

# SR Goes to the Movies

Arthur Knight

## Crime in the Cities

ALTHOUGH our cities are rapidly becoming impossible to live in, they are, as our movies keep reminding us, great places for dying. The sheer impersonality of their clatter and bustle, the dwarfing effect of their skyscrapers, the sense of entrapment created by their traffic-logged streets—or worse, one's chilling awareness of his own vulnerability once those streets have emptied in the dark hours before dawn—produce a latent feeling of menace that can flare into panic with the slightest touch of the imagination. Two new pictures, *The Organization* and *The French Connection*, skillfully augment the melodramatics of modern crime detection with these terrors inherent in our metropolises, and both wind up as superior thrillers.

It is perhaps significant that in both films—one based loosely on fact, the other wholly fictional—the criminals are international narcotics dealers, with wealth and resources far beyond those of the local enforcement agencies. Indeed, there is the implication that their influence extends into the upper echelons of police officialdom, leaving the hapless line detectives uncertain whether their real enemies are behind or in front of them. Clearly, theirs is a dedication above and beyond the call of duty—pathological in the case of Gene Hackman in *The French Connection*, totally committed

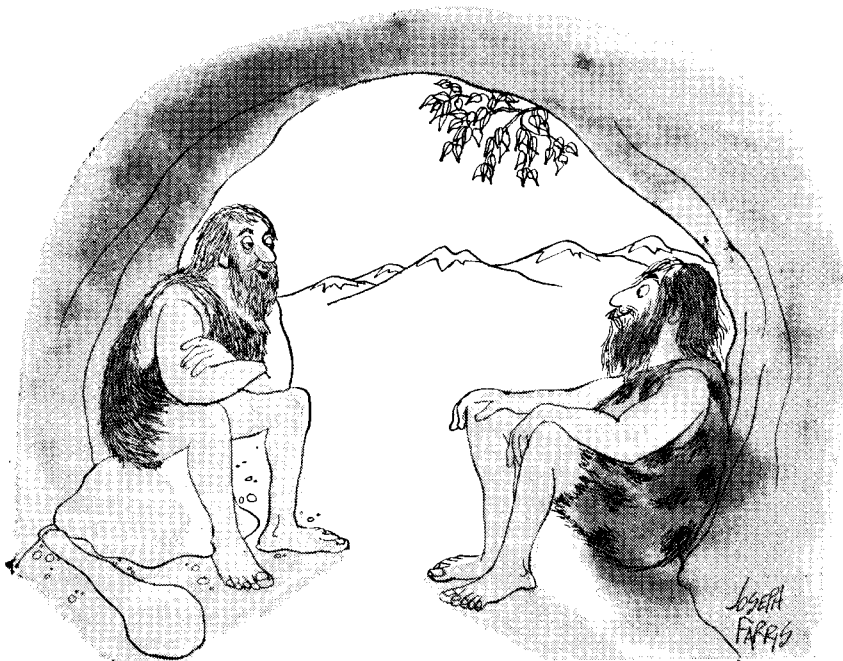
in that of Sidney Poitier, continuing in *The Organization* his Mr. Tibbs role. The fact that both detectives succeed in hitting their immediate targets while the top men escape scot-free may be interpreted as either the new realism or the new cynicism. Neither interpretation is apt to make the average city-dweller feel terribly secure.

In *The French Connection*, freely adapted from Robin Moore's best seller, the city is New York, and not since *Bullitt* has a city been so effectively mobilized to enhance a fundamentally routine cops and robbers script. The parallel is most evident in the spine-tingling chase of a hijacked elevated train by a police car snaking through the traffic below. (One wonders if the innocent bystanders whose cars are sideswiped in such a chase ever receive compensation from the P.D.) But no less to the point are the shady bars and shadowy alleys that present an open invitation to mayhem, or crowded Fifth Avenue and the even more crowded subways where a man under police surveillance can readily elude his pursuers. If *The French Connection* features New York at its most impersonal worst, it also offers Gene Hackman at his thespian best. As the overwrought, overworked, overzealous narco squad detective, he packs a drive and intensity that make one at once grateful and troubled that he is on our side of the law.

