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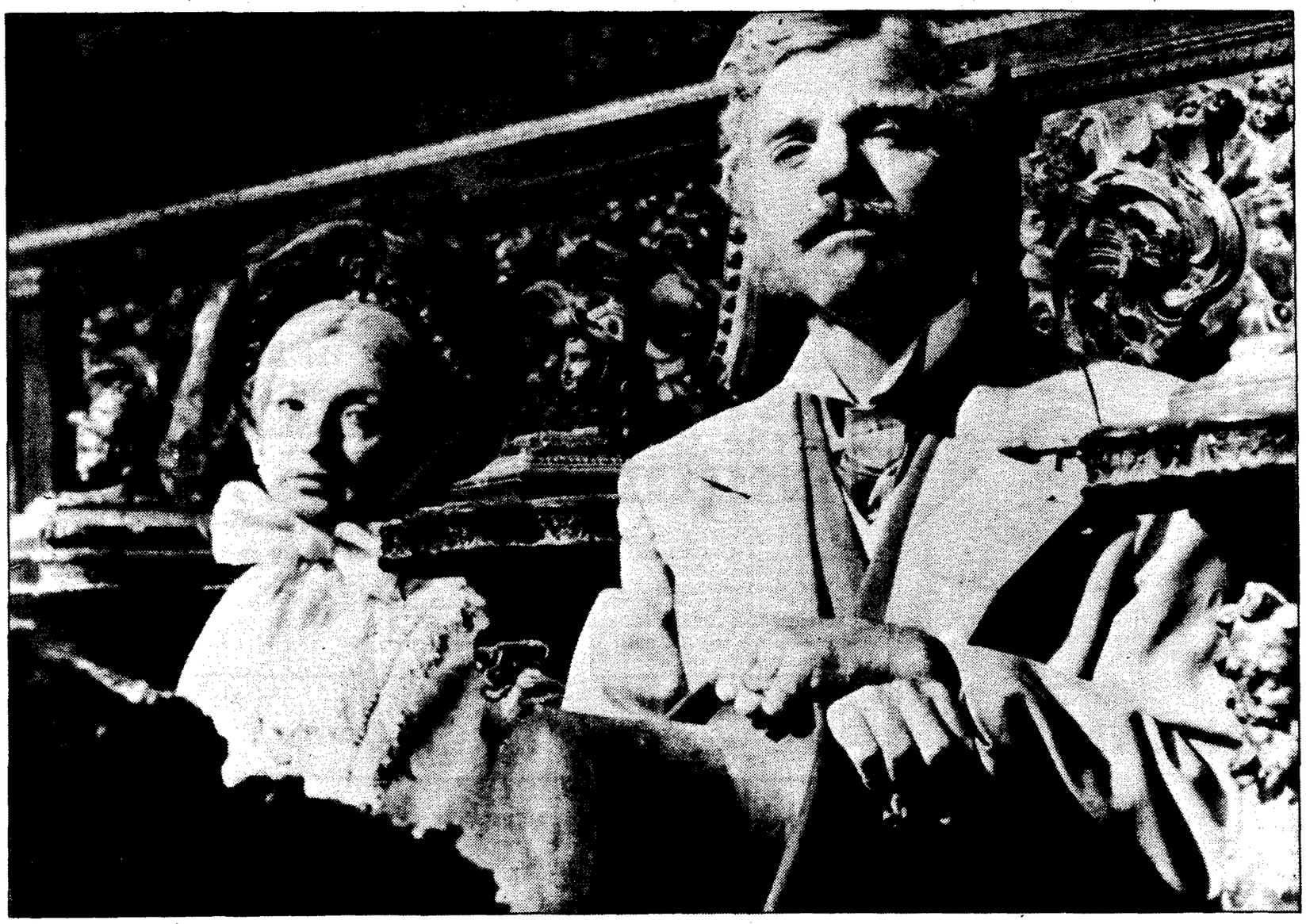

Visconti's *The Leopard:* a case of restoring the classical shape of a film

To Cut or Not To Cut

By Andrew Sarris

Rumor has it that two foreign films—one just released, and one just about to be released—have been considerably shortened for their American releases. Both features had been considered a bit on the long, slow side for comparatively hyperkinetic American audiences. I have not seen either the long or short version of either movie, and thus I cannot evaluate the harm or good that may have resulted from the snip-snip of the American distributors' scissors. My own instinctive reaction to this practice is negative in the extreme. It is not that I believe that every foot of film ever shot is sacred, but rather that there should be a cutoff point for every picture, which is to say that once a large body of people have seen a work in a given length, everyone else should have the same opportunity.

