

MOVIES

PAUL SCHRADER

Movies are usually packages, made of such composite parts as acting, direction, editing, script, lighting, and to overpraise one aspect is often to demean the whole film. When a viewer's attention is inordinately drawn to one aspect of a film, the other aspects suffer. A "standout" performance usually indicates less than a standout film.

In a film which depends on realism this can be fatal; it loses its balance and effect. A good realistic director will recognize this compositional imbalance and utilize it; a poor director, if he notices the disparity at all, will try to overcome it in obvious ways, heightening the schizoid nature of his film, and undermining even the effective sections.

This problem confronted John Schlesinger in the making of MIDNIGHT COWBOY, perhaps more than Schlesinger knew. "Midnight Cowboy" has two of the best performances of the year, by Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman, but also has some of the worst direction. Although Schlesinger should be credited for promoting these performances, he also must bear the responsibility for their final inadequacy. No matter how good Voight and Hoffman are, they simply cannot make the film do what it is supposed to do. The problem is not that the acting is too good, but that Schlesinger doesn't know how to utilize the performances he helped create.

Joe Buck (Jon Voight) is a drug-store cowboy from Big Spring, Texas, and self-proclaimed "one helluva stud" who sets out for New York to service the wealthy Eastern closet-nymphs who have been neglected by their faggy men folk. Buck has no success peddling his wares on the street corner but meets Ratso (Dustin Hoffman), a small-time pimp and con man. Both

look for integrity elsewhere and find it in each other. In a relief from the prancing fairies of recent American films, Buck and Ratso form a tender relationship which could be called homosexual, but which is more accurately human. Ratso, near death, tells Buck that he will regain his health if only he can get to Miami Beach and drink coconut milk. Buck, the blue-eyed innocent, viciously kills a homosexual conventioner for the bus fare. Ratso dies en route and Buck, the foul Big City behind him, discards his synthetic Western get-up and declares he will go to work in the country.

For some time "Midnight Cowboy" was regarded as one of the most promising properties around Hollywood. "Midnight Cow-

boy" had the ingredients of a natural success and producer Jerome Hellman set out to make it one. Hellman has a knack for near successes ("The World of Henry Orient," "A Fine Madness"), films which are packaged well but always are missing something elemental. In "Midnight Cowboy" the casting and script (by Waldo Salt) were excellent, but the director, Schlesinger, was entirely inappropriate.

Schlesinger has a reputation for having a reputation. That is, he was able to achieve a "big" name without ever really having to hand over the goods. His early films, "A Kind of Loving," "Billy Liar," were inventive, but not memorable. "Darling" vaulted him to popular success. It was the right film at the right time; and it looked ahead of its time. The cute directorial flair which made "Billy Liar" and "Darling" stand out from the pack (not too far) is anathetical to the mood of "Midnight Cowboy."

Schlesinger is an underconfident director, one who never seems sure he is doing the right thing. He lacks a basic faith in a narrative situation to let it carry the load. Instead, he inflates the importance of a scene.

Every shot has its gimmick. He is continually zooming through windows, hiding under cars, peeking over sofas. These techniques, which are intended to add dimension to a scene, only (Please turn to Page 36)

8201 SUNSET

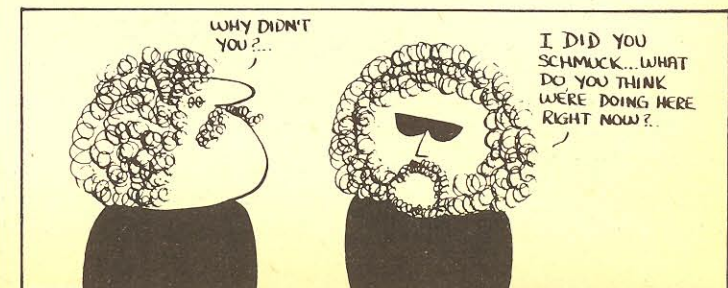
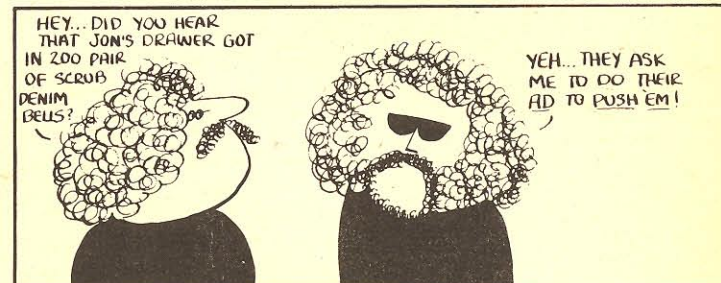
656-1410

TIMELESS OCCULT

Pure Patchouli Oil
Witchcraft Supplies
Sparkling Incense

Astrology
Magic — Candles
Complete Tarot

JON'S DRAWER
...of material things
13538 1/2 ventura blvd. sherman oaks



GRANADA HILLS JON'S DRAWER ALSO HAS PLENTY OF SCRUB DENIM BELLS... AT 17539 CHATSWORTH STREET OR PHONE 3639997...

NEW BOOK DEPT!

