

“Badlands, Mean Streets, and
The Wind and the Lion”
Manny Farber

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Badlands, Mean Streets, and The Wind and the Lion

“It occurred to me as I looked through my father’s stereopticon that I was just a little girl from Texas and I had only a certain number of years to live.” As the acquiescent, slack Holly (Sissy Spacek) muses out loud about the limitations of life, wondering what her future spouse is doing at this moment, “is he thinking about me somehow even though he doesn’t know me,” the screen fills with haunting images of the world’s past. These images jump around in terms of geography and culture: the sphinx, two Victorian harlots leaning on a piano, a sentimental picture of a farm boy and his sad girl.

Along with Warren Oates’ lean performance of a billboard-painting loner and the modernized Tom Benton view of Midwest Americana, Malick’s *Badlands* is often into the most artist-bewitching strategy of the ’70s. Conceptual artists like John Baldessari, Yvonne Rainer in her two films, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosslet in their postcard diaries, Fred Lonidier, Phil Steinmetz and Allan Sekula in their photo-fiction narratives are all using visual images and verbal texts in which the alignment isn’t exact, so there is a space or jar created by the disjunct. In that space, the irony, humor, absurdity or message

resides. The electricity created by the jar between text and visuals, words and pictures, has become the favorite technique for pinning down the madness of the human condition. It's also a strategy that allows for an exhilarating freedom, opening up the film, photo, painting format formerly closed to the possibility of informational facetiousness.

One of the earliest, surpassing examples: Godard's grainy, brusquely edited, stark antiwar film, *Les Carabiniers*. Throughout the mordant fable, two cretinous brothers, Michelange and Ulysses, send home postcards describing their adventures in the king's war, appended with terrific messages presented in longhand on the screen: "We can break old men's glasses, we can steal jukeboxes and slaughter innocents." The climactic scene: promised the world, the soldiers come back with a suitcase filled with postcards which voluptuously pin down the variety and beauty of civilization in a nearly ten-minute scene. Godard's idea is that this pictorial catalog—a 1920s Maserati, Durer's rabbit, the Taj Mahal, the technicolor works in Hollywood, the Chicago aquarium—represents the mad disparity of image and reality. The double-time biography of Liv Ullmann, which used actual snapshots of the actress to prove a feminist point, was the least trumped-up section of Bergman's otherwise soapy *Scenes From a Marriage*, Rainer's very interesting *Film About a Woman Who . . .* has a postcard-narration sequence, and the home-movie sequence in *Mean Streets*, including the typewritten credits, is vivacious and electric.

All these artists are turning their backs on '60s formalism in favor of a crossed-media art involved with biography, myth, history. Cliche is super popular ("cliche is in a sense the purest art of intelligibility: it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life with beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity" is a Leo Bersani quote which appears twice in Rainer's *Film*) as is the gritty, nervous teasing of the *Scarface* genre in *Mean Streets*, the broad parodying of a swash-buckler in Milius' *Lion* film, the slyly drained version of the Bonnie Clyde spree through flat, dull American towns in *Badlands*.

No survey of American films could route itself around two 1973 films, *Mean Streets* and *Badlands*, ambivalent milieu films about frenetic NYC punks and a Mr. Cool mad-dog killer, which are ebulliently lit from inside by a stored-up desire to make a personal statement. If these two oddballers, still intellectually interesting in 1975, are linked with a more recent writer-director film, *The Wind and the Lion*, they spotlight various postures that make the New Hollywood film so different from its forerunners, i.e., a facetious attitude about history, an automatic distrust of cops-soldiers-presidents, and, along with the bent for or against bizarre Americana, a jamming on the idea that people are inex-

trically influenced by myths, clichés, media, postcards, diaries, home movies, letters, etc.

From its jived, happy credit sequence, segments of a home movie with Keitel's Charlie mugging a church christening, *Mean Streets* is uniquely keyed to the small, off-center improvising of a snapshot. *The Wind and the Windy*, *The King and I* crossed with Brecht and a ton of anti-American roundhouse swings, is constantly teasing the official photograph. *Badlands* is the Bonnie-Clyde bloodbath done without emotions or reactions, plus a suave, painterly image (the visuals resemble postcards with the color printed twice) that bespeaks a near-comatose Dakota life. The lethargy of S. Dakotans is joined with a girl's (Sissy Spacek) deadpan, rosy-sided diary on the soundtrack. It takes this bloodless chick eight murders to figure her ex-garbage slinger with Nat Cole in his heart as not only "trigger happy," but, in fact, "the hell-bent type." "Hi, we're on the run, we'd like to hide out here for a few hours." A frozen-with-fear rich man, a paper doll chastized by gentility, says: "Of course, go right ahead." Holly, educated on fan mags and pop lyrics, tours the man's gothic mansion, determined to normalize pure terror. Meanwhile, her industrious lover (he was the handsomest boy I ever saw . . . he looked just like James Dean), always on the prowl between emotionless murders for useful items, has dug up a silver loving cup, an old football and a dictaphone for some studious Norman P. Veale messages for straightening potential Dakotan screwups: "Listen to your parents. They usually know best. Don't look down on the minority opinion, keep an open mind. But when the minority becomes a majority opinion, pay attention to it."

