

The cave

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ON FILM



Amos Poe, *Rocket Gibraltar*, 1968, still from color film in 35 mm., 100 mins.

In the upstairs bedroom of an opulent East Coast beach house, a group of children wrap a corpse in a blanket and head out with it toward the stairs. They slide it over the steps; it thumps its way down, then crumples unceremoniously at the bottom. If this scene were played for grimness, it could be an excerpt from a horror movie. Or perhaps it could be a dark farce, of the *Arsenic and Old Lace* variety. And it certainly does have its elements of black humor, but tempered with another, quite different quality: a blend of ob-

jectivity and tenderness. For the sequence was scripted by Amos Poe, and its concerns are complex.

Poe is perhaps best known for the "punk" films he wrote, directed, and produced in the mid-to-late '70s, with all the freshness and sense of pure freedom that often embodies new movements at their inception. Films like *Blank Generation*, 1975, *Unmade Beds*, 1976, *The Foreigner*, 1977, and *Subway Riders*, 1979–80, helped displace the formalism of an earlier generation of downtown filmmakers with a pictorial style and conception that was echoed in the other arts. Poe's images emphasized their photographic and historical sources. *Unmade Beds*, for example, gives the impression of still photographs being forced to move, while *The Foreigner* re-creates images and motifs from films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, 1959, and *Alphaville*, 1965—a citation of earlier texts that was also a statement on the ability of the film image to carry both cultural and historical meanings.

To support this priority of the image, the narratives of most of Poe's earlier films are reduced almost to sketches, with the stories dwelling more on the complexity of behavior than on the progression of a plot through significant action. Performing in his movies, Debbie Harry, Eric Mitchell, Patti Astor, and Duncan Hannah are all stripped of their idiosyncracies to occupy a status that is underlined as belonging to the realm of images. This quality is reinforced by their clothes, which often recall those of the actors in the French *Nouvelle Vague* cinema of the '60s. Setting is also crucial, and the landscape is downtown New York, not so much as a place than as a state of being. Geography is for the most part suspended by an unconventional editing style, and space is abstracted by both the framing of shots and a type of photography, first in black and white and then in color, that tends to "blow out" the image—to slightly overexpose it, allowing light sources to "bleed," radiating into the rest of the shot. The effect is dreamlike and abstract, creating a mythic landscape for the playing out of these

offbeat dramas. In *Subway Riders*, the streets of New York, attended by the plaintive music of John Lurie's saxophone, are awash in panels of colored light—blues, oranges, greens. Seeing them this way, we are encouraged to remember that these are images we are watching, not reality.

Some of this characteristic sense of "picture-ness" pervades the latest of Poe's works, *Rocket Gibraltar*, a film to be released by Columbia Pictures, and his second movie made under the auspices of Hollywood. Poe wrote the script, and began the direction, but was shortly replaced by Daniel Petrie. *Rocket*, however, carries many of the markings of an Amos Poe film, primarily because it is structured by his original screenplay and explores a topic of his choosing. Set in the Hamptons, New York's affluent outlying beach resort, it describes an extended upper-middle-class family gathered for the birthday party of their aging father—an untypical locus for Poe, whose earlier works are grittily urban. Nonetheless, *Rocket* is a portrayal, as much as was *The Foreigner* or *Blank Generation*, of "our" generation as Poe sees it. The adults in the film are couples approaching middle age, who grapple with their status as parents, as mid-career professionals, and as the children of aging parents. That may sound like the yuppie TV show *thirtysomething*, or like the more upbeat and large-scale drama of Lawrence Kasdan's 1983 movie *The Big Chill*; but in Poe's script, whose effects fairly well survive in the film, the characters exist primarily as types, as they did in his earlier movies, and their interactions, although at times contentious or humorous, never quite gel on the level of drama. And as before, their behavior tends to remain inconclusive; action and meaning ebb and flow in differing directions.

The movie's main interaction is between the young children of the family—especially the youngest, Cy Blue (Macaulay Culkin)—and the old grandfather, Levi Rockwell (Burt Lancaster). Cy, at five years old, is a little boy with almost no past, and Levi, at 77, is a man, as the film will show, with virtually no future. These

two characters come intensely into the present tense as the focal point of the film. While the adults bicker, worry, and only incidentally plan a party for Levi's birthday, Cy and the other children prepare for him the gift of a smaller version of a Viking ship. As it turns out, he will use this ship for his own Viking funeral. It all has to do with worms—Levi has told the children that worms eat a body when it is buried in the ground, and that he more admires the Viking practice of sending a body alone to sea and then, from the shore, igniting the boat with a single flaming arrow. When Levi dies during his own birthday party, the children steal the body and give him precisely this type of send-off.

