

BLACKFRIARS

The Spaniards would.
A marvellous and terrible precision,
black shadows clear-cut on the glaring sand,
error purged by pain,
no mistiness, no tolerance, no mercy.

And proved themselves, unflinchingly,
as brave as martyrs as inquisitors.

In 1936
eleven bishops and more than 5,000 priests
were killed by the democrats of loyalist Spain.

(And in three years of civil war
about 400,000 people died,
of whom, it is thought,
120,000 were killed
behind the lines on either side).

Heard and Seen

THE OTHER END OF THE TELESCOPE

As presented to us in Europe at the moment, the American film is in a rum state of disproportion. Hurtling around in circuit like so many giant satellites go the blockbusters—*El Cid* and *Ben Hur* and *West Side Story*—and not yet generally released are the near three hours of *The Cardinal*, the three hours plus of *Cleopatra*, looming like Easter Island figures in the West End or on the boulevards of Paris.

And yet, in contrast to films of such enormous magnification, spatial and temporal, financial and technical, we have now been able to see a handful of American films which would almost appear to have been made by directors looking through the wrong end of the telescope, so deliberately small-scale are they.

The first of these was, I suppose, the memorable *Shadows*, made by John Cassavetes to please himself in a kind of sophisticated near-improvisation, which ran for months at the Academy Cinema, with the longest queues of the most enthusiastic young audiences that London had seen since foreign films reached

us again after the war. This study of race relations in New York, made in a minor key but with major intelligence, was most absorbing, apart from its sheer cinematic interest, for the insight it gave one into the lives of real people, as distinct from film stereotypes, as prolific in the American cinema as in the British, but less easily detectible by the stranger. And now that one has read James Baldwin's *Another Country*, *Shadows* seems even more impressive in retrospect. Then came Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*—I do not think one can include *The Savage Eye* in this category, for it was essentially a documentary—which was a wonderfully entertaining piece of work. It dealt, you will recall, with the existence of junkies whilst they await the appearance of Cowboy—sinister black boy in white dungarees—who will bring them their dope, without which they cannot survive. The total disorganisation of the action was equalled only by the extreme discipline of the images, for in this picture the camera-work was not only done, but seen to be done, since one of the more important characters was the man with the camera who was making the film we watched, as we watched it. Shirley Clarke has gone on to make another film, *The Cool World*, which I saw at Venice last year. This, she told me, was the first film to be shot in Harlem with the active co-operation of the inhabitants. It is a longer work than *The Connection* and not, perhaps, as successful, because a good deal of the story is so much more conventional. This reportage on a coloured teenager, living, loving, getting into the worst kind of trouble, is set against a background of sleazy townscapes with an intoxicating score composed and played by the great Dizzy Gillespie, and has several sequences of great impact; but the linking passages are apt to slacken the tension too much to carry the two hours' duration. Almost all of it was shot on location, and this gives it a tremendous feeling of actuality, and emphasises the personal relationship between screen and spectator.

In between, visitors to the National Film Theatre had been able to catch on the wing the Beat film, *Pull My Daisy*, with a commentary written and spoken by Jack Kerouac, and acted by various members of the West Coast confraternity. This was so funny, clever and inconsequent that it set a standard of achievement that other experimental films of this type have rarely equalled. Admittedly, it was not a feature and only lasted around half an hour, but it was complete in itself, and should certainly be ranked in this category of film. It made its 'cinema of the absurd' point with no hesitation, and was deeply enjoyable from start to finish.

To last autumn's London Film Festival came *Hallelujah the Hills*, which had been seen earlier in the year at Cannes, where those who liked it raved, and those who disapproved did much the same in the opposite sense. Again made largely on location, in an idyllic Vermont landscape, it is a perfectly lunatic in-joke for film enthusiasts which anyone outside could still enjoy, though not to the same degree. It employs a fine range of cinema techniques, from Japanese samurai fighting to *nouvelle vague* hand-held camera stuff, with an actual excerpt from D. W. Griffiths for good measure. The tenuous story line concerns two boys in love with the same girl who is, naturally, two girls (and played as such)

—Vera in winter and Vera in summer—and the film flashes from one to the other with a splendid abandon. She marries neither, of course, preferring the villainous Gideon. I enjoyed this very much indeed, but some critics have felt that the joke was too long drawn-out, and that the general air of amateurish indulgence was altogether too much.

But the best of all these American small films at last reached England when *David and Lisa*, after winning prizes all over the place, eventually fetched up at the Academy at the end of 1963. This is a film which uses only four professional actors—David and Lisa themselves and the two psychiatrists who treat them. It is a sad, confined anecdote of two disturbed adolescents at a special school, who little by little begin to draw a strength from each other that no one outside can give them. Both can make no contact with the real world: David, dominated by his mother and isolated by his scornful intelligence, has a pathological fear of being touched. 'A touch can kill', he screams, backing away. Lisa is a schizophrenic: one personality cannot speak at all, the other only in rhyme. Almost involuntarily they come together, finding that for each, the other is more real than the rest of the world. 'David', says Lisa, 'Look at me; what do you see, what do you see?' 'I see a girl', David replies, 'A girl like a pearl, a pearl of a girl'. And for the first time Lisa smiles, and later we see her tentatively feeling her breasts—perhaps she is a girl, after all. In the end, when David has found Lisa after her panic-stricken flight from the school, she speaks to him in straight prose, and he is able to take her hand. The film ends with a very long shot of the two of them walking away, hand in hand, into the early morning world.

It is about one-tenth the scale of the climax of *Cleopatra*, and about one hundred times as moving. Give me Lilliput everytime.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER