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Ulysses

1967

Screenplay by Joseph Strick and Fred Haines from the novel of James Joyce; directed by Joseph Strick; camera-man, Wolfgang Suschitzky; music composed and conducted by Stanley Myers; produced by Walter Reade, Jr.

Molly Bloom
Leopold Bloom
Stephen Dedalus
Buck Mulligan
Haines
Gerty MacDowell
Bella Cohen
Zoe Higgins
Josie Breen
Blazes Boylan
Nurse Callan
Alexander J. Dowie
The Citizen
Lieutenant Gardner
Garrett Deasy
Lynch
Bantam Lyons
Florry
Kitty

Barbara Jefford
Milo O'Shea
Maurice Roeves
T. P. McKenna
Graham Lines
Fionnuala Flanagan
Anna Manahan
Maureen Toal
Maureen Potter
Joe Lynch
Rosaleen Linehan
O. Z. Whitehead
Geoffrey Golden
Tony Doyle
Dave Kelly
Leon Collins
Des Perry
Claire Mullen
Pamela Mant

The choice of the fiftieth film in this volume is one that I purposely postponed until the deadline was upon me, thinking there might just arrive a last-minute, unexpected entry that would qualify to be pegged as one of the greats. The prospect was not propitious, it seldom is in this medium. But a surprise by the unanticipated is always a glittering outside hope.

And, sure enough, one came—as usual, from a source I hadn't looked to at all, and in the shape of a film I would have reckoned the least likely to leap forth as great. I would have said this because the very greatness, and the very uniqueness, of the book from which it was made would have seemed to preclude the probability of its being cramped into the formats of the screen. Furthermore, the novel's notorious candor in carnal revelation by words would have seemed an essential feature that could not be expressed or exchanged. By all the rules, I would have forecast this film had little chance. Yet here it is—Joseph Strick's splendid production of James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

There are several compelling reasons for my amazed admiration for this film and my confidence that it will stand forth as a classic of the screen. It is a welcome simplification and clarification of a massive literary work that has been a puzzle and a struggle for English

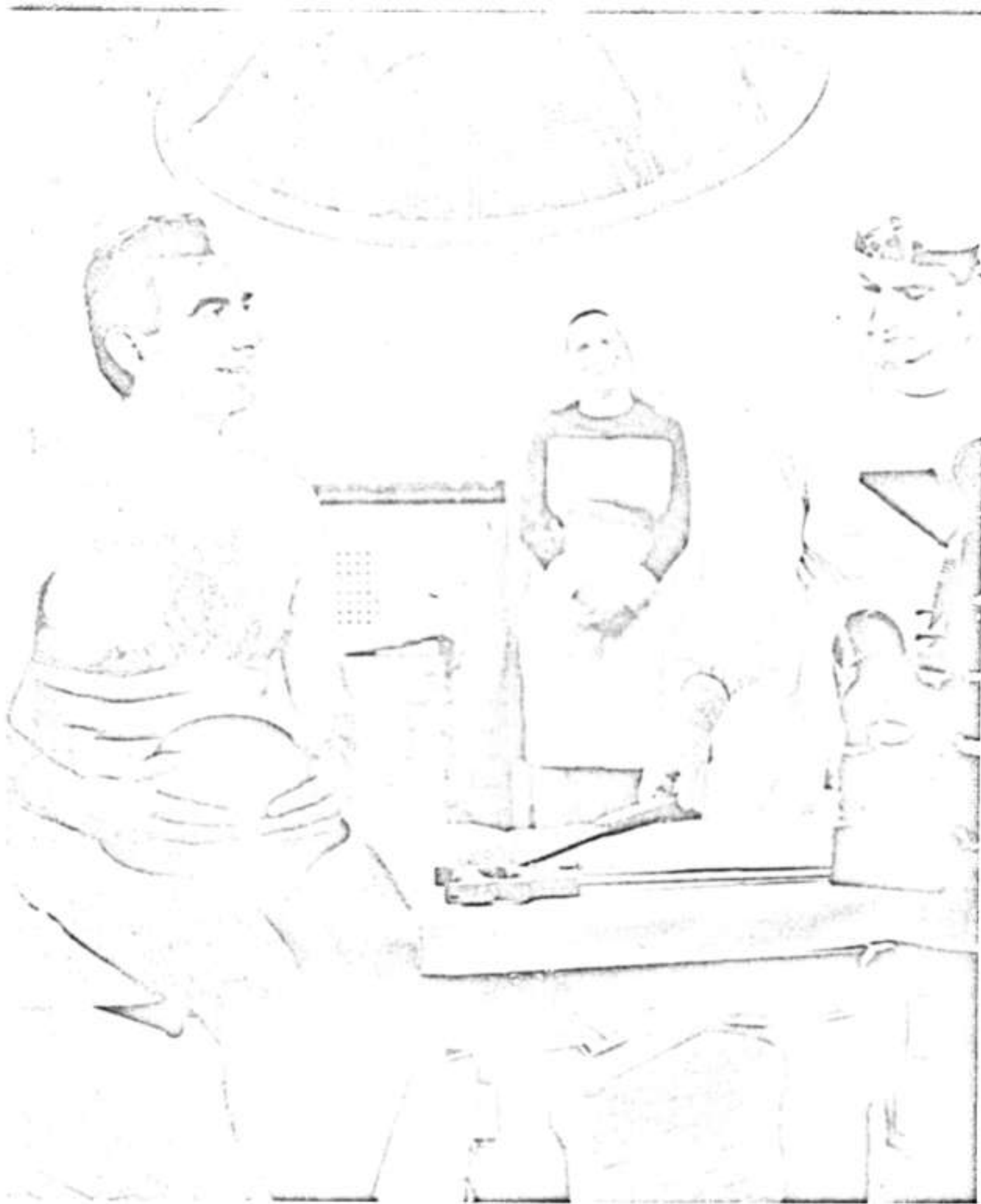
scholars for the past forty years. While it could not presume to be a compound of all the substance and vast complexity of Joyce's herculean novel, which is generally acknowledged to be the most famous, controversial and influential of the twentieth century—and, indeed, no one could possibly have expected it to be all that—it does a remarkable job of pulling the fantastic account of events in the lives of three persons in Dublin during the course of one day into a sequential pattern that makes it reasonably comprehensible. It firmly compresses the stories of Leopold and Molly Bloom and the ambitious poet, Stephen Dedalus, into a kind of cinematic narrative that knits their mundane activities and their abundant fantasies into a relevant form.

