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# LONG LIVE!

Les Blank's *Always for Pleasure*

by JULIAN NEBREDA-  
BELLO

illustration by  
DANIELLE STOLZ

LES BLANK'S 1978 DOCUMENTARY, *ALWAYS FOR Pleasure*, opens with a shot of an intersection in an industrial neighborhood of New Orleans. A train in the distance chimes its bell while the camera focuses on a street sign above: "Tchoupitoulas." From these images, the film cuts to footage of rusted ships moving down the Mississippi, and then to the more familiar footage of parades and dances along Bourbon Street as the film's score switches to upbeat jazz. Despite how strange the sequence might seem, the jump is not at all jarring. The industrial images that start Les Blank's film are far from what one would expect from a documentary portrait of New Orleans during Mardi Gras. However, Blank's editing gives this first sequence a poetic kind of logic that informs the relationships shown on screen and gives them coherence. The movement of industry by train and then by river is made analogous to that of people. Like the waters of the wide Mississippi, the crowd dancing and shuffling down the streets of New Orleans' French quarter seems unending. Like the boats moving down the river, each individual seems caught in a natural flow that cannot be stopped.

Already in this first minute, *Always for Pleasure* demonstrates the signature qualities of Les Blank's filmmaking. Like Blank's other documentary work, which captured distinct American cultures during the '60s and '70s, *Always for Pleasure* manages to deconstruct documentary techniques with experimental and poetic arrangements while



also achieving a conventional goal of documentaries that few others do as adeptly—to capture life like a time capsule. The subjects in Blank's films are allowed to breathe, talk and dance without feeling sensationalized, overdramatized, or detachedly ironic. The films do not attempt to string together a narrative, or even convey a particular message. Their singular energy is summed up in a phrase which repeatedly appears in Blank's films from this period in hand-painted subtitles: "When you're dead, you're gone. Long live the living!" If there is one thing that takes center stage in these films, it is the sights, sounds and movements of life itself.

During his early period, Les Blank made films on a number of different subjects. His most enduring legacy is a series of films on legendary folk and blues artists like Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb and Sonny Rhodes, some of them being the only record of these ephemeral musicians on film. His other projects during this time include a documentary about the shooting of Werner Herzog's Amazonian jungle epic, *Fitzcarraldo*, a documentary on garlic, and a film about gap-toothed women titled simply "Gap-Toothed Women." This diverse oeuvre has the constancy of Blank's attentive and respectful vision. Whether in the dance hall of a garlic-obsessed Spaniard, or talking to Herzog during a trip along an Amazonian river, Les Blank's films convey a sense of openness and honesty towards their subjects. One isn't meant to laugh or gawk at those on screen, but simply to observe.

Life takes on a literal presence in Blank's portrait of New Orleans. The second sequence of the film is from

a "jazz funeral." The tradition, still practiced today, is a funerary celebration for prominent people in New Orleans' African-American community. The body of the deceased is taken through the streets to the funeral home with a slow march, accompanied by somber spirituals like "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." From the funeral home to the body's final resting place, the event changes its rhythm. A brass band is brought together, playing upbeat numbers. All are welcome to join the parade behind the casket, marching, dancing, drinking and singing all the way to the cemetery. The tradition is a specimen of New Orleans culture as Les Blank seeks to capture it. Even in death, life is celebrated. A person dancing, caught on the street, explains the phenomenon in clear terms: "When I leave this face of the earth I want a little band behind me, and my friends having a nice time seeing me leave this place. But I'm living now, and I'm not going to wait til I'm in the ground and laid out to have a nice time on the street." This celebratory attitude sums up the entire film's philosophy.

The film moves from this Jazz funeral sequence to footage from a number of different parades throughout the city. The footage is intercut with performances by famed New Orleans musicians—Professor Longhair, The Wild Tchoupitoulas, The Neville Brothers and others. The diegetic music of these sequences forms the soundtrack of the film. Footage from different block parties and parades shows people of all ages dancing, singing and playing music in New Orleans' streets while drinking cans of Miller High Life and Bud Light. Les Blank captures the joy of New Orleans' street life with an intimacy

that does not look at the subject from a distance, but instead immerses itself in its world. The moving handheld camera conveys the feeling of being in the midst of the parades themselves. The film cuts quickly between shots of different party goers, as if to emulate the excited, disoriented gaze of someone there for the first time. Brief but illuminating interviews with people on the street punctuate the scenes of marching. One man, looking down on the parade below, offers his own view of New Orleans' lifestyle: "Look at that, people drinking beer out on the street, throwing beers on the sidewalk. They call it the city that care forgot. It's probably one of the last cities in America where you can feel free to live."

Part of what makes *Always for Pleasure* such a vibrant portrait of New Orleans is Blank's ability to capture distinct people through their spoken words. Blank's interviews record unadulterated slices of parlance. The accents, rhythms of speech, and tonalities of those speaking are almost as important as what they say. The film has no narration. Subtitles are offered at different moments in order to emphasize a sentence someone says, but these superimposed words strike one as more of an annotation by a fellow, attentive listener than an interjection or interruption.

*Always for Pleasure* does a good part in going beyond a superficial postcard image of New Orleans. Les Blank's lens captures artists and traditions that have gone unrecorded and unnoticed at the margins of society. He does not become so transfixed in the revelry and free spirit of the city as to overlook the origins of New Orleans culture in slavery and discrimination. The world

of the film is made up of these ignored voices. In his documentaries, Les Blank begins to unpack the exclusions inherent in saturated, monolithic accounts of "American Culture." In a candid sequence, an older African-American woman, surrounded by those dressed for Mardi Gras, brings the racial dimensions of the holiday to light: "If you wanna be white today, you can be white today. Anything you want, Superman, Batman, Robin, you can be anything today. But not tomorrow, you gotta be a nigger tomorrow." The universalism of the party is a short-lived break from a reality where racial boundaries exist in overt and harsh terms. Blank's attention to these voices in his interviews has already begun to demonstrate how racial injustice has informed all aspects the city's culture from slavery onward. It is in this context that he shifts his focus to the Mardi Gras Indians, symbols of resilience and pride within oppressed sectors of New Orleans' African American community. The film brings to the attention of the viewer the resilience of marginalized, excluded peoples that have nevertheless formed a cultural backbone for the famous party town.

The second half of the film focuses entirely on the history of the Mardi Gras Indians, one of the New Orleans African-American community's oldest and most important traditions. Their story is part of the exultant spirit of the city, yet it also emerged from the historic and daily realities of racism in America, New Orleans' historical role in the slave trade of the past and the discriminations of the present. Roughly halfway through the film, Blank briefly cuts away from footage of people to focus on a specific



location in the city, Congo Square. Overlaid text explains that during the early days of slavery Congo Square was where slaves would go every Sunday in order to speak to one another, practice their diverse African languages and religions, and play traditional songs. After rebellions in the 1800s, these meetings were made illegal and slaves were only allowed to join together and practice their traditions during Mardi Gras. Despite these limitations, groups formed in different neighborhoods to meet every Sunday.

These groups eventually formed “tribes,” each representing a different neighborhood. Every Mardi Gras they payed homage to the indigenous tribes of Louisiana by dressing up as “Indians” and engaging in mock tribal wars between different wards. Indians were a symbol of resistance. Their culture and way of life was considered closer to that of the slaves’ African ancestors, and, most importantly, African-Americans

in New Orleans wanted to pay tribute to indigenous peoples for their role in taking in runaway slaves. All these traditions come to the fore on Mardi Gras, when the different “tribes” march through New Orleans, wearing brightly colored outfits with large feathers and beaded designs. These costumes are made new each year.

Blank spends an extensive amount of the film showcasing these different outfits and their makers’ views on the history and tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians. The focus is on the sight and sound of these traditions as his interviews reveal a variety of perspectives and opinions on the ritual, its origins and its many poetic dimensions. Each group brings its own band, and is comprised hierarchically with a head chief, and other positions—spyboy, who works as a scout, marching ahead, and flagboy, who carries the tribe’s banner and colors. When different Indian tribes meet each other on Mardi Gras,



all: ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE (1978)



one participant explains, they engage in what is almost a clash of song and dance. Each member of the tribe meets the other, and they exchange threats and boasts. Another participant explains the spoken word dimension of these encounters: "It comes to you, you say what you feel, there's no script to follow. We talk Indian to each other." For a second time in the film, the audience is presented with subtitles. The exchanges are arranged into the poetic meter that the cadences of the speech conveys:

*Dude I'll tell you  
Make a tireless climber slip the wall  
Get to the top, you better not jump or fall  
I'm Big Chief Wild Tchoupitoulas  
Uptown ruler, won't kneel,  
Won't bow.  
The blood shiffa honna,  
Don't know how.  
Big chief, Wild Tchoupitoulas.*

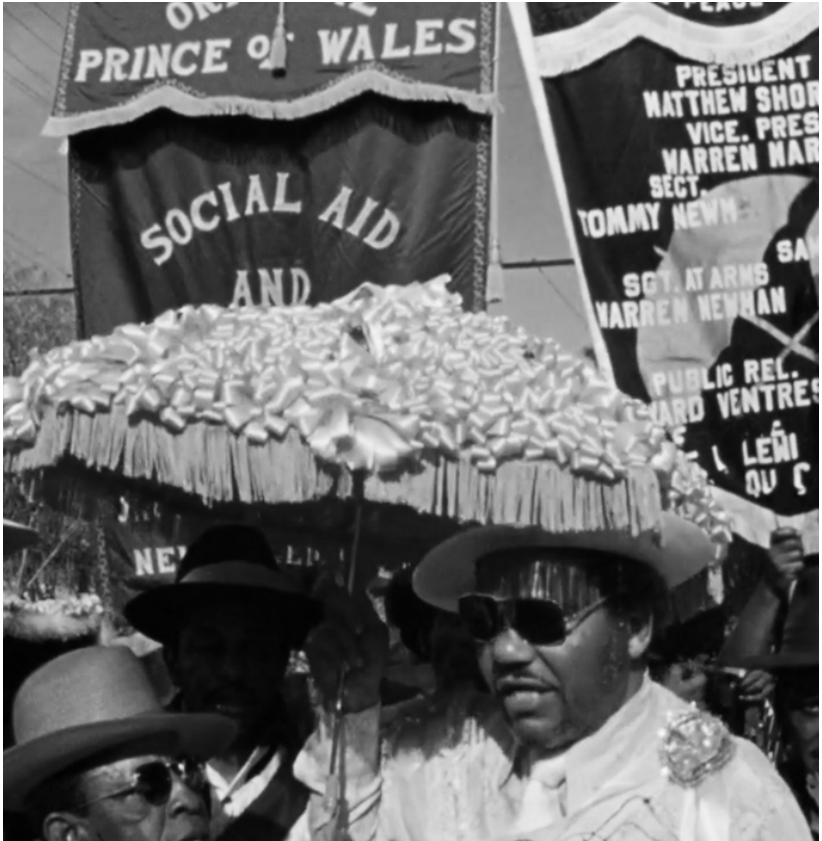
This rich language is accompanied by an almost intoxicating display of the colors and designs of the rich outfits worn by the different members of the "tribe." At the end of an encounter between different groups, no winners are announced, but it is clear which side has outdone the other in style and bravado. Throughout this segment, Blank shows different tribes moving through Mardi Gras. Chiefs and other members of the tribe stare at the camera with excitement and twirl, spreading their arms to show off the rich hues and complex designs of feathers and beads.

The final sequence of the film demonstrates Blank's deep respect and appreciation for this culture, its birth in resistance and its continued struggle to

survive the changes brought about by a society that is in constant flux. An older man puts this struggle in his own terms: "This Indian thing is something that every black man, I feel, should be into. Some of the black traditions are not being put forward as tradition. We wish to convey to every person a feeling of tradition." The value of history and the perpetuation of tradition is a constant struggle for the ways of life at the fringe of "American Society" at large, and yet Les Blank does a good deal in demonstrating the debt American culture owes to these marginalized voices, attitudes and heritages that are in danger of being lost.

The final minute of the film is edited with a poetic logic reminiscent of the first sequence in the movie, a logic that finds continuity in color. From a deep blue dress, the film cuts to the feathers of a peacock. From the bright pink of a carefully designed "Indian" costume, the film cuts to nearby rose bushes swaying in the spring breeze. The sequence conveys a metaphor similar to the one at the beginning of the film with its hulking ships and exuberant parades: New Orleans is a place where individuals are lost in arrangements from the natural world. From the realities of an industrialized port city captured in the first frames of the film, New Orleans, through the eyes of Les Blank, becomes a resilient exhibition of the natural world in a way that celebrates life in all its elements, even in death. The credits of the film, overlaid on a final shot of an evening New Orleans sky, are indicative of Blank's work. Before a long list of community members and production assistants, there is a line in all caps: LONG LIVE!





