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Manny Farber 10/31/68
by Fielding Dawson

Manny Farber was born in Douglas, Arizona, February 20, 1917. Taught art classes in Washington, D.C. and California. Presently (1942) joined the New Republic as film and art critic, replacing film critic Otis Ferguson. Stayed at the New Republic until 1946, later (1949) joining The Nation, when his friend and long-time colleague, James Agee, departed for Hollywood. Also worked for Time for several months of 1949. Left The Nation in 1954; then, in 1957, went over to The New Leader, staying on until 1959. Wrote for Cavalier in 1966; for Artforum from 1967 until the present. Has contributed various essays and interviews to Art News; Commentary (which printed perhaps his most famous article, Underground Films); Commonweal; The American Mercury; Prospectus. Currently lives in New York City, where he paints, carpenters, and teaches film appreciation at the New School.

October 28, 1950 / The Nation

Hollywood has spawned, since 1946, a series of ugly melodramas featuring a cruel aesthetic, desperate craftsmanship, and a pessimistic outlook. These films ("The Set-Up", "Act of Violence", "Asphalt Jungle", "No Way Out") are revolutionary attempts at turning life inside out to find the specks of horrible oddity that make puzzling, faintly marred kaleidoscopes of a street, face, or gesture. Whatever the cause of these depressing films -- the television menace, the loss of twenty-four million customers since the mid-forties -- it has produced striking changes in film technique. Writers overpack dialogue with hackneyed bitterness, actors perfect a quietly neurotic style, while directors -- by flattening the screen, discarding framed and centered action, and looming the importance of actors -- have made the movie come out and hit the audience with an almost personal savagery. The few recent films unmarked by the new technique ("Born to be Bad") seem naive and obsolete.

The new scripts are tortured by the "big" statement. "All About Eve" (story of the bright lights, dim wits, and dark schemes of Broadway) hardly gets inside theater because most of the movie is coming out of somebody's mouth. The actors are burdened with impossible dialogue abounding in cliches: "Wherever there's magic and make-believe and an audience -- there's theater"; timely words: "We are the original displaced personalities"; and forced cleverness that turns each stock character into the echo of an eclectic writer. The new trick is to build character and plot with loaded dialogue, using hep talk that has discolored cheap fiction for years. In "The Breaking Point" the environment is a "jungle", the hero a morose skipper "with only guts to peddle" who decides after a near-fatal gun battle that "a man alone hasn't got a chance". His spouse comes through with "You're more man than anyone I ever knew".

The stories, parading success-seekers through a jackpot of frustration, are unique in that they pick on outcasts with relentless cruelty that decimates the actor as much as the

character. As a colored interne moves through the "No Way Out" blizzard of anti-Negro curses, everything about him is aggressively spiked so that a malignant force seems to be hacking at him. When the cruel aestheticians really click on these sadistic epics, foreboding death lurks over every scene. Cameramen dismember the human body, accenting oddities like Darnell's toothpick legs, or Pat Neal's sprawling mouth to make them inanimate; faces are made up to suggest death masks, expanded to an unearthly size, spotlighted in dark, unknown vacuums; metaphorical direction twists a chimp's burial ("Sunset Boulevard") into an uncanny experience by finding a resemblance between monkey and owner. Under the guise of sympathy these brutally efficient artists are sneaky torturers of the defeated or deranged character.

Directors like Wilder and Mankiewicz mechanically recreate the unharnessed energy and surprise of great silent films with an elegantly controlled use of the inexplicable. In the jitterbugging scene of "Asphalt Jungle" Huston delicately undresses the minds of four characters and gauchely creates a sensuous, writhing screen, though his notion of jive is so odiously surrealistic it recalls Russian propaganda against the United States. The first glimpse of the faded star in "Sunset", using Bonnard's suede touch on Charles Addams's portraiture (a witch surveying her real estate through shutters and dark spectacles) is lightning characterization with a poetic tang. Brando, in "The Men", commands a G.I. troop into battle like a slow, doped traffic cop wagging cars through an intersection, but his affected pantomime electrifies the screen with the hallucinatory terror of an early painting by De Chirico. Movies have seldom if ever been as subtle as these scenes, or as depressing in the use of outrageous elements to expedite ambiguous craftsmanship.

To understand the motives behind the highly charged, dissonant acting employed today, one has to go back to the time-wasting, passive performance of an early "talkie". No matter how ingenious the actor -- Harlow, Garbo, Lee Tracy -- effectiveness and depth were dissipated by the uninterrupted perusal of a character geared to a definite "type" and acted with mannerisms

that were always so rhythmically and harmoniously related that the effect was of watching a highly attenuated ballet. Directors today have docked the old notion of unremittingly consistent, river-like performances, and present what amounts to a confusion of "bits", the actor seen only intermittently in garish touches that are highly charged with meaning and character, but not actually melted into one clear recognizable person. Darnell's honestly ugly characterization of a depressed slattern is fed piecemeal into "No Way Out", which moves her toward and away from malevolence, confuses her "color", and even confounds her body. Her job -- like the recent ones of Nancy Olson, John MacIntyre, Hayden -- shouldn't be called a "performance" because it is more like a collage of personality, which varies drastically in every way to create the greatest explosion and "illumination" in each moment.

June 4, 1949 / The Nation

Hollywood's fair-haired boy, to the critics, is director John Huston; in terms of falling into the Hollywood mold, Huston is a smooth blend of iconoclast and sheep. If you look closely at his films*, what appears to be a familiar story, face, grouping of actors, or tempo has in each case an obscure, outrageous, double-crossing unfamiliarity that is the product of an Eisenstein-lubricated brain. Huston has a personal reputation as a bad-boy, a homely one (called "Double-Ugly" by friends, "monster" by enemies), who has been in every known trade, rugged or sedentary: Mexican army cavalryman, editor of the first pictorial weekly, expatriate painter, hobo, hunter, Greenwich Village actor, amateur lightweight champ of California. His films, which should be rich with this extraordinary experience, are rich with cut-and-dried

*"The Maltese Falcon" (1941), "In This Our Life", "Across the Pacific", "San Pietro", "Let There Be Light", "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre", "Key Largo", "We Were Strangers".

homilies; expecting a mobile and desperate style, you find stasis manipulated with the surehandedness of a Raffles.

Though Huston deals with the gangster, detective, adventure thriller that the average fan knows like the palm of his hand, he is Message-Mad, and mixes a savage story with puddin'head righteousness. His characters are humorless and troubled and quite reasonably so, since Huston, like a Puritan judge, is forever calling on them to prove that they can soak up punishment, carry through harrowing tasks, withstand the ugliest taunts. Huston is a crazy man with death: he pockmarks a story with gratuitous deaths, fast deaths, and noisy ones, and in idle moments, has his characters play parlor games with gats. Though his movies are persistently concerned with grim interpersonal relationships viewed from an ethic-happy plane, half of each audience takes them for comedies. The directing underlines a single vice or virtue of each character so that his one-track actions become either boring or funny; it expands and slows figures until they are like oxen driven with a big moralistic whip.

Money -- its possession, influence, manufacture, lack -- is a star performer in Huston's moral fables and gilds his technique; his irony toward and preoccupation with money indicate a director who is a little bitter at being so rich -- the two brief appearances Huston makes in his own films are quite appropriately as a bank teller and a rich, absent-minded American handing out gold pieces to a recurring panhandler. His movies will please a Russian audience: half the characters (Americans) are money-mad, directly enriching themselves by counterfeiting, prospecting, blackmail, panhandling.

His style is so tony it should embarrass his threadbare subjects. The texture of a Panama hat is emphasized to the point where you feel Huston is trying to stamp its price tag on your retina. He creates a splendiferous effect out of the tiniest details -- each hair of an eyelid -- and the tunnel dug in a week by six proletarian heroes is the size of the Holland Tunnel.

Huston's technique differs on many counts from classic Hollywood practise, which from Sennett to Wellman has visualized stories by means of the unbroken action sequence, in which the primary image is the fluid landscape shot where terrain and individual are blended together and the whole effect is scenic rather than portraiture. Huston's art is stage presentation, based on oral expression and static composition: the scenery is curiously deadened, and the individual has an exaggerated vitality. His characters do everything the hard way -- the mastication of a gum-chewing gangster resembles the leg-motion in bicycling. In the traditional film life is viewed from a comfortable vantage-point, one that is so unobtrusive that the audience is seldom conscious of the fact that a camera had anything to do with what is shown. In Huston's you are constantly aware of a vitaminized photographer. Huston breaks up a film into a hundred disparate midget films: a character with a pin head in one incident is shown megacephalic in another; the first shot of a brawl shows a modest Tampico saloon, the second expands the saloon into a skating rink.

The Huston trademark consists of two unorthodox practises -- the statically designed image (objects and figures locked into various pyramid designs) and the mobile handling of close three-figured shots. The Eisenstein of the Bogart thriller, he rigidly delimits the subject matter that goes into a frame, by chiaroscuro or by grouping his figures within the square of the screen so that there is hardly room for an actor to move an arm: given a small group in close quarters, around a bar, bonfire, table, he will hang on to the event for dear life and show you peculiarities of posture, expression, and anatomy that only the actor's doctor should know. The arty, competent Huston would probably seem to an old rough-and-ready silent film director like a boy who graduated from Oxford at the age of eight, and painted the Sistine Chapel during his lunch hours.

Aside from its spectacular evidences of his ability to condense events and characterization, the one persistent virtue of Huston's newest and worst movie, "We Were Strangers" is

Jennifer Jones, who wears a constant frown as though she had just swallowed John Garfield. Garfield acts as though he'd just been swallowed.

June 10, 1950 / The Nation

Having won more prizes and recorded more hits in thirty years than any other Hollywoodian, Frank Capra is rated a "cinemagician" whose "masterful comedies" reveal a "tender sense of humor, a quick sense of social satire, and a glowing faith in human nature." Since he is always for the little man (Mr. Smith, Mr. Deeds: helpless, innocent, likeable, gawky) against such populist bogies as the Corrupt Politician, Hearstian Newspaperman, Big Tycoon; always in favor of copybook maxims (Be Kind, Love Thy Country, The Best Things Are Free); and spices his sermons with equally stereotyped sentiment and humor (a mild tap by a car salesman and the headlight falls off), Hollywood's best-loved preacher should please anyone who goes for obvious social consciousness, character-building, and entertainment. Actually the only subtle thing about this conventionalist is that despite his folksy, emotion-packed fables, he is strictly a mechanic, stubbornly anaware of the ambiguities that ride his shallow images.

"Riding High" (from riches to nags with Bing Crosby) catches some of the jumpy, messy, half-optimistic energy seen around racetracks, but leaves you feeling that you've been taken in like a carnival sucker. For instance, the movie drools democratic pride in Crosby's sugary relationship with his colored stableboy, displaying a sashaying Negro named "Whitey" whose happy slave personality, Sambo dialect (hallelujah), rapid expressions of unctuous love are derived from an old stencil cut from the deepest kind of prejudice.

Capra's nervous films skip goat-fashion over a rocky Satevepost terrain. In "Riding High" Crosby throws over a dollar-plated job and fiancée to make a stakes winner out of an under-

privileged beast called Broadway Bill (characteristically cast with a gentle, trick-performing horse who doesn't look "diseased with speed"). As in all Capra films, the world is given to the underdog (the 100-to-1 entry, two-buck better, brat daughter -- all win over the big, pompous and rich), but the sleek, pampered technique, the grandiose talk and eating habits of his down-and-out characters, and even the names (Imperial City, Pettigrew, Brooks) make for a plush, elegant movie that subtly eulogizes the world of powerful wealth. Capra's poverty boys are royalists in ratty boarding houses and leaky stables; when they eat at a hamburger stand, they treat the owner like a witless palace scullion. The gags always revolve about large sums of money, often rib a character for not being a liberal spender, delight in scenes that resemble a busy day at the Stock Exchange. Actually Capra only hates and attacks the humdrum plodder made humble by necessity; his smart-Alec jibes at artless, hardworking waiters or farmers invariably win sympathy where Capra intends you to snicker.

Capra's career-long punching bag has been smug respectability (one of the key lines from "It Happened One Night" was "Twenty millions and you don't know how to dunk"), but he characteristically double-crosses his social criticism. Although Crosby stands for the beautiful freedom of the gypsy (against job slavery, punctuality, table manners, neatness, and bathtubs), he suggests a spoiled little boy more than an anarchic vagabond. Surrounded by male and female sycophants who giggle violently at his jokes and turn up at crises with money, food and good cheer, Crosby looks like a well-kept seal, generally compromises his role with self-confident affectations (he knocks out a cop with a neat, powerless punch) and the secure, aloof expression of one whose mind is on a treasure buried twenty feet from every scene.

The chief sensation in "Riding High" is of a slick, capricious, over-trained life that holds one completely out of the movie as though there was a glass pane between audience and screen. The interesting details have an idiotic element because

the director's hand is constantly showing and the effects are obviously dictated by formulas for keeping an image active, holding the eye, manufacturing excitement in a slight, predictable plot. The idiocy is apparent where Capra energizes static scenes by having Crosby chew gum with jet-propelled jaws, or by photographing the burial of Broadway Bill, who dies crossing the finish line, in a small tornado. Capra is always getting into foolish, capracorny corners and almost edging himself out by suddenly reverting to stark journalistic shots (the horrifying close-up of Broadway Bill in a ground-piercing nose-dive), and carefully anatomized melodrama. One trick scene is the ultimate in surrealism: an extended mid-race examination (the race is so expanded by drama-building close-ups that a camel could have won) of a crooked jockey slyly throwing the race by standing upright in the stirrups and pulling the bit so hard the horse's nose is practically skyward. Despite the exaggerated villainy, the fact that the cameraman should have been trampled to death, and that the jockey is a different, even taller one than the rider who started the race, this is one of the few scenes that pulls you into the movie -- as much by spontaneous acting and newsreel photography as by its weirdness.

April 2, 1952 / The Nation

Alongside "Boots Malone", a race-park drama executed in a relaxed and mobile fashion, most of the current films appear to be moving on club feet. The story in capsule form shows a trade-struck rich kid being adopted by a jaded jockey's agent, put through an intensive training, and turned into an expert bug-boy. The necessary problems are provided along the way by a quiet, matter-of-fact, grim syndicate that muscles the agent, who is for a hero surprisingly timorous; also there is a snobbish mother who probably learned her acting trade at the rodeo -- she practically throws her eyebrows off her face. It is fashionable these days to show corruption in the United States; so the story has all but one of the jockeys, trainers, and so on merrily

finagling with horses and mutuel prices. All this corruption is probably exaggerated but treated with remarkable plausibility: the techniques and documentation obviously derive from a thorough-going knowledge of the sport of kings and bookies. The only possible moral is that horse-racing is a fascinating sport but don't place too much confidence in your scratch sheet.

There has been so much blowing on what is stale in this movie and what is wonderful -- paddock lingo and lore -- that I won't swell its volume, except to suggest that kid athletes are not likely to learn their profession via the ABC instruction meted out by the agent to his apprentice rider. I suspect that if basketball coaches told the rookie players to dribble in zigzags, keep their eyes on the basket, or imparted any other kindergarten knowledge, there would be an outbreak of assassinations in American athletics. Ninety-nine percent of American athletes learn their trade in their own way, and I see no reason why jockeys should depart from the norm. Such instruction ("Cock your knees, grab a handful of mane...") is there to please the critics who like educational movies and the chalk-sniffers who want to peep into the bowels of their favorite sport. As for the authentic racing talk ("fourteen-carat slow-bones", or "You don't make a claim on a one-horse owner"), quite a bit of it is sensitive, accurate, and illuminating. I remember with delight a race-track scrounger chortling with glee and using his winning mutuel tickets as blinkers, and the stark sentences: "All horses respect is force. They are mere brutes who have had all the intelligence bred out of them." And the entire handling of a fat, rich "win-crazy" owner is one of the most accurate examples of greed that I have seen this year. But a good deal of the fancy talk is contrived, and it hangs between people like tiny, misshapen dirigibles.

Milton Holmes, a movie specialist who writes only horse epics, is a born story-teller even if his stuff runs to pulp. His script treats the actuality of working for a living and does it without those short cuts that chop current movies into static fragments. The kid is shown learning how to ride

back-to-back chairs, a bale of hay, a chalk drawing, and finally race horses; this variety of mounts is obviously a gimmick for avoiding monotony, but it makes for a genuine movie atmosphere in which you see figures involved with racing and nothing else from dawn to midnight. This type of continuous and untightened narration gives actors room for small natural movements which never seem to get into a movie like "Detective Story", where close perspectives and absence of action force the actors into slightly hysterical business with eyes, lips, and hands. Holden, as the tarnished agent, is a dour sort who usually muffs the climactic scenes that demand big emotion (the pocket-picking in the beginning), but he is masterful in these realistic stretches -- doing some relaxed coaching in the starting gate or galloping with the boy telling him how to whip his mount (the best working shots I've seen in recent films). Holmes knows and likes the sights of a race track well enough to waste footage on the trip to the diner, motel life near the track, and the unrelated wanderings of a racing troupe stuck on the highway. This last scene, with its credible terrain and each shot connected into a line of actions that lead easily and logically from one thing to another, seems rather wonderful when compared to any of the vulgar settings and crazily-viewed scenes of such over-touted masterpieces as "Streetcar" and "A Place in the Sun". "Boots Malone" is no world-beater, but it does show professional men actually working; the surface of their lives is almost real; and thanks to Holden, the story tells you a good deal about the grace, recessiveness, and quiet discernments of a moderately gifted man going nowhere.

A word or two further about the acting. However he does it, Holden seems in constant motion standing still; his posture, coloring, and disinterested technique are so perfectly adjusted to a natural setting that he appears to be a worn, moving part of the air currents in a scene. Basil Ruysdael's kindly trainer is so full of lofty spiritual feeling and the visual qualities of a daguerrotype that he could be a farmer who wandered off the set of "Tol'able David" into this picture of corruption at the tracks. The rich kid, done in a controlled, over-trained

Broadway style by Johnny Stewart, is just this side of revolting.

Also recommended: "Five Fingers", "The Captive City", "Los Olvidados".

May 21, 1949 / The Nation

In the static atmosphere of Hollywood film production, the appearance of Screen Plays Corporation, a peppery little band of young aesthetes as hard and profit-minded as Du Pont, should cause more upheaval than any incident since the Santa Barbara earthquake. Hollywood has never experienced anything as brainy and volatile as this ant-hill organization that has managed not only to shake the foundations of the elephant studios but to leave them standing still in their own race for the fattest loot. The curious aspect of this new company is that it blends the creative artist's imagination with the Sammy Glick talent for peeling cash off of nothing. Its aim seems to be to kill two birds by turning out a five-cent "Gone With the Wind" and introducing techniques and ideas that are a few levels above the I.Q. of the average moviegoer, according to the superstitions prevailing in the industry. But Screen Plays is not the Prince on the White Charger, for underneath, as is seen in its new movie, "Home of the Brave", beats the heart of a huckster, a heart that has grown its tissues in the theatrical atmosphere of middle-brow and sentimental Broadway.

The irrelevantly titled "Home of the Brave" is a war film which starts with some good shattering shots depicting the brutality and destruction of battle but suddenly changes into idle, muddy psychiatric double-talk and a tepid display of the Negro problem. A Negro G.I. named Moss (James Edwards) returns from a dangerous mission traumatized and half-paralyzed; in this weakened condition he is put under the care of a noisy psychiatrist (Jeff Corey) with the face of a manic hawk and a bellicose, exasperated attitude that should complete the ruin of Moss but

instead puts him on his feet in a couple of days and gives him a lot of difficult thoughts to play around with for the rest of his life. After all this psychotherapy Moss is told he suffers from discrimination chiefly because he is too sensitive. This gets a big laugh, particularly from Negroes in the audience who doubtless think of all the jobs they didn't get because of oversensitivity.

The script writer (Carl Foreman) plants some bold dashes of prejudice but never grounds the movie in the street-level type of incident that would illustrate the Negro situation in all its bulging ugliness. The bite has been taken out of the problem by constructing the Negro G.I. as a thoroughly passive creature who is ceaselessly tormented by his enemy, continually soothed by his friends, who plays a meek guinea pig for the psychiatrist but scarcely makes an impression on anyone else; he is so suavely mute that this pioneering movie about anti-Negro prejudice unreels itself oblivious of the fact that the whole film does not contain a Negro (Moss is actually the man who wasn't there). James Edwards plays him as a bland, unmarked, self-possessed, and graceful character, very little different from the other players, although he is supposed to have been a long-standing victim of their conscious and unconscious prejudice. The character in the original play by Arthur Laurents was a Jew, and in making the change the producers simply lost sight of the fact that the Negro has suffered from a different, more violent kind of prejudice here; Moss appears to have neither offered nor suffered any kind of violence.

