

## THE CURRENT CINEMA

### *Muddling Through*



AMERICAN educators are now concerned about making schoolchildren "cinematically literate," but most of the new American movies aren't cinematically literate. There was a while there when well-made movies were taken for granted—so much for granted that "well-made" became a put-down, suggesting *merely* well-made, or conventional and not really interesting. Now there are so many inexplicably badly made pictures that "well-made" could be high praise. Great motion pictures are generally made by men in their twenties and thirties—before they have learned what can't be done, and while they still have the energy and heroism to do what hasn't been done before—but good, entertaining commercial movies can be made by trained, experienced "professionals." The businessmen have crushed the great talents, and they are so lacking in foresight and so indifferent to the future of their own industry that they haven't provided the conditions for the development of professionals. With the blacklisting of left-wing directors and then the breaking up of the big studios and their stables—which included directors as well as stars, and young directors getting experience on B pictures—a few generations of directors were lost. American movies may never fully recover from that discontinuity. They are exposed by competition from young moviemakers all over the world. It's as if American literature had stopped with Erskine Caldwell, Pearl Buck, John O'Hara, Thornton Wilder, John Dos Passos, and Henry Miller, still writing as they did twenty years ago, and then, when they got too tired and rich to go on, a new generation had been expected to pick up and start writing just like them (and as if the rest of the world had also paused for twenty years). Our movies are beginning to look as if people had forgotten how to make them, or had never learned how. American movies used to excel in the Western, the gangster film, and the musical. These genres developed out of a common delight in certain forms of entertainment that were not native to the screen (they had theatrical roots in the Wild West show, in melodrama, and in vaudeville, and can surely be traced much farther back) but were ideally

suitable to it. Popular genres gave movie people a measure of flexibility inside the commercial system. Directors knew the limits within which they had to work, and could often improvise and experiment and do something good within them (and that was true of writers, cameramen, technicians, and actors, too). Some of the best American movies have been genre movies; this had not been the case in Europe, but in recent years Europeans have been lured to the American specialties by their exotic charm and what used to be their vitality. And they are now being lured by an audience demand for American-style movies that we are no longer supplying, and may no longer be capable of supplying. The Italians have taken over the Western, and the French and Italians have taken over the gangster picture. Which leaves us the musical—at least, until the French learn to dance.

Unable to distinguish talent from no-talent among the French and Italians (that would require going to see some movies), and fearful of trusting young Americans, the American movie companies, with their classic acumen, are turning to England for directors. They're hiring the mediocrities and the bunglers of England—when even its best are none too good. The English can write and they can act (or, at least, *speak* beautifully, which is enough to cripple us with admiration), but they can't direct movies. They never could, but they had good scripts and so many good actors that the fundamental lack of directorial energy and distinction—of any real directorial artistry—in their movies could pass unnoticed. With the exception of Alfred Hitchcock and Carol Reed, there is scarcely an English director whose style one can discuss without giggling.

And now here are Michael Anderson with "The Shoes of the Fisherman" and Gordon Flemyng with "The Split," when we haven't yet recovered from recent joyless encounters with the work of Ken Annakin, Roy Boulting, Peter Collinson, Basil Dearden, Clive Donner, Lewis Gilbert, Peter Glenville, Guy Green, David Greene, Val Guest, Guy Hamilton, Anthony Harvey, Kenneth Loach, Joseph McGrath, Ronald Neame, Eric Till, Michael Winner, and Terence Young. Compared with the motion-picture art of Sweden or Italy or Japan or France or pre-Nazi Germany,



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English films have always been a sad joke; now these enervated directors may finish off what, for want of a better term, we still call the American movie.

