

CINÉPHILIA

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“Photography is truth. And cinema is truth twenty-four times a second.”

– Jean-Luc Godard

EDITORIAL

by Matthew Clayfield

For those of you who know me well, it probably comes as no surprise that I’ve decided to “cut the ribbon” on this thing with a quote from the French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard. However, believe it or not, there’s actually more to it than mere personal preference – there is, to “deconstruct” my decision, a subtext lurking underneath it. Not only is Godard, in my opinion, one of the three greatest filmmakers of all time; but he was also, way back when, a film critic for the legendary film journal, *Cahiers du cinéma*. Along with François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol and Eric Rohmer, Godard actually got his start in film criticism and theory, and this was, as far as I’m concerned, absolutely integral to his development as a filmmaker. And when you think about it, how could it not have been? *Cahiers du cinéma* was really just a prolonged exploration and discussion of the cinema, with people who really, *really* loved it. And I guess that’s why I’m writing to you now.

I’m looking for a film culture in which both production and discussion are celebrated and have their place. I’m looking for a genuine, bona fide group of cinéphiles and filmmakers to really get together and discuss *cinema*. And sincerely I hope that there’s place for a journal such as this one, however sporadic and irregular its publication may become. And while I don’t expect a following of millions and I don’t expect to one-up the critics of *Cahiers*, I do hope to write, and to read, and to watch.

And if no-body else is interested, I’ll just keep doing it for myself.

Enjoy.

– m.

FEATURE ARTICLE

BECAUSE IT’S “COOL”

by Matthew Clayfield

From here on in, I reject – on any and all levels – the messy and illogical justification given by many student filmmakers when asked, quite simply, the question of “why?” This is *the* fundamental

question that must be asked when making cinema, and the majority of student filmmakers fail dismally when asked it. On a very basic level, where does one put the camera, and *why*? Why does this shot pan, dolly, or tilt? How does it do what it does, how does it show what it shows, and why, why, why, why, *why*? And “because it’s cool” is not an answer.

Films are, both consciously and sub-consciously, formal constructs; they are, more simply put, assembled works (of art, entertainment or both) that have been put together using a multitude of techniques (primarily, in my opinion, mise-en-scène and editing). With each and every film, someone (usually the director) has had to decide how these techniques are to be used, and how to construct – from scratch – the film. That person, in my opinion, must be able to answer two very simple questions: how and why. These questions, as it happens, both rely on and support one another.

Cinematic technique, of course, can be used on a number of levels – it can create a mood; suggest an idea; or imply the film’s entire thematic subtext. A wide-shot that “isolates” something in the centre of frame, for example, suggests a feeling of isolation; a cut between two disparate shots – and this is really just pure Eisenstein here – creates a meaningful juxtaposition, the significance of which is then felt and understood by an audience. Now, while the creation of mood or the suggestion of an idea could well be one’s answer to the question of “why,” as far as I’m concerned, that’s really far too simple – “why” can only be answered, I think, when the audience and their reaction to a technique – their emotional or intellectual response – is taken into account by the filmmaker:

“So, why are you cutting there?”

“Because I want to show the audience this shot here, so that they can understand this piece of information there, and thus, ultimately, react and respond to the film in the following ways...”

“Ah, I see; that’s excellent! But now that you’ve told me just *why* you are cutting, can you explain to me *how* it’ll work?”

Of course, one can answer “how” and “why” as though the questions are independent of one another, but the filmmaker with the greater skills should pretty much be able to answer them in tandem – because, let’s face it, when one is able to verbalise not only what they want to do, but also how they’re going to go about doing it (and why), that’s when you know (at least for the most part) that this a person in control of their craft.

