

Performance

COLIN MACCABE, 1998
 London, BFI Film Classics
 pp. 88, illus.; £7.99 (paper)

Don't look now

MARK SANDERSON, 1996
 London, BFI Modern Classics
 pp. 84, illus.; £7.99 (paper)

It is almost 30 years since the release of Donald Cammell and Nic Roeg's film *Performance*; despite changes in culture, fashion and politics in the intervening years, it is still a powerful film. Colin McCabe's study embraces the disparate strands—or, better, tensions—of culture, fashion and politics which entwined and infused the film's production and its delayed release. McCabe writes '*Performance* was shot in the summer and autumn of 1968 following a spring when the youth culture which had been building since the early sixties looked set for a brief instant to change all the known rules' (p. 49).

Sometime in the period between the heady events of May, 1968 and the shootings at Kent State University in 1970, the 1960s ended. During the same period, London's Chelsea set, decadent young aristocrats, partied, played and collected fashionable objects. These included curios from the world of pop and the world of crime: no society party of the era was really complete unless it featured a face or two from the pop world or the criminal underworld. Against this backdrop, McCabe considers *Performance* in nine short chapters, dealing in turn with the background, the development of the script, the casting, the shooting, the editing, the release and the aftermath.

So potent was the film's mix of violence, confused identity, drugs, rock music and criminality that, although editing had been completed by the end of 1969, it was not released in Britain until 1971. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the film's powerful charge. The violent scene involving the shaving of the chauffeur's head near the start of the film is apparently based upon an incident involving David Litvinoff, described by McCabe as 'one of the great mythic characters of 60s London ... the bridge between the world of the Kray twins and the Rolling Stones' (pp. 24–25). Litvinoff is credited in the film as 'dialogue coach/technical adviser'. Shortly after 'falling out with the Krays', Litvinoff found himself regaining consciousness 'hanging upside down from the railings of the building where he lived, with his head shaved completely bare' (p. 25). In a tantalising footnote, McCabe adds 'The full details of this incident involve too many living performers for me to desire to achieve complete accuracy' (p. 83). McCabe is probably wise, if not simply self-preserving, to recognise the better part of valour is discretion still.

Production was suspended briefly after Warner executives viewed the rushes of the relaxed bathroom scene, featuring Mick Jagger, Anita Pallenberg and Michèle Breton. The film's departure from the script, as well as 'the plethora of naked bodies and ... an easygoing polymorphous perversion' (p. 52), were such that production was almost abandoned. McCabe makes no particular mention, however, of the setting-up of the shot of or of any particular reaction to Jagger's submerged loofah-like prothesis which stands out as a particularly memorable feature of the bathroom scene. Later in the production, the processing laboratory wanted to destroy the negative of the bedroom scenes variously involving Jagger, Pallenberg, Breton and James Fox because it was thought they 'contravened the obscenity laws' (p. 56). Cammell, however, persuaded the laboratory to destroy only the print and managed to save the negative before engaging the services of a different processing laboratory.

McCabe outlines the textual history of the film's script, which has its roots in a draft of an abandoned project called 'The Liars', about an American crook on the run (to be played by Marlon Brando) holed-up in the Earls Court house of a rock star (to be played by Mick Jagger) and a script called 'The Performers', which makes the gangster a Londoner and relocates the house to the more bohemian Notting Hill. The latter script exists in two versions, each of which differs from the finished film. In each of these, however, the second half of the script revolves around a drug bust, which was modelled on the bust at Keith Richard's house, the scene of the orgy at which Marianne Faithful notoriously used a Mars Bar. Although the drugs bust is absent from the finished film, a sharp-eyed McCabe draws attention to the Mars Bars placed waggishly on the doorstep of Turner's Powis Square residence.

