, depicted Napoleon's call to arms and the aftermath but avoided actually depicting it, but it accords with Scott's greater scepticism and now-familiar interest in systemic acts. Here, drawn from history, is a precisely identifiable moment when one man established himself as a judicious wielder of power, and with a coherent corollary: if his predecessors in the course of the Revolution, in any faction, had shown the same gift, they would have become Napoleon Bonaparte, or some version of him that now fills history books. But that sense of force writes in red ink, sprayed on the Parisian cobblestones.



Later, Napoleon departs for his epic-absurd excursion to Egypt, where the grand spectacle of civilisations in immediate confrontation is described with an ideogram of satiric precision as Napoleon's artillery resounds in the face of an advancing Egyptian army and a cannon ball clips the peak of a pyramid. Scott depicts the machinations of the Brumaire coup, in which Napoleon, in league with Roger Ducos (Benedict Martin) and Joseph Fouché (John Hodgkinson) and with the help of Paul Barras (Tahar Rahim), deposed the ruling Directory and established himself as First Consul, the first major step towards becoming national dictator. The coup is again delivered as a comic spectacle, drawing humour from the way it paints Napoleon as in his element in bringing his tactical mind to bear and manipulating a situation, making it look like he's been roughed up by the Directory members with a show of breathless escape, so as to more easily deploy and reassure the soldiers he has waiting to storm the building that they're in the right. Thus he creates the impression that he is the truest representative and saviour of the Revolution even as he's actually betraying it and suborning it to dictatorship.



Scott's admiration for David Lean, most particularly *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), is as constant a motif for him as Kubrick. And yet, despite the superficial epicism *Napoleon* is not a reach for Leanian grandeur, not in theme nor in style. Rather than seeing Napoleon as a would-be titan in the Lawrence mode, doomed by his inability to convert ideals into facts in a corrosive world, Scott characterises him far more like the title character of *Barry Lyndon*, one of Kubrick's many fools of fortune cut off from the pleasures of power that can only be wielded by authentic brutes. Feels very likely, too, that Scott has more recent likenesses in

political theatre and fury in mind. This is a Napoleon for our era of social media-inflated populists and authoritarians who, partly through design and partly through vagaries of fortune, become lodestones for other people's passions and prejudices, battle lines drawn between the "us" such figures court and capture, and the perfidy of whichever "them" arouses special ire. The great archaeological enterprise that Napoleon sponsored during the expedition, forming the roots of Egyptology, is noted but also viewed askance, as Napoleon finds himself compelled by a mummy propped up after being dug up. The sight of the ancient, wizened body, a tilt by one society at achieving immortality, taunts a man starting to hear the same siren song, only for the mummy to listlessly lean over under his hard and searching scrutiny; in that end all that's left is a well-dressed corpse. Scott contrasts this tug of grandiosity with the messy reality of a would-be overlord who has neither house nor nation in order.



When it comes to making this sort of movie, filmmakers have in essence three choices: one is the general explanatory portrayal pitched to those who don't know much about the epoch and personalities under scrutiny, and hitting each vital beat succinctly. Another is the more impressionistic approach, usually counting some level of familiarity of the general run of events in the viewer and toggling associatively through vivid fragments. Many biopics of recent vintage tend to limit their scope to refine some essence of a famous person's life, through capturing a pivotal moment or a portrait from a specific viewpoint. *Napoleon* hews closest to the first approach, but flirts with all three. Anyone going into the film expecting a sober, steady expostulation of history will find it a patchy, frustrating, tonally bewildering affair as it stands. The narrative leapfrogs over the period between Napoleon becoming First Consul and Emperor, and from there to his invasion of Russia in a few scenes, encompassing as that period does all the apparently trifling business of his grand battles for Italy and Germany and Spain, as well as Trafalgar. It's all enough to make me particularly frustrated that filmmakers don't do old-school explanatory montages anymore, the kind of technique that can compress great swathes of information and action into brief and dynamic representations.



A lot of political to-ing and fro-ing is noted, with Talleyrand (Paul Rhys) engaging in deft diplomatic manoeuvres where his master tends to stamp heavily, but without any cumulative sense of contrapuntal meaning. The other personalities of the era, including Napoleon's brace of legendary marshals and even Talleyrand himself, one of those figures cloaked in delight by generations of political and historical observers, or Fouché, whom Scott ingeniously employed Albert Finney to impersonate in *The Duellists*, are only vaguely identified, the equivalents, in Scott's eye, of the kinds of second-tier hoods who comprise the foot soldiers going out to the whacking in a Scorsese or Coppola gangster movie. Later on, Louis XVIII (Ian McNeice) is seen installed in Napoleon's place after his first abdication, and I felt actively sorry for all the who's-that-guy? audience members wondering who he is and where he came from. Rahim makes an impression as Barras, the cunning operator who orchestrates Robespierre's downfall and becomes Napoleon's mentor in politics before being brushed aside, and the film notes the intriguing sight of General Dumas (Abubakar Salim) as one of Napoleon's confederates, a Black Haitian (and later father of the writer Alexandre) evincing the first glimmers of new social horizons. The trouble is that after pursuing the political theme early on in the film, Scott seems to feel it exhausts itself once Napoleon becomes First Consul. Or, rather, he transmutes one way of exploring the theme into another.



The focus then falls on one of the most famous yet opaque marriages in history, that between Napoleon and Joséphine de Beauharnais (Vanessa Kirby), whose course is seen as intimately woven with the general rise and fall of Napoleon's fortunes and continues to define them even after it's technically ended, and it's this

marriage Scott and Scarpa identify as exemplifying something about the age as well as the characters locked in it. Joséphine is first glimpsed being released from prison at the end of the Reign of Terror, a pathetic figure with crudely shorn hair and soiled clothes, as if she's stumbled out of the rehearsal-turned-orgy in *Marat / Sade* (1966). Soon she's invited to one of the Survivors' Balls held for raucous celebrations by those who escaped the national razor, a vignette of lewd and raucous entertainment in a moment of supremely licentious release for those who have survived political terror and still enjoying a moment before the old morality kicks back in. There she encounters Napoleon, whose lovestruck gaze lingers on her until she confronts him for it: all he can do is bleat about his capture of Toulon, something she only gets amusement from at first, but quickly seizes upon her connection with the odd young officer in realisation he could be a star worth hitching her wagon to, and vice versa, given her connections in high society.



Scott trots out the vignette of Joséphine's son Eugene (Benjamin Chivers) approaching Napoleon to beg for his executed father's sword, but with a twist that invests this tale with a new meaning. Napoleon moves to oblige the lad, only to be confronted with rack after racks of similarly impounded swords, none of them marked according to owner. Again, in one efficient gesture Scott conveys the nature of the Reign of Terror as leaving holes in the shape of so many dead men persisting only as myths of martial glory and lost legacy, and delivers a punchline wherein Napoleon selects a random sabre to give to the De Beauharnais. It's both his ticket into Joséphine's household, and also an ironic self-description, as one sword is as good as another, and he's the sword currently being offered: Napoleon explicitly characterises himself elsewhere as merely a handy sword. Joséphine sits and talks with Napoleon, and, making her play, calmly opens her legs invitingly to him, in a gesture that's as much a challenge as an act of seduction. Later, Joséphine weighs up her feelings in with her chambermaid, and quickly concludes that whilst her affection for him is much less than his for her, she cares enough for him to go ahead with a union that becomes for both a perverse thicket. Like Gance, Scott sees Napoleon's swooning ardour for Joséphine as part and parcel with his most fervent conquering zest in the opening phase of his career, but in a completely different way. Their union delivers wealth and splendour, as Joséphine swans through swank abodes that become the trappings of high office and joins her husband in the forbidden delights of fucking in once-royal beds. Napoleon enjoys the servicing of his raw lust, which manifests on a virtually infantile level, as he inveigles her to congress with childish noises and prostrate her for jackhammering sex sessions.



Such episodes ram home (sorry) Scott's scornful take on the macho warrior ethos he offers Napoleon as exemplifying (which might be rather unfair in this case, as being bad at sex never seemed to be one of Napoleon's problems, given the historical record of Napoleon's relations with his second wife Mary-Louise) in a manner that clearly extends *The Last Duel's* concern with such things. At the same time it twists away from that film's straightforward and blistering sense of historical righteousness towards something more ambivalent, if still with an eye for the egregious. Joséphine is every bit as wayward and lusty a personality as her husband, and the tug of war between their mutually complicit egos and anxieties defines their marriage, to the point where Napoleon storms home to France, leaving his army in Egypt in the lurch, after hearing about Joséphine's affair with hunky young officer Hippolyte Charles (Jannis Niewöhner), and her dalliances become the stuff of proto-tabloid news feasting. Napoleon returns to his home with Joséphine only to find her out for the day, further stoking his rage and leading him to dump all of her belongings out on the front lawn. Joséphine becomes panicky upon seeing this on her return, and the night and following day become an extended playlet of ritualised domination and submission amidst a stew of fierce and contradictory feelings, first with Napoleon fiercely extracting expressions of undying fidelity and respect, and then her from him: "You are nothing without me" is a catechism each makes the other repeat in turn.



This part of the film, which continues the playful, satirically skewed aspect of the film's take on the historical record, is nonetheless very much central to what Scott's take on *Napoleon* is aiming for, a quest that traces the outlines of the old canard that "behind every great man is a good woman," tested and

smelted and recast as a similar but distinct idea, one that traces out the way ambitious, spiky personalities seek same with all the potential and pain that can result. Napoleon's subsequent confrontation with the grandees of the Directory, who try to criticise him for abandoning his army in Egypt, sees him fiercely turn the tables in noting their incompetence and mismanagement, rattling off a series of denunciations concluding with, "And I've just learned that my wife is a slut!" one of the most unexpectedly hilarious lines in recent cinema. Moreover, it nudges the connection of the course of the marriage to the course of Napoleon's career, suggesting Napoleon's conviction that both Joséphine and France are inconstant lovers easily distracted by louche poseurs and needing his firm rod to keep both in line, but to which he remains fatefully tethered. Or, from the opposite perspective, that Napoleon is at once a gallant deliverer and petty thug for both. Joséphine plays her part right down the line, up to and including falling on her metaphorical, matrimonial sword for the good of the nation, and she retains a quality that refuses reduction, unlike the other players in the drama, to organs of Napoleon's will and ego, and that's precisely because he does actually feel something for her. But those feelings are not simple or reassuring.



The fascination for the political apparent in the personal is one of Scott's recurring points of obsession and inquiry, and he nails the fascination for such dynamics in these portions of *Napoleon*. Napoleon readily confesses his affairs after reacting with specially aggrieved passion when he finds Joséphine has been doing the same: the old double standard, of course, except that the couple talk about it all during their long session of dirty laundry-airing that becomes a vital ritual in their evolving relationship. The idea of a Napoleon who's a total cuck is a neat provocation to the current cult obsessed with masculine esteem, but the film gropes through that to another, more substantial perspective: the reason these two people are locked together by fate and emotion is precisely because they're not normal, or "relatable" as the awful current phraseology has it, even if they are still nonetheless very human. As Joséphine's incapacity to conceive a child threatens the Bonapartes' proto-dynastic ambitions, however, her position becomes increasingly endangered, and finally Napoleon feels obliged to divorce her. The divorce comes in a ceremony that becomes a second, rather more gruelling act of public theatre after the coronation they shared in together, this time a stew of sardonic disbelief and squirming frustration, with Napoleon dealing a quick slap to Joséphine's face in trying to get her back on message, the film's most grimly amusing contemplation of personal life and statecraft fused in a sickly dance.



