But I digress. Ahem, ahem. In considering this strangely neglected film…This what neglected film? This strangely what film? This strangely neglected what?

Perhaps Cleese's Stimpson is a latter-day Jim Dixon, warped by the U.K.'s long decline and fall into Thatcherism. Cleese's comic ties certainly zigzag back to Guinness and forward to Basil Fawlty. But for me, in this moment, *Clockwise*'s great appeal is that it is comparatively neglected, it is strange, and it is not easily classifiable. It is also not on trend, and if, like me, you've had enough of what is trending, what is canceled, and what is utterly illiterate, you will find *Clockwise* charming, hilarious, and a reminder of a time when English comedies didn't depend on Hollywood conventions, Hollywood stars, romcoms, Hugh Grant, or heritage porn. The film has nothing obvious to say about politics or race—apart from the fact that the snobbier schools are building mosques and introducing A-level Arabic in order to snare the social-climbing Middle Eastern parents who will fatten the alumni endowment. And as for gender, Stimpson simply acts as most men do when women are talking to him—ignores them while remaining completely absorbed in his own voice-over. One of the funnier lines of the film is uttered at the headmasters' conference (before everything is Stimpsonized) when one delegate spies an aged female among the throng and gasps, "Good God! Is that a woman? How did she get in?" Do I need to tell you that all of the head teachers at the meeting are men? Most of the great school/campus novels and comedies to come out of the U.K. have focused on male educators. Well, we can leave them to their diminishing school playing fields and forgive the odd cultural crime—as long as we haven't forgotten our sense of humor.

—J. E. Smyth

The Parallax View

Produced and directed by Alan J. Pakula; screenplay by David Giler and Lorenzo Semple Jr.; cinematography by Gordon Willis; production design by George Jenkins; edited by John W. Wheeler; music by Michael Small; starring Warren Beatty, Hume Cronyn, William Daniels, Paula Prentiss, and Walter McGinn. Blu-ray and DVD, color, 102 min, 1974. A Criterion Collection Release, www.criterion.com.

Upon its release in 1974, Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* was greeted with generally indifferent reviews and tepid box office, swamped by the shower of plaudits and attention justly lavished on *Chinatown* (a misfortune that was in part a function of the curious decision by Paramount Pictures to release both films on the same June weekend). Over time and with the benefit of hindsight, however, *Parallax*'s reputation has grown steadily—and stunning new DVD and Blu-ray editions from The Criterion Collection will likely cement its status as one of the soaring achievements of the cinema of the 1970s. *The Parallax View*'s visual precision, eye-catching beauty, and razor-sharp attention to architectural setting and minute detail are such that with this new 4K restoration, even some repeat viewers will experience an entirely new film. Pakula must share credit for these accomplishments with cinematographer Gordon Willis—one of the essential artists of the New Hollywood—and production designer George Jenkins.

The Parallax View is an iconic Seventies film, steeped in pessimism, narrative complexity, moral ambiguity, and its insistence on an ending that is relentlessly downbeat, even by the brooding standards of the era. *Parallax*, with *The Conversation* (1974) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), form the holy trinity of that very Seventies subgenre, the conspiracy thriller; it also takes its place as the middle entry in Pakula's own "paranoid trilogy" situated between *Klute* (1971) and *All the President's Men* (1976). The affinities between *Parallax* and *Condor* are especially salient; both were co-written by Lorenzo Semple Jr., steeped in late-Watergate disbelief and despair and, with their unflinching assessment of American authority, they anticipate the findings of the Church Committee (1975) that exposed the reckless, extralegal malfeasance of the CIA, FBI, and other arms of the U.S. government. Each film also aims to subvert confidence in basic interpersonal trust. Sydney Pollack considered the erosion of trust, "the basis of society and all relationships," to be the main theme of *Condor*; Pakula said of *Parallax*, "If the picture works, the audience will trust the person sitting next to them a little less at the end of the film."