**"THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN"** is a movie made by people who don't know how. It shouldn't have taken very much talent to turn the novel into something reasonably acceptable; its idea is of an overpowering banality, but it's the kind of banality that can be amusing in a movie. I think most of us are perfectly willing to go to a movie of a book we wouldn't dream of reading. We don't turn to movies and books for the same thing, and after a while we get a sense of how movies work, and we know that second- and third-rate novels often make better movies than first-rate novels, because they're likely to be full of characters and action, while really good novels are dependent on the author's style and his way of seeing. Movies are good at common fantasies, and "The Shoes of the Fisherman" is "If I Were Pope," combining the fantasy of becoming Pope almost overnight with the fantasy of having it in one's power to save the world. Who at some time hasn't said (if only to himself) that the Pope is hardly in a position to make humane speeches about giving to the poor? Here a Christ-like Pope, played by Anthony Quinn, gives away all the riches of the Church to feed the hungry. The idea is as appealing a movie idea as going to an enchanted valley where one could live for hundreds of years, as in "Lost Horizon." It wouldn't require art to make it entertaining but only a fair amount of craftsmanship and ingenuity, and that not even on a very high level—just enough skill to turn out an old-fashioned, corny, pretentious movie (like "Lost Horizon," which, of course, was old-fashioned at the time it came out).

This movie cheats even on its own fantasy level, because although the audience knows that the Pope means to feed the starving Chinese and thus prevent World War III, he doesn't mention this to the crowds who cheer his announcement about giving the wealth of the Church to the poor. One suspects that even the Italian Communists might not cheer the idea of sharing the wealth of the Church with Asia.

The fantasy of George Englund, the producer, and his crew is that they're moviemakers. They don't have the simple logic to tell a story effectively; they introduce elements that are not carried through, they load the



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movie with unnecessary explanations, and they forget to put in the revelations and climaxes. They reconstruct the Papal chambers and the Sistine Chapel in Cinecittà, but they don't know what to have the actors say or where to put the camera in their own specially built Vatican. (If the Church ever does divest itself of its property, who but moviemakers would want those gilded halls?) The acting, however, is not consistently bad. Quinn is too obviously trying hard for restraint and humility, but his attempt is an honest one, though his range is inadequate (particularly for the end). He manages to put on a Russian accent without too many slips; the dialogue coach is the only person on the crew who deserves a credit. The cast is what is usually called "distinguished;" it includes John Gielgud (being laid out as a corpse again), Frank Finlay, Oskar Werner (doing his doomed bit and looking more like William F. Buckley, Jr., than ever), and Laurence Olivier, who seems to be having a good time, which he shares with the audience. But, oh, so briefly. M-G-M probably won't have to worry about giving away the profits on this picture. It hardly seems worthwhile to analyze its faults; it's cleaner work just to summarize them. "The Shoes of the Fisherman" is the worst-written, worst-directed, worst-photographed, and worst-edited *big* picture of the year. It takes movie storytelling back to before "The Great Train Robbery" of 1903. It's the coup de grâce for 1968.

**A**FTER a run of spoof heists, robbery pictures are now coming out again without self-parody. "The Split" is of the same genre (but not the same quality) as Stanley Kubrick's "The Killing"—each is about a robbery planned to coincide with a sporting event (this time it's a professional football game)—and it has some similarity to "The Asphalt Jungle" and "Rififi." Indirectly, new crime movies are begotten by old ones; the pulp novels that the movie companies buy for this kind of picture are written by fast writers, who synthesize old movies for their plots and characters. New kinds of crime rarely appear in them; the authors generally don't know any more about crime than one can learn from old movies. Nor is it likely that the producers would take a chance on a crime script that didn't resemble earlier pictures, and so genre movies shrivel in interest. But even within the limited terrain of the straight robbery picture derived from other rob-