No such doubts assail us as we watch

Sidney Poitier pursue the pushers in *The Organization*. James R. Webb's original screenplay, a combination of Mr. Tibbs and *Mod Squad*, ingeniously aligns Poitier with a sextet of former users and dealers who have their own reasons for fighting the drug syndicate. As in earlier Tibbs episodes, this connection places him outside the law, even to the extent of turning in his badge; but his instincts, it transpires, are sound, leading him to ever-higher echelons of organized crime. There is a nice sense about this film—due in part to the writing, and in no small part to the casting—of never quite knowing in whom to believe: the sweating vice president of a furniture factory whose boss has been murdered; the cool, drunken wife of the murdered man; the Negro head of the local narco bureau. What you do believe, always, is that San Francisco is every bit as hospitable to would-be criminals as New York. The inevitable auto chases never approach the tension of the one in *Bullitt*, but this deficiency is more than compensated for by a three-way manhunt through the diggings for the still uncompleted Bay Area Rapid Transit in downtown Frisco. And the dead-of-night details of the multi-million-dollar drug theft that introduces the film are as suspenseful as any movie heist since *Rififi*.

There is, however, another kind of crime that can be chalked up to the cities, and this is developed by exquisite, poignant, and often terribly funny flashbacks in a movie called, unfortunately, *T. R. Baskin*. T. R. Baskin is a girl from Ohio who takes up residence in Chicago to partake of the sophisticated pleasures of an urban center. Those pleasures, it soon develops, consist of high rents for inadequate apartments, a particularly unrewarding nine-to-five job with a depressingly computerized firm, and a round of dreary seductions that climaxes in a hotel room encounter with an auto tire salesman from Utica, New York. The coldness of the big cities is perhaps best summed up by the salesman (Peter Boyle) who, after an unsuccessful attempt to make love to T. R., plaintively observes, "Utica doesn't frighten people." Chicago does, and Candice Bergen, topping her performance in *Carnal Knowledge*, touchingly depicts the vulnerability of a would-be sophisticate fresh from the sticks. The script, by Peter Hyams, while consistently witty and fresh, suffers from dialogue that—in his own phrase—"talks like a typewriter," but director Herbert Ross has done a masterful job of making his people act like humans. Unlike the melodramatists, Hyams and Ross seem to feel that humanity and decency can, at least for a while, hold the city at bay.



"I just invented a new concept. It's called media."

## Children

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former wife of Cary Grant. For eight years she has been director of psychodrama therapy at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, a subject that she teaches at several other schools. Her book is a form of acting out—through the marionette that is Lucia—the pain of a rejected child. If one understands it in those terms, one may be willing to suspend disbelief.

In this light, the exaggerated movements and reactions of the characters may become less obtrusive and consequently more meaningful. The over-poetic passages of description and emotion, seen as painted flats and translucent scrims made brighter than nature in order to look real from the balcony, are acceptable in a drama whereas they are irritating in a novel. The one-sided characterizations—mad mother, immature father, mean old grandmother, selfish aunt, loving but oppressed black servants, cruel twelve-year-old boys, totally misunderstood Lucia—are figures moving across a lit stage to dramatize a message. The slice-of-life ending, without resolution, without growth or development, might have its place on a makeshift stage where people are acting out their problems; it is contrary to everything a novel should do.

Calling this a novel is perhaps the publisher's mistake; the work is clearly more akin to drama. Perhaps it is actually psychodrama in print and should be judged as such.

*Eileen Lottman is a contributing editor of Publishers' Weekly.*

### THE DREAM MUSEUM

by Seymour Epstein

Doubleday, 297 pp., \$6.95

Reviewed by Joseph Catinella

■ "Why do these kids go for drugs the way they do? I offer my own life as evidence that the ordinary chances provide more than enough rare sensation." These are the thoughts of David Lang, who, when he learns of Dodie's affair with another man, leaves his wife after almost twenty-three years of marriage. Sexual infidelity is a theme familiar to great art as well as pulp fiction, but for Seymour Epstein it's only the point of departure in this fresh, profound novel that examines the forces that can disrupt the lives of apparently stable men.