What I want to see more of in the work of student filmmakers is exactly that sort of thinking – more people asking themselves

how they’re going to use film technique to say what they’re going to say, and *how* they’re going to use it to manipulate the audience. Most importantly, I want to see people asking themselves *why* they’re going to choose one thing over another – be it a camera move; a musical cue; a line of dialogue; or a jump-cut. If I see a tracking shot in a student film, I want to know that someone sat down and worked out its purpose; that they sat down and worked out their film as a whole. I want to see technique, story and theme coming together to create complete, cohesive and unified films, and “because it’s cool” is simply not an answer.

Unfortunately, however, I think that, in most places that you find young and emerging filmmakers, this “cool factor” has actually become the standard answer to questions such as “why”. I myself, these past few weeks, have found myself getting more and more excited about something as ultimately trivial as a shooting format! Yes, we’d all like to shoot on 16mm, or work with dollies and tracks and Steadicams, but even if we *can*, that doesn’t mean we *must* (and anyway, in some cases, it turns out that we actually can’t). What purpose does that tracking shot really serve in terms of what you’re trying to do with your film? Sometimes, yes, there is a genuine, bona fide purpose – and, in those cases, it’s fine – but if you’re only tracking because you have access to a dolly, then, Baby, you’ve really got to go back to the source, and start thinking about what you wanted to say in the first place.

However, let it be known that I’m not merely trying to snobbishly intellectualise things. Cinema is, before anything else, the seventh art, and obviously our personal favourite. Artists are not always intellectuals, of course, and they’re not always academics. Instinct should not be underrated or disqualified as viable reasoning for one’s decisions, and personally, I quite often find myself basing almost everything I do during a shoot solely on my “gut instincts”. “Gut instincts,” it should be said, can be (and more often than not *are*) almost completely right. However, I would argue that this can only ever be the case when a filmmaker instinctively (and this can be a sub-conscious thing) already knows the answers to those pivotal questions of how and why – and thus, one should always be able to answer them. If a filmmaker is asked by someone else (or even better, if they ask themselves), then they should be able to provide their reasoning, and their reasoning should be watertight.

I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again: “because it’s cool” is *not* an answer.

DECLARATION

AGAINST STUDENT FILM

by Matthew Clayfield

BERNSTEIN: You don’t want to make any promises, Mr. Kane, you don’t want to keep.

KANE: These’ll be kept.

– *Citizen Kane*
(d. Orson Welles, 1941)

1. The term “student film” must never be used to explain or excuse a film’s weaker aspects, because it’s not going to be used by industry professionals when they’re looking at our pictures.
2. A film by a student filmmaker, therefore, is like any other film – good, bad or merely average – and must ultimately be approached this way by both its maker and its audience.
3. In letting nice visuals compensate for weak storylines, we’re ultimately being submissive and settling for second best. Student films can have nice visuals *and* strong storylines, as one need not be sacrificed just for the sake of the other.
4. As student filmmakers, we should be aiming to make films that reverse the above trend, not enforce it.
5. We need not “reinvent the wheel”...

...but we must, however, try.

FEATURE ARTICLE



HOLLYWOOD ANXIETY

by Daniel Staud

Ever since the first Hollywood studio was established in 1911, there has been a world of wasted talent – a world of productions that could have been classics and a world of catastrophic doomsday vehicles. Even though we well into the new century, nothing has changed; the bad movies are still being made. Take a huge amount of money, combine it with the talents of Stephen Sommers and you will get a picture that is little more than a mediocre waste of 35mm film. If you still haven’t written the script for your debut feature film after having locked yourself in the attic with a bucket and toilet paper for a month, give it to someone else. Learn to write your film! Use your red hammers to bash you head for great ideas!

There’s only one Ed Wood, and it’s not you.

Still, some people never learn. I recently saw *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (d. Alfonso Cuarón, 2004), a picture that had so much potential, but sadly did not realise it. Don’t stuff the novel – which is 435 pages long – into a picture that runs for 142 minutes! Live it, breathe it, and make it the best film ever. Expand the running time to accommodate a breathtaking story, like Peter Jackson did with *The Return of the King* (2003). Fans of the *Rings* stayed for the entire screening, so is Warner Brothers simply scared of making a true “epic adventure” on that scale? You don’t just add and subtract elements to an original piece; if the story and plot is craving for 179 minutes to develop, then bend the limits a little and let it. If Jackson had compressed *The Return of the King* to a mere two hour and twenty minutes, would it still be worth its eleven Oscars?