"Home of the Brave" is infused with a sophisticated technique that turns an essentially thin and artificial script into a clattering, virile movie with deeply affecting moments. The sophistication appears everywhere: instead of seeing the Jap sniper fall, as in any other war movie, all that you see in this movie is broccoli-like jungle, accompanied by a slithering sound and a mild clonk to inform you that the sniper is done for. The script is so basically theatrical that it has to be acted almost entirely from seated or reclining positions, but the

director works more variations on those two positions than can be found in a Turkish Bath. The actors talk as though they were trying to drill the words into each others' skulls; this savage portentousness not only forces your interest but is alarming in that the soldiers are usually surrounded by Japs and every word can obviously be heard in Tokyo. Actors are never balanced within the picture frame; often a head is half cut by the top of the screen or, for no reason, some secondary figure will walk straight through a shot, knocking out your view of the principal figures, but giving an effect of careless spontaneity to a scene that is actually no more active than the inside of a can of sardines. This energetic technique has several limitations: the repetition of close eye-level shots practically puts the actors in your lap, but after a few reels I would have liked a long shot of all of them on top of a mountain; the camera men are so enamored of shadows in outdoor scenes that the actors often seem afflicted by leprosy. Dmitri Tiomkin's background music only comes on in crises, adding extra heart-throbs where the action is as swollen with emotion as a Faulkner river.

Well-played and punchy, "Home of the Brave" is not quite clever or ingenious enough to conceal its profit-minded, inept treatment of important issues.

April, 1951 / The Nation

In "A Place in the Sun" -- the latest and glummiest remake of "An American Tragedy" -- there is enough gimmicky, pretentious footage to keep one's eyes glued to the screen while one's common sense and muscles beg for respite. For all its flash, occasional power, and streaks of frighteningly natural acting, this extra-earnest Paramount production is one long, slow, hyperbolic attack on ordinary American existence -- an attack whose renewal in one recent film after another is obviously part of Hollywood's strategy to jerk its audience back from the

ingenuous attractions of television.

We are given, for instance, the oh-so-languid rich; the pious, magisterial M.D.; billboards that out-Petty Petty; distant sirens playing a counterpoint of doom to ordinary phone calls; the beefy, hysterically shrill D.A.; a thick undergrowth of portable radios everywhere the camera goes; juke-box joints sprawling with drunks. And I am getting very tired of stock shot 32-B, which feeds us the myth that all the windows in depressed urban areas face out on huge, blinking neon symbols of wealth and achievement.

The script by Harry Joe Brown is remarkably faithful to the plot of Dreiser's bleak novel: the complicated love life of a not quite bright social climber (Montgomery Clift) puts him finally in the electric chair. But Brown's dialogue is so stylish and unalive ("You seem so strange, so deep, so far away") that it appears to drift out of the walls and furniture rather than the twisted, jittery, or guppy-like mouths of Clift and his two ladies -- Elizabeth Taylor and Shelley Winters. An even more troubling factor is Brown's determination to modernize a tale that is hopelessly geared to an outdated morality and a vanished social set-up. ("An American Tragedy", published in 1925, was based on the Chester Gillette case of 1906. By its contortionist avoidance of the verboden subject of abortion -- or less drastic alternatives -- and its black-white demarcation of the worlds of luxury and drudgery, this "modern" version cuts the ground from under its own feet).

But Producer-Director George Stevens turned Brown's arty, static nonsense into something almost as visually interesting and emotionally complex as "Sunset Boulevard" or "The Asphalt Jungle" -- one more key example of Hollywood's recent desperate commitment to misanthropic expression via elegant, controlled, mismatched power effects. Ordinarily a soft-hearted poetic realist, Stevens is particularly good at getting natural performances out of his actors and at putting across the gauzy, sentimental gestalt of a popular song, a kiss, an important dance, a ritual-

ized seduction. Here he has blown such elements larger than life -- building them into slow, parabolic choreographies of action and camera movement in which you are more dazzled by the incredible control and purposefulness than repulsed by the schmaltz of the whole thing. The Clift-Taylor kiss -- repeated in three double exposures -- is a huge, intimate, extended business that practically hammers an erotic nail into your skull. It is preceded by Taylor's curious Tin Pan Alley line: "Tell Mama -- tell Mama all!"

Stevens squeezes so much of their "real" personalities out of his actors that the screen is congested with discordances. Most of the honors go to Miss Winters, who at long last gets to show that she can do a Mildred -- just like Bette Davis; but a far more complex one-man show is that of the non-aging late adolescent, Montgomery Clift. To some spectators his performance expresses the entire catalogue of Greenwich Village effeminacy -- slim, disdainful, active shoulders; the withdrawals, silent hatreds, petty aversions; the aloof, offhand voice strained to the breaking point. To others he is a sensitive personification of all those who knock themselves out against the brick wall of success. Clift can stare at a Packard convertible or slump down on his spine with fatigue and by simply not acting make you aware of every dejected, mumbling success-seeker on a big city street. Finally, for the more perceptive he is a childish charade on all the fashionably tough, capable outcasts who clutter up "hard-boiled" fiction: cigarette dangling from mouth, billiard cue carelessly angled behind his back, Clift makes a four-cushion shot look preposterously phony.

The exploitation of a talent like this goes far to prove that ace directors no longer make movies as much as tight-knit, multi-faceted Freud-Marx epics which hold attention but discourage understanding in a way that justifies Winchell's name for their makers -- "cine-magicians".

April 1, 1950 / The Nation

The most depressing movie irony is that American long-hairs -- raised on the non-literary naturalism of Tom Mix, Fairbanks and movies like "Public Enemy", along with the revolutionary Griffith, Sennett, Keaton -- continue to coddle and encourage European directors in their burnt-out sentimentality and esthetic cowardice. Carol Reed's "The Third Man" (the short happy life of Orson Welles, who, having killed or crazed half of Vienna by black-marketing diluted penicillin, evades the police by playing dead) is one import in which the virtuosity is tied in with a spectacular control and verve. Its intricate, precocious use of space, perspective, types of acting (stylized, distorted, understated, emotionalized) and random, seemingly irrelevant subject matter, enlarges and deepens both the impression of a marred city and a sweet, amoral villain (Welles) who seems most like a nearly satiated baby at the breast. But it bears the usual foreign trademarks (pretentious camera, motorless design, self-conscious involvement with balloon hawker, prostitute, porter, belly dancer, tramp) over-elaborated to the point of being a monsterpiece. It uses such tiresome symbol-images as a door which swings with an irritating rhythm as though it had a will of its own; a tilted camera that leaves you feeling you have seen the film from a foetal position; fiendish composing in Vuillard's spotty style, so that the screen crawls with patterns, textures, hulking shapes, a figure becoming less important than the moving ladder of shadow passing over it.

"The Third Man"'s murky, familiar mood springs chiefly from Graham Greene's script, which proves again that he is an uncinematic snob who has robbed the early Hitchcock of everything but his genius. Living off tension maneuvers which Hitchcock wore out, Greene crosses each event with one bothersome nonentity (A crisco-hipped porter, schmoo-faced child) tossed in without insight, so that the script crawls with annoying bugs. While a moony, honest American (Joe Cotten), unearths facts of Welles's death, Greene is up to his old trick of showing a city's lonely strays blown about the terrain by vague, evil forces. Greene's

famous low sociology always suggests a square's condescension and ignorance. He sets Cotten up for quaint laughs by characterizing him as a pulp-writer, having the educated snipe at him in unlikely fashion ("I never knew there were snake-charmers in Texas") and the uneducated drool over him; every allusion to Cotten's Westerns, from their titles to their format, proves that no one behind the movie ever read one. Greene's story, a string of odd-sized talky scenes with no flow within or between them, is like a wheelless freight train.

But Reed manages to turn the last half of this tired script into a moving experience of a three-dimensional world in which life is sad, running simply from habit, and ready to be swept away by street cleaners. In Reed's early films ("The Stars Look Down", "Three on a Weekend") sordid domesticity was scored in a pokey, warm, unbiased way; in the daylight scenes of "Third Man", his paterfamilias touch with actors is tied to a new depersonalizing use of space that leaves his characters rattling loose like solitary, dismal nuts and bolts in vaulting landscapes. A beautiful finale -- Welles's girl Valli, returning from his burial down a Hobbema avenue of stark trees -- picks up the gray, forlorn dignity of a cold scene and doubles the effect by geometrically pinpointing the figure and moving her almost mechanically through space and finally into and around the camera. Reed has picked up a new toy-soldier treatment of conversations, where the juxtapositions and movements are articulated like watch-cogs, each figure isolated and contrastingly manipulated till the movie adds up to a fractured, nervous vista of alienation in which people move disparately, constantly circling, turning away, and going off into their own lost world. But the movie's almost antique, enervated tone comes from endless distance shots with poetically caught atmosphere and terrain, glimpses of languid, lachrymose people sweeping or combing their hair, and that limp Reed manner with actors, which makes you feel you could push a finger straight through a head, and a sweater or a hat has as much warmth and curiosity as the person wearing it.

Always a soft director, Reed turns to chickenfat on

night scenes, where his love of metallicly shining cobble stones, lamps that can hit a face at eighty paces, and the mysterious glow at every corner turns the city into a stage-set that even John Ford would have trouble out-glamorizing. For instance, endless shots of Cotten and Welles sliding baseball-fashion in rubble wastelands that look like Mt. Everest touched up by an M.G.M. art director. Both are seen only momentarily in these wastes because it is obvious no human could make the descent without supplies. Reed is seldom convinced that anything artistic is being said unless the scene looks like a hock-shop. Scenes are engulfed in teddy bears, old photographs, pills; a character isn't considered unless he is pin-pointed in a panorama of baroque masonry, seen bird fashion through bridge struts or rat fashion through table legs; like most current art movies Reed's are glued to majestic stairways.

The movie's verve comes from the abstract use of a jangling zither and from squirting Orson Welles into the plot piece-meal with a tricky, facetious eye-dropper. The charm, documentary skill, and playful cunning that fashioned this character make his Morse Code appearances almost as exciting visually as each new make-believe by Rembrandt in his self-portraits. The cunning is in those glimpses -- somewhat too-small shoes, a distant figure who is a bit too hard and resilient, a balloon man, not Welles but flamboyant enough to suggest his glycerine theatricality in other films -- that seem so Wellesian, tell so much about him, yet just miss being Welles. Through camera tricks and through a non-mobile part custom-built for this actor (whose flabby body and love of the over-polished effect make any flow in his performance seem a product of the bloodiest rehearsing), Welles achieves in brief, wonderful moments the illusion of being somebody besides Welles. Two of these -- some face-making in a doorway, a slick speech about the Borgias that ends with a flossy exit -- rate with entertaining bits like Paul Kelly's in "Crossfire" and the time Bob Hope tried to hide behind a man taking a shower in a glass cubicle. Reed's nervous, hesitant film is actually held together by the wires of its exhilarating zither, which sounds like a trio and

hits one's consciousness like a cloudburst of sewing needles. Raining aggressive notes around the characters, it chastises them for being so inactive and fragmentary, and gives the story the unity and movement it lacks.

March 9, 1959 / The New Leader

In The Devil Strikes at Night, Robert Siodmak (The Killers) is working at second speed on an unglossed Vuillard-plain image of a women-strangler whose fifty or more murders cast a dreadful spot on the inferiority of Aryan police. Most of Siodmak's comment on Hitler's Reich is a dated recall of Hitchcock-Reed thrillers, plus an even sadder use of West German "politics" (as in The Young Lions, The Enemy Below) which shows the Reichland overrun with anti-Nazis and infected with a murderous disaffection for war. However, it is almost worth the admission price to follow the portrait of a hummily normal looney, which starts on the infantile "science" level of M and becomes a more interesting picture of violence, played suicidally as far into gentleness as credibility allows.

Using a wonderful roughened stone (Mario Adorf) as the shambling killer and shifting between a curious lack of technique and gymnastic inventiveness out of the old experimental film kettle, this ghoulis portrait accomplishes a feat that is rare in current mixed-goodies films. Where Dassin's international potpourri, He Who Must Die, has a helpless discomfort about its Potemkin mimicry, as though he were trying to change a diaper in midstream, Siodmak's best moments, flexibly relaxed or tight, seem comfortably inventive. In the movie's peak scene, the village idiot (always on the hunt for food, always eating) wanders into a pick-up meal with a spinsterish Jewess, and the movie settles down, as though forever, as idiocy meets hopeless loneliness in a drifting conversation played as silently as any Vuillard painting of inverted domesticity.

May 14, 1945 / The New Republic

Rouault

The painting of Georges Rouault (1871-), now at the Museum of Modern Art, is as conservative and unfulfilled as it is talented, dead serious and passionate. Rouault's paintings are of clowns, judges, nearly nude prostitutes, Christ, the Crucifixion, landscapes of flat ground, little detail and a horizon around the center of the canvas. Their theme, which is as rigid as their treatment, has to do with an expression of the inadequacy of life. The painting is always done with fierce emotion, contains passages in which there is the most terrifying kind of sensation, and everywhere else the work of an enormously experienced, clever artist. The statements are often rockbound, always forceful, and easily recognized as Rouault's. Rouault, though, has never taken his exorbitant talent, erudition and ferocity more than a half-hearted step away from conventional painting; he has stuck rigidly to an art-school kind of undistinguished, uncomplicated, limited design; he is content with easy, commonplace, ambiguous solutions in place of following out his art to its most inspired, complex, difficult point.

The paintings are firmly grounded in an old, naturalist mode of painting to which he contributes nothing original and in which he convinces me further that the old masters left nothing unsaid or unsolved in the style. The closest Rouault comes to putting a personal, new note in their design is in the thoroughly limited abstract designing he does with the heavy black drawing lines that section his painting. In "The Wounded Clown" the mass of three figures is broken up half-realistically into a series of small, elongated slabs of light and dark, which are woven into a nervous, intense rhythm. But through most of this canvas, and more so through others, the line, which is seemingly distorted, is used only in the conventional, illustrative way and forms a design that is in no sense new or Rouault's. His paintings employ the oldest of compositions, and the lack of personal idiosyncrasy in reworking the form indicates as great a want of imagination

as I know of in notable painting. The composition is one where the main figure is placed in the center of the canvas with each element balanced by a similar color and shape at a point level to the opposite side. There is a superficial attempt at painting in a flat, abstract sense: the scenes are pressed up a little closer than usual to the surface; the people are slightly flattened; and the color in about a third of the canvas is moved dynamically in the manner of Cezanne toward the picture edge. Essentially though, the surface is considered as a window, the subject matter is painted in the most conventional, three-dimensional, realistic way and isn't seriously influenced by the picture edge, and the Cezanne treatment of color is superfluous. Roualt's color is a tonal one, from the old masters, of red and blue and green, and makes no basic use of any innovations from the Impressionists onward.

The dominating factor in this work is its black lines that cement the paintings as much as anything into their rigid, unfulfilled forms. The lines are dramatic enough and so anti-color that they half-veil the boring repetitiousness of the other color, lift it a degree out of its pedestrian quality and make it more forceful simply by the extremeness of the contrast. But the color design is of a kind in which one color block is stereotyped by others of the same tone and texture. The glow that is so often spoken of in these paintings is a property of individual areas, where the color is of an illuminated intensity to start with, but seldom of the painting as a whole. An exception is a very small, very moving landscape called "Afterglow, Galilee", which has few lines or sections and is practically one chunk of glowing, coppery pink color. The paintings seldom seem to me to be carried to a point where background and figure, canvas and painting, or any two neighboring areas are related into a living, self-sufficient form; designs that would probably be swimming are locked almost automatically by the black lines.

Though the paintings get tied down within the canvas space, it is in the static, monosyllabic manner of "The Old King" -- without buoyancy between areas and airless and dull-voiced

within them. The one answer Rouault seems to have for any problem is a black line and an intensification of the color next to it. The composition is never recast to accomodate a change, so that throughout his work there are makeshift adjustments, not answered at any other point in the picture. Rouault's great limitation and lack of daring as a designer are illustrated in "The Wounded Clown", in which there seems every need, and every inability, to distort the realistic scene in order to bring sky and figures into a larger, clearer unity. Rouault occasionally leaves his bisymmetrical design, as in "Crucifixion"; at such times he seems to turn out his worst jumbles and half-cooked affairs. They contain a thousand finicky color breaks related closely but imperfectly, a dominating color that has the luminosity of cream, and a statement developed no further than that of a sketch.

January 13, 1951 / The Nation

As an anti-climax to the Critics' Awards, the following are my choice of the best films that didn't appear on other "Ten Best" lists.

"Union Station". A famous depot kidnapping re-enacted by Rudy Mate for all the remembered thrills of a game of hide-and-seek; Mate revives an all but lost film style in which excitement springs from the crisp, moving patterns made by players on a carefully controlled surface.

"Mystery Street". Its scientific crime detection makes better use of documentary technique than any other fiction film; an intelligent, unsentimental rendering of American citizenry by Betsy Blair and Bruce Bennett.

"Crisis". Director Richard Brooks's clever, explosive blend of documentary and melodrama casts a revealing light on the inside of a dictator's brain; elegantly acted by Cary Grant.

"Broken Arrow". A preachy western; it shows Director Delmer Daves's unique talent for moving lone figures through dangerous terrain and gaining the suspense of an early Hitchcock without using gimmicks.

"Winchester 73". Anthony Mann's arty western; a striking example of how to humanize an overworked genre with natural dialogue, acting, and a director's original "film eye".

"The Winslow Boy". The best adaptation from the stage. Roughly equal to sitting in a library of thick carpets and padded chairs, reading a familiar, beloved English classic.

"Captain China". The second-best thing for landlubbers who have a desire to experience the sights, skills, and smells of life on a tanker.

"Macbeth". Orson Welles's orgiastic rendering of Shakespeare, co-starring my nephew, Jerry Farber.

July 14, 1951 / The Nation

"The Frogmen", in which Richard Widmark wins the latter part of World War II under water, is a new type of movie experience, roughly equivalent to reading "Tom Swift" in Braille at the bottom of a well. While examining the strokes, breathing apparatus, and demolition tactics of the Navy's warfaring bathing beauties, it unwinds a boyishly heroic tale beneath the Pacific in middle-distance shots that make the story as hard to see as a recent dillie called "The Long Dark Hall", which was shot without electric lights in a dark walnut courtroom. One virtue of 20th Century-Fox films is that they are cast with manly males of the advertising-executive type who reject the kind of pansy-brained, masochistic, floorwalker's poetic technique that has become a lauded acting style in most Hollywood films.

"Ace in the Hole" -- an ex-G.I., crazy for Indian relics, is pinned down in a cave fall-in, with sand dribbling in his face, while a sensationalist reporter keeps him there for the sake of a gaudy news story -- is built chiefly around the acting of a tough, corrupt newshound by Kirk Douglas. Douglas plays it in the worst style of the Yiddish theater, bursting with self-pity, slowing everything with a muscular, tensed-up technique, and ranting as though he were trying to break the hearts of people blocks away from the theater. His conceited hamming is pretty typical of the whole show, in spite of a well-cast Albuquerque contractor, a reasonably well-cast floozy (Jan Sterling) who makes a nice nasty thing of riffling some currency in Douglas's face, a few beautiful long shots of the carnival that blossoms at the scene of the tragedy. These last make up in a very small part for Producer Wilder's dreadful, misanthropic, corny depiction of the rubber-neckers gathered for the kill and of "hicks" whose provincialism consists of not being hep to chopped liver or Yogi Berra.

Joseph Losey, the left-wing naturalistic director of two excitingly candid films, "M" and "The Prowler", is an ambivalent citizen who loathes the cupidity, sadism, and prejudice of his fellow-men, and lovingly borrows the best things they have done with a camera. In his remake of "M" the discriminating Losey makes good use of, among other things, Lang's morose camera set-ups and lighting, the architectonic design and subjects of Walker Evans's photographs, and the eerie handling of carnival freaks, last seen in a good "B" called "Woman in Hiding". "M" provides a sensitive if unimaginative evening, whose major asset is David Wayne's somewhat over-harassed acting of an elegantly hysterical psychopath. However, in "The Prowler", which catalogues a cop's hot pursuit of a frightened wife and his disposal of her disc-jockey husband, Losey has perfected his taut, dry naturalism to the point where he has turned out a near "sleeper" held down only by its mimicries, all less snappy than the models from "Double Indemnity", "Greed", and so on.

"He Ran All the Way" is an old-fashioned gangster film

(no message or Freudian overtones; fairly intense and exciting) about an inept hooligan (Garfield) who shacks up, unwanted, with a tenement family. This family, generalized with dull virtues, never tries to find out what makes the gangster tick, but just stands around scared to death. The locale, dialects, architecture are a puzzling mish-mash of Bronx, Venice, Cal., and Group Theater. The film takes place entirely in a railroad flat, where, despite the fact that the ceilings seem to have been removed and the doors left off all rooms so as to allow for camera movement, the energy comes entirely from emotionally congested acting which appears to have worked its way down through a hundred plays and movies from "Awake and Sing", an earlier and better Garfield show.

