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TAKE ONE

SEP. 1978



OSHIMA

IN PARIS REACHING FOR THE FLAME

By John Hughes

Dec. 11, 1977. Received a telegram from Paris today. "Oshima expected here Dec. 31 to begin editing a new film, *Le Fantôme de l'amour*. You will be only journalist allowed to observe editing of film, as guest of Argos Films. Respond immediately. Amicably, Anatole Dauman." The text of the telegram is read to me on the phone by a friend who has called me at the Central Park South home of Sid Geffen and Jackie

Raynal, with whom I am dining. Sid, who has shown many Dauman-produced films (*Hiroshima*, *Marienbad*, *Two or Three Things*, etc.) at his New York theatres, smiles impishly, brings over one of the telephones that are scattered throughout his living room, dials for the international operator, and hands me the phone. Following an irresistible impulse (although it is nearly midnight in Paris) I call Dauman



and am relieved to hear music and voices in the background (or in the *offspace*, as they say in *Cahiers*) when Dauman answers. Hearing the anxiety in my voice, he assumes the patriarchal cordiality that is one of his favorite roles. "It will be a dream for you, my dear Hughes. I will repay you for leading me through the savagery of New York by showing you the civilization of Paris. And we shall drink much sake with Oshima. A bientôt." Afterwards, a long and delirious talk with Sid and Jackie until 4 A.M. about Oshima, Dauman, *In the Realm of the Senses* and my P.R. work for it in New York, Lacan and the Parisian psychoanalytic scene, and much else. As I'm leaving Sid delivers one of his typical latenight orations: "The obscure cabdriver-critic becomes an international journalist with an inside line to the greatest director and producer in the world. What a story—somebody should make a film out of it..."

Jan. 2, 1978. I'm staying at "the new house," the five-storey mansion which Dauman is having renovated and which is across the street from his exquisite flat near Place Victor Hugo. I have dinner with Dauman, who tells me that I'll be able to see a rough cut of the film later this week—Oshima and his crew, who are staying at a nearby hotel, have been working twelve-hour days at the St. Cloud studios preparing the final cut. During the dinner (Lemon-flavored chicken prepared by Maryse, Dauman's Moliere-esque cook-confidante)

Dauman talks about his involvement with Rouch, Resnais and Oshima, and his fascination with the Orient. "I'm always delighted to think that 'Oshima' rhymes with 'Hiroshima,'" Dauman says. During the cheese course, as Maryse listens uncomprehendingly (before the dinner she has told me that she "has never had the least desire to learn even a word of English"—a typical Parisian attitude), Dauman describes the astonishing footage that Oshima has brought from Japan. Finally, while Maryse pours the plum liqueur, the jet-lag-ridden listener gets his reward—Dauman exits through the hidden door in the bookcase and returns with a set of production photos. An instant burst of adrenalin when I look at them. Fiery sunsets streaming down on a weary rickshawman bearing his burden. Forest landscapes like a Hokusai woodcut in the manner of Auguste Renoir. Gleaming torchlit bodies writhing in sexual ecstasy on the earthen floor of a peasant hut... As I prepare to leave, Dauman is agonizing over the film's title. He's afraid *Phantom of Love* will remind everyone of Bunuel...

Jan. 5. Have spent a couple of days following Dauman around Paris—breakfast in the little kitchen with Maryse, morning at the Argos office in Neuilly or at a board meeting at the troubled Cinémathèque, lunch with a personal friend at the Place Victor Hugo flat (yesterday Jean Rouch talked about *Les Maîtres fous* as "an eerie

prediction of people like Idi Amin"), an afternoon screening (today it was, Borowczyk's inspired Rouchian documentary on the painter Ljuba, who is a friend of Dauman), an evening swim and sauna at "Cercle Foch," in front of which Baron Empain was kidnapped (the only event in the headlines which can compete with the forthcoming left-right clash in the elections), and a long dinner with one of Dauman's fellow-producers to prepare strategy for their attack on the French Government's destructive influence on the cinema (i.e. high taxes and lots of movies on prime-time TV)... Everyone I talk to, including old friends from New York or new friends here, wants to know about Oshima. But I've promised Dauman not to tell anyone about the screening tomorrow at St. Cloud, where I shall finally meet Nagisa Oshima...

