

Document Citation

Title	Don't look now: Nicolas Roeg interviewed by Tom Milne and Penelope Houston
Author(s)	Tom Milne Penelope Houston Nicolas Roeg
Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	Winter 1973
Type	interview
Language	
Pagination	2-8
No. of Pages	7
Subjects	Bond, Edward (1934), Great Britain Roeg, Nicolas (1928), London, England Hitchcock, Alfred (1899-1980), Leytonstone, London, Great Britain Corman, Roger (1926), Detroit, MI, United States Christie, Julie (1941), Chukua, Assam, India Sutherland, Donald Borges, Jorge Luis (1899-1986)
Film Subjects	Far from the madding crowd, Schlesinger, John, 1967 Performance, Roeg, Nicolas, 1970

Nothing but the best, Donner, Clive, 1964

Fahrenheit 451, Truffaut, François, 1966

Don't look now, Roeg, Nicolas, 1973

Walkabout, Roeg, Nicolas, 1971

The Godfather, Coppola, Francis Ford, 1972

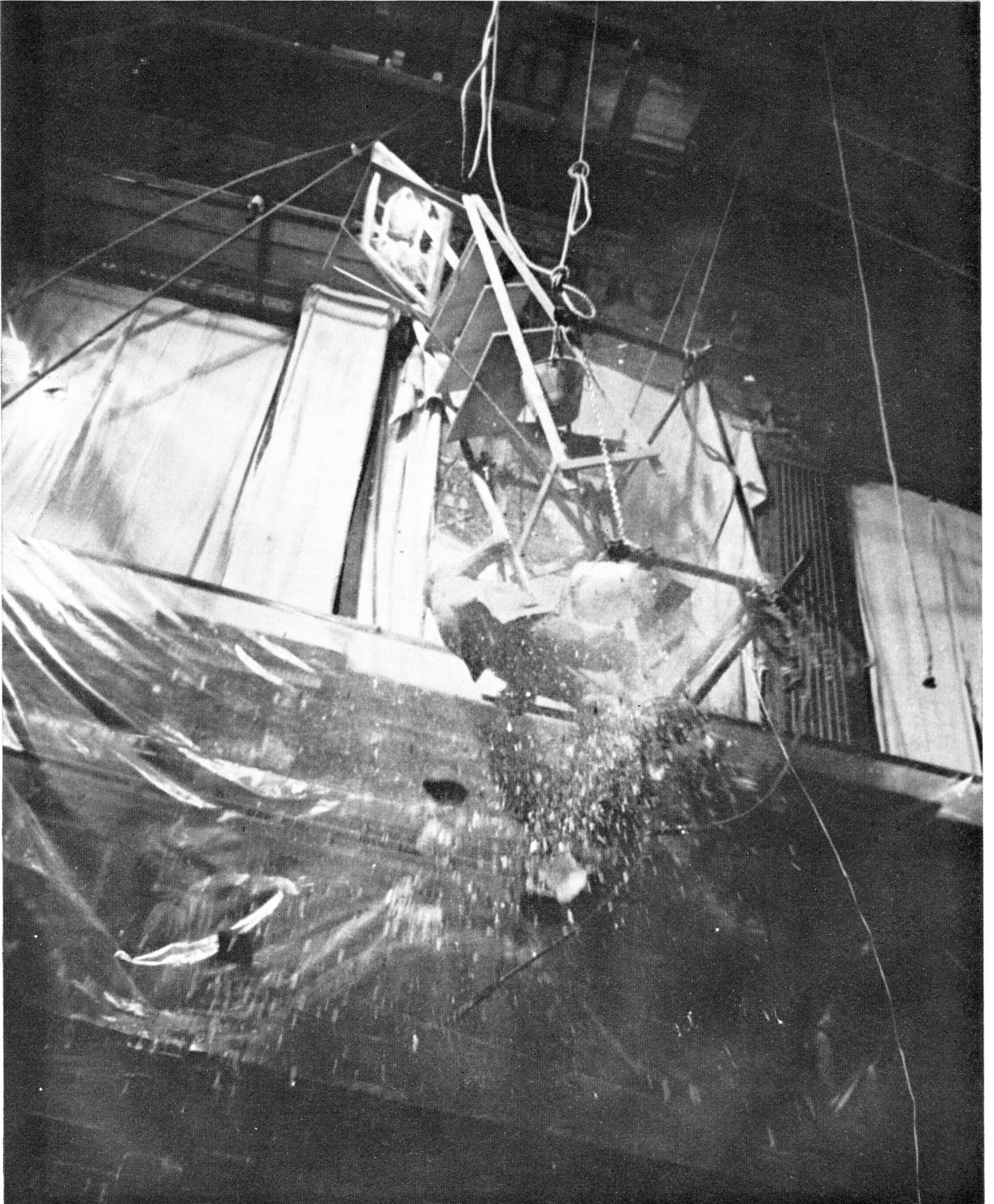
The birds, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1963

[Roeg]