*The Dream Museum* deals with birth and marriage, and a procession of

visits, meetings, and quarrels. But Epstein is such a gifted writer that he transforms these commonplace events into occasions that reveal the beauty and terror of life. He explores David's separation from Dodie within the scope of our general divisions: subtle misunderstandings and withdrawals, our inability to connect with people we love best yet know very little about. Using the minutiae of everyday life, Epstein has written a book that dramatizes the intense significance of most men's "ordinary chances."

David is living in a friend's New York apartment, where he tries to understand what went wrong with his marriage. His first major "sensation" occurred when he dreamed of his wife having sexual intercourse with a stranger. After this dream, he longed to express "contrition" to Dodie and somehow atone for their dreary life together. But, when she returned from a visit to the Museum of Modern Art, David was seized by a terrible vision of her and their friend, Arthur Gerson, meeting as lovers in the museum's book shop.

Dodie admitted she had been unfaithful, and David now reviews "the prophetic element in dreams," though he doesn't believe in extrasensory powers. Forty-seven-year-old David is a rational man whose perceptions are always human, rooted in the objective world he knew when he was an executive for an educational film company. After he left Dodie and sold his share of the business, his private education began—a search for self-knowledge that may also help him understand Dodie and their son, Lenny.

As he recalls his past, David tells the story of his friendless youth. Growing into an equally lonely manhood, he had hoped that "Dodie and I would move out of our separate histories into the one we would create together." Because Epstein is a novelist who seeks

important truths, he probes David's life with uncommon delicacy and precision although, as David soon realizes, truth is often intangible: "I guess truth lives in its own element, like deep-water fish. Beautiful colors, fantastic forms, but when you bring it to the surface, the colors dim, the movement ceases, it dies."

But the author captures some truths as they pass quickly from one medium to another—from revelation to memory. David visits Lenny at his college in Vermont and meets Kathy, the twenty-two-year-old girl who returns home with him and who stays on as his bed-mate. These young people help David see just how much he's ignored and abused life's "ordinary chances."

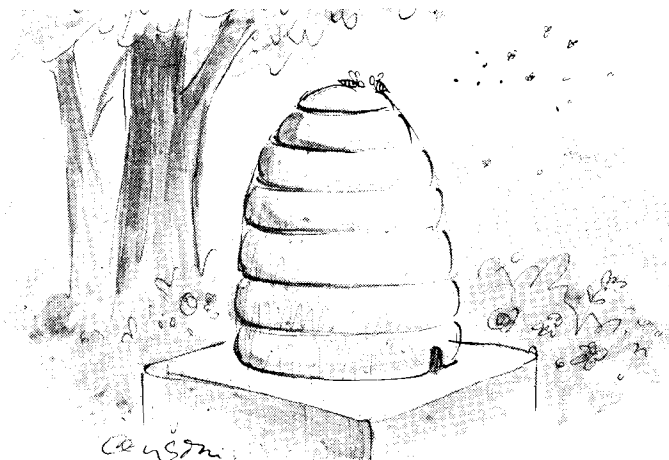
Every major character in this book endures his own sensations: Dodie, who dreads the boredom of a marriage that has dissolved into mere gestures of concern; Lenny, who escapes the "tranced" world of his parents to realize his own selfhood ("He had learned how to protect himself from love"); Kathy, whose vague amorality never conceals her desire to locate some meaning.

And, of course, David Lang, who "failed of the inspiration that would have made an ordinary life into a miracle." Like most of us, David is startled to find that he possesses the vanities and fears that can destroy marriages and maim children. But he learns that shock is basic to life—revealed in our dreams and in the explosive energy of our waking thoughts.

All men, Epstein seems to be saying, must experience some "rare sensation": the terror of aging and death, or of never loving anyone.

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Answer to Wit Twister, page 58:  
poles, slope, lopes.



"How can we break it to the Queen that we're changing from a monarchy to a republic?"