Here, in a properly open and wanton performance by Milo O'Shea, is Bloom, the insurance agent whose awareness of being a Jew is aggressively superseded by his pride in being an Irishman, and whose small life is troubled and brightened by wistful wishes and wondrous fantasies. Here, in Barbara Jefford, is Molly, his lumpish wife, whose sexual affairs and dull frustrations are jumbled in lurid memories. And here, in a perfectly measured and darkling portrayal by Maurice Roeves, is Stephen Dedalus, the renegade Catholic, who is a simulacrum of Joyce himself. Here, too, are several strong impressions of typical Dublin characters from the large and rich assemblage in the book.

Further, these warmly living people and the whole ambience of Dublin, with its old gray buildings and groaning graveyards and challenging vistas out to the Irish Sea, are defined by conception and camera in a visual and verbal poetry that is sensitively reflective of the novel and consistent with the best work on the screen.

But the paramount distinction of this picture and the reason it constitutes a shattering and inevitably potent breakthrough in the culture of films is the fullness and absolute naturalness with which it uses and articulates the sensuality of the novel and the language in which it is conveyed. Nothing of Joyce's startling candor in describing the carnal thoughts and the vagrant erotic impulses of his very human and true characters is stinted or weakly obfuscated. Strick and his fellow scenarist, Fred Haines, have these people state explicitly what is in their minds—the longings for self-satisfaction, the expiations of their insecurities, the oppressions of their animal instincts, the verbalizations of their sex experiences. They dare to express in motion picture the deep libidinous realities and the consequent human revelations that are basic in Joyce's book.

It was mainly because of these exposures, which society had chosen to describe and conceal with the prohibitive word "indecent," that most critics generally



In his fantasy, Leopold Bloom (Milo O'Shea) has many images of himself; one as being pregnant and in the delivery room of Trinity Hospital in Dublin.

assumed no one would ever venture to bring *Ulysses* honestly to the screen. The fact that Joyce had spoken to Sergei Eisenstein in the early 1930's about his doing a film from the book, and that Eisenstein had abandoned the task after preparing a tentative script, seemed a fair indication that the job could not be done. The language, much more than the complexities and obscurities in the structure of the book, made it seem highly unlikely it would ever be made into a film—at least, not one that could be taken as anything but a cheap parody. Just as the novel was pilloried and obstructed for eleven years following its publication in Paris in 1922 before it was admitted, on a memorable ruling by Federal Judge John M. Woolsey, to be published in the United States, so it was reckoned that any picture that dared treat the novel faithfully would be pilloried, or totally discouraged, by the elements that pressure films.