Sight & Sound Winter 1973/4

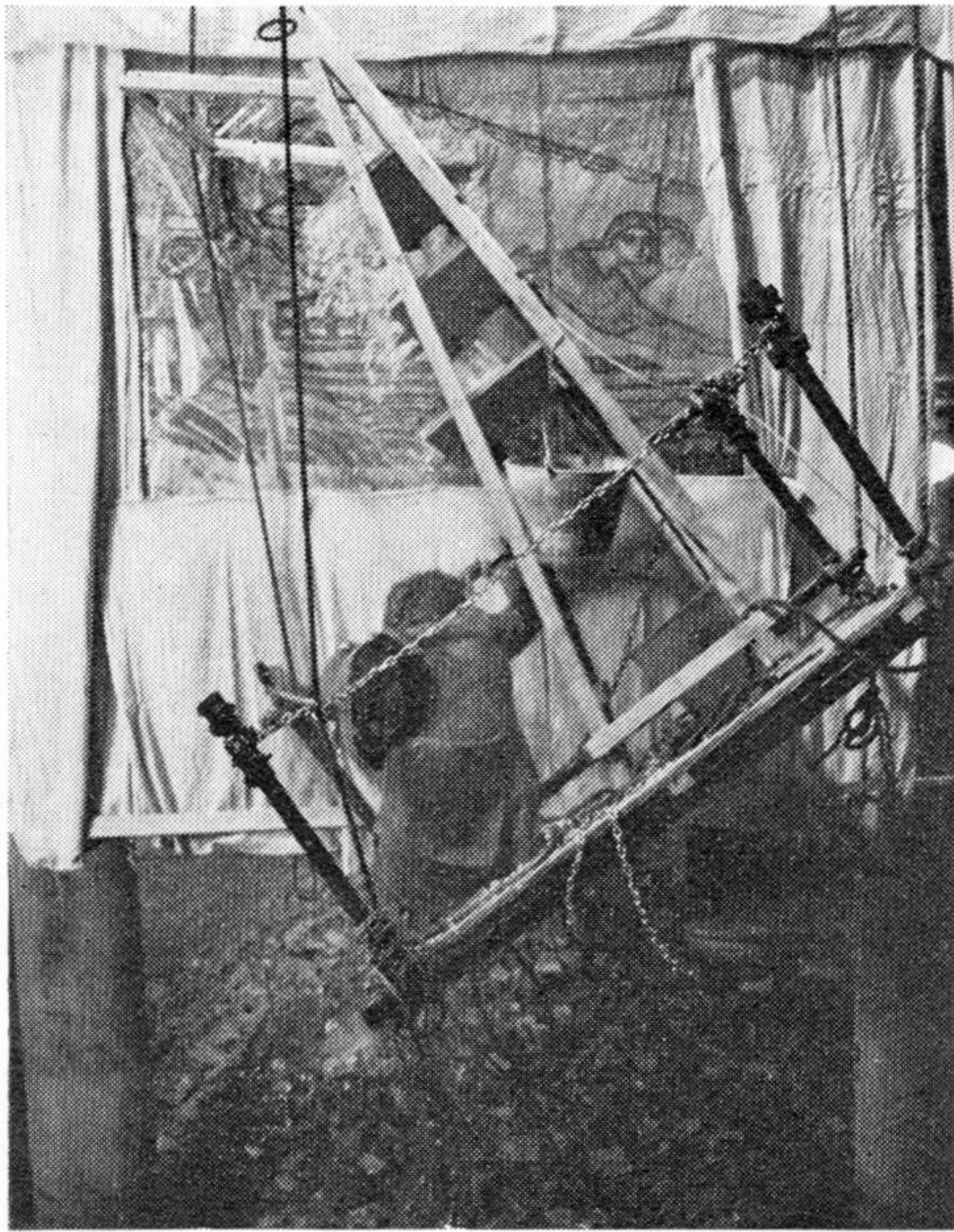
DONT LOOK NOW

Nicolas Roeg interviewed by
Tom Milne and Penelope Houston



On the day we interviewed Nicolas Roeg, he had just come back from a trip to Haiti—part holiday, part with an eye open to possible future locations. A week later, his third feature *Don't Look Now*, an extension in another setting and format of some of the ideas in both *Performance* and *Walkabout*, opened in London to exceptionally enthusiastic reviews.

Although a comparatively late starter as a director, Roeg entered the film industry as long ago as 1947, when he was nineteen. His films as a cameraman include *The Caretaker* and *Nothing But the Best* (Clive Donner), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *Petulia* (Dick Lester), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Schlesinger), *The Masque of the Red Death* (Roger Corman) and *Fahrenheit 451* (Truffaut). He also wrote the original story of Cliff Owen's 1961 thriller *Prize of Arms*.



To what extent was *Don't Look Now* your own choice? A publicity handout says it was Peter Katz, the producer, who thought Daphne du Maurier's story would make a good film.

Yes, he sent me a script; I was reading scripts and it came out of the blue. I was looking for a story that was a yarn, that would complete in some way, or continue in some way, a line of thought. You remember the scene at the beginning of the film when Julie Christie mentions the little girl's question, 'If the world's round, why is frozen water flat?' and Donald Sutherland says, 'Nothing's what it seems'? That isn't in the dialogue of Daphne du Maurier's story—we changed most of the dialogue anyway, because in the film they are different

characters—but it is the key to the whole premise, and is exactly the feeling I have about life anyway. And without stressing that premise, I wanted to keep it within a story form that *Performance* and *Walkabout* hadn't taken. They were yarns too, of course, but they were different *movements*. One was a film of emotion and ideas; and the other I wanted to make—I hate to use the word because it always conjures up another connotation—a documentary using a story form. Now I wanted to make another film developing a similar idea and not to lose sight of the yarn. To stick to the yarn.

After I read that script, I read her story. I've never met her, but I'm a great admirer of Daphne du Maurier, she's an extraordinary writer. It's not a fluke that such interesting movies are made from her novels. . . . *The Birds*! She wasn't involved in the film at all, but I'm told she did ask for photographs of Julie and Donald to see what John and Laura looked like.

Had the change in the characters already been made in that first script? Was John Baxter a church restorer, for instance?

That was after I came into it. I wanted them to have a background that attracted me anyway. I liked the idea of an international marriage, people from two different cultures and backgrounds. I imagined him as somebody who might have been a Rhodes scholar and had perhaps met her brother at Oxford, so their families had been linked that way. I wanted to have them be almost golden people, so that it became rather like the incident at Chappaquiddick. Like the Kennedy family. They were unprepared in life. Most people are, aren't they?

Julie and Donald got it absolutely, right from the beginning. In fact the whole cast was beautiful to work with. Clelia Matania

is amazing; she's a Neapolitan, and yet she can speak English like that. Renato Scarpa, who plays the police inspector, could speak hardly a word of English, but we didn't dub him either; I found the *difficulty* of communication he had with Donald, the man he knew was going to be a victim, very exciting.

So the feeling one gets that the police inspector is not really taking in what John Baxter says is real as well as plot-motivated?

Exactly. I wanted John Baxter to feel that he's a detective, another kind of detective, and that here he encounters one who isn't interested in fingerprints or the forensic side of police work. I had a line I took out because it seemed a little too pointed. When Julie and Donald go past the scene of a murder, after they have left the hospital, they are in a motor boat taxi and the detective on the bank has a fingerprint man with him. I wanted to lay a line in there with Julie saying, 'Oh, that fingerprint rubbish is really more to scare people than anything else.' (The fear of the thought that the police can say, 'We've got your fingerprints . . .')

When were you filming in Venice?

January and February last year, and December 1972 in England, on location at the home of David Tree, who plays the schoolmaster. I'd been looking for a house this man would live in, a man who was a restorer. And then we found David Tree's house, and he was so perfect for the schoolmaster that we begged him to play it. The house is half wood and half brick; it was right in line with the idea that this couple hadn't finally made up their minds about how they wanted to live, hadn't decided on Georgian, Tudor or modern. They were halfway all the time.

Were you thinking of the house simply as the sort of place they would live in, rather than from the 'Nothing's what it seems' point of view? When you see it the second time, in the funeral flashback, it's almost like a different house.

