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The Decline of Venture Filmmaking

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

In the world of moviemaking, the low-risk venture is the rule. And so when a film comes our way that is high risk—that is, which avoids the surefire and the proven—it tends to gain our admiration for audacity alone. We respect the conviction that seems to lie behind a controversial subject, the aesthetic adventurousness that leads to fresh techniques and the daring imagination that encourages casting and playing against type. But much as we might applaud the sentiments, we don't always appreciate the results. Sadly enough, a high risk can frequently turn out to be little other than a poor risk.

Certainly this is the case with "Quintet," the latest offering from one of filmland's greatest gamblers, Robert Alt-

On Film

"Quintet"

"Hardcore"

"Agatha"

man. Always willing to take the chance of defying his audience's expectations, Altman has in all of his films done away with traditional plot, made use of experimental sound and directed his actors towards an improvisational style. As a result, he has frequently managed not only to surprise but to delight, particularly when he takes a satirical stance and makes society his target. When, however, Altman assumes a serious mien and tries to delve into the metaphysical, he proves less innovative than merely innocuous.

Nowhere has he been so solemn and speculative as in "Quintet" where he serves up an apocalyptic vision of the world coming to an icy end. And not soon enough either, for us or for its denizens; life as we witness it here in a snow-covered, skeletal city is dreary in the extreme.

It's so cold that people walk about so smothered in blankets we can hardly tell them apart. There is so little food that if one of the film's large cast of dogs starts nipping at someone's heels, that person had better step lively. Human communication has virtually ceased—though curiously, when people do talk not only does smoke come out of their mouths but an epigram as well. ("Hope is obsolete"; "Death is arbitrary.")

The only activity people seem to engage in is Quintet, a game in which you don't pin the donkey but your opponents—piercing their cheeks with arrows or slitting their throats with knives.

Clearly, Altman in this highly unusual piece of filmmaking is trying to tell us something. And all the more so in that he has filled his film with suggestive references. His prestigious international cast (including Paul Newman, Vittorio Gassman, Fernando Rey and Bibi Andersson) all appear in Elizabethan headgear. Their city resembles a ruined Globe theater. The film's soundtrack is swollen with Purcell-

like strains. Altman even has a corpse sent down an icy river, Ophelia-style.

Could it be that all of this has been summoned up to tell us that Western culture, as symbolized by Shakespeare, is dying? Perhaps. But what we are left with is the sneaking suspicion that it is Western experimental film, as exemplified by Robert Altman, which may be dying instead—or which is at least on the critical list.

Unlike "Quintet," "Hardcore" (written and directed by Paul Schrader) takes no risk in its form or even in its story, which involves the search of a devout Midwestern businessman for his runaway daughter, taking him inside the decadent world of the West Coast's extensive porno industry. Still, it did demand a certain amount of courage on the part of an actor of George C. Scott's stature to involve himself in this project. After all, a film which treats of the shoddy and sleazy is constantly in danger of descending to the level of its own material. In fact, according to the film's production notes, Scott's wife, actress Trish Van Devere, was at first very much against her husband playing in "Hardcore" for these very reasons.

But though Scott himself does emerge with his dignity intact, this is more than one can say for the film. Failing to explore the runaway daughter's motivations (either what makes her leave home or what attracts her to pornography), failing as well to develop the father's experiences, and lapsing into an illogical and gratuitously violent conclusion, "Hardcore" never manages to justify its journey. The film, then, remains without "redeeming social value" (not to mention redeeming aesthetic value), leaving us a good deal less sure than Scott must have been about its implicit intentions.

Like Scott, Dustin Hoffman, in accepting his most recent role, also showed some daring—though of a different nature. Certainly, Hoffman wasn't choosing controversial subject matter. Indeed, given the pointlessness and plotlessness of "Agatha"—a film that purports to solve the real-life mystery of what transpired during the three days in 1926 when Agatha Christie disappeared and provides as its answer absolutely nothing—one can hardly say he was choosing any subject matter at all.

Hoffman's courage instead was in taking on a role that at first glance he seemed ill-suited for and at last glance he assuredly was: that of a suave, sophisticated, Anglified American journalist. What's more, playing opposite Vanessa Redgrave (as Agatha), an actress who stands head and shoulders above him in more ways than one, he comes across as a rather unlikely lover.

True, as we watch the two of them dance or look at Redgrave bending down to bestow a kiss, we can't help but be struck by movieland's courage in taking the risk of breaking old stereotypes. It wasn't very long ago, we recall, that Alan Ladd had to stand on a stepladder for his love scenes with Sophia Loren. Still, innovations aside and at the risk of sounding reactionary, there may be something to be said for stepladders after all.