The movie's intricate plot is accessibly summarized in broad brush, if not always easily followed in a first viewing. A presidential candidate is assassinated; a formal government inquiry into the affair determines that the murder was the work of a disturbed lone gunman, but in the following years an unnaturally high number of witnesses to the event have met with untimely ends. A would-be-muckraking reporter starts sniffing around the possible blockbuster story, and soon becomes aware of what looks like a vast and sinister conspiracy, one that is very much still ongoing and even thriving. These themes touched on open wounds in 1974, then just eleven years removed from the nobody-believes-Oswald-acted-alone assassination of President Kennedy and only six years after the also-attributed-to-lone-gunmen murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy. (For comparison, consider that the election of Barack Obama was thirteen years ago; 9/11 is now two decades in the past.)

Journalist Joe Frady (Warren Beatty) in Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View*.

The Parallax View has its origins in a spec script written by Semple, which was based on an undistinguished 1970 novel by Loren Singer. There is very little evidence of the book in the finished film, with the exception of one thrilling scene. (Viewers who saw the unleashing torrent at Gorge Dam in Washington State as a metaphor for "Watergate" will be disappointed to learn that this action dates to the source material.) It is also possible to see traces of the novel's rather rancid and prurient leering at homosexuality in the movie's subtle and deft suggestion that the relationship between Austin Tucker (William Daniels, in what is arguably his greatest performance) and his bodyguard might have a romantic element. This understated touch also gives an extra edge to that moment when said bodyguard puts his hand on the shoulder of protagonist Joe Frady (Warren Beatty), and informs him that he will be subject to a "skin search" (with the pointed elaboration, "If I don't see you, you don't see him").

It is no surprise to learn, then, that Pakula was unfamiliar with the source material; according to Semple, the movie is not only a very far cry from the novel but also from his original draft—and for that matter, from Giler's subsequent revision. *The Parallax View* went into production with story and dialogue very much up in the air. Pakula and Beatty wrote and rewrote furiously and on the fly as the cameras were rolling, under pressures that were exacerbated by a writer's strike and Beatty's pay-or-play contract. Hume Cronyn, on hand in the role of newspaper editor Bill Rintels, also pitched in, as did, reputedly (a sensitive matter given the strike), Beatty affiliate and legendary script doctor Robert Towne.

Semple's draft focused on the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination; Giler, with the encouragement of Pakula and Beatty, shifted to an abstract, entirely fictional trauma—but one that was clearly evocative of and influenced by the murder of Bobby Kennedy in 1968. (The politically engaged Beatty—his next film, *Shampoo* (1975), takes place on that fateful year's election eve—was a great admirer of Bobby and had campaigned for him in the Oregon primary.) And over the course of successive drafts Joe Frady morphed from baseball player to cop

In the opening scene of *The Parallax View*, the suspected assasin of a liberal U.S. Senator running for president is chased to the roof of Seattle's Space Needle by Secret Service agents.

to finally and perhaps inevitably, in the age of Woodward and Bernstein, an investigative reporter.

The plot holds together well and the dialogue is serviceable—but ultimately *The Parallax View* is a clinic in visual storytelling. Its strongest passages largely withhold dialogue, as seen famously in the "Parallax Test" montage (a four-minute scene that took four months to compose) but even more impressively in a twelve-minute virtuoso sequence in which Frady must at great peril find his way on and off an airplane. Hitchcock could not have done it better; in fact, one suspects that Hitch might have overplayed a scene that Pakula navigates with restraint.

Described by one critic as "not only a film about paranoia, but a deeply paranoid film," Pakula and Willis achieve this mood with a number of motifs, including the common resort to very long shots that give the sense of being watched—such as during the train ride with an "ex-ex-FBI" man (well played by Seventies stalwart Kenneth Mars)—and the recurring subjective view of distant conversations that are witnessed but inaudible. (Such anxiety-provoking moments are enhanced throughout by the very effective score of another Seventies regular, Michael Small.) Willis, affectionately dubbed "The Prince of Darkness" by his peers, deploys a very broad palette here, from the brightly lit corridors of the hypermodern Parallax Corporation, to the purposefully anachronistic use of soft yellow lights and wood paneling in newsman Rintels's office (which for Pakula intended to represent "certain nineteenth-century American humanist values"), to the impossible lit-by-a-single-naked-bulb darkness of Frady's undercover flophouse in two scenes featuring the menacing Jack Younger (Walter McGinn, who would also have a small but pivotal role in *Condor*). Willis and Pakula were close collaborators who worked extremely well together (the cinematographer exquisitely shot all three entries in the paranoid trilogy, as well as Pakula's subsequent *Comes a Horseman,* 1978), but of these latter, marvelously underlit encounters, surely Pakula was not the first director to grumble at Willis that he would have preferred to direct the actors, not the shadows.

