



Film Maudit: SORCERER

By Gloria Heifetz

Sorcerer is a bleak, harsh, and uncompromising film, adjectives that may have reflected the inner state of William Friedkin after the reviewers were done with him. It had the misfortune to appear around the time of *Star Wars*, and although the simple-mindedness of that film was decried, *Sorcerer* was found to be confusing, pretentious, and most evil of all, depressing. A certain conformity seized even the lowliest writer, and only the single brave voice of *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll rose to defend the film. It is amazing how attitudes sweep through the press, but considering the financial failure of the film, perhaps the sociological indifference of audiences merely found feeble articulation in the media.

I think *Sorcerer* is superior to both Georges Arnaud's original novel, *The Wages of Fear*, and the film from it directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot and written by Clouzot and J. Geronimi. The "existential" novel was published in the U.S. by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1952. The Clouzot film follows the book closely, but with certain changes in structure and temperament. The novel opens directly with the explosion at the Crude Oil Corporation's oil field in Las Piedras, Guatemala. The main

character is Gerard Sturmer (Mario in the movie, Jackie Scanlon/Juan Dominquez in *Sorcerer*) just the sort of person one would expect in the quickly drawn atmosphere of the grubby town and its stolid roll call of 20 other men, hiding and trapped. There is much anti-American attitudinizing and talk of fear as a "colorless liquid" and much colorless swearing. The 300 mile truck journey is set up and begun in a matter of a few chapters, and there is crying, railing against life and American imperialism. Gerard actually *has* his own Linda — she is not just a Hollywoodesque role stuck in the film for Clouzot's wife. Here is an example of the "tough" and "spare" dialogue which the novel presents, taken from page 90 of the Avon edition (Norman Dale, Translator):

"A little later [Johnny] turned to Gerard and cleared his throat. He had something rather difficult to say.

"Hey — Gerard."

"Well?"

"Thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

"Well, for not leaving me in that ditch when I let you take those bends on your own. You're all right, Gerard."

"For God's sake!"

"Yes, you're all right..."

Besides Gerard there is Johnny Mihalescu, a Rumanian who once stabbed his best friend in Tequicigalpa; Juan Bimba, a Stalinist Spaniard; and Luigi Stornatori. The events of the drive are echoed or expanded for the film, but the book concentrates on the shifting tensions between Gerard and Johnny of fear and courage. The film adds scenes that give the sociology mobility. For the most part characterizations are carried over to the film intact. Johnny becomes Jo, and Gerard Mario. Rather than committing itself immediately to the catastrophe, Clouzot's film spends the first twenty minutes or so setting these characters. When it occurs, the four obvious men are selected, and the mission begins with Linda clinging to the side of Mario's truck exuding nihilistic romantic passion. The units of suspense are the washboard, the platform, the stone, the pool of oil, and the final leg of the journey, the delivery, ending in a twist, Mario, in his exuberance, accidentally driving off the road and killing himself, all of which have comparable analogues in *Sorcerer*. (The gust of air that blows away the tobacco of Jo's cigarette as a predecessor to the explosion that kills Luigi and Bimba is particularly

good — there is no similar scene in *Sorcerer*). The film making is adequate, the scenes are tense, particularly after the tedium of the films opening, but the constant interruptions that illustrate Jo's descent into crazed abjection are repetitious and annoying. The intended comparison of Mario and Jo, though beneficial to Mario, doesn't seem to go anywhere, and the pacing of the film is thrown off by this intermittance. Thematically the points are made. We understand the moral differences between them. Unfortunately, the final two of the four drivers are not well-communicated to the spectator; as characters their deaths mean nothing because their lives meant nothing to us. This imbalance, among other defects, leads to the detachment one feels while watching the film, a detachment different in quality from that felt while watching *Sorcerer*.

Friedkin solves this problem by the use of four opening vignettes introducing the four principals; Nilo, whose first, shortest, and least important scene realizes the air of sudden, fated death; Kassem, the politically engaged arab terrorist, a reflection of the terrorist guerillas who bomb the oil-rig in (apparently) Chile and who actually kill him later; Victor Manzon, a French businessman caught in a fraud, in his desperation deserting his beloved wife, finding Porvenir eggs a sharp contrast from lobster, (reminding one of the contrast developed between Charnier and Popeye in *The French Connection*, realized in one particular shot with a zoom, and a contrast of warm restaurant colors and cold street gray); and finally Jackie Scanlon, who is given poetic profiles, utilizing Roy Scheider's incredible face, and the photography of John M. Stephens and Dick Bush. Scheider is the spiritual center of the film, being the "ordinary" fellow of the lot: though a hoodlum, nowhere in the performance is there any sense of evil, maliciousness, or extremes, which make him most likely to reflect the self-image of the spectator.

