

Books

OVEREXPOSURES

By David Thomson. New York: Morrow, 1981. \$13.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper.

Deep ambivalence quickens David Thomson's *Overexposures*—a collection of essays, some reprinted from film magazines, others seeing print for the first time—with intense, witty melancholy. He announces a crisis: “. . . movies are nearly at an end”—then has an imaginary Hollywood trendy trill, “Oh, shit, that one again.” Others, expecting the usual platitudinous, scapegoat-seeking outrage at movies and television for supposedly causing all of America's problems, may want to trill right along. But there is none of this professional indignation in the book. Thomson's prose vibrates with an uneasiness that feels unmistakably personal. Just as certain film-makers (Joseph Mankiewicz, Sam Peckinpah, Paul Schrader) have called themselves “Whores,” he compares his film teaching to pimping, but without their not-so-secret vainglory.

Part of his distress has a topical basis: the depressing personalities, practices, and predicaments of Hollywood during the past decade. A time of decreasing production and soaring costs—budgetary and especially marketing. Steadily less risk-taking and steadily more incessant appeals to the most fickle and immature part of the mass audience, “the

kids.” A time of baby moguls who do not love movies, only what they can get out of them, and baby geniuses (George Lucas is Thomson's prime example) who are prodigies of command over arcane technology, which they use to present “experience (as) a pretty, pat commodity, no more complex than chewing gum.” A time when even more substantial figures (he cites Schrader and Francis Coppola) wallow in melodrama and paranoia. Bewitched by a smothering, essentially adolescent tidiness and tightness of style and effect which ignores “film's natural readiness for doubt,” they oppress their audiences like jailers and torturers, confirming everyone's sense of fear and alienation. According to Thomson, most American directors (Bob Rafelson is his bright exception) promote “a voluntary and neurotic enslavement,” show little or no feeling for “the complexity of human nature that surprises us in life,” and scant “the dignity of ordinary lives.” He declares: “I feel surer year by year that, by dwelling on the momentous dark, the American movie has turned its back on richness and enlightenment.”

In framing his indictment, Thomson ranges over a broad landscape of popular culture: the Tonight Show, Jerry Lewis's annual muscular dystrophy telethon, slash-'em-up horror movies, the bizarrerie of Los Angeles, personal observation of Rafelson struggling to prepare

his first studio picture *Brubaker* (from which he was fired after a week or so of shooting), analytic profiles of some complicated personalities (Warren Beatty, James Toback, Pauline Kael, Bruce Dern), close readings of Alfred Hitchcock and his work (especially *Strangers on a Train* and *Psycho*), plus separate chapters on *The Shining*, *The King of Marvin Gardens*, and the four pre-*One from the Heart* Coppola films. He praises a few of these, slates many more. But through it all he writhes in furious, liver-gnawing, amazed ambivalence, as an Englishman entranced by movies since childhood, as a literary intellectual who moved here to teach respectably at Dartmouth only to find his senses awash in American garishness, and as a potential movie-maker who shamefacedly wants in on the racket.

But Thomson is wrestling also with the innate qualities of film itself and what it may be helping to do to human consciousness. Constant, massive doses of photographic imagery, he fears, are eroding our ability to perceive, understand, and deal with reality: "Human-kind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth." You will not find these words in *Overexposures*. They are the very first sentences of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. But Thomson obviously agrees with them, and her book has unquestionably influenced his. Simplifying her argument drastically: Photography fools us into believing that it brings us closer to reality, whereas it actually renders reality more nebulous by giving us the sense that we can carry it around in the form of frozen pictures, like kids swapping baseball cards as though they truly owned Mickey Mantle or Reggie Jackson. "Essentially," she comments, "the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people's reality, and eventually in one's own."

