

know, to get a reading on majority sentiment as to particular issues or candidates; it is not to make individual voters feel "powerful." Such feelings of powerlessness as are worthy of attention do not involve the franchise at all. Rather, they involve another aspect of our particular democratic republic—namely, that part of our political theory which holds that a government should not excessively interfere in the lives of its citizens. Citizen feelings of powerlessness or even "alienation," if you will, may be quite real and quite justified to the extent they rest on governmental in-

terference in the discretion accorded individuals in their private domains. But such feelings are hardly reasonable indictments of the balloting process itself.

So I must confess to relatively little concern over the statistics on lack of voter participation, and to relatively little sympathy for those who do not vote. To be sure, voting should not be a burdensome endeavor, and no doubt it behooves our government and candidates for its offices to arouse voter interest. But at bottom, my reaction to this problem involves what is, in our era, fairly unpopular counsel—to

wit, except in cases of race discrimination, the non-voter has no one to blame but himself. Voting is at base a collective exercise, designed to elicit a prevailing view among the citizenry as a whole. If one is too lazy or unconcerned to participate, so be it, and may he disturb us not with his complaints. If, on the other hand, one feels "powerless" and "alienated," I suggest that he take another look at precisely how much power the franchise was designed to give him; and that he then reassess his expectations as a potential voter to determine if they are reasonable. □

THE TALKIES

by

Philip Terzian



An Introductory Note

When the editor of this magazine very kindly invited me to review movies, I told him that I was not certain that I could because I am very largely unhappy about the state of the cinema, have been for some time, and was not at all sure that I should wish to observe at first hand its further decline.

However, on reflection, I decided that if anyone should look at them it might as well be me, for I am as irresistibly drawn to chronicling horror as I am to pleasure, and a similar paradox rests in my attitude to film: I like movies in principle, and dislike most that I see. They have certainly become products of their time: simple-minded, loud, self-consciously fashionable, they are undeniably a characteristic '70s institution. Over the years I have had to retreat into the expedient of seeking out old (and in many cases very old) favorites for solace, but that is probably a dishonest attitude for a putative fan. Movies are, for good or ill, a part of our contemporary mythology and intellectual life—indeed many of our most horrifying cultural icons are descended from filmdom—and it might

be useful to watch the spectacle and draw some lessons.

Spectacle, indeed, and critics have been particularly culpable, for it is they who should be the illuminating influence in film culture. Instead they have become part of the mad process, slavish adherents to trendiness, masters of articulating the obvious, frequently little more than press agents trumpeting for various actors and directors. Or, what is worse, they have grown turgidly analytical in a fashion that is almost comically academic: so obsessed with form and function, camera angles, exterior shots, splicing and other technical minutiae that it is nearly impossible to recall they are speaking of something they consider a form of art. It should be the responsibility of the critic to consider art, judge it, explain his judgment, and perhaps draw some inductive conclusions. Why was this movie dull, fraudulent, eloquent? Why did I laugh in spite of myself? Is this movie a symptom or an idea? He should be wary of conventional wisdom, and consider also that culture is a cumulative phenomenon.

Two examples might suffice: some years ago the *Newsweek* reviewer gave *Bonnie and Clyde* an unfavorable notice and then, realizing he was drastically out of step with the critical community, reversed himself in the following issue. To what avail? To demonstrate that, in a democracy, opinion

should be uniform, that the judgment of consensus is immutable? There was also a time when it seemed *The New Yorker*, in its capsule descriptions of plays, characterized nearly every one as a "biting anti-war satire" when, of course, a pro-war play would have been truly satirical. Satire invariably turns into orthodoxy, and happy the man who can tell when.

The cult of personality has always been a dominant theme in film and there seems to be no conclusion about who is the hero of movie-making. At the moment it is the director, but it has been the actor, the screenwriter, even, in a twisted sense, the producer. In any case, each celebration has brought forth an equally ubiquitous and equally nauseating image that is etched indelibly in journalism, in the annals of popular thinking and interpretation.

The screenwriter. Those photographs of William Faulkner in sun glasses and Bermuda shorts tapping out the script of *The Big Sleep* do not explain that he, like Scott Fitzgerald and Dorothy Parker and the rest, was in Hollywood as an act of desperation, arguing plot and dialogue with former shoe salesmen. The case of the Hollywood Ten has given us an episode in the morality play of creativity *vs.* commerce (or, in their case, politics *vs.* politics). But it should be noted that the agonies of screenwriters do not inevitably benefit the cause of art, as when the late

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Dalton Trumbo, after years of blacklisting, was finally unleashed to realize his epic allegory (*Johnny Got His Gun*) and brought forth an outdated molehill.

