

Entertainment

How much for a man's life?

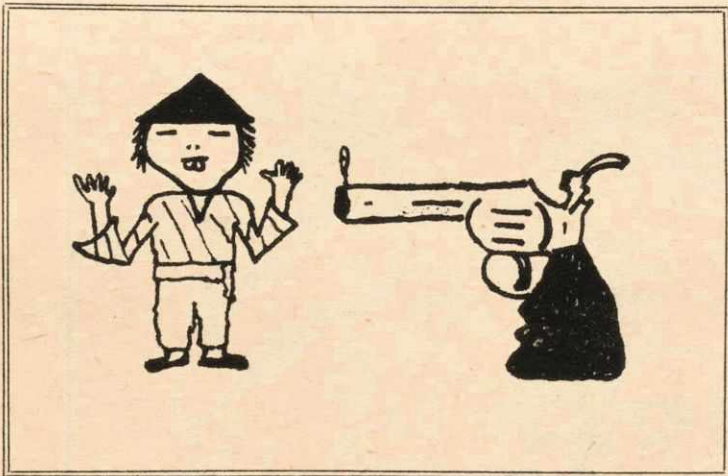
by Michael McCarthy

The Fall Film Series (Rebecca Cohn Auditorium) presented its second offering of the season Sunday, Sept. 21, with **The Killing of a Chinese Bookie**, a 1978 film featuring Ben Gazzara as a loser who loses in a big way and in style when he gets into debt with the underworld, and pays off that debt by murdering a competing crimelord.

Essentially, the plot of the movie stems from "what price is a man's life?" If it's our own, we generally hold it invaluable, but if someone else's . . . ? For Cosmo Vitelli (Gazzara, who gives a strong characterization), a sleazy night-club owner, obsessed (paradoxically) with "class" and "style", the price is \$23,000 and the inducement of a going-over from his "creditors". But how will this voiding of another man's life affect the price, or worth, of his own life—to himself, and others? He doesn't want to be

mixes, frequent use of hand-held cameras and dim lighting help submerge the viewer in the brutal, gut-wrenching world Cassavetes likes to deal with. The main character's(s'), psyches are scraped bare or hacked to pieces, and the naked reflection of the primal humanity glaring from the screen bludgeons the audience into a definite reaction; either revulsion at the way people are ripped into, their viscera spewed over the screen, or a kind of diffident awe at the courage, dedication, and skill of the man who can recreate this jungle of raw drives and lacerated nerves, to pull us so far down into the dark, lower reaches that lurk in us all, and may in fact be the primordial and pre-eminent directives of man.

Another distinct characteristic of Cassavetes' films is their tendency to disintegrate towards the end. This is not so surprising, since the characters tend to disintegrate, and

