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SR Goes to the Movies

Roland Gelatt

The Old Refrain

IS IT BASE HERESY to suggest that the Western film has begun to wear out its long-standing welcome? Merely to raise the question is to impugn one of Hollywood's cardinal articles of faith, which holds that the Western represents an art form of manifest durability, susceptible to an infinitude of variation, and favored with an everlasting grip on our mythic sensitivities. There comes a point, however, at which even the most fecund formula succumbs to the law of diminishing returns, and though the patrons are still queuing to buy tickets, it is time to question whether the Western may not be reaching a dead end.

Am I the only one who now stifles a yawn when the horses go clattering down a lovely, lonely valley and the potbellied locomotive goes chugging across a perilous trestle? Is there no one else who would willingly forego the sight of another dusty frontier street, with its mandatory bank, bordello, and bar? Or who has encountered enough charming outlaws and devoted sheriffs to last a lifetime?

These unwholesome—indeed, blasphemous—thoughts are occasioned by the appearance of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, which is having its world premiere next week, amid much academic folderol, at Yale University. As Westerns go, it is extraordinarily good. William Goldman's script rings some witty changes on the ancient theme of banditry versus society, and the title roles are played with engaging skill by Paul Newman and Robert Redford. But its very excellences—its literate dialogue, splendid photography, imaginative cutting—serve to make this viewer more acutely aware than ever of the Western's growing limitations.

This time the dramatis personae are rooted in historical reality. Butch Cassidy and his crack-shot accomplice were engaged in the standard Western thieveries during the frontier's declining years, then decamped for Bolivia, where they continued in similar vein until their demise at the hands of the Bolivian militia in 1909. Goldman catches them as they approach middle age, no longer wholly content with their life, but unable to break loose from the habit of grand larceny. This allows him to endow them with a quizical, amused objectivity about their lifework that makes for some adroit

patter on screen, if not for total credibility. The tone is set early in the picture as Butch and Sundance go clattering down that lovely, lonely valley. "Y'know, every time I see Hole-in-the-Wall again," Butch exclaims, surveying a scene of magnificent desolation, "it's like seeing it fresh for the very first time . . . and whenever that happens I ask myself the same question: how can I be so damn stupid as to keep coming back here?"

Needless to say, Paul Newman delivers this sort of jab with his customary twinkling urbanity, but eventually the device of setting up a cliché situation for a verbal anticlimax begins to wear a little thin. Also, one is hard put to believe that the real-life Butch and Sundance could have had much in common with the suave affability of Newman and Redford. Among the film's minor delights are a droll performance by George Furth as Mr. E. H. Harriman's devoted train guard, some lilting theme music by Burt Bacharach, and a lovely sequence of sepia stills limning the palmy days of New York when its heart was young and gay.

Another formula film fallen on evil days is that of the intricately planned robbery that works like a charm until some maladroitness turns events into a robbery of the robbers of their hard-earned booty at the end of the last reel. It was great fun for a while to be silent accomplices of these crafty brigands as they hatched their complex schemes, and then to laugh with them as the prize slipped away, but the conceit can withstand only so many repetitions.

The Italian Job is neither the best nor the worst of the genre. In it some nifty English crooks attempt to rob the Italians of \$4-million worth of gold by tying up the city of Turin in a monumental traffic jam at the very moment when the bullion is en route to the bank. Noel Coward masterminds the operation from the safety of his London prison cell and Michael Caine supervises on the spot. Not surprisingly, in view of the utter mindlessness of the enterprise, Caine goes through the motions with hazy detachment. At the very end, with the gold almost over the mountains and safe in Switzerland, we have an updated version of the tottering cabin scene in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*—only not one jot so funny.

An essay review of "The French: Portrait of a People,"
by Sanche de Gramont (Putnam, 479 pp., \$7.95)

France as Faulted by an Ambivalent Son

by LEWIS GALANTIERE

Sanche de Gramont seems to be in a predicament. A grandson of a duke whose forebears greatly served Louis XIV, the author of this very personal book was, like Alfred de Musset's Roila, "born too late in a world too old." Maturing in the 1950s, when the royalist cause was stone dead, he was without the lodestar by which his caste was still guided at the beginning of the century when Proust was immortalizing its disintegration. On the other hand, having spent twenty years—more than half his life—in the United States, attending Yale and Columbia universities, then learning his trade as journalist during a decade on the staff of a great New York daily and of our oldest national weekly (both now defunct), he appears to have substituted, for traditional loyalty to the *ancien régime*, democracy "in the Anglo-Saxon or American sense" as the measure by which to judge French institutions. The influence of his American experience, however, remains rational and external. What we may call his race memory, together with his French secondary education—the decisive factor in a Frenchman's intellectual formation—and his military service as a young conscript, have left him instinctively and emotionally French to the core of his being. Despite his remarkable command of the American idiom, only a Frenchman could have written this book.

The result is a valiantly confused work. Mr. de Gramont cannot shake off a nostalgic feeling for the *ancien régime*. He calls Voltaire "the shopkeeper's philosopher" and believes mistakenly that Voltaire was anti-

monarchic. Yet he is as critical of monarchical as of republican régimes. Like Voltaire, he is anti-doctrinaire, a defender of the individual against the state, of free thought and expression; but, though moved by private prejudices and engaged in a one-man war against what he finds detestable in the France of his times, de Gramont is more wide-ranging than Voltaire in his efforts to place the blame where, in his view, it belongs.

His good faith is plain. He puts all the régimes since the Revolution of 1789 into the same sack—the five republics, three monarchies, two Napoleonic empires. All were false to their trust: "Every French régime has treated its constitution as a dispensable scrap of paper." At the same time, Mr. de Gramont scrupulously notes that even the hateful Jacobins had some merit. The Third Republic "gave the nation basic freedoms" and was able to survive grave crises including "the right-wing threat in the Thirties." Léon Blum's Popular Front government introduced "the most important social legislation France had known." Mendès-France, who governed briefly in 1954, "was able to end the Indochina war and enact sound economic measures."

Altogether, this book, undertaken upon the author's return to France following a prolonged absence, is in some part the book of a Frenchman in search of himself.

Seeking to illustrate and support its arguments from the whole of French history, the book, which was written in English for the American market, is so crowded with passing allusions to little-known persons, places, events and assorted phenomena that an American (possessing school French) will want to have at hand the historical and biographical pages of the *Petit*



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LEWIS GALANTIERE, born in the United States, was educated in France and has for many years written on all facets of French literature and society.