All the Colors: Bertrand Tavernier Talks about "Round Midnight"
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With Round Midnight, Bertrand Tavernier has made a fiction feature about jazz musicians without false picturesque details or corkscrewly melodramatic plotting. Meandering and eddying like the curls and backflows of a developing jazz improvisation, the film chronicles the West Bank Parisian existence that so many black American jazzmen, fleeing homegrown racism, poverty, and neglect, took up during after World War II and throughout the 1950s. Instead of the floating party presented in Paris Blues, all glamorous romances, tempestuous artistic crises, and the usual tourist attractions, or Les Liaisons Dangereuses, which (to quote Pauline Kael) “uses jazz and Negroes and sex all mixed together in a cheap and sensational way that, I assume, is exotic for the French,” Round Midnight shows these expatriates existing in a continuous orbit between the stages of tiny boîtes like the legendary Blue Note and a series of drab, characterless hotels. In these clubs, they swim in their self-generated seas of sounds usually lost even as they loft forth, except in the dimming memories of each night’s small bands of aficionados or on an occasional bootleg recording. In the hotels, they sit torpidly, drink, cook Southern-style when they can find the ingredients, exchange occasional gnomic remarks, wait out the leaden hours until the next set.

Tavernier and David Rayfiel (a frequent collaborator, not always screen-credited, of Sydney Pollack and the co-writer of Tavernier’s Death Watch) have fictionalized material mainly from the experiences of bebop pianist Bud Powell, who eventually succumbed to the stresses of the life, and commercial artist Francis Paudras, whose love of jazz led him to befriend Powell and at least slow down his decline. Their protagonist is tenor saxophonist Dale Turner (played by real-life jazz veteran Dexter Gordon), his guardian angel Francis Borier (François Cluzet), but the trajectory remains the same: a late-in-the-day reflowering of music and humanity before the final fall.

The movie’s grip and eloquence arise chiefly from Gordon’s mesmerizing presence—his lolling walk that continually threatens to send his 6’5” frame tottering to earth like a felled tree; a gluey, sandpapery voice whose range of low rasps speaks every instant of both a longing for release and a mulish determination to hang on some more. Taking his cue from this poetic hulk, Tavernier keeps exposition about his past to a minimum, focusing on the tones and cross-currents of the moment instead. For instance, he never spells out the relationship Dale once had with much younger, dazzlingly beautiful singer Darcy Lee (Lonette McKee) but, rather, concentrates on the heady outpourings of regret-tinged but perfect happiness that burst radiantly from their scenes (one of them a rendition of George and Ira Gershwin’s “How Long Has This Been Going On?”).

François Cluzet (who manages to resemble both the young François Truffaut and Robert De Niro) is also riveting as the starry-eyed self-appointed keeper of Dale’s flame. Under his ministrations, as Paudras has done, Dale escapes, at least for an unexpected time, his prison of depression, alcoholism, and heroin, finding fresh outlets for the courtly, lyrical side of his nature, not to mention some fellow-feeling, the renewal of his composing, and a few decent paydays. But the film also shows how Francis’s passion for jazz makes him indifferent to his vulnerable young daughter Berangère (Gabrielle Haker) and piercingly cruel to his estranged wife Sylvie (actress-writer-director Christine Pascal, another frequent Tavernier collaborator, particularly on Spoiled Children).

Round Midnight works to present what Dale calls “all the colors” of jazz yet remains intent upon nuances of sorrow and human weakness that not even perfect creative fulfillment can assuage indefinitely. This element surfaces most
Dexter Gordon and director Bertrand Tavernier discuss a scene in Round Midnight

poetically when François, his daughter, and Dale visit the seaside and the film stunningly cuts from its heretofore cramped spaces to aerated vistas of sky, beach, and ocean. Lying back and gazing upward, Dale slowly croaks, “It’s funny how the world is inside of nothing. Your heart and soul are inside of you. Babies are inside of their mothers. The fish are in the water. But the world is inside of nothing.” The film, finally, is a tribute to the commingled gaiety and sadness of all attempts to fill up that void.