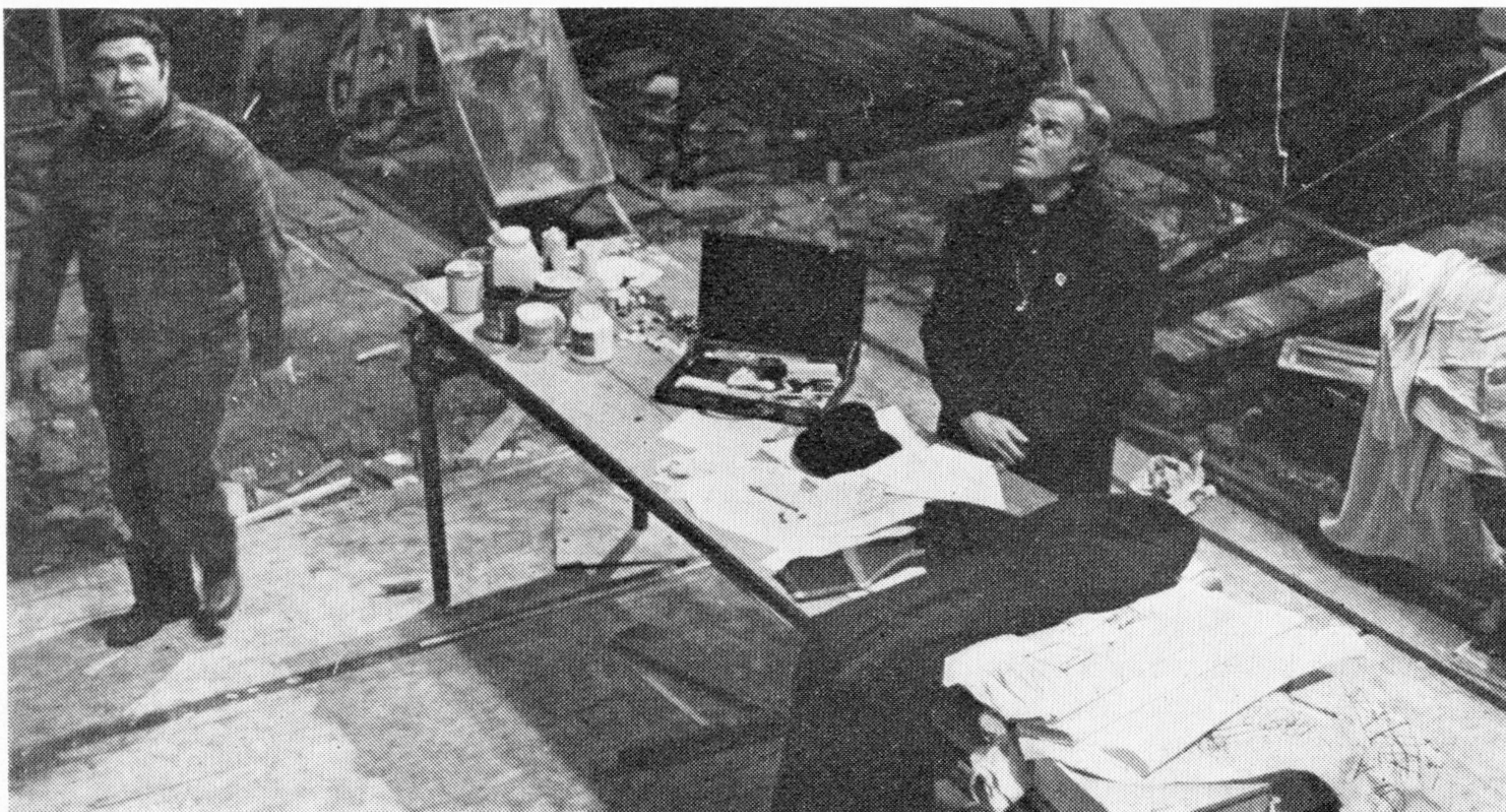
It just fitted that way. Oddly, things like that happened with the movie. Omens. I didn't want to shoot those scenes on two locations—pond and house—and I'd been looking for weeks for a house. Finally we had to settle it, and the guy I'd had out scouting said, well, there's this house, there's this one, and that one's no good. Wait a minute, I said, looking at the polaroid he'd put aside as no use, this is incredible; and we got in the car and drove off.

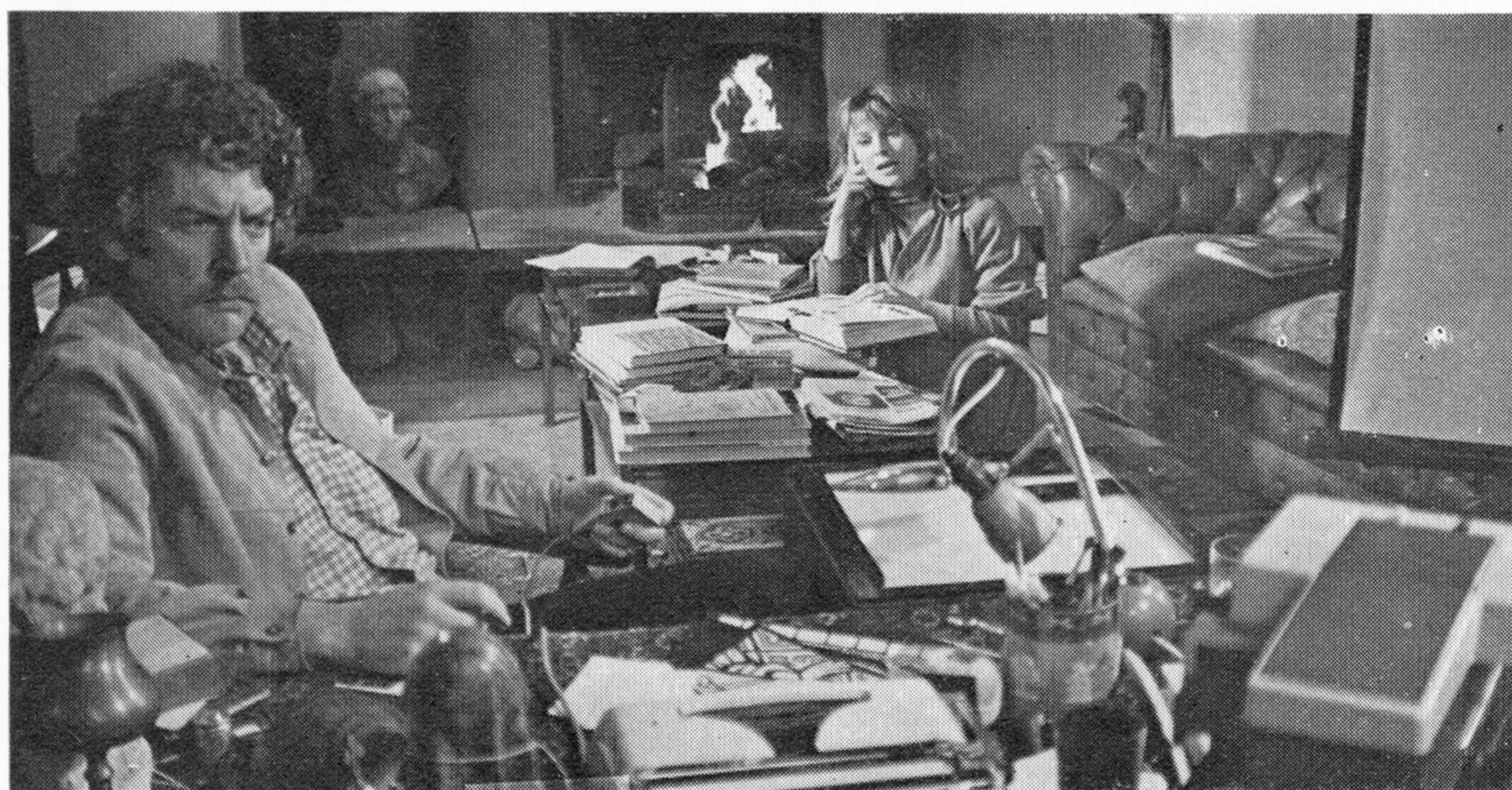
In Venice, it's all location. We filmed in the Europa Hotel, and the Baxters' suite was in the Bauer Grünwald . . . just to be able to pull the camera back, because the Europa rooms were very small. The little man who plays the hotel manager was a critic; he reviewed a Fellini movie, and then Fellini used him in a film. And he wrote most of his own dialogue. I'd said to him, 'I'd really like you to be a hotel manager who doesn't like the guests.' Immediately he said, 'I love it, I love it! Please let me work on this man.'

