



Lights, Camera, Action!

By DAN MERKUR

John Christopher has been one of science fiction's causes celebres of recent years, with several novels now to his credit. Based on one of his books is *No Blade of Grass*, Cornel Wilde's latest film, which concerns the destruction of English society through over-population, pollution, and a global epidemic that kills all cereal crops, and leaves starvation in its wake.

Science fiction films have a tendency to be crummy, which has to do with the heavy-handedness inherent to most SF. A filmmaker rarely will be good enough to be hard-hitting without being oppressive, and then the SF film succeeds. *No Blade of Grass* is one of the successful SF films.

Isaac Asimov has postulated that an agile mind and a curious outlook are required of SF fans, which makes science fiction necessarily esoteric. Consequently most people cannot follow (and so do not enjoy) the stories of most good SF. Occasionally a story is so practically relevant that the more absurd postulations of the plot are taken in step, simply because historical reality is no less implausible.

The negative utopias — *Brave New World*, 1984 — may be so remote, but if so, they are unavoidable, and so we consider and dismiss them. The nightmare of *No Blade of Grass* is quite as near and perhaps beyond preventing as well, yet the return to technically-sophisticated but essentially savage barbarism resulting from the anarchistic end of government is a state we are actively striving toward, or so this film maintains, and the horror is all the more powerful.

Much that is common to the best SF writing traditions comes off poorly on the screen (eg. brothers David and John fight it out over which is to survive and rule — an obvious Biblical attention is the best SF tradition that somehow fails on film) or else is lost unless one is looking for SF traditions, like the reinvigoration of a ritual that was once meaningful but has fallen into misapplication.

For instance, in *No Blade of Grass* the ritual of an open, weaponless hand extended for shaking regains the symbolically important and meaningful value of non-violent acceptance of the individual, that was implied by the ritual in its original sense. Something like that is almost impossible to bring off visually on a film. *No Blade of Grass* makes a good try, but I think one has to be an SF fan to really get the idea.

Perhaps part of the problem is that the film runs barely beyond an hour and a half, and that the story is epic and archetypal, needing closer to a three hour running time to do it justly.

The camera direction is usually quite good, although the special effects department — SF film's stock-in-trade — goes well overboard with heavy-handed gimmickry and meaningless, would-be, arty optionals. Still, *No Blade of Grass* hangs together pretty well.

The script is poor. It just doesn't do for naturalistic dialogue, full of the inane, irrelevant, and mundane illogical constructions we use daily, to be inserted in a film whose story is a fantasy of expressionistic horror, fraught with literary and visual symbolism. The mixture of styles will not work, and the script is obviously inappropriate.

No Blade of Grass has guts, conviction, relevance (in that it is not very far-fetched at all) and power in its righteousness (in that it is realistic and unfolds in the way that it most properly should.) It is both a powerful statement by the authors (Christopher and Wilde) and a fine bit of (tragic, powerful, and depressing) entertainment. Flawed, but awfully well done.

CROMWELL is a film about a guy who didn't like the way his country was being run, procrastinated around for a while. Then, when he had decided where the responsibility of the individual to revolt lays, he led a democratic revolution, and finally staged a coup and installed himself as dictator — all this of course while remaining an honest, modest, God-fearing husband and father, who just happened to have the best head in the country.

Well, if you expected any great effort spent on such contemporary concerns as the right to revolution you can forget it. *Cromwell* is history written with a quill pen — slow, dull and remote.

It is nicely enough done, I'll grant. The acting is good. The colour photography is pleasant. Costumes and sets are agreeable. The script is literate. Unfortunately *Cromwell* is like champagne stored with a faulty cork — all the fizz is gone, and it



Clockwise from upper left: Richard Harris as Cromwell; John Gilbert and Lillian Gish in *La Boheme*; John Wayne, John Qualen and Thomas Mitchell in *The Long Voyage Home* and an illustration from Walt Disney's *Fantasia*.

opens not with a bang, but with a whimper.

For pageantry, little has been done to match the processions of *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Bette Davis and Errol Flynn, 1939). For the colour and mood of the Puritan era, *Witchfinder General* (a 1967 horror film with Vincent Price) is about the best; for earthiness, there is *Tom Jones* (1964, directed by Tony Richardson); for colour and pomp, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Leslie Howard, 1934) is superb. For plodding and stylized history-book drama there is *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Charles Laughton, 1932), and now there is *Cromwell*.

Like, who needs it? Yet if you want to see a movie that you won't mind getting up to get a drink during, because you ate so much popcorn on account of the movie wasn't so good so you got restless and hungry, a movie that you won't have to think much about after leaving, a movie that isn't trying to do anything to you, a movie that is, at best, going to teach you some history, well, then *Cromwell* is what you want. It's a really nice bit of emphyseas. Really nice.