*ALWAYS FOR PLEASURE (1978)*

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# MORE THAN A TRAINING MANUAL

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John Marshall's  
*Pittsburgh Police Series*



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by HUNTER KOCH

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ONE NOTICES A LACK OF explosive moments, watching John Marshall's ethnographic corpus the *Pittsburgh Police Series*, a collection of seventeen films that look at the day-to-day interactions between the police and citizens of Pittsburgh. In the entry "A Forty Dollar Misunderstanding," a woman runs out of a door in an act of aggression toward her boyfriend who took forty dollars from her. She doesn't get far before an officer restrains her for a moment or two, at which point she decides to go with the officers to the station and report the incident. This scene is typical of the most visceral moments in the series—we see short bursts of physicality, but such energy is never truly shocking or sustained. This subdued action seems anti-climactic considering that the *Pittsburgh Police Series* began production in the wake of the nationwide civil unrest in 1968, prompted by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Police and civilian interaction, especially in the context of police brutality, is a volatile issue that seems to have a strong attraction to spectators. We want to see the true story behind violent acts of power, often looking to simultaneously reinforce our preconceived notions of who's right and who's wrong in these situations. But Marshall's series seems to evade this straightforward judgment—it is too easy, he seems to suggest, to show us sensationalist violence that would simply play into whatever desires we bring into our viewing. Instead, we enter into a radically different approach to understanding police-civilian interactions, an approach that can be rather difficult to embrace. The series is long and somewhat uneventful, and in

its slowness and mundanity it can feel hard to watch. However, if the *Pittsburgh Police Series* can potentially offer us a new phenomenology with respect to policing, it is worth attempting to discern and understand how this change in perspective might be elicited.

An immediate characteristic of these films is the near-total lack of contextual information in its scenes. This ambiguity may not seem entirely unprecedented, especially when we constellate *Pittsburgh* with other observational films of the era such as *High School* by Frederick Wiseman, who rarely provides the specifics of his subjects. In *High School*, we learn the particular facts of the school, its location for instance, only through incidental details like brief background shots of informational posters or sports banners. But Marshall's films take this excision of context to a greater degree, its use becoming much more piercing vis-à-vis his subject, the police.

For example, the three-and-a-half minute "Manifold Controversy" begins with three police officers entering an argument between a man and a mechanic. The man claims the mechanic sold him a bad exhaust manifold; the mechanic claims the man knew exactly what he was getting. The man yells while the mechanic tersely defends himself. With respect to factual knowledge, this is the entirety of what the film presents to us. Importantly, we do not know what the ultimate verdict is—who is right and who is wrong, either legally or ethically. Marshall's exclusion of context becomes interestingly complex in the film "The Informant," a twenty-four minute sequence that centers around a police questioning with the interrogatee acquiescing to become an informant. The man is charged with rioting and

looting, but he hesitates to give too many details. His crimes are not random acts of violence, but were committed during a series of riots in Pittsburgh. There is really nothing exceptional about what he has done; in fact, his actions become insubstantial as the film refrains from focusing on his criminal background to any degree. Ultimately he agrees to serve as an informant, rendering the facts of his case moot.

By approaching these scenes free of context, we enter into a space where individuals' interactions with the police are not centered around their status of guilt or innocence. The films seem almost disinterested with trying to determine or even clarify the context of particular interactions, which becomes all the more salient when we remember that we are watching a series of films structured entirely around police activity. The criminal justice system ostensibly operates under a correspondence theory of truth. That is, one looks to reconstruct narratives presented to see if these accounts correspond to a factual event; from there one attempts to determine whether a person is guilty or innocent. But Marshall's films point us elsewhere, signaling a sharp turn away from existing paradigms of criminal justice. The films seem to suggest a reconsideration of police interactions governed by the guilty-innocent dichotomy or through a search for some *a priori* truth that would determine how interactions proceed. We are pushed to ask: *if we are going to take a critical look at how the police engage with citizens, would it not be wise to avoid reifying, in the films, the epistemologies of the very processes that we are scrutinizing?*

The maneuver away from this dichotomy is further compounded through Marshall's overall selection

of incidents that comprise the massive 399-minute series of films. With respect to police brutality and police interactions generally, media representations tend to center around exceptionally violent incidents. Filmed brutality may be increasing in exposure as our media consumption increases, but it nevertheless has real precedents in earlier works. For example, there's an infamous scene in Frederick Wiseman's 1969 film *Law and Order*, produced about the same time as Marshall's films, where we see an officer kicking open a door, grabbing a woman from behind some furniture, and putting her into a chokehold. She gags and cannot vocalize, yet the officers repeatedly berate her for not responding to their inquiries. Literally seconds after this incident, in a shocking display of dissonance, the officers deny that they were choking her despite Wiseman having filmed the entire incident. Extreme images like these inadvertently become a baseline for police overreach more broadly.

When discussing issues concerning the police, especially as the police interact with communities of color, the conversation begins to center strictly around such exceptional acts of deadly violence. Indeed, while police shootings are, sadly, unbearably common in many communities, murders and deadly force do not comprise a majority of police-civilian exchanges. In films such as the two mentioned above, we have long, unintrusive shots of individuals, often simply in conversation or slowly moving throughout spaces. Even in films like "A Forty Dollar Misunderstanding," the burst of activity comes toward the end of a long conversation between people in an apartment, and the film continues afterward as the police and



“THE INFORMANT”

the woman discuss what to do next. Marshall utilizes an observational mode to offer a de-exceptionalization of police interaction, to push beyond merely criticizing police in their use of deadly force and instead place scrutiny upon quotidian actions. We repeatedly see these mundane situations over the course of nearly seven hours slowly but persistently pushing us away from an expectation or desire for explosive events and toward a viewing experience where scrutinizing normal exchanges becomes typical.

The German photographer August Sander took hundreds of portraits of ordinary individuals for his series *People of the 20th Century*. The photos attempt to show a cross-section of

German society at the time, each one simply captioned with occupational descriptors that become almost ontological: the Farmer, the Pastry Cook, the Parliamentary Representative. Reflecting on these photographs, Walter Benjamin, a contemporary of Sander's, writes:

*“Work like Sander’s could overnight assume unlooked-for topicality. Sudden shifts of power such as are now overdue in our society can make the ability to read facial types a matter of vital importance. Whether one is of the Left or the Right, one will have to get used to being looked at in terms of one’s provenance. And one will have to look at others the same way. Sander’s work is more than a picture book. It is a training manual.”*

There exists a lasting impact to this quote, for indeed police brutality does involve profiling and being “looked at in terms of one’s provenance.” But this quote in fact illuminates the series’ break with other forms of ethnographic work. As consumers of the *Pittsburgh Police Series*, we do not read facial provenance in the same way that Benjamin suggests we do with Sander’s photographs. The films offer not a training manual, but an analytical tool; not a way to identify some fixed truths, but a way to reconsider that which exists before us in the everyday. It remains important to look, but in the *Pittsburgh Police Series* we are pushed to look elsewhere: not merely at faces, not merely at the superficial, but at the root causes that go beyond a process of stereotyping.

In any given incident of police brutality, we construct causal chains in a fairly typical way. *Why did the man get shot?* Because he ran away, and the officer’s instinct was to shoot. *Why did he run?* Because his instinct was to do so. A film focused on images like these structures its analysis around determining who acted, how they acted, and what actions are correct. It becomes a project of typifying actions and determining their correctness and value in a normative ethical sense. It is a system that works at the surface, yet while firm denunciation of brutality is necessary, such a condemnation can result in excessive specificity, a case-by-case situation that only analyzes acts in the moment. We cannot ask: *why are those instincts in play?* or *What occurs outside explosive situations that produce such displays of brutality?*

These strands come together to shed light on a more concrete phenomenology presented in the films.

As I argued above, the deliberate lack of context and the mundanity of the films’ events place us outside normal paradigms of criminal justice systems: we are no longer focused on finding a truly good or bad act, on determining who is definitively right or wrong, or on situations that reveal clear violations of the law. What, then, are we left with?

The *Pittsburgh Police Series* opens up a space allowing for criticism that involves a more nuanced analysis of police-civilian dynamics. We watch quotidian, unexceptional interactions that could happen at any time, and we are denied the ability to make easy judgments about what is happening. When there is a domestic disturbance, as in “A Forty Dollar Misunderstanding,” who is in the wrong? Well, no one, so far as we can tell. A woman shows her anger through an outward burst of aggression, but she never really does anything besides express her distress through verbal and non-verbal cues. The police do not resort to physical altercations, aside from holding the woman back for a second or two and driving off with her on her own volition. We are thus forced to look elsewhere, to see what is happening in the relationships between these people. In other words, how does the dynamic between a citizen and a cop manifest itself in ways besides deadly force? How do the cops express the power imbalance through extra-discursive and indirect ways? We are no longer dealing with strictly concrete situations, but heading towards a more complex sphere of affects. Marshall’s observational mode places us in a situation in which we can more closely perceive this inarticulate space. The camera interrogates, over and over



“A FORTY DOLLAR MISUNDERSTANDING”

again, a relation that is stripped bare of any context or act that could be used to justify its power imbalance in superficial terms; it watches and interrogates this affective space in order to pick up on that which is normally imperceptible in police-citizen interactions.

This space of interrogation no doubt seems abstract and immaterial—and rightly so. But our unfamiliarity with what to look for when watching these films signals a new and productive break from other forms of police documentaries, a break that I do not think has been replicated since. This new space is highly generative, creating further relations that may not be as initially apparent or readily nuanced as other spaces. For example, other films on the same topic easily stay in a more material realm by explicitly looking to or incidentally suggesting issues of race and class in these relations.

Our discomfort is challenging yet productive. It is easy to indict brutality when it stares us in the face, but are we able to pinpoint why it happens, to see the violence in the unexceptional, in the everyday? The films implicate every viewer in this experience, but they also guide us through the process of reflection, offering the everyday as material for our scrutiny. Marshall gives no definite or easy answers, nor does he suggest them, but by refocusing our attention, the *Pittsburgh Police Series* creates new perspectives. While their efficacy is debatable, they are nonetheless worthy starting points for a more thorough critique. Today we would do well to return to Marshall's opus, to reconsider our own preconceived notions, and to level a more nuanced, subtly powerful critique of police brutality and the unspeakable structures that lie beneath.

# A LIVING CINEMA

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Registering Reality in *Chronicle of a Summer*

by SOPHIE KOVEL

“ARE YOU HAPPY?” MARCELINE ASKS a series of passers-by, holding a microphone up to their lips. Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronique d’un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*) is, from its opening, immersed in the pedestrian rhythms of the streets of Paris. “Are you happy?” superficially introduces the larger question Rouch and Morin pose as their premise and guiding question of the film: “how does one live?” (*Comment vécu?*) Street interviews, a direct result of increasingly portable cameras and sound equipment, gave rise to a new cinéma vérité. As Morin suggests in “For a New Cinéma-Verité,” published in *France Observateur* in 1960, *Chronicle* was a simultaneous quest for a *cinéma de fraternité* or cinema of brotherhood, setting a precedent for street interviews in films from the early 1960s and ’70s like Chris Marker’s *Le joli mai*, William Klein’s *Loin du Vietnam*, and Raul Ruiz’s *De grands événements et de gens ordinaires* (*Of Great Events and Ordinary People*).

\* \* \*

“This film was made without actors, but lived by men and women who devoted some of their time to a novel experiment of ‘film-truth,’” Morin narrates as waves of commuters exit a metro station. Rouch and Morin sit in their living room with Marceline, a psychologist to

whom they now turn: “how to live begins with you.” After explaining the mundanities of her day-to-day life, Marceline is the one who asks: “Are you happy?”

Edgar Morin, who conceived the question “how do you live?” as a guiding principle for the film, was a sociologist. He called *Chronicle* a form of research, claiming it was not a documentary film but “an ethnological film in the strong sense of the term” insofar as “it studies mankind” (“For a New Cinéma-Verité”). *Chronicle* is by no means ethnographic in treating its subjects objectively, nor is it engaged in an ethnography of the foreign, of life as it is lived in far away places. Instead, Rouch and Morin are invested in an ethnography of locality and devise the idea of commensality, the practice of eating together, to bring forth the proper conditions for film encounters. Gatherings in private apartments with food and wine embody their “cinema of camaraderie.” The technicians, camera operators and directors took part in meals with their subjects. As such, *Chronicle* can be said, technologically and socially, to be participatory and to pursue what Maxime Scheinfeigel somewhat loftily describes as “the ambitious project of reinventing the approach of the other” in her biography of Rouch. For Morin, “the absence of a barrier, a “moat” was a means to overcome the impasse of a “cinema [that] needs a set, a staged ceremony, a halt to life.”