One of the fascinating things in the film is your use of detail and the way the detail builds up—motifs like the breaking glass, the colour red. How does this generate in your mind? Where does it start from?

I like working for a long, long time on a script. Consequently, the first draft is

'Don't Look Now': Donald Sutherland falls from the scaffolding while the bishop (Massimo Serato) watches





'Don't Look Now': child and parents (Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie) in the opening sequence

usually the one that is set up as a movie. I like to work with the writers until I've actually got the scenes so that I can work on them with the artists. So that kind of detail I have in the script, because I want the prop men totally aware of what they've got to get; it's written down and that's it. The whole film was shot in eight weeks, and you get into a state of tremendous confusion if you suddenly have to send out for something. I prefer to do that kind of thing in advance, and then one can really have a game with the film.

But is the broken glass followed through in the script, for instance? Is the build-up of the motif conscious from the outset?

That particular thing was absolutely conscious. It stemmed from a story, a personal story. A friend of mine might have been able to save . . . to prevent a dreadful incident . . . he said . . . *if* he'd been able to break some glass at the time. Apart from any symbolic quality, glass sets up a sensation of fear, of something dangerous and brittle. This is built into everyone. Almost everyone has a fear of shattered glass. Mirrors and glass, glass especially, so fragile . . . so firm at one moment and so dangerous the next, it's frightening.

The red, the flowers and so on, was also planned in the script. Obviously there are things that link up as you work, and you think, 'My God, that's odd!' It's curious too—I'm sure other film-

makers must have noticed this—how you think of an idea, you work on it for six months, and suddenly there are eight other films all with the same idea. 'Oh, God,' you think, 'I thought I was keeping it a secret!' I'm sure it's because of the link between all of us somewhere; we're being tipped off in the same way in making our films.

So when you're planning a script, you're consciously putting in visual associations, even ones that audiences may not get?

It helps me. One of you mentioned in your review of *Don't Look Now* the cut to the shot of the two sisters laughing, saying it implied that the sisters were maybe fakes. That was absolutely intentional. But that laughing shot wasn't in the script; it came later when we were shooting. I thought they were getting away with too much, those two Scottish sisters, being too definitely and certainly clairvoyant; as we were shooting they were becoming more and more obvious for the audience. The way the yarn had been told they were so innocent. So I changed my original idea, and in the scene with the photographs of the children and the little bust—an unusual thing to have a bust of your child: I wanted it so that the blind woman could feel it and touch it—I had the other sister interrupt angrily. You realise that she hadn't heard the blind sister tell Laura that the child

was dead, so it was quite reasonable for her to be shocked at Laura touching what might be something sacred. And so when they were laughing earlier, it's conjecture that maybe they were remembering some other incident with the children.

So that laughing shot is not just a Hitchcockian trick, it's mainly worked out in terms of the characters?

Absolutely. I wanted it to appear bizarre, but stemming from something that was totally natural and ordinary for them to do. But within that situation it's . . . curious.

How about the actual cutting of the film, is that all planned at the script stage too? For instance, the intercutting in the love scene . . .

No, that was in the shooting—two-thirds in the shooting and then developed in the cutting. After the bathroom scene in the script, I hadn't anything: just 'they made love . . . and went out to dinner.' But we got to a point in the film where I desperately wanted the feeling that at that moment of making love she might have become pregnant again. I had that in mind; and the way they behave afterwards in getting dressed . . . I wanted to make clear that it's not just some billing and cooing. I really hope it works on this level, and that's why I'm upset by an article in the *Daily Mail** this morning which tries to make a sensation out of the love scene. Things like that destroy the scene. It isn't a sexual scene, a sensual scene; I wanted to get a reality to it of two human beings.

The *Mail* suggested that the scene had been cut in America. Is that true?

Well, I delivered it to America about six weeks ago, but it doesn't come out there until January. You know the traumas they're having over there with censorship: theatre owners are frightened of showing the films, because they are the ones that stand to get hit. Putting it briefly, they don't mind violence but they do mind sex.

Anyway, *Don't Look Now* hasn't been shown yet officially to any American censorship board, but the distributors have said that they don't want to run the risk of getting a rating that will exclude certain cinemas. So it looks likely that it will be cut unless we can get it off to a better start here. That's why a story like the one in the *Mail* is so upsetting. I feel very strongly about all this in films: I love the idea of a theatre marquee and showmanship, but I don't think you tease people.

Were you aware that the intercutting in this sequence would help with the time ambivalence in the film?

Oh yes.

And did the sequence dictate the choice of the two shots at the beginning of the film? The pond and the shower stall—losing one child and, as you've just said, perhaps conceiving another.

No . . . I wanted to have the background to the titles from two separate sections of the film: one from the beginning and one from the second part. The titles I'd originally planned for the film were based on the Möbius curve, but everyone was buying

*'One of the frankest love scenes ever to be filmed is likely to plunge lovely Julie Christie into the biggest censorship row since *Last Tango in Paris*' (*Daily Mail*, October 5, 1973). So far, the row has not materialised, and Miss Christie remains unplunged.

those Escher books and that suddenly seemed a little obvious. So I thought well, perhaps that window thing and the pond would work. They were suggested by the editor. In the very first draft of the script, the whole opening scene was written as a pre-title sequence, which didn't seem to work because it always splits a film somehow. I wanted it linked by the drill and the cut on Laura's scream; if that had been a pre-title sequence, it would have just fallen apart. I wanted it to be shot forward in time. Allan Scott and Chris Bryant did a terrific job, I think, in the writing after that opening scene, that part of the film where the audience is shot forward and hopefully is saying 'What? . . . where am I? . . . what's happening?' That scene in the restaurant, bringing it down again in level before they meet the sisters, keeping it not too long and not too short . . . it took ages and ages. They did a very clever job working in the letter Laura's writing.

The last shot of the opening sequence, of Julie Christie screaming, is very tight. Presumably you cut that back in the editing?

No, that was in the script: 'short scream' and the cut to the drill. That's what I asked Julie for: 'Make it a short scream!' At the same time she tore a piece of her hair out. This had happened to a friend of mine, a similar shock, an instant shock. I wanted Julie to have that look, to take it in *instantly*.

You mentioned the Moebius curve; was that book in the opening sequence a genuine one, *The Fragile Geometry of Space*?

No, it's John Baxter's book; I imagined it maybe as a treatise he'd written. Actually, it's rather a shame, you can't really see it properly. We got a repro thing of the cover done and they didn't make a very good job of it. Only the white of the title stood out.

What about the emphasis on religious objects, which isn't in the original at all?

It isn't a bible-thumping film or a Catholic piece, but it is about faith in its way, faith in a wider sense. I wanted a man who is a prince of the church, a bishop, whose faith was linked to all faiths; but he was stuck with *his* form. So he was not really a doubting bishop, but . . . I have a little mirror of this before the scene of John's fall in the church, when the priest is showing his Byzantine crucifix to the bishop and explaining it, and the bishop says 'very nice, very interesting' as though he's quite aloof and uninvolved.

