Document Citation

Title	**The terrible paradox of talking pictures**
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Source	*Village Voice*
Date	1980 Dec 10
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	65
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Altered states, Russell, Ken, 1980

The Terrible Paradox of Talking Pictures

By Andrew Sarris

ALTERED STATES. Directed by Ken Russell. Written for the screen by Sidney Aaron from the novel by Paddy Chayevsky. Produced by Daniel Melnick and Howard Gottfied. Released by Warner Bros.

TRIBUTE. Directed by Bob Clark. Written by Bernard Slade from his own play. Produced by Joel B. Michaels and Garth H. Drabinsky. Released by Twentieth Century-Fox.

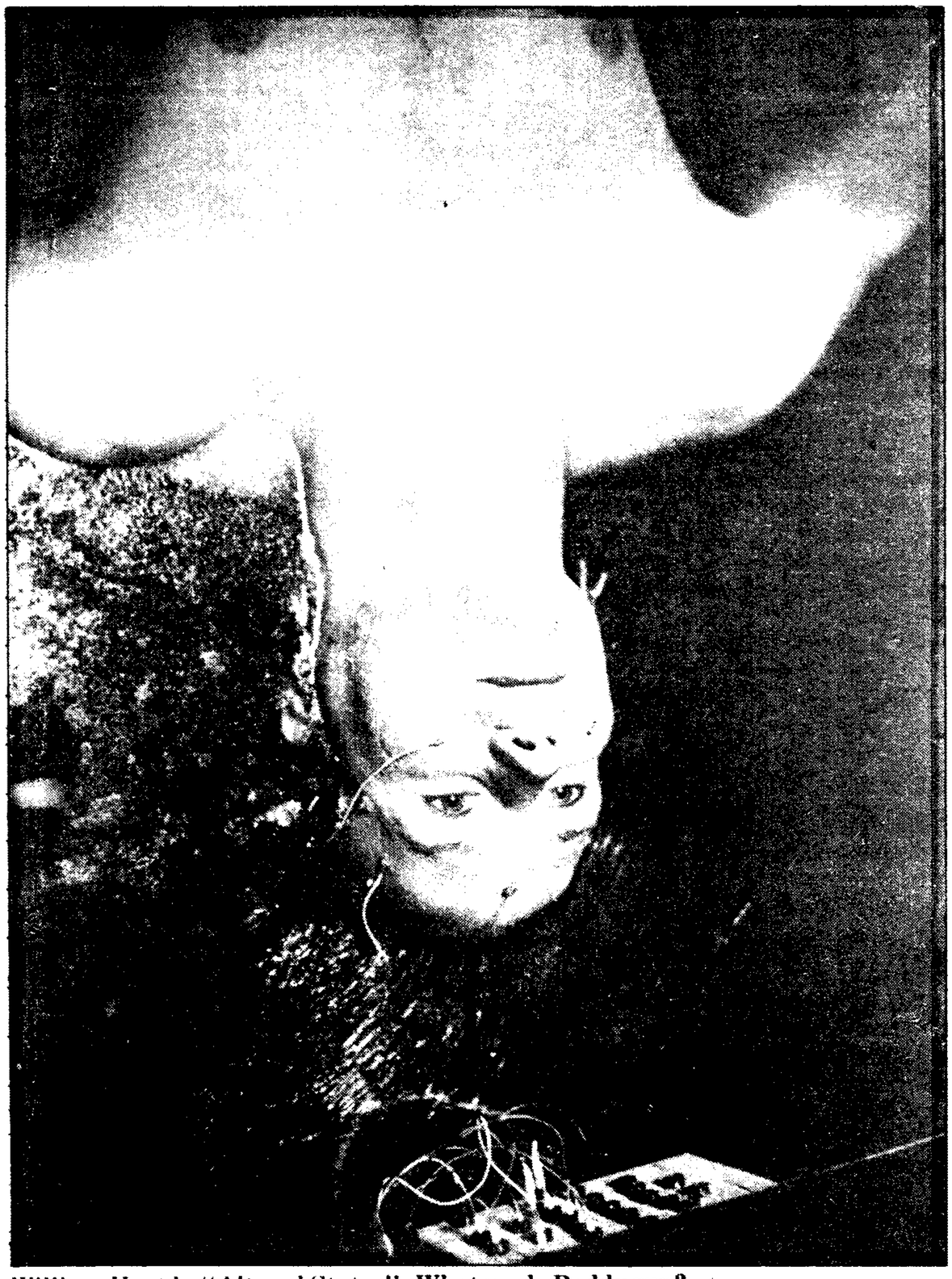
THE FORMULA. Directed by John G. Avildsen. Written and produced by Steve Shagan from his novel. Released by United Artists.

