The Talkies

by Robert Asahina

Farewell, My Lovely

Although the lonesome cowboy has been for some time an object of derision or nostalgia or parody (or even self-parody, as with John Wayne), the hardboiled detective has remained a peculiarly evocative screen figure for successive generations of movie audiences since the 1940s. In many respects, of course, the private eye is merely an updated version of his Western counterpart. Substitute a .38 police special for a Colt .45 and a slouch hat and trenchcoat for a Stetson and buckskins, and Humphrey Bogart might be playing much the same character as John Wayne. But the crucial difference between the two lies precisely in the updating: The private eye is the archetypal *modern* figure, the antihero lost in the wasteland of the big city; and the transformation of character from the rugged individualist facing the Opening of the West to the alienated outsider in the underworld of crime helps to explain the attraction which movie audiences have felt for the hardboiled detective. The fundamental premise of the private-eye movie was, and is, the very same cynicism which proved to be the undoing of the old Hollywood Western: The larger-than-life virtues which had made the cowboy ride so tall in the saddle were eventually scorned as mere Hollywood trappings; but audiences too cynical to accept white-hatted heroes were all too ready to respond to trenchcoated antiheroes.

However, the private-eye movie is not free from its own kind of romantic foolishness. A couple of years ago, Robert Altman made a movie of Raymond Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye*, starring Elliott Gould as Philip Marlowe, the detective character that Bogart had made famous thirty years ago in *The Big Sleep*. To judge from the hostile reaction of audiences and critics, many people were upset by Altman's deft parody of the conventions of the private-eye movie. Gould's portrayal of Marlowe, particularly, was seen as a betrayal by those fans who had elevated Bogart's Marlowe into a veritable icon of popular culture. But what those outraged audiences missed, or blinded themselves to, was precisely what Altman had recognized: that the hardboiled detective was just as much a Hollywood fake as the lonesome cowboy; that his tarnished cynical armor was just so much tinsel, especially since it covered that same old Hollywood heart of gold.

The cowboy may have been a child's idea of a hero, but the private eye, as Pauline Kael has noted, was surely an adolescent's idea of an antihero; and Hollywood had proved adept at catering to the audience's need for a fantasy figure at either level: a strong silent type who could ward off Indian attacks, or a cynical outsider who could plumb the murky depths of the underworld but still maintain, in spite of his alienation, a personal—and romantic—code of honor. To show just how sentimental a character Marlowe really was, Altman set *The Long Goodbye* in the 1970s, where whatever virtues the private eye possessed seemed anachronistic and foolish—as they had been all along, anyway. As if in reaction to that film, the latest adaptation of yet another Raymond Chandler novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*, is deliberately staged back in the 1940s—complete with well-preserved autos, period clothing and hairdos, and throwaway remarks about DiMaggio, Hitler, and Eleanor Roosevelt. The idea obviously is to evoke the feeling of the 1940s, and especially the feeling of the movies of that decade—as if the reawakened sentiments of the audience could breathe new life into the tired conventions of the private-eye movie.

Whatever the intent, *Farewell, My Lovely* shows just how flabby the hardboiled detective has become in thirty years. For example, the latest movie Marlowe (Robert Mitchum) gets the inspiration to continue his investigation from a young black boy (significantly, a character not found in the original Chandler novel) whose father was murdered—a piece of Hollywood sentimentality that even audiences of an earlier era would have derided. Likewise, Marlowe's loyal friend (another character not found in the novel) turns out to be a newsboy—not a cripple, fortunately, but something almost as hackneyed: a has-been prizefighter. Worse yet is the casting of Charlotte Rampling as the female lead—a deliberate and bungling attempt to exploit her physical resemblance to Lauren Bacall, who had played opposite Bogart in *The Big Sleep*. The only purpose these clumsy contrivances serve is to evoke a phony nostalgia; but like the old cars, they are just empty mechanisms.

