

THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

The Last American Dream

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lips twitch, the camera
enter his dream.

ld hotel in Spring Lake,
meeting of the Ladies
n progress. On the plat-
: Henry Whittaker is
d on either side of her
bers of the patrol that
en Captain Marco, led
52. The soldiers look
their minds. The talk
to, that we're listening
oring: "Our Friend the
ore or less. The scene is
astliness of Mrs. Whit-
nt dress is topped only

begins a circular pan
: an audience of women
: Mrs. Whittaker, most
y, a few young, listening
g notes, whispering po-
ther. It's a long, slow
camera returns to Mrs.
ern, the scene is com-
. Yen Lo, a fat, enter-
: Communist scientist
Dhiegh, is now speak-
are seated at his sides,
sey hotel room. They're
, modern auditorium;
ed with Soviet and Chi-
hind Yen Lo are huge
italin, workers, peasants
rn, post-dada montage
elegance.

ins that the soldiers—
ir interpreter, Chunjin,
Silva—were set up for
on maneuvers in Korea,
licopter to a hospital in
what Yen Lo calls "con-
ainwashing," he says,
h I understand is the
rm." The soldiers have
elieve they are waiting
a New Jersey hotel.
o says, all they hear is

er reappears—speaking
in her own voice—a bit
h an edge of contempt.
talin and Mao.

ars as himself in the
peaks as himself, in the
el. From his point of
s audience, the Ladies
Mrs. Whittaker speaks
in the auditorium. In
speaks as Yen Lo, with
lres filling the garden

returning to the United States from
Korea to be awarded the Congressional
Medal of Honor, for leading his sup-
posedly lost patrol back to safety. The
question is, says the Chinese in the
audience, "Has he ever killed anyone?"

Mrs. Whittaker replies in Yen Lo's
words, and then addresses Raymond
Shaw. Yen Lo continues speaking as
himself—in the garden club. A member
of the club is cradling a bayonet like a
kitten, smiling. Mrs. Whittaker, speak-
ing as Yen Lo, is about to take it, when
a Russian officer, in the auditorium, ob-
jects: "Not with the knife, with the
hands." The officer turns into a mem-
ber of the garden club, gaily waving a
handkerchief.

Yen Lo is present in the auditorium
as himself: to prove the efficacy of the
experiments he has performed on Shaw
and the others, Raymond, who (Yen Lo
has explained) has been programmed
as an assassin who will have no memory
of his deeds, will now have to kill the
member of the patrol he most likes.
"Captain Marco," Shaw says. "No,"
says Mrs. Whittaker, with Stalin and
Mao at her back, "we need him to get
you your medal." So Shaw chooses the
soldier he likes next best, and begins to
strangle him with a towel. The soldier
protests—"No, no, Ed," says Yen Lo in
a friendly voice. The soldier is polite—
he relaxes—it's just one more moment in
"Our Friend the Hydrangea." Through-
out the sequence, the soldiers have
acted naturally, not at all like zombies,
just bored. So now this soldier is, again,
bored. Raymond Shaw kills him, and
the dead man topples off his chair. No
one reacts. It is 1952; back in 1954,
Major Marco wakes up screaming.

The sequence is structured around
the same principles of post-dada New
Sobriety montage that shape the photo-
montage backdrop Yen Lo and Mrs.
Whittaker speak against. It's visually
irresistible, as lucid as anything beau-
tiful is lucid, and at the same time it's
unacceptable—confusing, at first, then
an impossibility, then again perfectly
possible. The sequence is set up as a
dream, but it doesn't come off the screen
as a dream, doesn't come off as a blur,
with soft edges, dissolves, milky tones—
it's severe, mathematical, a fact, true.
It's real. You realize that this actually
happened.

IT'S HERE, in this moment, that *The
Manchurian Candidate*. a movie based

to happen.