Morin and Rouch first coined the term “*cinéma vérité*” in the essay “Cinema or the Imaginary Man and

the Stars,” recalling and translating Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov’s conception of *Kino-Pravda* or “film-truth.” For Rouch and Morin, cinematic truth, the ability to capture the relations of life as it is lived, affectively and otherwise, was not intrinsic to cinema—*cinéma vérité* meant, to adopt Deleuze’s terms, “the truth of cinema” and not “the cinema of truth.” French filmmaker Mario Ruspoli proposes *cinéma direct* as an umbrella term of “direct and authentic contact” with “lived reality” that has geographic nuances along national lines: the Canadian “candid camera,” Pierre Perrault’s *cinéma vécu*, the American “living camera,” as well as the French *cinéma vérité*. Opposing tendencies in “the cinema of immediacy” (a term introduced by the French film historian and critic Louis Marcorelles) posit that the French were advocates of the “provocative camera” (Jean Rouch). The Americans, on the other hand, were advocates of the “non-interventionist observing camera,” as in the work of Richard Leacock from the same period as *Chronicle*.

Technological invention is central both to *cinéma vérité* and to *Chronicle of a Summer* in facilitating the intervention of what Marcorelles calls the “provocative camera.” Morin describes how Rouch redefined the filmmaker in “For a New Cinéma-Vérité.” For Rouch, the filmmaker is a “filmmaker-diver” who “plunges” into real-life situations. A lightweight camera became an extension of the filmmaker’s body coinciding with increasingly agile





left and right: *CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER* (1961)

means to record sound. Lighter cameras alongside Nagra sync-sound, a battery-operated, portable sound recording system, allowed filmmakers to plunge into the streets of Paris. As opposed to the studio-recorded ambient sound of the 1940s and '50s, in the 1960s the clumsiness of sound became a register of reality; the imperfection of the image a register of truth.

\* \* \*

Jean-Pierre narrates, "Marilù<sup>1</sup> doesn't act in front of the camera. The camera doesn't inhibit her but it prompts her to search (*recherche*) for herself. The

same goes for Marceline, she talks to herself. And we're embarrassed because we feel we're intruding. But it's also when we get completely caught up." He continues, "What's great about the film is switching from phony naturalness, like these meaningless street interviews, to a close-up of Marilù that is beautiful and much more true. This movement back and forth is what gives the film its strength."

*Chronicle of a Summer* marks the transition from direct to meta-discourse. Rouch and Morin appear in the film throughout as interlocutors, a provocative mode

<sup>1</sup> It is later revealed that Marilù works as a secretary at *Cahiers du Cinéma* and her new boyfriend, though appearing briefly and unnamed, is none other than the director Jacques Rivette, only furthering a reflexive discourse.





of authorship that emulates a “provocative camera.” The crowning reflexive moment is a screening within the film itself of a rough cut of *Chronique d’un été* to all involved followed by their reflections. Jean-Pierre, a French student and on-screen subject, acknowledges Rouch and Morin’s controlled juxtapositions and sudden transitions as a virtue and source of meaning (as opposed to the premeditated documentaries that rely heavily on reenactment, like Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*).

Perhaps the most powerful juxtaposition of scenes is between a “commensal” outdoor gathering and Marceline walking in the Place de la Concorde. The cut between the two spaces provokes and brings into

conversation hitherto unspoken political strife with personal trauma. Landry, a South African immigrant, though somewhat tokenized as the voice of blackness, is essential to furthering the political trajectory of the film. “All the African states were colonies once,” Landry responds when asked about national solidarity with the anti-colonial struggle of the Belgian Congo. This question is timely for the ethos of the French consciousness given its own colonial enterprises. Not inconsequentially, 1960 was both the year *Chronicle* was filmed and the year the Belgian Congo gained independence from its colonial ties to become known as The Democratic Republic of Congo. “When whites crack down



*CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER (1961)*

on an African state . . . we all feel we share in the others' sufferings,"<sup>2</sup> Landry adds.

Marceline speaks of a parallel implication of solidarity in the face of anti-Semitism. The plight of the colonial other and the Jewish other become analogous, but the film gravitates towards the pastness of the Holocaust rather than grappling with the present. Marceline reveals that the tattooed number on her arm was given to her in a concentration camp. At a loss for words when Morin questions Landry and his friend Raymond's familiarity with concentration camps, Raymond responds summarily "I've seen a film about a concentration camp." Marceline strokes a white rose, cigarette in hand. The frame freezes. "*Nuit et Brouillard*," Landry interjects (*Night and Fog*, directed by Alain Resnais). Here it becomes clear that the superficial question "are you happy?" is deeply enmeshed with politics. Rouch and Morin go on to test the extent to which they can externalize the psychological, private memories of their subjects.

Marceline walks alone in the Place de la Concorde. "La place de la Concorde is empty. Empty as it was when I was 20. 15 years ago. I don't remember anymore," she says. A few cars pass. Her heels click against the pavement. "Pitchipoi, you'll see... we'll go there...we'll work in factories. We'll see each other on Sundays," father said. And you'd tell me, 'You're

young, you'll come back.'" More cars pass. "I'll never return," Marceline recalls. She hums under her breath and continues to walk for some time, heels clicking. Marceline continues, "And here I am, Place de la Concorde. I came back, you didn't."

\* \* \*

"So, Edgar, what do you think of this screening?" Rouch asks Morin, as they pace in the Musée de l'homme (the National Museum of Natural History in Paris).<sup>3</sup> "Either our characters are blamed for not being true enough... or blamed for being too true," Morin responds. Verity and truth-telling come to the fore in this conclusory auto-critique in the Musée de l'homme which is as much about their characters' honesty as an opportunity for Rouch and Morin to evaluate the emotional character of their "novel experiment of 'film-truth' (*cinéma vérité*)."

In the preceding scene, Marceline's peers accuse her of acting, as did an interviewer at Cannes in 1961. She rebuffed her dramatization, advancing, "the rhythm of my steps led me to those memories."

\* \* \*

Walking among and through becomes a sort of working through for Rouch and Morin. *Chronicle of a Summer* places us in life rather than bringing a halt to it. Beginning and ending with pedestrians commuting, in the face of the question "How do you live?" *Chronicle* writes of inconclusivity.

<sup>2</sup> Landry's words recall Fanon's conception that "the Other introduces the system of differentiation which enables the 'cultural' to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic, historical reality." (Preface, *Black Skin, White Masks*.)

<sup>3</sup> Chris Marker filmed the majority of *La Jétée* at the Musée de l'homme one year later.

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# TYRANTS OF TINSELTOWN

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*In the Shadows of  
Hollywood's Dream Factories*



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by MATTHEW RIVERA

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**“Anything—anything can be  
done in this country.”**

*Heart of Darkness*

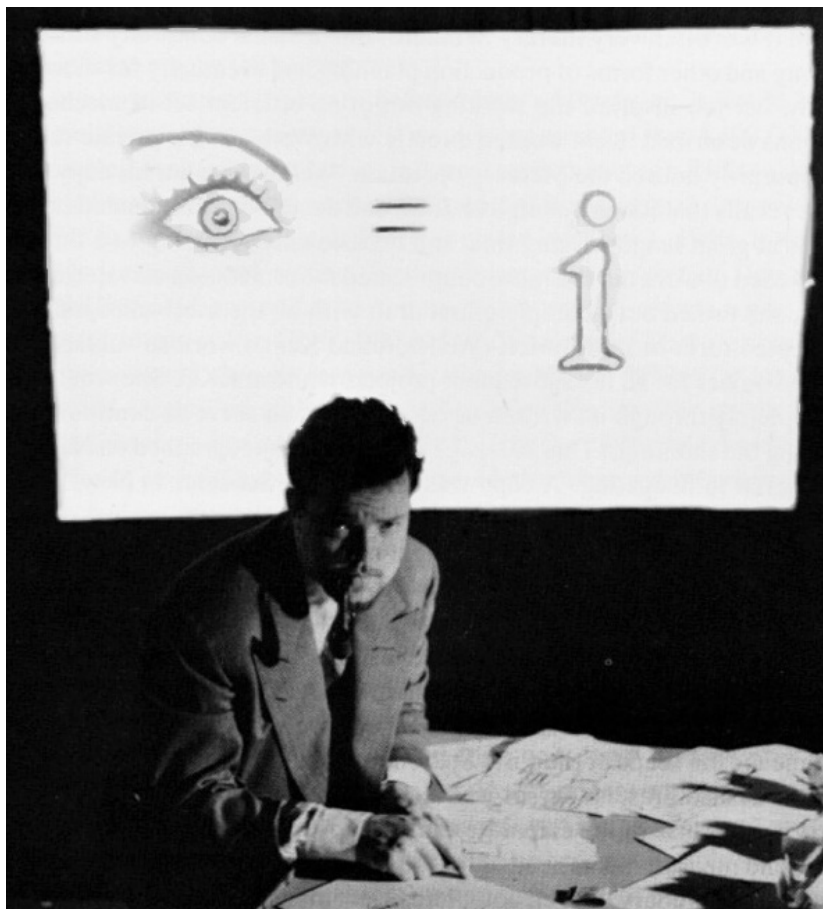
ORSON WELLES ARRIVED IN Hollywood with those famous words from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* echoing in his head: “Anything can be done in this country. Anything can be done in this country.” He had a contract with RKO for two pictures to be made his way, final cut and all. For his first project, he wanted to adapt *Heart of Darkness* for the screen. Welles would have played both Marlowe and Kurtz, the story goes. The film was soon to become one of Welles’ many lost projects, but by the end of his days in Tinseltown he would realize he had gotten more *Heart of Darknes* he could handle. Indeed he would play a part that would have overtones of both Marlowe and Kurtz, but it would be a far stretch from the way he had originally dreamed it might be.

George Schaefer was the head of production at RKO at that time. When Howard Hughes took over, Welles was abandoned. But Welles himself had already abandoned Hollywood for Brazil, inspired to make a movie on location after watching Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*. The story of Welles’ contentious relationship with the American movie-making machine and the people who ran it has been well-documented in many anecdotes showing a peculiar tug-of-war between his brilliance and the ego-driven, oppressive mode of production that he both despised and thrived on. Welles’ greatest triumphs in Hollywood

were more a product of his own genius than the genius of the system, although both played a part. On the other hand, his ultimate commercial and political defeat in America was more the result of an unjust system than his own tyrannic impulses, but again, both played a part.

Welles was hardly the first great artist disenfranchised by the system. Hollywood had made its reputation and built its power on unspoken crimes. If the system seduced you, abused you, and then cast you aside, your abandonment did not stop at mere exclusion. You were silenced, erased. D.W. Griffith, for instance, the tyrant who practically made Tinseltown, spent the last years of his life in the Knickerbocker Hotel just off Hollywood Boulevard where he was eventually found dead sitting in the lobby. One could fill an encyclopedia with the actors, actresses and directors who all but vanished only years after they had helped build the loot of Hollywood to insurmountable heights.

But Welles was not to be silenced. Lured to Hollywood in 1939, he made his presence and his objections to the system known rather quickly. *Citizen Kane* showed everyone that movies didn’t have to be made the way they had been for the past 20-odd years, and his next film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, threatened to do the same. Although we now localize the target of *Kane* to the news tycoon William Randolph Hearst, the film was really a more total scathing critique of economic and political power in America than an attack on one person. Making Hearst one of his many targets, however, was not the savviest choice for a Hollywood



WELLES' PLANNED INTRODUCTION TO *HEART OF DARKNESS*

newcomer. Hearst was the powerhouse of all Tinseltown tyrants, the tyrant that all the other tyrants had to answer to. His money and his press fueled the whole system.

Just as Welles made it clear how much he loathed Hollywood, Hollywood made it clear how much it loathed him. If asked in 1940, certainly by 1941, who the most tyrannical person in Hollywood was, the surest and safest answer would have been Orson Welles.

By *Ambersons'* release, the machine had been put into action. The gossip columnists had shredded away on their portable Remington Rands (poetically, RR manufactured both typewriters and guns), accounting every sordid rumor of Welles' contentious private life. The press agents followed suit, preventing Welles from getting any serious attention in the papers. Studio bosses met behind closed doors in fearful contempt of this threatening new

presence. Mysterious appointments were made in the cutting rooms and a hatchet job was done on *Ambersons*. Contracts were quickly voided. Welles was in Brazil.

Welles' Brazil film, titled *It's All True*, was certain to be a picture with a political stance just as revolutionary as *Kane's*. The columnists quickly spread stories of Welles' irresponsible "partying" in Brazil. In reality he was making a film about Brazilian Carnival and samba music, living with working class people (most of whom were black) to gain a deeper understanding of their lives. Welles' biggest offense was taking seriously the culture of a people that had thus far been depicted as a lesser Other on American movie screens. Howard Hughes soon took over RKO. Funding for the film was cut and Welles was deemed a failure. The system had regained control.