The deliberate mismatch of what you see and what you hear puts *Badlands* in the surreal neighborhood of a Thoreau nature study crossed with Lewis Carroll. One choice small event occurs near nightfall on the prairie. The still faithful and gullible Spacek is reporting Kit's latest plan to organize their outlawed life. "Kit said we had to get rid of that football because it was excess baggage." On screen, Sheen is in the middle of a prairie nowhere, repeatedly shooting a worn-out football, then trying to sqoosh out the air with gun butt and cowboy boots. He does it with the seriousness of a chem major. All this takes place about three minutes after her bland sing song reports: "Kit hits cows with the Cadillac to save ammo."

One thing that stands out is the way that many of the new demons in Hollywood and Marin Co. lived their youth in the Eisenhower '50s, hid out in film schools and Corman-ish B films during the heyday of Godard and Snow, and exploded in the '70s as impatient Prousts in an attraction-repulsion syndrome with the pious, smug Americanism that pummeled their teenaged years.

These 30-year-olds, who are on a kick investigating myths, clichés and autobiography, were educated in an era that was unforgettable, not only for the sponge mop, Pat Boone and Korea, but for sincerity, chastity and the drabest clothes of the 20th century, charcoal gray being the big color. The main point being made here is that each movie, plus a dozen semi-tortures like *White Line Fever*, gets its bite from being a backlash against the solemnity of the '50s.

The viewpoint in each film is from the outside looking in on a milieu that may seem as askew and perverse as Alice's Wonderland. From Sheen's angry moments in *Badlands* (disappearing behind a barn, where he starts kicking the ground, furiously jerking his shoulders, flinging his head around to rid himself of a pathological malice) to the Roosevelt vignettes in Milius' *Lion*, with Brian Keith's enactment of a middle-aged boy scout promoting America and himself as the quintessence of manliness, there is a quality of quaintness. The past is treated with an indulgence that expects idiocies.

Milius' film is a languid, cheerful portrait of the American as a beamish blunderer squandering lives and energy in the third world. It takes place alternately around Morocco and wherever Teddy Roosevelt's sporting performances occur. A robust, deep-chested Teddy (Keith) is clean, sure of himself, optimistic, and the movie implies that such conceit, naivete, and shallow comprehension has led in time directly to Selma, My Lai and Kent State. A rich American widow is kidnapped by Raisuli, the last of the Barbary pirates, whereupon Roosevelt creates a campaign catch phrase (Pedecaris alive or Raisuli dead) and some whacky moves to get her back.

Mean Streets, one of the classic 1970s films, talks about the '50s in an immigrant neighborhood from an ambivalent viewpoint, that of a writer-director who is now an outsider looking in but still yearns to be part of the neighborhood. Scorsese, who is the voice-over for Charley's conscience in the opening church scene and plays the small, retiring gunman (to perfection) who shoots up the three leads in the final Brooklyn Bridge scene, doesn't know whether to say hurrah for Little Italy or let me out of the place. His stand-in, Keitel's Charley, everybody's guardian, "everybody likes Charley, a regular fucking politician, this guy," is reminiscent of Brando's Terry Malloy in *On The Waterfront*, a big '50s hit. Keitel's weight-lifter's showy grace, his nervous-tiny fidgets, is stationed, like Scorsese himself, between Teresa who wants out in the worst way, "who needs this place," and his taunting pal, Johnny Boy (De Niro), who's totally out of control and caught up in the neighborhood, like a whirlwind.

Mean Streets is a terrific example of intricate, tough filmmaking. Like Renoir's *M. Lange* gem, Scorsese's whip-like style moves his ensemble with

incredible vivacity in an opening disco scene and later in a remarkable car scene with a funny queen screaming at every cute guy who passes in the street, "Wait for me, honey," mortifying all the tough hoods with him in the car. The poignant street film is a once-in-a-lifetime work: his own neighborhood, talented actors before they've scored and all the same age (nothing to lose), it's an intensely autobiographical work.