The priest of the church was extraordinary. When I went to see him on the recce for locations, he told me that story of the crucifix, but brilliantly, theatrically . . . a theatrical priest in a marvellously greasy cassock. We wanted to use him in the film, but he couldn't do it without authority from the Vatican. That meant sending them the script and that wasn't possible, so we cast an actor. I had a scene stemming from that recce: when John Baxter falls, the priest who was so involved with the church is hiding, and the bishop who had seemed aloof is standing right in the way of that toppling scaffolding. And he couldn't *do* anything. Another total frustration; and in that he was linked to the two women.

Did you have anything particular in mind with the mosaic John is restoring when the accident happens? It's almost like

completing a picture of himself, like breaking a mirror or something when he falls.

It wasn't that. What I wanted to do with the mosaic was certainly to have that face he was building up, remaking. But it stemmed a little further back, to the bishop who lets John take the mosaic pieces, casually suggesting by the way he talks about them that they are valuable: they aren't really, but they are if you think they are. So when John climbs up, he's working with something connected with the bishop, valuable things in a sense. Usually people would say, 'Oh God, do be careful with them.' I wanted to stress the point that the bishop isn't interested in the value, is just watching. Then when John falls, the mosaics fall too; and you see the bishop trample on them. It was really that connection I wanted to stress.

At the time of the accident, when the bit of wood falls, you have time to wonder whether you really saw it fall, whether it's really going to cause an accident. Are you working out an effect like that almost mathematically, in terms of real time, or are you deliberately giving the audience time for that double-take reaction?

I think the latter. It was shot at very high speed, and then the cutting was very deliberately done. I wanted the audience to feel . . . maybe doubtful, maybe that they'd missed something, maybe that it didn't happen. And then to think 'Oh, Christ!' and to have the time to get together with their time sense. You always worry about those things, whether they're too long or too short. It's very exciting that people actually get these things.

Another tiny but quite complex thing, like that earlier moment in the church when Julie Christie is lighting a candle and Donald Sutherland starts fiddling with the electric light switch: was that in the script or did it just happen?

In the script the scene was much longer, though with the same intention. It's very difficult to know until you start shooting in the actual place; but even so I like it fully planned in the script so that at least the *total intention* of the scene is there. We'd lined up a whole series of shots to get through this long and perhaps rather heavy-handed bit. When we started working, rehearsing it and blocking it in, Donald walked up and said, 'I don't like this church at all.' And Julie, who was kneeling, looked up and said, 'Well, I do.' I felt, 'That's it, exactly, that's what the scene is about.' And then suddenly she was lighting candles and he was standing playing with the light switch. And that *is* the scene.

In general, then, you like to have the script as detailed as possible, but it loses or gains bits during shooting; and any changes are substitutions for something that is in the script to start with?

Yes, I really think I'd feel cheated, or else I'd begin doubting my reason for making the film, if I thought halfway through that I'd changed my mind about what this person was, or what these characters were doing. If I said, 'I tell you what, he's not really like that at all, he wouldn't think that way,' then maybe I shouldn't be making this film, I should be making another film about this man. I like to keep the intention of the scene; I like to know the people. That's what interests me about a writer like Daphne du Maurier: one feels

she has thought about a story, maybe put it out of her mind and then come back to it and developed it—*before* she starts writing, and not halfway through, waiting to see what these people are going to do next.

Just in passing, are you an admirer of Hitchcock?

Very much. And it's not by chance that he's filmed three of Daphne du Maurier's stories.

How about Borges? At the time of *Performance*, although you insisted it was impossible to sort out who did what, one always assumed that Borges must be Donald Cammell's contribution. Were you interested in Borges before you made *Performance*?

It's odd about introductions to things, but I think it was about that time, perhaps six months before . . . I think I came to Borges through Donald Cammell. Donald and I had had a kind of running relationship for years, drifting apart and coming together again; and for years the question of identity had interested me. I wanted to do something on the idea of a change of identity. A book that had interested me for a long time was Nabokov's *Despair*. It's rather like the Poe story *William Wilson* about a man who has a double, but *Despair* is about a man who *thinks* he has a double, and who finally murders the other man to take his identity.

So I had been interested in Nabokov, and Donald I think in Borges. But we have both said that it's impossible to sort out the elements in *Performance*: it's a fifty-fifty collaboration, and an extraordinary event in both our lives at the time . . . because we'd had different backgrounds, inasmuch as Donald had been a painter and then relatively recently a screenwriter, and I had been a cameraman. But one tends to get stuck with things in life, and no matter what you do, it's always cross-referenced back. I suppose it comes down to this puzzle situation again: people don't like puzzles, they don't like you to be one thing one moment and something else the next. When I started out I wanted to be a movie-maker, and it seemed to me that the way to movie-making was to handle a camera. Then suddenly you realise you are inside a business; and that to make films you have to have a job. It was all very departmentalised and very like an industry: it *was* an industry. Then, by the time I'd served my apprenticeship and wanted to make my own films, the industry itself had entered another stage. 'Do it! It doesn't matter whether you know anything about it or not!' Which is marvellous. But that attitude didn't exist earlier, and I'd been stuck at a point where the reaction was, 'Oh, well, he couldn't do it because he's a cameraman.' Similarly, Donald was stuck with being a painter. So we had to make a leap; and we were perfect for each other, we could build on each other.

You obviously felt limited as a cameraman. Was this so, even though you worked on some fascinating films? *Fahrenheit 451*, for example?

It's odd you should pick on *Fahrenheit*, because I think it's an incredible film. It was . . . I don't know the phrase . . . I don't mean it was before its time, it was just an extraordinary film that very few people appreciated. It was a literary film, it was a visual film, it was a perfect piece of film-

making. I thought Truffaut was extraordinary, and for the first time in all those years I felt I didn't mind not making movies for someone else.

Did he leave you free on the visual side?

I was just thinking . . . free inasmuch as . . . no. We'd discussed the style before it started, and I said I thought it should look like Toyland; and he said, 'That's exactly what I've been interested in. It should be like a Doris Day picture.' We did a couple of tests, he liked the visual style, and he left me pretty well free on that. But the precision of the film, the actual set-up of the film, that was his. It was totally his film. We would offer things, obviously; when you like someone and you really admire their work, you can't help beginning to tune your mind to theirs.

I remember when we were shooting the scenes with the bookmen out at Black Park . . . It was a fine day, and then quite by chance it began to snow. François was delighted and said we'd move on to the very end, with the little boy who's been learning *Weir of Hermiston* from his grandfather. The old man dies, you hear the boy begin to repeat the story, and there's the snow: the boy makes a few mistakes, and you know that everything is going to change, that nothing was going to live, the bookmen couldn't exist. Then Oskar Werner, having been given his book in the spring and now it was midwinter, is in the circle and you see him still reciting the first line of his Edgar Allan Poe. I said, 'François, maybe Montag should be a little further into the book by now?' 'No, no, no,' he said, 'Montag was a bad fireman, he is a bad bookman.' I loved that. Montag may have had the right values, but he wasn't particularly good at anything; if you change from conservatism to socialism, it doesn't necessarily mean you're going to become prime minister.