The lead actors are at their finest in these scenes, Phoenix's smouldering, frustrated Napoleon matching Kirby's mesmeric evocation of an intelligence that doesn't quite mesh as much as Joséphine would like to think with her emotional identity: both are undone by their needy and compulsive streaks and the way neither quite has a substantial identity without the other. Late in the film, during Napoleon's first deposing and exile, Alexander visits the ailing Joséphine out of nominal gentlemanly courtesy and furtive intrigue, but with the subtext that Joséphine's bed, or heart, or more nebulous domain of kingmaking talent, or all at once, are further battlegrounds these conquering overlords need to compete upon and test themselves against. Earlier, and in stark contrast, Napoleon's mother Letizia (Sinéad Cusack) sets about attending to the dynastic problem by arranging for her son to sleep with a selected and willing partner, to find out whether her lad is shooting blanks in the boudoir if not on the battlefield: he quickly gets the appointed concubine knocked up, opening the door to the divorce. This hints heavily at where Napoleon gets his tactical zest and hearty absence of any kind of sentimentality, but also signals Letizia operates with a clearer head than her son, at least in terms of what she's aiming for and how to get to it. It's a pity Cusack's mommy dearest doesn't appear more in the film. Once the divorce is done, Napoleon promptly weds the young and eager Mary-Louise (Anna Mawn), with Napoleon greeting her and swiftly leading her on to the bedroom: sex is what they're both here for, in several senses.



The side of Scott that retains skills honed in making British television and the tradition of the docudrama – a facet of the director that has long sat in tension with his florid, decorative, world-conjuring side – has

come to the fore repeatedly in his career, underpinning the woozy blend of reportage and you-are-there sturm-und-drang of *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and more completely on *American Gangster*. *Napoleon* seems like a perfect fit for this, and yet again Scott demurs. Instead, *Napoleon* proves to actually be an entry in a style of historical film that doesn't get made much – generally because it's proven highly unpopular with audiences and a zone of confusion for critics – and also peculiarly British. A style exemplified by the likes of Tony Richardson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), Richard Attenborough's *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969), Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1976), Hugh Hudson's *Revolution* (1985), *Plunkett and Macleane*, Julien Temple's *Pandemonium* (2000), and much of Ken Russell's oeuvre – one could also nod to the likes of Richard Lester and *Monty Python* for more outright comedic variations. Unstable films where the familiar impulses of such movies, springing from the moment of the 1960s counterculture and later promising and blending with the impulses of punk, with their fascination for famous historical personalities and realism in recreating milieu, sit cheek by jowl was a sense of the ridiculous, located in awareness of disparity in viewpoint, and skit-like, semi-satiric attitude, with attempts to connect the modern sensibility with the period with aspects of ironic juxtaposition and poetic licence that tries to dig to something truer than what mere fact can convey.



It makes sense that Scott would have some sympathy with that style, coming as he did out of the same era and sensibility that shaped the likes of Russell and Richardson, at once finding themselves heirs to a cultural and artistic tradition and also rebels against it, looking for the down and dirty amidst all the gilt and froufrou, the proof of continuity in human nature even as history moved from veiling its primal impulses to letting it all hang out. And whilst he's long seemed more of a straight arrow than the likes of Russell, in fact it can be said that Scott's oeuvre has long been defined by the peculiar, personal spin he put on that kind of artistic sensibility – that he might even have always been the most sophisticated exponent of it. That's most overt in the arch blend of genres and styles in *Blade Runner* in particular, veering as it does between sci-fi and noir, classical and futuristic, the exalted and the fetid, all putting the punk in cyberpunk, and elsewhere in his career he's been fond of such juxtapositions, if usually in more subtle or purely stylistic ways. *Napoleon* is a long way from being as bold in its juxtapositions of technique and tone as *The Charge of the Light Brigade* or *Savage Messiah* (1972), but a sense of common roots nonetheless keeps bobbing to the surface. Scott boils down Napoleon's march on Moscow to a spectacle of self-defeat, with the Emperor inheriting the hollow trappings of Alexander's authority, and a deserted city he can't even claim credit for burning down.



That Scott is also thinking back to his debut is palpable in places throughout *Napoleon*, recreating the method apparent in *The Duellists* for recreating historical milieu, particularly the hollowed-out environs of the revolution-pilfered great houses and institutions, and even recreates some shots here and there. Scott dismissed *Waterloo* before making this film, and as a great admirer of Bondarchuk's movie the temptation to a little cackle of contumely is hard to resist, in noting how Scott fails to match that film's pungency as both war spectacle and character sketch, even if he is aiming at something quite different. Nonetheless the two grand battle sequences, the first depicting Austerlitz, the second Waterloo, that subdivide the drama, are two of Scott's greatest feats of filmmaking, as he tries to encapsulate the complex ebb and flow of action in those battles as units of expressive and coherent diagramming, particularly in the contrast of Napoleon expertly suckering in his foes in the first battle and flailing surrendering to his own macho mythos as well as Wellington's traps in the second. Austerlitz is illustrated with particular verve, Scott wielding watchmaker precision in the outlay of cause and effect, capturing Napoleon's capacity to see through the superficial chaos of the battlefield to both see and wield designs amidst it all. The battle climaxes with the infamous shelling of the iced-over lake the luckless Austrian and Russian soldiers try to flee across, the climax of *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) recast from heroic consummation as nature conspires with great leader to swallow the alien host, to a supervillain's wickedest flourish of contempt for a defeated foe.



Simultaneously registering as both problematic and fruitful, Scott's *Napoleon* emerges as feeling like two or three different movies, each competing for primacy – the post-punk satire, the intimate portrait of a weird

power couple, and the epic war movie delivered with all of Scott's most earnest and technically dynamic impact. Episodes of ribald humour graze against straight-faced depictions of brutal combat and fastidious politics. In this regard *Napoleon* recalls his *Robin Hood*, which had a similarly, internally divided and clashing structure, albeit an interesting one that disassembled the Robin Hood legend to then resituate it at a junction of real history and folklore rooted in specific cultural soil, recasting the famous hero as the epitome of plebeian English liberty fighting bullies foreign and domestic. *Napoleon* by contrast never quite finds a way of negotiating its disparities of portrait: if it applied a formal device, like what Christopher Nolan tried (if badly) in *Oppenheimer* (2023), or indeed as Scott did in *The Last Duel*, to establish the notion that Napoleon looks like a completely different person from different angles, that might be fine.



Napoleon's career contains multitudes enough for any biographer – the man who brought French Revolutionary ideals and political liberalism to European politics also stole and conscripted mercilessly, the champion of liberty also tried to toss the Haitians back in chains, and the urges that pushed him to such irreconcilable ends, again usually elided or oversimplified in film takes, cry out for a substantively engaged portrait. In a lot of ways this *Napoleon* settles for the least interesting version of the man that can be offered. But, again, that might be partly mistaking what this *Napoleon* wants to be, which can be summarised most concisely as a portrait of power as inherently absurd, especially when completely invested in a person, even if the results of it being wielded are anything but funny. Napoleon Bonaparte is just the historical vessel the thesis is poured into. The film ends with Napoleon, sitting out his exile on St Helena with his two daughters, dying whilst writing his memoirs – Scott films the silhouette of the man wearing his signature hat slowly keeling over, mimicking the dried-out mummy he gazed on earlier.



Here lies both ultimate absurdity, the great conqueror just another uniform without a body to hold it up anymore, at once a sight of pathos, but also one from which the contrived mystique is allowed to escape and haunt history evermore. Scott might well feel some empathy there, as that's also the kind of immortality the artist plays for, to leave behind traces of themselves in the works they have wrought. The final tally of the dead from Napoleon's battles and campaigns that rolls afterwards plays as a miniature self-critique of the list of terrorist actions at the end of *Black Hawk Down*: from cautionary tale about inaction to cautionary tale about too much action. *Napoleon* is a big, woozy, unusual film that's never less than extremely entertaining and absorbing even when it's also being extraordinarily frustrating. As a biopic of Napoleon Bonaparte, it's a haphazard affair; as an extension of Scott's late career obsessions, an ironic study in being human even when affecting to transcend that state, it's something like a triumph. Whatever else one might say about Scott as he keeps pushing back the horizon of his career in defiance of his age, *Napoleon* is a film that refuses to conform to clichés about a filmmaker's autumnal phase – compared to the way that, say, Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023) exemplifies that concept, for all its excellence. The messiness of *Napoleon* is a by-product of its wayward ambition, and in that regard, yes, Scott earns comparison with his subject.

The Marvels (2023)

this island rod



It seems already likely that Nia DaCosta's *The Marvels* will be remembered as the movie that marked a decisive downturn in the fortunes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, if not quite its crunching headlong demise. The reasons for the film's extremely underwhelming performance come down I think chiefly to a very simple and inevitable phenomenon – general public exhaustion with the superhero movie glut, which turned a modestly fun type of movie into the major blockbuster cash cow of the last decade. But other factors are in play too, some of them more interesting than whole movies in the MCU cycle. 2023 certainly has marked a calamitous year for superhero movies, with all the entries put out by Warner Bros.' DC Comics partnership going belly up, a raft of failure partly enforced by the way the studio unwisely announced it was abandoning its long-ailing cycle before the current slate was released, sapping them of the elusive frisson of interconnectedness that made the style so addictive. Disney-Marvel, for their part, made a move that on paper seemed like an ideal business tactic but only resulted in badly diffusing their audience, their fictional universe, and their reputation for reliable quality: extending the MCU into a raft of shows featured on their streaming platform, which meant that whole new characters and vital plot developments in relation to the MCU seem to be popping randomly into existence for those who were just happy to watch the movies two or three times a year, when they were reliable ways to spend a couple of hours in a movie theatre.



The COVID pandemic also seems to have marked a shift in audience habits and appetites, as well as political events that helped break, if not entirely relieve, the fever sweat-like sublimation from the youth audience that drove the franchise to its wildest heights of popularity, on top of more mundane things like the storytelling and marketing savvy that marked Disney-Marvel's confidence, which reached its natural high-tide limit with *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Like its major precursor in the MCU cycle, *Captain Marvel* (2018), *The Marvels* is plainly and proudly the product of the late 2010s zeitgeist, with the surge in online progressive demands for rhetorically fit films, as a superhero film starring and made by women. Such was the kind of concession that, after the success of *Black Panther* (2018), seemed not merely canny but perhaps compulsory in keeping up with the audience mood, without quite realising how quickly that mood changes in the internet age. *Captain Marvel* was almost immediately rendered a relic of the particular moment that produced it: it made a colossal sum of money despite being an astonishing mediocrity thanks to the feedback loop of being both an entry in a very popular cycle at the height of said popularity, whilst also proposing to give that cycle a supposed new glint of radicalism by offering the MCU's first outright, front-rank female superhero.