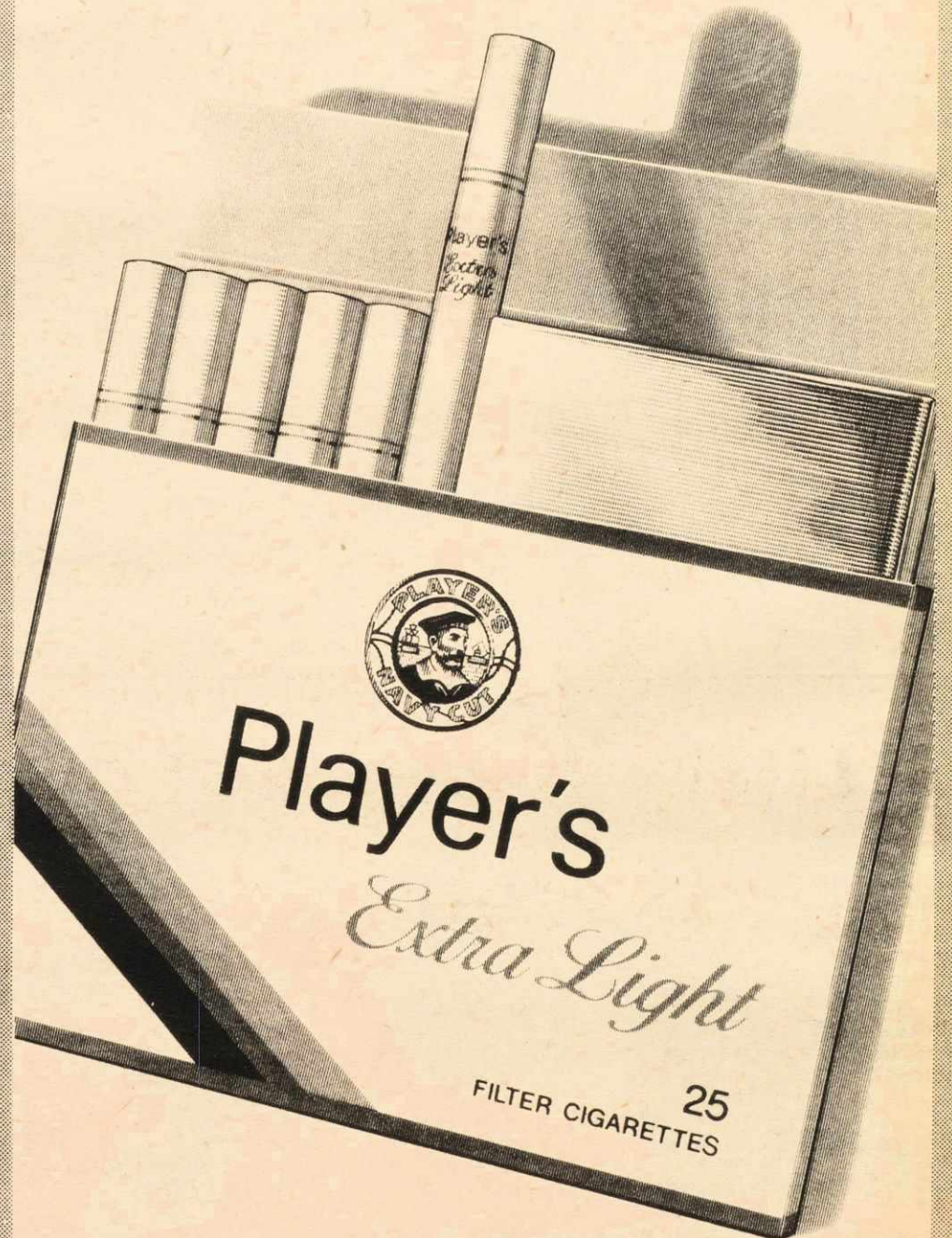


a murderer, but his own life-style draws him into the corrupt low-life vortex that makes him one. All the while struggling to keep his illusion (to himself, if no one else) of "having the world by the balls", he makes the hit, suffering a serious wound because of a double-cross, and staggers back to his club. As he physically deteriorates, he runs into the breakdown of his personal relationships and his business is fraught with truculent performers, mirroring his own imminent collapse. His philosophy dribbles out rather incoherently, and we leave him trying to "act comfortable" (the secret to happiness), ignoring the blood drenching his jacket, and the fact that both the "Mob" and the Chinese underworld want him dead and are undoubtedly on their way to effect his demise.

Director John Cassavetes has his own distinct style, and it is never pretty. Murky sound

in fact this may be the director's hint that life disintegrates (the ultimate triumph of entropy, if you like). Unfortunately, this leads to obscurity, confusion, and inconclusiveness. In short, I did not understand the last half of the film. It left me with a vague uneasiness, like a dark shadow, an eclipse of . . . the soul, perhaps? But it was the kind of unclearness arising as if from an initial, if incomplete framework that had been constructed which will lead to something valuable if finished by me. Many others took the opposite view, that it was a worthless, impenetrable piece of garbage. Far be it for me to say I'm right and they're wrong. Nonetheless, I don't believe Cassavetes should be required to give clarity in general to a subjective experience which must be finished and explained by the individual, and I am right and the others are wrong.

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