The Manchurian Candidate may be
the most exciting and disturbing Amer-
ican movie from *Citizen Kane* to the
Godfather pictures precisely because
this scene is not a set-piece: it is a prom-
ise the movie pays in full. To see Ray-
mond Shaw strangle one soldier—and,
later, in another patrol member's match-
ing dream, to see Shaw shoot a teenage
soldier through the head, to see a wash of
blood and brain matter splatter Stalin's
face—is to be shocked, and not to be
prepared for the atrocities that follow:
much quieter, almost silent atrocities,
and all the worse for that. And yet there
is no message here, no point being made,
not even any felt implication that Com-
munists are bad and Americans are
good, nothing like that at all—this is all,
somehow, taking place in an atmosphere
of moral neutrality, of aesthetic suspen-
sion. All we're seeing is people. We're
seeing the director, John Frankenheimer;
the screenwriter, George Axelrod; plus
Frank Sinatra, Laurence Harvey, Henry
Silva, Khigh Dhiegh, Angela Lansbury
(Raymond Shaw's demonic mother),
and dozens more—all of them working
over their heads, diving into material
they've chosen or been given, in every
case outstripping the material, and out-
stripping themselves.

Before and after *The Manchurian
Candidate*, John Frankenheimer was
and is a crude director without an inter-
esting idea in his head. Frank Sinatra
was a good actor, sometimes much bet-
ter than good, instinctive and wary, but
he never came close to the weight, or
the warmth, of his performance here.
You could say the same for almost any-
one involved in the project. Something
—something in the story, something in
the times, in the interplay of various
people caught up consciously in the
story, and unconsciously or half-con-
sciously in the times—came together.
Something in the story, or in the times,
that had to have been sensed, felt, but
never thought, never shaped into a the-
ory or a belief or even a notion, prop-
elled these people out of themselves,
past their limits as technicians or actors
or whatever they were, and made them
propel their material, Richard Condon's
cheap paranoid fantasy, past its limits.

There's a special thrill—a unique
response—that comes when you recog-
nize an author working over his head,
over her head—and in *The Manchurian
Candidate* everyone. from Franken-

where every moment
boarded, defined, fit
even here, nothing is
There's no story-bo
director's intention,
tion, that can call up,
that can account for,
Major Marco's smile
proves that his dream
but a memory—when
to break the case, wh
what he dreamed was
is warm; it is sadisti
determined, against
life is in that smile—a
happy ending, a happy
won't provide, the
smile, so all-consumi
as it appears on the sc

The plot of *The M
date* is simple nonsens
of terrors floating in t
terror of McCarthy
Communist brainwas
from the newspapers
Russians and the Chi
zombie assassin out
soldier—and contriv
awarded the Medal o
him beyond suspicion.
Their comrade in the
Raymond Shaw's mc
Senator John Iselin,
father (played by Ja
stand-in for Senator J
ing as rabid anticorr
and Mrs. Iselin are c
Ultimately, Senator I
vice-presidential no
party, Raymond Shav
the presidential nomir
delivers his acceptanc
Senator Iselin will tak
great patriotic addi
America even if it mea
Raymond's mother e
she gives him his assi
Senator Iselin, or r
mother, will be swept
she will exercise as p
own sake, betraying h
rades, destroying then
cation is, everything
States. The republic. F
pure pleasure of the
sure of its violence.