But the turn of the zeitgeist has its other hemisphere. There's a large cadre of partisans eager to see it fail as a nail in the coffin of the franchise's turn towards such emblazoned progressive prerogatives, and those who more generally feel the MCU has been degenerating in quality, and indeed who feel the turn towards embracing social concerns is being used to veil that rapidly waning product. In all honesty, to my eye,

recent movies in the MCU cycle have veered from the pleasantly negligible to the woozily impressive, but then they always have. What I would agree with is that, by and large, the recent run have betrayed quite a bit of hesitation from the creative team when it comes to trying at once to engage with more complex genre ideas particularly now they're trying to branch out into a "multiverse," but do so in the most simplified, glycerine-soaked fashion imaginable, so as not to turn off the 8-year-olds and the more easily perplexed dads in the audience. The multiverse angle in itself, whilst promising endless possibility, feels in practice mostly like a vortex of self-referential doom. And where the early MCU films earned their audience with well-crafted and dramatically intent vehicles for their most famous heroes, the cycle now is leaning on a succession of what are in TV terms backdoor pilots for second-string heroes being shuffled through to take their baffling places at the heart of the cycle. If *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (2023) played as a worthy capstone to the MCU as it stood, *The Marvels* proposes injecting new blood, only to find the blood bank a little low on stock.



All of that is, of course, theoretically distinct from the question of judging DaCosta's new film as an independent cinematic entity. DaCosta grabbed attention with the interesting, gritty, if rather one-note drama *Little Woods* (2018) and moved on to more populist fare with a remake of *Candyman* (2021). Here she has a near-thankless task, trying to stitch together a coherent narrative revolving around one established heroine, who is still nonetheless in need of being properly and effectively defined as more than a placard advertising supposed awesomeness, and two more birthed in streaming shows I haven't seen. Brie Larson returns as Carol 'Captain Marvel' Danvers, who, after breaking loose of the villainous Kree Empire and its supercomputer controller, the Supreme Intelligence, in her debut film, vanished into deep space for a quarter-century attending to various missions of mercy only to return in *Avengers: Endgame*. Teyonah Parris is Monica Rambeau, the daughter of Carol's old pal and former fellow fighter pilot Maria (Lashana Lynch), now gifted with superpowers of her own thanks to an encounter with a witch's spell (apparently) as well as working as an astronaut for SHIELD's less militaristic successor as Earth-protecting sentries, SABER. Kamala 'Ms. Marvel' Khan (Iman Vellani) possesses a mysterious alien artefact, a bracelet that allows her to briefly form solid matter from light to use as weapons or tools, and a family heirloom that bespeaks hidden influences in her heritage.



The three women are linked together by fate but not quite by chance, as a Kree warrior, Dar-Benn (Zawe Ashton), now risen to take the place of Ronan (yawn) as her race's cosmos-crossing warlord, wants revenge on Carol for shattering their society and to replenish the Kree's plundered natural resources at the same time. To this end she tracks down the partner to Kamala's bracelet: the two bracelets are artefacts out of myth which have the capacity to establish and control hyperspace jump points. Dar-Benn lures Carol and Maria to an unstable jump point, and the two women, as well as Kamala through the bracelet she wears, find themselves quantum-entangled, swapping places and abilities when any of them draws on their powers. Once they regain sufficient control and fight off some of Dar-Benn's goons, the trio join forces and head off into space to try and head off Dar-Benn's predations, which include stealing the atmosphere from a planet being used as a refuge by the Skrulls and the oceans of the water-rich Aladna, whose prince Yan (Park Seo-joon) Carol is married to, so she swears, purely as a diplomatic nicety. Meanwhile Carol's long-time friend and supporter, superspy Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), contends with Dar-Benn's ravages, which set in motion the slow disintegration of the new space platform he commands under the aegis of SABER. He brings Kamala's good-natured family aboard, and finds unexpected aid in the disaster through Carol's alien cat pet Goose, which is not just a truly bizarre alien tentacle monster capable of swallowing and regurgitating people entire hidden within a cute and furry exterior, but proves to be literally having kittens too.



The way the above synopsis quickly becomes a near-impenetrable thicket of series lore and characters seems to bear out the problems besetting the MCU cycles at this point. But in all truth, none of it's that hard to grasp. Kamala is the goofy fan-girl unexpectedly thrust into the same elite zone as her special hero. Monica is her older, weathered but wispily haunted counterpart – she too worshipped Carol as a youngster, but now finds their relationship charged with discomfort thanks to Carol's long absence, from which she returned and spent time with Maria when she was dying from cancer, an event Monica was absent for because she was one of the victims of Thanos's demi-genocide. The trio quickly meshes into a working unit, and contend with a villainess who's defined as a radicalised product of Carol's righteous but short-sighted actions. Ashton has some icy charisma as Dar-Benn, but her character isn't given nearly enough screen time and dramatic heft to resolve as much more than the regulation guest baddie of the instalment.



At least until things start to break down in the last third, I found *The Marvels* surprisingly enjoyable. Even if it at points the film's plotline felt rushed and spasmodic – the result, most likely, of some heavy pre-release pruning and reshooting – then at least the story hits the ground running and for the most does a good job of weaving in the substantive character and emotional beats with the footloose tenor of the comedy-action tale it wants to be. The early scenes of the three heroines faced with sudden, jarring shifts in locale and situation, and the chaos that ensues, are deftly choreographed and shot – props to DaCosta and her cinematographer Sean Bobbitt for the nimble camerawork and glossy veneer. Although it's a more spirited and zestily paced, and rather less pseudo-momentous, entry in the MCU cycle than Chloe Zhao's *Eternals* (2021), DaCosta reveals similar instincts to Zhao when it comes to wanting to inflect the superhero movie's stylistic lexicon with would-be hilarious segues into the musical, nodding to Bollywood cinema as a point of reference in a sidetrack to Aladna where the locals only communicate in song and so song-and-dance numbers are the requisite mode of diplomacy. This is a great idea DaCosta doesn't develop nearly as much as she might have, and dumps almost immediately, but still wrings a few moments of breezy absurdity from.



This also helps highlight the way DaCosta and Larson seem anxious to invest Carol with something like specific character traits, beyond the featureless, waxen stoicism offered in Anna Fleck and Ryan Boden's introduction for her, whilst also finding some gently ribbing humour value in her Kevlar sheen, particularly when being reunited with her mellifluous husband obliges Carol to break out her best moves and vocals. Early in the film there's more emphasis on Carol's tendency to get frantic and talkative with father figure Fury, with whom Kamala also connects in rather more immediate fashion when the two are thrust together to fight off Kree heavies. Larson's attempts to project glazed toughness still look vacuous, but her way of dropping in expert comic hints of confusion and momentary fazing in the face of the madness mounting about her reminded me of Roger Moore's James Bond, in a good way. Trouble is, we end up with two or three versions of Carol, none of them still quite adding up into a truly coherent figure. I also got the feeling that Larson seems to be trying to shake off the character's rather sexless image, with rather tighter, sleeker costume this time around, and swanning about in crop-tops when out of it. Vellani has a lot of personality, which helps make up for the way the script doesn't always know what to do with her and her skillset. Parris has on paper another thankless task, playing the heroine stuck between Carol's established omniscience and Kamala's plucky, delighted neophyte, but she tackles the role with enough conviction to be subtly impressive, particularly in the gritty physicality she exhibits in the fight scenes: Parris might not be able to move through solid walls like her character, but her eyes certainly seem able to glare through them. There's a marvellous mid-film montage set to the Beastie Boys' "Intergalactic" that sees Carol, Monica, and Kamala forging into an effective team and working out how to take advantage of their entanglement, sporting some nifty special effects that make sport of the idea of the destabilised powers idea, and also manage the extremely tricky feat of amplifying rather than disrupting the chemistry of the actresses.



DaCosta also nods to her own *Little Woods*, where she cast Lily James and Tessa Thompson as sisters and left it to the audience to figure it out, as the quasi-familial bond between Monica and her “Aunt Carol” is noted by the Khans, with the matriarch noting, “Family is complicated.” The problems with *The Marvels* are nonetheless as pronounced as its strengths. Kamala’s family (Zenobia Shroff and Mohan Kapur as the parents, Saagar Shaikh as big brother) are amusing but the close-knit family who offer equal doses of cringe and warmth for ethnically specific heroes is rapidly becoming an instant cliché (see also *Blue Beetle*, 2023), and particularly this year when Nida Manzoor’s *Polite Society* (2023) did interesting and provocative things with the unruly Desi daughter motif, whereas Kamala is conceptualised in a manner that desperately wants to play safe with it. The film nudges interesting character-building territory when Carol is forced to call in Kamala from her efforts to save Skrulls during the apocalypse Dar-Benn unleashes on their refuge planet, telling her, “You save those you can,” a moment that brings to the fore the inevitable moment of crisis sparked when a superhero confronts the limits of their abilities and the moral purview that drives them. Just a pity the movie never brings it up again.



The script, credited to DaCosta, Megan McDonnell, and Elissa Karasik, is also extremely confused in terms of not only the precise mechanics of how and when the three heroines swap places but also in Carol’s role in the collapse of the Kree. Carol has become known amongst the Kree, we learn, as “The Annihilator,” suggesting another interesting possibility with complex ramifications, the great hero from one viewpoint a bringer of ruin and catastrophe from another – reminiscent of the way the Doctor became a figure of

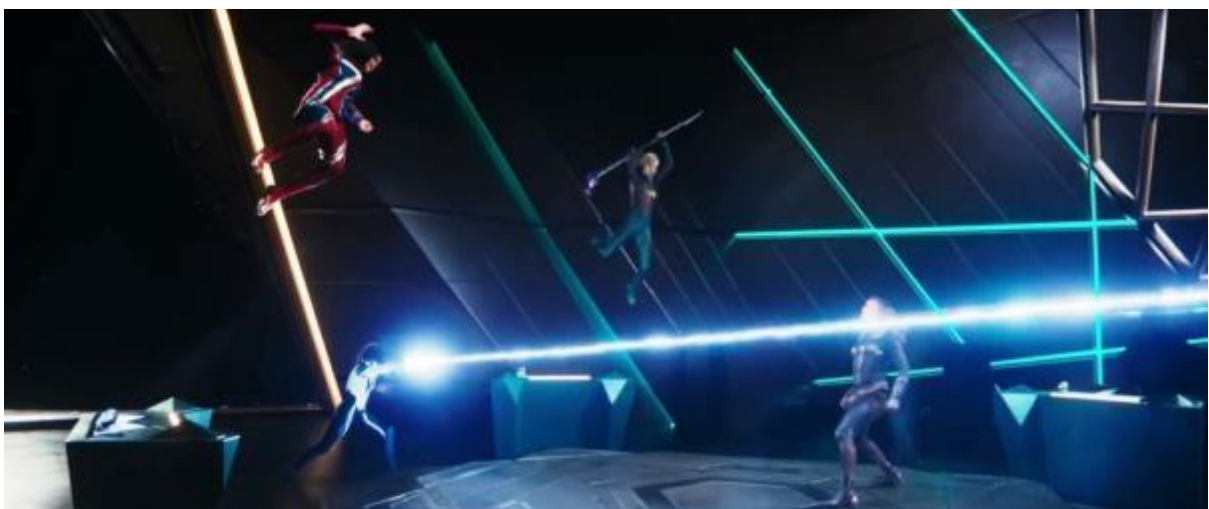
perfect, Satanic dread and loathing for the Daleks in *Doctor Who*. We're told the destruction of the Supreme Intelligence resulted in civil war amongst the Kree, which doesn't quite cover how it also resulted in their sun waning. Not discounting the likelihood of explanatory tissue being jettisoned during the film's extended post-production, *The Marvels* still reaps here the usual confusion that results from this sort of movie trying to encompass relevance to an immediate issue – highlighting both the problems of political and military interventionism, as represented by Carol, and environmental degradation giving rise to wars of resources – but doing so in the clumsiest and broadest fashion possible. It also cops out of wrangling with who deserves what blame, as the film wants to propose that maybe, just maybe Carol isn't all good, only to retreat hastily from its own gesture at complication.