Jan. 6. I'm watching the incredibly bright steel-grey sky over the Bois as Dauman drives towards St. Cloud. *Les Carabiniers* and the Parisian flashbacks in *Ulysses* come immediately to mind. Dauman shakes his head. "On such a morning in Paris you must think of Max Jacob: 'Grey like the inside of an oyster.'" ... As we approach the screening room I feel like I'm walking on eggs—Dauman has gingerly let slip the fact that "Oshima may be upset over a stranger coming to see his film." But, upon meeting him outside the screening room, I'm instantly put at ease by Oshima's



politeness and charm. It's impossible to be nervous in the presence of someone so complex—one is overwhelmed by the fascination and curiosity one feels (I remember feeling the same relieved insightfulness when I met Bunuel) after meeting a human being who is so young yet so old, so nervous yet so serene, so obdurate yet so willing to please... Oshima begins to laugh when Dauman, after introducing me, begins his usual rap about the "barbarism" of the reaction of the American critics, audiences and Customs officials to *In the Realm of the Senses*. Oshima, noticing my discomfort, giggles shrilly at Dauman and says "But John is a friend, you mustn't make him feel guilty about that..." Then several of Oshima's Japanese colleagues emerge from the projection booth, talking animatedly with Michael Wilson, the suave *Positif* critic who is one of Dauman's chief assistants. We all head into the screening room—before the film begins I notice Oshima moving from seat to seat in the front rows, as if trying to pick the ideal place from which to see his film. He finally sits in the dead center of the room and becomes totally immobile... Not overwhelmed easily (my allegiance to Brecht is ingrained by now), I'm nevertheless bowled over by Oshima's images—I find myself flinching during most of the film's powerful moments. I now understand what Dauman meant when he said my trip would be "a dream." I have, of course, read the scenario many times during the last week, I know the story by heart... The aging yet splendidly sensual peasant woman, Seki, who gets sexually involved with the boisterous village wastrel, Toyoji (played by Tatsuya Fuji from *Realm*) to the point where they are forced by passion to strangle Seki's husband, a sympathetic timeworn rickshawman named Gisaburo. Then the return of Gisaburo as a whitefaced ghost who timidly and inexorably haunts the couple into guilt, madness, blindness (for Seki) and destruction. But I'm totally unprepared for the (non-hard-core) frissons that Oshima has conjured up—the landscape splendors that surround Gisaburo's lonely rickshaw journeys; the firelit Uta-maro-like intensity of the lovers' faces as they suck and fuck themselves into a tragic ecstasy that is stunningly out-of-sync with the lowly medieval surroundings; the scary proletarian insistency of the ghost as he takes Seki (movingly portrayed by Kazuko Yoshiyuki) and Toyoji on misty rickshaw-voyages into a dream landscape, a place where both guilt and instinct reach their apogee and from which it is so difficult and hazardous to return... After the screening, I notice Oshima's editor, Keiichi Uraoka, lugging the heavy film cans out of the projection booth. I impulsively rush over and unburden Uraoka of most of the cans, which we begin to load into Dauman's car. Oshima, who has been discussing with Dauman (in the expressive pidgin English they use to communicate) some problem concerning the editing-in of the titles, sees me struggling with the cans and runs over to help. Then he startles me by pressing my hand. A sad, poignant smile on his face, he

says: "You shouldn't do this, John. It's very nice of you..." The emotion vanishes from his face as quickly as it came, and he returns to the discussion with Dauman. This flickering display of emotion seems to sum up the profundity of Oshima's art—the trembling awareness of the flame of human feeling, the tender vibrancy that calls into question the gamut of repressions and hostilities that enslave the "true voice of feeling"...