The more things change in movies, the more things come full circle. Professional prophets of the medium have been proclaiming for some time that the age of the writer-director was upon us, and that the word and the image would at last be joined together on the screen in artistic matrimony. At that fateful moment critics could congregate in projection rooms to make a fateful judgment on whether or not a director knew where to place the camera, whatever that means. If only film history were so neat and simple. Unfortunately, the same old power struggles and the same old unresolved dialectics that have afflicted movies since about 1905 are afflicting them today. The word still mars the image, the story still compromises the spectacle, the director and the writer are still at each other's throats, and the star is never fully satisfied with anything. The industrial ascendancy of talking pictures in the late '20s destroyed whatever hope the medium harbored for aesthetic purity. Yet as much as the public gobbled up dramatic narrative for its own sake, there have always been little coteries of camera freaks with a visionary faith in pictures that moved without the distraction of verbiage. The writings of these cultists have been accumulating for more than a half-century, mostly in little magazines devoted exclusively to the so-called Seventh Art. Theories of sound are much scarcer, and theories of dialogue are almost nonexistent. I have known many film students who use the word "plot" pejoratively. What is interesting about contemporary film criticism is how much highbrow theory has filtered down into popular journalism, although most often with a sociological hook attached to the stylistic analysis. Godard's once-esoteric dictum that there is a moral distinction between a cut and a camera movement has now been vulgarized into the simplistic notion that bad movies are invariably the products of moral corruption. I prefer to take the long view, however unfashionable it may seem. Hence, the current vendetta of the funk-fetishists against Jill Clayburgh for her "bourgeois" aspirations is a carbon copy of the '30s diatribes against Katharine Hepburn for putting on Bryn Mawr airs in the midst of the Depression. Similarly, the impasse that resulted between director Ken Russell and writer Paddy Chayevsky over *Altered States* is nothing new. I do not know all the particulars of the dispute that led Chayevsky to remove his name from the credits, but as Chayevsky is the quintessential screenwriter who believes that the camera must dot every one of his "i's" and cross every one of his "t's", so is Russell the quintessential director who must dazzle the audience with delirious swoops of his own feverish sensibility. The inevitable conflict between Chayevsky and Russell over *Altered States* was thus a virtual replay of the Trigorin-Treplev confrontation over artistic process in Anton Chekov's *The Sea Gull.* Chayevsky and Trigorin stand for the rational, the methodical, the cognitive aspects of creation, whereas Russell and Treplev stand for the mystical, the intuitive, and the ragingly unconscious.

The Chayevsky-Russell collision is reminiscent also of the '40s contretemps initiated by screenwriter Stephen Longstreet on behalf of the Screen Writer's Guild against Vincente Minnelli's elaborate camera movements in *The Clock.* Minnelli, according to Longstreet, had no right to impose his own sensibility on another person's screenplay. When auteurism began sweeping over the little film magazines around the world in the middle '50s, the Minnellis were enthroned over the Longstreets and then came a backlash in which the Longstreets were given their day in court, and now the most enlightened procedure is to consider each claim on its own merits.

Chayevsky may have been doomed from the outset as far as transferring his vision intact to the screen was concerned. Up to now he has dealt with comparatively realistic concepts and institutions: The Lonely Crowd (*Marty*); May-December Marriage (*Middle of the Night*); Man-Woman Love Over Group Sustenance (*The Tenth Man*); War (*The Americanization of Emily*); Medical Malpractice (*Hospital*); Media Megalomania (*Network*). With *Altered States,* however, Chayevsky has ventured into the outer reaches of consciousness-raising. As a self-proclaimed brainy square trying to beat the allegedly brainless hippies at their own game by turning their acid trips into occasions for "scientific" sermons, Chayevsky creates the literary impression in his novel of an aging anthropology professor dancing up a storm in a disco, pontificating all the while on primitive fertility rites.

The plot of *Altered States* is tame by today's tastes in the horrific, and the characters are all dedicated in a slightly demented way to their quest for a primordial truth in carnivorously ape-like form. There are basically only four characters: Eddie Jessup (William Hurt), a scientist who immerses himself in a sealed water tank after a crash course in Castaneda and reconstitutes himself in more primitive forms; Emily Jessup (Blair Brown), his fearful but loyal wife; Arthur Rosenberg (Bob Balaban), Eddie's venturesome research collaborator; and Mason Parrish (Charles Haid), a skeptical but curious medical chemist. The characters all spout a steady stream of clinical-metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, and seem to work nonstop through almost all their waking hours.



William Hurt in "Altered States": What made Paddy run?

FILMS IN FOCUS

What probably happened when Russell was confronted with Chayevsky's wordy script was simply a decision to make the players race through the dialogue at breakneck speed as if they were manic compulsives. It is years since I have heard such fast line-readings. The effect is eerie in a pre-Method way, but it is a masterly choice just the same. Russell's characters have always tended to be crazily compulsive anyway, and here they seem loonier than ever with their delusions of lucidity. The only major plot change from the book to the movie concerns a shift of enthusiasm for the continuation of the project from the wife to the research colleague. This was perhaps a significant alteration for Chayevsky, since he wrote the book more as an obsessively humanistic love fable than as the usual paranoid parable more characteristic of the genre in its more recent permutations.

Still, Russell does not "betray" Chayevsky by introducing any more menace or malignancy to the movie than there was in the book. If anything, the movie takes on an oddly comic tone, particularly in the sequences in which Jessup regresses to his primarily carnivorous state in a zoo. The essential sweetness of the story is enhanced by the realistically flavorsome performances of William Hurt and Blair Brown as the anguished but indomitable couple. Russell has had his ups and downs as an auteur, but here he functions admirably as a strong-willed *metteur-en-scene* in imparting a measure of grace to a potentially grotesque project.