The Marvels also has no idea what to do with a strong supporting cast. At this point Jackson is obviously just turning up to collect a large paycheck and inject proceedings with a toned-down version of his trademark macho ferocity, which by now has become rather a gruffly avuncular familiarity. Gary Lewis appears swathed in latex as the king of the Skrulls, and he does manage to inflect his few scenes with notes of desperation and rage suppressed beneath his affect of nobility. Park is essentially required to pose like a fashion model or Ken doll when not dancing or fighting, betraying the rather cynical way DaCosta and the MCU team want to annex some of the fashionableness of K-Pop and camp-hued musicals amongst the film's desperately courted teen girl audience, and also never gets to enlarge upon the exact nature of his and Carol's relationship. DaCosta is bolder in suggesting Carol swings both ways when Valkyrie (Thompson) turns up to take the hapless Skrulls to sanctuary at New Asgard, but of course that can't go anywhere either. Despite all the widespread hullaballoo about diversity in this realm, the MCU is cursed to be a place where all its erotic impulses are so intensely sublimated they only register on the most exasperatingly weak wavelengths. Because there is no actual diversity in this sort of thing: it is an aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual centrifuge, assimilating all, pulverising all.



The battle sequence sparked when the Kree arrive on Aladna is good stuff, if relatively familiar in the more cosmic wing of the MCU, with vigorous stunt and camera choreography, the bright and colourful Aladna locale offering some contrast to the general dinginess of much recent CGI spectacle. By the time *The Marvels* reaches its actual climactic scenes, however, it more or less falls apart. Fury and others on the SABER platform are forced to evacuate, using Goose's many children to swallow up the crew and puke them back up when safely back on Earth, a tilt at achieving comic craziness that instead sees both movie and the whole MCU imprimatur taking a perhaps fatal tilt towards the sloppy and silly. Meanwhile, the heroic trio (see what I did there? Yeah, Johnny To know how you do a great all-girl superhero movie) confront Dar-Benn when she is suddenly and conveniently all alone on her spaceship. A selfless sacrifice sunders the team even in delivering victory, and Carol literally relights a sun by farting extremely powerfully, or something like that. Things round off with Monica plunging into a completely different franchise, whilst Kamala approaches budding Hawkeye replacement Kate Bishop (Hailee Steinfeld) to join a proposed young superhero team. This flourish of self-satire, a play on the famous first credits scene of *Iron Man* (2008), the very moment that unchained the whole MCU beast, might prove instead to be a highly ironic moment of Ouroboros-like tail-eating for the franchise. DaCosta has certainly here made a superior movie to *Captain Marvel*, admittedly a low bar to clear, and if it had come, say, ten entries earlier in the MCU it might have held its head high as a playful divertissement for the brand. Now, the best thing about *The Marvels* is also the worst thing about it: it's the kind of movie that you just can't get mad at. Or feel much of anything for.



Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One (2023)

this island rod



Despite all the plaudits the series has gained in recent years, I've long found the *Mission: Impossible* films only sufficient as chewing gum for the eyes. It's been a franchise whose most salient characteristic is shared with its constant hero Ethan Hunt – a sort of slick featurelessness with supernal human elements, deliberately disposable. I've never even thought about watching any entry more than once, save rewatching the series opener during my occasional revisits to Brian De Palma's oeuvre, amongst which it plays as one of his smoothest but also emptiest efforts, not really intense enough to sustain itself as a high style exercise, and certainly not articulating his deeper personality and processing his usual scepticism towards power and institutions and the people who play games of secrets and statecraft to mere shtick. John Woo clearly thought he was making a homage to *Notorious* (1946) with his 1999 sequel but wrapped it in silliness; J.J. Abrams and Brad Bird did decent work on their subsequent entries but didn't deepen it at all. So I found the proposal that producer and star Tom Cruise and writer-director Christopher McQuarrie, who took over the series after an array of random auteurist guests spots with 2015's *Rogue Nation* and 2018's *Fallout*, wanted to give the series a truly epic send-off was then at once both intriguing and a little wearisome. A feeling the mass audience seems to have shared, given recent tardiness towards movies with "Part One" in the title, healthily developed in the decade or so since the last two *Harry Potter* films struck on a great way to make more money for studios by spitting franchise cappers. This resulted in *Dead Reckoning Part One* not doing as well at the box office as might have been expected.



But I owe full plaudits for Cruise and McQuarrie's latest entry, and also an apology for not catching it in theatres when it came along. *Dead Reckoning* starts with what I'll politely call a miniature pastiche of *The Hunt For Red October* (1990). A Russian submarine, the *Sevastapol*, whilst testing a new silent propulsion system, accidentally sinks itself when the experimental AI unit planted in its computer system fakes an attack by an enemy sub: the AI, dubbed "The Entity," has become self-perpetuating and malignantly purposeful, and has deliberately contrived to place its core intelligence out of reach of anyone trying to contain or control it. Governments the world over nonetheless scramble to try and gain access to The Entity, which holds the promise of world domination with its capacity to invade and manipulate every digital realm, with the only question being whether it's wielded by a state power or whether The Entity becomes the world's sinister, incorporeal dictator. A two-part cruciform key which unlocks The Entity's mainframe on the sunken *Sevastapol*, retrieved from the body of one of its dead sailors, becomes the motivating McGuffin of the subsequent plot. One half of it is captured by Ilsa Faust (Rebecca Ferguson) when she gets wind of it, and Ethan (Cruise) is sent to take it from her by CIA boss Kittridge (Henry Czerny). After an early fake-out where it seems Ilsa is killed by bounty hunters also after the key, she turns up again aiding Ethan in his angered efforts to find out what the hell is going on.



Ethan presses this to the point of forcing Kittridge to help him infiltrate a meeting of top-level US security officials, also including Denlinger (Cary Elwes), and then knocking everyone out. Now understanding the

threat and enticement represented by The Entity and resolving to destroy it, Ethan still doesn't know just what the key accesses, and so elects to sell Ilsa's half to someone who does. But the other half is stolen from the potential buyer (Christopher Sciueref) when Ethan tries to meet him at Abu Dhabi Airport, by formidably talented thief Grace (Hayley Atwell). A mysterious double act of assassins, Gabriel (Esai Morales) and Paris (Pom Klementieff), are more ruthless in pursuit, and two agents of Kittridge's, Briggs (Shea Wigham) and Degas (Greg Tarzan Davis), only want to nab Ethan. All four rival parties collide and battle in Rome, where Ethan tries to strike up an alliance with Grace, despite Grace's singleminded desire to get paid. Grace was hired by Ethan's old frenemy "The White Widow" (Vanessa Kirby), who wanted in her usual purview to auction off such a goodie to the highest bidder, but is intimidated when confronted by Gabriel, who proves to be a fanatical believer in The Entity as a god of death. Gabriel also – holy backstory, Batman! – killed Ethan's one-time lover in as-yet murky circumstances, and set him on the path to joining the IMF. Ethan is soon given fresh, bitter reason to hate Gabriel, a hate with the potential to finally drive him off his usually selfless sense of mission and seek revenge at the potential cost of the world's end.



Dead Reckoning Part One's more serious and genuinely dramatic take on the usual template is partly enabled through The Entity. AI, supercomputer, and digital doohickies as plot drivers are the most timely but also most consistently boring in the current pantheon of blockbuster storytelling – I still wince a little when I remember the countdown to the big nasty spy computer going online in *Spectre* (2015). But McQuarrie's script actually uses The Entity cleverly in the story, as the AI proves able to infiltrate security systems and other tech to mislead and misdirect our heroes and pull veils over its allies. Simon Pegg and Ving Rhames also return as Ethan's helpmates Benji and Luther, who find their jobs made harder, and finally close to impossible, by an enemy who rules the turf of the digital world they're usually supposed to command and manipulate to smooth Ethan's path: The Entity proves able to erase Gabriel from the sight of cameras in real time, and later uses deepfake abilities to lure Ethan into a double-edged trap. This eventually forces them to step back from the tech they usually use with orchestral skill to stay a step ahead of their foes. That's another trope this series made pretty *de rigueur* – heroes dashing about with their pet tech wizards rattling off instructions in their earpiece – that's become stultifying, now suddenly disrupted, even if Ethan and team quickly develop their workarounds by falling back on twitchier analogue tech. The stranger thing on display here is that Pegg, who was the funky new blood in the series a decade ago, now looks rather dismayingly haggard, whereas Rhames' ability to blend the gravitas of long and hard experience with simmering good-humour is a virtue not enough filmmakers exploit.



Wigham and Davis also are stuck with the most thankless type of part in this sort of thing – the representatives of higher authority who are the straight-arrow doppelgangers of the gone-rogue protagonists and who might eventually prove to be allies in waiting. Still the actors give the parts their best: Wigham in particular has the right energy, coming across as he does at once hardbitten but also a little tattered as a working stiff playing supercop. *Dead Reckoning Part One* pulls off a balancing act that's rare at the best of times and damn near miraculous considering how indifferently flung together many movies are in our great and glorious new streaming age. On the one hand, McQuarrie goes for a more serious and genuinely dramatic take on the usual template, charged with moments of high melodrama and genuine stakes for its heroes. The feeling of new uncertainty even pays off in the shocking mid-film death of a major character, and the mooted generation handover implicit in the storyline might well lead to greater losses down the line. McQuarrie alternates the flashy action setpieces with lengthy but increasingly intense sequences where the characters engage in games of enticing and verbal strongarming, including a multiparty confrontation in a Venetian nightclub, and the climactic sequence in which Grace pretends to be the White Widow with one of the custom IMF masks, sent to deceive Kittridge on the Orient Express.