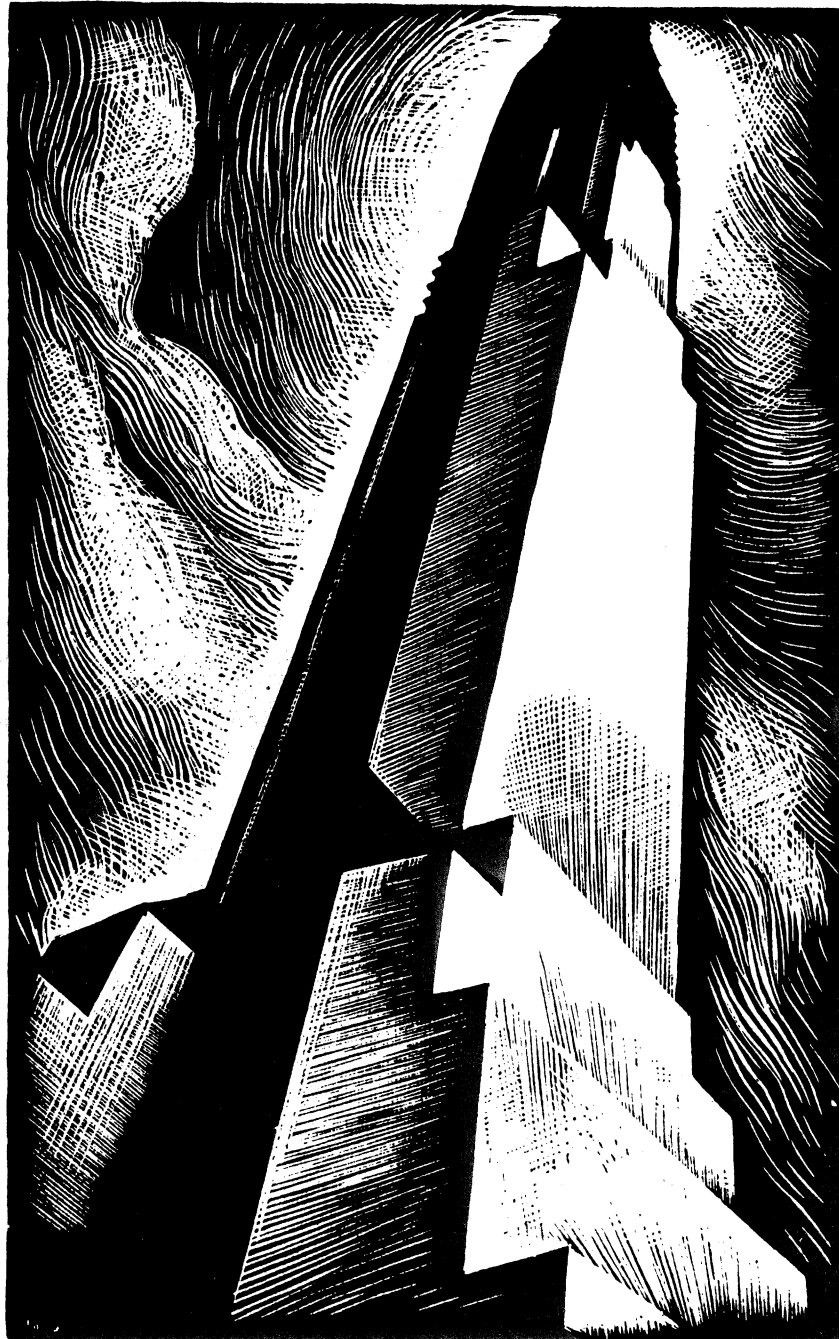
There is no point in
plot as a clue to anytl
plot as the clue to a
mind. The plot, in thi
cuse—an excuse for tl
movie's violence. Tha

it he had to have been
 pop, Charlie Parker, im-
 knowing where you're
 —this movie is not Duke
 an see this spirit, this
 s narrative irresponsi-
 that didn't have to be
 than a counter in the
 have to be more than a
 ce.

s paranoid dreams have
 breakdown; the army
 of his duties and reas-
 ublic relations assistant
 of defense. The secre-
 press conference, with
 .