Has any film ever been "saved" or even "improved" by desperate postproduction, postpreview, or even postpremiere recutting? No, never, I am tempted to say for purely political purposes, inasmuch as I have been a pioneer in the TAP (or Total Archival Preservation) movement, but like the straddling Gilbert and Sullivan character, I shall temporize with a resounding "well, hardly ever." There are the usual legends, of course, of movies being "saved in the cutting room." Indeed, Irving J. Thalberg has been credited with more of these "saves" than Goose Gossage in his prime. Through a mixture of recutting and reshooting, Thalberg is supposed to have rescued *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* from the shelf or worse, and thus helped Helen Hayes win a thoroughly undeserved Oscar for what is still a lousy movie. Thalberg had less luck with Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*, from which he chopped reels and reels without making it a box-office hit. Worse still, he ordered the burning of the excised footage in order to reclaim the silver from the nitrate prints. It is for this latter act that Thalberg lives in infamy insofar as film historians are concerned. He was hardly alone among Hollywood producers in his irresponsibility. Most of our silent heritage has been irretrievably lost, and only the voracious demands of television kept the early sound film from meeting a similar fate.

Still, a distinction has to be made between the archivists' inclination to preserve as much of the past as possible, and a film company's obligation to its backers and stockholders to earn as big a return on its investment as possible. One would wish that in the best of all possible worlds the people who put a movie together would have the right of final cut. The problem with *Greed* and, later, *A Star Is Born*, was that the directors were excluded from the recutting process. Yet even the most artistic directors can sometimes play fast and loose with different audiences. Bernardo Bertolucci, for example, is notorious for cutting sequences from his works long after they have officially opened and been widely reviewed. The striking spectacle of blind people listening to a Mussolini speech in *The Conformist* never made it across the Hudson simply because the director had become "bored" with the scene. The late William Wyler once asked Universal to screen one of his old westerns—*Hell's Heroes*, I believe—and then decided to "tighten" up the film by recutting it. What this means is that we cannot see the same movie other people saw at the same time. Even if the differences in the two versions were ridiculously slight, Wyler had tampered with a piece of film history. Some years ago I questioned Sam Fuller's revisionist action in showing *Forty Guns* without the final image of Barry Sullivan's reconciliation with Barbara Stanwyck. He argued that the ending had been imposed upon him. The late Kenji Mizoguchi made the same claim for the resolution of the subplot of *Ugetsu* involving the peasant-turned-samurai and his wife-turned-prostitute. Flaws and all, however, *Ugetsu* remains spiritually sublime, and *Forty Guns* remains brilliantly audacious.

On occasion, two contrasting versions of a film come to coexist. *Mad Wednesday* is what was left of the late Preston Sturges's *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* after the late Howard Hughes had cut it. I enjoyed both the long and the short of Harold Lloyd's antics under Sturges's tutelage. Though *Diddlebock* turns out to have been more self-indulgent than *Wednesday*, it is also more coherent. For the most part, however, the reedited-for-length-and-pace editions of good films are infinitely less satisfying than the originals. Jean Renoir's *La Regle du jeu*, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's *Colonel Blimp*, Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert's *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Henri Clouzot's *Wages of Fear*, and Max Ophuls's *Lola Montes* come to mind immediately as clear cases of no contest.

