

Reviews

Films, Films, and more Films . . . but not "Love Story"

Brewster McCloud

A Review by Fred "Aviary"

Director Robert Altman has managed to magnificently outdo his first internationally-proclaimed comedy—M-A-S-H, with his latest success: Brewster McCloud. Very simply, Brewster is a perceptive boy in his late teens, dedicated to liberating himself from the cages of contemporary society by constructing a pair of fool-proof wings and then flying away. This role is played aptly and innocently by Bud Cort.

Brewster is probably first exposed to a dream of birdlife by the character that opens the film—the lecturer, an all knowing bird-freak who begins lecturing under a blanket of academic terms but, as the movie progresses, becomes increasingly more bird-like in habit until finally we see him as "discombobulated mass of squawks and flutters". Rene Auberjonois, (chaplain in M-A-S-H), is a delightful evolution of subtleties, acting the part quite convincingly.

The film becomes more intricate, however, as we learn that Brewster is mothered and sheltered by a homicidal fairy godmother or guardian angel—Louise—acted with gratifying results, "ladylike sensuality", and as much depth as the plot permits by Sally Kellerman ("Hot-lips" in M-A-S-H).

The plot of the film is a key to its humour; the shape of the door and lock within which fits that key belongs to the director: Altman perceives America as divided between a materialistic mainstream and the idealists, between the humanists and the crazies of the counter-culture. But he dramatizes this division and the insanities on both sides without once resorting to the poster and protest conventions of cliché cinema. Instead, to express his disgust, he creates a metaphor epitomized in the figure of a defecating raven, plus an entire carnival of decaying—but energetically portrayed—characters: a superpatriotic dowager, Daphne Heap, in red, white, and blue that croaks the National Anthem before each baseball game at Houston's Astrodome; a vicious narcotics cop who beats his wife, ridicules his son, spews racial slurs, and shakes down pot smokers; a decrepit long-haired millionaire exploiter of old age homes, Abraham Wright, who is last seen streaking down a freeway, dead, in his wheel chair. They are all killed off in a volley of bird droppings. Stacy Keach, whose strong inclination for offbeat roles is unique, gets a good spot as A. Wright.

These mysterious murders

Elvira Madigan

ELVIRA MADIGAN - Directed and Written by Bo Widerberg. Photographed by Jorgen Rer-sson.

"Elvira Madigan" forces us to project our own emotional detailing into the lovers' situation. The dialogue contributes some information necessary for grasping how the world is closing in, and how the lovers are unfit to cope with it. Sixten is a count; he is unequipped to survive in ordinary life. Although Elvira could earn money, doing so would destroy their relationship and they cannot return. Widerberg could have built conventional dramatic machinery to drive home these points - it is easy enough to contrive incidents at the border, to have Sixten recognized as a nobleman when trying to find work, to heighten the suspense of the chase.

instigate a humorous sub-plot—an investigation that satirizes the "dragnet" establishment of America. Pitting against one another a Houston Police-chief, a private "dic" brought in from San Francisco who arrives with several suitcases of turtle-necks, and his Texas police flunky, a half-wit, all-American porker who reads Captain American comics and also tries to raise a family—this role was commendably portrayed with many grins of blissful stupidity by John Shuck, the frustrated dentist in M-A-S-H— and finally a local liberal, the type who treats his black chauffeur like scum; all of them bumping into each other's selfish interests.

The fairy tale ends on the inevitable and right note of Sorrow and Tragedy: Shelley Duvall, who makes her lively debut as Suzanne, a bopper-guide at the Houston Astrodome, not so accidentally seduces Brewster into losing his virginity and, in a moment of illusive manhood and trust, he confesses involvement in the murders. Suzanne lets her patriotic neuroses take over and dismissing Brewster's justification that the victims stood in the way of his total liberation, rats to the porkers. We find Brewster McCloud alone, hurriedly leaving his secret workshop deep in the bowels of the Astrodome, now deserted workshop deep in the bowels of the Astrodome, now deserted in a symbolic exit by his fairy godmother, as the police flood the enclosed stadium. He is airborne, flying...the wings work! But Brewster is trapped within the dome and finally, exhausted, he plummets to the field below, experiencing quite a different liberation: death.

The actual ending of the film is a beautiful surprise: the cast comes onto the Astrodome field as circus characters in the Greatest Show on Earth.

Brewster McCloud spares practically nothing in our society. All in all, there must be literally hundreds of gibes and pokes at contemporary society and they can't all be seen or heard at one sitting. Even MGM's Leo the lion doesn't escape the treatment: the beast's trademark roar is stepped on by the first line of dialogue.