The outcomes of these scenes feel genuinely purposeful and ratcheting in their tension, and not just in the way McQuarrie uses them to turn what used to be the most superfluous parts of these movies – the parts where the heroes stand around looking at a diagram and deliver exposition for the plot – into more

dynamic things where story and character click together. The protagonists are forced to battle their own innermost natures, and the choices and foes they face threaten to destroy all sure sense of gravity, as when Gabriel presents Ethan the prospect of seeing either Ilsa or Grace killed, and Grace is given a shot at gaining all she wants in life at a terrible price. At the same time, McQuarrie, armed with a newly fine and inspired touch with his action directing, decorates the film with levels of freewheeling mayhem and matinee serial-like motion. The film's first major action scene sees Ethan dashing into the desert to aid Ilsa, who's holed up in a ghost town whilst a band of mounted mercenaries attack her. McQuarrie delivers such delights as Ilsa pulling down an eye patch to improve her marksmanship on a colossal sniper rifle, whilst Ethan spins through a sandstorm, the man himself a whirlwind of violence, all filmed by cinematographer Fraser Taggart with looming, swooping lensing. And this scene proves just a relatively throwaway curtain-raiser, touching base with the conviction that any self-respecting epic film needs an interlude of *Lawrence of Arabia*-esque (1962) communion with the desert expanse. More profanely, it also hints that Cruise never quite gave up on the promise in the last images of his most ridiculed recent star vehicle, *The Mummy* (2017).



Klementieff's Paris in particular, a lethally hot, hotly lethal hired gun who grins in delight whilst unleashing utter havoc in contrast to Ethan, Grace, and Ilsa's slyer brand of professionalism, has a quality far closer to the classical ideal of a James Bond movie character than that rival series has dared offer in years. And coming out in the wake of *No Time To Die* (2021) and *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023), two truly dolorous films that made me wish their heroes had died sooner, the expert blend of fun and ferocity found here in feels like a tonic that finally leaves such rival imprimaturs in McQuarrie's wake. Also one has to smirk a little at the idea of producer Cruise contriving to shoot a scene where he gets his head squeezed between Klementieff's thighs. In a fight scene, you filthy-minded perverts. This points to one significantly improved element of this entry – McQuarrie feels newly confident in his action scenes, aiming bigger and scoring the same. The emphasis is more purely on cliffhanger thrills, including a most literal take on that word in the climax where Ethan and Grace dangle above a long drop to quick death in a sequence reminiscent of the best scene in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1996). The film's frenzied highpoint comes a little earlier, however, when Ethan charges pell-mell through the Venetian byways and battles off Paris and another goon, whilst Ilsa intervenes to save Grace from Gabriel, and the two super-assassins face off with blades on a bridge, each relishing the contest as a contest of professional pride as well as of the motives that have brought them to such a time and place.



The extended car chase in Rome, which breaks up into several small, tonally and stylistically varied segments, provide the movie's midsection and offers a marvellous encapsulation of McQuarrie's fresh delight. The usual roundelay of charging down narrow lanes leaving sideswiped cars in the wake is freshened up not just with particularly vigorous shooting and cutting, but aspects of high farce. McQuarrie forces interaction between Ethan and Grace – he has them handcuffed together at one point, *a la* the heroes of *The 39 Steps* (1935) – and Grace, who for all her talents of guile and sleight-of-hand is no swashbuckler is forced to ride out a steep learning curve, as she's not a great driver, so her careening progress through the narrow Roman streets becomes a carnival of destruction. A highly manoeuvrable IMF car provided for operatives proves unexpected in make and hard to control, whilst Paris simply crashes through and over every obstacle in a giant hummer. These ideas help make the sequence distinct from the many interchangeable car chases in that have permeated recent action-thrillers, with McQuarrie's concussive but coherent direction and the expertise of the actors helping augment it all into a symphony of genre filmmaking. In particular, the contrast with the similar Tangiers street chase in *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, as comedy-flecked action staging, that the differences could be worth a semester of film school, particularly as a lesson in how to characterise on the run.



Cruise himself finally betrays signs of slowing down just a little: the compulsory shots of him running pell-mell on a rooftop see him starting to look a bit heavy-footed, even if so much of the film still revolves

around his aura of bulletproof omnicompetence and level of gutsiness that transcends the realm of the mere actor and becomes almost a form of existential challenge, closer to a highwire acrobat's act. As someone once said of William Holden around the time of *The Wild Bunch* (1969), his compensation for any sign of wear and tear is finally showing hints of character: if it was hard to believe the Tom Cruise of the first film back in 1996 would bleed, let alone die, this one actually moves me through the spectacle of his sheer physical grit. McQuarrie even turns Cruise's dedication into a more overt dramatic concern within the film, as Ethan repeatedly promises to Grace that if he sends her into danger, he will put everything on the line to come to her aid. *Dead Reckoning Part One* hasn't been nearly as successful as Cruise's previous *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), but it's vastly superior as a work of filmmaking. The only real fault is that it's a bit long. Some of the potentially exhausting surplus on display here is hinted by the way the opening credits, sporting the latest, dramatic variation on Lalo Schiffrin's eternal theme music (how cool nonetheless that in the context of a blockbuster movie of 2023 I find I still have reason to mention Schiffrin), don't unspool until half-an-hour into the film, which could be a new record. Still, McQuarrie manages to keep his foot on the gas right until the end, so I even enjoyed the excessiveness of it all. Check that: *especially* the excessiveness of it all.



Killers of the Flower Moon (2023)

film.freedonia



Director: Martin Scorsese

Screenwriters: Eric Roth, Martin Scorsese

For all his capacity to make nice with the mainstream when it suited him, and all his latter-day stature as one of the grand old men of American film, Martin Scorsese has never been an entirely comfortable or readily domesticated filmmaker. Indeed, Scorsese's personal definition of an artist, like that of many others, certainly includes the presumption sooner or later they must take the chance of doing something the audience doesn't want to see or hear, to push us into a place we don't want to be, to ask questions we don't particularly want to think over. Scorsese remains challenging in a way that plainly infuriates certain viewpoints on the meaning of cinema. His status, bought with risk-taking, comes with the price of not quite sitting so securely from a vantage on movies as a popular entertainment, or from those wielding an arithmetical approach to the moral and cultural value of art. Scorsese's filmmaking, whilst grown more grave and rigorous in the past decade, still has a vitality that belies his age, galling in the way he still seems to so easily dovetail seemingly warring aesthetics in a way that so many who follow and imitate him can never quite nail. All of that's neither here nor there when it comes to actually adjudging an individual film, where it's only the frames bracketed within the running time of the reel, physical or digital, that actually matters. Supposedly.



The most depressing thing revealed by much contemporary cinema debate nonetheless reveals the degree to which many still really look at art through the prism of the morality play, in both its medieval origins and its Victorian era refinement – the idea that a work of art’s job is to instruct us in how to be good and what being bad looks like, and indeed that the work of art itself must grow from rhetorically untainted soil. Meanwhile Scorsese’s fondness for antiheroes and villains-as-protagonists has undoubtedly meshed in strange ways over the past fifty years with the zeitgeist. Some people identified with the likes of Travis Bickle or Henry Hill or Jordan Belfort, apparently because the films about them didn’t tell us with sufficient firmness that such people are not nice and one should aspire to be like them. Art can of course be moral in outlook, and dramatic art almost always is, on some level; indeed, often most moralistic when indulging portrayal of the most amoral ideas and impulses. Scorsese is in truth a relentless moralist, but also a realist and ironist. Realist in the literary sense, rather than realistic – Scorsese’s cinema has long been plugged into the same realm of magnified, semi-hallucinated reportage of life in the raw as Emile Zola or Fyodor Dostoevsky, struggling constantly with the study of human existence as the coexistence of physical, mental, and spiritual struggle.



Only a moral imbecile, for instance would look at the way Scorsese portrayed Belfort in *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) and think it a portrait of a figure to be emulated, but some did, or, at least, so I am told. Fair enough: even I wasn’t above feeling the seductiveness of what it portrayed, how easy it was to watch

Belfort's antics and figure, well, what the hell, I'd rather be doing that than cleaning toilets for a living. In the flux of existence, transgressive and hedonistic urges might indeed be as worthwhile as saintly ones – a problem Scorsese constantly wrestles with, because he refuses to take the easy way out. Such things are appealing because, well, they're appealing. And that was the entire point of the thing. There are hell of a lot more people who want what Belfort offered than what *Silence* (2016) depicted the suffering and saintly amongst us must contend with. *The Wolf of Wall Street* proved both an apotheosis of and salutary farewell to the finest pitch of Scorsese's bad-boy furore before entering what has seemed like a more meditative and measured late period. *Silence*, *I Heard You Paint Houses* (2019), and *Killers of the Flower Moon* have all revisited particular themes, reflexes, and to a certain extent stories in Scorsese's oeuvre, but reiterated them in a more particularly demanding, deliberating manner. The high modernist bite persisting in Scorsese's touch belies what could be taken otherwise for his transition into a career phase not unlike that of David Lean around the time of *Ryan's Daughter* (1970) – hitting a new pitch of art infused with a leisurely, epic, autumnal sensibility that doesn't obscure how biting and angry about human nature in general his perspective has become, but facing popular rejection and generational incomprehension for things that have little to do with actual achievement or intention. This might only be exacerbated by *Killers of the Flower Moon's* great cost versus its weak box office (notwithstanding the diffusion factored in by being financed by a streaming entity, Apple Original Films), which at this point seems to be an accepted price for anything like artistic ambition and quality in moviemaking.



Killers of the Flower Moon depicts a fascinating, disturbing, deeply galling piece of history – the Osage Nation murders of the early 1920s. Those murders were motivated by the vast wealth that suddenly flowed to the Osage people when the nominally worthless land they'd been shuffled onto by history suddenly proved to contain vast tracts of oil. A ruthless cabal of whites decided to grab as big a chunk of that sudden fortune for themselves as possible through a campaign of targeted conniving, marriage, and assassination that made Shakespeare's Richard III or Robert Graves' Livia look like dainty amateurs. The intermediary source is David Grann's 2017 non-fiction book on the murders, whilst the title for both that book and the film comes from a poem written by Osage writer Elise Paschen. One of the more unexpected touchstones for the now-aging ranks of the cadre once dubbed the "Movie Brats" has proven to be Mervyn Le Roy's *The FBI Story* (1959). A slick and colourful film made with the close cooperation of J. Edgar Hoover, who reportedly compiled one of his infamous dirt files on Le Roy to keep him on a tight leash, *The FBI Story* condensed, in story and stylistic terms, a generation's worth of other crime-themed movies, and, in historical terms, the actual cases that helped build the FBI's reputation. Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies* (2015) expanded on the spying case that provided Le Roy's film with its climactic episode. Now *Killers of the Flower Moon* sees Scorsese also expanding on a portion dealt with in that film in with a string of

murders of members of the Osage nation in rural Oklahoma – although technically it was the Bureau’s precursor, the Bureau of Investigation, which tackled the crimes.