Round Midnight reportedly began its road to the screen when Martin Scorsese introduced Tavernier and producer Irwin Winkler (whose credits include, along with Scorsese’s New York, New York and Raging Bull, the Rocky films, The Gambler, and The Right Stuff). Warner Bros. put up the budget of approximately $3 million, partly at the behest, one story has it, of Clint Eastwood, who is a jazz enthusiast. Scorsese closed the circle by portraying the owner of a New York club where Dale Turner plays out his last days, adding his own distinctive brand of motormouth New York spritz to the movie’s array of notes. What follows comes from an interview done (in English) on October 15, 1986, when Tavernier was in Los Angeles on a promotional visit.

A note runs through the movie: beauty is connected with pain. The usual idea is that a vision of beauty is a barrier against pain. Here it is not, and not because the music is neglected or there are no financial rewards for those who play the jazz. It’s that playing the jazz itself causes them pain at the same time that it gives them ecstasy.

Yes, exactly, exactly. And sometimes adoring jazz, understanding it deeply, causes the same thing.

What is Francis’s real nature? In particular, what is his condition at the end of the movie, when he is watching films of his friend that he shot and it’s several years later? I had the impression that he might be lost and unable to recover himself.

Francis for me is a very important character. First, because he allows the audience to ap-
approach Dale Turner in an impressionistic way. So sometimes without even realizing it, the audience sees Dale from his point of view, from his emotions. And I think you are projecting Francis's emotions or reactions upon Dale. For me, it's not only a balance, but I think that a lot of people don't realize that without Francis the emotion would never be the same. And the other thing about Francis is—I wanted the character to have some dark side. I didn't want to tell just the story of a friendship, just the story about someone rescuing another. I wanted to show the selfish side of people who want to save the world. And I wanted to show that sometimes the communication was difficult, and sometimes are they even really communicating, Dale and Francis? In the last scene with Francis, I wanted him to be partly the cause of Dale's death, unconsciously. By taking him to his parents, to Lyons, taking him in his family, he makes Dale aware, very aware, that he is an exile, that he is cut from his roots, and he provokes that need to come back. I even had a line, a thing which I shot, just before the Lyons concert. Francis was saying, "I think I should not have had him brought back to New York." And I felt it was too much of an explanation, so I cut it. The last scene between Francis and his daughter was improvised on the set. When she says, "I'm going out," and then she comes back. I wanted to show that at the same time that he was maybe more mature, he was left with all those memories, and he had never completely thought of her. And I wanted to show that, in a way, Berangère was more mature than he, was helping him. It's true that Francis has made a step towards her, he went to her. But he's still caught in a story. And she comes to him. I wanted that. She comes to him to give him tenderness, to tell him that it's not over. I mean, Dale is still alive. The image is still there. The sound is still there. It's why I wanted the voice-over of Dale at the last scene. The lines were not in the script. At the end of the shoot, I went to the studio with Dexter, and I made him talk about certain things, some of which I used at the end in the sound track. And then . . . I had written something which he had told me one day. "I hope that one day there will be—"

_The parks and the streets named after great jazz musicians._

He did it. He recorded it. And I suddenly asked him, without preparing it, I said to him, "What about Dale Turner?" And he looked at me, surprised, but immediately he said, "Maybe a street called Dale Turner." And I said, "My God, I will cut my questions," and I had the ending.

_One reason it's perfect is because when he's saying "I hope we'll all live long enough" to see that, he himself is no longer with us._

Yes, yes, yes.