Zack Snyder turned down the opportunity to direct *SWAT* (2003) because the producers would not let him make it an R-rated picture; rather he went on to make *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) instead. Snyder took on a picture that he would actually *enjoy* making, and that makes one hell of a difference.

If, like Snyder, Hollywood players were able to wait for the right projects to come along – if they were able have fun and explore the minds of their more talented filmmakers – then surely they’d wind up making better pictures. Kurt Wimmer (*Equilibrium* [2002]) waited fifteen years before he was finally able to make his dream feature. Patience rewards itself. Find your *Jaws* (d. Steven Spielberg, 1975).

IN THEORY

A RANDOM THOUGHT

by Matthew Clayfield

Notions of cinema a being “collective memory” are all very good and well in theory, but film-viewing is really an activity for the individual (and this explains why people disagree so much when it comes to matters of personal opinion). Now, this doesn’t mean that you can’t watch films with other people, of course; only that your response to a film is nobody else’s but your own.

Likewise, collaborative filmmaking is all very good and well in theory, but filmmaking (or storytelling as it were) is really an individual practice as well. There is always one domineering person on set – be they the producer or the director (though preferably the latter) – and there cannot be, not ultimately, equality in the creative process. Sometimes we get close to it, of course, but even though we pretend that it’s there, we inherently know that it isn’t.

Cinema, therefore, is ultimately a medium in which a message is communicated from one individual to another; the “giver” exists within one group, and the “receiver” within a second. Either way, the point of the matter is that, despite these groups, the connection in cinema is made between individuals.

CINEMA HISTORY

**IDENTITY CRISIS:**

Mise-en-scène and
À bout de souffle

by Matthew Clayfield

In Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (1960), the characters of Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) and Patricia (Jean Seberg) exist as part of a disjointed and ever-changing world, within which they unsuccessfully struggle to find meaning. Unable to understand their place within contemporary French society, Michel and Patricia resort to recreating and living the images that surround them in a futile attempt to find both themselves and one another. Godard's construction of the mise-en-scène augments these fatal flaws in character, clearly demonstrating the importance of both image and iconography to modern man's notions of self, and the ramifications that such notions entail.

From the outset, it is quite obvious that Godard's primary interest is the behaviour of the “modern man” (he of the mid-20th Century), and the setting in which he chooses situate the events of the narrative is quite clearly a “modern” or “contemporary” one. On a more specific level, Godard is commenting on the “modern man” within contemporary French society, and the inclusion of numerous Parisian landmarks within the mise-en-scène undoubtedly reflects this focus.

Wherever possible, Godard lights the film naturally, using both available and practical lighting sources as a way of suggesting – by way of an almost documentary-like visual style – a more truthful representation of reality. In this respect, lighting is intrinsically linked to Godard's use of setting within the mise-en-scène, and two elements merge together to suggest that this is not the fictional Paris of a traditional movie, but the actual Paris of the real world as merely observed by a camera. The points that Godard makes, therefore, ultimately become more like arguments in an essay than like themes within a fictional narrative.

The most important aspects of Godard's mise-en-scène, however, are the character themselves; both in terms of how they interact with and within the setting that's been created for them, and also in terms of how

they dress (though while discussed in tandem here, of course, acting and costume are ultimately two separate aspects of the mise-en-scène).