The differences in treatment are notable. Le Roy’s film, which charted the history of modern, maturing American through the lens of the FBI’s simultaneous fruition, began its episode dealing with the Osage killings in jokey fashion, noting the amusing excesses of the suddenly enriched Osage, like one man who had a personal telephone exchange installed in his house. That kind of jocular, patronising attitude dates the film, as do other aspects. But the tricky quality of judging such a film too quickly on that count lies in the way Le Roy’s work feels strongly rooted in the soil of the time: it’s a work of nostalgic filmmaking in a manner we’re far more familiar with today, casting its mind back along about a forty-year arc like most such movies do, contemplating the social shifts of the US as well as the advance of procedural investigation, evincing an interest in the past but also a sense of its necessity as a path to the present. Whereas *Killers of the Flower Moon*, whilst casting its eye back to the same moment in time, betrays a present tense groaning with a sense of futility and pain and disillusionment. *The FBI Story* was itself the cinematic offshoot of an already-established approach to mythologising the FBI’s stature via media dramatization, with *The Lucky Strike Hour*, a radio show having dramatized cases including the Osage murders since the 1930s.



Killers of the Flower Moon closes the loop by ending with a pitch-perfect burlesque of the radio show, utilised to offer an epilogue for the drama in a more unusual manner than the usual title cards saying who did what next, as well as by implication offering a sly and moving critique of what all such life-into-art transmutations risk. The current, vast cult of true crime documentaries and dramatizations across many media forms, including podcasting as the modern equivalent of that kind of radio show, owes much to the way Scorsese and generational fellow Francis Ford Coppola brought the old template of the gangland thriller up to date and crossbred it with the nonfiction bestseller breed. Scorsese opens *Killers of the Flower Moon* with a rite of mourning and accounting for the Osage, who have been forced from territory to territory with the advance of the colonising project before coming to a reservation in Oklahoma that seems unfruitful, but which they've decided to defend as a last redoubt. The discovery of oil on the land is visualised as an eruption from the earth that coats young men in black ooze as they gyrate in ecstasies, as if engaged in a rite at once primeval but also entirely novel, communing with the stuff of the earth giving up its bounty with what could be seen as ironic randomness or some sort of cosmic reapportioning of justice. Both interpretations are mooted during the film, with many seeing the sudden, astounding wealth of the Osage people as inherently absurd and unfair, and by them as a gift that will inevitably come with twinned edges. A fake newsreel lays out the result, with the Osage, now the richest people per capita on Earth, flaunting their wealth in ironic inversion of the usual presumed relationship of such people to the larger populace, dripping with jewels and ferried about by chauffeurs.



At least, that's the headline version. In reality many of the Osage linger under appointed state-appointed guardians in case they've been declared incompetent for some reason or another, including Mollie Kyle (Lily Gladstone), who, along with sisters Minnie (Jillian Dion) and Anna (Cara Jade Myers), and cousin Reta (Ja'Nae Collins), is one of the major beneficiaries of the oil wealth, but has to patiently face up to her guardian, Pitts Beaty (Gene Jones), to ask for cash. Scorsese contrasts the storytelling of the newsreel with its visions of jaunty wealth with a cold montage of Osage people laid out dead, having all succumbed to some illness, and one young woman found dead in a river, all left uninvestigated. This litany is punctuated by a more overt and startling moment of violence as a young Osage woman is gunned down on her front lawn by her husband as she wheels her baby in a pram, before the scene is made to look, at least cursorily, like a suicide. Here Scorsese sets in motion a sense of history laid out on two levels – the newsreel's depiction of merry communality and ironic good fortune, the stratum of media reality and popular lore, giving way to something more personal, tragic, the cold précis of a ledger of intimate reckoning, with Gladstone's Mollie reciting the names of the dead. This montage is followed in turn by Mollie visiting her guardian, who happens to have a picture of a mounted Ku Klux Klansman in heroic posture hanging on his office wall, having to describe herself as "incompetent." Lily puts up with Beaty's paternalistic authority

with a slight, indulgent smile, treating it as just another of life's absurdities, but much later on a return visit that slight smirk gives way to hollow recitation in a situation that kills the soul long before it kills the body.



Leonardo DiCaprio, in his sixth collaboration with Scorsese, plays Ernest Burkhart, just returned from the Great War where he served as a cook and weathered a ruptured stomach. He travels to Oklahoma to a welcoming hearth: his uncle William King Hale (Robert De Niro, in his tenth) is a prosperous cattle rancher who lives cheek-by-jowl with the Osage and is a local eminence, bridging communities and trusted by all. His uncle, who cajoles him into calling him King, also quizzes Ernest with purpose, vetting him for incorporation into his unfolding project of marrying his family fortunes to the Osage: Ernest's brother Byron (Scott Shepherd) is already working for him. Scorsese surveys the environs of the Hale ranch with an eye evoking the homesteads of *Giant* (1956) and *Days of Heaven* (1978), the house eloquent of the pretences of transplanted Victoriana amidst the rolling hills and pastoral recline. All three films are built around questioning that kind of stately pretence plonked down amidst the nominal freedom of the range, if with varying degrees of sharpness, with the implications of exterior and interior, outsider and insider, concepts charged with rigidity and yet constantly in flux on the landscape. Oklahoma, the land of *Cimarron* and Rodgers and Hammerstein's folksy fancies. And the Tulsa Massacre, an event contemporary with the killings, bespeaking the reality of social contest and fulminating jealousy infecting a heartland state in the decades after the frontier's closing.



Hale's carefully leading questions directed on Ernest establish his proclivities and general suitability for the role he has in mind for him, which he nudges him towards by giving him a job as a taxi driver for Osage personages, including, most fatefully, Mollie. The streets of Fairfax, the largest town in the county, have become a thrumming space packed with labourers, opportunists, and sundry blow-ins all looking for a slice of the prosperity, the luckiest recipients of which expend it on whims like staging car races up and down the unpaved main drag. DiCaprio plays Ernest with his familiarly handsome mug ruined by his character's habits of discomforted bewilderment, his mouth usually pulled into a bowed rut reminiscent of an expressionist horror movie golem or Edgar G. Ulmer's *Man From Planet X* (1951). Ernest only starts to bloom with anything like levity and charisma when he sets about trying to charm Mollie, whilst Mollie gently teases Ernest with Osage epithets, including labelling him a coyote. This connection between the two enables at least two concurrent projects: whilst Ernest is prodded towards romancing Mollie with a definite purpose to marriage by his uncle, and the chemistry they have is felicitous towards that end, Mollie knows well Ernest wants her money, but accepts that as par for the course.



What she wants from him, beyond simply latching on to a good-looking man, isn't stated, but is hinted. At one point in their courtship Mollie gifts Ernest a huge Stetson hat, a gesture at once touched with a hint of the ridiculous, as Ernest hardly seems the tall-in-the-saddle type, but also riven with encoded desire and ambition. Mollie tries to recreate Ernest in the image of the man she would like him to be, and what the culture around them would have him be, the image of the upright cowboy in both the personal sense, the strong and noble pretence, and something more practical and bound up with what Mollie and her many sisters want – marriages to white men, with all the advantages in assumed status and hoped-for protection that can bring. With, of course, the lurking, wicked corollary that this ambition instead gives Hale inroads to his own project of slowly but surely killing off everyone standing between him and a great fortune. Ernest's romancing of Mollie ironically echoes the other, darker project, as a human ritual laced with small flourishes and signals, little give-and-takes, implications and minute power exchanges, albeit in this realm expressed in shows of affection and proofs of intent, where Ernest's job is to keep nimble in the face of Mollie's amused cynicism as she prods him, interested to see how he will react.



The key moment of the courtship is an extended interlude in Mollie's kitchen where the two share a passion for good whiskey and Mollie encourages Ernest to be silent and honour and enjoy the sound of a storm raging outside, rain falling upon the land and the roof. A moment laced with intimations of the sublime, with Mollie trying to sensitise the perpetually ill-at-ease Ernest to the natural world that's vital to her and her fellow Osage. Earlier, during his briefing sessions with his uncle, Hale warns Ernest about the tendency of outsiders to ramble on in the face of the Osages' taciturn temperament, in what the Osage call "blackbird talk," a warning that here gives way to Mollie's solicitude in teaching Ernest the value of quiet, but also ironically sets up, much later, the methodology of the law enforcers who swoop upon Ernest. The falling rain is also eloquent of a drama that's written in elements, rhyming with the oil spurting from the earth and, later, the fire and blood unleashed upon it.



Scorsese's cinema has long played intricate games with genre, often cross-hatching the familiar templates of commercial film with the intricate messiness of real-life narratives, playing his own cinephilia off against his sense of the actual and authentic, a concern tackled most overtly in the clash of lush artifice and shambolic realism in *New York, New York* (1977). *Killers of the Flower Moon* extends this sense of fruitful tension most notably in its peculiar coda, whilst the rest of the film plays out on a generic and thematic faultline. The essential conceit of *Killers of the Flower Moon* is that whilst the setting is that of a Western, the film itself is another Scorsesean gangster movie, following a similar template to *Goodfellas* (1990) in

tracking the fate of a young and deluded goon drawn into a criminal enterprise, imagining himself to be on a path to the good life, but who finally faces up to the shell that is his life and pays for it in perpetual exile from what small paradise he had. As a portrait of the agonies of marriage it's a muted follow-up to *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Casino* (1995), charting an arc that is nonetheless also about losing a version of Eden through obeisance to darker masters. What's most unexpected however is that out of Scorsese's other films the one it feels like on a deeper level is *The Age of Innocence* (1993), as a clammily intense portrait of love as a cross to be nailed to, a tale in which Mollie is at once tragic heroine and sacrificial lamb. As a follow-up to *I Heard You Paint Houses*, *Killers of the Flower Moon* enlarges on its concerns, particularly the march towards an endpoint of reaping what one sows.



Scorsese stages Ernest and Mollie's wedding as, on the face of it, an idyllic display of fertile personal and cultural fusion and a display of the American ideal, the rites of the Osage and those of the whites in harmony, the music and dancing capturing even people we will later learn are unconscionable thugs in seemingly joyous celebration. Ernest and Mollie reel in giddy joy. Hale stalks through the crowd to console Minnie, nominally a venture of amity but one that makes him seem as focused as the shark in *Jaws* (1975) on prey. Minnie is married to the quietly decent and canny Bill Smith (Jason Isbell) but is feeling ill and haggard: Hale promises Minnie medical aid and anything else she needs, before performing an Osage invocation for her, displaying his prowess with both the nation's language and ritual, as Scorsese's camera swoops up and back from the curious display and surveys the celebration in full swing. Hale personifies the two-faced aspect of the scene with his affectations of playing the multicultural patriarch, stepping between expressive modes and playing the ideal neighbour. It would be fair to say that Hale is an Olympic-level virtue signaller and hypocrite, the kind who's mastered Osage custom purely to grant himself leverage, a man who knows how to project a veneer of folksy feeling whilst concealing a soul that surely looks like Goya's painting of Saturn eating his children. But De Niro's performance invests Hale's act with another level of implication, hinting at the way Hale sees himself with however many layers of deception applied to both self and others, as both midwife and officiating priest for the transfer of civilisations, offering the Osage up as sacrifices to his own particular god, which could be called mammon, or empire, or progress, or all of them wrapped into a holistic bundle. Hale appoints himself overseer of the Osage's fate, which he expresses through good works, but also claims a direct right to trim the branches and make himself the stem.