As written in the script, the "funeral" involves more black comedy and slapstick than have made it to the screen. Poe's *The Foreigner* and *Alphabet City* treat mortality with a similar offhanded humor. In *The Foreigner*, Eric Mitchell, running in Battery Park, is shot in the back—repeatedly, incessantly, to the point of absurdity. His shirt smoking from the gunshot wounds, he slips, slides, catches his balance, then does it all over again, until he finally comes to a stop, his legs splayed out beneath him, his head resting on the rail overlooking New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty. Onlookers, nasty types dressed in black, stop to stare, smoke, and then walk away. The humor, of course, comes from the knowledge that this death is only a performance in a movie, and that the film itself, as we have been reminded throughout, is a representation.

In 1977, when *The Foreigner* was made, its "inappropriate" response to death and violence seemed very much part of the punk attitude of the late '70s. That stance is considerably softened in both Poe's script for *Rocket* and the final film, yet its core has survived. Seen through the eyes and consciousness of the young Cy Blue, death here is simply factual. The children accept it without histrionic distress, and their subsequent actions are likewise down to earth, governed simply by expediency. Still, their composure over Levi's corpse should not be taken to sug-

gest coldness. We have seen enough of the children's relationship with their grandfather to understand his closeness to them, and the agreement between their action and his spirit. We know that he would have given them permission to do exactly what they do; their behavior is informed by a love between the living and the dead. A number of recent Hollywood movies—for example *River's Edge*, 1987, and *Stand By Me*, 1986—have shown corpses being treated in an alienated, anomalous way, without emotional response or action. Both scenarios like these and the controversy that attaches to them seem symptoms of the uncomfortable American attitude to death, which is sometimes suppressed from consciousness and sometimes brought out for uneasy and awkward handling. In the children of *Rocket Gibraltar*, Poe proposes an acceptance of the fact of death, but not the cold acceptance that *River's Edge* holds up for our disapproval. Here, the dead are emotionally linked to the living, but not so inextricably that life cannot go on.

The tendency to emphasize the factual in *Rocket's* attitude to death is continued in some of the film's formal properties. Poe was present for preproduction and the early stages of production, and was responsible for the casting, art direction, and locations, all of which tend to declare themselves in a way that recalls his earlier films. The casting, for example, makes the adults of the Rockwell clan so uniformly fair, healthy, and slender that they are for the most part indistinguishable not only from one another but, more important, from the Ralph Lauren-type print ads that mass-market the dream of class, style, and leisure. The clothes these characters wear are so uniformly "summer in the Hamptons" that they go beyond reference to deconstruction. The one exception is Dwayne (Kevin Spacey), a "downtown type," but still a type, and his costume too connotes its own cultural reference. In ways like these Poe emphasizes the "picture-ness" of the image, its status as an image with an ability for cultural resonance.

Petrie's shooting style, editing structure, music, and script changes make for a film that is more conventional and more sentimental than is typical of Poe's work, but that still incorporates some of his intended tenderness. The sense of place, for example, is well rendered, making the Hamptons so much what they are that they become everything they are supposed to be, and more—they become mythic. Watching *Rocket Gibraltar* is like inhabiting a paradigmatic time and place, the "summer in the Hamptons" of the American imagination. It is also important that as per Poe's intention, Burt Lancaster is Levi, the focal point of the portrait. It is no criticism of Lancaster's performance to say that his status here is largely iconic. His instantly familiar face appears as an embodiment of the cinema's history, as if a living image had somehow drawn the rest of the relatively unknown cast up onto the screen with him, and into the realm of pictorial artifice. This sense of the closed-off country of film, which we can look into but cannot enter, is also gently suggested in one of Levi's birthday gifts—a Fred Astaire and Rita Hayworth videocassette. For when we see Levi we see Lancaster, and it seems appropriate that he should be associated with this object, which contains in itself a whole world of which he is a citizen. Significantly, Levi is watching this tape when he dies. As a character, he exists in a different temporal dimension from the cinema's eternal present. But as a performance of Burt Lancaster's, he is as enduring as celluloid.

Poe has generally allowed for such shiftings of the usual congruences between actor and character, behavior and narrative action, transparency and opacity. Out of these disjunctions emerges a focus on the factual, on the existential, for which both the photographic image that is Poe's medium and the mortality that is his subject are apt correlatives. In Poe's conception, *Rocket Gibraltar* strove to express this tendency; in certain ways, it still does. ■

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