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Author(s)	Dan Sallitt
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\$90 Million's Worth of Christmas Viewing



The Cotton Club

LA READER
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★ DUNE

Directed and written by David Lynch
With Kyle MacLachlan

By Dan Sallitt

If only because their budgets settled in near the \$40 million mark, *The Cotton Club* and *Dune* were guaranteed first dibs

less convention in each film that neither director overcomes. If *The Cotton Club* is more persuasive than *Dune*, it's because Coppola tries to accommodate unoriginal elements and work his film around them, whereas Lynch tends to simply ignore them.

The *Cotton Club*, despite its high price tag and the presence of seven producers on the credits, is probably the closest thing to an unpretentious film that Coppola will ever make. After he inflated the S. E. Hinton novels *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* into grotesque manifestations of his epic sentimentality, one might have safely assumed that no subject was too small for him to treat it like a remake of *Citizen Kane*. *The Cotton Club* doesn't exactly disprove that thesis: It is conceived and executed, not as a musical comedy-romance, but as *the* musical comedy-romance. The old-fashioned titles, the diagonal-wipe scene transitions, and the tongue-in-check recreations of Slavko Vorkapich montage sequences mark the film as a metamusical instead of a musical; even more telling, no dutiful genre exercise would treat its musical numbers with such exaggerated reverence. Still, any fun film, even a Fun Film, requires a letting down of the hair, and Coppola managed the transformation better than I'd have guessed.

Set in Harlem between 1928 and 1930, the story takes place in and around the famous nightclub, in which blacks performed for white audiences. The issue of racism is handled adroitly by writers William Kennedy & Coppola, who maintain a focus on the characters' omnipresent race consciousness without often putting their disapproval in the actors' mouths. Strangely, though, the branch of the plot dealing with the black characters—a hooper (Gregory Hines), the brother and partner (Maurice Hines) whom he alienates with his ambition, and his light-skinned lover (Lonette McKee) who becomes a star by passing for white—is given short shrift.

Most of the screen time is hogged by the antics of the gangsters who dominated Harlem and by two members of their entourages: a cornet player (Richard Gere) who saves the life of psychopathic gang boss Dutch Schultz (James Remar) and is pressed into servitude for his trouble; and Schultz's teenage mistress (Diane Lane), whose bantering, clandestine love affair with the musician goes on for years.

Coppola's visuals are no more expressive than ever, and many a scene is troubled by inappropriate close-ups or spastic editing. But, especially in the film's first half, he shows a surprising flair for sustaining a light, humorous tone over jarring plot shifts. The comic depiction of the gangsters as overgrown kids, bolstered by the droll dialogue and the exaggerated crudity of the acting, yields at several points to unnerving violence, which Coppola skips through quickly and strips of melodrama. By throwing away his chances for easy visceral emotion, Coppola makes his comic perspective seem deeper: The test of an ironic, detached overview is whether it can assimilate a darkening of tone.

Since this offbeat approach slips away as the film progresses, one wonders whether Coppola ever had a good grip on it. None of the characters develops much beyond the level of surface mannerism; this wasn't much of a problem when Coppola was flitting lightly across a panorama of Harlem subcultures, but it becomes a considerable obstacle when he starts pushing the story toward conventional character drama in the second half. If *The Cotton Club* finally seems a bit empty, it's because Coppola has accepted the limitations of the entertainment film, as the best entertainment directors never do. He works hard on the humor, the musical numbers, and the social context that gives the film tone, but he probably thinks that the people and the drama should remain ciphers in a good musical. Well, there's no point kicking too hard over Coppola's first watchable film in years—even its worst scenes are relatively free of the

★★

THE COTTON CLUB

Directed by Francis Coppola
Written by William Kennedy & Coppola
With Richard Gere and Gregory Hines

bombastic incoherence that has been his trademark since *Apocalypse Now*.

Dune has more to it and less to it than *The Cotton Club*. David Lynch has a surer sense of how to achieve his effects that Coppola does, and he aspires to subtlety. But it's odd to see such a meticulous film maker never make contact with the heart of the narrative.

Frank Herbert's famous science-fiction novel sets Lynch the task of force-feeding the viewer a sizable amount of plot exposition in the first half-hour, and he confronts the problem head on: "Beginnings are hard," says the narrator, who spells out the story premises like a teacher at the blackboard. In the year 10191, a spice that extends life and expands consciousness is the most valuable commodity; it is mined on only one planet, which becomes the source of conflict between the noble Atreides clan and several unsavory rulers in the same empire. But a greater force will disrupt these political machinations: The oppressed native population of the spice-mining planet is about to receive its long-awaited messiah, the young Paul Atreides (Kyle MacLachlan), who is unaware of his destiny.

Before the film's release, it was a matter of general curiosity how Lynch, renowned for the unsettling dreamlike imagery of *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man*, would adapt to the demands of the special-effects spectacular that Dino De Laurentiis no doubt envisaged. But how incompatible, really, are Lynch's aesthetic and that of the special effects film? The image, or rather the content of the image, is curiously self-sufficient in Lynch's movies; it usually speaks directly to the viewer, whereas most imagery in narrative films must be related to the rest of the film before it works fully on the viewer. We talk about Lynch's dream imagery, not because all of it occurs in dream sequences, but because it is as disconnected, and consequently as redolent of symbolism, as the imagery of dreams. Special effects,

too, exist principally for their own sake and only relate to the narrative in an after-the-fact sort of way.

Lynch treats the emotional dynamics of the story with the laissez-faire attitude of a person who has more important things on his mind. The actors almost all fall into the measured, unnuanced, rather British style of line delivery that Hollywood deems appropriate for period and futuristic films alike. (Brad Dourif and Kenneth McMillan manage to break away into eccentricity, but they seem to be acting under their own cognizance.) No one could accuse the subject matter of allowing much room for behavioral complexity, so Lynch would have had to make an effort to put a human spin on the drama; as it is, he never even activates the *Star Wars*-like myth/cliché of an adolescent coming to manhood and mystical power. As hard as one might try to work with Lynch's often evocative visual and aural textures, the ponderous, dead-weight narrative becomes too heavy a burden to carry.

It's hard to talk about Lynch's films without butting up against the touchy subject of the significance of narrative. Lynch has many skills that work well in a traditional storytelling context—

his framing can matter-of-factly absorb the most grotesque changes of scale, and his depiction of the future as industrial wasteland is pleasingly indirect—but his admirers discuss his imagery as if he were an experimental film maker working directly through subconscious associations. My indifference to nonnarrative film making may be an obstacle to me here, but even the most fervent advocate of abstract cinema shouldn't be able to simply ignore the bulky narratives of *Dune* and *The Elephant Man*. There the stories sit, plop in the middle of the movies, reeking of convention and unhealthy good guy/bad guy dichotomies, and Lynch, for whatever reason, doesn't care to inflect them. A story line is never the meat of a work of art, but it's intended as a vehicle for expression; Lynch tends to leave the empty vehicle blocking the road. ■

FILM RATINGS

- ★ ★ ★ ★ — Inspired
- ★ ★ ★ — A Must-See
- ★ ★ — Noteworthy
- ★ — Minor Virtues
- — A Wipe-Out