September 27, 1952 / The Nation

"The Leopard Man", a reissued "B" (1942) showing with the rickety "King Kong", is a nerve-twitching whodunit giving the creepy impression that human beings and "things" are interchangeable and almost synonymous and that both are pawns of a bizarre and terrible destiny. A lot of surrealists like Cocteau have tried for the same supernatural effects, but while their scenes still seem like portraits in motion, Val Lewton's film shows a way to tell a story about people, that isn't dominated by the activity, weight, size, and pace of the human figure. In one segment of the film a small frightened senorita walks beyond the edge of the border town and then back again, while her feelings and imagination keep shifting with the camera into the sagebrush, the darkness of an arroyo, crackling pebbles underfoot, and so on until you see her thick dark blood oozing under the front door of her house. All the psychological effects -- fear and so on -- were transferred to within the non-human components of the picture as the girl waited for some non-corporeal manifestation of nature, culture, or history to gobble her up. But more important in terms of movie invention, Lewton's use of multiple focus (characters are dropped or picked up as if by chance, while the movie goes off on odd tracks trying to locate a sound

or suspicion) and his lighter-than-air sense of pace created a terrifically plastic camera style. It put the camera eye on a curiously delicate wave length that responds to scenery as quickly as the mind, and gets inside of people instead of reacting only to surface qualities. This film still seems to be one of Hollywood's original gems -- nothing impure in terms of cinema, nothing imitative about its style, and little that misses fire through a lack of craft.

November 3, 1951 / The Nation

Back in 1880, while imprisoned in the domestic quiet of his mother's souvenir shop and unrecognized by the innovators in Paris, William Ensor spiked some mildly impressionistic works with amorphous squiggles and grotesque pre-Freudian images that indicated his life-long distaste for his home town -- the genteel orderly world of Ostend, Belgium, which he never left and never stopped criticizing. Setting a decorous pace and yet apparently sensitized far under the surface by some disagreeable presences out of Poe, his canvases tell obvious stories. In one, a little girl looks up from a book, petrified with terror at the hideous shapes insinuating themselves into her bourgeois living room; in another, a gray-faced female corpse is stretched out behind the impressive medicine bottles that plagued her departure; a leadenly ironic self-portrait reveals the grave artist bedecked with a Victorian Hedda Hopper chapeau, a middle-class version of those sweeping hats in Titians and Bronzinis. Though these literary pictures can be read by anyone's backward nephew, they have never attracted the large audience that usually goes for this sort of thing. The reason may be found in the current Ensor exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, a display surpassing even the long-forgotten retrospectives of Sterne and Watkins in the ability neither to irritate nor to please the customers.

Those who have already written about the show have analyzed the morbid, disagreeable strains in Ensor by stressing

his subject matter and the ambivalently gracious and querulous old gentleman who always seemed "infected", "eaten", "grizzled", or "decaying" from something or other. Actually, the paintings are surprisingly weighted under a ton of Ibsen-like respectability. Ensor worked with thin, measured strokes of the palette knife, cutting shapes as though he were delicately chipping plaster with hours ahead of him in the quiet of a graveyard. He was a dreary composer, arranging large squarish hunks of space in feeble symmetry behind heavy pyramidal arrangements of central facts. The ghoulish qualities in his art come from the perverse, stubborn things in his technique. He handles a palette knife with astonishing delicacy, as though trying to simulate the effect of deft brushing -- a grisly charade (by a man who loved to paint masks) which produced a surface unlike any other in painting: hard-baked, closely stitched, with barely perceptible flaking effects, like a quart of strawberry ice cream that has turned pale and gray from having to work in an East Side sweatshop.

There are no grounds on which to compare Ensor's eccentric work with that of other artists, unless you can link him with a few, like Tobey, Homer, Hopper, Marin, who, despite their vitality, paint always with the austere resignation of old men. Without juice, making his most important utterances with dry, frenzied little twitches and curling strokes, bent on running a pleasureless chill through the middle-class universe, Ensor seems less a person than a device, a device so worn and affected by the culture, climate, topography of the Belgian coast that it ticked off a few minor masterpieces whose force is the lingering staccato of the death rattle.

November 3, 1951 / The Nation

American abstraction has not yet produced a Picasso, but like the Indianapolis Speedway it is crowded with top-flight fortune-hunters jockeying for position in a narrow, surfacy, thrill-a-second form of self-expression. Two of them, Lee

Krasner and Felix Ruvolo, are showing in these parts now, but the most impressive contemporary exhibitor is a Paris-detoured Philadelphian named Hugh Weiss, who rejects the razzle-dazzle style for something more traditional.

Weiss offers a sensuous, densely lit half-acceptance of nature that recalls Bonnard's uncontrasted light, Seurat's latticed compositions, and some of the primitive distortions of Rousseau. The paintings of young expatriates like Weiss may seem gripped by a lack of vigor brought on by too much happy cafe life, too much next-door communion with oozing rooms full of great Renoirs, and a philosophic "anti-American" reluctance to break the world's record in stunt-painting. Weiss's Impressionist rooted compositions are imbued with an indoor character, the tell-tale sign of an artist who is relying too little on the outside world and getting too much from European art galleries. For instance, his scenes of bridge, street or cafe ooze in shadowy, succulent oil rather than sunlight or air; even his view of what appears to be an unsteady bridge makes its own rules of perspective and tone, and they all add up to a scene that takes place within a ruby-red box. One suspects the painter of being well contented with his ways, almost brutally insistent on them. In direct opposition to nature, and sometimes to this critic's taste, he follows one hot color with another, working the blue-red harmony that has been flogged to death by art-school students. All in all, however, I am convinced he is the most artistic new painter this year.

Largely because of his near-sighted manner of concentration on tiny areas and building them outward in grass-like strokes of contrasting color from every part of the palette, his pictures take on a blurry quality. The shape of a table or figure puffs up from the canvas like a low foothill, crosshatched and worked over at length for the right color relationship with neighboring areas. It is in this reworking with subtle tones that Weiss seems to beat his picture into a deeper and rougher range of painting than is turned out by his abstract cousins in New York. In composing, he works with transitional tone and angle, relating directions,

curves and textures in a continuing rhythm through deep space -- a use of varying speeds and quantities in three-dimensional composition which has not been very common since the Cubists.

February 17, 1951 / The Nation

The American painter approaches independent art -- composition without subject interest -- with the firmly efficient spirit of people who believe in "getting down to brass tacks". From Feininger's frosted use of kinetic design to Pollock's glum idolatry of automatic writing, strict obedience to the principle underlying an art style makes the work appear cold and persistent. The artist not only pushes one principle to the exclusion of all else, but the quick, largely decorative solving of each canvas unmasks the expedience and intensity of young Americans out to "succeed". Once his technique is mastered, he becomes an assembly belt turning out the same machine in varying colors, sizes, and shapes. Art schools now find students masterfully covering stretched mattress ticking with aluminum house paint -- no model, no subject, no composition, and soon -- "Look, Ma! No hands!"

In sculpture the Americans' absorption in "method" has a truer ring because the aesthetic is unavoidably joined with problems of construction. In the metallic works of Calder, Smith, Lassaw, the artist's personality is drawn into the form by means of his arduous labor, while painters, fascinated by the mechanics of expression, lay feeling over structure like a sentimental veneer. Sculptor Lassaw, a sensitive materialist, builds an elongated nest of cubicles with a continuous string of plastic metal, the tedious repetition of stretched, molten drippings exuding a handsome, milky-gray atmosphere. Winding, changing width, plodding along at a snail's pace, the line has the sensuality of a heavy, languorous doodle. My first association with Noguchi's five-foot "Gunas" is of three loose keyholes cut from a marble bathtub. With wafer-thin organic shapes that can unlock like collapsible furniture, Noguchi communicates technical difficulties

along with an icy-fingered but admirable formal talent.

Among the better painters, James Brooks contributes a mystic landscape done with a weird paint-blot technique. Seeping blackish tints into both sides of a porous canvas, Brooks develops a translucent mire with magical white writing and tangling curvilinear shapes. The result is poetic chaos in a bottomless subterranean world, rich in atmospheric color and trick effects. The painting -- tissue-paper thin and deep as a dream, quagmire-surfaced and with a desert's dryness -- suffers somewhat from virtuosity.

The leaders of current abstraction are capable of more fireworks and elegant acrobatics, but the following works get closer to the nervous apprehensive flavor of current times. Russell's "La Rue Saint Denis" suggests a tenth-floor view into a busy intersection with everything abstracted into narrow rectangles of pasty color. This finicky labor holds the eye through the fine contrast between tiny, pure foreground colors and larger, background tones which expand and change to a ponderous glow. Cavallon's checkerboard looks like a Mondrian painted by a peasant: no two rectangles the same size, roughly edged contours, primitively built color. Because of sensuality that mixes a worn ivory tone into an old-fashioned palette, this geometrical composition exudes warmth, taste, some of the crudeness missed in Bauhaus-type art. Guston's panel of gummy red eeriness is also a clumsy work full of the joys and errors that come from pursuing emotion down a dark, uncharted path.

October 13, 1951 / The Nation

"A lot of people I know are at the edge of complete disintegration, want to give life up or trade it in at any moment. I'm at the edge." This fiery corn comes from the mouth of Larry Rivers, a twenty-eight-year-old romantic whose canvases, bleeding with "compassion" and bursting with bravura, reflect the several depots of his jolting journey -- the Bronx,

Hans Hoffman assembly line, the new Bohemia. His latest paintings, exhibited this month by Tibor de Nagy, indicate that he is only a year or so away from a top position in avant-garde art if he doesn't waste away in jitters and torment ("Been very nervous ... I keep waking up all scared"). Rivers is very close to being a rare, natural dauber -- a painter's painter on the order of Bonnard and Rouault, if you can imagine such a slapstick marriage; and he thus neatly snags both the aesthetic and the sentimental brass rings on the culture carousel. At his opening I heard an Elsa Lanchester-type zealot say that Rivers's stuff is as wonderfully oblique as Faulkner's, and this I suppose is true in that the younger man's work offers a Faulkner-like view of local (New York) misery -- turmoil, exasperation, nostalgia; lesbians, rabbis, Fire Island cottages, all tied together by a tireless, gushing, rhetorical crosshatching of strokes. Sometimes the superimposed texture is excitingly incorporated in the compositional structure, as when it helps build an abstract chunk of atmospheric space between one head and another; more often it is an unintelligible self-indulgence, burying the picture in a vagueness of feathers, flax, or mud.

Rivers is so taken up with the stereotyped sloppiness of present-day "intra-subjective" painting that he loses any chance for playing with such powerful and subtle machinery as shape, contour, three-dimensional composition. But the important thing today seems to be all-over pattern, and Rivers certainly gets that, both with his texture and his bushy, succulent islands of color -- Bonnard's "spots" blown into broccoli. Indelicacy permits him to beef up his canvas by taking advantage of the heavily mixed hues that find their way on to most contemporary palettes; he slams together endless combinations of pure pigment, working always for total ripeness with an unpleasant, mustardy zing and sweat; then he indiscriminately lodges these concoctions in ropes or bundles so as to establish a clumsy balance throughout the picture. The paint sweats or dries flat over a surface made luxuriously scummy by wild underbrushing, but the color is always visceral, acid rich, and so contemptuously and angrily applied as to be visually exciting. Unconcerned with grace, Rivers builds stolid archaic forms: take the trundled coffin in his huge

cemetery opus; simply by cross-hatching a squarish white hulk out of dark space, he makes the casket assume the solemnity and grandeur of something finger-painted by Courbet.

All his techniques are self-deprecatory, mournful, destructively mushy; it is a grandiloquent sentimentality rooted, I imagine, in the orthodox-Jewish tenement life which provides most of his subject matter. It is this -- plus the commitment at an early age to the sophisticated smear-drip-run academy of New York abstraction -- which could so restrict the gifted Rivers to a rut of soulful exhibitionism that he might never grow up to be more than the Gershwin of the easel.

Richard Pousette-Dart, on the other hand, is something close to the Bobby Thomson of the spontaneity boys, as well as one of the unheralded pioneers of their group. With the quiet assurance of a man who keeps to himself and the untroubled reflection of an Eagle Scout, he continues to knock out clean, competent, elegant, decisive line drives. Working with the tirelessness, dependability, and shrewdness of a good mechanic -- he loves gadgets -- and the unerring taste of one who was buried in art from his eighth year on by a poet mother and a painter father, Pousette-Dart is a jack-of-all trades (painting, sculpture, jewelry, photography, poetry, vegetarianism) who has had one or two impressive shows every year since 1941, when he introduced what was to become the bread-and-butter technique of the automatic school.

Now on view at the Betty Parsons Gallery -- and drawing that inevitable question from the witless: "Tell me, are any of these paintings Pollock's?" -- his recent output amounts to sculpture on canvas, veneered with an amorphous, glamorous crust of bright molecular color and half-remembered shapes (necklace, streamer, baroque vase) from the entire history of modern art. The huge phantasmagoria is latticed horizontally and vertically like many-paned early American window over which some Martian has drawn his concept of the innards of an Elgin watch. A typical picture shows a field of gems built to ponderous thickness by every means

of application except water pistol, coerced into a moody, earthy feeling by over-emphasis of texture and weight of pigment at the expense of true luster. Though the surface is imbued with deep red-salmon (or denim-blue or forest-green) fluorescence and jammed with mosaic-like bits of astonishing warmth, there is an over-all faltness, muteness and sullenness of tone that one associates with the closeted sensitivity of the deaf.

In fact, Pousette-Dart deliberately subjugates beauty to his own hygienic gear-and-lever religiousity ("I want to do the mysteries of wheels, put magic into bicycles ..."), and paints this part of himself into his pictures shrewdly and treacherously, without falling back on the formula of so many of his colleagues who know what their so-called "automatic" oeuvres will look like before they even start smearing, splattering and scumbling. Yet his works, though momentarily impressive, merely nudge rather than move the spectator. Like a Hemingway story, they present a perfection of tasteful styling and impact that becomes close-mouthed and incommunicado at all points beneath the skin.

The other openings, including the long-in-preparation Ensor exhibit at the Museum of Moddren Ott, seem less important than those of Rivers and Pousette-Dart. I will try to discuss the Ensor another week; I certainly suggest that you see it. Less certainly, I recommend these other displays: Lehmbruck and his Weltschmerzian friends (Valentin); Alfred Russell's dizzy skating on an isinglass ground (Peridot); Hugh Weiss, one of Dr. Barnes's last students (Hacker).

March 24, 1951 / The Nation

Though a common critical practise is to grade Americans as high-middle-and low-brows, where taste is concerned, it is hard to tell a Philistine from a Brahmin when it comes to modern furniture. For instance, whenever a tycoon, a dry-goods merchant, a dentist, or an aesthete wishes to put the sophisticated whammy on a room, he invariably buys some of the furnishings manufactured by Knoll Associates, Inc. The first furniture concern to prove that experimental designs sell, this loosely

collaborative set-up contracts people like Saarinen, Albin, Jeanneret to turn out fairly radical living equipment pretentious in the manner of an elegant bank vault. Their furniture is geared to the tastes of both the fastidious snob who selects a molded chair here or a floating chest there and the unimaginative show-off who "keeps up with the Joneses" by buying a showroom arrangement, complete to the potted rubber plant, much in the manner of mother who transported her dining and bedroom suites from the local department store.

The somewhat inhibiting spectacle of Knoll's showroom, with Mondrian's colors and Mies van der Rohe's free partitions, indicates the reliance of these designers on the aesthetic principles laid down in the '20's by neo-plastic painters and architects like Gropius, Oud, Mies. Their building style, often called "international", replaced massiveness with thin planes inclosing fat space, disposed of axial symmetry with the unbroken line of skeletal structures, departed from applied ornament in favor of color and texture. However, compared to the fluid integrity of German and French pioneers in cantilever chairs or arabesque rockers, Knoll's objects depend rather frivolously on fancy colors, over-textured fabrics, and ostentatious hardware to camouflage easy, inelegant building methods.

It first achieved wide acceptance in the early '40's with a series of limply curved birch chairs, made by Jens Risom, which resembled noisy veranda furniture because of the dramatical wide webbing used on a shape slowed down to the speed of an apprentice carpenter. Mortising slightly hollowed struts to simulate a bentwood effect, Risom was forced into more cumbersome proportions than those achieved with curled plywood. The group's greatest defeats lie in their humdrum or miscalculated manipulation of machine-age materials. In her slate and steel table, Florence Knoll blends two materials that are excitingly close in texture and tone, but utilizes a trite base and dimensions more appropriate to wood. The result is a heavily proportioned table, designed for demi-tasses and ashtrays, that could support a grand piano with no strain at all. Knoll exploded an inexpensive bomb on

the market by refashioning the wooden folding chair with sling seat that had been used by Italian officers in North Africa. The new metal-rod version over-dressed the skeletal idea with black and white paint and a leather hammock, and welded the joints with what seems to be a wad of gum left in each corner by your least lovable nephew. It has the form and beauty of a grounded butterfly, but is a bit low-slung for anyone taller than the average Italian officer.

Since relaxation is a vital luxury, Saarinen has worked on various means to accomplish the task. His pieces are so carefully molded to follow the positions of a human body that one has to look twice to make sure the chair is unoccupied before accepting its stubborn posture. By raising the shoulders and thrusting the head forward, this relaxing chair freezes you into the shape of a grasshopper about to leap. Unlike his former collaborator, Eames, Saarinen modifies his engineering theories with snob-appeal tactics. The curves of his newer "floating-leaf" chairs are supposed to relieve the need for upholstery, but along with foam rubber and miles of tweedy fabric, there are loose cushions front and back to attract people who tie plush living around their necks with a triple knot. In spite of all this padding, the knobby fabric feels like congested oatmeal.

In general, Knoll's art does little more than follow the familiar pattern of what modern design appears to be -- without successfully integrating function and form. Its biggest achievements have been to relieve many American interiors of dust-catching crevices, hysterical wall-paper, and claustrophobic decor.

April 26, 1952 / The Nation

My list of top pictures made in the last five years ("Red River", "He Walks By Night", "Act of Violence") has now

been expanded to include a titleless documentary of street life in Spanish Harlem, shot entirely with a 16-millimeter sneak camera by Janice Loeb, Helen Levitt, and James Agee. The technique of documenting life in the raw with a concealed camera has often been tried out, in Hollywood and in experimental films, but never with much success until this small masterwork turned up. One problem was finding a camera either small enough to be hidden or made in such a way that it could be focused directly on the scene without being held to the operator's eye. The "Film Documents" group used an old model Cine-Kodak which records the action at a right angle to the operator who gazes into his scene-finder much as was done with the old-fashioned "Brownie". The people who wound up in this movie probably thought the camera-weilder was a stray citizen having trouble with the lock of a small black case that could contain anything from a piccolo to a tiny machine gun. For dramatic action, the film deals with one of the toughest slum areas extant: an uptown neighborhood where the adults look like badly repaired Humpty Dumpties who have lived a thousand years in some subway restroom, and where the kids have a wild gypsy charm and evidently spend most of their day savagely spoofing the dress and manners of their elders. The movie, to be shown around the 16-millimeter circuit, has been beautifully edited (by Miss Levitt) into a somber study of the American figure, from childhood to old age, growing stiffer, uglier, and lonelier with the passage of years.

Let me say that changing one's identity and acting like a spy, or a private eye, are more a part of the American make-up than I'd ever imagined before seeing this picture. This not only holds for Levitt, Inc., who had to disguise their role of film-makers to get the naked truth, but also goes for the slum people who are being photographed. The film is mostly concerned with kids who are trying to lose themselves in fake adulthood by wearing their parents' clothes and aping grown-ups' expressions; even the comparatively few adults (at a war-time bond rally) go in for disguises -- Legionnaire uniforms, etc. -- and seem afraid to be themselves. The chief

sensation is of people zestfully involved in making themselves ugly and surrealistic, as though everything Goya's lithographs indicated about the human race had come true. This mood is established right off in a wonderful shot of a Negro tot mashing her tongue and face out of shape against a window-pane. This private bit of face-making is followed soon by a shot of a fat man leaping up and down and chortling with glee at the sight of a neighborhood kid carrying another one on his shoulders, solemnly impersonating a new two-bodied grown-up. And this scene gives way to a macabre game of gypsy kids making like maniacs by clubbing each other with flour-filled stockings swiped from their mudders.

Every Hollywood Hitchcock-type director should study this picture if he wants to see really stealthy, queer-looking, odd-acting, foreboding people. Even the kids, whose antics make their elders look like a lost tribe of frozen zombies, act a bit like spies from the underground. Enigmatic and distrustful, a small boy watches the little colored girl (mentioned above) smear her features on the window; an older smart-alecky one slyly bats a flour stocking against the back of a teen-aged princess -- the Mary Pickford of the neighborhood -- carefully watching her every move to see if she's getting erotically excited. It is this very watchfulness which makes one part of the picture so brilliant: these kids must jeweler's-eye everything, and when the camera-man (Agee) reveals himself, the space in front of the camera fills up with every kid in the neighborhood staring at the now bared camera like one Huge Eye.

To see what these kids will be like when they grow up, all we have to do is look at the shots of their parents. The watchfulness of youth has now become a total preoccupation -- an evil-faced pimp, a Grant Wood spinster, a blowsy Irish dame picking her teeth, are all forever staring at the world as though it were a dangerous, puzzling place filled with hidden traps. The great American outdoors, once a wide-open prairie for adventurers, is here, in one shrunken pocket of New York City, a place of possible terror to people who spend their time looking at it with 100 per-cent distrust.

