

Faith and the unknown are questioned throughout the film, as when the beggar character, a wandering savant staying at the farmstead, whispers to the panicked goatherd boy: "See the smoke trembling under the roof as if with fright? Yet when it gets out in the air, it has the whole sky to swirl about in. But it doesn't know that, so it huddles and trembles in the soot under the roof. It's the same with people. They quiver like a leaf in the storm, afraid of what they know and what they don't know." What seems within the text to refer to a pagan uncertainty toward the rewards of Christianity, feels for Bergman like an examination of his Christian background, and a fearful breaking from it.

As a production, *The Virgin Spring* rivals *The Seventh Seal* in its period detail; however anachronistic or even invented some of it may be, there is a tremendous sense of a lived-in past throughout, from Ingeri straining fresh milk through pine leaves, to the lead goatherd's boinging mouth organ that first attracts his victim. As he prepares to slay his victims, Töre calls for "the butcher's knife," which turns out to be a dagger with skeletal ribcage design, adorned with a horned skull; the tunic he wears for the assault resembles a butcher's apron. Bergman was self-admittedly going through a Kurosawa phase at the time, and thus scenes such as this take on an epic intensity that is absent in his other works—perhaps this is why today *The Virgin Spring* is one of his most accessible and rewatchable films. The Kurosawa influence can be seen elsewhere, particularly in the tracking shots of Ingeri and Karin through forests and alongside streams. Nykvist, who replaced Bergman's previous regular cinematographer Gunnar Fischer late in preproduction, did not have much time to prepare, so his signature look of shadowless grays is absent here, instead revealing a tremendous high contrast black-and-white look, where shadows draw emphasis, even divide up the images, such as in the final moments of Karin's life, when the shadows of branches cruelly carve up her terrified face.

Rereleased in a new 2K scan, the film looks exquisite (admittedly, it would look great in a VHS rip viewed on an iPhone 4), but Criterion has underserved it by merely porting over extras from its 2005 DVD release. Birgitta Steene's commentary is great for framing the film within the context of Bergman's life and career, and occasionally draws clever attention to shot composition, but the accompanying interviews with Lindblom and Pettersson add little new. However Bergman may have felt about it, *The Virgin Spring* feels an essential work of his, almost rending his career in two by closing a chapter where faith remained an option. Like the two hitchhiking students in *Wild Strawberries* slapfighting over whether or not there is a God, *The Virgin Spring* would be the last time Bergman would question these matters with either violence or humor.—David Neary

Midnight Cowboy

Produced by Jerome Hellman; directed by John Schlesinger; screenplay by Waldo Salt, based on the novel by James Leo Herlihy; cinematography by Adam Holender; production design by John Robert Lloyd; costume design by Ann Roth; edited by Hugh A. Robertson; musical supervision by John Barry; starring Jon Voight, Dustin Hoffman, Sylvia Miles, John McGiver, Brenda Vaccaro, Barnard Hughes, Jennifer Salt, and Bob Balaban. Blu-ray and DVD, color, 113 min., 1969. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterion.com.

John Schlesinger's X-rated *Midnight Cowboy*, a nobody-saw-that-coming critical and commercial success, was a sensation at the forty-second Academy Awards ceremony in 1970, walking into the room with seven nominations and leaving the building with coveted statuettes for Best Picture, Best Director, and Adapted Screenplay. Of course, "rated X" had a different meaning back then—as part of the brand new, post-Hays Code ratings system, the expectation was that the designation would apply to envelope-pushing, ambitious, challenging films that featured material and themes unsuitable for children, previously forbidden terrain that the emerging New Hollywood was eager to explore. (And besides, a sheepish MPAA soon reclassified the film to "R" without cutting a single frame of the picture.)



Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman star in John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Nevertheless, not everybody was pleased. The Old Hollywood and the New were not on good terms in 1969, which was also the year of *Easy Rider*, *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *Medium Cool* (all of which were passed over by the Academy for best picture nods in favor of the family-friendly fare *Anne of the Thousand Days* and *Hello, Dolly!*). Bob Hope unleashed a monologue full of vituperative jokes ("Remember when a movie score referred to the music" was a relatively gentle jibe) that did not mask his hostility to those on the other side of the cultural divide. "This is not an Academy Awards, it's a freak out," he lamented, "nothing is taboo anymore"—these lines and others were commonly met with the applause of many in the audience. The comedian closed the show on a more sober note, offering what amounted to an editorial plea for more wholesome screen fare.