There is an overdose of bird dung and an apparent waning cause for liberation in the film, but these are small failings within a clear triumph of the imagination. Go and see Brewster McCloud. You won't be surprised that Judith Crist has rated it among the Ten Best Films of 1970.

by Robin Kaplin

Many aspects of the emotional side of the film are conveyed chiefly through miming and music: the close-ups of diminishing money in hand, sinister fortune cards, the dagger and the gun, Elvira's secret scene on the clothesline, the eating of berries and mushrooms, and of course the many love scenes. This curiously antique quiet extends to "action" scenes—as Elvira and Sixten steal away from a hotel where they have been spotted, they hide in breathless silence while a man strolls past; Sixten wins their last meal by a wordless game of strength. Their escape on horseback, their quarrel and boatride, even the suicide itself, are basically silent scenes. Widerberg deals only with peripheral matters through dialogue: Sixten's role as soldier, Elvira's selling of the Toulouse-Lautrec turn out to be weak spots.

Films

"Trash" - Starring Joe Dallesandro, Holly Woodlawn, Jane Firth. Written & Directed by Paul Morrissey. Produced by Andy Warhol.

"Gimmie Shelter" - Starring The Rolling Stones. Filmed by Albert & David Maysles and Charlotte Zworin; A Cinema V Production.

by mjj

A unique segment of contemporary American Cinema is moving quickly in new directions. It is becoming bolder, more daring in its approach to presenting reality. And the emphasis seems to be shifting - radically - from entertainment, or at best, moralism, to as close to experience as one can get via cinematic medium. The two films listed above provide real confrontations for the viewer; they are deadly proficient in their ability to absorb him.

This occurs primarily because of the cinematic techniques employed in the two films. These are primitive and crude films, photographed by hand-held cameras (with the exception of parts of "Gimmie Shelter") and as such, offer a limited, but striking and gripping sense of realism. Because the focus is so narrow and usually singular, we are forced into perceiving a myopic, but engaging, viewpoint. It's contrived gimmickry, of course, but it works and with astounding results.

This process doesn't always make for great art or even good film, however. But that almost becomes a secondary consideration, so strong are the engaging qualities of these films. Almost. What prevents them from being absolute in their power is basically a dreadful lack of craftsmanship and a matter of taste.

New Hero

It is also significant to note the emergence of a new hero (for the screen; he's been drifting around the American Novel for some years now) - the confused, existential hero thrust into a mad, mad world who emerges, often in spite of his own nature, still possessing a kind of purity or innocence. In their own distinct and separate ways, the main people and characters in these films are appealing. God knows, even charismatic. (This has to do with the kind of reality established by the film itself; in "Trash", Joe, a junkie, comes out pretty normal and likeable in the face of the people who surround and use him).

"Trash" is the latest epic from the Warhol Factory. Warhol and Morrissey (artistically, the two are synonymous) seem to be moving forward in their attempt to recreate (re-define?) the American Cinema; they are into the Thirties now. "Trash" is certainly the best (i.e., it has a plot, there is a semblance of dialogue, a touch of what might be acting, etc.) of Warhol's films that I've seen. It is, if nothing else, engrossing.

It is "about" a junkie and his inability to get an erection. Despite this deficiency, Joe isn't very hassled. But the chicks he encounters are - and Joe spends

much of the film being seduced. All Joe wants is his next fix. Within this thin plot, Warhol and Morrissey demonstrate how all of society is a junkie looking for the next fix.

There's lots of sex, lots of skin, lots of perversity, and lots of dope. "Trash" is really an arty skin flick. But it's something else too - a view, an outlook an encounter with a reality that repulses us and yet forces us to watch, even involve ourselves.

Dallesandro mumbles and stumbles his way through the film, not acting, but being. He is funny, tragic and in many ways, very ordinary. I liked him, felt sorry for him, empathized with him. Sometimes, he just makes you relate to him. In one scene, he has just shot up and is being observed by a weird married couple who flip when they think he is going to OD. They throw him naked out onto a fire escape. Joe, spaced, throws on his clothes and mutters a perfectly timed "Shit!" in a splendid Brooklyn accent.

Holly Woodlawn, the chick Joe lives with, is great. "She" is played by a female impersonator who is...incredible.

"Trash" is trash. That seems to be the whole point. I didn't like it. I don't think I was supposed to. But I stayed until the end and I feel as if I've...lived through something very strange, yet beneficial.