Jan. 9. I am in a café near the Bastille, a teeming section of Paris to which I frequently repair—the super-bourgeois elegance of the Place Victor Hugo area has begun to stifle me. I suddenly become aware that the café is empty, and that the streets outside are deserted. Then I'm startled as a huge wave breaks through the window of the café. As the mass of water is about to engulf me I wake up... The phone in the "new house" begins to ring—Maryse is calling, it is a sunbright Monday morning, and her sweetly gruff voice asks "why have you not come for breakfast with Anatole?" Over breakfast Dauman tells me that he has been up all night searching for a new title for the film, and that it finally came to him at 6 A.M. The film will now be called *Empire of Passion*. Dauman watches for my reaction, then disappears to telephone Oshima. He returns: "Oshima likes the title very much. He says that the title is good because it shows that *L'Empire des sens* and *L'Empire de la passion* form a



kind of diptych..." Later on, a huge roundtable dinner at Dauman's favorite restaurant, Le Séoul, a softly-lit and exquisitely ornamented Korean gourmet paradise not far from Etoile. Oshima is there with most of his crew—Uraoka, Takemitsu (the brilliant modernist-classicist composer who's creating an eerie score for *Empire of Passion*), the cinematographer Yoshio Miyajima (a wise, earthy man who keeps filling everyone's glass with sake) and the high-strung Shibata, Oshima's production supervisor and interpreter. There are also Dauman, several fashionable French ladies, and Jean-Paul Sarré (an eclectic Lacanian psychoanalyst who writes for *Le Quotidien*). Over the *sashimi* I tell Oshima that the sexual politics of his recent films seem to me an important corrective to the

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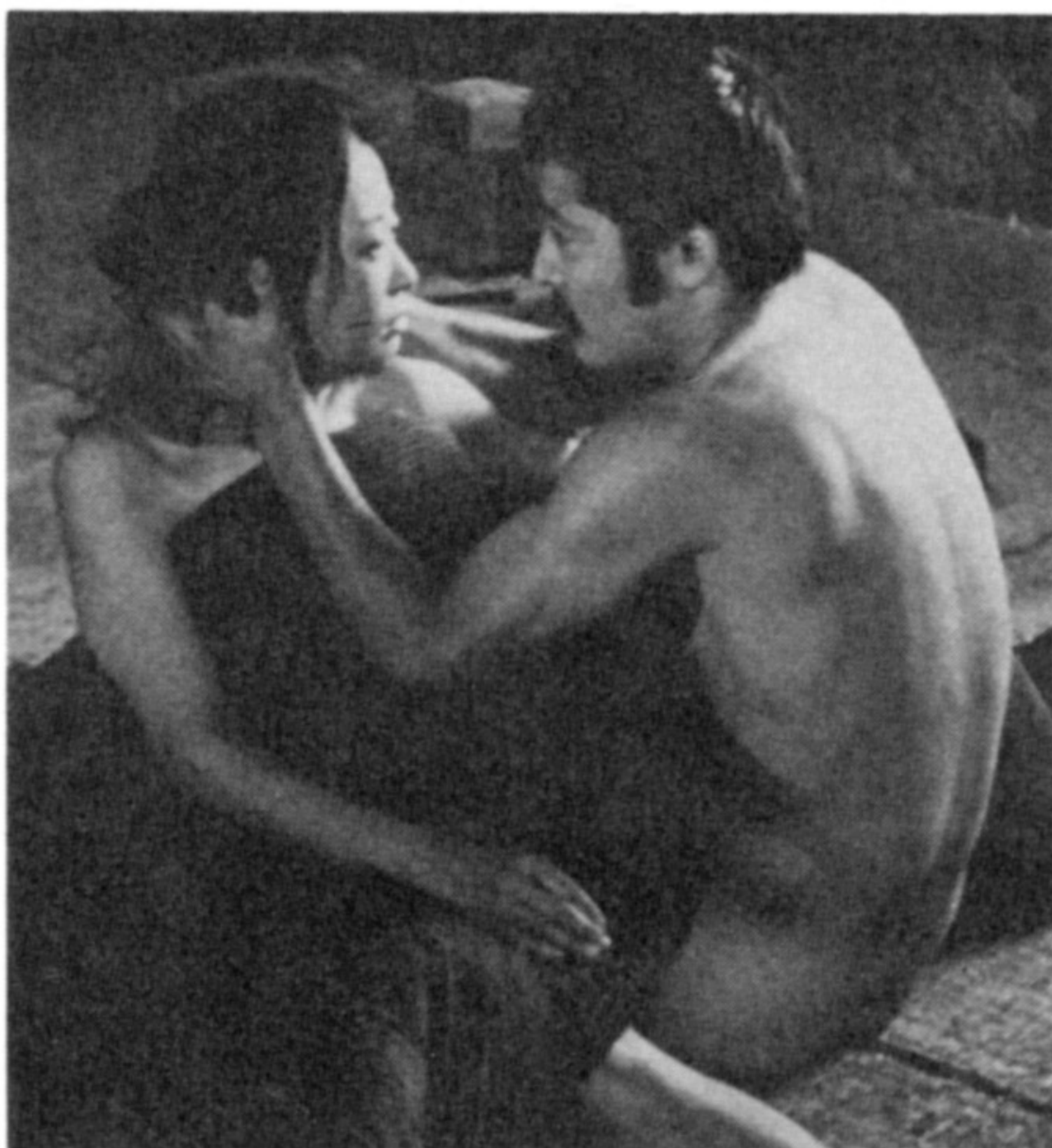