François did another nice thing at the end, with Julie Christie. He got Jeremy Spenser back, the boy from the beginning; there he is, sitting on a fence eating an apple. Julie walks past, looks at him, takes the apple, and takes a bite of it. So Montag was not only a bad fireman, he was also a cuckold!

There are some films, like *Far from the Madding Crowd*, on which one feels you did the best possible job in the circumstances; others, like perhaps *Nothing But the Best*, in which your camerawork helps to make it seem a better film than it is. Are you conscious, in general, of being able to influence a film as its cameraman?

Yes, that is the damnable thing. Being a cameraman in motion pictures is the most extraordinary job because it's nearly at the final decision. Nearly. And over-influence can shatter a director to pieces, can destroy what he's doing. You can never see what's finally in a person's mind. . . . It's a matter of diplomacy, really, because if you become too strong with what might be a weak man but a brilliant director, that's wrong. You've got to get to a point where it's still his film. But yes, you can feel you're influencing a film, and if you feel you're influencing it to the point that you've got everything out of the man's mind there is to get, then . . .

Did you deliberately choose *Walkabout* to follow on after *Performance*?

No. Because, oddly, I had done the recce and the script was written for *Walkabout* a

year before I started making *Performance*. *Walkabout* collapsed, and it was only after *Performance* that I was able to get it going again, so there was an odd interim.

So *Walkabout* could just as well have been your first film. Was that also a case where everything was planned in the script? Had you been over the locations so that you knew it all?

Yes, I spent weeks in Australia. But not Edward Bond, and he'd never even been there. That was quite a different way of working with a writer: the script of *Walkabout* was only sixty-three pages. But Bond is a brilliant playwright, and I think the dialogue in *Walkabout* is quite extraordinary. I was rather sad at the Cannes Festival screening, with the English contingent especially . . . not recognising the words, the style, the blank verse of the little boy, who is quite amazing. I think it was Irving Wardle who wrote an apologia for *The Times* about a year after *Saved*, saying that at first he'd thought Edward Bond was a fake but that really he writes like a god. . . . There's a line when the children reach the top of the cliff and the little boy sums up their relationship in three words, put in different juxtapositions. 'There's the sea./It's the sea./It is the sea, isn't it?' It's beautiful, and it's something a child can do!

What happened was that I sent Bond a copy of the book, and asked him to do the screenplay. He wrote back and said he wasn't interested in doing anything that wasn't an original. So I thought I'd go up to see him; he was living just outside Cambridge at the time. Have you ever met Bond? He's very, very shy. He was living there in a little cottage with absolutely nothing in it, no knick-knacks, just a sofa, desk, chair, a giant television set, a record player. And we talked. I urged him to read the book, and he wrote again and said he'd like to do it; he'd changed his mind because he'd always thought of writing a play about a journey, and could we start on it at once. So then National General were going to make the film. I'd got them interested in the book when I was in America, and had said

I wanted Edward Bond to write it. 'Great, great!' they said, but I don't think they had ever heard of Edward Bond. I think they were thinking of a story about little rabbits and bees, but they said, 'OK, if you think he can do the job.'

So I went to Australia. I had carte blanche and I spent eight weeks going everywhere. Edward had told me that he wrote very quickly; that he'd think about it and then probably write it in the last week; and that he'd have the first draft ready by the time I got back from Australia. I rushed up to Cambridge and asked how it was going. Rather diffidently he said, 'I think it's rather good,' and he handed me just fourteen pages of handwritten notes. They were *exactly* what I wanted. I never wanted it to be anything but a play; I wanted it to be like *Our Town*, but with Australia as the setting. But while we were talking, I was thinking: I've got to present this as a first draft to National General . . . fourteen sheets of airmail paper! In the end they gave us more time to work on it, and it was a joy sitting in with a playwright who, while he was developing his play, was developing my movie as well. Then National General read it, said no thanks, and stuck it on the shelf. It's an extraordinary piece: it had no scenic detail, nothing—it was a play.

Time went by and we shot *Performance*. Various people had read the script and liked it, including Si Litvinoff, but he couldn't see it ever being made into a movie. Then about three months later, Si came to England with a man called Max Raab, and said, 'Look, do give Max a copy of *Walkabout* because I know he'd like it.' Gradually people had taken copies until I only had one left, and that one I wanted to keep. But finally Si cornered me, as Max Raab was leaving on the midday plane. I took it round to the Dorchester with a note begging him to return it to me, whether he read it or not. But he did read it on the plane, and the next morning he phoned and said 'I'll do it.' Which was . . . startling.

What was it that attracted you to the book in the first place?

'Don't Look Now': Donald Sutherland. 'I wanted . . . a Gothic feeling'





'Don't Look Now': funeral in Venice. Julie Christie, Hilary Mason, Clelia Matania

It was that I was able to question . . . this extraordinary puzzle. I've got a lot of children, and I've been tremendously conscious each time of this question of identity and destiny. It wasn't the visual side of the book at all. It was that here were two people—two people in effect, since the little boy really acts as a chorus to the aborigine and the girl—who by this curious moment of fate were at a point where they could have been in love with each other. They had everything to offer each other, but they couldn't communicate and went zooming to their own separate destinies, through the odd placement of identity, the identity that other people had put on them. The girl came *nearly* to the point where she could have changed, but then in one moment when they see the road she slipped all the way back, tumbled back into this mould. So nearly . . . and there was still doubt in her right at the end of the film.

In a way the theme—of two people meeting—seems extraordinarily similar to that of *Performance*. In *Walkabout* they separate, whereas they do meet in *Performance*. But in a way it's an artificial solution in *Performance* because it is done through drugs. Do you feel you could have worked *Performance* out in any other way, without the drug element?

No, I don't. Well yes, the story perhaps, but not the film. Because the drug thing was not bound in merely with the story; it was also that at the time (and of course *Performance* was released in England a year after it was completed) we both wanted something that was happening socially. The film would have been less pop, it would have been less socially accurate without the drug element and the wide boy inside the de Quincey-like attitude. I don't think it would have had its social contact. Originally, the drug was to have been a quite straightforward, jolly, social drop of marijuana or hash. But then that seemed too easily identifiable. It's a weird thing about what influences people and how much films influence people. The film was quite popular, it had a lot of contact with young men and women who were directly involved in that particular aspect of life;

and yet, so far as its influence was concerned, I don't know of a case where anyone has in fact taken *amanita muscaria*, although you can pick it on Hampstead Heath—it is quite clearly stated that that's what Turner and Pherber are taking, and it's a very difficult and dangerous drug to take. But it didn't become a popular drug, so these people are in fact watching the film intelligently. The drug thing was a comment rather than, in the words of those days, something to be hip about.

I asked about the drug element because it runs parallel to the Borges theme in *Performance*. Although you do merge them, they are in a sense totally separate; and the rather more interesting Borges theme seems to have become more important in your work.