Midnight Cowboy was not that. Steeped in a then gasp-inducing frankness unprecedented for a commercial Hollywood film, *Cowboy* tells the story of the relationship between Joe Buck, a dim-witted, would-be hustler from Texas (a then-unknown Jon Voight), and Enrico Salvatore "Ratso" Rizzo, a dilapidated, hanging-on-by-his-filthy-fingernails New York City street grifter (Dustin Hoffman, recently seen looking much more spiffy in *The Graduate*). The movie unfolds in three dispiriting movements: Joe's early struggles, as the naive rube is chewed up and spit out penniless into the gutter by a heartless Gotham City; a slightly more hopeful interlude when the two men become "roommates" and even friends in the condemned building that Ratso calls home; and finally crisis, as their fortunes, always precarious, decline dangerously further as a wrecking ball and winter weather encroach, and the tubercular Ratso's health deteriorates.

Schlesinger's camera is unflinching, lingering on the poverty, pawn shops, blood banks, street walkers, and the general desperation of Times Square, where Joe, who once dreamed of servicing and satisfying high-society ladies, is reduced to participating in the furtive, low-rent, all-male trade (his first customer is a young Bob Balaban in his big-screen debut). And in New Hollywood style, the director shows, even lingers, on the most unflattering moments in his characters' lives, as when Joe savagely beats and robs an elderly trick (Barnard Hughes). Including the scene caused considerable debate during production, but Schlesinger thought it important, though he acknowledged it would not have survived a test audience. Bob Hope surely would have walked out, but it's doubtful he would have stayed much beyond the early flashbacks to the gang rape of both Joe and his Texas girlfriend (Jennifer Salt).

Released almost fifty years ago, *Midnight Cowboy* holds up remarkably well. And as magnificent new Criterion Collection DVD and Blu-ray editions make clear, the stellar product was a collaborative effort. It was also

a long time coming. Schlesinger, coming off a string of highly regarded, commercially successful films in his native Britain, including *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *Billy Liar* (1963), and *Darling* (1965), read James Leo Herlihy's novel when it was published in 1965, and was eager to take on the book. He found a willing partner in producer Jerome Hellman, despite the fact that at the time the novel was patently unfilmable—there was no chance it could get past the Hollywood Production Code, even on its last legs (it took an appeal and line-by-line negotiation to get approval in 1966 for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, with words like “screw” red-lined from the screenplay). But standards continued to loosen, and in 1967 screenwriter Waldo Salt was commissioned for the project. (Salt, who was blacklisted in 1951, would go on to write *Serpico* [1973] and *Coming Home* [1978].)

Schlesinger and Hellman engaged in a voluminous correspondence with their deliberate writer as the screenplay was shaped over the course of twelve successive drafts. Salt was also on hand for extensive preproduction rehearsals, as well as during the shoot, and Hoffman and Voight were encouraged to improvise (in particular during the scenes in Ratso's apartment). The actors' conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then crafted and honed by Salt, who took care to integrate the new material into the logic and structure of the overall story. (The freedom afforded to the players led to some of the movie's special moments—such as the subtle embrace when Joe wipes Ratso's face with his shirt, the result of spontaneous gestures by each actor.)

In addition to these five principals, cinematographer Adam Holender was another important creative partner. Then only twenty-eight, the Polish-born Holender had spent his early childhood in a Siberian labor camp, his parents having fallen victim to the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. He made his way to New York and fell in love with the city (in 1971 he would shoot *The Panic in Needle Park*). *Cowboy* was Holender's first American feature, and the European's sensibilities meshed perfectly with those of his director (and the New Hollywood): a strong preference for gritty, realistic images; shooting on location whenever feasible (often deploying very long lenses to allow the actors to move freely through the city streets, mixing in with real-life crowds); and relying as much as possible on natural light—often to the grumbling dissent of the crew. *Cowboy* also wore its hipness on its sleeve, with a number of tricked-up shots and extensive, fractured flashbacks that moved freely between black-and-white and color images. In retrospect, Schlesinger saw some of these then-trendy flourishes as excessive, but they work well, especially if you follow Salt's advice to think of the flashbacks not so much as revisiting the past, but as reflecting Joe Buck's emotional reactions to events as they are visited upon him in the present.