Why then does the practice of recutting foreign films continue? It may be partly a hangover from the old montage theories of Kuleshov, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Vertov, now drastically modified if not thoroughly discredited. It may be partly due also to the perennial presence of "creative" nonartists who like to "play" with a film until they get its rhythm right. This is a game in which almost anyone can get involved, whereas actually making a movie is a comparatively tedious process. Fortunately, the most bothersome breed of "creative" distributor has faded into a deserved oblivion.

Nonetheless, even the two relatively isolated instances mentioned earlier should not be allowed to proceed unchallenged. Why do it at all? People travel so much more than they did 30 or 40 years ago. Consequently, there are many more witnesses to the screenings of films abroad. Censorship is no longer a problem, and it is silly to argue that the American audience for foreign films needs a faster tempo. Most of the Americans who see *Berlin Alexanderplatz* are probably more patient and hence presumably more "Europeanized" than the German viewers who saw it on German television. The biggest argument against cutting a foreign film for American distribution is that it will probably make no difference commercially. If people hate a movie, 70 minutes is too long, and if they love a movie, 270 minutes is too short.

Besides, people who tamper with the works of their betters almost invariably assume they are cutting out fat when they are actually slashing into muscle. Bernard Shaw once remarked of a misguided adapter of Shakespeare that the cuts were unfailingly made at the expense of the Bard's most exquisite poetry while the most egregious plot details remained intact. Television performs much the same function with movie musicals that have to be squeezed into shorter time slots. The most sparkling musical numbers are jettisoned in order to preserve the most tedious scenes of screechy misunderstanding.

This is what happened to *A Star Is Born*. The first half is all buoyant behaviorism, the second all turgid melodrama. What was cut? The buoyancy, of course. After all, it didn't advance the plot. No matter that it made the plot more bearable. The theater owners needed more turnover in their theaters. As usual, the butchery of the film proved commercially counterproductive, and now almost 30 years later as much of the original *A Star Is Born* as possible has been painstakingly reassembled. From the guillotine to the restoration and all that.

Indeed, the local screen is now awash with reconstituted films returned to their original uncut form: Mel Brooks's *The Twelve Chairs*, Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*, and Vittorio De Sica's *Terminal Station*. All three films were considerably underrated at the time of their release, and of the three *The Twelve Chairs* is probably least affected by the addition of lost footage, actually quite minuscule. Even so, *The Twelve Chairs* marks the end of the quiet, subtle phase of Brooks's comic career. The very climate in which old films are bravely advertised as "uncut" may contribute to a popular reassessment of this comic masterpiece. The more substantial additions to *The Leopard* restore the classical shape of the film to the Chateaubriandian memory-span proportions of the Lampedusa novel. *Terminal Station* is the most problematic revival of the three inasmuch as the casting of Montgomery Clift as Jennifer Jones's macho Italian lover is almost as bizarre as the professional collaboration of Vittorio De Sica and David O. Selznick. The drastic cuts in the original American release print of *Terminal Station* served to preserve Selznick's big-star gloss in the foreground at the expense of De Sica's little-people grit in the background. The new version may come as a revelation to many people who dismissed the truncated *Terminal Station* as a Hollywood corruption of neorealism. Even on the negative side, what was once merely a disquieting performance by Clift is now suffused with an overpowering, almost intoxicating morbidity.

In any event, the time is long past when audiences had to be pampered by having their foreign film fare pared down to plot-advancing essentials. We have always known that films keep changing in our consciousness. But now it is our consciousness itself that has changed to the point that we can wait patiently for the stylistic pattern of a film to emerge without undue prompting. Distributors, throw away your scissors! Good films don't need your surgery, and bad films can't profit from it. Besides, there is now a network of film gossip to discredit your dastardly deeds.

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Speaking of dastardly deeds, I inadvertently misled my readers by reporting that the New York Film Festival was showing all five of Hitchcock's lost films: *Rope, Rear Window, The Trouble with Harry, The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Vertigo*. The festival is screening only *Rear Window*, but all five films will be shown eventually at the D.W. Griffith theater. I also gave the year for *The Man Who Knew Too Much* as 1954 rather than the correct 1956. My excuse is that I had been out in the sun so long I misread a press report. ■