Sontag pointedly excludes the movie camera from her study precisely because its product, moving pictures, exists in time (even though that movement is founded on an illusion). But Thomson extends this inquiry to film. Some samples of his recurrent themes:

Books are latent experiences: They are tunes we play only when we take them up into our heads. Films are explosions, happenings, which do not actually need an audience. This means that the spectators they do attract feel relatively powerless and insignificant. We are less aware of an

order that our imaginations can perceive. Instead, films have the characteristics of flow—elemental, heedless, and unconscious. . . . We may be less determined to live our lives once we have seen this allegory of life pouring through us.

The shaping of films encouraged us to believe that the world shown in the dark and the world struggled with outside were different . . . No one alive in America in this century can believe that the distinction was observed. People have been confused, not least the filmmakers, men like Martin Scorsese, who expect Charles Manson every time they enter a taxi.

The purpose of (*Jaws*, *Carrie* and the like) is to secure, or trap . . . not to move the audience, to change its mind, to delight or console it, to do any of the enriching things that one hopes for in art, but to hold it—as one holds a kitten and thinks of drowning it . . . It is a cruelty that the canopy of "entertainment" struggles to contain.

. . . even the worst movies of the year seem immune to error or uncertainty. Film has such ravishing authority. Our helplessness in front of the flow of motion grants it an elemental force beyond questions of right and wrong.

This "domineering and extortionate" power, which most filmmakers rush to exploit, springs from the core of the medium—looking, voyeurism—which Thomson goes so far as to compare with rape. He believes that "The assertion of the photograph [rather than] the attempt of the word" characterizes our world. And that impels him virtually to cry out: "We are all mad who look at images and believe in them . . . A part of me wishes that there had been no photography, no film, no television . . ."

From ideas and emotions like these, Thomson zeroes in on specific moviemakers. In his view, Hitchcock never really cared about anything except hooking the audience and then misanthropically wringing it dry, not just separating style from content but rendering style hostile to content. Of *Psycho* (which he demolishes in detail as an "elegant, gloating trap") he insists: ". . . the pain inflicted in the film is secondary to the skill which keeps the hook in the audience's fish mouth . . ." Comparably, *Strangers on a Train* "assists Bruno's madness . . . The future of love and happiness that Guy is being denied is a hollow sham. Hitchcock never makes us believe in or want it . . . That is why Bruno is so good and unwitting a portrait of the director. Bruno has no real life . . . He is a man of ideas, envious of doers and blithely unconscious that his elegant ideas inflict a monstrous, prettified destruction

on others.” Coppola is similarly culpable: for the “soulless stylistic bravura” of *The Conversation*, for not noticing its similarity to the wizardry of repressed sound technician Harry Caul, for the “magnetic attraction” to Michael Corleone and his glamorously bruised, ostensibly condemned but actually relished evil in the *Godfather* films, for his floundering “struggle to be profound and popular at the same time—the torment which has always beset Hollywood” in *Apocalypse Now*. But *American Gigolo* evokes an interestingly mixed response. Afflicted by a sense that its script is basically garbage by literary standards, Thomson glows, with a bit of a red face, over its lustrous visual plan, its aural bath of Blondie and Giorgio Moroder, and Richard Gere’s perfect embodiment of “photographed man.” Similarly, *The Shining* drives him nuts with its hermeticism (“the great vow that gives up life for fiction”), yet its weird humor and eerie serenity tantalize him into reconsidering his previous criticisms of Stanley Kubrick (see his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*) and provoke him into writing the best interpretation yet of this perplexing movie. Rafelson he endorses without reservation; *The King of Marvin Gardens* is his favorite lost cause, “so astute about the romance of success in America, it was always likely to be a commercial failure.” And he stands up for James Toback—indeed, romanticizes him—as an “outlaw artist.”

The informed passion of *Overexposures*, so dishearteningly missing from nine out of every ten film books of recent years, makes Thomson confront intractable contradictions head-on. Part of him may wish the visual media out of existence, “but,” another part continues, “I am moved by the energy in fiction. American movies may harness that too rarely, but they have entertained me all my life. Is it insane to live and work in that mode while still urging caution?” And he openly acknowledges what few academics dare to admit: “I suffer from a conflicting rage for the visual and the puritanically literate.” But the book evades other matters.