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puritanism of Godard. Oshima: "I see what you mean. And of course I've been very influenced by Godard. My favorite Godard films are *Breathless*, *Contempt*, and *Weekend*. I'm glad you see the political element in the new film. The ghost is not out of Kabuki, he is a very plebeian ghost—he remains a rickshawman even after his death..." I also talk to Miyajima about the painterly influences (from Utamaro to Monet to Sisley) on his style. Finally, over the vodka-flavored green-tea sherbet, a rather giddy conversation with Sarré about Oshima, Dauman and the psychoanalytic school of Jacques Lacan (which has influenced much of my film criticism, for better or for worse). Sarré talks about "the undiscovered continent of female sexuality." This is why Oshima is of such great interest to him and his colleagues, he says. "Oshima demonstrates what Lacan has said recently in his Sorbonne seminar: The woman is always waiting to make love with God... None of us have been able to come to terms with this. But Oshima does, he is a true artist—as is Dauman as a producer; the true artist can be conscious and unconscious at the same time. He can be inside and outside, with the mother and without her, in the sphere of life as well as of death... But society always sees such people as crazy." I mention to Sarré a mutual acquaintance, a writer, who has contracted cancer. Sarré: "I am beginning to understand cancer as a kind of pre-genital craving for some early experience of death. This, too, you can become aware of in *Empire of Passion*, in a scene where Toyoji grabs Seki's breast away from her infant son." ...Afterwards, a little high on sake, I'm talking with Oshima as Dauman's chocolate-colored Mercedes shoots past the deserted Arc de Triomphe. I ask Oshima about his relation to Mizoguchi, Ozu and Kurosawa—the latter because of the abandoned well in *Empire of Passion* (it's where they bury Gisaburo) which reminds me of the well in *Redbeard*, which I saw last week at a cinema near the Odeon. But Oshima's very guarded in his response to my questions about the classical Japanese directors (I've noticed this before). He says something about "the difficulty each of these directors had in reconciling the freedom of their ideas with the control of their style..." But Oshima has had even more sake than I, and he suddenly becomes silent. Then, as we approach his hotel, both Dauman and myself are startled as Oshima raises his head and begins to croon the beautiful melody of a sad and lyrical Japanese song. I feel privileged to experience this exuberant outburst, and I tell him so as he's getting out of the car—as usual there is the quick flicker of emotion, followed by the shy diffidence...