Yes, I think that's true. Basically, I think, because of my fascination with the discovery of identity. I can't but be amazed at the reinvention of people—people seem to be reinventing themselves all the time. I meet someone I've known for ten years and maybe haven't seen for eight, and find he has reinvented himself. You can take it on a social level; you can take it on all sorts of levels. And in *Performance*, with Rosebloom, the man who's reading Borges, the intention was in fact to try to hint that he might be Harry Flowers' brother. Why does Harry Flowers put up with Rosebloom? Maybe because he's his brother.

Do you think this is destructive, all this about identity and people changing their identity? Because it is destructive in your films.

I think it's a destructive thing, because it gets one further away from solving the puzzle. Some time I want to do a book of Colin Wilson's—there are two books of his that I'd like to film. Because he is involved in refining life down to the simplest form of the puzzle, trying to find out in the simplest form where we actually fit into the landscape. And I think that by changing identity you're getting further away from where you fit in, because you are putting yourself in another hole. We seem to be screaming off in the opposite direction; instead of getting back to any

reasonable route we seem to be trying to get away and change our identity, taking ourselves even further away. Indeed, that's what Chas is saying to Turner when he says, 'No, you're coming with me.' Turner is trying to find out where Chas' real identity is, but at the last moment he has doubts. Chas, after all, is hiding so many things; he is changing himself.

In all three films, the impression is of people who at the end are more or less willing themselves to die. Objectively speaking, within the situations that the identity crises have created, they don't have to die. It's not this sort of death wish that interests you so much as the identity aspect?

No, death does interest me in that way, the fact that we seem to go directly towards it, however much we avoid it. It's something that does obsess me, the idea of where and how we approach, and where we finally reach our personal death scenes. At one time people used to go to funerals—I had a rather elderly father, and I remember how he used to go to funerals. But today death has become a taboo thing; again, this getting away from identity. And today the obsession with health is extraordinary . . . that opposite reaction is what I found attractive about Turner, that he always had the blinds shut, he didn't go out, and he didn't *do* anything. It was another angle on that drugs thing: the odd reversal right now from drugs to a maniacal obsession with perfect health. And in spite of that, people do things that will them to their deaths. There's some extraordinary force that is waving them on and they can't help going. At the end of *Don't Look Now*, John looks back just on a cut to Laura; he knows she's there and yet he has to go on. It's a crazy thing. Actually it was done marvellously in much of the demoniac cinema. Nowadays, when people talk of the Gothic cinema they're really talking about camp. It's very sad, because the Gothic is a tremendous cultural influence, not a funny thing at all. And I wanted *Don't Look Now* to have a Gothic feeling.

To reduce it to a simple formula, in all three films you have someone who is either searching for his identity or being pulled in some way towards another identity; and when he finds it, he dies.

That's right; and dies in a ludicrous way, too. I like that. I like absurdity. The thing that won me instantly to Daphne du Maurier's story is the last line, 'What a bloody silly way to die.' It's superb, but it didn't fit. I wanted that to come out of the visuals, not to have John Baxter actually saying it. I did think of keeping the line at one time, but at that point it would have been crazy for him to say anything. You could do it in the film without it. But on paper I wanted to clap when I read that line.

Both the deaths in *Walkabout* were linked, obviously, when the father was put in the tree—because that is a form of aborigine burial—and the boy died in the tree; but for the audience it was a lunatic thing . . . the boy had willed himself to death, had lost the spirit to go on. And in *Performance*, Turner in the end virtually just says, 'All right, do it.'

***Performance* still stands up remarkably well, except perhaps that the parallel drawn between business and violence, in**

the cross-cutting between Chas at work and the lawyer in court, is a little obvious. Similarly, the Borges references are rather pushed at one—although remarkably few critics in fact picked them up at the time.

Yes, I was amazed at that. And it's funny you should bring up the business and violence thing. I don't know which version of *Performance* you saw; because of cuts and censorship, there were about five different versions going the rounds, and in the end I got completely muddled. The business thing was undoubtedly made simpler by that cross-cutting: it wasn't quite like that in the very original version. But what strikes me as odd is that when *The Godfather* came out a big thing was made in America about how the Mafia is really a business. 'Well I'm darned!' I thought: maybe what we did seems heavy-handed now, but people didn't get it then.

One of the most striking things in *Performance* is the subtle identity confusions so that, in the love scenes particularly, you are not always sure who is who; as in the moment when Lucy comes to Chas' bed, and just for a second you think she is Turner. You presumably cast with resemblances in mind?

No, that all came later. *Performance* was a curious film in that we went on the floor and the construction came after. That's why Donald and I never separate our contributions. It became like our lives. We went on the floor with an outline, an idea, and about the first three scenes; there wasn't a script; and the two of us were doing all the jobs of writer, director, cameraman; it was perfect. We got together in a mysterious way, just worked night and day, day and night, and it began to live. When we went on the floor each day, though, the scenes were *exact*; we knew the intention, and the artists knew the intention, so they had an influence in a subjective rather than objective way, insofar as their behaviour patterns would take shape. But the secret of the film, I mean the secret inside the film, was totally locked between Donald and myself. I don't think anyone at any stage during the shooting really knew that little secret. Sandy Lieberman, the producer, had incredible faith; he liked the movie as it was going. But there never was a final script, and it was a marvellous stroke when Warner Brothers flew a man over to stop the film because we weren't sticking to the script. Show us where we're straying, we said. 'Well,' he said, 'I haven't got a copy here, but they tell me . . .'

Yet there are very precise associations and references in *Performance*, similar to the ones you said were scripted in *Don't Look Now*. For instance, the possibly accidental link when Chas tells the lawyer to 'Shut your hole' and Rosebloom repeats it in mime, pointing to his open mouth; Rosebloom's open mouth links with the poster of Turner with his mouth open. Was that accidental or planned?

That particular thing wasn't a planned link. The hole business was a sexual reference, really. That scene, which we shot at the Inns of Court, was written in the afternoon; we'd been putting it off, having shot a lot around it. In a way that's how we worked: it was shot very much out of continuity, so that a scene could be fitted in like a piece from a puzzle. All the opening stuff with the gangsters was written down in total detail before we began; but the

