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# Chan Is Missing: Hard-edged, Gutsy

By MICHAEL LAM

*Chan Is Missing*, the new film by local filmmaker Wayne Wang, has a surprising 'underground' look. Surprising because this hard-edged, unconventional visual style is considered out of fashion, and is rarely seen nowadays. What everyone is after is that polished, slick look: one that is pleasing to the eyes, and non-challenging to the mind.

Take the case of *Street Music*, another locally produced film. Thought reasonably fluent, it resembles a sweetened, made-easy television movie. Its willingness to please becomes irritating, if not slightly offensive, after awhile.

## RAWNESS

*Chan Is Missing* functions on a more gutsy level. It has the kind of rawness that one often associates with the early French New Wave, the Godard of *Breathless* and *Les Carabiniers*. Shot in documentary-like black and white, it also recalls Cassavettes' *Shadows*. Like these films, it draws heavily on movie past, especially the film noir genre, and recaptures the style with a personal flavor.

Filmed with an incredibly low budget of under \$20,000, it proves once again that it does not take big money to make a decent film. Although cheaply produced, it is in no way sloppy. Wang should be congratulated for the handsome final result.

Chan Hung, the center figure of the film, is never shown. Disappearing with the money of two cab-driver friends from the begin-

ning, he serves as a 'MacGuffin' in this intellectual thriller, the flip side of Charlie Chan movies. Through the search for Chan, we learn of different layers of the community that he lives in, facts that are revealing and at the same time mystifying.

## GUESSING

The dialogue of the film is spoken in three languages. Most of the time English is used, and at appropriate moments Mandarin and Cantonese are spoken. Since nothing is subtitled, those who do not understand one or two of the languages might have more fun than those who understand everything. After all, guessing is the name of the game, and the unsureness works very well with the visual style.

The film is slow-moving at first, but the second half picks up considerably. The acting is uneven, a quality that perhaps Wang prefers, but which I find distracting at times. San Francisco looks strangely familiar here. It is colder and sharper than the city we used to see on film.

*Chan Is Missing* will be shown at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley on Dec. 10, at 7:30 and 9:20, and Wang will be there to answer questions. It will also play the Roxie, Dec. 13 through 15. For an interview with Wang, please refer to *East/West*, 9/23/81.

• In *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan*, a song sung by Marianne Faithfull, the heroine is a 37-year-old middle-class housewife who, when her husband has gone to work and her kids are off to school, fantasizes riding through Paris 'in a sportscar with the warm wind in her hair.' The song is an eerily dark portrait of a woman who gets caught in the suburban life, and Faithfull's rendition is uneasy and unforgettable.

## PALE

*Montenegro*, which is about a certain Marilyn Jordan, is based loosely on the song. Why the name change, is not clear. What is clear is the fact that Dusan Makavejev,



Filming a scene from *Chan Is Missing*.

who wrote and directed the film, has wasted the song. What should have been a cross between Waters' *Polyester* and Allen's *Interiors*, turns out to be a self-imposed, pale and flat 'comedy.'

From the very beginning, it is obvious that Makavejev does not know how to handle the material. Played by the exquisitely delicate Susan Anspach, Marilyn Jordan is wrapped in her expensive fur, staring aimlessly at the heatless Scandinavian sunset. Why, you think, this woman can fly to Paris any minute, and will have no problem getting herself a ride in any car. The camera sits there indecisively for the longest period of time, and the film literally stops dead.

Which, in a way, is a shame. For this is Anspach's prized role, her most attractive part since *Five Easy Pieces*. Sadly and curiously, her talent and beauty did not take her to where she deservedly belongs. She could have been a more sophisticated Grace Kelly, a thinking-man's princess. Though misused and mal-directed, she remains the only reason to sit through *Montenegro*.

It is playing at the Bridge.

• When you go to a movie, and

during the course of it, keep thinking that it should have been done as a radio talk show, you know something is not quite right. *My Dinner with Andre*, directed by Louis Malle, is one of those unfortunate occasions.

Actually, to call it a movie is stretching it too far. It does not move. Doing nothing other than recording a conversation between two friends over dinner, it is one of the most uneventful happenings that I have witnessed on screen in a long time. Some of what these two men have to say is interesting, but most of it is pretentious and not illuminating. That neither of them, who are on screen *all* the time, is particularly captivating makes it an overwhelmingly boring experience.

On paper, the idea sounds good. On film, it proves to be a waste. I personally would never advise anyone to pay \$4 to look at people eat. I would make the kind suggestion of spending the money on a *real* meal. For those who insist on food for thought, why not buy the screenplay, which is out in paperback. At least you have the option to skip pages.

*My Dinner with Andre* is playing at the Gateway. □

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