Cammell, Roeg, Jagger, Pallenberg, Litvinoff and Fox were all part of the same social set. Cammell, according to gossip repeated by McCabe, had a predilection for threesomes and was allegedly involved sexually with all the leading members of the cast. Off-screen tensions between some of the cast found

resonances in the performance of *Performance*. Pallenberg and Jagger, for example, sought to sexually taunt and titillate the 'straight' James Fox off camera, much as Pherber and Turner play games with Chas while the camera is rolling. Although Pallenberg and Jagger may have been playing roles similar to the social roles in which they found themselves cast at the time, Fox was a rising star whose public school background had prepared him for the role of the ineffectual aristocrat, such as he played in Joseph Losey's *The Servant*, a type he might have made his own were he not cast as Chas, the repressed homosexual working-class gangster. If *Performance* did not directly contribute to Fox's breakdown, it is perhaps coincidental that it was the last film he worked on before turning to religion and withdrawing from acting for some 10 years. As MacCabe writes, 'it is not the sex and drugs which is the real scandal on the set of *Performance*; it was the fact that the performance of the actors ceased to be a representation of a text and became instead the acting out of their fundamental relationships' (p. 53).

Harry Flowers, based on Ronnie Kray, was played by non-professional actor Johnny Shannon who worked in the print trade and was a boxing coach in his spare time—in an East End gangland pub. Initially, Shannon's involvement in the film (Shannon was an acquaintance of Litvinoff's) was to help James Fox become acclimatised to the atmosphere of machismo and villainy that permeates a particular type of working-class masculinity. Shannon seems to have survived *Performance* better than some of the others involved in it, setting a new standard for the portrayal of the gangster in film (cf. Bob Hoskins) and going on to establish an acting career, while others had breakdowns (Fox), succumbed to heroin addiction (Pallenberg and Breton) or, as in Cammell's case, committed suicide.

For MacCabe, 'Cammell's and Roeg's movie reproduces London in 1968; it makes us part of that metropolis, a reality that it promises for us each time that it unwinds' (p. 55). It would probably be more accurate, however, to say that *Performance* allows the viewer to experience vicariously the twin delights of gangland violence and rock 'n' roll decadence; the frisson of hard men, soft drugs and easy sex, with none of the dangers. Although one could argue that the film offers a 'safe' version of what the Chelsea set had been flirting with since the early 1960s, Warner Brothers apparently thought otherwise, rejecting the cut offered them by Roeg and Cammell as unreleasable.

Warner Brothers demanded that the film be re-edited in Los Angeles (a euphemism meaning that the studio was exerting control). Despite some argument between Cammell and Roeg over the final edit—which introduced the film's intense and disturbing fast cutting—the film was finally represented to Warner Brothers and—owing to a fortuitous change in the ownership of the studio—was eventually released in 1970 in the US and early 1971 in the UK. MacCabe declares that

Performance is a film which demands a very wide range of cultural references for its interpretations. The knowledges... are not the knowledges encouraged by the current division of the faculties in the university. Whether *Performance* will have the strength of a genuine classic and produce the scholars it requires or whether it will remain as a historical footnote... is something on which I am inevitably unable to make a final judgement. (p. 73)

MacCabe then goes on to pontificate magnificently about the film's ending in the monograph's coda, 'politics and magic', reaching by turns for Bataille, Freud, J.L. Austen, Judith Butler, Frederic Jameson and Borges. One thing MacCabe appears not to have done, however, is to examine the final sequence using his video player's pause or slow-motion facility. Had he done so, he would clearly have seen that Turner, who is expecting Chas, produces a pistol from beneath the bed covers and it is Turner's shot which kills Chas, not vice versa. Of course the film attempts to set up the audience to believe Chas kills Turner, reinforcing this duplicitous play with the lobby poster which is reproduced on the cover of MacCabe's book: 'Vice. And Versa'. In the end it is not Chas who escapes—he has already 'escaped' as a result of having his identity 'dismantled' during a period of psychoactive and sexual experimentation—it is Turner. Chas' body is dumped in a cupboard while Turner, having adopted Chas' 'disguise', looks out from the window of the limousine.

Performance is, in MacCabe's words, 'the greatest British film ever made' (p. 24). Despite—in spite of—all the MacCabean pontification at the end of this monograph and even though one might have expected MacCabe to have made rather more of the countercultural and political developments in Britain at the end of the 1960s, this remains a very useful study which locates a rather neglected film in the interstices of a number of differing, overlapping, popular cultural contexts. Generally vilified by mainstream critics on its release, the film was however feted by the underground press. Hopefully, MacCabe's study will stimulate some new interest in what has become a 'cult' film, which may, in turn, lead to its inclusion on film studies and cultural studies syllabuses: perhaps a new generation will come to a better understanding of what all the fuss was about.