These surface in occasional excesses of Thomson’s vivid prose style: for example, a certain glibness whenever he tries to wax ironic about the Bitch Goddess El Lay, “a place for gamblers, spritualists and sunbathers, poets and druggies, stars and therapists, messiahs and people at the movies.” Locals who do not

have heads full of smog sometimes collect such Locustville numbers; Thomson’s are more entertaining than most, but that is generally all they are. These and other statements like them Thomson hopes will add up to a portrait of mass America “pioneered and victimized by fantastical hope”—media fomented. But admitting that concrete evidence is hard to come by, he indulges in tricks of rhetoric—like the foregoing and like finding it striking that a nation with America’s heavy fiscal preoccupations “should believe in a large rubber shark and the ominous musical theme current in the waters off Amity Island.”

Mocking the “mania for inner meanings” that Los Angeles is said to encourage, Thomson sometimes gets stoned on it himself, detecting all but the Decline of the West in the comatose ramblings of a few Tonight Shows or working up an ominous froth of nouns and adjectives after gazing at some “unwholesome collection of hot and bereft people” in a movie theater’s lobby “who must wonder why I am describing them.” Well might they wonder, for the resulting description betrays the same insistence on pulsating melodrama and, finally, paranoia that Thomson accuses so many filmmakers (“looming above with the power of authorship”) of foisting on us.

His comments about Hitchcock, though full of insights, reduce him to Fat Alfred, chortling orotundly as he pulls the wings off us flies in the audience and makes us love it. “We” react dutifully, Thomson indicates, whenever Hitch yanks our string: joining him to violate Marion Crane with our “tumescent” gazes in and out of the shower; cheering Bruno on as he pops a brat’s balloon, throttles a bitch and lowers her corpse toward our avid retinas, toys byzantinely with that wimp Guy Haines, whom we (like the Fat Man) only pretend to admire. The helpless audience—Thomson strikes this note over and over again. But does everyone really react identically even to movies as cunningly controlled as Hitchcock’s?

Let me be the lab animal for a moment. My most recent memory of *Psycho* is too old for detailed citation. But I did get to see *Strangers on a Train* for the umpteenth time while reading *Overexposures* for the second, and it wasn’t Thomson’s *Strangers*. Yes, I certainly did find myself fascinated and delighted (for the umpteenth time) by Bruno, which means, partially, fascinated and delighted with the

finesse of his creation by Hitchcock, his writers (including Raymond Chandler), and Robert Walker. But do I or Thomson's "we" necessarily endorse Bruno? Like Hitchcock, I might have preferred actors other than Farley Granger and Ruth Roman as Guy Haines and his new love; still, allowing for that, it seemed to me that Hitchcock did his utmost, especially in the way he filmed their kisses, to induce our belief in their intimacy and our hope that they might save it. As for Guy's slatternly wife, must I, must "we," be nothing more or other than happy when Bruno murders her? But suppose "we" are happy about it. What then happens when we notice, at Hitchcock's insistence, her resemblance to the sister of Guy's love, a part played by the director's daughter? Thomson makes a lot of how the ostensibly accidental encounter of Guy and Bruno on the train is really "fated" by Hitchcock's insistent intercutting of their shoes as they approach it, separately and unaware of one another's presence. But Thomson does not mention the other strangers whom Guy meets on other trains, encounters which do not foment Brunoesque plots and paranoid moods. And if Bruno, like Hitchcock, really has us under such tight control, what do we make of the movie's climax, when the insanely disintegrating merry-go-round destroys him and his trap system?

It seems, then, that "my" *Strangers* differs significantly from Thomson's. I consider mine closer to Hitchcock's. I could be right, I could be wrong. But I am not "helpless." And neither is anybody else.