**We don't go for strangers in Hollywood unless they wear a sign saying that their axe has been thoroughly ground elsewhere, and that in any case it's not going to fall on our necks—in other words, unless they're a celebrity. And they'd better look out even then.**

**F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon***

Welles returned to Hollywood from Brazil without a movie, but he wouldn't be around much longer. The films he made during this period proved he was both a product of the system and simultaneously someone who was above it. Welles just about killed Harry Cohn, the maniacal studio boss at Columbia, with *The Lady From Shanghai*, his second-to-last film before he left for Europe. Cutting

Rita Hayworth's signature scarlet hair and dying it blonde was one of Welles' most damaging aggressions. Another event involved a studio pawn named Jack Fier. One Saturday Welles told Fier he needed one of the sets repainted for shooting on Monday. Fier denied Welles' request, so Welles broke into the studio over the weekend and painted the entire set himself, leaving a sign that read "The only thing we have to fear is Fier itself." This escapade caused the unionized set painters to picket around the studio. Fier himself handed out signs that read "All's well that ends Welles."

Hollywood had the last laugh. It still taunts Welles with the labels of "boy wonder" and "flash in the pan," and most serious writing about his work has to first situate itself against these clichés. Cohn's reputation, however, isn't much better. Moe Howard of the Three Stooges called him "a real Jekyll-and-Hyde type guy," and Frank Lloyd Wright wrote him this apology note in 1952:

**My dear Mr. Harry Cohn: You should come around to see our new projection room now. You might feel differently about letting us see some of your films. Sorry we offended you.**

There's a line near the end of *Citizen Kane*: "I don't think any word can describe a man's life." As it was with Kane, so it was with Welles. He was a tyrant, but he was also a casualty of a system far more tyrannical than he could ever have imagined. He was both a victim and a victor of the studio system. His independence took him to heights far greater than a successful career in Hollywood and



simultaneously crushed him under the weight of Hollywood's pre-established structure. It is for this reason that Welles remains a fascinating and mysterious case, even though he is one of the most studied filmmakers of all time. There has never been a final word on the Welles story and there never will be. Such is also the case with Hollywood as a mode a production and a structure of power. Serious study of the studio system is unfortunately often superseded by works that gush with nostalgia or blow off the whole thing as a mere extension of the "culture industry." But how did Hollywood really work? Like Welles, its story is particular to itself: there is none other like it in history. But one of the best answers emerged from the system itself—Hollywood liked few subjects more than Hollywood, and the studios made countless pictures about their own means of production and the people running it. These films were undoubtedly thought of as fantastically fictionalized upon their release, but in retrospect they seem surprisingly self-critical.

Even the tyrants that ran Hollywood were not exempt from being made subjects on the screen. These fictional movie moguls are almost as interesting as the real ones were. *The Last Tycoon's* Monroe Stahr is a genius producer based on Irving Thalberg. *Twentieth Century's* Oscar Jaffe is a manic, manipulative theatre producer based on Jed Harris. *The Bad and the Beautiful's* Jonathan Shields is a domineering, vindictive producer based on RKO's mastermind of horror, Val Lewton (with a touch of Selznick and Welles). A more recent creation, *Swimming with Sharks'*

Buddy Ackerman, is based on Joel Silver, the tyrant behind *Lethal Weapon*, *The Matrix* and *Die Hard*. *Hail, Caesar!'s* Eddie Mannix is a curious creation. He acts like a movie executive, but really he is just a fixer, the guy who holds the studio together by covering up scandals. Indeed, there was a real Eddie Mannix at MGM who did just that.

Movieland has always been as enamored as it has been repulsed by the power-crazed few who helm the operation. The autocracy was never hidden. You never saw their names in cursive on the screen like the Selznicks, the Zanucks or the Goldwyns. You never saw them in photos at Romanoff's, Musso & Frank or the Cocomat Grove. But they were around and everybody knew it. They ran the operation, pulled the strings, held the purse. Their names were whispers in a town made of cheers.

There is an even greater slew of fictional movie stars, drunk on power and desperate to hold onto it as they watch their stardom extinguish before their very eyes. *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond, the abandoned silent movie queen, is played by and based on Gloria Swanson. *A Star is Born's* Norman Maine, an alcoholic playboy star under constant surveillance by the studio publicity department, was based in part on John Barrymore. A Looney Tunes short called *The Scarlet Pumpernickel* created Daffy Dumas Duck, based on Errol Flynn and Leslie Howard. Duck has written his own swashbuckling script that runs somewhere over a thousand pages and has brought it to the office of "J. L." (Warner, that is). There was hardly a powerful, cigar-



chewing studio boss on screen that wasn't quickly recognizable as a nod to Jack Warner or David O. Selznick. Sometimes the reference was even by name. Hollywood's obsession with power—and the people who possessed it—was never a secret.

**There's a fair face to the land, surely, but you can't hide the hunger and the guilt. It's a bright, guilty world.**

*The Lady from Shanghai*

*The Scarlet Pumpernickel* begins with a beautifully subversive sequence. Over a wide establishing shot of a studio backlot we hear Daffy Duck's voice screaming: "You're killing me! I'm being murdered!" Crossfade to the studio gates: "I can't take this torture any more!" Then

down the halls of an administrative office: "I'm dying! You're killing me!" Finally Daffy stands before a desk, making his plea to an unseen bigshot. By this long move inwards through the interior of the studio, we feel we might be approaching the heart of Hollywood's evils. But along the way those evils seem to be ascribed to different things. At first it might be the massive, indistinct factories, like loaves of bread lined up in a row, void of any sign of humanity. Then it might be its gates, the exclusionary walls of the system. When we finally see the source of this screaming voice, an altogether different possibility awaits us: it might come down to the psychopaths running the show. The film ends with Daffy shooting himself and the glorious line: "It's getting so you have to kill yourself to



THE SCARLET PUMPERNICKEL (1950)

sell a story around here!” In the true spirit of a Tinseltown tyrant, life is cheap but sales are not. *The Scarlet Pumpernickel* implies that the root of the problem is neither just the system nor the psychopath, but a little bit of both.

**His Hollywood wasn't the exclusive night club where everyone knew everybody else. He learned that Hollywood extended from Warner Brothers at Burbank, in the valley beyond the northern hills, to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, twenty-five miles southwest in Culver City. He found a new side of Hollywood, the ten-man-for-every-job side, the seasonal unemployment, the call-again-next-month side. The factory side.**

**Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?***

One of the most memorable of fictional Tinseltown tyrants is Jonathan Shields from *The Bad and the Beautiful*, whose title is a nod to Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned*. Kirk Douglas plays Shields in what is one of the most startling depictions of monomaniacal power produced by the studio system. Shields' story begins with his father's failure in the movie industry, having once run an empire and ending up so widely despised that the younger Shields had to hire extras to populate his funeral, we are told. We can picture the formation of the young Shields into the vindictive, coercive authoritarian he is now as we imagine him blocking out the action on the set of his own father's funeral. As he sets out on his career relishing the power

to orchestrate other people's lives, we wonder for the entirety of the film, mainly composed of flashbacks, whether he has been choreographing his own funeral all along.

As the movie goes on we hear stories from people who once worked with Shields—a director he cheated out of a contract; an actress he seduced and abandoned; a writer whose wife perished in a plane crash that may have been precipitated by Shields. We get the feeling that just about everyone in Hollywood has similarly despicable stories about Shields, but we also get the feeling that Shields is in no way an exception to the system. “Some of the best movies are made by people working together who hate each others' guts,” he says at one point. One of the tragedies of the story is its un-specificity: the fact that Shields could be Welles or Selznick or any other Hollywood producer.

One of the many inspirations for Shields was Val Lewton, head of the horror unit at RKO before he was fired by Howard Hughes. His most famous movie was *Cat People*, directed by Jacques Tourneur and brilliantly photographed in suspenseful, velvety shadows by Nicholas Musuraca. *The Bad and the Beautiful* includes what is almost a reenactment of the creation of *Cat People*, retitled here *Doom of the Cat Men*. Shields, it is quickly evident, has more than just power—like Lewton, he has vision. Watching him create *Doom of the Cat Men* is exhilarating. After seeing dailies of people in clunky cat costumes miming around on the screen, Shields convinces Amiel, his director collaborator, to keep things in the shadows, to show less. The scene is



THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL (1952)

a Kirk Douglas classic, a spiraling tirade about the poetry of darkness: “The dark has a light of its own. In the dark all sorts of things come alive!” In these lines, Shields’ passion for filmmaking transitions into a passion for darkness. The two seem inseparable to him, filmmaking and darkness. His tactics as a producer are equally shadowy, on-screen and off.

**He had a telegram. It said: ‘Faulkner is fired. MGM Studio.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ Browning said. ‘I’ll call that so-and-so up this minute and not only make him put you back on the payroll but send you a written apology.’ There was a knock on the door. It was a page with another telegram. This one said: ‘Browning is fired. MGM Studio.’**

**William Faulkner interviewed in *The Paris Review***

I remember seeing an old two-reeler in three-strip Technicolor from 1938 called *Out Where the Stars Begin*. The short takes place on the Warner Brothers lot with the character actor Fritz Feld playing a movie director named “Nitvitch” who has a temper as outrageous as Cecil B. DeMille’s boots were tall. The whole thing is a tongue-in-cheek send-up on Warner’s best-known director, Michael Curtiz, with a dash of Ernst Lubitsch for good measure. Risky business considering Curtiz was Warner’s main workhorse: in 1938, he directed five films for the studio including the classic *Angels with Dirty Faces* as well as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Four Daughters*, both of which received best picture nominations. Hollywood pulls no punches for its public tyrants, especially if they’ve got an ounce of passion and a foreign accent.

*Out Where the Stars Begin* was the first in a trilogy of short musical films featuring the workings of a Nitvitch set. Another was released in 1938 called *Swingtime in the Movies*, then there was *Quiet, Please*, rounding the whole thing off in 1939. Together these three shorts comprise a candy-colored glimpse into a Hollywood studio replete with its tyrants, its whipping boys, its irritable divas, and its starry-eyed hopefuls. The whole thing is as fascinating for giving us a glimpse of the Warner Brothers lot in its heyday as it is for showing us what Hollywood thought of itself back then.

According to these three films, if there are tyrants in Hollywood it's the "artists" whose make preposterous demands for the sake of their "art." One story from *Quiet, Please* involves a romantic comedy musical Nitvitch is directing. Feeling the picture needs a little something to give it the Nitvitch touch, he goes to the studio boss and demands more money to build an ice palace and a snow storm (sugar glass and goose feathers). On top of that, he pleads for a live gorilla. The studio boss's first reservation is that all this will require a new script: "It's impossible to get out a script by Tuesday!" "Nothing is impossible," responds Nitvitch. "Don't you want it to be good?" "No! I want it Tuesday!!" This joke was an old standby around the studios.

But back to the gorilla—Nitvitch insists upon a real one, and finally the execs give in, so long as he uses a double in costume for the close-ups. The costume is so good, however, that when the real gorilla escapes, Nitvitch mistakes it for the

costumed extra, bossing it around the set like one of his proletariat lackeys. The gorilla, unused to such "civilized" treatment, goes absolutely berserk, grabbing Nitvitch under his arm and dragging him up into the rafters. The soundstage is bedlam. How will the publicity department clean up this one? Imagine the unions. Nitvitch has to be saved. The fire department is called in with a net. The tranquilizer gun is on hand. The gorilla, cornered and with no other option, drops Nitvitch who lands in the pool of unsolidified candy glass in the middle of the ice palace. The snow storm is let loose in the midst of all this, covering the sugar-coated Nitvitch in goose feathers. Nitvitch, just for trying to make a decent picture, is tarred and feathered on his own set. If Orson Welles had seen these images, perhaps he would have thought twice about going to Hollywood.

**On thinking about Hell, I gather / My brother Shelley found it was a place / Much like the city of London. I / Who live in Los Angeles and not in London / Find, on thinking about Hell, that it must be / Still more like Los Angeles.**

**A poem by Bertolt Brecht**

By the mere fact that stories like Nitvitch's made it onto movie screens, it's clear that Hollywood always knew it ran on a vastly oppressive and exploitative system. It made no effort of hiding this fact from the public eye; instead it thrived on this self-image. The system built a whole empire on broadcasting its exclusions and injustices. One of Hollywood's



QUIET, PLEASE (1939)

most recycled plots is that of the bright-eyed hopeful who comes to Tinseltown to make it in the pictures. Sometimes they get their chance, as in *Out Where the Stars Begin*, but most often they don't.

One Paramount newsreel from the 1930s warned: "DON'T GO HOLLYWOOD! Los Angeles—Girls galore flock movie city! Casting directors dash hopes of thousands, seeking start as screen extras." The film features a panoramic shot of 850 girls crowded into a Hollywood soundstage. The camera looks down on them from high up in the rafters, a mass of washed out faces and waddling shoulders. In the next shot they march past the camera, under inspection. A voice tells us, "Meet the women. They came from every

town and city from coast to coast. Many are from foreign lands. All with one dream: stardom. Few make the grade. That big break seldom comes. They have looks, perhaps talent. Sometimes they have both. But take it from us: girls who go Hollywood sometimes go hungry." The Hollywood dream—that one could go to Tinseltown and become a sensation in the movies—was quickly unveiled as the bait of a few conniving, sadistic men trying to lure young women to movieland. But newsreels like this one probably did little to stop the wave of bright-eyed hopefuls. If anything, they seem to beckon even modern viewers with a distant voice whispering, "Look at these women! Don't you want to be one too?"