The Parallax View opens, fittingly, on Independence Day, with a sun-drenched, steeped-in-Americana Fourth of July parade (as Pakula put it, he wanted to "start with...the America we've lost"). The breadth of that history is nicely captured by the subtle camera move that shifts from a Native American totem pole to reveal the Space Needle in Seattle. A very promising start, and, indeed, with the exception of a barroom brawl and subsequent chase sequence a few reels in that seem to belong to another movie, there is nary a false step in this film, which is filled with provocative pieces of business, even in the margins. (Note, for example, what is being suggested as the monkey is swept off a stool and who comes to take his place, or the casual glance with which a hotel clerk peruses Frady's mail.)

Of course, the innocence of that summer day is shattered by the bravura and in some ways wrenching assassination sequence (ill-fated Senator Charles Carroll is not Bobby, but the final framing shots of the incident are eerily evocative of those horrifying moments at the Ambassador Hotel). As Willis emphasizes, this early action introduces two additional elements of *Parallax*'s visual signature: the use of glass barriers that are suggestive of different ways of seeing the same thing (a hat tip to the dictionary definition of "parallax") and the construction of subconsciously unsettling unbalanced compositions within the widescreen (2.39:1) frame.

"Three Years Later" the titles tell us, and Joe Frady, a small-time reporter barely hanging on to his job, is visited by Lee Carter (Paula Prentiss)—both he and she were present on that fateful day. Carter is a wreck (Prentiss is superb in the scene) and fearing for her life. In the tradition of such films, Frady is skeptical, until, inevitably, she ends up as the next victim of an apparent accident. (Once again, these are stories visually told—note the vertical/horizontal composition at the morgue, with the scale that bisects the frame suggesting the moral burden that has now fallen on Frady's shoulders, and his half-beat hesitation before moving on.)

And so our hero must take up the case, find the answers, expose the bad guys, and set things right. But it's the Seventies out there, which means that our shaggy protagonist is not only self-aggrandizing and morally compromised (did he pass the Parallax visual test? Pakula regrets not being more explicit about that)—he is also in way over his head. Austin Tucker warns, "Fella, you don't know what this story means," which was exactly what Noah Cross (John Huston) told Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) in *Chinatown*—"You may think you know what you're dealing with—but believe me, you don't." But Joe and Jake, one day apart in American theaters in 1974, shake off this advice, and doggedly pursue paths that lead to their own destruction.

In *The Parallax View*—as with so many other thrillers of the era (*Klute*, *The Conversation*, and *Condor*)—everyone is watching, and nobody is secure. Seen today, in an era characterized by the hypersurveillance panopticon of enmeshed, overlapping, and irresistible private and public eavesdroppers, such films come across not as dated, or paranoid, but prescient.

The supplementary features that complement the Criterion discs are satisfactory and informative, if not up to the very high standards often associated with that shop (and the absence of a commentary track is surprising and disappointing). Across seventy-five minutes the set boasts a fine new introduction by Alex Cox; American Film Institute interviews with Pakula from 1974 and 1995; a new interview with production assistant Jon Boorstin; and, the cream of this crop, an eighteen-minute featurette about Willis from 2004. An accompanying booklet includes an essay by Nathan Heller and an interview with Pakula by Andrew Bobrow from 1974 that originally appeared in *Filmmakers Newsletter*.—**Jonathan Kirshner**