Early in *Midnight Cowboy*, “Ratso” (Dustin Hoffman) regards New York newcomer Joe Buck (Jon Voight) as merely a mark for his various cons. (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection)

Despite its radical, groundbreaking nature, *Midnight Cowboy* doesn't cut all its ties to time-tested studio formulas—it actually sticks close to the structure of a classic Hollywood romance, if wildly revised and reimagined for very different times. Joe and Ratso first “meet cute” in an encounter that suggests some spark between them but ends poorly; the couple then go their separate ways, until fate unexpectedly throws them together many movie-minutes later and they slowly come to realize that they are meant for each other—until an ultimate crisis threatens to tear them apart forever (but no worries, that crisis is resolved in the nick of time).

Of course, *Cowboy*'s crises are a bit more daunting than those faced by the attractive, fast-talking, financially secure urban professionals of the Hollywood dream factory. The crucial reunion of the characters takes place only after Joe has hit rock bottom, signified by one of the movie's key images: the ketchup that Joe, homeless and hungry, spills on his lap in a cafeteria, leaving a large red stain that marks his ultimate emasculation. Right after that, a desperate Joe looks himself in the mirror (Holender's use of mirrors, reflections, and transparencies are a key visual motif of the film), and says, “You know what you got to do, cowboy,” sending him off to scrape the bottom of the barrel in Times Square, taking his place among the gay hustlers.

Similarly, the couple's final crisis has a much harder edge than the “new job out of town” or “return of the former lover” tropes of a typical rom-com. In *Cowboy*, the existential threat to the relationship occurs, paradoxically, when Joe finally finds success in his chosen profession—heading off with the well-heeled (and well-paying) Shirley (Brenda Vaccaro). In an extraordinarily choreographed shot, Joe and Shirley's first kiss coincides with Ratso tumbling down a long flight of stairs in the same frame. And when Joe returns home the next day, flush with cash and armed with a fistful of phone

numbers promising additional clients, Ratso can no longer walk. It is Salt's interpretation that, with his career about to take off, Joe intended to leave his friend—but now Ratso must be taken to Florida, and true love conquers all, as the two men board a Greyhound Bus to fulfill the Florida dream. Of course, it is the New Hollywood out there, so the ending is necessarily downbeat, as circumstances dictate that their time together will ultimately be brief. But there is hope for Joe, who sheds his hustler fantasies, and, likely, the film suggests, has emerged as a more grounded and fully realized individual.

Midnight Cowboy, a film about the development of an intimate relationship between two men, was criticized by some for not having the courage of its convictions—that is, for failing to portray Joe and Ratso as lovers, a choice that Hellman and Schlesinger both saw as necessary, and appropriate. Perhaps stung by that criticism (but more likely empowered by *Cowboy*'s commercial success), *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, the following film from then-professionally closeted Schlesinger, put an end to any question as to whether the director was being coy about the subject.

In the wake of *Cowboy*, Schlesinger recalled, “There was nothing to stop me doing anything I wanted”; he wrote in his diary at the time, “I can get away with anything now.” That anything was a love triangle in which a gay man (Peter Finch) and a straight woman (Glenda Jackson) vie for the affections of a bisexual man (Murray Head). The radicalism of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* is found in the fact that it is not a film about homosexuality; it is a movie in which the leading character happens to be gay (no small notion at the time; homosexual behavior between consenting adults was a criminal act in England until 1967). Moreover, the details of the narrative make clear that it was, in the director's words, the “most personal film I ever made.” The Finch character

"was based on myself," Schlesinger recounted in an interview with his nephew Ian Buruma, and in particular a similar triangle he experienced in the 1960s.

But *Midnight Cowboy* is not that picture. Despite its precedent-shattering frankness with regard to the portrayal of homosexuality on screen, it is not a story that is ultimately about the sexuality of its characters. It is, in Schlesinger's words, "about friendship and loyalty." More pointedly, he observed, "the film is not about anything if it is not about loneliness and the need for human contact." The awakening in *Midnight Cowboy* is not about sexual identity, but about how these two damaged characters, who have never known genuine friendship in their lives, learn how to achieve such a relationship with each other. Ratso's last line in the movie is a gently murmured "thank you"—in the moment, it is for a small comfort provided on the bus, but it can be seen as an expression of gratitude for Joe's friendship, which rescued him from a lifetime of loneliness.

With its emphasis on loneliness, and its milieu of an unforgiving New York City teetering on the abyss of the ungovernable 1970s (and especially the hollow, strung-out, lawless no-go zone that was Times Square at night), *Midnight Cowboy* takes its place among other New Hollywood films in which the decline of America's city serves as a metaphor for alienation, isolation, and despair—with *Taxi Driver*, seven years later, closing the parentheses on the period. Times Square, today teeming with tourists and home to Disney attractions and a 25,000 square foot M&M's World store, is much safer now than it was then (and so are most Hollywood movies). Ironically, it is still a no-go zone, at least for this native New Yorker.