Michel is obviously a by-product of the movies that he's seen; he idolises the *idea* of Humphrey Bogart and emulates the star by dressing and behaving like the characters that “Bogie” plays. He smokes like a train; acts like a misogynist; and has even developed his own peculiar physical nuance, which is not at all unlike Bogart's “ear tug” in Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946). Similarly, Patricia feels the need to compare herself to the girl in a Renoir painting – to whom she bears a more-than-striking resemblance; down, in fact, to the very angle of her head within Godard's frame. Interestingly, both the Renoir painting and Bogart himself actually exist as tangible elements within Godard's mise-en-scène (the latter in the form of a photograph), implicitly suggesting – when considered in relation to the character's responses to them – the impact of one's environment (and more importantly, the images and iconography within that environment) upon the individual – especially the individual who is unsure of where he or she “fits”.

Of course, in emulating the screen persona of a Hollywood actor and the exquisite beauty of an impressionist painting, Michel and Patricia do *not* find themselves or one another, but only emptiness; a greater sense of confusion; and death – both literal and otherwise. Michel, it should be noted, dies long before he gets shot.

Thus, in his deft construction of *À bout de souffle's* mise-en-scène, Jean-Luc Godard is able to comment on the significance of both image and iconography to the modern man's notions of self, and the negative ramifications of this significance. What's more, he is able to do so in a way that allows his arguments – which are reinforced by the film's documentary-like realism – to be taken as though they were part of an anthropological study on the nature of “modern man,” and not just as themes of an inventive – and endlessly thrilling – movie.

FILM TECHNIQUE

**STORY STRUCTURE IN HOP**

by Ella Chau Yin Chi

Hop (d. Dominique Standaert, 2002) tells the moving story of a thirteen-year-old refugee, Justin, who lives in Burundi. The film takes the audience on an elaborate journey, and takes a look at serious issues like immigration and social assimilation. Although the film is endowed with an

abundance of thematic content, it is always concise and never meandering. This achievement is largely the result of the film's well-structured script, where character actions have multiple functions and are always motivated by both the film's story and its content.

The early scenes of *Hop* are integral to the story. In the film's opening scene, Justin tells a tale about the Punic Wars, and introduces “hop,” which is a skill one must have if one wishes to exert control over the mighty elephant. To explain the wars, Justin draws a diagram, and the red lake within it (the only colour in the picture) symbolizes the many deaths that the Punic Wars have resulted in. These actions provide a wealth of important information, and ultimately foreshadow later events in the story. The folktale proves to be a source of inspiration for Justin as he devises a plan to reunite himself with his father (who has been deported), and the red lake acts as a major link to the climax of the story. In this same sequence, we can make a number of assumptions about Justin himself, and we can tell that he is a clever child from observing how he behaves. Clearly, this first scene has a multitude of functions: it gives us important information about the character's qualities and provides a foundation for the rest of the story.

The story's focus now moves towards the personal world of Justin, where the audience is given more information, and thus a greater understanding of his background. An important catalyst in the story, his father, is introduced, and these scenes thus establish a close father/son relationship, which will (as with the red lake) be integral to the story. Tapping into their neighbor's television cable in order to watch a football game acts as the film's inciting incident and ultimately triggers all the ensuing action in the story. As above, this scene is effective because of its multitude of functions: it tells us more about the characters and propels the story forward.

Part of *Hop's* conciseness is a result of its finer details, and the film often takes the “little things” and makes them integral to the action. Every little something has a reason and a purpose. Repeated motifs and story elements (such as “hop,” the red lake and the soccer match) echo throughout the picture and communicate integral information to the audience. Every aspect of the film is part of a cleverly constructed chain of events, and these are what stand out as being the major reasons for its success.

Hop interlinks the various levels of conflict in a chain reaction of episodes, all of which lead, in the end, to the story's climax. It emphasizes minor details, compresses information, and therefore, to its audience, *Hop* is a perfectly structured story.