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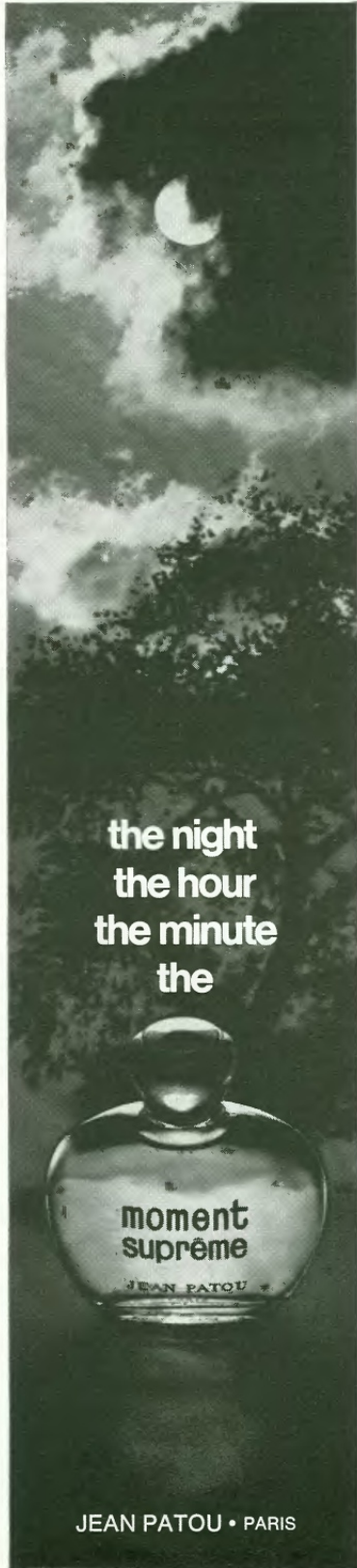
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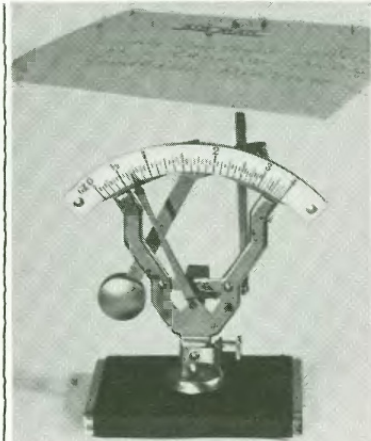
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bery pictures it's possible to do a workmanlike job—to present the occupational details of crime accurately (or convincingly), to assemble the gang so that we get a sense of the kinds of people engaged in crime and what their professional and non-professional lives are like. A good crime movie generally has a sordid, semi-documentary authenticity about criminal activities—big ones and petty, queasy ones—plus the nervous excitement of what it might be like to rob and to tangle with the law. But "The Split" is no more authentic than the spoofs, and no more plausible.

In a good robbery picture, the chases and the violence are integral to the story; in a poor robbery picture they're just thrown in to relieve the boredom, and you may be grateful for them because you know that's all the excitement you're going to get. Jim Brown, as the leader of the gang, selects his men in a series of brutal tests—one act of mayhem after another—that are obviously designed merely to give the picture a big opening, since they have no relationship to the skills that are later required of the men. After the robbery, when the money is stolen from the men, they beat and torture Brown in another implausible sequence. They're not so stupid and unprofessional as to suppose he would have taken the money and waited around to be beaten; clearly, somebody thought it would be good for the box office to have the hero tortured. The action sequences in the James Bond films and in spoofs in general are not plausible, yet one doesn't mind, and, conceivably, action sequences in a "serious" heist film could be so well done that one wouldn't mind implausibility in them, either. But in "The Split" the director, Gordon Flemyng, tries a lot of flashy stuff that doesn't work. There's only one really good scene in the movie—a ghastly but effective one in which Diahann Carroll and James Whitmore say "Oh, please" to each other, hers meaning "Don't rape me" and his meaning "Say yes," and then the meaning of her "Oh, please" shifting to "Don't kill me." This movie is full of acts of violence that are prepared for but are still implausible; Whitmore's sudden appearance in the movie, on the other hand, is reasonably acceptable, because it is *conceived* as the unexpected turn of fortune that upsets plans.

For long stretches during "The Split," I mostly listened to the Quincy Jones music; that's not so much a tribute to Quincy Jones as a comment



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on Fleming's handling of actors and staging of action. Standard movie music is naïve program music carried to absurdity—a dramatic supplement designed to make you swoon in the romantic scenes or to shock you to attention at some brutality, but never encouraging you just to listen. It's a relief to hear the Quincy Jones music, which goes along independently, at its own rhythm. But Fleming's direction is so uninteresting that without the kind of music that makes points and emphasizes climaxes and intensifies the changes of mood one tends to forget about what is going on on the screen. The action up there doesn't seem to have any shape—it's like what one might see from a train window—and so some stretches of the movie are concerts.