November 8, 1952 / The Nation

During Howard Hughes's reign at RKO a number of good movie ideas and artists were stopped in their tracks by the boss's slutty taste and inveterate kibitzing on every production. "The Lusty Men", one of Hughes's last jobs, however, has a refreshing story idea (about wild men who work the rodeo Big Apple from Tucson to Pendleton) with a more humanized version of the Hughes formula, which includes cheesecake, climactic and fast events, spare somewhat salty dialogue, and a copybook exercise in splitting up two pals with wine, a practical-minded redhead, and quick money. What is good about it is the occasional imaginative scene, as when the has-been bronco buster searches under the old ranch house for a boyhood cache, with the camera taking you on a treasure hunt under the rotting beams, and the treasure turning out to be a broken sixshooter and a purse with two pennies. Arthur Kennedy brings to the male lead -- the glory-seeking contestant -- a mixture of sweetness and wildness, with some exquisite touches, like the shy, guilty smile of encouragement just before his rival takes off on his last Brahma-bull-riding turn. Mitchum is the most convincing cowboy I've seen in horse opry, meeting every situation with the lonely, distant calm of a master cliché-dodger.

October 11, 1952 / The Nation

The Kinesis films, produced by a group of little-known San Francisco experimentalists, are mostly animated "cartoons" that have the glitter and bang-bang sort of interest of Pollock-Motherwell-Hoffman paintings, and practically drug you with their quick, even-cutting pace, lush over-scoring of music, and shallow richness. The idea of most of the Kinesis group is to take something that is practically nothing (thick swirls of lava-like paint, etc.), make it march, expand and fade, relate it to Mozart or Dizzy Gillespie, and hope that it takes wing like music. My own feeling is that if you put as much music into films as Gordon Belson and Hy Hirsh, you won't have a picture

so much as a repetitious exercise in rhythm. Belson's new animations give the impression of a Jackson Pollock kaleidoscope set in motion to mamba sounds; the over-all effect is morbid and thick. Hy Hirsh puts on a stunning display of tricky neon-colored evolutions, but her film -- Arp-like ovals deploying across the screen like a formation of airplanes through three symphonic movements -- almost sent me to sleep.

Weldon Kees's "Apex Hotel" (not animated) steals the Kinesis show, partly because the camera work and cutting are as primitive as the drawing of "Moon Mullins" but principally because it is such an aridly neat and unbiased picture of architectural debris. Kees's camera takes you through a crumbling two-story dwelling, a completely unilluminating tour that keeps you guessing about where the house is, what shape it originally had, and who lived in it. The movie crawls down a steam pipe at the pace of a half-dead bug, sits on a busted light socket for four seconds, stares down a toilet bowl, examines the MacArthur headline of an old newspaper. Kees may never threaten Gregg Toland or James Wong Howe as a lensman, but he has a wonderful eye for accidental composition -- shapes, lines, and textures lock together as though they were set in concrete. The effects he gets are sometimes quite jolting, as though things were appearing as they are, without any evidence of mood, or participation.

January 13, 1951 / The Nation

"Manon" is a hard-boiled version of Prevost's bedridden novelette, with a creaking, improbable script job waylaying director Georges Clouzot. Manon Lescaut (Cecile Aubry) is now a baby-faced siren, her incredibly faithful lover is a maquis fighter, and their unswerving passion -- shared with any willing and wealthy fat man -- lights the way from Paris black markets to the sands of Palestine. The cold, frank Clouzot ("The Raven", "Jenny Lamour") is a perverse craftsman who casts incongruous

creatures (half-pint Aubry) and contrives unnecessary obstacles. On a jammed train where there is no room for moving-picture apparatus and crowds are unwieldy, he threads his heroine through every aisle for a masterful analysis of life on the level of canned sardines. In an abandoned farmhouse with no constricting conditions for the director, the impassioned teen-agers neck in the dark, search the rooms with a flashlight that digs the past out of the worn-out decor. Clouzot's best talent is for clawing behind camouflages with a candid camera. He achieves the lonely, unglamorous feeling of a junky movie theater by working only in the basement and manager's office. His detailed pictures of a high-class bordello, a frenzied jive cave, a dress salon, unearth the provocative nuances of its people -- usually from the waist down. "Manon" is halted and conventionalized by its hack plotting enlivened by its ludicrous pornography, and is, otherwise, a painful study of Parisians at their peculiar worst.

April 14, 1951 / The Nation

The death of Val (Vladimir) Lewton, Hollywood's top producer of B movies, occurred during the final voting on the year's outstanding film contributors. The proximity of these two events underlines the significant fact that Lewton's horror productions ("Death Ship", "The Body Snatchers", "Isle of the Dead"), which always conveyed a very visual, unorthodox artistry, were never recognized as "Oscar" worthy. On the other hand, in acclaiming people like Ferrer, Mankiewicz, and Holliday, the industry has indicated its esteem for bombshells who disorganized the proceedings on the screen with their flamboyant eccentricities and relegate the camera to the role of passive bit player.

Lewton always seemed a weirdly misplaced figure in Hollywood. He specialized in gentle, scholarly, well-wrought productions that were as modest in their effects as his estimate of himself. Said he: "Years ago I wrote novels for a living, and when RKO was looking for a horror producer, someone told

them I had written horrible novels. They misunderstood the word horrible for horror and I got the job." Having taken on the production of low-cost thrillers (budgeted under \$500,000) about pretty girls who turn into man-eating cats or believe in zombies, Lewton started proving his odd idea, for a celluloid entertainer, that "a picture can never be too good for the public." This notion did not spring from a desire to turn out original, non-commercial films, for Lewton never possessed that kind of brilliance or ambition; it came instead from a pretty reasonable understanding of his own limitations. Unlike the majority of Hollywood craftsmen, he was so bad at supplying the kind of "punch" familiar to American films that the little mayhem he did manage was crude, poorly motivated, and as incredible as the Music Hall make-up on his Indians in "Apache Drums" -- the last and least of his works. He also seemed to have a psychological fear of creating expensive effects, so that his stock in trade became the imparting of much of the story through such low-cost suggestions as frightening shadows. His talents were those of a mild bibliophile whose idea of "good" cinema had too much to do with using quotes from Shakespeare or Donne, bridging scenes with a rare folk song, capturing climate with a description of a West Indian dish, and in the pensive sequences making sure a bit player wore a period mouth instead of a modern lipstick. Lewton's efforts not infrequently suggested a minor approximation of "Jane Eyre".

The critics who called Lewton the "Sultan of shudders" and "Chillmaster" missed the deliberate quality of his insipidly normal characters, who reminded one of the actors used in small-town movie ads for the local grocery or shoe store. Lewton and his script-writers collaborated on sincere, adult pulp stories which gave sound bits of knowledge on subjects like zoanthropia or early English asylums while steering almost clear of formula horror.

"The Curse of the Cat People", for instance, was simply for the over-conscientious parent of a problem child. The film is about a child (Ann Carter) who worries or antagonizes the people around her with her daydreaming; the more they caution

and reprimand, the more she withdraws to the people of her fantasies for "friends". When she finds an old photograph of her father's deceased, psychopathic first wife (Simone Simon, the cat woman of an earlier film), she sees her as one of her imagined playmates; the father fears his daughter has become mentally ill and is under a curse. His insistence that she stop daydreaming brings about the climax, and the film's conclusion is that he should have more trust and faith in his daughter and her visions. Innocuous plots such as these were fashioned with peculiar ingredients that gave them an air of genteel sensitivity and enchantment; there was the dry documenting of a bookworm, an almost delicate distrust of excitement, economical camera and sound effects, as well as fairy-tale titles and machinations. The chilling factor came from the perverse process of injecting tepid thrills with an eyedropper into a respectable story, a technique Lewton and his favorite script-writer, Donald Henderson Clarke, picked up during long careers of writing sex shockers for drugstore book racks. While skittering daintily away from concrete evidences of cat women or brutality, they would concentrate with the fascination of a voyeur on unimportant bric-a-brac reflections, domestic animals, so that the camera would take on the faintly unhealthy eye of a fetishist. The morbidity came from the obsessive preoccupation with which writers and cameramen brought out the voluptuous reality of things like a dangerously swinging ship's hook, which was inconspicuously knocking men overboard like tenpins.

Lewton's most accomplished maneuver was making the audience think much more about his material than it warranted. Some of his devices were the usual ones of hiding leading information, having his people murdered offstage, or cutting into a murderous moment in a gloomy barn with a shot of a horse whinnying. He, however, hid much more of his story than any other film-maker, and forced his crew to create drama almost abstractly with symbolic sounds, textures, and the like that made the audience hyper-conscious of sensitive craftsmanship. He imperiled his characters in situations that didn't call for outsized melodrama and permitted the use of a journalistic camera

-- for example, a sailor trying to make himself heard over the din of a heavy chain that is burying him inside a ship's locker. He would use a spray-shot technique that usually consisted of oozing suggestive shadows across a wall, or watching the heroine's terror on a lonely walk, and then add a homey wind-up of the cat woman trying to clean her conscience in a bathtub decorated with cat paws. This shorthand method allowed Lewton to ditch the laughable aspects of improbable events and give the remaining bits of material the strange authenticity of a daguerrotype.

Unfortunately, his directors (he discovered Robson and Wise in the cutting department) become so delirious about scenic camera work that they used little imagination on the acting. But the sterile performances were partly due to Lewton's unexciting idea that characters should always be sweet, "like the people who go to the movies" -- a notion that slightly improved such veteran creeps as Karloff, but stopped the more talented actors (Kent Smith, Daniell) dead in their tracks. Lewton's distinction always came from his sense of the soundly constructed novel; his \$200,000 jobs are so skillfully engineered in pace, action, atmosphere that they have lost none of the haunting effect they had when released years ago.

July 28, 1951 / The Nation

"A state of uncertainty, generally accompanied by a feeling of anxiety or fear; indetermination; indecision." This, according to Webster, is the meaning of suspense -- probably the best single theme for movies in an anxious era like this, when we are all sweating out something -- from A-bombs, bullets, or furloughs to pregnancies, ironclad marriages, or high prices. But this theme has been misconstrued and bastardized by both Hollywood and its critics. One director in particular has made his living by subjecting the movie audience to a series of cheap, glossy, mechanically perfect shocks, and for this he has been hailed as the High Boojum of Suspense. The name of this artist

is, of course, Alfred Hitchcock -- who has gone farther on fewer brains than any director since Griffith, while cleverly masking his deficiency, and his underlying petty and pointless sadism, with a honey-smooth patina of "sophistication", irony, and general glitter.

Having vented this long-pent-up gripe, I hasten to add that Hitchcock's latest film, "Strangers on a Train", is fun to watch if you check your intelligence at the box office. It is too bad that this director, who has the observing eyes of a Dos Passos and the facility of a Maupassant, does himself the disservice of intercutting rather good naturalistic scenes with so much hoke. His forte is the half-minute visual uncertainty -- a murderer's hand straining through a sewer grating for a symbolically decorated cigarette lighter. Hitch not only shows the fingers straining forward with slow, animal cunning but throws a white, metallic light over them, thus turning a dirty black hole into Grauman's Chinese on opening night. The whole thing is done in a boxed close-up, so that one can't help feeling the cameraman could have cut the nonsense short by handing the Ronson up to the villain. The late-twenties Hitchcock, devoted to the fairly credible style of John Buchan and Belloc Lowndes, would have rejected all such intrusive, romantic, metronome-timed schmaltz and no doubt fired the script writer for lifting the gesture and locale from a film -- "The Third Man" -- made by his former shadow, Carol Reed. However, like so many transplanted foreign aces who consider American audiences more childish, gullible, and slow-witted than those in the Marshall Plan countries, Hitchcock has gone so soft that he makes even the average uninspired native director look comparatively non-commercial. His only really punchy Hollywood job was "Lifeboat". "Strangers on a Train" ranks somewhere between that effort and mushy gab-fests like "Sabotage", "Under Capricorn", "Spellbound", and -- though it had its merits -- "Rope".

Because chases and homicides and Pearl White escapes clutter his pictures, no one notices the general emasculation Hitchcock has perpetrated on the thriller. Brittle, soft-checked

petulant pretty boys (Dick, Dall, Todd, Donat, Cummings, Granger) are projected into high melodrama. These characters seem to disappear like clothes dummies within their tweedy, carefully unpressed Brooks Brothers jackets and slacks, thanks to a director who impregnates costume and decor with so much crackling luster, so much tension and latent evil, that the spectator expects a stair corner or tie clasp to start murdering everyone in sight. Hitchcock did a lot of harm to movies by setting off a trend toward investing backgrounds, architecture, and things like cigar bands with deep meaning. Finally, he takes all the bite out of his stories by whipping quickly but delicately down various "artistic" detours. In "Strangers on a Train", he cuts away from a brutally believable strangulation to the concave image cast up by the lens of the victim's fallen spectacles. At once the onlooker loses interest in the murder as such because he is so entranced with the lush, shadowy choreographic lyricism with which Hitchcock shows the life being squeezed, fraction by fraction, out of a shallow, hateful nymphomaniac.

The movie, by the way, is built around the travestied homosexuality of the murderer. Robert Walker provides the role with a meatier, more introverted, unhealthier savour than the stars usually give a Hollywood production. This is partly the result of Hitchcock's mechanical and spurious use of the new close-up style in camera work, which is evidently aimed at fetishists who like to study pores. Here he has given Walker an oily, puffy face and made him skitter his tiny eyes back and forth horizontally until it appears that the actor looks at everybody as if he were reading a book. But somewhere in the past two years Walker has picked up an aggressive jump style of acting; so that he seems to bull his way through the action -- even when quietly waiting around a carnival for the sun to go down -- like a thoughtless, savage two-hundred-pounder about to plunge for a touchdown. The heavy blanket of twisted melancholia which Walker spreads over this film is beautifully counterpointed by the work of Laura Elliott in the role of the victim. She seems to swish up into the picture like a sexy, bespectacled

baby whale. All the best things in "Strangers" have to do with the playing of these two.

April, 1968 / Art Forum

The element of debris, disconnection, has been in most finished films, but it's obliterated by Mr. Clean critics who need antiseptic design the way some people need catsup. Tons of criticism have been written about Hitchcock: the Catholicism, talent for directing viewers, cosmic homicides -- a Lewton-ish conception in which environment, a shower curtain or telephone booth, is inclement and capable of unleashing the most violent destruction on a mild clerk or schoolmistress. More tons have been offered about his over-rated knowledge of cheap thrillers, his synthesizing of diverse events into a path-like visual event, compacting a whole Gulliver's adventure into a silent linear pattern that takes five minutes.

It beggars such uneven films to keep pressing in on them with more and more analyses, favoring the film as a one-man operation, pure genius. As late Hitchcock passes into history, his bashful cleverness ("I used the high angle, I didn't want to cut, I insisted that the audience...") becomes less apparent than the feeling of pulpishness, a mostly unbelievable woman's mag thriller. Spotted throughout are those much celebrated stretches, frittery and arty, where the director's hand is obvious: the berserk carrousel, the feet going this way and that into a Pullman encounter, the bloodthirsty crows on a jungle gym (OK, send the next bird out).

To either put Hitchcock up or down isn't the point; the point is, sticking to the material as it is, rather than drooling over behind-the-camera feats of engineering. Psycho and Strangers on a Train, respected films in the Hitchcock library, are examples of good and bad clutter, though the first third of Psycho is as bare, stringent, measly, minimal as a Jack Benny half hour on old

Seeing the latter film today is disturbing for the amount of suppositional material. Why is taxidermy necessarily a ghoulish hobby? Are stuffed birds in a motel's back parlor dead giveaways of an abberant mind? First, a passing motorist, then a wily detective, takes one glance at seven stuffed heads and becomes either queasy or intrigued by the psychological significance. ("What kind of warped personality is this?") The great supposition is that the haunted house, California Gothic, is going to scare people. Having picked such a Casper the Ghost turreted antique, a cliché before Charles Addams stamped it to death, his choice isn't justified by anything more daring, unexpected, against-the-grain than Abbott-Costello rudimentary Eeeeeek. Forget the fake-y mother-mummy down in the wine cellar, a-rocking with one hand on each knee, a stock old lady wig on a stock skull (the viewer is supposed to faint), the most contrived scene is the head-floating-backwards of a stabbed detective falling downstairs. Hitchcock and his devoted auteurists have sewed and sold this time-expanded scene a dozen times.

Taking this "classic" apart, scene by scene, is pointless because the horror elements have dried up (with the exception of the shower scene) like mummy's skull in the cellar. The most striking material is the humdrum day-in-the-life of a real estate receptionist: Godard-like, anonymous rooms, bare, uncomfortable. Except for the World War II armor-plated brassiere, the opening of a girl having only her lunch hour to be in bed with her hardware swain, is raunchy, elegant. The scenes later are even better: packing the bags (there's something wonderful about the drabness), and the folks from her office, off to lunch, passing in front of the embezzler's car: the little smile and wave, and then, nearly out of the camera's range, the double-take.

The point is: why deal with these films nostalgically as solid products of genius? Strangers is medium-superior to Psycho, right through the murder in a pair of fallen spectacles: a ravishing wooden island with a pavilion, a balmy dusk that can actually be felt. If "pretty" in a good sense can be used about film, it's usable here. There's nothing handsomer than the calm,

geographic scything through Time, from the moment of the feet going through a railroad station to Robert Walker's head-back-foot-out promise of sex in an open-air carnival, the unbeatable elegance with which he rings the bell in a hammer-and-ball concession.

Nothing, even the pristine engineering of the bashful, uncomplaining Master, is sustained here (how many movies since Musketeers of Pig Alley have been sustained?). Walker's contaminated elegance, which suggests Nero Wolfe's classy, intricate hedonism, with omelettes in a 23rd Street brownstone, dissolves into bad, semi-bad brocade. Alongside a pretty block of husband-wife bickering in a record shop, its unusual use of glass partitions, sexual confidence and bitchiness in a girl with glasses, there are literally acres of scenes in elegant homes and tennis stadiums which could be used to stuff pillows if there were that many pillows in the world.

One of the best studio actresses (Laura Elliott: a sullen-sexy small-town flirt with ordinary, non-studio glamour) gives a few early sections extraordinary reality, eating up the sexual tension created by a posh character who tails her around an amusement park, while she juggles two local louts. Then, like a homing pigeon, the movie goes back to the old Hollywood bakery, dragging out those supposedly indispensable ghastly items: Senator rye bread, daughter egg twist, and little Babka. Hitchcock has always been a switchhitter, doubling a good actor with a bad one, usually having the latter triumph. It takes real perversity murdering off Elliott and settling for Ruth Roman, a rock lady in Grecian drapery, plus Pat Hitchcock, who, aside from her clamped-on permanent wave, carries an open-mouthed bovine expression from one dull block-like scene to another.

April 16, 1945 / The New Republic

The showing of the non-objective paintings of Piet

Mondrian (1872-1944) at the Museum of Modern Art seems to me a crucial art event, and from what I have seen of the audiences at the Museum is getting the kind of blank, cold, unbending, bored or savagely derogatory and snobbish reception only the very best silent films get at the Museum. Mondrian believed that if painting rid itself of all individual or personal reference it could get at reality that was more fundamental to life, that was all-inclusive rather than merely self-expressive, and timeless rather than tied to the moment. He worked for this reality all his life, and his painting is of such a high order that the difference between an art of the individual and an art of universality is immediately evident. His work is so human and so lacking in tricks or easily produced notes that if it is at all comprehended it will destroy the misconception about abstract art that it is a cold, easily achieved method. These canvases show more clearly than any other modern paintings I know what actual painting expression is, and they make elements like rhythm, dynamic equilibrium and glow, which are hidden, compromised or confused in most realistic art, very obvious. Their clarity and expressiveness should, I think, influence many painters toward an ambition more difficult and more profound. Mondrian's art expanded dramatically at the very end of his life, and his last great, unfinished painting, "Victory Boogie Woogie", is of the greatest consequence. It was realizing an expression as multiple in its effects and moods as symphonic music, and indicated the point at which I think the greatest painting of our time, if there is to be any, must aim.

Mondrian's fundamental aim was to paint the equivalent of what he felt was unchanging and universal in reality, which was a constant living state wherein the elements are as free of individual or particular detail as possible. His "more or less neutral means" are straight bar-like lines that are unconfined to any particular form and cut spaces that are either rectangular or right-angled triangles. His color is mainly the blackest black and the whitest white, with pure red, yellow and blue showing up more and more in his later work. Texture is unvarying throughout, and like a finely brushed plaster. His compositions

are structures of relationships rather than structures in which the meaning lies in particular forms. The paintings have a constant vitality that he produced from balancing the forces created and released by containing them within the right-angled composition on which all his painting is based.