Thus the report was taken lightly when it was announced in 1961 that Jerry Wald, a Hollywood producer, had acquired the screen rights to *Ulysses* and intended to make a picture, with John Huston as director. Especially was it discounted when rumors got around that the British comedian, Peter Sellers, would

play the role of Bloom. Subsequent indications that the project would be directed by Jack Cardiff, a British craftsman who had previously directed D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1960) for Wald, did little to lift expectations. *Sons and Lovers* had clearly revealed the customary film-maker techniques of softening realities and obscuring basic revelations in bringing strong literary material to the screen. Then Wald died, and his option on *Ulysses* was allowed to lapse.

In the meantime, Strick, an independent American producer and director, who had been involved in several varied and interesting minor works—the most impressive of which was a drama of alienation, *The Savage Eye* (1960)—had been hopefully eyeing *Ulysses* and laying out in his mind how it could be digested and articulated on the screen. He had attempted to get screen rights in 1960, before Wald stepped in. Now, when he heard the rights had reverted to the Joyce estate, he tried again. This time he gave the executors a frank and encouraging account of how he intended to do the picture, and they optioned the rights to him.

Obtaining financial backing was much more difficult. No major American company would touch the project. Interest among British producers was glacial. Then Walter Reade, Jr., a New York theater owner, independent producer and distributor, got excited about it and agreed to put up the money, in association with the combine of British film-makers known as British Lion. That group was dubious, however, and stipulated that its investment would be contingent upon the granting of a British censor's certificate to the finished film. Reade was compelled to guarantee that he would assume the total cost, which was calculated at \$700,000, if a certificate was not obtained.

With this support and understanding, Strick went to work on the film. He arranged to shoot it in Dublin, which was essential to get authentic atmosphere, and also allowed a saving of money through use of an Irish staff and crew. His cast was studiously selected from promising people without star names. Miss Jefford had been spotted by him when he saw her play Shakespeare with the Old Vic company in Los Angeles. O'Shea had been discovered in a Dublin musical revue, and Rooves, a young Scottish actor, was found on the recommendation of Laurence Olivier. Top salary for these players was £100 a week. The rest of the cast was picked in Ireland and England, and there was one American.

Shooting was started in Dublin in the early summer of 1966, with a house in the Sandymount section used for interiors of the Bloom house on Eccles Street—Molly's bedroom and the kitchen—and also the parlor of the brothel of Bella Cohen. The enterprise was remarkably similar to Erich von Stroheim's shooting

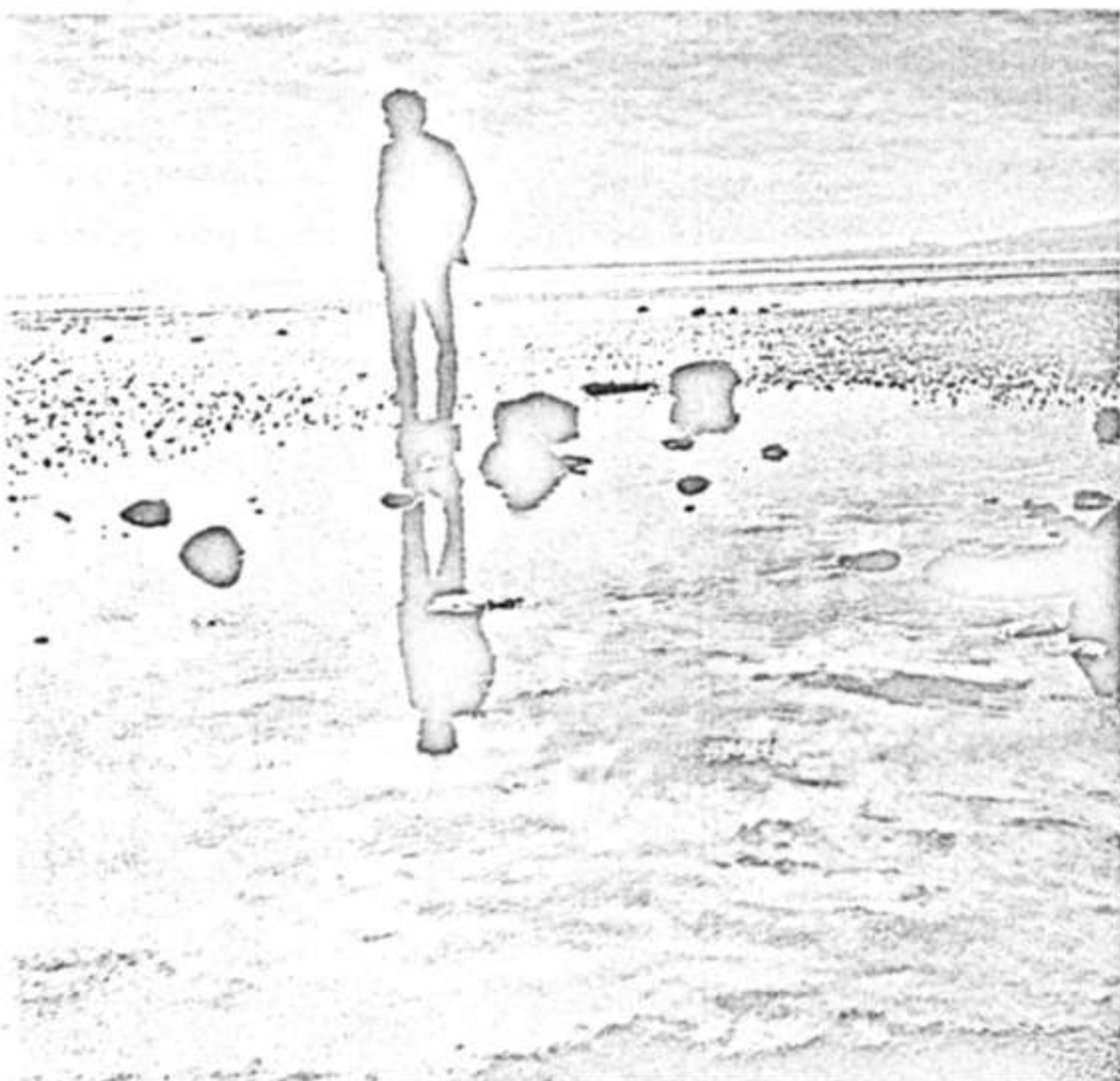
Greed (which see) in San Francisco more than forty years before. Sixteen weeks were spent filming; then the editing and scoring were done in London. The picture was ready in early 1967.