Thomson's remarks on Coppola read similarly: scintillating individual points (how the *Godfather* movies might be better had they built to Kay Corleone betraying her husband's criminal empire, the trickiness in the use of the line that Harry Caul records in *The Conversation*) trapped in a web of insistence on how "we" monolithically must respond to the films. "We long to be with the Corleones," Thomson insists—no other response is possible—thanks to Coppola's "meek, facile complicity" in their values under the guise of exploring and deploring them. As evidence, he mentions the commercial success of these costly pictures (to him, this proves their safeness—an easy bit of Monday morning quarterbacking) and Coppola's "guileless" satisfaction with such effects as Part One's intercutting of a baptism and

a slaughter. "If Coppola sought irony," Thomson insists, "it has been smothered by the romanticism of the American movie: unflawed melodramatic progress and undimmed prestige bestowed on the people. Together, they define our response: identification, never any sort of detachment."

What these sentences define is Thomson's response, which he is certainly entitled to present (especially this interestingly). But this advocate of the necessity for doubt, in life and in movies, really should consider doubting his ability to be so sure of "our response." It is a matter of record that many "helpless" viewers—correctly or incorrectly, with, without or despite Coppola's true compliance—have managed to view Michael and the other Corleones with considerable detachment *and* different degrees of identification, varying throughout the films from quite a bit to none whatsoever. For all his sophistication, Thomson often sounds like the studio executives John Sayles described in these pages recently, who insist that the script say explicitly that Ralph is likeable. Thomson wants Coppola to have said just as explicitly: "These Corleones are really rotten sons of bitches, and don't you dare have any other thoughts or feelings about them." And his "puritanically literate" side appears again in his attack on Coppola for taking pleasure in how he says something (whatever it happens to be). It is also symptomatic of how, after indicating repeatedly that doubt and complexity and ambiguity are the true meat of life and film, Thomson continually falls into a deep funk whenever he discovers movie-makers like Hitchcock, Coppola, Schrader and the rest inextricably enmeshed in them.

This contradiction points towards another: despite his professed concern for the "dignity of ordinary lives," he finds little of it in how people respond to movies or how they might respond. He suggests that, had Coppola followed his recommendation for Kay Corleone, "it would have driven the audience away in the millions," the same millions who didn't turn out for *The King of Marvin Gardens*, thereby certifying its integrity. It doesn't speak well for all that dignity, especially when the dignified are also helpless. But Thomson's invocations of the helpless audience represent the height of paranoia. "Film has such ravishing authority . . ."—yes, it can be unnerving

to see a theater full of people jump, shriek, laugh and cry on cue (and even more unnerving to find oneself doing the same right along with them). These also may be honest, non-Pavlovian reactions. Helpless? Hasn't Thomson ever heard people heckle movies or laugh in the "wrong" places? Hasn't he ever done these things himself?

More plangently than Sontag, Thomson seems to long for a "simpler" version of "reality" that will never come again unless some cataclysm annihilates the present one, which will continue to *include* photographic imagery. Thomson does bury an acceptance of this quandary in his text: "Reality and imagination . . . haunt and mimic each other, and properly so. Our most debilitating condition would be if either one overpowered the other. But if we must live paranoid, or in the discord of two ways of understanding, then we must expect extremes of dismay and exhilaration as the struggle goes on." This is his equivalent to Sontag's call for "an ecology of images," which is provisionally achievable only through constant thought and vigilance. Whatever my or anyone else's quarrels with parts of it, *Overexposures* is a distinguished contribution to this ecology, which will be all the more needed during the forthcoming deluge of cable TV/home video image-saturation. But the somber tone of even its humor differs sharply from her calm lucidity. Maybe that is what inevitably comes of trying to reconcile art, literary values, careerism, ordinary dignity, life itself, and the movies.

—MICHAEL DEMPSEY