THE ONTARIO FILM THEATRE was two weeks ago granted funds by the government to begin to create a film library in this country, similar to, but not on the scale of, Cinematheque Francaise in Paris, Washington's American Film Institute, and New York's Museum of Modern Art Film Library. Under the direction of Gerald Pratley, funds will also be available for the production of films.

Meantime, the OFT has been screening films at the Ontario Science Centre (Eglinton and Don Mills Road) for better than a year now, and I must say that the current programme is their best yet.

John Ford's sadly underrated, brilliant film of 1940, *The Long Voyage Home*, which is based on several short plays of Eugene O'Neill, will be playing on December 15. It stars John Wayne, Thomas Mitchell, John Qualen, Barry Fitzgerald and Ward Bond; and is one of Ford's finest works — one of his most consistent, best paced, and visually exciting.

Walt Disney's *Fantasia* will be playing on December 22. This 1941 film is about the best work ever done in animation, with gorgeous colour and drawn to music by the classical masters as performed by Stokowsky and the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. The film is one of the first with stereo sound, and though erratically received in its 29 year history, an absolute masterpiece. It is also a real head trip.

December 29 has Charlie Chaplin in two silent shorts, *A Burlesque on Carmen*, with Chaplin playing Don Juan in a de Mille parody, and *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, the most famous, and justly so, of his early

comedies. The late Marie Dressler co-stars in the latter film. Horace Lapp will accompany the films on the piano.

On January 8 and 9, **MISS LILLIAN GISH** will be at Burton Auditorium. On the Friday, she will be lecturing and showing clips from her early silent films made with D.W. Griffith; and on the 9th, she will introduce screening of King Vidor's *La Boheme* (1925), a silent film which Charles Hofmann (who played for *The Birth of a Nation* (last year) will accompany. John Gilbert costars in *La Boheme*, which, incidentally, was one of the legendary Irving Thalberg's personally supervised productions.

Miss Gish, whose (very excellent) autobiography "The Movies, Mr. Griffith and Me!" has recently been published, is, along with Greta Garbo and Katharine Hepburn, the year-stick by which film ac-



Lillian Gish to speak here.

tresses are measured. Unlike the other stars named, Miss Gish also held her own next to "legitimate" actresses Helen Hayes, Katherine Cornell and others. Miss Gish has played Ophelia to John Gielgud's Hamlet, and she has been in a position to turn down the role of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

In film she is best remembered as D.W. Griffith's best actress, the youthful star of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915); the eternal mother in *Intolerance* (1916); the persecuted heroine of *Way Down East* (1920); the delicate and tragic child of *Broken Blossom* (1919); and the rescued-at-the-guillotine maiden of *Orphans of the Storm*

(1921). Less well known, but fondly remembered by those who do, are her later, talking-picture roles in *Duel in the Sun* (1944), *The Night of the Hunter* (1956), *The Unforgiven* (1959), and *The Comedians* (1962).

A great part of the naturalistic school of acting developed from the screen, as the close-up made it unnecessary to exaggerate facial and physical expressions of emotion in order to convey meaning. D.W. Griffith's repertory company was the first, and most important group of naturalists in the cinema, and among the players, Miss Lillian Gish is undoubtedly the foremost. No inconsiderable part of the 20th century dramatic tradition is traceable directly to her. She made no insignificant contribution to the world of theatre and cinema.

Tickets for the lecture and for the film are \$2.00 each evening, available, I suppose, at the Burton ticket office (they are not yet on sale.) A worst, they will be evenings to remember.

Openings to take note of: *Soldier Blue* (at the Imperial) stars Peter Strauss and Candice Bergen. Claiming to be the most violent, disgusting, gruesome film ever made, *Soldier Blue* chronicles a massacre of Cheyennes by the U.S. Cavalry, back in the 1880. Do we really need another film to prove that violence is ugly?

Little Big Man (Uptown 1) is Arthur (Bonnie and Clyde) Penn's most recent film, and stars Dustin Hoffman, Faye Dunaway and Martin Balsam. Purporting to tell it like it was, *Little Big Man* attempts to destroy many of the western myths, and is probably a film well worth a look see.

The Owl and the Pussycat (Hyland) allows Barbra Streisand more time to completely disgust anyone foolish enough to be caught at one of her films. George Segal plays the owl, if you can dig it.

Twelve Chairs (Uptown 3) was written, directed and stars Mel Brooks, and stands an awfully good chance of being silly and zany if nothing else, and likely a good deal better than *Where's Poppa?* which stars George Segal in Carl Reiner's story.

Howard Hawks hasn't made a film in a few years, and so the news that the master of action and adventure would be making another western (he did *Red River*, *Rio Bravo* and *Eldorado*) with John Wayne came as big news. The film is *Rio Lobo*, and you might look out for George Plimpton in a small part as a heavy. This ought to be first rate material.

The Wild Child is Francois Truffaut's latest film will finally be opening over Christmas (at the International). Almost no one makes films better than Truffaut, and the opportunity to see him act as well as direct is not to be missed.