Jan. 12. Another grey, brilliant, and unseasonably warm day. And, early this morning, another strange dream—of New York in a fiery chaos, with buildings falling and mysterious planes and dirigibles flying



overhead... I've been feeling very hyper and schizoid for the last few days—too much wine and cognac, too many experiences to assimilate. And Dauman is a bit angry at the fact that I'll be leaving for Yugoslavia next week, where I may be asked to write a screenplay for a film on the futuristic inventor, Nikola Tesla (a man who, ironically enough, supposedly never had sex in his life—as in Rossellini's great *Blaise Pascal*)... But with New York toppling, and Paris sterile and constipated, where else to take refuge but in the "capital of the Third World"?... Despite myself, however, I've been having a good time... Dinner last night at Balzar, near St. Germain, with Dr. Sarré, who talked brilliantly about "the paranoid narcissism" of certain pseudo-left-wing tendencies (of the sort that are quite in vogue in New York now), and about "the fascistic leather-fetishism and infantile cannibalism that so often characterize the supposed *gauchistes*"... Then, this afternoon, some delicious *cuisine lyonnaise* with the least fetishistic and most elegant of *gauchistes*, Serge Daney of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. After some depressing talk about the elections ("the Left will destroy itself, just as it's doing all over the world"), Serge and I get bombed on red wine (we've been irritated by some noisy children at a nearby table) and get lost in a complicated discussion about the "humanism" of *Redbeard*, the fragmentation of point-of-view in Oshima as compared to the Japanese classical directors, and the Lacanian idea of "the phallus" (Serge: "That which passes between man and woman in the sexual act, but which neither can totally possess")... He draws some diagrams on the tablecloth to illustrate this idea, which causes some of the waiters to glower angrily at us as we're leaving. At the Metro, he tells me about the new direction *Cahiers* is taking: "We're becoming more mainstream. We may even have to abandon Marxism in order to return to the cinema..." Waiting for the train, I'm both depressed and elated by his statement, I don't know why...

Jan. 16. My two weeks in another town (a town where, sadly enough, the Lacanian Other can only appear via a great Japanese artist and a masterful Polish-Jewish producer) have come to an end. I'm at Orly waiting for the Monday afternoon flight to

Zagreb, where I'll meet with the associates of director Krsto Papic. Last night at Dauman's I managed to say goodbye to nearly everyone, for an *Empire of Passion* slide-showing-cum-sashimi-buffet was staged for all of Dauman's and Oshima's colleagues, as well as every important film critic in Paris. Oshima was in a happy mood, and it's easy to understand why—without having seen the film, critics from *Figaro* to *Cahiers* were comparing it to Shakespeare and Sophocles (the results of Dauman's incredible publicity machine, but the comparisons aren't excessive) and predicting that the film will win a major award at Cannes... Spent my last morning here looking at the Pompeii frescoes and the Elusian sculptures in the Louvre. It was there I found the solace I needed to begin a new voyage, to continue my search for something that both Rossellini and Rouch described to me (at different times, but in the same words)—the lost connections between the depths of human eroticism and the necessary web of communality. Before the tragic pathos of those ancient images, with *Empire of Passion* and *Voyage to Italy* and *Chronicle of a Summer* flashing amidst the neurons in my head, I finally understood that the "dream" Dauman had given me was the cinema itself—that ability to dream on many different levels in order to more intimately confront the tangled realities of our social selves... But I was a bit crestfallen when, after returning to Place Victor Hugo for my luggage, Maryse informed me that "Anatole called to say that he can't come over to say goodbye..." So I kissed her heartily ("Bonne chance, Monsieur Johnny," she giggled—she's seen *Johnny Guitar* on the TV) and headed to the street to look for a taxi. It was raining, not a cab to be found. Suddenly, the chocolate Mercedes rounded the corner and stopped in front of me. In it was the Argos Films chauffeur, who had been sent by Dauman to give me a friendly farewell and a fast ride to Orly.

John Hughes is a free-lance critic (Film Comment, The Thousand Eyes, Soho News, The Village Voice) and filmmaker who has recently completed the scenario for Cosmic Man, which will be shot in the US, Canada and Yugoslavia.

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United States illegally to find work. Karl Reisz's *Who'll Stop the Rain* (ex: *Dog Soldiers*) also managed to make some serious points about the connections between the corruption of the Vietnam war and that corruption which permeates American society, without ever missing a fast-paced beat as Reisz rang changes on the action genre. And, finally, there was *The Last Waltz*, which proved not only that Martin Scorsese is the singularly most interesting director now working in American film, but that it is possible to make a joyful, graceful, and, above all, personal film from such unpromising material as a rock concert.