Scorsese's gritty, small imaged, nervous epic is a lower-case study of petty hoods who are more a problem to themselves than to the police or rival gangs. Grandiosity, paranoia and saving face are the movie's subjects, rather than real crime. Still, it is the small lower-case touch that sets the movie off from its Caesar-Scarface forerunners. The oldest of gangster-film violences, one car's gangsters shooting up another car's trio, is cashed for a dozen small-time points. The two hoods are not only stunned that they butchered Charley-Teresa-Johnny, but they park nearby like amazed grandstanders with a stricken curious look on their faces. An over-choreographed bash in a poolroom is at least crossed by an uncanny surprise note: a feisty fatty in tennis shoes who turns into a Toshiro Mifune. A possible dull stretch while moving the lovers from hotel tryst to elevator is cunningly spiced with a credible racist crack: one minority picking on another.

This shot-in-the-dark film that paid off shows a gut connection to the '50s on Mott St. The crude use of earthy language to make strong contact: "Where the hell you been, Johnny? Your cousin's been worried sick." The rejoinder ("I've been out, taking a walk, what's the big deal, can't I go for a walk?") comes from the all-stops-out, suicidal Robert De Niro, who's just casually come through the fire-escape window after ferociously and furtively beating it up and down the East Side pavements. The show-biz gesturing, vacillating between raging and supplication, reeks of the '50s: hiding the fact of caring for a girl from pals, horrified about a girl's obscene language ("boy, Teresa, you've got some mouth"), looking good to other guys ("I don't want Johnny Boy making me look like a jerk-off"). Scorsese understands these touchy bonds.

From one angle, *Mean Streets* is another glorification of the hood as a glamorous energy force. At least, Scorsese has injected a rare lower-case vision, from the concept of the area as small figures in a threatening, congested darkness to the murky, musical, prowling camera. Scorsese's grasp of the hilarity, finely tuned camaraderie and in-fighting that can happen in a car adds a recurring and unique element to this film, the final scene beginning with De Niro's charming, bravado dance around the car, when his life's hanging by a thread, and proceeding through a ride that is cunningly detailed just for its mapping and geography. "You're sure you know where you're going, Charley?" Charley

answers: “You’re asking me, do I know Brooklyn? Does Livingston know Africa?” The movie’s ragged, vitriolic image is a high ’70s point, and it has a razzing sound track that is great for juicy NYC timing and emphasis, the way a single word like moog or Joey Clams surfaces out of a sandpapered garble. This final ride, with a willowy, gritty Amy Robinson and the incautious, self-destructive De Niro slicing perfectly in and out of Keitel’s intricate put-on piety, “What’s this, Chahley, Yuh talkin’ to yuhself now,” is beyond perfect ensemble acting into exhilaration.

with Patricia Patterson; September 23, 1975

New York Film Festival: 1975

NEW YORK’S press knows without a doubt how movie elements should behave, and it excoriates those films which dare to rearrange formal conventions. It tells us (1) music should never be an aggressive, dominant element (as it is in *Moses and Aaron*); (2) voices over the film should explain and correspond with visual material and never create a contradiction to the image (*India Song* blasts this law); (3) an image should hold the screen no longer than it takes a quick New Yorker to digest the point (*Kaspar Hauser* has its own passionately held notion of pace and its purpose); (4) an image should never be blocky, sculptural, and anti-flow (*Moses and Aaron* promulgates these Cézanne-esque qualities) or airlessly compacted, flattened into close frontality (the homosexuals in *Fist-Right of Freedom* are often profiled toward each other, close to the camera, filling most of the frame). Above all, a movie should progress fluidly in a rhythm and length that are comfortable and familiar to audiences (which applies to none of the above films, our favorites at this year’s New York Film Festival).

Yvonne Rainer, a Manhattan dancer and filmmaker, describes one of her dances with an iconoclastic humor unknown to the righteous, reproving New York movie critic, who not only knows every point at which an artist goes right or wrong, but knows it conclusively within twenty-four hours. Ms. Rainer talking about *Parts of Some Sextets*: “Its repetition of actions, its length, its relentless recitation, its inconsequential ebb and flow all combined to produce an effect of nothing happening. The dance went nowhere, did not develop, progressed as though on a treadmill or like a ten-ton truck stuck on a hill: it shifts gears, groans, sweats, farts, but doesn’t move an inch. Perhaps next