Mark Sanderson's approach to Nic Roeg's *Don't Look Now* is quite different from MacCabe's approach to *Performance*. Sanderson does not seek so much to locate the film in its cultural context, but

rather explores the film as text. While MacCabe's chapter headings are descriptive noun phrases, for example, 'The Script', 'The Shoot' and 'The Edit', Sanderson uses epigrammatical phrases taken from Roeg's film or from Daphne du Maurier's short story. Sanderson's introduction, entitled 'I'm Getting Out of Here', is akin to something of a Roeg film itself, reaching both forwards and backwards. The reader is slightly disoriented by this, but suspects that something interesting is about to unfold.

Sanderson's second chapter, 'So Many Impressions to Seize and Hold', discusses the narrative in Daphne du Maurier's short story and Nic Roeg's film in terms of similarities and differences between the story text and the film text. Sanderson also offers a useful precis of the story. The next chapter, 'We've Been Trying to Reach You', discusses the production, casting, critical reception and film's classification ('R' in the States, and 'X' in Britain). The 'adult' classification is a result of the lovemaking scene between Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland, which exercised the American censor and the *Daily Mail*; the media's attempt to sensationalise the scene is dismissed by Roeg as 'a non-story'.

In Chapter 4, 'What is it You Fear?', Sanderson considers Roeg's film as a gothic chiller, seeking to find further resonance by adding grim details concerning some of the individuals of the cast as a short coda.

Chapter 5, 'The Deeper We Get, the More Byzantine it Gets', offers a frame-by-frame analysis of the film's opening scene, including the title sequence, which is comprised of 102 different shots rapidly unfolding over the first 7 minutes. Sanderson's analysis takes the form of a brief description of each shot, with dialogue and a note of shot transition if it is anything other than a straightforward cut. The shot description is followed by five pages of analysis, concentrating chiefly on symbolism and colour. While it is an entirely subjective reading of the film (of course no reading can be entirely objective) this is one of the more compelling parts of Sanderson's study.

Black humour, and comic and ironic elements are discussed in Chapter 6, 'It's Incredible You Can't Change Your Course'. While Sanderson asserts that '*Don't Look Now* cannot be reduced to a single interpretation ... It is black, it is comic, it is gothic, it is ironic. It says one thing while suggesting another. It can be, and often is, all of these things at the same time' (p. 54), his use of dated vernacular terms, for example 'sensory overload' and 'bonk', is a little jarring.

Chapter 7, 'Nothing Can Take the Place of the One That's Lost', discusses faith, guilt and loss. There is clearly a personal element in Sanderson's analysis of the film's exploration of grief. Indeed, he writes in the introduction that his own close loss has shown him 'just how sensitive is its handling of bereavement' (p. 9). Despite this un-British sensitivity, Sanderson avoids mawkishness.

In Chapter 8, 'We're Almost There', Sanderson undertakes another shot-by-shot account of a key scene in the film. This time it is the scene at the end in which John is killed by the dwarf and his life 'flashes before his eyes' in a rapid montage sequence. Chapter 9, 'I Know Where We are Now', concludes the monograph with a ten-page interview with Roeg conducted in 1996, some 25 years after the shooting of *Don't Look Now*.

Like a Roeg film, Sanderson's monograph is densely packed and enigmatic. There is so much here one needs to reread it almost at once to get some grasp of all the disparate threads. If one had to compare the two studies, one would have to say that Sanderson's study displays a number of idiosyncrasies, from the personal recollections in the introduction to the brief, annotated bibliography, while MacCabe's is the more deftly constructed analysis. Both, however, will provide useful additions to the bookshelf of any student of Roeg or British cinema of the 1970s.

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The Birds

Camille Paglia, 1998

London, British Film Institute

£7.99

When asked what it was about *The Birds* (1963) that so fascinated her, Camille Paglia replied, 'Tippi Hedren as a gorgeous bitch'. A self-styled cultural critic, whose outspokenness (on Madonna, on date rape and, most recently, on the Hitchcock heritage) recognises few bounds, Paglia possesses an almost unnatural talent for self-promotion. Her latest book *The Birds* arrived on bookshop shelves amidst a media flurry of interviews and televised talks together with the front-page news that Paglia had stormed out of one important meeting, accusing Jonathan Dimbleby of being the 'worst prepared popinjay of a reporter' she had ever encountered. The reason for expanding on these details is simple. Films have