Friedkin is the poet of frustration. Gene Hackman's embodiment of it in *French Connection*, where Charnier elludes him on the subway, and Tony Lo Bianco on the freeway, are studies of the emotion. Although frustration plays a certain role in *The Exorcist*, especially in Jason Miller's attitude to his mother and later the Devil, it is hardly the principle element. Even lesser films, like *Boys in The Band*, the oddly tilted *Birthday Party*, and the otherwise execrable *Night They Raided Minsky's*, with its triad of frustrated show and anti-show people, offer variations on this theme. Not until the cast of *Sorcerer*, however, have despair and futility had such an overall physical manifestation. Hackman was perfect, of course, and the subtle touch of his hat flying to pieces understated the shattering outcome of his driven nature (Popeye's mostly un-commented-on boot fetish makes thematic, though not psychological, sense by

pointing his sexual drive in the direction of an item of apparel most used for basic locomotion, appropriate for a character constantly giving chase).

Walton Green has given Friedkin a script of supremely fluid structure and tempo. It can be divided into approximately five parts: the opening vignettes; the interlude setting the scene of entrapment in Porvenir; the blowing of the well and Corlette's selection of the men; the drive; and Scanlon's return. Scenes of quietude (the funeral march, the departure of the trucks) follow or precede perfectly balanced scenes of excitement (the riot, the brilliant "grind" montage) creating a hypnotic and yet satisfyingly full effect.

Before discussing the film section by section, and in order to show the difference in tone between *Sorcerer* and its predecessor, I want to compare the piss-comaraderie scene in *Wages of Fear* with — nothing. *Sorcerer*, bleak, and unromantic, does not offer friendship as a scale by which to judge life. One little scene in which Manzon reminisces precedes directly his death (but this could be merely ironic, rather than "fated"). Clouzot's scene is touching and is consonate with the thrust of the film, but given the isolation of Green/Friedkin's characters, whose occasional happinesses are frustrated, the ambience is different and, I think, improved.

After the opening (each environment is shot in a slightly different fashion) and particularly after the cold blues and grays of New Jersey, we find the, perhaps misleading, soft yellows, greens, and blues of South America (according to Scanlon's work permit, it is September of 1976). There are a number of scene-setting shots, moving progressively from long to close, culminating in Scanlon's sudden awakening, from a nightmare, at the screech of a slaughtered pig, a scene created with a rarely communicated felt reality. (Having read in Key's *Media Sexploitation* that Friedkin allegedly used certain subliminal effects in *Exorcist*, I was extremely curious about the brief unidentifiable shots that flicker just prior to Scanlon's awakening, resembling the futile, but fiercely focused eye, roosters. After a good deal of trouble I was finally able to look at a print frame by frame, and the shots, 15 in all, actually are of a rooster, one we see earlier. However, to save others the silly effort of running down the film, I herewith print a list of the shots:

- Scanlon's hand on sheet
- 24 frames of a dead hood on the street
- Scanlon's hand
- 24 frames of bars, before a white wall
- (Frames 1 - 5) The rooster moving right, ducking its head in normal movement.
- (6) A white frame
- (7) The rooster
- (8) The rooster with its head ducked
- (9) White, faintly negative, of 8
- (10) Rooster, head ducked
- (11) White, faintly negative, of 10

- (12) Rooster's head ducked
- (13) The same shot as 12, printed negative
- (14) The same shot as 12, but white
- (15) Scanlon's hand again

The orchestration of these simple frames to create a jolting nightmarish effect is amazing.

The peacefulness of Porvenir is an illusion. Such shoved-in-the-corner sights as a man carrying the severed head of a goat, (also appearing at the film's conclusion) contribute to the disquiet, the relentless seediness. There is the quietude of the four opening locales, which disguise violence and deceit, epitomized by the enormous formal Catholic wedding, in which the bride has a black eye, and the schoolgirls walking the street before Manzon's house. Manzon's wife, literate and loving, is the focus of the humane possibilities of life, by virtue of the gift she gives her husband of the watch (which still is not enough to get him out of Porvenir — we are made aware that necessary human qualities of kindness and love have no value in this dark underside) as well as by the short exchange between them that sets the tone for the struggle the men endure against the limitations of life and themselves.

"The cannons were trained on the village," she reads from the military memoir she is editing, about which he asks "Another soldier poet?" and she replies, "More philosopher than soldier." "Soon I would lower my hand and the firing would begin. Through my field glasses, I could see a woman with a jug of water on her head, walking slowly toward her home as she had always done. In a second, my simple gesture would remove her from the face of the earth. Whose gesture would remove me? When and how would it come?"

Manzon: And did he lower it?

Blanche: Yes.

Manzon: Then he was just a soldier.

Blanche: No one is "just" anything.