ASTROLOGY △△ MAGIC and ALCHEMY
JUNG and ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY
YOGA △△ I CHING △△ EDGAR CAYCE
MYTHOLOGY △△△ POETRY △△△ TAROT
QABALAH and the OCCULT △△△ ART
HERBS △△ the AMERICAN INDIAN
CHILDRENS' △△ BOOKPLATES △△
△△ PHILOSOPHY and RELIGION △
FREE I CHING INSTRUCTION SHEETS
OPEN from 10:30a.m. to 9:00 p.m.
SATURDAYS to 5:00 p.m.

the Chest Tel. VE7-2777
10604 w. Pico, L.A.

MOVIES

PAUL SCHRADER

(From Page 28)

create a frustration when the depth is not provided. The powerful Voight-Hoffman dialogue scenes, which should have carried themselves, are lost as the audience chases cockroaches across the floor. Schlesinger's gymnastics are obtrusive and, now, out of date. "Darling" was able to get away with such trickery, but viewers have now seen enough of these "dazzling" techniques to expect some mind behind the massage.

Schlesinger's direction not only exudes a technical lack of confidence, but also a sociological naivete. Nothing is quite so difficult to satirize as the obviously ridiculous, and no one is so difficult to satirize as the obviously ridiculous, and no one is so foolish as those who satirize it obviously. Schlesinger levels his big British guns at the most foolish Americanisms — and misses entirely. Schlesinger makes verbal and visual digs at the hickness of the American South and the coldness of American megapolises. As Buck rides a Greyhound through the Bible Belt a radio gospeller exclaims, "Jesus wants to know how many sent in \$5 for their home worship kits!" Watching satirist Schlesinger at work, I had the same feeling I did during fellow Britisher Tony Richardson's "The Loved One," which mocked Los Angeles' customs of life and death. To an outsider creations like the radio preacher may only seem ridiculous signposts on the American Way, but to those who were born and raised under these conditions they seem, although nonetheless silly, important in a deeper cultural manner. To mock these Americanisms facetiously completely misses the point of our feelings about them. It gets the laugh all right, but it's a cheap laugh and quickly passes. No knowledge is gained and our faith in the storyteller is damaged.

The seedy backstreets of Manhattan provide Schlesinger a greater opportunity to exercise his cultural preconceptions about America. Urbanites are either cold and brusk, depraved and perverse, or completely freaked out. Ratso stands out so strongly because he's the only New Yorker who has some remotely human values and isn't a complete caricature. As the ultimate test of depravity Schlesinger throws one of those big god-awful garish parties with Viva, Taylor Mead and other Warhol folk. Schlesinger used the same device in "Darling," and the resulting characterization was equally superficial. The only time I know of such parties today is when a student film-maker wants to show the boredom of the wealthy and invites his friends in full drag for a night under the lights. Whether in Texas or New York Schlesinger manages to catch the American myth without the meaning.

Schlesinger is forced to fall back on Voight and Hoffman's performances, the only cards in Schlesinger's deck which don't seem phony. Yet neither is Schlesinger blameless in this matter. Hoffman's performance is a solid-gold tour de force; Hoffman obstructs himself with items like greasy hair, a Puerto Rican accent, a bum leg, failing health, and overcomes them. It is a star's vehicle, a chance for Hoffman to demonstrate that he can be more than Benjamin in the "Graduate." Hoffman's performance is so self-consciously different that

his character of Ratso never has a chance to be anything more than Dustin Hoffman dressed up. And it is largely Schlesinger's fault that Hoffman's character is allowed to assume such baroque proportions. As with his direction, Schlesinger is interested in swaying the audience with the obviously good and important. If Schlesinger had been more of a film-maker, Hoffman's performance would have been less of a standout.

In Schlesinger's hands the resolution to "Midnight Cowboy" is a complete fiasco. The primitivistic finale is no better or worse than other strong Hemingway endings where the hero decides he should return to nature to learn about the "real" values. The best of such endings can convince us that there is something to be learned in nature, if it is only the countryside of the mind. But Schlesinger's romantic rurality is just as superficial as the urbanity he flees from. Buck learned in the first scene how dull Texas was and only the more boring Viva-Joshua Light Show party could convince him to go back. But we know that New York is not really a Sodom, and the countryside is not really idyllic. Only for John Schlesinger.

Regular readers of this column were probably suprised last week when I stated that, "The Wild Bunch" does for the emotions what "Shane" did for the intellect." The original copy read "Shame," not "Shane," and referred to Ingmar Bergman's recent film, not George Steven's 1953 "classic." I don't have the slightest idea what "Shane" did for the intellect. From time to time similiar "proofreaders alterations" occur in the copy, an added benefit of underground reading. Like movies Free Press reviewing is a corporate product.

COMPANY THEATRE SEE PAGE 5

IS THIS ANY WAY TO RUN A RAFT?

Find Out At The
WEST COAST PREMIERE
of the New York-London hit

JOHN BOWEN'S
witty, chilling study
of survival

After The Rain

ALL PROFESSIONAL CAST!

TWO UCLA WEEKENDS:
Thurs.-Sun. June 19-22, 26-29
Schoenberg Hall - 8:30

"Grips with brilliant theatricality" ... London Observer
"Stretches the mind" and
"Changes us" NY Times
Tickets: \$4.50, \$3.75, \$3.00,
\$2.25, (\$1.50 students) at UCLA
Concert Ticket Office,
825-2953, and all Mutual
Agencies, 627-1248.

Presented by the UCLA
Committee on Fine Arts
Productions and "The Scene"