," says a reporter, "can
 ut in budget?" The sec-
 and impatient, with a
 hanson in his vehemence
 of Johnson's savvy, ex-
 ou've asked a simple-
 1," he roars, "I'll give
 mple-minded answer."
 oes on to explain, in
 ghtforward you can't
 ing spoken today, that
 il power threatens the
 vy, there is no need to
 : thus the cut in budget.
 illed up with reporters,
 nonitors—like Major
 the scene is at once
 it up. Now we see the
 , then on a TV monitor,
 then from the crowd,
 rom his point of view,
 ig fast.

is responding rudely,
 or. You're caught by a
 lation of plain speech,
 of bureaucratic propri-
 man? How did he get
 is more lively, more
 nment is supposed to
 a warm-up. As Major
 id the press conference,
 ands up in the back of
 iselin, sitting off to the
 outhing the words Sen-
 g to speak, words she's
 usation that there are
 id some card-carrying
 re Defense Department.
 the camera moves from
 Iselin to a TV monitor
 etary, the monitor then
 ig, sliding, ripping—to
 e speaks both from the
 he room—it's a kind of
 violence, a sort of media



Howard Cook, *Chrysler Tower*, 1930

Senator Iselin, about the strange and hideous conspiracy that's unfolding—you want to see the secretary of defense keep talking, you want to see him take over the story. And he does, in a way. Even though we never see him again, his

friend and tell him he had to see it, too. We went the next night; as we left the theater, I asked him what he thought. "Greatest movie I ever saw," he said flatly, as if he didn't want to talk about it, and he didn't. He said it stunned

ders from his mount
 operator," Raymond
 senator. It's not hor
 shooting the senator t
 from a distance, Ray
 the body, bends over
 necessary, professional
 the dead man's brain.
 so, his wife, the se
 comes running down
 frame—and then Ra
 been instructed not
 target but to kill any
 killing, coolly, casu
 slightest human resp
 still, somehow, seems
 real person), turns ar
 through the forehead.

At the end of the n
 convention, as Raymo
 Madison Square Gar
 spotlight booth, posi
 nate the presidential
 end, when Raymond
 stepfather, Senator Is
 stant cut to Raymon
 next to the senator, as
 coming. A second bu
 her forehead, and her
 head, just as Preside
 went to his neck. But
 come to see Raymon
 a prig, but as an indiv
 for all his demons mi
 a life to live, who des
 When he commits th
 fated, heroic crime,
 mother, in that instan
 and you stop, and y
 happened: the horror
 doubled. His father-i
 stepfather, his mother
 has to kill them all. I
 can't cheer, not ever
 Raymond Shaw shoo
 think: my God, he's
 What can he do nex
 himself—but that's n
 want. And you can't a

This kind of viola
 extremism—presente
 possibility and absur
 naturalism—is not al
The Manchurian Can
 happen in movies to
 sense of people workir
 which is finally a sen
 "What can we get av
 what's happening wit
 black actor to play
 trist—one of the few
 characters in the fil

who made the movie of the glee with which played it out, but a di-fronts us now, twenty-that is, we are watching another world. ous moments that take vn time, as we watch moments that seal the ity, as a relic, that takes of the action—the f the elevator operator iw’s apartment build-s in the elevator. Far ht of 1962 cars on the of the Korean War as yone once understood, as a monster or a hero eviled or applauded, know elevator opera-t anymore, that even if oean War, another Joe on’t get any more ele-smoking in elevators. n which such tiny de-them today, make the y—protect us from it. ally, as the movie plays ies to hold onto such he rest of the movie is

ian Candidate, plung-: assassination of a ent, closing with the he man who’s going to is taken out of circula-er it was released. Not right after the assassi-nt Kennedy—even after s shown on television. drawn—because it was, ght. It wasn’t that the y predicted the events the finally incompre-ations that filled the he years after that, all is and near-assassina-Kennedy, Malcolm X, ing, Robert F. Kennedy, eorge Wallace, Gerald on, Ronald Reagan. On e who controlled the

have been a sense— e sense—that the film these incompre-his somehow whole, r event, of this current e: a transformation of is open, public life into r hidden conspiracy. e been a sense, as the wn, as year after year

of any of us. And that disgusting accep-tance, today, is part of what *The Manchurian Candidate* is about.