Every point of Mondrian's best painting (the Museum sells an excellent reproduction of one of these, called "Composition in Black, White and Red", for a quarter) projects a particular kind of deeply moving, very human sensation. For instance, along the inner divisions of his designs there is a constant, piercing glow of light, the feeling of the heavy, cutting edge of the line and of that line cutting space. Where lines cross, there is a violent, irritating pulsation of light; inside of divisions the light is lower, more even and sensuous. The compositions are constantly in a circular process of opening and closing, and at points where lines strike the edge of the canvas there is another double sensation of glow and the rhythmic play which that point starts up with similar points around the edge. Mondrian had the greatest capacity for producing structural unity and he frequently achieved structures that have a strength and size that seem more in the realm of large-scale architecture than that of painting; their accuracy, I think, will make almost any other painting seem to some extent soft and padded. His designs are adjusted to an amazing point, where nothing is uncomfortable, static, lacking in sensuousness or even mildly ambiguous. At the end he was producing the most brilliant effects by composing color rhythms of varying speeds and varying degrees of power, mood and richness of pattern.

The vitality and beauty of Mondrian's constructions never quite compensate for an essential lack of painting quality. His extreme need to simplify and his extreme demands upon simplification took his work to the verge of escaping from painting character, so that the quality of his line and color does not seem indigenous to painting, and lowers the esthetic satisfaction by referring you to some other medium -- metal or plaster. In his last paintings, Mondrian was employing color

probably more profoundly and complexly than any other artist of his day; but up to this time he had fallen short of being a great colorist. The spectrum colors that he used with black and white give an impression of an approach to them that was stiff and shy. The paintings contain the unpleasant irony that they will in time lose part of their effect through the graying of their main color, white. This relaxes their sparkle and their marvelous equilibrium, a fact Mondrian accepted. The black lines, which he called "oppressive", finally disappeared in the last period, the plasterlike white almost did, and he was beginning to orchestrate color with tremendous effect.

Mondrian repeatedly accused the Cubists, who were his chief influence and whose painting he called "sublime", of not accepting the logical consequences of their discoveries, and painting completely abstractly. In some ways, though, Mondrian's art is also tied to concepts that are more appropriate to realistic than to abstract painting. The white areas of his paintings do suggest space in a realistic, unlimited sense, and his line and form suggest an objective world simply free of individual markings. In the old tradition his compositions build up from the bottom of the canvas as though it were a floor, rather than in a purely non-realistic sense which considers each canvas edge of the same meaning and importance. The treatment of painting surface is somewhere between realistic and purely flat painting.

Mondrian "began to paint at an early age" and said he was the only one of his family who remained a painter because he was willing to give up everything to it. He painted constantly for nearly sixty years, working slowly and developing slowly. Some time around the end he said he had had a happy life.

October 11, 1952 / The Nation

"What Price Glory?" owes its spark and vitality to the

Cagney-Bailey acting team, which doesn't seem bothered by having to shoulder some of the oldest luggage of slapstick and pathos. Going along with modern Broadway ideas, someone at Twentieth-Century-Fox got the notion to do this War I play and movie (which had guts, explosive energy) as a snappy, overdecorated semi-musical, with soldiers on motorcycles running smack into haystacks, tough officers choking up at the sight of a wounded youngster and cursing the horrors of war, and every so often the oh-so-cute Corinne Calvet being maneuvered by a crowd of drunken friends into a position where you can either look up or down her dress. The rivalry between Captain Flagg and Sergeant Quirt is worked out with a ballet-like synchronism between the two leads, both of whom seem to have ripened in recent years and to have become curiously uneasy and eccentric, even verging to the slightest degree on madness -- Cagney, with a crazy waddle and ferocious decisiveness, and Dailey with a loose-tongued delivery and the signs of frenzy in his Gary Cooperish face. Their befuddled digressions into mannerism give the film the sharp accents and jagged rhythms of silent films, and lessen the romantic distortions of director John Ford, who derived his shapes and colors from Thomas Benton's paintings.

September 2, 1950 / The Nation

Hollywood's move from studio-built to on-the-spot productions has led to well-regulated rather than raw realism ("Lost Boundaries" vs. "Open City"), and judging from recent films even more unexpected developments are on the way. Marlon Brando's "throw-away" tactics in "The Men" may swerve naturalistic acting from "dead-pan" to florid, and produce a new tribe of instinctual fire-balls who explode only during the actual shooting in order to circumvent every theatrical point on which the director had planned. Eliz Kazan distils the corn out of the city documentary in "Panic in the Streets". The photography in "Edge of Doom" (in a shrewd attempt to mix the physicality of theater with the journalistic aspect of films) gets so close to

the action that any further intimacy will put the camera inside the actors. In fact, this close-up style -- huge bodies, faces hypnotically looming from the screen -- gets very close to painting: the flat, massive envelopment of space found in Matisse or in painters like Kees and Bazliotes.

"The Men" -- a dull, over-designed primer on paraplegia -- rehabilitates a sullen introverted patient (Brando) and then drops him into soap-opera. The script concentrates on the savage wit and dull pain of spinal cases, with an unhappy talent for making slick stereotypes of a cast largely made up of patients from Birmingham Veterans Hospital. Of the Hollywood players, Richard Erdman does a kind-hearted clown with the cocky insensitivity of a child star; a prima donna M.D. is done with hard conceit by Everett Sloane, who makes a stage business even of sucking a milk shake. Brando, however, nearly script-worshipped into a prig, gives his role a likable amateurishness by brilliant underplaying, delaying on cues, slouching through his lines.

Although "The Men" is excessively composed, abstract visual effects are achieved at the expense of naturalness of action. Zinneman's cold craftsmanship and somewhat innocent view of Americans leads to a basketball scene (Brando deploying down court with an ending close-up of him hooking in the winning basket) made up of diagrammatic moves, staccato editing, and an understanding of sports that must have come from reading Frank Merriwell. Zinneman sometimes tones down his artiness and with Brando's help gets poetic effects in which the tragedy is in the space that divides people.

Kazan's New Orleans manhunt, "Panic in the Streets" -- a forty-eight hour journal of a diverted plague -- needs more medical curiosity and less vigorous gab. The discovery of a hapless, unidentified victim of two bullets and a deadly contagious disease sets the city officials (Richard Widmark, Paul Douglas) on a race to nab the murderer (Walter Palance) who is unwittingly touching off a slight epidemic of pneumonic plague. Kazan, the true New Yorker, cuts movie life down to

virulent conversation between suspicious opponents who, like the average Broadwayite, hide character under an easily read appearance and demeanor. All that one gets from Widmark & Co. is a frustrating surface of gesture and grimace. This type of melodramatic travelogue is fun because the writer (Richard Murphy) dodges the places haunted by tourists and corny realists stumbles into scenes that are already in motion and need no build-up, and disguises folksy insights by a cold sophistication. While two thugs growl at each other, one is munching Nabisco wafers; a brief look at the kitchen of a Greek restaurant reveals a hopeless cook cutting her way through a fog of grease. But for a story about such things as rat fleas, bacilli pesti, and coughers, the script misses scientific excitements. The bullying tactics of Widmark and Douglas are watched on board a tanker, but not the doctor, below deck, ferreting for rats. The camera is usually one room removed from plague victims, looking the wrong way on autopsies, and forsaking the careers of germs left by Palanca on various coffee sacks, Bendix washers and scratch sheets.

March 1, 1952 / The Nation

James Brooks's three-dimensional kaleidoscope scenes at the Peridot reveal him to be about eight times more thoughtful and fluent than any other Manhattan abstractionist. Brooks usually achieves something with tangles lines and geologic textures that looks like the cross-section of a rock-pile -- but a rock-pile sledged out of a cathedral. He works simultaneously in all parts of the picture -- including the reverse side of the canvas -- troweling, blotting, kneading, evaporating the pigment with a sensuality that sinks his imagery into the very threading of the linen. However he does it, he handles his medium with more respect and feeling than I can impute to any of the more prominent dabblers in the Rorschach League. What you see from a distance is a rich chunk of harmonized, understressed oranges or greens, curious for its poetically ambiguous intermixing of wetness and

dryness, earthiness and restraint. When you get closer, the density of the color fades away into dustiness and gauziness, and the picture, though still compositionally alive, seems as thin as a Brooks Brothers' shoulder. As he works from plane to plane over his Euclidean field, rather than in, out, and around volumes, Brooks falls into a wheel-like motion that leads to hypnosis through rhythmic repetition, contrast, balance. The Pollocks, Poussette-Darts, and deKoonings, more nervous and emotion-ridden, have set out to destroy this sort of connectivism by a reliance on roughness, complication, and the anarchy of happenstance; yet perhaps it is Brooks -- neat, subtle, and quietly profound -- who strikes closest home with his skillful analyses of the Gatsby personality.

Alfred Leslie, at the Tibor de Nagy gallery, is a pseudo-roughneck who likes to thumb his nose at polite art customs. In trying to shock he offers among other things a twelve-foot picture of opaque, brownish-black scum with a three-foot white stripe in the bottom left corner; an incoherent self-portrait constructed vaguely around the four letters of a dirty word; and a tangled, smeary abstraction half on paper half on canvas, fastened together with black plumbers' tape. "Oh the hell with it all" seems to be his guiding emotion and ultimate goal in painting. A sort of Bronx cowboy abstractionist, Leslie carries his scorn for "training" to the farthest point, a place where color can never be deepened beyond the simplest, quickest mixture, where paint must never, never be put on smoothly, where the "rough, untrammelled" look and simple bedraggled light-dark harmony are the only possible things to be tried for. Despite the clutter and primitivism, some of the pictures have a nice worn luminosity, as though a shadow had been pummeled and kneaded by other darker or lighter shadows. Each painting looks half painted, but upon closer observation, it comes together into a harmony of delicate flickering curves and light waves. His most successful works are seven-tenths empty and three-tenths as busy as Times Square.

December 22, 1951 / The Nation

The latest show of weariness in American art can now be viewed at the Whitney Museum, where 150 painters are enlisted in a nation-wide survey of the work of 1951 -- a survey that sags almost as much as the joists under the museum's squeaking floors. From its first room, given over to vertical-horizontal checkering of space by Mondrian disciples, to its last -- in which a John Sloan follower named Cox uses his brush as a needle to loop endless threads around two black-stockinged nudes and thereby presents us with the cheapest sex painting ever to be invited to the Whitney -- the exhibit offers New Yorkers a chance to see our best artists with their techniques up, their spirits down, and their eclecticism everywhere showing. This dispiriting effect issues from the dedication today to flat over-all design, and the clearest point made by the current doings at the Whitney is that the two-dimensional art put across by the Cubists invariably drives the painter into repetitious parallelism, and traps him into discarding such things as color transition, subtlety of form, or loving brushing. So much bath-water is tossed out, in fact, that the baby just dries up and blows away.

It is not altogether surprising, then, to find that this 1951 gathering of the clan -- under the "radical" banners of Hoffman, Pollock, and Motherwell -- seems even more quiet and controlled than most of the more realistic Annuals of the past. These avant-gardists, who formerly specialized in out-sized canvases, this year are content with the modest dimensions that they once rejected for fear of making "a hold in the wall"; also passe now are erratic contours, aggressive color, and the thick impasto; all in all, there is so little untoward violence in these new paintings that it is comparatively easy to detach each artist's trademark and look it blandly in the eye.

Take the first thing that hits you as you enter Room 1 -- Fritz Glarner's "Rational Painting", a linoleum-like construction with a pool-hall pallor. Glarner is a cool, and overpoweringly dull, artist who seems to be trying to introduce

imbalance into Mondrian's perfectly ordered geometry. The only biting sensations in this example of his work come in the patches where he has roughened up a pure color by covering it with a gray tone. Alongside this nerveless picture is an artistically computed version of what seems to be a floor plan for a ranch-type bungalow. I. Rice Pereira, promulgator of this faded Prussian blueprint, has hit on the idea of lifting some of her ruled one-inch lines about an eighth of an inch off their masonite surface. The careful bas-relief thus performed suggests a precious bit of concrete work in an orange substance succulent enough to eat.

Moving along to the Intrsubjectivists, one finds that these masters of free forms and free applications have undergone some changes. Pollock has begun to introduce organic shapes into his canvas, but his real force still springs from his homely textures and the motion of his chopped-up background space rather than his tiresomely undeveloped experiments in crescents. Baziotes has dropped the wandering watch-spring shape and most of the contours from his slithy, slimy mint-green toves; Hoffman has muralized and stiffened his explosions; Stamos, the stone-under-water painter, now goes in for a black-white picture with a slashed-out shape suggesting a badly-cut boomerang; Motherwell has moved from vivid plane geometry to somber flat biology. (And yet he remains the only American, I think, who has the nerve to rely on sensibility instead of bravado. His charm comes from an ability to stand back and study balances and color relationships -- as Mondrian did: his limitation lies in the fact that nothing he does seems to contain much real application of brush to canvas.) These new developments do not indicate the imaginative groping of avant-gardists so much as the worried maneuverings of no longer startling arrivistes.

Though even the best things in this Annual seem to have been done in that gray overcast of fatigue and insecurity which makes American painting look as if it were practised at home after a hard day at the office, there are at least a few pictures which must have caused the artist to sweat, to push

his technique beyond gaucheness into the sound, hard-earned subtleties that Americans like Homer and Eakins substituted for sparkle and bounce. In Gottlieb's ominous fantasy, for instance, even though it is stamped with the endemic crassness of the Kootz group, there is pleasantly little indecision in the large spiked shape of sanded black which sits over a scrubbed tan background and a distant sprinkling of determined-looking symbols that might be bottle-openers or spokes from the wheels of Conestoga wagons. Here is the occasional Gottlieb which is so soundly constructed as to make its objects seem hammered into place with sixteen-penny nails. The Gottlieb doesn't say much, but it happens to catch him at his best.

In a more realistic vein is Fletcher Martin's good, gentle tone-painting -- a picture of a lissome female toying with a couple of shooting-gallery birds. Since relinquishing the portrayal of Negro stevedores, prelim boxers, and bronco-busters for the more lucrative job of illustrating medical advertisements, Martin has relaxed.

Of the sixty-four artists who have not been previously hung at the Whitney, the most striking is realist Kenneth Davies, who has developed an eye for tones to a point where he makes the camera seem like a feeble competitor. His picture of a dusky red blotter covered with stray objects -- lobster claw, sun glasses, king of diamonds -- features an envelope, puckishly addressed to Bishop Berkeley, whose three-cent stamp, watermarks, rips and tears, all go to demonstrate that Davies is an amazing mixer of pigments. He has turned the clutter on a student's desk into an array of precious objects. Another man of tones -- gray, black, white -- is Robert Vickrey of Greenwich Village, who piquantly reveals a nun wandering through a labyrinth of walls at two o'clock in the morning.

In Martin, Davies, Vickrey, and a few others we have painters actually painting according to Hoyle, with a good many of the delicate tonal enrichments, the compositional rhythms, and the linear refinements that are to be found in the work of

the old masters. I do not think these "reactionaries" are as tired, or as tiresome, as their more famous and more liberated colleagues.

May 19, 1951 / The Nation

Amadeo Modigliani (1884-1920) once esteemed by worshippers of modern art, now makes most of them yawn. It is pretty obvious why he has become a forgotten man in the School of Paris while artists of less originality, deftness and power hold their place as big shots -- people like Soutine, Roualt, Bonnard, who are weak and vacillating compared to the outspoken Modigliani. His technique -- composing in line and then filling in with unmodulated color, comic-strip fashion -- has become passe in a world where the artist now gropes into his subconscious with ambiguous color and a worried brush. Modigliani was as sure as Velasquez that truth lay plainly before his eyes; he could draw a tiny button-hole eye and patiently, arbitrarily, fill it with dusky jade, not realizing -- or realizing, and not caring -- that life, his own debauched life, moved at a more violent, chaotic clip. Today he is like a cagy spit-ball pitcher hanging around in a business that has outlawed his delivery.

Painting only portraits, Modigliani had more odd little tricks than Olsen and Johnson, and some were just as tiresome. Elongated oval faces with pendulous noses, Mae Murray mouths, Halloween-mask eyes -- gimmicks like these turned his models into puppets, toy balloons, with hot rusty-orange skin, looping razor-sharp edges, plastered against a background that is as flat as they themselves are bulbous. These are just a few of the tricks repeated in each canvas now on display at the Museum of Modern Art. The peculiar thing about this Italian Jewish mannerist is that for all his affectation he could not only catch personalities with brutal candor but also charge his tight, rigid portraits with enough elegant, painterly feeling

to put them in the pure, un-narrative, unpsychological league of Matisse.

Brutal candor: the fat, snotty-bourgeois matronliness of Mme. Amedee, the slob-farmer essence of Soutine, the desperate sexlessness of Cocteau. Like a caricaturist, Modigliani could instantly seize on the main fact and exploit it, exaggerate it. He seemed to gather -- and attract -- types without any critical concern; one cannot help gasping at the number and variety of people that made up his company -- people of every class from bohemians to prudish professionals, wispy schizoid teenagers, whores, sexless matrons. Every class but one: being a gigolo, he wasn't much interested in working stiff.

The source of his power lay in the use to which he put his impersonal lines in static compositions with unmolded figures. The lines have very little to do with the person he paints. Like boa constrictors here, like lariats there, they whip in without warning from a concealed quarter, playing their private dance, ignoring the model, squeezing a face or chest into a bursting, tight-skinned sausage. And so the figures come out as locked ovals of space piled treacherously atop one another and irritatingly divorced from the background. Modigliani's sensuality reacted so strongly to color, line, and texture that he spent most of his energy stepping up the voltage of his canvases. By laying a paper on wet pigment and then drawing it away he created a sucked-up stipple surface -- one of the most freakish surfaces in all painting -- whose insidious effect on the spectator is to make him accept a morbid substitute for brushwork or realistic skin. When he seems to employ a line to bring out the roundness of an abdomen or thigh, he actually uses it merely for abstract contrast. This unrelenting passion to sensualize his medium at the expense of everything else shows up in Modigliani's drawings; the empty-faced "Head of Kisling" is simply a doodling attempt to expand the lyrical effect of some grass-like lines of hair which don't suggest hair and aren't meant to. People probably think they are getting one man's stylized but realistic impression of a likeness in

each of these portraits because Modigliani gives them hands with five fingers, navels, and all the other standard equipment. What they are actually getting is a warm, troubling abstraction outfitted with the thinnest kind of anatomical skin.

But Modigliani's compositions get steadily worse as he goes farther into the canvas. Take a look at the painting of Anna Zborowsky: backing her up is a vague architectural mess, no better or worse than the glib settings to be found in the work of an art student -- some striped wallpaper, a splintered board glued to the lady's back, irrelevant atmospheric "concrete". Like an art student, Modigliani echoes the shapes and colors of his figures in quickly drummed-up window ledges, curtains, wall corners. If the composition lacks movement, he can always juice up a doorknob with a crucial shadow -- although there is no other shadow in the painting (Boy with Red Hair).

For all this, he is one of the cleanest painters of his period. Unlike the others, he is selling nothing, pushing no part of his own personality into what he does. No bombast, no heroics, no rhetoric, no self-pity, and most of all -- no forced feeding. He is a sober painter, interested in painting and little else. And like Velasquez, he is an essentialist who makes the others look like dramatists, sentimentalist, exhibitionists.

February 9, 1952 / The Nation

American art critics, from Leo Stein on, have worked so hard at creating a new hierarchy of painters that to try to knock down one of their idols now is as useless as trying to chip through a bank vault with a teaspoon. Yet one must speak one's mind, and to me the recent Matisse show at the Fifty-third Street Barr and Grill spilled a scandalous secret about "the greatest master of the twentieth century". Far sketchier than it was ever cracked up to be, the display did touch on most of

the high spots of his career, and clearly showed his long industrious progression from thin to thinner painting, both tangibly and philosophically. The inescapable revelation is that the philistines of thirty-odd years ago were nearer than they knew to the truth: Matisse may be skillful and ingenious, but only by the wildest idealistic rationalization can he be credited as a dedicated, ripened artist who has given himself over to feeling, sensuality, "love and life".

The crux of the great myth is that this magnificently endowed pagan has been the most adept of all painters in selecting and juxtaposing erotic, dynamic, gleaming colors; that he flies you close to the sun, in fact, with colors like so many bursts of jet exhaust. Trudging around through those rooms full of dead fish, heavy-breasted nudes, copper vases, flowers, fruits, costume jewelry, silk curtains, Milanese pigeons, and musical bric-a-brac, I found it a collection of embarrassingly insipid themes imprisoned in listless, lusterless, somewhat dirty tones of superficial color. There was on every hand the look of taut old icing plastered thinly over an excessively impelling surface, an icing now going vaguely ocher since the surfaces themselves are yellowing with the passage of time. And the assertive black outlines -- on which Matisse has depended as trustingly as Rouault to make his reds and yellows sing -- have held their power while everything else has faded, so that today the blacks overwhelm and over-darken almost every harmony. The exhibit verified a long-held hunch of mine that the jolly hedonist's glory has been felicitously created in large part by the brilliancy, gloss, and sparkle of the products of the reproduction industry. The plates in Barr's new book, for instance, are beautiful and scintillating, but hold any one of them up to its original and you will get an awful jolt.