Although "The Split" is like a square comic strip, this may be enough for commercial success, because people want action so badly that they don't necessarily mind if it's stupid and patched together out of irrelevant, jarring camera angles. And, because in the movie business the producers look not at a man's work but at the grosses of his pictures, Gordon Fleming will go on to bigger messes. Good gangster-action movies don't always score at the box office. Carlo Lizzani's "The Violent Four" went by earlier this year without much attention, and when "The Killing" came out it was a financial failure. They weren't crude and garish sideshows, like "The Split," and they didn't have Jim Brown. As a hood, Jim Brown is handsome and stiff—the essence of straight. He looks like an Indian, and he acts like a wooden one; he's totally unconvincing. (For a comparison, one needs to go back to Charles Starrett.) But each time he comes on the screen the kids in the theatre yell as if he had just scored a touchdown, and an actor who has the public on his side like this is almost sure to loosen up; when you're cheered for a performance like Brown's in "The Split," you have no need to be anxious and stiff. Brown may become the first Negro matinée idol of the screen. Poitier made it to the top by acting; Brown is the equivalent of the old Arrow-collar-ad idols, and he may be the new Robert Taylor or Gregory Peck. Is there a phrase along the lines of "Ontogeny repeats phylogeny" for blacks' recapitulating whites' mistakes?

ONLY fourteen years have elapsed since "It Should Happen to You," in which Judy Holliday, as Gladys Glover, a nobody who wanted to be a somebody, thought the answer would

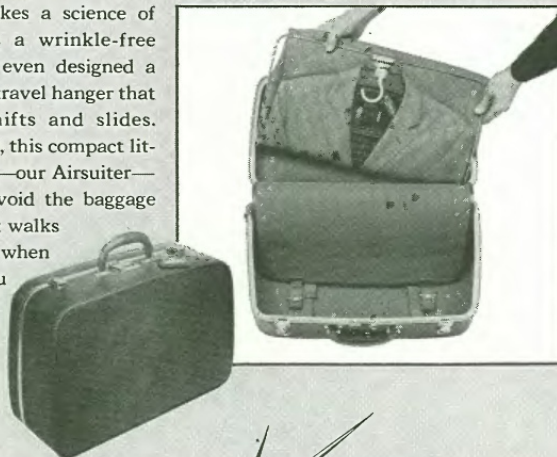


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be to have her name on a billboard—a solution that the movie presented satirically. But our notions of celebrity have changed, and John Brockman, a young mixed-media promoter who has put his face in the television and newspaper ads for "Head," has probably made himself a somebody. Brockman has made himself the star of "Head," though he doesn't even appear in the movie. The depressing possibilities that he has thus opened are sure to be seized on.

The advertising campaign for "Head" suggests some sort of turned-on movie about the drug scene, but the movie itself is designed for the sub-teens. The only novelty is in the selling—in convincing kids that they are visually sophisticated when they buy old jokes and blackout routines as mind-blowing, psychedelic, McLuhanite collages. "Head" is an attempt to do for the Monkees what the Richard Lester films did for the Beatles, but it borrows as much from Abbott and Costello as from Lester. (Will somebody try to sell the old Abbott and Costello films as marijuana visions, too? And "Hellzapoppin," and the Three Stooges?) This is the kind of material, taken from all over, that the Monkees have already worn out on television, only much worse. The movie might have worked for bored kids at kiddie matinées, but the filmmakers got ambitious. The by now standard stuff of girls squealing as pop idols perform is not even convincing when they're squealing for the Monkees, and when this is intercut with documentary footage of the suffering and horror of war, as if to comment on the shallowness of what the filmmakers are manufacturing and packaging and desperately trying to sell, the doubling up of greed and pretensions to depth is enough to make even a pinhead walk out. So when the boys started to sing "Open your eyes, there's so much to do in the sunlight"...

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