‘Why don’t you quit the movies?’ I asked.

‘Why should I?’ she said. ‘I may get to be a star overnight. Look at Hepburn and Margaret Sullavan and Josephine Hutchinson . . . but I’ll tell you what I would do if I had the guts: I’d walk out of a window and throw myself in front of a street car or something.’

‘I know how you feel,’ I said, ‘I know exactly how you feel.’

**Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses Don’t They?***

From 1920 to 1930 the population of Los Angeles more than doubled from just over 500,000 to over 1,200,000. By the end of the 1930s, however, Hollywood had begun to cut itself off from the rest of the world. It continued exporting its product around the globe, but it shied away from importing new stars and artists. By the end of the 1940s, during the Red Scare, Tinseltown’s international exports expanded to include members of its own population.

Sometimes they left because they were afraid of being deported, often they were removed by force. It was the beginning of the end of a short-lived empire. Being a place powered by exploitation and all-or-nothing stakes, it was inevitable that Hollywood’s demise wouldn’t come from outside but from within. Hollywood ended by self-implosion, which brings us back to RKO and Orson Welles.

There are two versions of RKO’s story: one involves its status as a dream factory on the margins, its budgetary and square-footage shortcomings (RKO was the smallest of the five major studios) making it the whipping boy of movieland and giving it the reputation of making pictures with less prestige. A quip from the war goes: “In case of an air raid go to RKO . . . they haven’t had a hit in years.”

The other version of RKO’s story culminates after the war, when it would prove to be a much less popular destination if one wanted to avoid being a casualty of political turmoil. Howard



EDWARD DMYTRYK ON TRIAL



Hughes, the puppeteer behind the Hollywood blacklisting that lasted until the late '50s, was the head of RKO. He set a standard for communist cleansing that all the other studios followed with varying degrees of fortitude. Five of the famous "Hollywood Ten" blacklisted had done significant work at RKO: Dalton Trumbo, Edward Dmytryk, Adrian Scott, Albert Maltz and Herbert Biberman. In November 1947, the Ten were cited for contempt, refusing to answer questions for the House Un-American Activities Committee. Not coincidentally, Welles departed for Europe that same month. He wouldn't return to Hollywood for almost a decade.

While we should look back on the Communist witch-hunts with an appropriate amount of shame and disgust, the accusations of leftist messages in films were not unwarranted. RKO movies of the period are chock full of "un-American" overtones, making its product some of the most consistently interesting to watch today. While the rest of Tinseltown was busy writing off RKO's movies as mere program fare, the studio was actually making some of the most daring films of the late '40s and early '50s, a time when Hollywood was increasingly deeming films important that were snobbish and superficially artful. RKO's corpus of low-budget Noir and horror films remains some of the most poignant criticism of the capital crimes of the American empire from the post-war period. For example, Edward Dmytryk's last picture before the events of November 1947, *Crossfire*, is the story of a senseless murder committed by an anti-Semitic American soldier who has just returned from the war. Its radical undercurrents are shocking for a film

made just two years after the war ended.

In 1948, RKO's owner Floyd Odlum left the business after the first wave of congressional inquiries. Hughes now had total control of the littlest of the majors. He tore down the studio looking for Communists, shutting it down for months and firing most of its employees. In the end, he found more Communists than he knew what to do with, necessitating the making of two lists: a blacklist and a less-consequential graylist. What isn't told in the layman's version of the story is that the blacklist was almost entirely Jewish, while the graylist was exclusively Gentile.

**The secret of great fortunes that have no apparent cause is a crime forgotten because it was done properly.**

**Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot***

We will never know all of Hollywood's crimes. Indeed we have forgotten most of them because, as Balzac said, they were "done properly." Not in the sense of being hidden, but instead in that they were done so blatantly under our noses all along. Hollywood never tried to conceal its evils. Just the opposite: it broadcasted its sins and relished in them until its audience was made guilty of complicity. Hollywood's end came about not from some outside enemy—and that's not to discredit the roles of television or the Paramount antitrust case of 1948—but from its own guilt complex and paranoia. The system and the psychopath had become one united force whose wounds would be almost entirely self-inflicted. Something was clearly wrong when Charlie Chaplin fled to Switzerland and Ayn Rand,

Ronald Reagan and Walt Disney were upheld as the bastions of moral and political judgements in a place where morality and politics had been deemed all but trivial.

By the end of the '50s, Hollywood wanted things right back as they had been in a time no one could remember. Lesser offenders were slapped on the wrist and told to go back to work. Many were left jobless and lifeless. The lucky few were in another country altogether. But as much as Hollywood wanted to believe the worst was over, the end had just begun. The best writers of the era, who made the best movies ever produced in Hollywood, were out for good. The Noir canon, Hollywood's last great genre movement and its only original genre directly linked to politics, would soon reach its end.

Most of the tyrants themselves, both victims and perpetrators of the crimes of the blacklist, would make their respective exits. Welles would return for only one more picture, *Touch of Evil*, an undeniable masterpiece that would fall victim to yet another studio hatchet job, although he continued working and making films elsewhere. In 1955 Howard Hughes sold RKO to General Tire and Rubber company who would run the studio into the ground. Harry Cohn died of a heart attack in a hotel in Arizona in 1958. By that time Zanuck, Selznick, Louis B. Mayer and virtually all the other moguls had vanished. Jack Warner was the last one standing, retiring in 1969.

Just as all of these real tyrants vanished, so did the fictional ones. Ayn Rand directed movie makers with her 1947 "Screen Guide for Americans," positing, "All too often industrialists, bankers and businessmen

are presented on the screen as villains, crooks, chiselers or exploiters. One such picture may be taken as non-political or accidental. A constant stream of such pictures becomes pernicious political propaganda: it creates hatred for all businessmen in the mind of the audience, and makes people receptive to the cause of Communism." Rand's observations on American cinema are uncanny. She noticed what most critics at the time merely danced around. Her description of "industrialists" captures their on-screen representation perfectly, but it also portrays their real-life counterparts even more authentically. From what we know of the Tinseltown tyrants, how could they be classified as anything other than "villains, crooks, chiselers or exploiters?"

The problem was Hollywood listened too closely to Ayn Rand. Movies that featured scenes of moviemaking and industrialists in their true light came fewer and farther between. The very thing that fueled Hollywood—the perpetuation of its self-image as a nightmare factory—was running on empty. No longer did one look towards Tinseltown with those words simultaneously corrupt and naïve ringing out, "Anything is possible in this country." Hollywood was the place where it had once been possible and, more remarkably, where it had all once really happened. But the manifest destiny had played out. The tyrants behind it all had crawled off into a shadowy corner behind the big tin sign on the hill reading HOLLYWOOD.

**"Remember, angel, in the beginning was the land. Motion pictures came later."**

*In A Lonely Place*



HOLLYWOODLAND

# CHARACTERS LIKE ISLANDS

Religious Powerlessness in the  
films of Ingmar Bergman

by MICHAEL THURSTON

portrait by JENNIFER BI



FAMOUSLY, INGMAR BERGMAN HAD a strict, religious upbringing.

His father, a Lutheran pastor, became the chaplain to the king of Sweden and dragged the young Bergman from church to church as a child, instructing him in rigid Lutheran practices. The severity of this upbringing most potently manifests itself in the way his intensely personal movies are centered on largely isolated characters attempting but failing to find solace in one another. David (Gunnar Björnstrand) in *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961) explains this predicament to his daughter Karin (Harriet Andersson) who has recently estranged him: “You see Karin, one draws a magic circle around oneself

to keep everything out that doesn't fit one's secret games. Each time life breaks through the circle, the games become puny and ridiculous. So one draws a new circle and builds new defenses.” Bergman's strict upbringing resulted in a circle he drew tighter and tighter as he increasingly isolated himself from others. For much of his life Bergman famously inhabited a hidden corner of his beloved Fårö Island where he might go for days without speaking to a single soul.

This penchant for solitude finds its way into Bergman's films as an active aversion towards intimacy. Moments of interpersonal connection are plagued with guilt or shame and familial ties quickly verge on the

incestuous. *The Silence* (1963) takes place primarily in a hotel room, where a promiscuous mother, her young son, and her uptight, intellectual sister are all staying. While the mother takes a bath, she calls in her child to wash her back. The son does so and, in a moment of shared affection, rests his head upon her back and closes his eyes. While the moment is innocent enough, for the audience this gesture has subtle tones of perversion. In probably the most dramatic scene of *Through A Glass Darkly*, the schizophrenic Karin runs away from her brother, Minus (Lars Passgard), to an old, dilapidated shipwreck washed up on the coast of the island they inhabit. When the brother enters the hold to find her huddled in the back, he grabs her and tries to wake her up. She grabs him and pulls him close in an embrace—the camera swiftly cuts away to rainwater falling from the decrepit ceiling, with the

dirty planks and bizarre angles of the shipwreck mimicking Karin's mental deterioration. We never see what happens in the hull of that boat, but the implication is undeniably present.

Much of the film until now has dwelled on the fears of Karin's slowly loosening grip on reality and her family's corresponding estrangement from her. With the implication of incest, Minus' attempts at intimacy are thus subtly perverted. *Through A Glass Darkly* seems to put intimacy and incest hand in hand, as if close relationships are shameful and damaging. This association highlights a recurring catch-22 in Bergman's works, and to a large extent his life: his characters long for closeness, but are dissatisfied and ashamed when they find it.

Bergman seems to punish his characters for such moments. *Cries and Whispers* (1972) features a similarly coercive dynamic between the two main characters—sisters



THE SILENCE (1963)

Karin (Ingrid Thulin) and Maria (Liv Ullmann). Karin is a reflection of her husband and the strict comportment his dignified diplomatic career demands. She represses her emotions to justify her distance from everyone, including her family. Maria's callous indifference to the world, on the other hand, is almost inexplicable. In one scene, Maria's husband stabs himself while she backs out of the room, expressionless. Following the death of the third sister, Agnes (Harriet Andersson), Maria attempts to open up to Karin, offering to start the friendship they never had as children: "We could laugh and cry together. We could talk to each other for days and nights on end. We could hold each other tight." Karin pushes Maria away, spitting out: "I don't want you to be kind to me." Later that evening, after lashing out at Maria, Karin apologizes and the sisters speak with each other as if for the first time. All diegetic sound is cut and the camera moves back and forth between the two sisters' faces as they embrace and speak to each other.

To a large extent, this intimacy is the unattainable goal of Bergman's characters. Everyone seems to speak in either contemptuous whispers or piercing cries, unable to maintain a stasis of connection through lucid, room-tone communication. Towards the end of the movie the sisters finally decide to leave the mansion after its sale. Karin pulls Maria aside and asks if they are still as close as they were that evening. Maria replies "yes," but it is clear that she has returned to her flirtatious indifference when she avoids Karin's gaze and diverts her questions. Karin accuses her: "You touched me. Don't you remember that?" The bond

all too briefly shared between the sisters has become a source of their shame. Having finally reached what they desired most, they are now left with a feeling of remorse after sinning. Only their respective façades of repression and indifference can stifle their internal disgust. As we watch this scene we get the sense that the tragedy of the two sisters' relationship lies not in their inability to connect, but in this connection's inability to exist alongside the overwhelming guilt it produces. The sisters must maintain their isolated appearances, even as an angry but honest desire for their lost connection endures.

The characters in *Through A Glass Darkly*, the first of Bergman's informal "Trilogy of Faith," seem to seek a sort of religious salvation through their relationships with one another. At the end of the film, Minus and David speak to each other following Karin's forced removal to a mental institution. Minus, deeply depressed, demands proof of God as a reason to continue living. David glumly responds: "I can only give you a hint of my own hope. It's knowing that love exists for real in the human world." Until now, there seemed to be a cruel irony in each character's search for God in loving relationships. Karin would get up every morning, led by a disembodied voice, and wait for the arrival of God in a decrepit room full of people. At the climax of the film, she conflates God's entrance through the door and the arrival of a helicopter from the mental institution, which she perceives as a spider: "The door opened, but the God that came out was a spider." Previously, the spectator



THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY (1961)

heard Karin's allegedly imagined whispers. Now, however, her madness is irrefutably exposed as her vision turns horrifyingly sour. As we watch this helicopter descend we understand that Karin's tragedy, the source of her punishment, comes from her devotion to an imagined god. She becomes irreversibly separated from her family as she fully descends into madness.