We could reduce the film to this maxim, but Friedkin's compassionate but unsentimental realization of the film prevents the phrase from diverting us from the true vividness of their fight against despair. However, it lends a mature respect to the men at the film's conclusion. When the hoods come to get Scanlon, part of our disappointment arises from our knowledge that they are coming from another world, operating under the same thesis as Manzon, that Scanlon is "just" a cheap hood, which conflicts with our appraisal of him.

All societies are two societies operating side by side, the innocent and the dark. In Porvenir, it is mostly dark that has superseded the usual need to disguise, to hide the inevitable darkness, summarized as death. The morbid shorthand of shots of the dying, burnt men at the oil field emphasize the outrage of sudden death, in this case caused by guerillas, which hangs like a stench over the rig, Porvenir, the world. It is Camus's sense of man living under sentence of death. When the burnt carcasses



Victor Manzon (Bruno Cremer).

are delivered to the town wrapped in plastic and dripping with blood and pieces of flesh, the stunned silence of the crowd turns into irrational rebellion, towards the oppression of the corrupt government, and toward the tyranny of death itself.

Yes, yes, Porvenir can be seen as a metaphoric condensation of life itself. After the sabotage, there is a beautifully acted scene between Corlette (Ramon Bieri) and his superior in COREPET: the situation is set up. Four men must drive the nitro 218 miles to the field. Corlette is another moral force in the film, the familiar man-doing-a-dirty-job character, but the actor's skill gives the character a ragged, tired humanity. The film's focus is temporarily him and his frustration. "I've seen worse" his explosives expert tells him, but this doesn't make blowing it any easier. The announcement to the village follows, and then the excellent montage, in a film that is almost all montage, of the potential drivers being tested. Scanlon, a driver in his previous life, does well, as do the four other most desperate men, each driving in a fashion that articulates his character. In a humorless film as is this one, even the gag of the bad driver knocking down the men in the bed of the truck contributes to the malaise; on a miniscule level it reiterates the suddenness of life's, usually deadly, jolts. A second montage follows quickly, brilliantly: the men assemble two trucks ("Sorcerer" and "Lazaro") from the wreckage of several. The music of Tangerine Dream, here, as elsewhere, supplies the emotional continuity of pursuit, drivenness (much could be written of Friedkin's use of sound,

as in for example the transition from New Jersey to Porvenir, with the gradually-louder el abruptly superseded by the dawn birds of South America. The roar of the second bridge scene contributes to its tension by virtue of its giving the spectator no relief from the scene's doom-filled possibilities). Nilo, who also wants out of Porvenir, waits and watches silently, while his ultimate victim, Marquez assists the others. The combination and succession of the different framings, camera movements, and lighting situations must be seen to be appreciated, culminating in the beautiful shot of the switching on of a truck's lights.

Now the specificity of frustration is realized. Rather than the metaphoric city of stasis Porvenir, now a chain of incidents engage the spectator in the plight of the four men. Though their numbers are reduced until only Scanlon remains, each obstacle is overcome: the two bridges, the tree, delirium. The careful character construction pays off as the interactions resonate under the weight of each crisis. Manzon assumes a take-charge attitude, Scanlon grubby greed and exasperation, Nilo both calm and cowardice, and Kasem angry determination. The tests-of-wills between each one is the very essence and evolution of the journey, the dictation of its form, and a response to its content. Ingenuity destroys the tree, but once it is gone, they relax, and Manzon begins to reminisce. Just as earlier Scanlon's contemplation of happier moments precedes problems, so Manzon is doomed. Sex is Friedkin's shorthand for communion, relaxation of the will, and peace, leading

inevitably in this severe film to slip-ups. Existence is relentless and impatient. As he speaks of Paris, their tire is shot out, and Manzon and Kassem are killed. They are not "just" anything, despite the efforts of life to confine them.

The cliff-hanger ending is well-prepared for. The town's cops are there in the cafe, and we know from a previous scene that they want part of Scanlon's reward. The plane overhead, we soon discover, carries the hood and Scanlon's betraying friend. Corlette gives Jackie the letter Manzon gave him, but once again the fate of the letter is questionable, as "April in Paris" begins to play, and Scanlon (in an *Asphalt Jungle*-inspired moment) begins to dance with the old woman. If only he had left immediately... Again, like the sex talk between Nilo and Scanlon, and the Coke ad (where the segmentation of the ad into three shots builds up the gag of the Coke bottle in the model's hand), the desire for warmth and solitude lead to trouble. Just as the pretty girl holds a Coke, just as Porvenir hides violence, and a wedding ceremony hides oppression, so does the seed of sentimentality spawn self-destruction. The plane that before had represented freedom, now brings potential death. It would have been vulgar of Friedkin to show the climax that seems inevitable. Instead the camera pulls back from an explosive situation. The continuation of life's struggle is suggested. The ending does not so much doom Scanlon as pause before another crisis. After all, just as he was the single hood to escape the car accident, and the only one of the four drivers to survive, he may once again prevail. We know that, if he does, he may never rest again.