SHAKA KING: BLACK PANTHER POLITICS AND *JUDAS AND THE BLACK MESSIAH*

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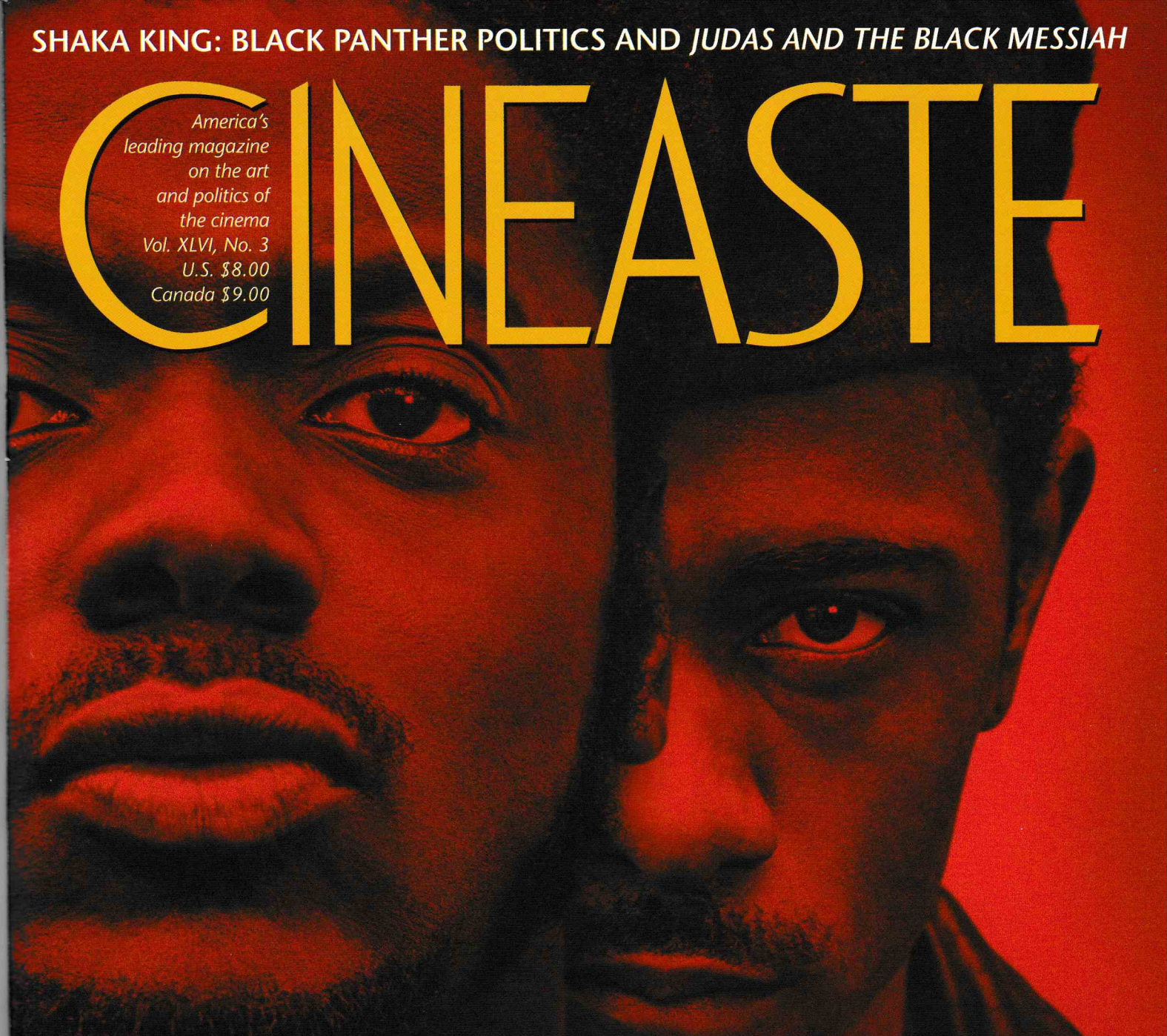

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