This quality of Hale's is later inverted in a scene that sees the mask that conceals the true dynamics of power and control slip properly for the first time. Hale summons Ernest to the Fairfax Masonic Lodge to chastise him for his more foolish dealings which threaten to bring the attention of the law a little too close to the working parts of Hale's project: Hale makes Ernest prostrate himself on a lectern and beats him with a paddle as punishment for his blundering, a spectacle of raw domination and humiliation painted with hues of evil comedy. Otherwise Hale talks in obscuring terms in regard to drawing Ernest along with his plot for much of the early phase, utilising phraseology like "That's something a man can work with." Hale's ruthless insight sees the potential even in the fact that Anna carries a gun for self-protection, nominally making her a tougher customer, as another potential method to clear the path as "One day she's gonna pick a fight with the wrong person." The festive togetherness of the wedding segues more immediately into a scene highlighting the thorny commingling of social, sexual, and familial dynamics, as Mollie and her sisters and their various boyfriends, husbands, and relatives gather in what seems on the surface like a humming hive but where the various strands of unease are very quickly pulled taut, from racist elders sitting in glum quietude until slight provocation draws out cries of "Savages! Savages!", and a boozed-up Anna is easily infuriated when her beau Byron resists being claimed as her man and instead makes a show of flirting with a younger girl, sparking Anna to pure rage. Meanwhile the girls' mother, Lizzie (Tantoo Cardinal), lingers in an undefined state of sickliness, still bestowing maternal love on her offspring whilst holding aloof from the outsiders who move through her life. Lizzie perceives the imminence of her death in the form of a hallucinated owl that struts into her bedroom and caws. Shortly afterwards, Anna is found dead, shot in the head and left to decompose in a gully.



Killers of the Flower Moon is a film preoccupied by death, not simply in depicting murder for profit but in a more pervasively, spiritually angst-ridden fashion. Evidently Scorsese is starting to feel the weight of the years, and it's a concern he invests as deeply here as he did in *I Heard You Paint Houses*, but with different emphases. He returns to the ecumenical reflexes he previously exercised in *Kundun* (1997), a film he echoes in the film's opening and closing, seeking out the spiritual expression of the Osage as a counterpoint to the crime and mayhem. The owl Lizzie envisions is a harbinger of death in her culture that is ironically something palpably alive and strangely beautiful: later Mollie glimpses the owl when she too starts to drift on the outer shoals of life. The owl is something that comes with promise in that fierce liveliness, however, a promise reiterated when Lizzie expires and has a vision of elders visiting and leading her off into pastures beyond. Such visions portend death as a relief from the sweltering straits of being alive when you're a member of an assailed nation. The spiritual life of the Osage is fertile and vital, for all the battering they've taken: Mollie making Ernest listen to the storm and respect its force contains an element of worship; later, in a wry aside, Ernest, who's claimed he's Catholic, makes a mistaken gesture when he goes to church with Mollie at the Catholic church many of the other Osage belong to without any apparent tension with their more traditional faiths, both of which Ernest remains largely oblivious to.



Ernest's genuine affection for Mollie and the children he has with her never impedes his greedier impulses, which he works out by participating in nocturnal robberies of cashed-up Osage and arranging frauds with

an assortment of local chancers, losers, and petty criminals, including Byron and Blackie Thompson (Tommy Schultz), who Ernest arranges with to steal his car to claim insurance money on, only for Blackie to get caught and locked away for the theft. This is the misbegotten scheme that brings down Hale's wrath on Ernest when he gets wind of it, because Hale wanted Ernest to commission Blackie and others into helping with some killings where the slower, subtler methods aren't possible. Particularly galling to Hale is the way Bill Smith, after Minnie's death, marries Reta and so remains a major impediment to the oil rights coming into Ernest's hands, not just in terms of legal succession but because he has a growing inkling of what Hale and clan are up to. The felicity of killing both at the same time drives Hale and Ernest to track down explosives expert and thief Acie Kirby (Pete Yorn), and commission him to blow up the house Bill and Reta share. Hale also has his eyes on collecting the insurance he's taken out on his friend and neighbour Henry Roan (William Belleau), an Osage man who's inclined to depression and was once married to Mollie in a tribal ceremony when they were teenagers. Making sure Henry doesn't kill himself before the policy comes due and then arranging his timely end is a fine art Hale charges Ernest with, perhaps counting on the faint flickers of jealousy the news about their marriage stirs as well as threatening his inheritance. Ernest hires John Ramsey (Ty Mitchell), a wanted criminal reduced to working at a moonshine still, to get close to Henry and then shoot him in a way that will look like suicide, but Ramsey instead shoots Henry in the back of the head and sticks Ernest with the gun.



The villainy in *Killers of the Flower Moon* isn't as spectacular as, say, the orgiastic climes of self-indulgence glimpsed in *Casino* or *The Wolf of Wall Street*, largely because the fortune in play remains a goal that never quite arrives for the conspirators, any more than it does for the "incompetent" Osage, which is why Ernest has to satisfy his urges with his robberies and subsequent sessions of frenzied gambling and drinking, scenes of dissolution that are more pathetic than passages of a great sinner. These killers are a bunch of half-smart – and often not that much – thugs and pirates living on the fringe of a state that's replete with chaotic communities and drifting populaces, operating at a safe distance from Hale, who deploys Ernest as his agent and sometimes counts upon, or gets lucky in regards to, Ernest's sense of personal antagonism with Henry Roan, as a supposed rival, and with Bill Smith, who is the man Ernest would like to be thought of, the decent interlocutor between white and Osage communities, which helps Ernest overcome any qualms about seeking their deaths. Meanwhile Hale, as one of his charitable good works, arranges for Mollie, who is diabetic, to receive doses of the new-fangled medicine called insulin: two local doctors who are also brothers, James (Steve Witting) and David Shoun (Steve Routman), give Mollie her doses. Not at all coincidentally, the Shouns also performed a clumsy and inconclusive autopsy on Anna. Eventually, as Mollie's health starts to fail, she insists on Ernest alone collecting her insulin doses from the train. She also makes a play to find out what's going on by hiring a private detective, Bill Burns (Gary Basaraba), only for

him to seemingly vanish, Mollie unaware that Ernest and Byron beat him up and ran him out of town, whilst another representative the Osage commissioned was knifed to death in the street.



Killers of the Flower Moon extends the great overarching themes of Scorsese's oeuvre, of which not least is the thesis that American history is particularly rich in gangster stories not just because of the common genre theme that organised crime can be taken as merely a particularly refined version of capitalism, but because the country itself has roots in gangs – knots of clannish identity and conspiracies seeking enrichment by any means necessary, with something like true order and just authority only slowly gaining form and often painfully imposed. *Gangs of New York* (2002) dramatized that idea in the most immediate and literal manner. *Killers of the Flower Moon* also presents a partial, deeply ironic inversion of the depiction in *Silence* of people contending with being immersed in an alien place and culture and forced to abide by new ways whilst trying to hold on to a sliver of private identity, with the Jesuit Portuguese in that film swapped for the Osage. Henry Roan, perhaps the most perfectly tragic figure in the film, is beset by what he describes as melancholy as he moves through life with an affect of bland neighbourliness hiding deep lodes of anger and shame he's driven first to act out with fists on the butcher, Roy Bunch (Joey Oglesby), he thinks is having an affair with his wife, and on his own person, with liquor and suicide attempts. Hale's act of false fellowship and empathic counsel is at its most appalling with Henry, and he notes to Ernest whilst pointing at Henry's knocked-out-loaded body prostrate on the floor of his parlour, "I take care of him because he's my neighbour and my best friend," before amending this to a more precise summary, "That's twenty-five thousand dollars laying there."



Killers of the Flower Moon also arcs back, through the choice of period, to a place close to where Scorsese started with *Boxcar Bertha* (1971), in the milieu of a backroad-and-byroad Americana, the “old, weird America” when it was a rough and ready place where the raucous liveliness was part and parcel with its darker boles of cruelty and iniquity. A haunted wonderland with relics like sepia-tint photos of men posing on tinsel moons, tacked-together automobiles with shiny brass carving a path up dusty streets, labouring oil wells churning up money, Osage people coming to get married in splendid regalia, blues warblers infusing sullen evenings, and silent Westerns skittering upon movie screens. As he touched on in the opening of *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974) and again in *New York, New York* and *The Aviator* (2004), Scorsese finds in this era roots for the whole modern infrastructure of American dreaming, growing out of sullied soil. One of Scorsese's slyer flourishes throughout comes in casting musicians like Isbell, Yorn, and Sturgill Simpson, a neorealist-like touch with an eye to capturing some aspect of authenticity, being used to performance but not acting, the raw stuff of Americana locked in their strong, interesting but non-Hollywood features. In some ways *Killers of the Flower Moon* could be in fact described as a feature-length extrapolation of the tragic finale of *Boxcar Bertha*, which saw its radical hero nailed Christ-like to a boxcar, a sacrifice to power and greed, and a scene that declared, in Scorsese's cinema, the death of such heroes – from then on he looked for the avatars of profane humanity caught between yearnings for whatever form of transcendence they understand and dark temptations, usually suffering from their incapacity to tell those things apart.



Mollie is the most obvious avatar for the Christ-like figure, betrayed and suffering at the hands of the unrighteous, where Ernest is an avatar for Judas, squirming as he reaps the fruits of his treachery, which eventually includes losing a child to illness and his marriage, when he fatefully declines the chance to fully and truly purge himself of his wrongdoing, an act linked to the Catholic idea of confession as well as legal and emotional concepts of it. Isbell and DiCaprio share another of the film's more quietly vital scenes as Bob and Ernest face off after an apparently convivial dinner for the sisters' sakes, Bob unveiling his contempt for Ernest and prodding Ernest to drop his own dissembling, with Bob positing, "You aim to kill me – or is that your big brother's job?" Soon after, at Hale's urging, Ernest gets down to arranging for Acie to blow up Bob and Reta's house. The thunderous blast shatters the windows of Mollie and Ernest's house and stirs the neighbourhood to a frantic rescue effort in the chaotic rubble of the couple's home: a mangled Bob screaming out for someone to shoot him contrasts the uncanny sight of Reta seemingly laid out untouched on a piece of undamaged flooring, only for the back of her head to prove missing when a rescuer lays hands on her. This act of pure terrorism drives Mollie and a deputation of Osage leaders to Washington to beg for some sort of federal intervention, which does finally arrive in the form of a brace of BOI agents led by Tom White (Jesse Plemons), whose knock on the door one day seriously rattles Ernest.