As the movie ends, in its final scene, Marco, Frank Sinatra, understands the whole story—why it happened, how it happened—and he can’t accept it. “Hell,” he curses. “Hell.” That’s the end of the film: misery, regret, fury, the secret he has to hold inside himself. It can’t be told, that the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China conspired with apparent American fascists, who linked themselves with fascist tendencies in American life, in order to destroy the American republic: the repercussions would be too great. Marco will have to take the secret to his grave. The truth of the life and near-death of the republic cannot be told to the people who make up the republic. It will be buried, for our own good.

So you look at the movie, lost in its visual delight, cringing at its violence, wondering what it says, if it says anything—wondering what happens. A lot of what happens is unburdened by any weight at all—the great karate fight between Sinatra, Major Marco, and Henry Silva, Chunjin (Chunjin now working as Raymond Shaw’s houseboy). Sinatra rings the doorbell to Raymond Shaw’s apartment, Silva opens it, Sinatra sees Silva, the whole betrayal in Korea comes back to him, as a fact, undeniable, and he slams Silva in the face. After the fight has gone on and on, not a second too long, there is that moment when Sinatra has Silva down on the floor, is kicking him in the ribs, again and again, each movement as precise as it is fierce, asking Silva, the Communist agent who betrayed the patrol in Korea, what happened, what *really happened*—and then the cops arrive, and Sinatra, not thinking, acting in the real world, responds to a grab around his shoulders by elbowing the policeman in the stomach, and the cop falls away, and the scene is cut. It’s a purely instinctive act—and it catches so much of what’s alive about this movie.

But that’s not all. After so many years, or after seeing the movie now, more than once, another element enters. You see that, here, everyone acts politically: the villains, the heroes, the characters that barely register, that simply come and go. Everyone acts as a citizen of a republic, or as an anti-citizen. What’s at stake is a commonwealth. As the movie closes, in that final scene, Sinatra re-

THIS IS, today, an odd idea—as odd as the casting of a black actor as a psychiatrist, or the characterization of Major Marco as an intellectual: “You don’t want to hear about my mother,” Raymond Shaw says to Marco in a drunken moment. “Sure I do,” says Marco. “It’s like listening to Orestes gripe about Clytemnestra.” “Who?” says Raymond. “Greeks,” Marco says. “Couple of Greeks in a play.” The idea of everyone as a citizen is as odd, once one has been subsumed into the world of the movie, as the speech President Bush made on education last week. “Bush Rallies Businesses to Invest in U.S. Education,” read the headline in the *San Francisco Chronicle* four days ago. “The businesses that are involved with local schools, developing the workforce at its source,” Bush said, “are making fail-safe investments.” The anonymous wire-service reporter finished the story: “Bush mentioned no specific reforms or initiatives to give workers the skills and background that will be demanded by economic changes and technological advances.” But this was no criticism. The reporter was accepting the terms of the president’s world, of the republic he spoke for: the anti-republic.

Just as, today, the paranoia of *The Manchurian Candidate* is absurd, so, within the world defined by *The Manchurian Candidate*, is this little news story. Here, now, the citizen of the republic is reduced to part of “the workforce,” as in the People’s Republic of China, today; in the movie, all people are citizens, concerned with a commonwealth greater than themselves; they are acting, in small or great ways, purposefully or thoughtlessly, to save or ruin it. And that is the issue. The idea that any man or woman could be merely part of “the workforce,” private, concerned only with his or her personal fortune or lack of it, is in *The Manchurian Candidate* as foreign, as strange, as alien, as the smoking elevator operator is to us today.

In the end, *The Manchurian Candidate* is about patriotism—a commitment to a life where every private act has public consequences. This is no longer the world we live in. This is the shock of the movie, now. This Hollywood movie, based on a commercial novel, from long ago, or not so far away, is a fantasy of a life we could be living. A fantasy—not so different, in certain ways, from John Wayne in the last shots of a war movie. But I’ll take Frank Sinatra, smiling, as

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