Earlier in the film, Karin brings Minus to the decrepit room where she has her visions. She cries, confessing to Minus: "Sometimes I have this intense yearning. I long for that moment when the door will open and all the faces will turn to him . . . I think it's God who will reveal himself to us." She then becomes gravely serious, and tells him that she must choose between Martin and the imaginary others. "I've made up my mind. I've sacrificed Martin." Bergman chooses to depict madness as a cruel deception: Karin

neglects her family to find God in her imagined visions. The end of the film further illuminates her deception. David, watching sadly from a window as the helicopter takes Karin away to an institution, is approached by a traumatized Minus. The son asks his father for proof of God, which is where David gives his unsure reply that "love exists for real in the human world." Their fleeting faith reflects their own evanescent happiness that they find in their relationships. Minus says hopefully "then Karin is surrounded by God, since we love her . . . Can that help her?" David's unsure response has elucidated the film's thesis: the characters search for God through intimacy with each other, catching only obscured glimpses of divinity or happiness, hence the title *Through A Glass Darkly*.

*Cries and Whispers*, which was released a full 11 years after



*CRIES AND WHISPERS* (1972)

*Through a Glass Darkly*, expresses a sort of jealous contempt for the faithful Christian. A priest, after an impassioned prayer following Agnes' death, remarks that Agnes' faith was greater than his. Her painful death served as proof that God "found [her] worthy of bearing a long and torturous agony." Later on in the film, Anna dreams that the dead Agnes is calling to her sisters for help. Karin rejects Agnes, saying she wants nothing to do with her death, but Maria agrees to Agnes' request. But her repulsion at Agnes' touch reveals her falsity; she throws Agnes on the floor out of disgust, leaving Anna to care for her. Anna, the devout, simple servant, shames the two sisters and shuts herself in with Agnes to care for her. Bergman lets two close-ups of the sisters depict their disgrace, cutting to a recurring image of Anna cradling her head at her exposed breast like a mother breastfeeding a child. Agnes is a simple, childlike

creature whose relationship with her sisters is distanced by their faults. She recalls in a flashback: "Maria and mother always had so much to whisper about, but then they were so alike. I used to wonder jealously what they had to laugh at." However, the mother, also played by the actress who plays Maria, Liv Ullmann, is discovered later in the flashback in a moment of sorrow, contrasting with her jovial whispers with Maria. Agnes puts her hand on her mother's face: "And for that moment we were very close." Bergman seems to express his own longing for the capacity of religious belief in his depiction of Agnes' innocent faith. As the mother gazes at the young Agnes and as Maria and Karin shamefully look at the door behind which Anna dutifully helps her sick mistress, Bergman manifests a sad jealousy for the childlike faithfulness Agnes maintains in the face of her tormenting illness and his inability to be a part of it.

The intensity of Bergman's characters is emphasized by his lingering close-ups, where he often choreographs more than one character at a time in the same frame. Following the previously described scene in the boat in *Through A Glass Darkly*, Karin asks Minus to get her some water. As he leaves, the camera settles on a close-up of Karin's face, disheveled and tormented, crawling on the floor of the ruined ship. Minus runs back to the house through the rain, but collapses on his bedroom floor, gazing up at the window before he can bring it to her. The camera settles on his face. "God," he pleads. Bergman's close-ups allow greater identification with the characters, meditating on their problems as they wrestle with life. We can see, through the close-up, how hopelessly separated Minus is from his sister as he looks through the window out into the storm where she lies. The film then cuts to a close-up of the two siblings lying together in the dirty boat hull. Karin lays her head on Minus' shoulder and closes her eyes. Notably, neither sibling looks at the other; Bergman conspicuously demonstrates their distance as Minus, unmoving, looks painfully away from her.

*Cries and Whispers* takes the feeling of these close-ups and endows them with an even harsher, analytical nature unlike almost any other film in Bergman's repertoire. Intense close-ups of individual characters facing the camera, accompanied by ominous, indecipherable whisperings, precede key scenes depicting their respective natures. These close-ups draw the spectator's attention to the characters, forcing us to examine them closely. Their guilty acknowledgement of

the camera furnishes the close-ups with a cruel vulnerability that we expect to see emerge again in the accompanying scene. In one sequence, Maria attempts to seduce the family doctor while her husband is out of the country. The doctor, interrupting her advances, brings her in front of a mirror. He gives a lengthy, meticulous analysis of her face and what it says about her: "Your mouth has a slightly hungry, dissatisfied expression." This taxing shot epitomizes the classic Bergman close-up: looking past the façade for a deep, often intrusive exploration of the character's plight. His characters are like islands, ashamedly isolating themselves from others, but always jealous and desirous of any kind of intimacy.

Bergman's religious films tend to be his bleakest, and perhaps their most devastating element is the punishing, inevitable estrangement that he seems to express through his characters' failed interactions. For Bergman, there are no innocent relationships. Characters are penalized for their attempts at intimacy through corruption or disappointment. Throughout his films, there always exists an overarching desire for fleeting glimpses of love and happiness through God and each other. At the end of *Cries and Whispers*, Anna reads an extract of Agnes' diary where she shares a moment of happiness with her sisters. After the flashback, the scene fades to the text "THUS THE CRIES AND WHISPERS FALL SILENT." For Bergman, these fleeting moments of happiness suffice as his entire meaning and purpose of life, compensating for all its hardships.



# GOLD FROM THE SKY

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The Capital-Driven Narratives of Journalism Films

by SAM FENTRESS

ANY FILM ABOUT JOURNALISM MUST FIRST be a film about narratives, and the best films about journalism explore the ways narratives are produced.

Three films from distinctly different periods address this idea: Billy Wilder's 1951 *Ace in the Hole* considers how a man's greed can become a community's greed and how narratives can fuel capital. 1976's *All the President's Men* follows two reporters as they struggle to scrape together facts in an empty and shadowed political landscape. The journalists at the center of 2005's *Good Night, and Good Luck.*, directed by George Clooney, work together to deliver a blow to the rising paranoia of McCarthyism during the 1950s wielding the newly-found potency of the televisual image.

Most journalism films are about people to trying to tell stories with integrity. Characters in journalism films—like Al Pacino in Michael Mann's *The Insider* or the investigative team in 2016's *Spotlight*—inevitably face barriers to the production of truthful narratives. Sometimes these are political obstacles (as in *All the President's Men*, where the thick curtain of the Nixon administration prevents civilian visibility), and other times the obstacles are corporate (as in *The Insider*, where the same network that resists Edward R. Murrow's progressive broadcasts decades earlier in *Good Night, and Good Luck.* tries to bury a dangerously-litigious *60 Minutes* program). In *All the President's Men*, Deep Throat, the FBI informant

who drops clues on the Watergate trail for the pair of *Washington Post* reporters played by Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford, tells Woodward to “follow the money.” This is a good recommendation for Woodward, as it leads them to a successful story, but it is also good advice for the viewer of any journalism film, as storytelling rarely exists in isolation from someone providing a brown paper bag of cash.

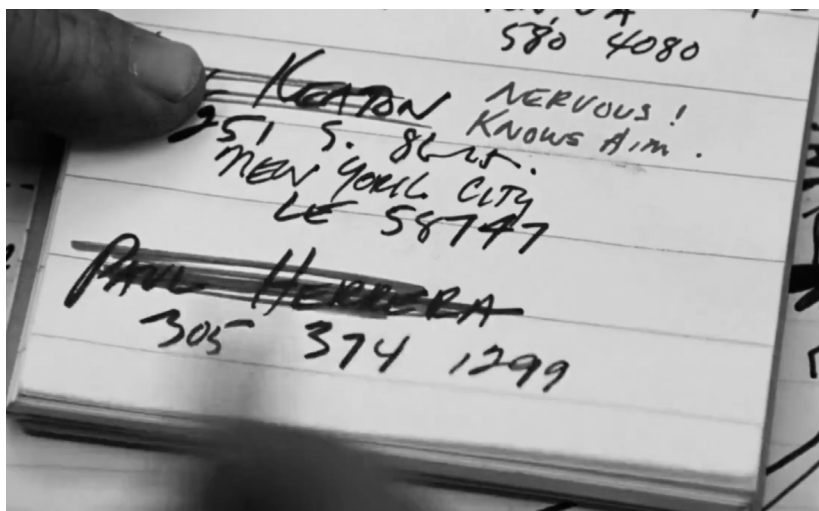
So the question of *who tells stories* is importantly tied to the question of *who gets paid to tell stories*. In the film world, one need only look to the raucous circus of the Academy Awards for reminders that getting a job telling a story has been traditionally difficult for people who are not in a place of power and privilege. Echoing this unfortunate truth is the fact that the heroes (or in the case of *Ace in the Hole*, villains) of all three of the films discussed in this essay are white and are men.

This fact does not mean their successes—as journalists, as society’s truth-sharing heroes—are not still successes. But it’s dangerous to consider their successes as universal. It’s tempting to think of some kinds of reporting, i.e. Woodward and Bernstein’s Watergate investigation, as being on some level of objective truthfulness. But even in the case of fact-based journalism (or *especially* in this case), it is impossible not to consider the voice behind a piece of writing, and equally important to remember that a film about journalism involves a telling of a telling: these films do not observe journalism itself so much as the people who are producing it.

Two of these three films take place in historical frames of reference, and their filmmaking reflects the particularities of that time and place.

Alan Pakula and George Clooney both incorporate historical footage into their films. In *All the President’s Men*, this happens on a little tube TV perched in the newsroom itself. The screen becomes a kind of clock—each speech, hearing, press conference is a tick forward, grounding us in the timeline of the early 1970s. The incorporation of real televisual textures reinforces the illusion that the two-hour movie spans two years. The TV images allow us to compress our experience into bite-size moments, slipping through months in the portal of the screen. In *Good Night, and Good Luck.*, Clooney cuts footage into the thread of the film, calling attention to the layers of media the film invokes. The men in the newsroom carefully select clips to use against McCarthy, and so does the director; Clooney seems as interested in pointedly portraying the senator through clips as the men preparing a news segment. Media awareness permeates the film.

Journalism films must choose how precisely to heroize their protagonists. While films like *The Insider* treat their leading men like action stars, *Good Night* paints Edward R. Murrow and his team with Romantic remembrance. If the film has any noticeable author, it’s cinematographer Robert Elswit (known for his work with Paul Thomas Anderson), who lights and shoots Murrow (David Strathairn, probably in his best role) as a newsroom singularity. A long tracking shot midway through the film starts close on Murrow alone in his barely-lit office late at night, typing away for the next day’s big show. As we pull out slowly, we notice Clooney on the side smoking a cigarette. “Write your closing piece,” Clooney mutters.



ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN (1976)

Murrow doesn't look up. He keeps typing. "It's Shakespeare." Murrow is not a hero who's going to use his fists, but his fingers at the typewriter.

In *All the President's Men*, The typewriter is a symbol of power, even of violence. The opening shot of the ear-splitting typewriter clack is a manifesto, a clarion call, an atomic bomb. Like some kind of spiritual cry, it asserts the power of the Word and sets a tone of reverence and awe towards the journalist's act. Bernstein and Woodward, too, are artists (the Simon and Garfunkel to Murrow's Sinatra). They are scruffier, hungrier, and of a different time. Pakula's camera pays a great deal of attention to Woodward's notebook, and his scribbles are not those of a measured fact-checker, but a crazed story hunter-gatherer. They are fervent, almost abstract, and the constant cut-ins to the action of the pen bolster our inclination to enshrine the protagonists as Romantic poet-journalists.

Steven Soderbergh, in a *New York Times* commentary he did 15 years ago, suggested that it would be hard to get a movie like *All the President's Men* made today. It is too slow, he said, too talky. Still, he admitted, the presence of two of the day's biggest stars might have helped. Bernstein and Woodward were not roguishly attractive like Redford and Hoffman.

There's a distinct dynamism in films about journalism between how they are made, when they are made, and when they are about. *All the President's Men* is about the 1970s, but it is also of the 1970s. It's shot on 35mm film, in color, and the camera work by Gordon Willis has the same virtuosic touch as the work he'd done earlier that decade in *The Godfather* and the work he'd do later in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*. *Good Night, and Good Luck* was also shot on color 35mm, but was corrected in the editing room to black-and-white. *Ace in the Hole* is black-and-white



GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK. (2005)

35mm, and though it is just as much a time capsule (I'm thinking of Jacques Rivette's quote about every film being a documentary about its own making), of these three films it is the least attached to its time.

*Ace in the Hole* feels like it is a film that could be made at almost any point in the past century because, in part, it's a film interested in capital. One needn't look far to find films at any point in cinema history about men exploiting innocent communities on a massive scale. (In fact, this has become a bit of a recent subgenre, for which Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* or Adam McKay's *The Big Short* form the syllabus.) Though *Ace in the Hole* boasts some classic lines about the trade ("Bad news sells best, because good news is no news" and "Tomorrow this'll be yesterday's paper and they'll wrap a fish in it"), it is much more interested in how greed can become law. In her Film Noir seminar, Columbia Professor

Ann Douglas speaks about narratives that generate corpses and corpses that generate narratives—in journalism films it is about narratives generating capital and capital generating narratives.