Though miles of criticism have been published about Matisse's early use of Manet's simplicity and flatness, Monet's fragmentation and illumination of color, Cezanne's hatching, modeling, and composition -- and finally of the synthesis and maturity that emerged when he picked up some decorative things

from the Oreint -- a glance at his early trivial experiments in impressionism and post-impressionism should convince anyone that M. Mati\$\$e is an egocentric who cares little, and understands less, about any style other than his own. (If he is really indebted to any of his colleagues, it is to the tricky mannerist putterers who decorate cheap pottery.) Painting with a bland stroke, hardly mixing color on palette or canvas, working neatly, quickly, deftly, and a bit hygienically -- like an Old World gentleman -- over his "spontaneous" projects -- indeed, "tickling" his way along, to borrow frenemy Picasso's devastating verb -- he seems never to be deeply involved or even slightly carried away by his work. This was made pretty apparent in a two-reel film of Matisse at work realeased here a few years back, but nobody paid any attention to it; so the myth goes on that Matisse and sensuality are synonymous, while the latest retrospective showing of his pictures yawns with barrenness, baldness, and an inescapable faggish pseudo-sensibility.

Yet his position fairly far up in Western painting -- say 73 on a scale from 0 to 100 -- is insured, I think, by both the variety of his compositions and his superb elegance and mobility as a draftsman. He moves on to a new compartmental arrangement after about three pictures, where a Breughel or a Corot spends from a decade to a life-time on the same crowded figure eight or inverted pyramid; and his line is as much a thing of genius -- if somewhat glib genius -- as Cary Grant's dark nonchalant glitter. With one swift, sure, unbroken flip of the wrist he can do more for the female navel, abdomen, breast, and nipple than anyone since Mr. Maidenform.

Aside from this, what has Matisse really given the world to keep for the next thousand years? Certainly nothing more, in the last analysis, than a gigantic dose of that kind of "charm" which has enabled the butterfly battalions, during his reign, to take over almost exclusively in almost every field of creativity from the short story to the symphony, from the straight chair to the department store. The only trouble is that -- as we all know but none of us admit -- this charm is

sterile; it is also getting dated, as are the paintings that were its source. Sterility is the key to the chapel at Venice which Matisse and everybody else call the climax and summation of his career. Here if anywhere is symbolized, in cold white bathroom tiles, cold black doodles, and cold tinted sunlight, the modern artist's breakout of the ego and breakdown of technique and feeling -- to say nothing of religious feeling, on which I am no authority. It is a movement in which the artist gets to say whatever he bloody well pleases with an oversimplification and rapidity that make one yearn for the distant era when craftsmanship was so complex that you started at the age of nine as an apprentice, learning to mix colors, prepare panels, and so on. The chapel has naivete, "charm", and a confident slickness; it also does things with filtered light that are breathtakingly pretty. But is the prettiness valid or vulgar, and is this church designed for the worship of God or Matisse?

Henri Matisse never seems to have sweated over a work long enough to give it deep values, plastic or human. It will be said in rebuttal that Matisse himself has never pretended to be more than a nice old rocking chair of an artist, whose goal was to soothe the soul with a pure, calm, equilibrated art. The impoverished surfaces, the absence of rich color chords, the lack of muscle, the lack of heart, make even this claim appear questionable.

October 14, 1965 / Cavalier

There is a dreadful notion in criticism that movies, to be digested by aesthetes, must be turned from small difficulty into large assets and liabilities. James Agee, who always paid out tribute like a public address system, is never precise, but his fastidious pricing of a Lauren Bacall gave the reader the secure feeling that Bacall could be banked at the nearest Chaste National.

Henry Fonda, during a recent run-through of his films in New York, doesn't add up as "one hell of an actor" (as Bill Wellman declared in a Cinema magazine interview), but he is interesting for unimportant tics: the fact that he never acts one-on-one with a co-actor.

When Glenn Ford is a boneless, liquid-y blur as a cowby dancer in The Rounders, Fonda fields Ford's act by doing a Stan Laurel, suggesting an oafish bag of bones in a hick foxtrot. Again in The Lady Eve, Sturges kids this Fonda-ism of opposing his playmates in a scene: Fonda's Hoppsy is a frozen popsicle, a menace of clumsiness while Eric Blore, Eugene Pallette are clever acting dervishes playing scintillating types.

Fonda's defensiveness (he seems to be vouchsafing his emotion and talent to the audience in tiny blips) comes from having a supremely convex body and being too modest to exploit it. Fonda's entry into a scene is that of a man walking backwards, slanting himself away from the public eye. Once in a scene, the heavy jaw freezes, becomes like a concrete abutment, and he affects a clothes hanger stance, no motion in either arm.

A good director must chop Fonda out from his competition: John Ford isolates Fonda for a great night scene in Young Mister Lincoln; communing with himself on a Jew's harp; there is another one in Oxbow Incident where Fonda explodes into a geometrical violence that ends in a beautiful vertical stomping. Left on his own, Fonda gets taller and taller, as he freezes into a stoical Pilgrim, sullenly and prudishly withdrawing while he watches another actor (Lee Tracy in The Best Man) have a ball.

Fonda's man-against-himself act was noticable in his first films during the 30s when his 20-year-old Tom Joad-Slim-Lincoln were aged into wizened, almost gnome-like old folks by an actor who keeps his own grace and talent light as possible in the role. During the 40s, in Daybreak and Ox-Bow, Fonda starts bearing down on the saintly stereotype with which writers strangled him. In a typical perversity, he edges into the bass-

playing hero of Wrong Man with unlikable traits: nervousness that is like a fever, self-pity, a crushing guilt that makes him more untrustworthy than the movie's criminal population. Almost any trait can be read into his later work. From Mr. Roberts onwards, the heroic body is made to seem repellantly beefy, thickened, and the saintliness of his role as an intelligent naval officer-candidate-president shakes apart at the edges with hauteur, lechery, selfishness.

The peculiar feature of this later Fonda performance, however, is that he defeats himself again by diminishing the hostility and meanness -- so that they fail to make us forget the country boy style in which they are framed.

In his best scenes, Fonda brings together positive and negative, a flickering precision and calculated athleticism mixed in with the mulish withdrawing. Telephoning the Russian premier, desperate over the possibility of an atom war (Fail Safe), Fonda does a kind of needle-threading with nothing. He makes himself felt against an indirectly conveyed wall of pressure, seeping into the scene in stiff delayed archness and jointed phrasing -- a great concrete construction slowly cracking, becoming dislodged. It is one of the weirdest tension builders in film, and most of it is done with a constricted, inside-throat articulation and a robot movement so precise and dignified it is like watching a 17-foot polevaulter get over the bar without wasting a motion or even using a pole.

Before it reaches its two strippers at midway point, The Rounders shows Fonda in urbane-bouyant stride, but even a second-team bit player, Edgar Buchanan, out-fences him during a funny exchange in which Fonda explains the name Howdy. Eugene Pallette (Lady Eve), a buoyant jelly bowl moving skywards as he goes downstairs, is a magical actor and nothing in Fonda's divested vocabulary is equipped to produce that kind of spring water bubbling and freshness.

1962 Film Culture

From White Elephant Art Vs. Termite Art

Most of the feckless, listless quality of today's art can be blamed on its drive to break out of a tradition while, irrationally, hewing to the square, boxed-in shape and gem-like inertia of an old-densely-wrought European masterpiece.

Advanced painting has long been suffering from this burnt out notion of a masterpiece -- breaking away from its imprisoning conditions towards a suicidal improvisation, threatening to move nowhere and everywhere, niggling, omniverous, ambitionless; yet, within the same picture, paying strict obeisance to the canvas edge and, without favoritism, the precious nature of every inch of allowable space. A classic example of this inertia is the Cezanne painting: in his in-doorish works of the woods around Aux de Provence, a few spots of tingling, jarring excitement occur where he nibbles away at what he calls his "small sensation", the shifting of a tree trunk, the infinitesimal contests of complementary colors in a light accent on farmhouse wall. The rest of each canvas is a clogging weight-density-structure-polish amalgam associated with self-aggrandizing masterwork. As he moves away from the unique, personal vision that interests him, his painting turns ungiving and puzzling: a matter of balancing curves for his bunched-in composition, laminating the color, working the painting out to the edge. Cezanne ironically left an expose of his dreary finishing work in terrifyingly honest watercolors, an occasional unfinished oil (the pinkish portrait of his wife in sunny, leafed-in patio), where he foregoes everything but his spotting fascination with minute interactions.

The idea of art as an expensive hunk of well-regulated area, both logical and magical, sits heavily over the talent of every modern painter, from Motherwell to Andy Warhol. The



Patrick Patterson

private voice of Motherwell (the exciting drama in the meeting places between ambivalent shapes, the aromatic sensuality that comes from laying down thin sheets of cold, artfully cliché-ish, hedonistic color) is inevitably ruined by having to spread these small pleasures into great, contained works. Thrown back constantly on unrewarding endeavors (filling vast, egg-like shapes, organizing a ten-foot rectangle with its empty corners suggesting Siberian steppes in the coldest time of the year), Motherwell ends up with appalling amounts of plasterish grandeur, a composition so huge and questionably painted that the delicate, electric contours seem to be crushing the shale-like matter inside. The special delight of each painting tycoon (de Kooning's sabre-like lancing of forms; Warhol's minute embrace with the path of illustrator's pen line and block print tone; James Dine's slog-footed brio, filling a stylized shape from stem to stern with one unifying color) is usually squandered in pursuit of the continuity, harmony, involved in constructing a masterpiece. The painting, sculpture, assemblage becomes a yawning production of over-ripe technique shrieking with preciousness, fame, ambition; far inside are tiny pillows holding up the artist's signature, now turned into a mannerism by the padding, lechery, faking required to combine today's esthetics with the components of traditional Great Art.

Movies have always been suspiciously addicted to termite art tendencies. Good work usually arises where the creators (Laurel and Hardy, the team of Howard Hawks and William Faulkner on the first half of Raymond Chandler's The Big Sleep) seem to have no ambitions towards gilt culture, but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything. A peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.

The most inclusive description of the art is, that, termite-like, it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than

eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement. Laurel and Hardy, in fact, in some of their most dyspeptic, and funniest movies, like Hog Wild, contributed some fine parody of men who had read every "How to Succeed" book available; but, when it came to applying their knowledge, reverted instinctively to termite behavior.

January 5, 1952 / The Nation

Let Stevens or Kazan win their Oscars; The Nation's Emanuel -- a life-size drip-celluloid statue of Kirk Douglas, ranting and disintegrating in the vengeful throes of death -- goes to the man or men responsible for each of the following unheralded productions of 1951. "Little Big Horn". A low-budget western, produced by Lippert, starring John Ireland and Lloyd Bridges. This tough-minded, unconventional, persuasive look-in on a Seventh Cavalry patrol riding inexorably through hostile territory to warn Custer about the trap Sitting Bull had set for him, was almost as good in its unpolished handling of the regular-army soldier as James Jones's big novel. For once, the men appear as individuals, rather than types -- grouching, ornery, uprooted, complicated individuals, riding off to glory against their will and better judgment; working together as a team (for all their individualism) in a genuinely loose, efficient, unfriendly American style. The only naturalistic photography of the year; perhaps the best acting of the year in Ireland's graceful, somber portrait of a warm-hearted but completely disillusioned lieutenant, who may or may not have philandered with his captain's wife.

"Fixed Bayonets". Sam Fuller's jagged, suspenseful, off-beat variant of the Mauldin cartoon, expanded into a full-length Korean battle movie without benefit of the usual newsreel clips. Funny, morbid -- the best war film since "Bataan". I wouldn't mind seeing it seven times.

"His Kind of Woman". Good coarse romantic-adventure nonsense, exploiting the expressive dead-pans of Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell, a young man and a young woman who would probably enjoy doing in real life what they have to do here for RKO. Vincent Price superb in his one right role -- that of a ham actor thrown suddenly into a situation calling for high melodramatic courage. Russell's petulant, toneless rendition of "Five Little Miles From San Berdoo" is high art of a sort.

"The Thing". Howard Hawks's science-fiction quickie; fast, crisp, and cheap, without any progressive-minded gospel-reading about neighborliness in the atom age; good airplane take-offs and landings; wonderful shock effects (the plants that cry for human blood as human babies cry for milk); Kenneth Tobey's fine unpolished performance as a nice, clean, lecherous American air-force officer; well-cast story, as raw and ferocious as Hawks's "Scarface", about a battle of wits near the North Pole between a screaming banshee of a vegetable and an air-force crew that jabbers away as sharply and sporadically as Jimmy Cagney moves.

"The Prowler". A tabloid melodrama of sex and avarice in suburbia, strictly out of James M. Cain, featuring almost perfect acting by Evelyn Keyes as a hot, dumb, average American babe who, finding the attentions of her disc-jockey husband beginning to pall, takes up with an amoral rookie cop (nicely hammed up by Van Heflin). Sociologically sharp on stray and hitherto untouched items like motels, athletic nostalgia, the impact of nouveau riche furnishings on an ambitious ne'er-do-well, the potentially explosive boredom of the childless, uneducated, well-to-do housewife with too much time on her hands.

"The People Against O'Hara". An adroit, scholarly example of sound story-telling that every Message Boy should be made to study as an example of how good you can get when you neither slant nor over-simplify. Also highly enjoyable for its concern about a "static" subject -- the legal profession as

such -- and the complete authority with which it handles soft-pedalled insights into things like the structure and routine of law offices; the politics of conviviality between cops, D.A.'s, judges, attorneys; the influence of bar associations; the solemn manner of memorializing the wrench caused by the death of a colleague; the painful "homework" of committing to memory the endless ramifications of your case, as well as the words you are going to feed the jury in the morning.

"The Day the Earth Stood Still". Science-fiction again, this time with ideals; a buoyant, imaginative filtering around in Washington, D.C., upon the arrival of a high-minded interplanetary federalist from Mars, or somewhere; matter-of-fact statements about white-collar shabby gentility in boarding-houses, offices and the like; imaginative interpretation of a rocket ship and its robot crew; good fun, for a minute, when the visitor turns off all the electricity in the world; Pat Neal good, as usual, as a young mother who believes in progressive education.

"The Man Who Cheated Himself". A lightweight, O'Henry-type story about a cop who hoists himself on his own petard; heavyweight acting by Jane Wyatt and Lee J. Cobb; as a consequence the only film this year to take a moderate, morally fair stand on moderately suave and immoral Americans, aged about forty. An effortlessly paced story, impressionistically coated with San Francisco's oatmeal-gray atmosphere; at the end, it wanders into an abandoned fort or prison and shows Hitchcock and Carol Reed how to sidestep hokum in a corny architectural monstrosity. Cobb packs more psychological truths about joyless American promiscuity into one ironic stare, one drag on a cigarette, or one uninterested kiss than all the Mankiewicz heroes put together.

"Background to Danger". Touch, perceptive commercial job glorifying the P-men (Post-Office sleuths), set in an authentically desolate wasteland around Gary, Indiana, crawling with pessimistic mail-robbers who act as though they'd seen too many movies like "Asphalt Jungle". Tight plotting, good casting, and sinuously droopy acting by Jan Sterling, as an easily-had

broad who only really gets excited about -- and understands -- waxed bop. Interesting for such sidelights as the semi-demi-hemi quaver of romantic attachment between the head P-man and a beautiful nun.

And, for want of further space, six-inch Emanuels to the following also-rans: "The Tall Target", "Against the Gun", "No Highway in the Sky", "Happiest Days of Your Life", "Rawhide", Skelton's "Excuse My Dust", "The Enforcer", "Force of Arms", "The Wooden Horse", "Night Into Morning", "Payment of Demand", "Cry Danger", and an animated cartoon -- the name escapes me -- about a crass, earnest, herky-jerky dog that knocks its brains out trying to win a job in a Pisa pizza joint.

February 19, 1952 / The Nation

"Behave Yourself". A tasteless, paceless, surprisingly good farce, spoofing the "Thin Man" idea of having cops, robbers, a dog, a mother-in-law, keep a young married couple (Grainger again, with Shelley Winters) from going to bed together. Crammed with ultra-modern buildings, furniture, statues; shot mostly through leaves and incidental bric-a-brac. Cameraman James Wong Howe, usually an earnest documentarist, shoots a crucial murder here as if he'd been bribed by Florence Knoll. The humor is either strictly Minsky or tied up with the decor, or both (as when the dog finds himself in a jungle of plastic manikin legs). Best funny moment of many months is provided by the scene in which a silly egg-skulled cockney gangster (with a bullet wound in his forehead that may have been painted by Pierro della francesca) slides down like a well-oiled banana into a colossal bubble-bath.

July 22, 1959 / The New Leader

Getting Inside 'Inside Humor'

Though "Sergeant Bilko", "The Honeymooners" and the first Ernie Kovacs vaudeville showed traits (lonely, abrasive,

lower-than-lowbrow, morose, not too energetic) that predicted a comedy of desolation, TV's most recent comedians have done an about-face. An Elegant Ego has taken over: In a medium that discourages physical comedy and robs experienced clowns (Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton) of fantasy and finesse, turning them into realistic rogues-gallery personalities, the newest stars consider tasteless any movement more earthy than Shelley Berman's dainty crossing of legs while reaching for a make-believe telephone, Mort Sahl's waving of a rolled-up newspaper, or Jack Benny's princely, slow double-take.

The greatest assist to the new Ego is an ugly invention: Inside Humor, which allows the comedian to buddy-buddy his humor without actually committing himself in action or idea: i.e., chuckling at hidden jokes, playing snob-ball with names like "Needleman", aiming words ("cool it, cool it") and ideas at a mysterious group of superior characters who claque on cue.

While the professional funnyman still reaps the highest prices and best TV time, the news in humor is being made by the satirical monologist, whose home is the chi-chi nightclub and whose goal is a place somewhere in the suburbs of High Art.

In its most likable form (the Canadian low-think tea of John Wayne and Frank Schuster doing a faintly Jewish, contemporary blabbering of Great Works like "The Scarlet Pimpernel"), egghead comedy is a revolt which starts by insulting audience intelligence with a contrived gag, and then, through semi-skilled pantomime (Skelton, Lou Costello) builds a hectic atmosphere that could be called laughably energetic, if not funny. At its worst, the cerebral, cruel or freethinking talk in trying for trenchant comment on the current scene, uses words, tastes, dialects and subjects that have long been the ego-supports of Bohemian intellectuals and are now the property of bank-safe middlebrows.

Self-admitted as a guy who thumbs his nose at the tide, the make-them-think monologist is actually the most ferocious believer and sect-worshipper in a business engulfed by mystic brotherhood stuff. Lenny Bruce, whose Beat Generation specialities are wrathful anti-bourgeois humor and self-devotion ("I find most of my satires on 42nd Street"), devotes part of his routines simply to listing passwords in upper Bop: "Nat Hentoff, Ralph Gleason, Jules Feiffer, Herb Caen, Miles Davis" (and manages at the same time to apple-polish the pop-art critics). When Mort Sahl's raspy voice is in normal jet repulsion, the audience is inundated by generalized hates, loves, gambits that add up to stale anti-American swing.

The most celebrated of Serious-Blooming wits, Sahl has an interesting delivery, a rapid outpouring in which words are used for abundance, beat and ripple. The most curious gimmick (plagiarized by Lenny Bruce) is Sahl's fake laugh, which sounds like genial surprise but is used as a fraternity button, to show that Sahl is inside the Group with a cynical word ("Right, it's wild"), opinion ("The Man Upstairs, Henry Luce") or topic ("We have Utopia with Byrd, Eastland, Faubus, all the Southern senators who want to hang the world.").

Despite a talent for swinging doggerel and brashness that probably developed in college bull-sessions, Sahl is only a slight improvement on Will Rogers' safe political iconoclasm. Sahl's flooding speech does occasionally turn up an insight, usually about night people -- his picture of a restless figure who wanders out at 4 a.m. just "to see if Kantor's Delicatessen is open," and then the real confusion of Western Man: "Do I want a hamburger or fried eggs?"

The most engaging egghead comedian is Shelley Berman, an essayist usually found with imaginary telephone in hand, working with intimidation (an airplane passenger), badgering (delicatessen owner deflating his son's acting ambitions), and small annoyance (the pornographic look of an emptied glass of

buttermilk). Berman combines a number of unlikely comic talents: a writer's knack for small-word humor ("I'm fine thenk you and how are you ... fine, fine, thenk you very much"), an acting flair that indicates training in The Method and keeps the spectator glued to outrageously dramatic tricks of timing and correct tone, and a conceited-needling voice that creates a suspenseful mood that almost strangles the audience.

Berman's essays, that play like Mozart with infinite control of rests, elongations, and tiny pointed notes, have brought TV audiences some enormously beguiling relationships, particularly a frustration-on-the-telephone skit involving a man badgering a Dennis-the-Menace child to call his mom on the phone ("If you put the telephone down, lightning will strike you, I'm God."). Though Berman is a persuasive, interesting, elegant raconteur in Jewish-toned anguish humor, he stays too far within average sensibility to escape sentimentality, back-slapping, preciousness.