The first half of "Gimmie Shelter" offers a rare chance to see the Rolling Stones as they blew across America in late '69. We watch them traveling riffing in motel rooms, playing sheer dynamite music at their concerts. The focus is naturally on Mick Jagger, as he seems to embody the Stones' legend and myth, and he is astounding. The shots of the band performing are superb, the sound incredible, and they forcefully show you why they are the best rock and roll band to ever take a stage.

Inevitable Gloom

Despite all this, the film moves with an aura of inevitable gloom surrounding it. The Maysles have edited the film with a purpose: to show the events leading up to the disaster at the Altamont Speedway, where a man was killed by the Hell's Angels during the Stones's free concert. The tour section of "Gimmie Shelter" is ominously spliced with grim omens: the faulty, uncertain, uptight planning sessions, the legal hassles involving lawyers and sheriffs, the typical wheeling and dealing operations of hardened promoters like Sam Cutler. Also, we see a pensive and apprehensive Jagger watch the rushes of the film, flinching when a Hell's Angel leader calls him an idiot and sordid as the horrific spectacle of death unfolds before him...again. All of this shrouds the action with a sense of tragedy and despair.

"I Hate You"

Altamont comes, a gray, cold, sullen day - much like the people who came expecting an "instant Woodstock." Tension crowds the day. Jagger is hit by a young man screaming "I hate you!" as he steps off the plane arriving at

Altamont. The Angels show and assume their roles as "policemen," a position apparently assigned them (for quantities of acid and beer) by someone.

The Airplane play. A fight breaks out (the Angels are wielding pool cue sticks as weapons) and lead singer Marty Balin is laid out trying to stop it. The bad vibes are manifesting physically with brutal results. Watching the film, I grow tense, feeling as if I am there and, like the rest, helpless.

The Stones finally saunter on stage. It is late, dark and hazy. Erie campfires illuminate ghostly Angels and a nervous Mick Jagger. They play brilliantly, but something is happening. Scuffling in the crowd. Jagger is shaken and the Angels openly despise him and his faggy dancing. Their faces say it. "If I could get my hands on that little queer..." The Stones stop playing. Jagger: "Who is fighting and what for?"

"Sympathy for the Devil." More disturbance. The Stones can't see but their instincts warn them. "C'mon people, get it together!" The music begins again. Suddenly, screaming and chaos. A black man dressed in fluorescent green is charging the stage. He has a gun, we see it. From the cold, black night, a Hell's Angel crosses his path and cuts him down with a shining dagger.

Still unsure of what is happening, the Stones plead with the crowd. They are doing all they can and any claim that were: "irresponsible" is bullshit. Keith Richard, angered and aware that something bad is happening, grabs the mike from Jagger and points into the crowd: "That cat better stop fuckin' around!" Finally, the commotion subsides, the Stones finish and split, still not aware that a man was killed.

Speechless

In the cutting room, Jagger, looking unlike the same man who danced in front of America with his mocking Uncle Sam hat, is shaken and speechless, his eyes dim and remorseful. The camera freezes and Mick's icy stare is captured as the credits roll up and we hear "Gimmie Shelter." An astonishing experience. It seemed like a script, that couldn't have happened.

Despite their many flaws and oversights, these two films are landmarks of American film making. They are undeniable in their force. Both are documentaries, even "Trash," and they leave behind a record, an epistle, of the life and times in the modern world. Perhaps we are beyond the point when we can refer to "good" and "bad". "Trash," and "Gimmie Shelter" very nearly transcend that. These films are, they exist, not as art, not even as cinema, but ultimately as experience. And as such, they may have discovered for the medium its most functional and vital purpose.

NOTE: Both "Trash" and "Gimmie Shelter" will be playing in Greensboro, at the Janus 1 & 2, next week.

Postscript: Pia Degermark of "Elvira Madigan"

Pia's story is just as romantic as Elvira Madigan's; she was discovered by director, Bo Widerberg, who couldn't stop looking at a newspaper photograph of Pia dancing at a palace ball with young Crown Prince Carl Gustaf, her friend from childhood. Widerberg lured the sixteen year old girl from her sheltered boarding school life to spend her vacation as love-struck

Elvira; the role paid her \$1,270. Then she returned to school while her gentle, flowing-gown Elvira floated out to the movie public. Shocks and rewards came to Pia with "Elvira Madigan;" her too easy success provoked hostility from schoolmates and Stockholm actors. She began to feel so isolated that she was emotionally ill for a year. By the time Pia went to Cannes for "best actress" award, she was down to seventy pounds and had to be wheeled about as an invalid.