The director. As I said, we are presently assailed by the notion that directors represent the essential ingredient of films, and most of them have learned to behave in time-honored uniformity. How confusing it is to recall which was which when we open the pages of a news magazine and find a feature story on one. There he is, a swivel-hipped, jean-clad artiste, usually in early middle age, a man who would otherwise spend his days riding a motorcycle but instead swaggers around the set waving his phallic lens and speaking profoundly on *The Tonight Show*. I don't expect to be guilty of eulogizing these creatures, but hope to be able to decide what, if anything, should be done with them.

Or with the cinema as whole. At some pernicious moment in recent times, "movies" became "films"—with all the pretense that suggests—and were turned into creatures of their audience. Not content merely to entertain, movie-makers now seek largely to educate, a laudable goal, but ultimately dangerous inasmuch

as it takes an educated person to do the educating, and most movie people, in whatever capacity, are not overburdened with learning, or even, alas, talent. When a vaudevillian *manqué* seeks after the truth, the result is more often than not embarrassing (*Last Tango in Paris*, *Shampoo*, *Carnal Knowledge*, etc.). The show becomes a harangue, and that, mixed with a misunderstanding of theatre and the temper of our unsubtle age, adds up to a national bashing of the head. What is revealing is that the ostensibly intelligent audience seems in fact to encourage it. How often have our wavering thinkers debased their judgment before a movie that is patently absurd, or dishonest? So many movies no longer purport to tell a story or raise a laugh or illustrate an idea—with the demise of reading, they are the original source, the model for life to imitate.

This was revealed to me in the course of my undergraduate career (not so many years ago) when I observed that behavior was so often modeled on cinematic themes, a particular irony since movies have so consistently misunderstood and caricatured university life. The fanciful image of

a generation ago (Jack Oakie, Lanny Ross, June Allyson) gave way to the bizarre world of the early '60s: fraternity brothers at State eternally shuttling between the beach and the gym, which in turn led to the inimitable late '60s—a universe of bleary-eyed, dull-voiced, idealistic youth storming the administration building (*Getting Straight*, *The Strawberry Statement*, etc.). Happily, the whole subject is lately in eclipse.

But where it will all end, knows God. Movies are in their childhood. There is an increasing abundance of them, although statistically there must be few masterpieces. Comedy is inevitably handicapped in a heavy-handed and self-pitying era such as ours. The much-lauded end of the studio system has, like universal popular suffrage, not necessarily improved the quality of the product. As the potential of television has evaporated into Newton Minow's vast wasteland, the demands on the cinema grow. There is a growing understanding of the historic value of film. Tomorrow is another day.

We shall see. □

John R. Coyne, Jr.

Charlie

With the process of selecting our Presidents in the hands of convention delegates, we don't have anything to worry about. Do we?

The single most significant result of the conventions last summer is that the networks are rerunning every old Ronald Reagan movie they can dig up.

Outside of that, the results are mixed. But at least until November, we have only four major things to contend with—Gerald Ford, Robert Dole, Jimmy Carter, Walter Mondale. Now that's no cause for rejoicing, to be sure, for those four things can be awfully boring. But earlier in the year, before the conventions, just think of the things we had to carry around with us—Morris Udall, Birch Bayh, Henry Kissinger, detente, Fred Harris, Martin Luther King, Sr., Scoop Jackson, George Wallace, primaries, the CBS-New York Times poll, Terry Sanford, Jerry Brown,

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Tom Hayden, Proposition 13, Frank Church, David Broder. But now phase one is finished, the conventions are over, and we can forget about certain things for good—things like 16c, the Mississippi delegation, Hubert Humphrey, Edmund Muskie, James Buckley's vice presidential candidacy, Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller, William Scranton, William Ruckelshaus, and, praise be, Richard Schweiker, the most forgettable thing of all.

In 1980, of course, it will all begin again, and some of those things will still be part of the burden we'll have to shoulder once more—things like the CBS delegate count, votes prefaced with "the beautiful island of Guam, where America's day begins," John Connally, Jerry Brown, maybe Teddy Kennedy, Amy Carter, Bill Moyers, "New Mexico, the land of enchantment," David Brinkley, Roger Mudd's kid, Moyer's kid, balloons, frisbees, porcine faces, that

obese lady the cameras zoom in on who looks like she's zonked out on Hostess ho-ho ding-dongs and Old Mr. Boston lemon flavored gin, the refugees from every Shriners convention ever held, Clarke Reed, benedictions, Sam Donaldson, Sonny Bono, Dan Rather, foolish hats, Evans and Novak, body odor, Tony Orlando.

We still have those four major things to carry until November, and on election eve there'll be things like CBS vote projections to carry. But the conventions are over, newsmen no longer have to crib from one another in order to try to analyze the latest unanalyzable move by John Sears, and the delegates have all gone home to sober up.

It'll be hard at first to settle down again to the daily grind back in Sweat, South Dakota, or Bump, Texas. And there'll be one or two conventioners who'll have a hell of a time explaining to the little woman