What nearly saves *Farewell, My Lovely* from all these contrivances is the casting of Robert Mitchum as Marlowe. At first, Mitchum would seem to be entirely wrong for the role. For one thing, he's simply too old: What used to be his chest is now barely contained by his belt, and the deep lines in his face terminate in the jowly pouch that used to be his neck. Twenty or even ten years ago Mitchum would have been fit to play this tough-guy role with contemptuous ease. But at the age of 58, he would seem to be as unsuited to play Philip Marlowe as John Wayne is to play the marshal in yet another Western.

But Mitchum does not indulge in the pathetic self-parody that Wayne and other old Western stars have in recent years. Mitchum has never been a great actor, but he always has been a powerful one, bringing an immense physical presence to the screen: The insolent dangling cigarette, the casual slouch, and the heavy, hooded eyelids are his trademarks that suggest vast animal power kept smoldering under his surface. And when Mitchum begins the movie with the words, "It was this past spring that I finally realized I was getting tired, and growing old," we realize why he can succeed in the role: Mitchum himself, like Marlowe and like the entire private-eye genre, has become an anachronism; and it is our shared recognition of his seeming inappropriateness for the role that gives Mitchum the ironic edge to cut through the self-conscious treacle of the rest of the production.

Hollywood heroes, and antiheroes, have contributed significantly to the national idiom; and the movies have played a much larger part in the shared fantasy life of supposedly sophisticated audiences than they are willing to admit to themselves. The antiheroes of our adolescence are perhaps more difficult to give up than the heroes of our childhood, but the artificial perpetuation of artificial myths serves no one but those who profit from the marketing of phony nostalgia. *Farewell, My Lovely* therefore seems like a desperate rearguard action to save the private-eye movie from parody and, ultimately, derision; unfortunately, it succeeds only as a sagging tribute to a tired cinematic genre, propped up by a sagging, but still powerful, actor. The title itself is an unintentionally ironic farewell to Mitchum-as-tough-guy, to the movie Marlowe and all his faded cinematic glory, to the novels of Raymond Chandler, and to the private-eye film. Phony nostalgia only cheapens their memory; and the time has come when the hardboiled detective should follow the lonesome cowboy into a cinematic sunset. □

Book Review/William H. Nolte

This Book Must Have a Stop

When I was young and easy under the apple boughs, to borrow a phrase from a boozy poet, no longer, alas, whinnying with us, I believed that one was duty-bound to read books from beginning to end, pausing only for food, sleep, and baseball. Although I became more and more selective in my choice of books, this madness ran on into my early twenties. Such folly is probably harmless in one's youth, but it would be unforgivable in an adult—evidence of arrested development. Now when a book begins to pall and makes me fidget and pull my ear, I take revenge by quietly setting it on the shelf for immediate return to the library or for donation to the Salvation Army. In such matters taste—that is to say, prejudice—plays the lead role. Many of these failed books have doubtless brought pleasure and even knowledge to other readers (or else the reviewers quoted on the dust-jackets are more incompetent and bigger liars than one might ordinarily assume them to be), and some of them may be masterpieces. Moreover, it is only natural to assume that I have rejected books for no better reason than that they caught me, or I them, in the wrong frame of mind—or at a time when my liver happened to be in a foul mood, or when remembrance of past sins made me despair of eternal bliss. I confess further that I begin far more books than I finish, and use the confession as testament to my good taste. Then there are those volumes that can be got through only by taking a number of "breathers" along the way, stopping now and again to read some other and more rewarding tome.

All this by way of introduction to a few words about my off-again on-again affair with Sybille Bedford's "life" of Aldous Huxley. By the time I got through it—and the four or five other books which occupied me along the way—a number of reviews had passed across my reading table. Is this biography "unquestionably a work of art" and a "superb biography," as the bookman for *Atlantic* insisted it is? The answer is No. If you doubt my word then I refer you to the *Harper's* critic who informed us, in unblushing understatement, that the book is "not one of the great efforts of literary biography.... No attempt is made to distill, cohere, or judge the life of her subject, and one is often shocked by her carelessness of style and organization of facts—defects that make so much of her work read like notes for a biography." George Steiner began his review in the *New Yorker* by objecting to the plethora of gossip and trivia found in many recent biographies (of Henry James, Lytton Strachey, and Faulkner, for example), and then delivered himself of a number of acerb reservations concerning the Huxley canon before concluding with this harsh judgment: "The literal dimensions of this book further diminish its object. Largesse betrays. A smaller biography would have left a greater man." I seriously doubt that the greatness of a man is dependent upon his biographers, but I sympathize with Mr. Steiner's view.