Despite a few stunning moments on TV spectacles, the Mike Nichols - Elaine May team is often undone by a cheerless, frightened presence and a shallow dialect that backfires, suggesting Nichols-May are themselves as untough and pretentious as their victims in look-Ma-no-rehearsals conversation ("maybe you could be a boss and his secretary in a cocktail lounge"). While poking about populating their spontaneously created scenes with plagueable types such as the jazz-accompanied Beat poet ("You did it, you son of a gun ...") or the Trevor Howard dentist in an English movie abscess ("When you looked in my mouth and said it's rotten ..."), their humor soon sags in midstream of consciousness and Nichols-May become the two sad bunnies tracking through the darkest interior of David Reisman's lonely crowd.

Their talent, however, is in the delicate craftsmanship of fantastically light voices that seem spooked by inhibitions, a trick of building each dialogue to a pin-point of passion ("Oh Reba, Reba, when you looked at me as though I were me ...") and a suspenseful comic format (faucet-drip dialogue of clichés in

which the comedy never shows its face).

In its early period, TV hit roads which few in pop-comedy thought to travel: impressions of empty treadmill existence done with unbeguiling humor, created by an immobile, charm-robbing medium, and hack writers such as Nat Hiken ("Bilko"), who can anchor a story in the center of commonplace life without making philosophic promises. For the first time, the large audience saw a murderously dry infantry life ("Bilko"), a morbid, bickering slum series ("Honeymooners"), and a driveling Mr. and Mrs. ("I Love Lucy"), all of which were funnier in their depiction of the mirthlessness of daily existence than for their expected comic embroidery.

Recently there has been another turn in the direction of desolate, anti-chic humor. Where an Inside comedian (Jack Paar) spends a lot of time simply in boasting, savoir faire, explaining his comedy, and cementing himself with the esoteric flock, his opposite is a modern version of Buster Keaton playing into social outcast comedy, bucking the current with a negative streak that balances his artistic sophistication. While the chain of Insiders has been growing rapidly from Tom Poston to "Guido Panzini" to genial smiler Dave King, it is surprising to find lonesome (unpopular?) humor turning up in a variety of forbidden shades.

Joey Bishop (calculated) and Jack Douglas (madly wooden) are two fair examples. Perhaps the most authentic examples reside on TV's outskirts -- Howie Morris (in last summer's "Pantomime Quiz"), Morey Amsterdam (a long-time horror who somehow lights up the "Keep Talking" panel), or Kaye Ballard (on a recent "One Night Stand") -- uncontrollable clowns who work within several levels of sophistication without the slightest pretense of belonging to the mysterious group of cohorts that succeed in alienating at least this reviewer.

August 16, 1952 / The Nation

It is perfectly safe to see "Don't Bother to Knock", which is a little more different from a Marilyn Monroe peepshow (as advertised) and a lot closer to the portrayal of the atmosphere of a second-class New York fleabag than the critics mentioned. Constructed like a stage play, with no more motion than can be found in a hotel restaurant between meals, it concerns a smalltown Alice in the Wonderland of the "Franklin Hotel", a place so dull and quiet that it is hardly able to wake itself up to the sordid problems of violence, suicide, and insanity that the girl brings in. She seeps through its revolving doors with a blank, questioning look, and is led out about three hours later wearing the same stare by two cops who handle her like an expensive glass figurine that might disappear into thin air. Her uncle, the elevator jockey, has put her on to a baby-sitting job, unfortunately for the baby -- for she takes to the occupation in a way that should scare even tabloid readers. First, she dons her employer's black negligee, jewelry and perfume; next (no surprise) she invites a lonely pilot in; and then she really goes to work until all her crazy little dreams tumble down around her bobbysocks. For some unfortunate reason this story is split between the baby tender and a stock love affair (the pilot and a Dinah Shoreish canary in the lounge but it is nevertheless a relief to find a new movie that hasn't been foreshortened, polished, and sensationalized out of all relation to its middle-class scene.

The matter-of-fact treatment (Zanuck must have been looking the other way) makes for an old-fashioned movie with a nearly dormant pace, a greedy curiosity about small hotel matters, and people who fit in with the antiquated cigarette stands and radio outlets in their rooms. They all have a degree of unsophistication that has been missing for some time in American films, the kind of bourgeois sincerity which causes the housewife to look puzzled when Monroe aggressively tells her to have a good time, and which starts Widmark quaking and backtracking almost before he gets to work as a seducer. Monroe,

with her unconcerned dreaminess and ability to make any garment look as if it came from a bargain basement, generally seems to be working upstream as far as life is concerned, being nonplussed about everything except getting her own way and doing what she wants. She can also be shrewdly coy, as when she lures Widmark in from across the way by wigwagging the Venetian blinds and then turns with a cocky expression toward his inevitable phone call. It is the most direct and plaintive job of acting a hot, lost, peace-wrecking female since Keyes in "The Prowler". Widmark has the lesser role (his bosses are trying to bury him in near "B" films), but he stands out as probably the only literate, salty-talking he-man who would play a fast pick-up with some embarrassment, doubt, and compassion.

The director (Roy Baker) keeps everything prosaic, leveling all incidents -- including the baby-sitter's steady maltreatment of her ward -- and lulls you into always believing the girl is more normal than she is. Baker's passive version of the Graham Greene type of controlled understatement keeps his people, and the audience, captives of hotel machinery, a trick that brings out all the jittery yearning for excitement that lies beneath the lack-luster surface. The film does have a studio-type face or two (Widmark and his girl) and occasionally there is a heavy touch in the middle of its naturalism. The story comes together too neatly at the end for a Daily Mirror-type yarn, but compared to "Fourteen Hours", which dealt pretentiously with a suicidal castaway in a New York hotel, it is far from a turkey.

December 6, 1952 / The Nation

"The Turning Point" is a throwback to another gangster era in movies, when the director knew the difference between a movie and a play, the writer confined his dialogue to short, sharp chunks, and bit players were telling you all that you needed to know about the affectations and preoccupations of

mean pool-room types. Like the movies of that "Little Caesar" era, this film masks a thin story -- stealthiness, stalking, subpoenaing -- with numerous smart tricks for making screen life seem like a more taut and colorful version of activity in the drab corners of a big city. Unfortunately, it is halfway between the old and a new era which shelters an epidemic of wicked ones -- gangsters, molls, and fight-arena types -- mixed in with Romantic Notions of good people. For example, Edmond O'Brien is so exuberant in demonstrating the self-sacrificing, hard-hitting traits of a district attorney that he overburdens the screen even when he is just walking through an empty hall; Bill Holden plays a reporter who seldom has to do anything unromantically ordinary like showing up at the newspaper office.

The good quality of the movie comes from its crisp handling of a few action sequences in which the main idea seems to be to make movement as colorful as possible with a vast variety of purely cinematic contrasts. The big scene has a syndicate killer trying to draw a bead on Holden from the catwalks above the boxing stadium. You get the delectable visual contrast of the easy, graceful Holden turning up with a pet underworld spy, a slick, slinky mixture of the Bronx and anyone you have seen holding up the wall outside the neighborhood ginmill. Meanwhile, the stalker moves with the speed and deftness of one who has spent his life playing hide-and-seek with the law. The wonder of his performance is that he does all this delicate, intricate weaving through crowds and over arena chairs in spite of a body that is thick and awkward and a glib conceit that insists on making everything appear nonchalant. Director Dieterle all the while, swings his camera over setups where the actors are static and talking, pries with his lens into the least-noticed corners of the stadium to evade the cliché shots of boxing situations. He not only produces a tingling entertainment but gives you an encyclopedic knowledge of character types as they build themselves out of the movements of their job of the moment.

The next item on the agenda is a poetic pantomime that is supposed to glow with the fulfilment of childhood desires,

but probably because it cost four million dollars, took three years to create, and goes about an hour overboard in length, it takes on a faint glitter of grown-up ambitions. Up from fairyland comes "Peter Pan", replete with crocodiles that have swallowed clocks, children who can fly through the air, pirates who fight Indians, and a Walt Disney treatment that may leave a nauseated smile on your face. Being a veteran anti-Disney leaguer, I expected the extravaganza literally to put me in dreamland, which it did. But before falling asleep, I found that the picture moved rather well, in the pleasant fashion of British domestic comedies. Also, I discovered that Disney, who always has had trouble making a human figure realistic, intermittently tries out a new drawing style and a more hectic type of animation and timing. As usual most of the central figures are coated with a sticky charm. Peter, the boy who wished never to grow up, can be touching and funny at times when the people in charge keep their attention on unorthodox visual effects. But Disney gets so much syrup into the first realistic scenes that the later fairy-tale stretches somehow don't seem quite right. Doll-like Wendy's brothers are done with a sissified touch, and give the feeling that someone has pinned the sign "Kick Me" on the back of each one.

After the picture moves from the chattering nursery of the Darlings, it almost reaches the borderland of laughter with Disney's new way of caricaturing figures. In place of the ovular features and symmetrical rhythms that make Peter and friends so insipid, Disney draws his pirates and crocodiles with an anuglar, hacking, cutlass stroke, and he puts the frenzy of a Widmark gangster into their personalities. In the best scenes you will see an unbelievably misshapen crocodile working through a beautiful lagoon in weird animation. It is somewhat like a jet-pace hiccuping, and all the while there is an evil pirate trying to escape the animal's jaws and making some of the nicest prickly patterns to be found anywhere in drawing art. All in all, the fantasy runs thin, and as Disney feeds it rich technicolor, sweet songs, and such candy-box items as pixies and mermaids in tiny Maidenform undies, he seems to tell us once

more that he is one Hollywood adult who refuses to grow up.

January 17, 1953 / The Nation

The only way to pull the vast sprawl of 1952 films together is to throw most of them into a pile bearing the label "movies that failed through exploiting middle-brow attitudes about what makes a good movie". This leaves me with the following box-office stepchildren to list as my "Ten Best" films. It is difficult to say whether I liked or disliked a number of films that will appear on most other lists, since it was usually a case of being impressed with classy craftsmanship and bored by watching it pander to some popular notion about what makes an artistic wow. One such film, "Come Back, Little Sheba", went all out for sympathizing with underdogs; another, "Member of the Wedding", stuffed itself with odd "characters" of Dickensian proportions; "Forbidden Games" rubbed amateur acting and untampered rural surroundings in your eyes. In each case, I felt I was supposed to applaud the "crutches" that are currently leaned on in cinema, and that, for me, negated some good things about the films.

"The Strange Ones". A macabre melodrama about incestuous adolescence; rates top honors in every film department for its tough-minded, unself-consciously clumsy but delicate treatment of a subject a movie crew could easily have murdered. Turns up one fascinatingly grotesque image after another; set in the small, special world of a fantastically disordered bedroom, it works with a sick brother and his sister who wander about in bathrobes seeking some new gadget or ritual for kicks; crowds the whole tremulous desperation of two deeply affectionate, anarchic little beasts into the performances of Stephane and Dermuthe, whose acting of the queer and fantastic should be studied by the overrated Julie Harris-Shirley Booth-Marlon Brando academy of overplaying.

"Oh, Amelia". A fifty-year-old French bedroom farce refashioned by Claude Autant-Lara with split-second timing, extreme gaiety, and ingenuity in repeatedly compromising the heroine without actually corrupting her; though it may have been slapped together by a group of aloofly amused actors during their lunch hour, it has the ridiculous charm of a Punch and Judy show and the innocent, pell-mell vulgarity of a Sennett comedy.

"The Turning Point". A tingling, rather moving example of the half-serious gangster film that Hollywood does better than anything else in its repertoire; particularly good in its unsentimental handling of cutthroat competitors in moments of duress, when their ambitious careers are about to crumble around them; also casts a touching spotlight on New York-type friendships: a cop turning virtuous but trying to play fair with his gangster friends; an attorney's girl friend methodically setting up a romance with his best chum but being very concerned about not losing the attorney's affections; a triumph of crisp acting (Edmund O'Brien, Tom Tully), vigorous camera work, lean writing.

"Don't Bother to Knock". An unpolished, persuasively written little melodrama about a blonde baby-sitter drifting in cuckoo-land in a big-city hotel; Richard Widmark's acting of a grousing, ornery, efficient individual waltzing into a pick-up romance and then finding himself unable to cope with the personality of the girl; Monroe's amateurish manner and childish blank expression used without the usual glamour treatment in the character of a paranoiac refugee from a small town; the best naturalistic photography on a drab American hotel since "When Strangers Meet" and a job of direction (Roy Baker) that seems to dig its way into stale hotel atmosphere through room radios, between plastic Venetian blinds, over ugly ashtrays.

"Something to Live For". A soap opera that started with a story that was practically nothing and ended up as a strangely disturbing, clean, uncluttered picture of alcoholism;

mark up another score for the camera magic of Director George Stevens, the only genuine pioneer working in current films; he evokes a rich lather of romance with his slow, imaginative use of looming close-ups, overlapping dissolves, filtered camera effects, and oddly contrived compositions; story-telling images bring out the inner problems of characters in a purely cinematic way: two members of Alcoholics Anonymous trembling through a party, with the camera insistently hovering over trays of martinis and highballs; creditable acting by Milland and Fontaine.

"Five Fingers". In its literate, satirical way, this spy melodrama was the most unusual thriller since Hitchcock's first low-budget films; almost totally a product of witty scripting, it built up incredible tension and speed with elegantly comicalized dialogue, neatly turned portraits of war-time diplomats with their brains at half-mast, and practically no outward violence; a great job of perfectly controlled, suave acting by James Mason; wonderful bits of unscrupulous carrying-on: the slow awakening of Countess Danielle Darrieux to the possibilities of being a valet's mistress once she finds out he has a priceless pair of safe-cracking hands.

"Limelight". A sentiment-ridden tragi-comedy with enough of Chaplin's grace and absurdity as a funny man, and Raphael-like taste for visual qualities to compensate for the slow, rumsprung style of story-telling.

"The Sell-Out". A fast thriller off the top of the news, with perceptive atmospheric bits of barroom drama that fall quietly into place, two plausible performances (Audrey Totter, John Hodiak), and the feeling throughout of something chanced upon rather than confected.

The following are honorable also-rans: "Room For One More", "Scaramouche", "Brandy for the Parson", "House Across the Street", "Young Man With Ideas", "Casque d'Or", "Wait 'Till the Sun Shines, Nellie", "Beauty and the Devil", "Apache War Smoke", "Pennywhistle Blues", "Jour de Fete".

1962 Film CultureFrom White Elephant Art Vs. Termite Art

One of the good termite performances (John Wayne's bemused cowboy in an unreal stage town inhabited by pallid repetitious actors whose chief trait is a powdered makeup) occurs in John Ford's The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. Better Ford films than this have been marred by a phlegmatically solemn Irish personality that goes for rounded declamatory acting, silhouetted riders along the rim of a mountain with a golden sunset behind them, and repetitions in which big bodies are scrambled together in a rhythmically curving Rosa Bonheur-ish composition. Wayne's acting is infected by a kind of hondo-ish spirit, sitting back on its haunches doing a bitter-amused counterpoint to the pale, neutral film life around him. In an Arizona town that is too placid, where the cactus was planted last night and nostalgically cast actors do a generalized drunkenness, cowardice, voraciousness, Wayne is the termite actor focussing only on a tiny present area, nibbling at it with engaging professionalism and a hipster sense of how to sit in a chair leaned against the wall, eye a flogging over-actor (Lee Marvin). As he moves along at the pace of a tapeworm, Wayne leaves a path that is only bits of shrewd intramural acting -- a craggy face filled with bitterness, jealousy, a big body that idles luxuriantly, having long grown tired with roughhouse games played by old wrangler types like John Ford.

March 1966 / Cavalier

The great strength of the movies in the 40s was the subversive power of the bit player. Movies that have become classics, rightly (The Lady Eve) or wrongly (Casablanca), are never more savage and uninhibited than in those moments when a whirring energy is created in back of the static mannered acting of some Great Star.

The Casablanca film shifts into high gear as soon as Bogart's glum face hits the surrealistic Yiddish energy of Leonid Kinsky. The Eve film is charmingly acted by Stanwyck and Fonda, but that looney Dickensian spirit that was Sturges's trademark came from brief moments with people like Blore, Palette, and Demarest. Most of these sub-actors were short on range, but the explosiveness of their Brief Moments more than made up for it: Frank McHugh using his hands, eyebrows as though they were wings; Edgar Kennedy mixing drinks like a barker playing a shell game; the electric-fan velocity with which Demarest counteracted the monotony of his voice.

As opposed to these midget giants, we find something more nearly the opposite today. Tushingham, Moreau, and especially Guiliette Masina -- three tiny women -- swell their proportions to giantism with gestures and decor. Moreau, for example (in Bay of Angels) piles herself with outsized boas, eyelashes, cigarette lighters, corsets, wigs. This is supposed to prove that she's psychologically doomed.

There is very good acting today, but it is very different from the Tushingham-Moreau approach in that it stays within the modesty and infiltrating of good bit playing: Oscar Werner's precise melancholia in Ship of Fools; James Fox's toughness immersed in a soft-sweet intellectualism in King Rat; Robert Shaw's scene-stealing in From Russia With Love, which is done alongside Sean Connery, who is a master in his own right in the art of sifting into a scene, covertly inflicting a soft dramatic quality inside the external toughness.

Thus, the current movie, like the current cocktail party in which one or two cultural Big Shots take over, tries to get along with a few big actors doing star turns. Repulsion, a Mittel-Europa case history modeled on Hitchcock's Psycho, is often convincing and horrific, but the star, Catherine Deneuve, is a too-glamorous actress incapable of blending herself into the street scenes which lack bit players to make them credible. Just as the best thing in The Hill is the hill itself, so the best things here, substituting for the old bit performances, are background minutiae such as wall cracks, dripping faucets, distant views of a playground.

A good actor is usually one who has picked up the tricks that made Lee Tracy better than Spencer: a talent for (1) retreating into a scene, (2) creating an effect of space, and (3) becoming a combination of fantasy figure and the outside world, but always a fragmental blur. For the same reason, a good straight man is nearly always a better actor than the star comic: Dean Martin, George Burns.

A bad example of an actor who has nothing of Tracy's sifting is Simon Signoret, Werner's partner in the Fools film, a female Lionel Barrymore sullenly encased in a blacklike girth. She shows nothing but perspiration to pull herself into the scene. An even worse example of the megalomaniac star who can make the simplest action have as many syllables as her name is Rita Tushingham.

The myth that a director breaks or makes a film is regularly disproved by this actress who does a sort of Body Unpleasant act of turning herself into a Duck Bill Blabberpuss (The Leather Boys) and carrying on a war of nerves against the other actors. In a somewhat gentler vein (The Knack), she adds a gratuitous spookiness which makes every gag seem to last forever. While this film has been accused of having too many jokes, the fact is that the actress smothers every joke with a goonish nasality and by peering overlong at the grown-ups.

February 9, 1954 / The Nation

This department saw nothing last year that deserved a Best Film award. Here, but not in any preferential order, are the seven films that gave me the most pleasure.

First there was Alfred Hitchcock's "I Confess", a suspense yarn with too much talk and some polished semi-documentary photography (by Robert Burks) that was too obviously chopped up with symbols and oddly arranged angles for my taste. However, it had the most interesting acting of the past year -- by Anne Baxter, Roger Dann, and particularly Clift, involved in a methodically directed murder story in which the chief suspect is a young priest. Clift won the year's acting award for his

ability to project states of mind and feeling with a kind of repressed toughness that became too obvious in the "Eternity" film. The movie was also noteworthy for the skill with which Hitchcock exposed the unraveling out of a romance without wasting a motion, moving from the most romantic movie styling to the uncolored quality of a police report.

Next there was "The Young Wives' Tale", a domestic comedy that seemed to have a screw loose and featured Joan Greenwood, the woman with a fog-horn voice and the manner of a slightly drowsy, kittenish narcissist. It was a fresh little British movie that gave you the sense of all hell breaking loose in a two-family house, while Miss Greenwood, a rather gawky Audrey Hepburn, and some others had fun in the manner of unregulated acting virtuosos.

The next three spots go to three substanceless Hollywood movies -- "I Love Melvin", "Inferno", and "The Big Heat" -- that seemed to be perfect features on neighborhood double bills. "Melvin" was the only musical I saw that had any genuine liveliness or youthfulness in its choreography; "Inferno" used the Robinson Crusoe technique of dreaming up realistic details to draw you along on a fantastic journey and was more fun to watch than any of the American comedies. "The Big Heat" was excitingly acted by Glenn Ford and Lee Marvin -- in spite of the lush decor and sentimental writing.

Sixth, George Stevens's "Shane", though it often seemed ridiculously arty and slow as its precise director attempted to give ballad-like stature to the ordinary ingredients of a cowboy story. But it is a movie that takes its own measured, deliberate time finding ways to increase your pleasure. Its key method was to provide an endless number of visual treats through the color photography of Loyal Grigg, who seems to have a genius for dramatizing moody stuff like the approaching shadow of a rain storm or the eerie night light on a porch. Unfortunately the spectator had to put up with some unbelievable fights, the over-aged-child acting of Brandon De Wilde, Palance's

phony cowboy costume, and the nasal delivery of Jean Arthur.