Reade's distributing organization was aware that the film would be a faithful reproduction of the candor of Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the possibility that it would run into trouble with censors was fully realized. A pattern of exhibition whereby it would be shown simultaneously for three-day premiere engagements in a number of theaters all over the United States at a \$5.50 top scale of prices was calculated and arranged. It was hoped that by booking it this way, in 130 theaters, enough money would be made in one go-round to pay off the cost of the negative, at least.

However, in writing contracts with the theaters that agreed to show the film, the distributors were compelled to make the provision that any theater operator could cancel out, if he was displeased or worried after seeing a preview of the film. As it turned out, the Reade organization could not obtain a finished print in time to provide the scheduled previews, so several sections of the sound track were obtained—those sections containing the most candid language—and these were audited in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. Following these auditions, 100 theaters canceled their contracts. The distributor had arranged only 5 more bookings; he was left with the dismal prospect of a total of 35 dates. (When the film opened in March, the number was up to 65.)

There was a further grave anxiety—getting the film through customs into the United States. The federal

Maurice Rooves is seen as the young scholar-poet, Stephen Dedalus, walking along the beach in the early morn.



government still has authority to deny admission to any material considered of a "lewd or obscene" nature, just as it had at the time the novel was originally banned. Whether the customs inspectors would appropriately abide by the ruling of Judge Woolsey that *Ulysses* was not "obscene," or whether they would find the film guilty of that of which the judge had absolved the novel—namely, "the leer of the sensualist"—was altogether uncertain. It was a desperate two and a half hours for the distributor while the inspectors were viewing the film. But within a few minutes after they had seen it, they voted to pass it intact. The decision was a prognostication of critical reaction to the film.

For the general and often amazed discovery of critics and customers has been that *Ulysses*, while startlingly outspoken, is wholly without lasciviousness. It is so shamelessly open and natural in expressing "unrefined" thoughts and in using notoriously vulgar but familiar and robust words that it is frequently characterized by critics as being in surprisingly "good taste." The phrase defines precisely the paradox exposed by this film. It is the completely uninhibited nature and performance of the mind in its private ruminations and reflections, so often pervaded by sex, in contrast to its public inhibitions: this becomes the dominant theme. It is the indifference of the psyche to any of the socially imposed restraints of "good taste" or of canonical circumscription when communicating solely with itself. And it is the true aspect of *being* that this film so recognizably reveals.