Quite frankly, I found Mrs. Bedford's biography a chore to get through, and more than once decided it wasn't worth the trouble. To begin with, fully two-thirds of this massive book is direct quotation. And much of that is from letters and notes of Maria Nys, Huxley's first wife, who was certainly a devoted helpmate, a thoroughly good, kind, and generous woman. But happy marriages, as Tolstoy implied when he said that they were all alike, are of little interest to anyone outside the family.

> *Aldous Huxley*
>
> by Sybille Bedford
> Knopf $15

Most great writers (or artists of any kind) have an element of the monstrous in their makeup; normally they are extreme egotists and more than a little careless with the common decencies. Fascinating to observe—from a safe distance and with one's money and womenfolk locked safely in the cellar—they are too much concerned with Self to be easy companions, and if not always immoral, they are frequently contemptuous of the prevailing morality in their time and place. That may be one reason we are drawn to their biographies. Not so to Huxley's. If we can believe Mrs. Bedford (and I think we must), he was one of the nicest and most considerate men who ever wrote a book or had an original thought. And that fact may be used as partial explanation of the biographer's failure to make this "life" an interesting book.

Only in his promiscuity, practiced intermittently over the years, did Huxley seem wayward. (He and his friend Bertrand Russell were similar in their attitude toward sexual matters.) Knowing that he enjoyed female distraction, and that the brief encounters amounted to no more than that, Maria aided and abetted the liaisons since, as she put it, "You can't leave it to Aldous, he'd make a muddle." He certainly was no Casanova, forever falling in love and thereby confusing physical desire for emotional attachment. "It might be a fluffy blonde," Mrs. Bedford tells us, "just as soon as someone middle-aged and amusing. What Aldous offered, apart from the essential thing that he *liked* making love *and* made no bones about it, was friendliness, good humour, a measure of affection. What he did not offer was courtship. He would have grudged the *time*."

Born into one of England's great intellectual families, Huxley was from the beginning filled with a consuming curiosity about the visible world, and would probably have become a scientist except for the strange (its precise nature is unknown) eye infection which he suffered at the age of 16 and which left him totally blind for several months. He immediately set to work learning braille, and during that dark period he taught himself to play the piano. Although he regained partial vision in one eye, he had to work always under a handicap that makes his encyclopedic accumulation of knowledge seem almost fabulous. It was during the period when he was reading braille that he developed his phenomenal memory; also during that period he wrote his first novel of about eighty thousand words, which was subsequently lost. He published in all 47 books, many of them requiring extensive research, a fact that boggles the mind. His brother Julian marveled at this prodigy in his *Memories*: "How Aldous managed to absorb (and still more to digest) the colossal amount of facts and ideas which furnished his mind remains a mystery.... Maria devotedly read to him for hours at a time; and with his one good eye, he managed to skim through learned journals, popular articles and books of every kind. He was apparently able to take them in at a glance, and what is more, to remember their essential content. His intellectual memory was phenomenal, doubtless trained by a tenacious will to surmount the original horror of threatened blindness...."

Sprinkled throughout this biography are several amusing anecdotes—concerning Huxley's friendship with D.H. and Freida Lawrence, an encounter with Thomas Mann and a group of his worshipful admirers, the travels throughout the world, and so on. There is a letter from Huxley, written in 1957 (on pages 613-614), on the earthy character of Freida that all Lawrence scholars and/or admirers should know. Although we are told too little about Huxley's attitudes towards his fellow writers, what we are told is unfailingly interesting. I was especially delighted by a story Huxley tells of dining with James Joyce in Paris and listening to the latter's comments on the meaning of the word Odysseus, that is, its derivation. Joyce's discourse on the etymology of the word, totally unrelated to anything we might call realistic, struck Huxley as just the sort of thing one might have expected to hear from Albertus Magnus in the thirteenth century. While respecting one's love for words, Huxley insisted that "one has to realize the limitations of words," and then described