In *Ace in the Hole*, Kirk Douglas plays a washed-up reporter who turns water to wine when he launches a media circus around a local mining accident—a man named Leo Minosa has become trapped in a cave. The film is set in Arizona, a strangely Western departure from the East Coast newsrooms of most other journalism films. It is very much a film about the West—Douglas' character, Chuck Tatum, is the prophet of a media manifest destiny.

Douglas plays it heavy-dose slick. Tatum can hardly keep a smile off his face when he first hears about the accident that will make him rich, and he works the story at every exploitative level. He makes under-the-counter deals with politicians, appropriates

Native American lore for mystique, and deceptively paints a failing marriage as a couple tragically torn apart. Lorraine and Leo Minosa are far from happy, however, and Lorraine (Jan Sterling, whose husband is trapped in a mountain) is like Tatum—more interested in the gold falling from the sky than her husband trapped under a ton of rock.

Our first entry into the mountain is one of the film's most expressionistic sequences. It's not hard to connect the dark, winding path to the stone tomb within the cave with the treacherous moral descent Tatum will make in broad daylight. When he reaches Leo, his face is caked with dust, and the smart, canted framing of Charles Lang, the cinematographer who also shot Wilder's *Sabrina* and *Some Like it Hot*, communicates the dangerous power structure already in place. To Leo, and to the people outside, Tatum will become a hero. But in the in-between space, the blind, crumbling passageways of rock, he knows his sin.

Tatum's main skill—and this is Wilder's cynical take on the job of the journalist—is manipulating appearance, and the film pays close attention to moments of visual control. When Tatum tells Lorraine to go pray to a rosary in public for the sake of the story, her response is as self-interested as his: "I don't go to church. Kneeling bags my nylons." When he insists, explaining that there will be photographers, she agrees, adding thanks for "writing me up so good in the paper. You really can make with the words."

Wilder must have known that Tatum's ethical choices are not so dissimilar from those of the writer-director, and that his failings as an artist

hunting for capital are not so different from those of Wilder and his Hollywood colleagues. The most disturbing scene in *Ace in the Hole* comes after the first wave of success. When Lorraine gets giddy with thanks for Tatum's plan, Tatum shuts down her advances. He insists she stop smiling (she is supposed to be mourning) even though they are inside where no one can see them. When she refuses, the moment explodes. He slaps her, and the smile vanishes.

What *Ace in the Hole* lacks in its calculable style, it makes up for in its ability to implicate capitalistic power structures with phenomenal storytelling. The hierarchies in the film (of the auteur over the actor, of the male over the female) are constructed entirely by money. What's obvious from the start is that capital commands people, but what's revealed gradually by the film's formal elements is that narratives command capital. Tatum's success is predicated on the fact that he is *not* a bad journalist; he's a great one. He understands that to the extent he can control a word, a sound, an image, he can control other people. Tatum's slap, the slap that controls image (in this case, the female image), is the fascistic arm of capitalism, an act of violent censorship motivated by money. Tatum's problem is most of ours—he can't beat death. When he leaves Leo in the cave too long, Leo dies. That's the end of the story. When the cave collapses, so with it the faulty pillars of capitalist narrative.

Perhaps the difference between a great journalist and a bad journalist is the same as that between a great artist and a bad artist. At the film's end, Tatum must confess his failure, and as he sounds out to the crowd gathered on the hilltop, he cries for quiet: "Listen

to me!” His phrasing of the next fact is particularly important: instead of saying “I killed Leo Minosa,” he states, “Leo Minosa is dead.” Besides the fact that any good writer avoids the passive voice, this statement—though perhaps more objective—is less adequate, less truthful, than the reality. Moreover,

a good journalist knows, like a good artist, that the job is not to get people to listen, it’s to point to something off in the distance, something they might not have seen without a guide. So Tatum cries: “Listen to me!” while Murrow, Woodward, and Bernstein cry: “Listen.”



ACE IN THE HOLE (1951)

# TWO TOKYOS

The Fractured Families of  
*Tokyo Sonata* and *Tokyo Story*

by HEIN WIN AUN

illustrations by  
CHARLOTTE FORCE

THE TITLE OF *TOKYO SONATA*, A 2008 MOVIE by Kiyoshi Kurosawa, is curious for a film that has little to do with music. Yes, it has a distinct sonata-like structure, and yes, there is music involved, but it could have just as aptly been named *Tokyo Story*, like Yasujiro Ozu's 1953 movie. As their namesakes suggest, both stories are set in Tokyo, but their connection goes beyond their titles. Both are family dramas presented as an earnest slice of life with the dysfunction and melancholy that goes along with it. The premise of *Tokyo Story* is simple—two aging parents visit their children in Tokyo in a changing post-war Japan. *Tokyo Sonata* draws its influence from Ozu's iconic family dramas, spinning the genre into something new—a modern take on a timeless story that weaves a tale of dread, despair and dissonance from the individual story-lines of each family member. If *Story* tells the tale of family dynamics that change as they move into modernity, *Sonata* is a report on the fracture of the family structure, a reflection on the growing confusion and absurdity of life in an increasingly modernized world.

Tomi Hirayama, the grandmother in *Tokyo Story*, remarks on how miraculous it is that she and her husband Shūkichi can arrive in Tokyo in just a day by train, yet this development does not seem to bring them any closer to their two adult children living in Tokyo: Kōichi, a



pediatrician, and Shige, a beautician. We see how this family meeting becomes something other than what the elderly couple expected as the children have lives and households of their own. Ozu presents their drifting family fabric through small moments of interaction between the members. Their two grandchildren hardly give the elders a sign of respect, let alone affection. In one of the more contrived scenes of the movie, Tomi questions if she will still be present when her grandson Isamu grows older—Isamu doesn't as much as acknowledge Tomi while he continues playing in the grass.

The generational gap is hardly reserved only for the relationship between grandchildren and grandparents. Koichi and Shige, both meaning well but leading busy lives of their own, delegate the task of showing their parents around Tokyo, passing them between each other's households until Noriko, the widowed wife of their second-born son, happily obliges. When faced with the cost and time of hosting their parents, the two children veer towards the economical, dismissing sashimi and Kabuki shows as needlessly extravagant. At one point, they try to send the couple to a seaside resort, only for them to return because of the loud gambling in the hotel at night. Without a word of dispute, they accept the treatment from their children who are too busy to receive them. It is only the widowed daughter-in-law who shows them real compassion as she gives them a grand tour of Tokyo and some spending money. The children finally seem to give their parents some recognition

only after Tomi dies and they return home for the funeral.

Kurosawa manages to endow *Tokyo Sonata*—a film made and set 45 years later—with just as many revelations about the modern Japanese family as *Tokyo Story*. *Sonata* too discusses the distance between a family within the walls of their house. It opens with the camera panning inside the family's dwelling, mimicking wind stirring within. The camera snaps to the back door left ajar in the storm, water pouring in. A woman, alone, attempts to dry the floor, but then she reopens the door and watches as the rain enters. From the opening scene, we see that the movie is concerned with entropy through this natural phenomenon, encroaching on the confines of the household. Rather than trying to tame it, she accepts the chaos inside.

*Sonata* transforms a typical family dinner into a reflection of the change that seems to have started in *Story*. Though the Sasaki family seems to dine together regularly, their close physical proximity does not ensure intimacy. Kurosawa captures this distance on camera in one scene by positioning the shot behind a shelf and staircase, bisecting the family members as they quietly eat. Though Kurosawa's symbolism may seem heavy-handed, the message is hardly clear. After all, these are just people living their daily lives.

There is a great deal under the surface of the simple plot of *Tokyo Story*. The changing pace of society is reflected in the children finding themselves too busy to pay their parents some due attention, even when they are about to send them

off elsewhere. The state of post-war Japan too is reflected in Noriko, the daughter-in-law. Her husband died in the war and his body was never found, leading Tomi to feel he is still alive “somewhere.” In response to the kindness Noriko shows her, Tomi beckons her to remarry—one the few tearful scenes Ozu shows us. Noriko cannot seem to break her stasis, eight years after her husband’s death.

Ozu paints his tale with a delicate brush, neither stripping his characters of their emotions nor filling the film with melodrama. The language is sparse and the dialogue is thin. When asked how he feels after the funeral, the widowed grandfather Shūkichi merely comments on the weather. There are no emotional eruptions or exaggerated conflicts; the couple, resigned to their age and place in a changing world, have come to terms with it. Even when the trip to Tokyo clearly turns out not to be what the grandparents had hoped for, they dutifully thank their children for the effort they’ve shown despite their busy lives. Though Ozu typically keeps his camera close to the ground, he pulls into closer shots for conversation scenes where it is the eyes that do the talking instead. In black-and-white, the teary clarity of the characters’ eyes conveys an astonishing depth of emotion, despite the formal dialogue. Shukichi’s face as he thanks funeral attendees for their kindness is much more telling.

Unlike Ozu, who is famed for his emotive family dramas, Kiyoshi Kurosawa is known for horror movies, notably *Cure* (1997) and *Pulse* (2001). Although *Tokyo Sonata* isn’t a blood-and-guts horror film,

Kurosawa doesn’t entirely shake the atmosphere of his most familiar genre. The potential for violence pervades *Sonata* through a murder-suicide that occurs in another family and the foreshadowing of a home invasion from the beginning, setting a tone of familial distrust. Kurosawa also plays with shadows in darker scenes, such as in a confessional between Ryuhei’s younger son and a schoolteacher, and in a botched job interview. People’s shadows grow larger than their bodies, moving alongside them on the walls like uncanny conjured doubles.

*Sonata* opens with an aging father, Ryuhei, losing his job due to his company outsourcing to China. Before the boss calls Ryuhei to let him go, a Chinese woman introduces herself to him with perfect fluency in Japanese. The man accompanying the woman remarks that you can hire three Chinese workers for the price of one Japanese. Filmed during the Great Recession, Kurosawa incorporates the concerns of a desperate time with a nation in fear of decline. Later in the movie, Ryuhei falls asleep in front of the TV and his wife wakes him up as he seems to be having a “nightmare.” Playing on the TV is news of China’s economic growth. Ryuhei doesn’t speak a word about losing his job to his stay-at-home wife. Instead, he hands her the month’s wages and goes on, business as usual.

Ryuhei soon finds out he is not alone as he meets a classmate, Kurosu, while loitering in a park, waiting for free food. His classmate too is unemployed, but has been for a while. He gives Ryuhei some advice on how to handle unemployment, speaking as if he is an expert on unemployment



BASED ON TOKYO STORY (1953)



BASED ON TOKYO SONATA (2008)

insurance and severance pay. Kurosu even has his phone set to ring five times an hour to keep up the appearance of a busy salaryman for his family. Even after being laid off, Ryuhei flexes his authority. He stalls a family dinner by grabbing a beer from the refrigerator, pouring it, and taking a sip before everyone can begin eating. After adorning such strong roles as fathers, their identities are put in jeopardy as they are unable to fulfill the most basic responsibility: to provide for their families. As Kurosu notes, his wife's "eyes are filled with distrust." Unemployment opens a

new crisis, or crises rather, for Ryuhei and his wife, who later learns about the situation.

Although his ability to feed his family has been shattered, Ryuhei remains an authoritative parent, a necessary symptom of his ideals as a father figure, disallowing his two sons to pursue their goals. His older son, Takashi, wants to enlist in the United States military in a new program. In his view, this program would allow him to help defend his family as Japan does not have a military of its own, another reflection of the nation's confused identity. The

younger son, Kenji, wishes to take piano lessons. The exact explanation for why Ryuhei denies them these ambitions is unclear beyond that he wants his children to have “happy lives.” Ryuhei’s demands on his children are fueled by his own lack of agency in his life, and they turn out to be just as futile. Takashi eventually does enlist without either parent’s permission, and Kenji takes lessons in secret. As the couple in *Tokyo Story* observed, time and other people, even one’s own children, cannot be controlled.

Kurosawa portrays Megumi, Ryuhei’s wife, most sympathetically, showing her thanklessly cleaning and preparing meals for the family. In one instance, she makes donuts for her family, but no one bothers to even glance at them, let alone eat them. Her utterances of “Won’t you have donuts?” echo throughout the house. Her labors of love are consistently taken for granted. No wonder she dreams of independence too with her acquisition of a driver’s license, something she only reveals to Takashi. Somehow, she gets a taste of freedom when a burglar, played by the famed Koji Yakusho, abducts her and makes her drive a convertible at knifepoint. The choice of a convertible is intentional. Ironically, it is the same car she gravitates to during an earlier solo trip to a car dealership. The burglar later gives her the opportunity to escape, but instead, still captivated by the slick convertible, she puts the roof down and drives on. For Megumi, the driver’s license represents freedom and roofs universally symbolize family ties. When she puts down the

car’s top we feel she is leaving her family behind.

