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FILMS WILFRID SHEED

Not for me, the relentless pounding of the Film Festivals; as soon as read three novels a day for a week; the raw celluloid burns your eyes and coats your tongue in no time. However, a modest sampling, supplemented by pathological eavesdropping, suggests that the New York Film

Festival proved this year what it proves every year: that we aren't missing much the rest of the time, but that we are missing something, and that anyway it is good clean fun to clank up and down the glass corridors of Lincoln Center with the international set, Roberto, Alain, and

the gang from Poland.

There were several anti-war films on hand confirming one's impression that this is slowly replacing music as the international language. ("Your people hate war, Ivan? My people hate war too." "Fine, Joe.") As a film genre, it seems limited—although it takes a master like Jean-Luc Godard to show exactly how limited. His *Les Carabiniers* wears out the whole vein like a blunt hypodermic.

The reasons are not far to seek. Film, by necessity, can deal only with the phenomenology of war, not its substance. It is next to impossible to dramatize the warm-water port or the mining rights that brought the whole thing on, let alone any niceties of ideology: so your standard anti-war film disguises its limp, its limitations, by suggesting that motives don't matter anyhow, that they are always equally silly, and that war is so horrible no motive would be good

enough for it: two arguments, one good and one so-so, jumbled and commingled in the undeveloped areas that most directors use for heads.

Godard's attack is quite traditional. He takes the killing and looting to be the motive, and to hell with the warm-water port. Two French hillbillies are recruited on the understanding that they will be allowed to set fire to women and drive Maseratis, which is what war always comes down to in the end. Then, as they go bounding off on a weird campaign that takes them through Egypt and Mexico (Godard's little joke), they send home postcards, rapturously describing the atrocities they are getting a chance to commit, their big break at last after all those dull years on the farm.

This is what movies do best: never mind what war is supposed to be about, this is what it is. Existentialism is the official philosophy of movies. What matters is what's happening on screen: this child being killed, that woman being raped; what doesn't matter, because it doesn't photograph so well, is why it's happening. For movies, all war is the same war. Or, to put it McLuhanly, it doesn't matter which program you turn to, France vs. Germany, Egypt vs. Israel—the slaughter is still the message.

Godard lumbers into this hoary nest of concepts as though no one had ever been there before. He discovers ironies that go back to Homer, and shakes them until they rattle—which raises the old Godard question. It is, I guess, possible for a movie director to get by on the literary sensibility of a fifth-rate Armenian novelist, provided he keeps away from literary turf altogether; but when he blunders like this into the world of words and ideas and fictional forms, he had better send for help. Truffaut, Godard and Antonioni have all come to grief lately over defective literary ideas. In their best early work, they had each appeared to bypass literature; but literature has been getting its own back.

The trouble is that they don't always recognize a literary problem when they see one. *Les Carabiniers* is the equivalent of a terribly banal novel, and Godard doesn't know it because presumably he doesn't know novels. Fortunately, his claque at Lincoln Center seems to be in similar case, and they stare open-mouthed as Godard rediscovers the wheel and the steam kettle.