

# Heard and Seen

NOT TIME'S FOOL :

'If it's gonna be good, it's gotta be slow'; thus the coloured jazz man in Dorothy Baker's unforgettable novel, *Young Man with a Horn*. I do not know how Marlon Brando feels about the blues, but he would seem to be quite happy to apply this aphorism to the cinema. Certainly the first film he has directed, *One-Eyed Jacks*, has been allowed to develop as slowly as it needs: and for my money it is, if uneven, a very exciting piece of work. It took Brando three years to make, and a very great deal of money; as originally shot it is reputed to have lasted seven hours, and the cutting has clearly been savage, but even now many have felt that its two and a half hours are too long. For myself I was never bored for an instant. Brando has been at no pains to make things easier for himself; not only does he act as well as direct, always a hazardous business and never more so than with a first picture, but he has also issued a slightly pretentious manifesto of his aims, which has provided critics with ready-made ammunition. 'I have', he writes, 'the obligation and the opportunity in a recently discovered impulse, to try to communicate the things I think are important. I want to make a frontal attack on the temple of clichés'. He chooses the western because, he says: 'Properly handled, the folklore of the outdoor era contains all the vital ingredients of powerful picture-making'; and he makes it clear that he is to play a character, and present others, who are not to be divided into clear-cut blacks and whites.

Eagerly the critics have hastened to detail all the clichés he has, in fact, employed; what they seem to have overlooked—and I cannot believe I am inventing this—is that these visual clichés (which is presumably what Brando meant) are constantly used slightly askew, so that their hackneyed designs are made to strike us freshly precisely for their visual values and not blurred by the well-worn connotations which have almost deprived them of impact over the years. Thus, for example, that time-honoured shot of a poker game, seen from above as a ring of engrossed heads bent forward over the cards. Brando uses it all right, but purely incidentally—it is not there for the intrinsic excitement of the game and its chances, but to emphasize the thoroughness of Rio's search for Longworth by means of an excellent composition. Again, Brando's use of the sea in this picture, which is really worthy of an article in itself, is wonderfully emotive. This is the first western to be set by the sea; one might almost call it a sou'western; and the salty, bracing sense of liberation given by the constant return to the tumbling breaking seas, the cries of gulls or the dull background thunder of the rollers enormously enlarges the psychological contrasts between past and present, which are so important in this story of past treachery and present revenge. But over the years, how many times has one

seen the climax to a successful seduction expressed in the cinema by a sudden surge of waves overwhelming the immediate image on the screen? Brando manipulates this almost with impudence; he even goes so far as actually to place Rio's seduction of Louisa on a real beach, but his waves, raging obtrusively up till now, fall right away and only re-appear as ripples in the candid dawn which confronts the tousled lovers. Not for quite a long time comes the crash and thunder of the flooding tide again, to express not passion but Brando's own fury and confusion after yet another humiliation by Longworth. A cliché: perhaps; but quite out of familiar context. Even the John Ford silhouettes, the frieze of figures against the skyline, without which no western is worthy of the name, are used sparingly and unexpectedly.

All this, of course, is only one aspect of this film—a long, post-Elizabethan study of revenge and obsession and the ravages this can wreak, not only on the principals, but also on the subsidiary characters involved. The beauty of the camera work (by Charles Lang) is haunting; shot after shot combines with its accompanying soundtrack to punch home the maximum effect as, to take one example only, in the final gunfight between Rio and Longworth. The two men are manoeuvring for angles of fire round the fountain in the square; there is a sudden silence and all one sees is the sliding water and all one hears is its impersonal murmur, and then the shooting breaks out again and Longworth is killed. The performances of Brando, of Karl Malden as Dad Longworth, fooling himself but not his wife that he is an impersonal instrument of justice; of Katy Jurado as the wife, and Pina Pellicer, a lovely thin brown girl new to the screen, as Louisa are all extremely intelligent and, with the possible exception of Malden, projected with surprising discretion.

It is clear, I think, that Brando knows he is taking his time: there is a significant exchange between him and an accomplice during a discussion on methods for the proposed bank raid. 'Not my style', says Rio, dismissively; 'Your style seems a touch slow to me' replies the other, and this is so apposite—and dangerous—a comment that he must have left it in on purpose. But if we stand with him on the empty sunny shore, endlessly exercising his mangled hand on the draw, if we watch the hypnotic seas with him as he sits on a rock looking very like Hamlet brooding on his wrongs, all this is perfectly in character with Rio and his story; and if Antonioni can get away with this coral-reef build-up of near irrelevancies, why should they be denied to Brando? All the ingredients of the classic of the genre are there—the bare desert at the beginning, the horsemen diminished by the vastness of the landscape, the dreaming distances, the saloon interiors, the quick grave snatches of Spanish, the cruelty, the violence and the sudden death. What is unusual is the mind that directs the mixing of the ingredients. One is left with the feeling that if no one had known that the director was the sometimes over-cocky Marlon Brando, the picture might well have been given a much warmer reception.

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