The film begins, as does the novel, with Buck Mulligan atop the Martello Tower, speaking his impious praise to the early morning and calling up Stephen Dedalus to consider with him the ironies and absurdities of life. It briefly establishes these young scholars and their pedantic English visitor, Haines, then cuts without cluttering introductions to the home of Bloom and Molly, his wife. In crisp and droll domestic glimpses, it tacitly indicates Bloom's generous indulgence of the sullen Molly, his knowledge of her infideli-

Impotent since the death of their son, Bloom comes back to bed with Molly (Barbara Jefford) who, in her reverie, somehow senses a change in Bloom.



ties and yet his wistful attachment to her through the bond of their baby boy that died.

Hence it proceeds to weave a chronicle of episodes in the day's activities of Bloom and Stephen—Bloom's accidental tipping of a horse to an inveterate gambler, his attending Paddy Dignam's funeral, his visit to the newspaper office to negotiate an ad, and his serio-comic encounter with an anti-Semitic citizen in a flavorsome saloon; and Stephen's poignant confrontation with one of his pupils at Mr. Deasy's school, his unpleasant conversation with Mr. Deasy and his lonely ramble on Sandymount Beach.

The two are eventually brought together in the interns' room at Trinity Hospital, where Mulligan, Stephen and others are indulging in a spree of irreverent banter while in their cups; then Bloom and Stephen go off together to the red-light district of Nighttown, and there Bloom surrenders his mind and spirit to a series of elaborate and revealing fantasies while visiting the brothel of Bella Cohen. What the film conveys through this exuberant and witty flow of figments of imagination is the cheerfulness, sentimentality and sexual insecurity of Bloom and the restlessness and self-doubt of Stephen, who has a fantasy of causing his mother's death. Each, in his way, is compensating for his inner despairs and loneliness—Bloom because he has no son to succeed him, Stephen because he isn't a great poet.

The brief intermingling of their spirits is recognized in a sequence where they go to Bloom's home together for cocoa after their Nighttown escapade, and their moods are sardonically translated in a disembodied, quizzical dialogue. Then Stephen leaves, Bloom goes to bed with Molly, and there follows her great silent soliloquy reflecting, at last, her own feelings. Thus the film ends as the novel does.

It is in this amazing soliloquy, this "internal monologue" with its stream-of-consciousness cerebration complemented by pictorial images, that the whole vulgar life of Molly, her pathetic union with Bloom, her shattered hopes of being a concert singer, her contempt and her need for men, her tawdry affair with Blazes Boylan, her voracity in sex, all run together (but with Miss Jefford providing punctuation with the measure of her speech) to coagulate the sadness of this woman. It runs for twenty-three minutes, and is the staggering climax to the whole.

Inevitably, many of the characters and much of the novel is left out of the film. No effort is made to emphasize the classical parallels—Bloom as a modern-day counterpart of the ever-questing Ulysses, Molly as the restive Penelope and Stephen as the son, Telemachus—nor any of the numerous literary parodies that are so much the delight of Joyce. Mulligan, Boylan, Stephen's

father, the crippled girl, Gerty MacDowell, and many others of major consequence in the novel are briefly sketched, in the film.

But the essence of this symbolic story of man's eternal longing and loneliness is grandly distilled in the poetry of Joyce's language and Strick's images and in the excellent performances that every member of the cast gives. And after one has the experience of Molly's soliloquy, with its passages of carnal realism and its beautifully supporting visuals, one has a sudden awareness of how tongue-tied the screen has been in trying to articulate feelings that Joyce expressed half a century ago.

It is, I feel, highly appropriate and also poetically just that this film comes last in this volume, for it stands as such an interesting summation of past and probable future trends. By at last giving Joyce's great novel the cinematic visualization it cried to have—and which, indeed, was anticipated in numerous intervening stream-of-consciousness films, such as Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957) and Federico Fellini's *8½* (1963), all of which owed their conceptual nature to the inspiration of Joyce's work—it sets up a suitable monument in this medium to an artist from whom much has been derived.

But, more than this, it establishes a model of mature approach and artistry in articulating experience of a sort that is being examined more and more in films. The delicate areas of the human libido, the depths of the subconscious mind, the alienations of the procreative impulse and the sterilities of sexual appetite are matters of increasing interest. Copulation has been explicated on the screen in such fine films as the Swedish *Dear John* (1965) and the Japanese *Woman in the Dunes* (1963). Homosexuality has been detailed in Bergman's *The Silence* (1963) and Andy Warhol's artless indulgence of sheer voyeurism, *The Chelsea Girls* (1966). Clearly this medium, which can so graphically comprehend and communicate the mysteries of psychological movement, will be called upon to do so more and more.

It is well, then, that there should be a compound of image and verbal poetry to mark the channel in this direction. And it is most felicitous that it should be the film of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

So long ago Bloom and Molly were happy together, he vigorous and full of manhood, and she satisfied with his love.