The Criterion editions come packed with even more extras than usual, including an uncommonly informative commentary track by Hellman and Schlesinger (it turns out the famous "I'm walkin' here" scene was shot on the same day as Bobby Kennedy's funeral Mass at nearby St. Patrick's Cathedral, which infused the day with a melancholy pall). Other supplements offer various archival interviews and new featurettes with Holender and Schlesinger's long-time partner Michael Childers (who was attached to the production), a documentary from 1990 about Waldo Salt, and a perceptive booklet essay by Mark Harris. —Jonathan Kirshner

Errata for Cineaste, Summer 2018

Apart from the usual assortment of innocent typos (e.g., Jean "Maris" instead of Marais in the photo caption on page 11), most of which you probably never noticed, more serious, even embarrassing, errors included our mistakenly reversing the names of the actors in the photo caption on page 65; that's Oliver Reed on the right and Alan Bates on the left.

On page 60, in the review of *Tom Jones*, the title of Lindsay Anderson's 1968 film, *If....*, was incorrectly cited with only three concluding ellipses, when everyone knows that there should be four ellipses.

Gun Crazy

Produced by Frank King and Maurice King; directed by Joseph H. Lewis; written by Millard Kaufman (fronting for the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo) and MacKinlay Kantor, based on the *Saturday Evening Post* short story "Gun Crazy" by Kantor; cinematography by Russell Harlan; music by Victor Young; edited by Harry Gerstad; starring Peggy Cummins, John Dall, Berry Kroeger, Morris Carnovsky, Rusty Tamblyn, Nedrick Young, and Harry Lewis. Blu-ray, B&W, 87 min., 1950. A Warner Archive release, www.warnerbros.com/warnerarchive.

Did Joseph H. Lewis hold a baleful view of American marriage and family life? In the 1941 Bela Lugosi horror film *Invisible Ghost*, an adulterous wife hypnotizes her kindly husband to commit serial murder. In his breakthrough 1945 hit *My Name Is Julia Ross*, a single, working woman is kidnapped and forced into marriage by an uxoricide and the mother-in-law to trump all malign mothers-in-law. *The Big Combo* (1955) centers on whether or not a vicious gangster killed his wife.

It is with *Gun Crazy*, however, that Lewis takes aim at the central institution of post-war America with the greatest precision (the screenplay was reworked by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo using a front). Its male protagonist Bart (played by Mickey Little as a boy) discovers his gun craziness when he uses a toy rifle to shoot at targets in his backyard. Soon Bart (played as a teenager by Russ Tamblyn) is committing grand larceny and standing trial in juvenile court from where he will be sent to reform school. He is defended by his older sister Ruby (Anabel

Shaw), who has reared him in the unexplained absence of their parents. Ruby is in her "Sunday best" for her court appearance, and cannot repress a bright optimism attributable to her upcoming marriage to a traveling salesman whom she suggests to a skeptical judge (Morris Carnovsky) as a paternal substitute for Bart.

In subsequent scenes, her husband will be conspicuously absent as family life takes its toll on Ruby. Her initial cheerfulness and confidence is replaced by exhaustion and resignation, long before Bart (played by John Dall as an adult) gets into trouble. Her milieu and worldview become increasingly narrow and threadbare. When fugitives Bart and Laurie (the sensational Peggy Cummins) seek refuge with Ruby, they look through one of the film's many windows from a dark, menacing, Gothic exterior—Ruby and her children are bathed in a white, heavenly light as if guardians of a holy sanctuary. Not for the first time, the frame of perception provided by the window is misleading—by the time Bart and Laurie cross the threshold into the house, Ruby and children look haggard and browbeaten, like one of photographer Dorothea Lange's subjects from the Great Depression (MacKinlay Kantor's original short story was published in 1940, toward the end of that period of social and economic upheaval).

This focus on the family might seem an odd place to introduce a film that is one of the greatest crime thrillers in film history, a breathless ride fueled by fast guns, fast cars, and fast love. *Gun Crazy*'s famous frisson can be attributed to Lewis's distinctive direction of his actors, as revealed in an interview for Danny Peary's *Cult Movies* (1981):



Laurie (Peggy Cummins) and Bart (John Dall) give up their day jobs to make one last deadly heist at the Armour plant in Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1950). (photo courtesy of Photofest)

Behind the Scenes with Stanley Kubrick's *Filmworker*

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