FILM REVIEW

**CINEMA, MON AMOUR:**
The Dreamers (2003)

by Matthew Clayfield

And if I was captivated before – my God! – well, now I was entranced. As the three beautiful, protagonists of Bernardo Bertolucci's intoxicating *The Dreamers* – Isabelle (Eva Green), Matthew (Michael Pitt) and Theo (Louis Garrel) – began to walk along the side of the Seine, a music, so wonderfully nostalgic for some reason, began to rise on the soundtrack – and as any well-versed film buff would tell you, that music was straight from *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (d. François Truffaut, 1959), the film that ushered in the French New Wave and that had obviously changed these characters' lives.

The Dreamers, which has just finished its run at the Gold Coast Arts Centre, is Bertolucci's complex, striking and truly romantic love letter to the cinema – to the “seventh art,” to all its practitioners, and to a time when films could change one's life.

The reference to Truffaut is by no means isolated, and the film is literally overflowing with knowing winks to the films and filmmakers that have impacted upon Bertolucci. “I was born in 1959,” declares Isabelle, “and do you know what my first words were? New York Herald Tribune! New York Herald Tribune!” Oh, to have lived in a time when movies were far more than something you'd go to see on a Saturday night and when cinema was something you *lived!* When Isabelle first meets Matthew, she can't help but observe that he's simply “too clean” to be someone who loves the cinema. If you really loved the cinema, you wouldn't have the time to wash.

Bertolucci's film is set in a time when cinema meant far more than just “going to the movies,” and has been made for those of us who, somehow, still believe that it can and does. Set in the Spring of 1968 (a time when, as Roger Ebert notes in his review of the film, “the planets of Sex, Politics and the Cinema aligned”), the picture is a tribute to the idealism of the era – an idealism that, quite frankly, believed that film could change the world. While to some film students today, of course, the year 1968 may mean very little, this was truly a revolutionary time and cinema was there at the eye of the storm (a thought that, today, is unfortunately kind of ludicrous). In the February of 1968, Henri Langlois, the co-founder of the Cinémathèque Française, was forcibly removed from his official post by the increasingly hostile Gaullist government and the backlash had been suitably enormous. Cinéphiles, critics and filmmakers alike took to the

streets in defence of Langlois, and the film, with such obvious longing for the time and its fiery passion, revels in recreating the protests (keep an eye out for Antoine Doinel) and then despairs at the inevitable riots (the latter of which, one can't help but feel, Bertolucci can't help but regret).

Of course, in the middle of this “historical epic” (it's not really one, though could always be seen that way) is the film's dramatic action – the strangely endearing menage-a-trois between Isabelle, Matthew and Theo. Like the films of Godard (one of which is the subject of Bertolucci's most astonishing homage), *The Dreamers*, despite its historical backdrop, is ultimately interested in both the individual and the individual's role within the broader scope of history. The human experience – be it sexual, political or even cinematic (and be it the character's, ours or Bertolucci's himself) – is ultimately a holistic individual experience in which everything is interconnected and “one” (like Isabelle's lighter on the kitchen table). Our place in history is our own to choose and we decide the roles we play.

The major criticism that I've read in regards to *The Dreamers* is that it fails to offer a completely accurate depiction of the Langlois Affair or of the student revolution that took place in the May of 1968. In my opinion, however, it really doesn't need to. As with the somewhat similar *Almost Famous* (d. Cameron Crowe, 2000), all *The Dreamers* needs to do (and in my opinion does it) is create the feeling of being there and more importantly of *feeling* it – and if Bertolucci does anything at all, he more than certainly feels it.

For those of us who live, breathe and love the movies, *The Dreamers* is something that we can grab and hold on to. It's as accurate a depiction of pure cinéphilie as I've ever seen, and it's a reminder – to those among us who may have forgotten over time – that cinema actually means something, and that it can ultimately change our lives.

CONTACT

Please direct all letters, comments, queries and submissions to the editor at the_silver_bullet@mail.com

NOTE: If our goal is to start intelligent and impassioned cinematic discussions, then it'll be necessary for us to be just as interested in publishing rebuttals and disagreements as in publishing everything else. So, if you think that what we've written is completely and utterly wrong, don't just sit there bitching about it: write in, and show us what you've got.