One could be a little sceptical that *Killers of the Flower Moon* in both length, at three-and-a-half hours, and cost seems closer to something like *Ben-Hur* (1959) than the kinds of ruthlessly pruned and shaped noir films Scorsese evokes – one could note that Anthony Mann, with *Border Incident* (1949), and John Sturges, with *Bad Day At Black Rock* (1955), knocked over similarly barbed portraits of racism and crime in much less than half the time. Scorsese certainly has tapped the prestige hunger of the nascent streaming services for all they're worth, and more power to him. Nonetheless, *Killers of the Flower Moon* articulates a certainty that the devil really does lie in the details, and the complexities of the story being told, which keeps twisting in startling directions even when the hammer of the law finally seems poised to come down on the conspiracy. *Killers of the Flower Moon* still comes with displays of Scorsese and constant collaborator Thelma Schoonmaker's, familiar, thrilling editing work. The allure of stolen goods and acts of piracy for Ernest and his confederates is registered in stroboscopic cuts, delivered as brief respites from the otherwise mercilessly measured pacing in a manner that mimics the occasional flashes of relieving spiritual vision, but, ironically, without the same lingering substance: all wealth, all enrichment, passes through the gullet of the style in brief spasms. Robbie Robertson's final score for Scorsese before his sad passing provides sinew for the drama with its quietly propulsive, pulsing method. The intricacy of style is its own justification but is also wound tightly with the thematic concerns, even if perhaps it might still have benefited from a little simplifying here and there, especially considering that it's not a docudrama despite solid roots in Grann's book (Ernest, for instance, didn't serve in World War I), and some of the secondary

characters are brusquely introduced only to prove important later in proceedings. But that's such a weak criticism I feel dull making it. Just about the only false note in the film's period detail comes when one of the Osage elders drops the word "genocide" in an anachronistic manner, an awkward sop to contemporary discourse. But the scene around this is valuable as it offers a practically unmediated window into the actuality of Osage voices.



Plemmons brings a subtle shift in the gravity of the film when he enters it without displacing the core drama, playing in White a law enforcer who's still reasonably young and forthright, but who already suggests lodes of witnessed evil that's left him with no illusions whatsoever about human nature. Much of *Killers of the Flower Moon's* last third depicts the sheer difficulty of getting convictions in such a case: spotting the men behind the murder plot isn't that hard – anyone who's ever read a detective novel could spot where the streams of income are all being channelled with the many deaths – but chipping away at the various personnel involved demands carefully applied pressure. Hale tries to cover his tracks with expert gangland art, by arranging for the death of Acie and trying to kill off another minion, Kelsie Morrison (Louis Cancelmi), a lanky dipshit who at one point proposes adopting two part-Osage children only for his lawyer to comment it sounds like he's planning to murder them, and who instead gets captured after gunning down a cop. (I was struck by some similarity to the figure of 'King' Hale to King Cutler in Cecil B. DeMille's *Reap The Wild Wind* (1942), also a scheming potentate specialising in murder and conspiracy – Scorsese surely knows the film well enough, but I also wondered if the characterisation in that film, complete with the name, was influenced by the echoing cultural memory of the case.) White's fellow agents hover around the county undercover, with one posing as an insurance agent who writes policies for Hale, another a Native American, John Wren (Tatanka Means), who makes connections around the locality.



Despite this the narrative pointedly avoids becoming a standard investigation tale, as the agents hover around the edges of the conspiracy. At one point White peers on during a charged moment between Hale and Ernest as the former presses the latter to sign a document that will ensure the rights that have devolved upon Mollie and him will go to Hale if he dies, effectively giving his uncle power of life and death over them both. White is oblivious to the material of their talk but readily perceives the import of it. This scene again sees the communication by inference in play, from two different sources. The film's few moments of anything like heroism are indeed moments from characters who cease dissembling, including Bob's earlier provocation of Ernest, and the moment when Bunch refuses to heed Hale's "friendly word," actually an attempt to manipulate him into fleeing and thus look guilty of Henry's murder, telling him bluntly, "You're not my friend – take my chances in Fairfax." Despite such momentary salves, the governing principle of the film remains the way it forces the viewer to cohabit with Ernest in all his cringing, spineless pathos.



Mollie, who is nobody's fool and repeatedly takes self-mortifying steps to try and get something done about the epidemic of death hitting her people, is eventually immobilised and sidelined as the Shoun brothers, with Hale's backing, give Ernest a vial of an obscure drug to add to Mollie's insulin, "To slow her down." Mollie's very flesh becomes a weapon used against her, a weight to sink her with, reality losing shape to the point where when Hale comes to visit her she's not sure if he's real or a conjuration of her imagining. Through all the mounting casualties of *Killers of the Flower Moon*, the main source of tension is whether or

not Mollie will survive her ordeal, played however not as a source of suspense and more as a kind of physical and spiritual wrestling much with existential dread refined to a pure elixir. Thankfully, Mollie is eventually found in her house close to death by Wren and another agent, who rush her to a hospital, and is quickly returned to health. Gladstone had a difficult task in inhabiting Mollie, the innocent in the drama who does nothing to invite such torment: it would have been easy to offer her up as a hapless naïf or walking, talking symbol, but Gladstone helps give her substance far beyond that with her shows of sly humour and loving, mixed with a coolly self-sufficient equanimity at the outset, quelled by abyssal grief and then physical degradation.



Scorsese's filmmaking – working with production designer Jack Fisk, and cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto – makes the most of the film's large budget: every image glows with subtle, rigorous craftsmanship and expressive intent. The film nonetheless loses something in moving from big screen to the small, not in terms of the expansive visual aspects but rather in the sense of intimacy, of the drama of both body and soul registering on the sodden skin and hollowed eyes of Mollie and the ever-deepening ruts that mimic facial features on Ernest. Perhaps the film's best scene, and a highpoint of Scorsese's career as a manipulator of cinematic effect, comes at one of the subtler dramatic junctures, but one that Scorsese and his collaborators turns into a small aria of visual and aural expression. The BOI agents, gathered for a nocturnal meeting on a hillside close to Hale's property, see fires blazing and realise that Hale is burning his fields out, his ranch hands working to keep the fires sustained and consuming. The spectacle at first sparks a wry realisation from the fake insurance agent, as he realises Hale intends to claim the fire insurance policy he filed with him. Meanwhile Ernest and Mollie, in their neighbouring house, see the fire as shimmering, infernal shades cast on the windows – Schoonmaker cuts from the prostrate and haggard Mollie to her view of the firelight and then to Ernest gazing out, subtly distinguishing the meaning of the menacing spectacle for each of them, before shifting to hallucinatory visions of the working ranch hands amidst the licking, swirling fire. All scored to Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground," a vintage blues number that, in its surreally slipping textures, artful and purely expressive of its era but also escaping it, otherworldly and primal.



This scene again recalls *Days of Heaven* where a crucial story pivot occurred during a brushfire around the homestead, but where that scene was highly dramatic, Scorsese and team wring this version for different effect – rather this is a season in hell. The essential idea, that the characters realise they’re lingering in a perdition of their own founding, is easily grasped, even obvious. But the illustration of it wrings it for transformative epiphanies – the shift from a hint of comedy to an invocation of the truly nightmarish, the weaving of the visuals and music creating a poetic register invoking a past time but making not just the period atmosphere but the moral and emotional climes utterly palpable. It is also the sequel and inversion of the earlier scene of the couple listening to the rain, the exchange of elements containing its own meaning – what Mollie offered Ernest was inextricable from the life-giving natural bounty, where Hale extracts every morsel of life with fire and leaves only a desert. Ernest elects this moment to try the additive he puts in Mollie’s insulin on himself, pouring some in his whiskey and sinking in hazy fever sweats. The nadir of the drama, for in the next scene the BOI agents swoop on Ernest as he sits in a local pool hall and bustle him away for a long session of interrogation, where Ernest finds blackbird talk hard to hold off.



Even when White and crew move on Ernest and others in the gang, the drama becomes no less tangled, no less exhausting in the squirming and stymieing, partly thanks to the formidable lawyer Hale hires, W. S. Hamilton (Brendan Fraser). Hamilton manages to suddenly divert the first attempt to get Ernest to testify in court with a calculated show of theatrics, and later Ernest, after being briefly delivered from the law’s

clutches, is brought before the grandees of the white community of the Fairfax district. This proves a subtler but no less intimidating and humiliating experience for Ernest than his uncle's beating of him, as Hamilton and others browbeat him into not only showing his communal and family loyalty but also convincing him to say that he was "tortured" into a false confession. Ernest ultimately faces the choice of which of his families to save, and after his infant daughter dies from an illness he finally turns against Hale because now he wants to be home with Mollie and his other kids, cueing a confrontation between the two men through prison bars laced with new dimensions of veiled threat and fresh resistance. But the process of exposing the reality of the crimes, including the testimony of Ernest and others, sees ambiguity turn to hard fact, leading to the final confrontation of Ernest and Mollie. As in *I Heard You Paint Houses*, the ultimate act of repudiation and devastating moral judgement comes from a woman, with Ernest left to blink bewilderedly at just how quickly he went from being a man with a personal mythology of protecting his family to a doomed exile and imminent jailbird.



The coda finally leaves behind the personal drama behind in an ingenious way that also returns to the early motif of rival ways of remembering and narratives, as Scorsese shifts into his recreation of the *Lucky Strike Hour* episode, tweaked to deliver a more general kind of postscript informing the film audience what happened afterwards. Scorsese depicts the staging such a show, with sound effects created live and actors switching between character voices, with a sense of both the inherent humour value in seeing what's only supposed to be heard and the dated brand of hype it extols, and also some admiration in the crispness of the storytelling. Underlying this, a cool regard for the tension between this form of instantly mythologised reportage and the story as it's been portrayed in the film before it, the transmutation of messy, agonising history into a simple morality play littered with archetypes. Justice itself offers mixed solace, given that neither Hale nor Ernest died in jail, although both seem to have finished up as pathetic remnants, particularly Ernest who ended his days broke and living with his brother.



Scorsese saves the most considered blow as he himself, in the guise of the radio show's producer, steps forward to read out the funeral notice for Mollie who despite all succumbed to her diabetes in 1937, her role in the drama of the murders unmentioned for whatever reason. That Scorsese performs this gesture himself amounts to noting that all this too is only another angle on a past, returning to narratives and histories that are twinned but never quite meeting, the mass media mythos and the legacy of violent crime still felt by a community, leading in different directions. The last shot offers a stunning antistrophe by shifting to another way of remembering and reckoning, an Osage memorial ceremony filmed in a superlative crane shot that rises and rises until the ceremony is beheld as a swirl of geometry. Here Scorsese harks back to the quasi-abstract reflexes in *Kundun*, and with the same aim – to try and visualise a sense of cultural and religious balance, expressed in visual geometry. It is, at once, a rite of mourning, and a proof of endurance. *Killers of the Flower Moon* meditates on James Joyce's famous line from *Ulysses* when he commented that history is the nightmare from we are trying to awake, and offering a codicil: one should not mistake awakening for a chance to forget.