Seventh, William Wyler's "Roman Holiday", a completely pleasing comic travelogue that seemed close to the first Garson Kanin comedies in its ability to inject heart and zip into zany human situations. It starred a rather cold and facile actress who turns on charm with a kind of trademarked affectation. On the credit side it sported a clever rebelling-princess script, the tough stooge acting of Eddie Albert, a good Cary Grant-type mugging by Gregory Peck, and direction that was masterful in its ability to manufacture small humorous details to delay the cliché twist in each segment of story.

October 1967 / Cavalier

The decisive encapsulating opinion in movie reviews comes usually from reading a plot that is all but hidden by molecular acting and direction. Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? is an example of Kaleidoscopic Limited, an ordered melange with not too many pieces but each of them colliding against its neighbor, and all of them hitting like flak into the famous Albee play. The most famous scene is an erotic non-dance, which is neither erotic nor dance-like, in which Elizabeth Taylor suggests a gyrating milk-bottling mechanism. Part of the problem here is that the view is top-heavy and, while her pinchy face and Orphan Annie hairdo are very noticeable, there is no feeling of fatness in action. All the little effects -- the acorns in her cheeks, cushion bust, tiered neck -- mitigate against the story idea that this is a Bitch Wife drawn to an impotent Science Boy.

The all-important George name which is screamed, belched, panted at a non-George shows once again that movies must not be read as stories. The mangled name (even Miss Taylor yowls it or jowls it, seeming not to know who it belongs to) is never acted by its supposed owner, a cyclonic acting machine

named Richard Burton. Burton is pleasing, but the emerging character is not Albee's or Martha's George.

This is not to say that Burton, who is far ahead of his co-workers in this movie, doesn't add up to intensely absorbing, complex terrain. Alongside the mushy Taylor performance, Burton is without self-consciousness as a drinker, and unlike his wife who moves like a three-dimensional playing card, he fills a scene with body, talk, face. Everything flows around Burton though at no point is he a masochistic, mediocre ultimate in soft, ineffectual husbands.

Miss Taylor's Martha is also a perfect example of the error in trying to surround a performance with an imprisoning judgment. The role has been castigated as crude, monotonous, prankish, but there are at least two scenes in Woolf where she's close to humor and uses the fat lips and lines enclosing them to fill the screen with credible humanity. Her opening mimicry of Bette Davis reacting to a messed-up bedroom should become an unforgettable movie bit, probably because it suggests Burton's mentoring. The bit involves the expression "Wha-ta dum-puh!" said with a complain-y, whine-y little girl effect in which Miss Taylor ends up handing you the puh sound in dump; Miss Davis, a blatant blend of Sophie Tucker and Eleanor Roosevelt, should be jealous. Miss Taylor is even more haunting later in the film, when, after sleeping with the visiting professor (George Segal), she suddenly starts using the kitchen as a workable locale. Moving from counter to fridge to sink, her hips become a hub around which the kitchen appears to be moving.

Shifting Albee's play into a Warner Bros. movie brings on a curious ambivalence. There is a need to make every surface intensely touchable or realistic in the manner of every rackets film photographed by James Wong Howe. At the same moment, opposing this old Warner's trick is an abstract theatricalizing, a negation of scene and scenery when the play moves outdoors and into non-scenes; yards without neighbors, streets without cars or people, and a juke joint without customers. Yet the surfaces

are intensely specific as air, bark, skin -- even moon surfaces. A movie about intellectuals, sophistication, high verbosity, rattles with images of blindness, papier mache settings out of children's operetta, streets ridden with street lamps and blinking signs that don't light, and people staring into these fake lights without seeing anything, a la Orphan Annie and her blank circle eyes.

Thus, the movie loses reality by disallowing terrain, but picks up interest when people are treated as terrain. The movie's pivotal scene is a long monologue, Miss Taylor weaving back and forth, using the word "snap" to suggest the final disruption of her marriage. Her weave-like motion, the lights moving kaleidoscopically on her face, a hairdo like a great tangled bird's nest -- the whole effect is a forest of tangled nasoid speech and crafty motion that doesn't record as talk, but makes insidious impact as shifting scenery.

December 8, 1959 / The New Leader

Star Gazing for the Middlebrows

Agee on Film.

McDowell, Obolensky, 432 pp. \$6.00

James Agee was the most intriguing star-gazer in the middlebrow era of Hollywood films, a virtuoso who capped a strange company of stars on people's lips and set up a hailstorm of ideas for other critics to use. Of all the ham-on-wry critics who wrote for big Little magazines, Agee had the prose and ad-libability to handle the business-craft from all sides. He gave any number of unsung creators their only "deep" coverage; certain key images like "gentleman director" (in the case of Howard Hawks) spotlighted a peculiarly mellifluous soft-shoe type.

While his Tol'able Jim classic, Let Us Now Praise Famous

Men, disclosed that he was an unorthodox, unsure left fielder, Agee was able to build skyscrapers in art out of cross-purposes and clay. Even at his worst, in reviews where he was nice, thoughtful and guilty until he seemed an "intellectual" hatched in Mack Sennett's brain, Agee was a fine antidote to the paralyzing plot-sociologists who hit the jackpot during the 1940s. His great contribution was a constant emphasis on the individuals operating in what is wrongly supposed a "mass art" that assembly-lines the personal out of existence.

The writers who flowered in 1939-47 movie columns of liberal middle-class journals had the same kind of reader-employer freedom that encouraged good sportswriters in the 1920s -- i.e., they served an undemanding audience that welcomed style and knew hardly anything about the inside of movies. Agee wrote reasonable exaggerations, beautifully articulated, about dull plodding treacle that stretched from Jean Simmons to Ingrid Bergman. (Olivia De Havilland, he once wrote, "has for a long time been one of the prettiest women in movies; lately she has not only become prettier than ever but has started to act, as well. I don't see any evidence of any remarkable talent, but her playing is thoughtful, quiet, detailed and well sustained, and since it is founded, as some more talented playing is not, in an unusually healthful-seeming and likable temperament, it is an undivided pleasure to see.")

Thus, Agee built a Jim-dandy fan club almost the equal of Dylan Thomas's. Given this terrain of Agee-philas (Auden's rave about Agee in a Nation fan letter included the proud "I do not care for movies and I rarely see them"), it was predictable that Agee's contradictory, often unlikable genius would be distorted, simplified and dulled by an ever-growing hero-worship.

Even where he modified and show-boated until the reader had the Jim-jams, Agee's style was exciting in its pea-soup density. As in his beloved films (Treasure of the Sierra Madre, Olivier's work), his criticism had an excessive richness that came from a fine writing ear as well as cautious hesitancy,

ganglia, guilt. The sentences are swamps that are filled with a suspicious number of right-sounding insights. Actually, Agee appreciation sticks pretty close to what the middle-brow wants to hear, as when he accused Mel Torme of being out of a jar, and raptured about the unequalled "poetry" of Huston's Mexicans (who were closer to a bottle -- spirits of hammonia -- than Torme). His three-dimensional use of "I" constructions, which seldom aroused the reader to its essential immodesty, was buttressed by a moralism that hawked the theater looking for the "sell-out" in art. The Hollywood technicians were put through a purgatory: A new angle -- the artist's soul -- was added to movie criticism as Agee, borrowing words from God, decided whether the latest Hollywood sexpot, in Blanche of the Evergreens, was truthful, human, selfless, decent, noble, pure, honorable, really good, or simply deceitful, a cheat, unclean, and without love or charity.

As he shellacked the reader with culture, Agee had one infallibly charming tool in his kit: an aristocratic gashouse humor that made use of several art centuries, a fantastic recall of stray coupons -- like old song lyrics and the favorite thing people were saying in February 1917 -- and a way of playing leap-frog with cliches, making them sparkle like pennies lost in a Bendix. The funniest passage Agee wrote had to do with a fairly deadpan description of a movie discussion in a Time elevator, humor coming from his capacity to capture an elevator's sociology in the fewest words. But more often he indicated great comic timing, winding up the top-heavy The Lost Weekend review with one flashing line: "I understand that liquor interesh; innerish; intereshish are worried about thish film. Thash tough."

Agee built slow reviews with his pet multiplications: "It is unusually hard, tense, cruel, intelligent and straight-forward. But I see nothing in it that is new, sharply individual, or strongly creative." The humor, which came strictly in spots, acted as an oasis: "Otherwise, the picture deserves, like four or five other movies to walk alone, tinkle a little bell and cry

'Unclean, unclean.'

At least half of the growing Agee legend -- that he had a great camera eye, writing equipment, and love for movie-makers -- is fantasy. Agee's visual recall, so apparent in tour de force pieces on Sennett's gang that hit like a cold shower of visual needles, is always wedded to a blindness to chic artiness. His humanity has a curious way of leveling performers with flattery, and over-competing with directors by flooding their works with a consuming sensibility. His journalistic manner in the smaller Time reviews is flawless, but, unfortunately, Agee's reputation is based on heavier writing which has a sensitively tintured glibness (as in this pontifical stretch: "In these long closeups, as in much else that he does, Dreyer goes against most of the 'rules' that are laid down, even by good people, for making genuine and good motion pictures. In a sense I have to admit that he is far out at the edge rather than close to the center of all that I think might be most productive and original. But there is only one rule for movies that I finally care about ...")

Agee's Time stint added up to a sharp, funny encyclopedia on the film industry during the 1940s. Though he occasionally lapsed into salesmanship through brilliantly subtle swami glamour (Henry V, the Bergman cover story), Agee would be wisely remembered for quick biographies and reviews, particularly about such happy garbage as June Haver musicals and an early beatnik satire, Salome Where She Danced, where his taste didn't have to outrun a superabundant writing talent. But this is the writing that has been shrugged out of Agee on Film by too-shrewd editing that is conscious of the artminded and carriage trade. Other evidences of the book short-changing Agee's richness: (1) no sign of those extended journeys on Luce limb for a box-office hero, and (2) no evidence of his conflicting reviews on the same picture for the power (Time) and the glory (The Nation).

Suffering from happy-plexis and booming emphasis, Agee's deep-dish criticism in the Nation was motivated by a

need to bridge Hollywood with the highest mounts of art. Like Gilbert Seldes, he had a dozen ways to move films into the museum. For instance, Agee was a master of critics' patter, the numbers racket, and the false bracket. He used other critics' enthusiasm ("Winsten and McCarten think it is one of the best ever made. I don't care quite that much for it, but ..."), expanded petty courage into infinity (Wilder's courage in making The Lost Weekend), and maneuvered in a pinch with the one-eyed emphasis. "June Allyson, who seems incapable of a superficial performance" is a typical Agee periscope of an actress's one trait, a minor sincerity, at the expense of an immobile rangeless cuteness.

If Agee had struggled more with the actual material of the popular non-artist, it is inconceivable that he could have missed the vapidness of so much "good" film art. With his incurious response to super-present-tense material in films, he could praise the stuffed-shirt timing in Olivier's "Crispin's Day" speech or the academic woodchopper's emphasis on that leer in Sunset Boulevard. A great segment of fine Hollywood work isn't interested in Big Art, but in making a contemporaneous "point" that, by the nature of its momentary truth, dies almost the moment the movie is released.

In certain abrupt Nation reviews (Hathaway's anonymous realism in Boomerang, Ford's smog-like They Were Expendable), there is a mild struggling with the awareness that the movie is talking not about art but of the necessity of placing itself in a likable position with the furthest advances in currency -- whether that contemporaneity has to do with nonchalance (Good News), a manner of shorthand phrasing (early parts of The Ox-Bow Incident), or a way of looking at "hip" folk (The Big Sleep). Agee was a brick wall against pretense in small movies, but, on Big Scale work, where the Boulevard is made of National Velvet and the Limelight's as stunning as the Sierra Madre, Agee's review suggested a busy day at Muscle Beach: flexing words, bulging rumps of talent, pyramidal displays of filming cunning.

Agee is perhaps as bewitching as his bandwagon believes if his whole complexity of traits is admitted in the record. Seldom has more personality walked through American criticism with such slyly cloaked over-possessive manners. The present Hollywood film, in which a mish-mash knowledge of faintly old modern art is presented in show-biz language, owes part of its inauthentic soul to a fine critic, who even felt obliged to place pictures he disliked with "all the good writing of this century, the films of Pudovkin and Pabst, and some of the music of Brahms."

November 1968 / Artforum

There is nothing so funny in the recent New York Film Festival as the Romany-esque overland coach in Lola Montes, a blood-colored Pullman on wheels that belongs to Franz Liszt, and serves as a major trysting nest for the scandalous heroine. A love affair on wheels is a nice idea but this over-decorated vehicle is the hub for eight minor events which are nothing but crazy makeup, improbability, and an ordeal of graceless acting. Martine Carol, an hourglass made out of stale golden cupcakes, is a mock George Sand, locked on a chaise longue; her boyfriend has a goofy smile, silken curls, and stumbles about putting the finishing touches to "The Farewell Waltz". The real nuttiness is the feeling of home-town operetta around them. Lola's getaway wagon, which follows behind, is operated by a husband-wife servant team who run out from behind the wheels, carrying bird cages and carpetbags, shouting "spaghetti." Some other fake elements: a painted backdrop of the Italian countryside and one of those villas which once housed Ricardo Cortez, a domineering mother, and a raging river, the wildest in 1920s melodrama.

This ooze-like structure about a Garbo-ish woman of affairs played by a non-Garbo as stupid, not very classy, and two shades from pure ugly, is a perfect Festival film, steeped in attitudes. The theme, from Naked Night, through three

festival films, has the director as a ring-master, magician, lion-tamer, vulnerable to man's foibles but knowing everything about life. There is a grandiose attempt at cosmic embrace, pro-life and pro-love, with the requisite number of peculiar bosom shots: the breasts are pushed up and then bounced, always a couple of fleshy folds around the armpits. Any Ophuls movie is supposed to be fluid magic, but after the first five minutes of circus, it is like driving an old corpse around and around in sawdust.

The truth about a film festival is that it is a parlor of myths, a dilemma bound to overrun a place that is supposed to be exhibiting only the best blue chip films. Some of the very clear myths are (1) that Renoir is deadly accurate on "human passions", hard working folk and the plight of the poor (2) that there is a torrent of important films washing through Czechoslovakia (3) that Ophuls made better films in Europe than in Hollywood (4) that American moviegoers want and need the taunts directed into films by Franco-Italian mandarins and mad dog labelers.

What a queer sensation to be face-to-face with a cause-less film that can draw a "my God, I like it" remark. Mailer's Beyond the Law has a zillion little irritations, but it has authentic scurrility and funk before it goes sour with Mailer's Irish brogue monologue. Faces is a real breakthrough in movie acting, despite the wrong stamping of Americans as compulsive laughers; it also goofs such motivations as a husband cheerfully clicking his heels and greeting his wife after spending ten hours with a high-priced whore, and a squad of elderly males who are just rancid hams with face-y leers.

Mouchette, by about three hundred miles the most touching and truly professional film, is a fourteen year old girl of the peasant class, living in a small French village, daughter of two alcoholics. The film has apparently melted down to a short story, being adapted from a Bernanos novel, but it moves on about five levels. It has to do with the surpassing

beauty of a girl who is in a state of excruciating physical discomfort. On another level it is about difficulty, an almost pure analysis of its sides, and, in this case, the way it multiplies when luck is out. (Mouchette has some luck in a bumper car concession at the amusement park, but it doesn't last long -- only long enough to create the most poetic action sequence in years.) Other levels deal with a particularly bitter village and its inhabitants (the snare theme, Life chasing the human being into extinction); the conception of people as being so deeply rooted in their environment that they are animal-like: the simple effect of a form briefly lit by a truck's headlights.

Mouchette, played by Nadine Nordier, has a touching toughness, the crushing sense of not expecting anything from anybody, and a harrowing know-how about every niche of village life. Unlike Frankie Darro, who got the same desperate shadow effects in Riding High, Nordier's singularity is tied to painful appearances: apathetic about her well-being, hair uncombed and probably lice-ridden, a large part of the painfulness has to do with large lumpy legs, stockings that won't stay up, big shoes. Despite all these humiliations, she is never cartoon-y and gets enormous somber dignity into her walking tours, combats with other girls, and a terrific moment when she climbs into bed, wet from a rainstorm, and then goes into some slovenly chores for the baby.

Some of the most important things movies can do are in this film. The barmaid for instance. A queer and singular girl, as muscular as she is narrow, her character, which has tons of integrity and subbornness, is barely caught: through a crowd of locals, from an off-angle, pinning up the top flap of her apron, drying the glasses. The role is backed into through gesture and spirit, rather than direct portrayal. Then there is the great device of placing Mouchette's house on a truck route, and milking that device for the most awesome, mysterious wonders. Also, for a film that is unrelievedly raw, homely and depressed, it seems a wild perversity to bloom four

minutes with Mouchette, a likably acted boy, and some dodgem cars at a fair into sudden elation. After so many misused amusement parks in films, it is remarkable to come across one that works.

In the category called Bloody Bores, the Festival offered Capricious Summer, Hugo and Josefin and Twenty Four Hours in a Woman's Life. Orson Welles's little orchid, The Immortal Story, missed by being only thirty minutes long and having but four audible lines ("Take back your five guinea piece, old master," the next line -- "In one way or another, Miss Virginey, this thing will be the death of him." -- is repeated at least four times. What makes Eilshemus Levinsky so sure?).

Capricious Summer features three middle-aged crocks hanging around a 1920's bathhouse doing their thing. An ex-athlete gone to girth swaggers, brags, and plays dull largesse. An army officer is an irritating, strutting performer doing worldly cynicism. The third, a minister, works on timid innocuousness. A slender, owlish magician (acted in fey, fond-of-itself mime style by director Jiri Menzel) comes to town with a threadbare tightrope act, and, after his blonde assistant diddles the three dullards, this rerun of dozed-off acting, Renoir color and Bergman soupy philosophy winds up with the notion that a circus invariably leaves a whistle-stop town sadder and wiser than it was in the first reel.

The most interesting work always occurred outside the self-conscious languor acting that grips French and Italian films. Jacqueline Sassard and her Lesbian owner in Les Biches sit on this veneer act so hard that it becomes possible to decide how much cosmetic art has been planted on an eyelid, or the number of small elegances that transpire in getting one bite out of a chicken leg. There is a strain of this nauseous elegant withdrawal in the two dozen conceited stiffes who make up the young Parisian middle class in Two or Three Things, led by Marina Vlady, a project-dwelling housewife who daylights as a prostitute when she isn't haughtily walking through a dress shop, sniffing the air, discussing her inner life with the

audience. It's amazing how Raoul Coutard's camera can transform this puerile conceit into a zingingly crisp image.

In The Red and the White, a swift fresh air war movie about Czarists, Red Russians, and a band of Magyars who get tangled within the scythe-like moves of both armies in a Hungarian border locale that has a grandiloquent sweep, there are a dozen actors with amazing skin tone, sinewy health, and Brumel's high-jumping agility in their work with horses. These actors have an icy dignity -- they never mug, make bids for the audience's attention, or try for the slow motion preening that still goes on in cowboy films. (Jack Palance in Shane, hanging over his saddle iron, spitting tobacco juice, menacing the poor town folk, relating to his horse as another part of his stylish costume.)

As far as acting goes, though, Faces is a far more important case. Lynn Carlin is near perfection, playing the deepest well of unexplored emotions as the wife of a rubber-faced business wow who seems like a detestable ham walk-on until he surprisingly lodges into the film's center for good. This Carlin style starts as soap opera face work, a camera intimately registering the melancholy of an American woman, but it builds velocity and possibilities for itself by working into the area that Warhol has pioneered. It's amazing how far Carlin swings her role as a middle class wife: she's so deep into the events that after one night out or in with a gigolo swinger she seems to have expanded the role out of sight by the time her husband returns from a bored-with-job whore.

Faces is a Loser Club movie, the theme being about people straying into brief sexual relations, or wanting to stray and not being able. The strength of the movie is the depth to which it dives into a particular situation: four middle-aged women, uncomfortable with themselves, awkwardly trying to be swingers, entertaining a blond hustler who does some insatiable dancing around the living room. The movie -- no rush and plenty

of time -- sits and stares at each. It stares at a pair of blazing eyeballs in a woman who is scared, out-of-practise. It's very good on a woman, nearing sixty, greedy and nearly out of her mind at the possibility of making it with a young cat: she palpitates with suicidal abandon and blatant lust. There's a sweating excitement in the work with Carlin, a decorous young wife full of twitches, stiff postures suddenly dropped, and prissy lips that never stop working into nervous moods. One of the movie's unspoken themes is the desperate disparity between this unworldly woman and her husband, an oily actor (John Marley) who suffocates the movie with he-man sophistication. The top moment is a profile shot catching this actress at the end of a marathon, teasing evening of too many cigarettes, lousy drinks, and faded chances. The movie ricochets from a frunken semi-comic dance to the coldest close-up of Carlin's frazzled side of the face, an innocent mouth that exudes the feeling of a long night's journey into deafening defeat.

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