All the individual stories of the family members eventually diverge, but being family, they are inextricably linked. At the climax of the movie, against our expectations, the family refuses to fall apart. One by one, wordlessly, they all return to the home and to the dinner table. Megumi puts on her apron and cooks for her husband and son, signifying that the rigid family structure is here to stay, although the dynamics have unquestionably changed.

It is in their endings where *Tokyo Sonata* and *Tokyo Story* harmonize, albeit through different notes. The ending of *Sonata* takes place four months after the near-death of the family. In its final scene, *Sonata* suddenly recollects its title, as music has been notably sparse throughout the movie, and sweeps up the discordance with a graceful overture. It manages to leave the audience with a catharsis reminiscent of that evoked by music. The melancholic euphony of the scene comes to symbolize the family’s acceptance of dissonant times, perhaps the only change that occurred in those four months. *Story* takes a bow, albeit in a different style, with the grandfather alone in his room, watching a boat leaving the harbor that their home overlooks. The boat initially appears to pull into the harbor but then trundles away, just as life for Shukichi and everyone else continues to toil forward. Both endings refuse definite resolution. Rather, they leave the viewer to resign to changing times while simultaneously witnessing the unchangeable.

# SOMETHING IS HAPPENING

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Two Youthful Revolutions by  
Chantal Akerman and Bertrand Bonello

by ETAN WEISFOGEL

“Don’t you feel something is about to happen? Things can’t stay like this. No, they gotta blow up. They have to.”

– *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the '60s in Brussels*

“It was bound to happen, right? ... It had to happen, it really had to happen.”

– *Nocturama*

IN 1994, FRENCH TELEVISION CHANNEL ARTE commissioned ten filmmakers to make short works about the broad theme of “youth.” Each film had to meet a highly specific set of criteria—they had to take place in a particular year between 1960 and 1990, and there had to be a party scene with rock music from the chosen era. The goal was to encourage a group of artists—some seasoned professionals, others fresh faces—to create an eclectic, deeply personal set of films that reflected, in some sense, the progression of younger generations over a 40-year span. What had changed? And what had stayed the same? The series was titled *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge*—in English, *All The Boys and Girls of Their Age*.

That title might be just as appropriate for Bertrand Bonello’s *Nocturama*, the French director’s most recent and most controversial work which was only just picked up for U.S. distribution by Grasshopper Films in February after premiering

almost a year earlier in France. *Nocturama* follows a diverse group of students all between the ages of 17 and 21, excluding the group leader in his 30s, and a younger member around 14. These characters are introduced silently in the picture's first half; we see their faces long before we hear them speak. The camera breathlessly follows them as they move through Paris, riding the metro, walking with purpose to various destinations, checking into hotels, picking up packages, getting back on the metro, and so on and so forth, their paths crossing and gazes meeting every so often so as to suggest some level of familiarity with each other. Their faces remain blank, steely. It becomes clear they are involved in some sort of complex, covert operation, the details of which are only barely filled in through a number of flashbacks. If you've read anything about the film and the controversy surrounding it, however, you have an idea of what is about to happen: they are going to carry out a series of attacks on Paris.

Certainly, such an intense thriller seems entirely antithetical in topic and style to Arte's anthology program of quiet, interpersonal coming-of-age dramas. However, watching the film in close proximity to episode three of *Tous les garçons . . .*, Chantal Akerman's *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the '60s in Brussels*, brought out some striking similarities in the way the two films view the power and potential of youth during moments of political unrest.

*Portrait* is not an overtly political film. It follows Michèle as she plays hooky from school. She meets a boy, Paul, at the movies, wanders around Brussels with him, sleeps with him,

then leaves him to go to a party with her best friend Danielle. There is the suggestion of romantic feelings towards Danielle, but they remain under the surface. There are only two explicit references to politics in the film. The first is when Paul admits to being a deserter from the army, a conversation which leads into the scene quoted at the beginning of this article, where they discuss the Vietnam War protests and their sense that something must change: "Don't you feel something is about to happen?" The second and most important reference is the film's subtitle—"April 68," which places the film just a month before the student protests of May '68 that spread from Paris to various neighboring areas, including Belgium where students briefly occupied the Free University of Brussels.

*Nocturama's* alternate title, *Paris is Happening*, is also instructive; these are both films about the feeling of something happening, the intangible but undeniable feeling that something is about to change, that things can't keep going the way they are going. Exactly how things are going isn't necessarily specified in either film. As mentioned, Vietnam is briefly discussed in Akerman's film, and there are references to unemployment at banks like HSBC in Bonello's. Ultimately, specific political issues seem less important than prevailing moods, a kind of mass tension that everyone feels but can't quite articulate.

In *Portrait*, that tension remains unrelieved. The film can be thought of as a pre-coming-of-age tale; all the events that other directors might choose to focus on in this girl's adolescence, the



development of her sexual identity, her burgeoning political consciousness, the confrontation with her parents (who are never shown in the film) over her playing hooky, are threads hinted at but never resolved. This unresolved tension is not oppressive; rather, it's exciting. The film is about the period in a person's life just before becoming oneself.

While *Portrait* exists in a moment of unresolved tension, *Nocturama* resides in the moment when that tension becomes so unbearable that it explodes. In the film that explosion is both literal and figurative, and Bonello does not seem interested in separating the action's symbolic meaning from its manifestation on the screen. It has been interesting to hear the film framed as a work about terrorism—even Grasshopper Films describes it as a “terrorism thriller”—when Bonello has said it was not his intention to make a film about terrorism. Indeed, at the Q&A following the film's New York premiere at the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual “Rendez-vous with French Cinema” festival, the director stated his preference for the term “insurrection.” Of course, a director cannot always be trusted to accurately describe his or her own work, and it makes sense that many would see the film in the light of terrorism considering its release in France came six months after the November 2015 attacks in Paris (the film was written five years before).

However, if one looks at the actual events as depicted in the film, his interpretation holds up. It becomes clear that the attacks involve destroying symbols of French national pride and

buildings associated with authority, financial and otherwise. It also becomes clear that the original plan specified that no one would be hurt. The intent is not to create terror or fear among the populace, but instead to signal a movement against the current structures of power in France.

Many might argue that these acts still constitute terrorism—I do not intend to weigh in on that debate, though it should be noted that the government within the film defines the collective as “enemies of the state”—but that's not the point. Rather, the point is that viewing the film in relation to a series of attacks that had not even happened when the film was written and, more importantly, that parallel the events of the film in only the most superficial ways makes the work seem entirely confused about its own message. Indeed, many of the responses from critics fall in line with this way of interpreting the film—they position the picture as a work about terrorism and ask exactly what the film is saying about the subject, determining it is the work itself that is confused. But remove the angle of terrorism, and suddenly the implications and significance of the narrative become much clearer: a group of young people, dissatisfied with the state of the world and their country, take radical action against their government and are promptly put down for their efforts.

When asked during the Q&A about his choice to make these characters so young, Bonello talked about the connection between youth and revolutionary movements throughout history. 1968 is, of course, the prime example, though he chose to discuss the punk movement instead.



NOCTURAMA (2016)

He also cited the startlingly young ages, between 16 and 18, of Japanese kamikaze pilots—not a revolutionary movement, but one where the young were asked to take radical action for a political cause. His message, in any case, is clear: if any group can be mobilized to take radical action for a cause, whether to a positive or negative end, it is the younger generation.

Both *Nocturama* and *Portrait* follow a similar structure, specifically in the way they position their young protagonists as agents of change within their narratives. The first acts of the films exist almost entirely in the open space of the city—there is the occasional detour into a building or metro station, but almost immediately the characters enter back into open air. These spaces suggest freedom, freedom of movement and, thus, freedom of will, but, as Gilles Deleuze proposes in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, the infrastructure

of these cities constrict the characters' movements, directing them along a set of predetermined paths. The way both Bonello and Akerman's cameras follow these characters' movements similarly suggests a push and pull between power and powerlessness. Their tracking shots alternate between motivated camera movement, directed by the motion of their characters, and unmotivated camera movement, readjusting to a different angle in the middle of a tracking shot or dollying forward, against the action of these characters, to suggest a world outside of their control.

The films' second acts move indoors to spaces of celebration. In *Portrait*, that space is a friend's home where Michèle and Danielle go for a late night party. In *Nocturama*, the space is an evacuated shopping mall where the group holes up for the night while waiting for the post-attack commotion to die down so they can make their quiet escape.

Ironically, it is within these closed spaces that the characters seem to have the most freedom—they're uninhibited in ways they could not be in the outside world. In *Portrait*, these unrestrained actions occur on a small scale: Michèle dances with Danielle, an ostensibly innocent act that is nonetheless the closest she comes to consummating her repressed feelings for her friend. In *Nocturama*, these actions occur on a much larger scale: the kids play out their greatest fantasies in the decadent shopping mall, riding around in a Go-Kart, taking advantage of the state-of-the-art speaker systems to play and dance along to their favorite tunes, and, most impressively, doing a lip-synced performance of Shirley Bassey's version of "My Way" in drag.

These spaces of infinite possibility soon close in on the characters and become oppressive forces. Michèle,

after having her brief moment of connection with Danielle, is subsequently reminded of the impossibility of their romance as the next song starts and Danielle goes to dance with another boy. In a single motion, the camera captures the end of Michèle and Danielle's dance, the boy entering the frame and taking Danielle. The camera then moves around the new couple while pushing in towards Michèle to observe her face as her elation turns to isolation and melancholy. (The music choice of "It's a Man's, Man's, Man's World" by James Brown would almost be too on-the-nose if the pairing of song and camera motion wasn't so perfectly executed.) In *Nocturama*, the kids realize too late that their hiding spot has been discovered by the authorities, and their self-created universe of freedom and play suddenly becomes the site of their



PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG GIRL AT THE END OF THE '60S IN BRUSSELS (1994)

demise. Some attempt to escape, others to fight back, others surrender. All are shot dead on sight.

The final shots of both films provide startlingly different views of the future for these kids. In *Portrait*, Michèle and Danielle reconnect outside and wander around the large lawn behind the house. Michèle decides that Paul and Danielle would be perfect for each other—one wonders if she is attempting a consummation by proxy in pairing her object of affection with the man she slept with earlier on. Perhaps she is simply resigning herself to a world where she cannot happily be with either. Still, despite this seemingly tragic, self-sabotaging action, the ending is bittersweet, even hopeful. The final shot is a wide composition of an open country field. Michèle and Danielle walk towards the camera. The sun is rising. They spot Paul in the distance and Danielle joins him off-camera. Suddenly Michèle turns around and walks away from us just before we cut-to-black and the credits roll. If Michèle has been searching for a space in which she can truly be free, running away from school, moving aimlessly around the city, attempting to give herself into the spirit at the party, here she finds that space. Deleuze's control theory no longer applies; the field is completely untampered with by humankind, there are no paths or directions. As she moves away from us into an uncertain future, we get the sense that she has discovered something about herself and that, whatever that is, it will equip her for whatever is to happen in the coming, tumultuous month.

The final shot of *Nocturama* is much bleaker, to say the least. Mika, the last surviving member of the

group, has been discovered and is now surrounded by the SWAT team. He is framed in close-up; the camera shoots from above, perhaps in pity, making him look small and weak, or perhaps in the position of heaven, where he has previously claimed he will go for carrying out these acts. However, his expression is not of inner peace. He is terrified. He begins to cry "help me," then again, louder and louder, until a gunshot ends both him and the film.

If *Portrait* suggests that the young can change themselves, then *Nocturama* has a very different message for those intent on changing the world. Whether or not the attacks are justified has little relevance to Bonello's real purposes of the film. Instead, he leads us to question the society that brings these kids to feel they have no other recourse but to attack the symbols of a state where all the power has been given to an elite, wealthy few who exploit the powerless. In that context, Mika's final cry for help becomes representative of their actions as a whole, their anger stemming from a desperate, unquenchable need for support. That cry is met with suppression.

Suppression met the cries of protesters during May '68, too. Police were sent to quell both the students, as well as the workers' strike that came out of the student protests. However, it was not merely suppression that killed the revolution. It died when President de Gaulle agreed to dissolve the National Assembly. His party won reelection handily. Thus its death was not a bang but a whimper. One wonders where Michèle was in all of this. As the protests quieted down and the workers returned to their stations, was she too crying for help?



NOCTURAMA (2016)



*PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG GIRL AT THE END OF THE '60S IN BRUSSELS (1994)*

# LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

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Greeting to you Harold

Inbox x



**estelle richard** <estellerichardrt@hotr

Apr 13 (13 days ago) ★



to ▾

Greeting to you Harold

I have been waiting to hear from you, didn't you receive my message

I sent to you?

Yours faithfully

Mrs. Estelle Richard



Click here to [Reply](#) or [Forward](#)