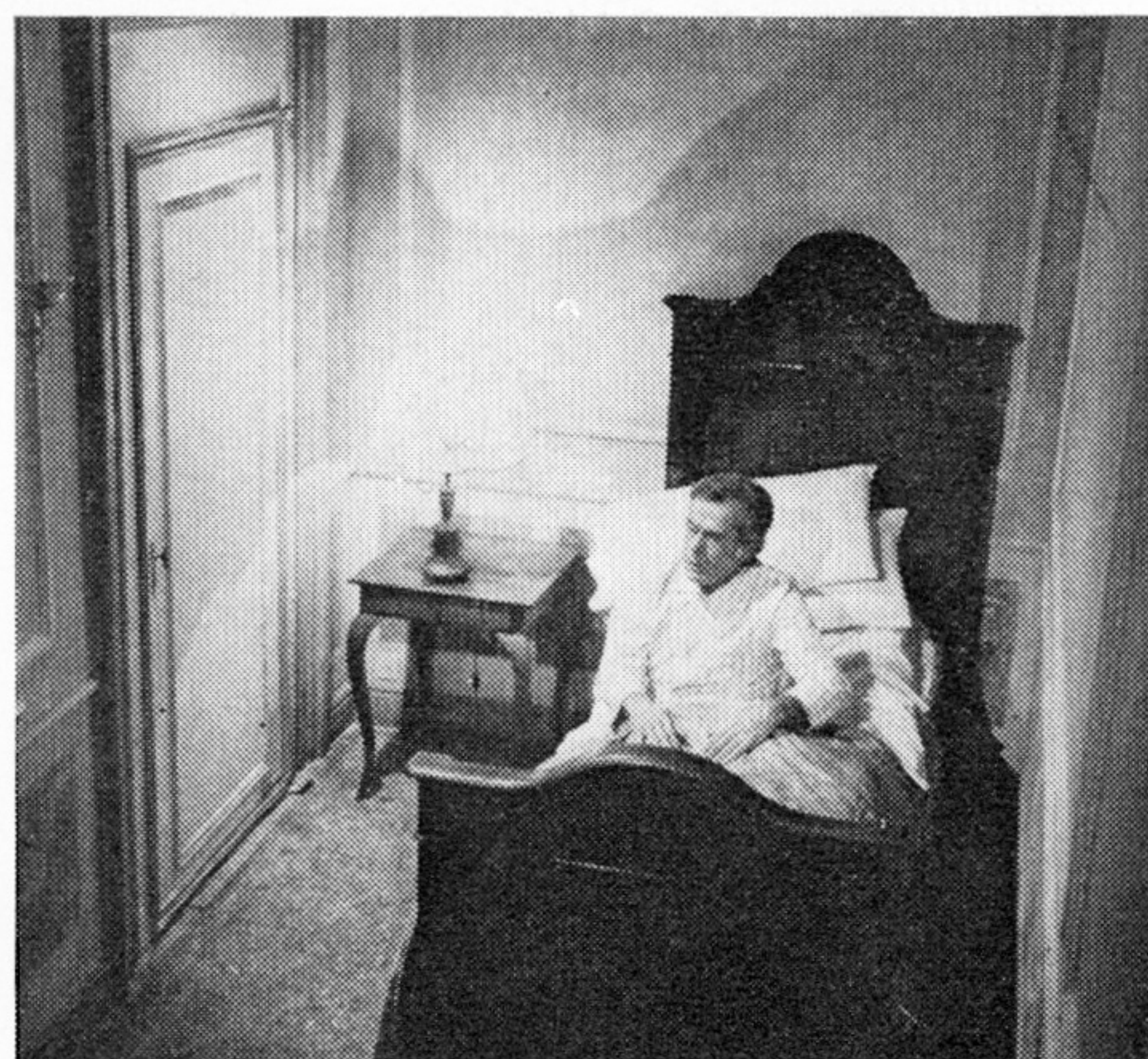
dialogue, the discussion between Chas and Turner, wasn't worked out until it was worked out by the film. Our preparation, really, came in terms of the detail, like the house, and what these people were, who they were, copious notes about them. In a way it's like a play, too, like *Walkabout*; a four-handed piece after they get into the house.

What about something like, not the Borges theme but the shot of Rosebloom reading the Borges book? Is that put in to tip off the audience, or is it a little *homage*?

No, I hate *homages*. The reason was to help the audience. I hope that films exist longer than the first week; that they don't just come and go, and if you don't get it you don't; that they have various stages of life. So the idea of putting something in just as a homage, to say well, we're all reading Borges now aren't we, isn't right. The idea should be to give constant enjoyment to the film and for someone a year or so later to say 'Hey, you know . . .!' *Performance*, I'm glad to think, is more popularly understood now. *Walkabout*, funnily enough, has taken longer to fill out. That's why I had a second thought about *Don't Look Now*, why I wanted to make a *yarn*, a film that could keep going as a *yarn*.

In every film one has a couple of things where one can actually feel . . . 'I do like that!' Near the end of *Don't Look Now* there's one. I remember when I was thinking about this shot, and when we talked about it, and every time I see it, it encapsulates for me one aspect of life. It's the moment when Laura rushes out after John, with the sisters crying 'Warn him, warn him!' And at that moment the bishop wakes in his little single bed, and the camera goes in to a picture of where his faith began. He's in pyjamas, lying on a little boy's bed—I wanted it like a prep school bed—and you see, instantly, that the man has got one whole side of his life missing. Maybe that's why he isn't quite understanding life, maybe that's his trouble. He is obviously a sensual man—I mean, when he opens his coat and touches Laura, as a woman she's aware that's not chance. He blows his nose and says 'Coming to stay with me Thursday?', he opens his coat very wide and touches her breast, then shuts the coat. But he's looking straight ahead. Massimo Serato has a marvellously sensual, warm, living face, nothing pious about it; he looks like a priest who's been to every bordello in the Vatican City. Then at the end you realise he's still living in this

The bishop (Massimo Serato) wakes in the night



childhood world. Something has woken him in the night and he looks, for confidence, to where his faith began as a child with that little picture on the wall. I wanted 'Jesus the Good Shepherd', but we couldn't find one in Venice. You can imagine him as a little boy waking up in the night, frightened, and seeing the picture and getting comfort from it. 'Well, that's all right . . .' And the bishop snuggles down again, clicks out his light. And right at that point, probably, there was the link between all faiths; but he didn't get it.

What happened to *Deadly Honeymoon*, the film you were to make after *Walkabout*?

I prepared *Deadly Honeymoon* for six months in America, and we were five days away from shooting when MGM cancelled the film. It's also a mad story . . . The novel is a little pop paperback thing about a couple who go on their honeymoon. A very, very straight couple; the girl is a sort of mid-Western virgin of about twenty. And that first night, in their honeymoon chalet, two gunmen kill a man. It's rather like the opening scene in *The Killers*: a man who had befriended them earlier at dinner bursts into their room with the gunmen following, and they kill him in front of them, then beat the boy and rape the girl. And then—it's a real pulp story—the young couple decide to go after the two gunmen themselves.

There's a lot of plot—it's a lovely script by W. D. Richter, who wrote *Slither*. It really became tremendously interesting, because you gradually found out that the gunmen weren't proper gunmen: they were cheap criminals who had other jobs, and this was a first time thing for them. Close to the end there was a scene when the young couple do in effect kill them; and again it's the impulsion thing . . . the gunmen kill themselves, really.

And next is Haiti, is it?

I don't know if it's next, but it must be close. I'd like to make a film that has been haunting me for a couple of years or so. An effect not of disorientation . . . but to have people looking at other people going through the same or similar forms of behaviour—getting up, going to bed, getting involved in whatever dramas the plot might contain—but in a totally different culture. So that your point of non-reference is that you don't understand why those people behave like that, what it is in their background that makes them behave so.

Do you want the next film to be a 'yarn' again?

I think I would like to make it in a way a combination of all three of my previous films. In its form it could be as though I was spying on someone. When I say all three—documentaries try to spy on people. But to be a spy, you have to be a very *good* spy, otherwise people know you're spying. Documentaries or television nearly got it when it was a new thing to go out and look at people and ask them questions and so on, and then they stopped there. But I mean to really spy, to use the whole form of spying, to put my story inside the spy camera. And I think I could do that in a different culture from my own. That's what interests me about Haiti or South America, or Eastern Europe. It's very difficult to spy in your own home. ■