_In addition to which, we still don't have those streets and those parks._

Yes. This is exactly the problem which I wanted to get at. In a way, I can relate to the passion of Francis. When I was a press agent, I had the same relationship that he has with Dale Turner, I had it with people like John Ford. When I took care of John Ford, when we had him come into Paris. In those first days—not at the end, he was perfect at the end—but those first days he was really drinking a lot. To the point that we had to sleep in the same hotel room to take care of him. So when Francis Paudras told me the story of his relationship with Bud, I could very, very, very much relate
to that. I had lived several times that innocence. The scene when Francis tells Dale how much he loves him and he loves his music, and Dale says, "Do you have enough money to buy me another beer?"—it's based on one of the meetings between Bud and Francis. But at the same time, I experienced the same thing with Ford. When I told John Ford how much I love his work and had been talking about The Sun Shines Bright, She Wore a Yellow Ribbon, My Darling Clementine, the Searchers, Young Mr. Lincoln, we were talking a little like Francis in the picture, and he said, "Do you think I could get a B & B [Benedictine and brandy]?" "My God," we said . . . We had the same reaction as Francis—surprise, disappointment, and it was very easy for me to relate to that kind of emotion. Francis has a very French, romantic, naïve, and passionate attitude toward Dale. He loves him, and he respects him. And Dale always has a way of cutting him. And I liked that.

There are moments when you just want to come out and say it. You don't want to be oblique or subtle.

Yes, exactly, exactly that, sure. And Francis Paudras several times told me that he had had the same experience with Bill Evans. One day he was with him in a car, and he had, like, three minutes to communicate something. You cannot be oblique in those moments. And, too, it's not the way of the character to be oblique. The people who love the films, they will go directly to somebody and say, "I love your work." So I had a big discussion with David Rayfiel about that. David is a wonderful oblique writer. But sometimes not everybody has to be oblique. David is great for making a love scene where people say "I love you" in talking about matches and . . . I don't know, the grass or things like that. He wrote beautiful scenes like that. But maybe there is a moment, sometimes, where the people have to say, "I love you." David would even have a problem writing a scene with somebody asking for eggs and bacon. He would like to find a subtle way. And I found the same thing with the scene with the wife [when Francis tries to borrow money from Sylvie to move himself, Berangère, and Dale into a roomier apartment]. David was thinking that the scene was telling the audience that Dale is great. And I was saying, "No, David, it's a very violent scene." It's somebody who is so childish and immature that he is telling the woman whom I think he still loves that he has never been inspired by her. So he hurts her all the time during that scene. And I think the scene is very, very, very important because it brings out the dark side of the character. Which I think doesn't make him less likable or interesting.

In a way, it ties in with what Dale says: "Music is my life, music is my love, and it's 24 hours a day." That's a heavy sentence to face. It's like something that will not turn off and will not let go of you.

Yes, and I think it's completely true of all the jazz musicians of the period, completely true. Maybe that story of friendship and passion is more related to the jazz musicians. I don't know that anything like that happened in rock-and-roll. Maybe because the other kind of music is more the music of the establishment. It's a music where people are making lots of money, where in jazz, the people were not making lots of money. They were outside of the system. And I still think that the bebop is the only part of the American music which has never been recuperated, swallowed, by the system. I mean, Broadway has used the blues, has used Fats Waller, Duke Ellington. They took everything.

The way the numbers are shot, there are rest periods in the middle of them with little bits of byplay and behavior between the musicians. Instead of playing, Dale will sit and rest for a minute, or he'll look at a drink and try to get it, and there will be looks passing back and forth between them. Rock-and-roll wouldn't allow for such a thing. I thought that was one of the most effective aspects of the film.

We were determining a certain number of [camera] positions, because we never knew where we were going in the numbers because jazz is so much an improvisation. So we had, like, 12 positions, and when I was watching the numbers, I was behind the grip and the operator, and I was saying [whispers] "5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . ." And we were constantly moving.

Were you shooting with only one camera?

Two cameras. And I always said that I wanted to use the movement. So they were trying to make the movements smooth and fast. And then suddenly I would say, "Pan on the
Herbie Hancock
(who composed, arranged, and conducted the score) as Eddie Wayne in Round Midnight

drummer, on Billy . . .” And I wanted to get a lot of shots of the people listening. There is, I think, a wonderful shot of Billy Higgins during “Body and Soul.” You see that he is listening to Dale. And you see that he is thinking a lot of things: “Well, Dale may be a little bit out of shape. I hope he will make it, but he went into a kind of adventurous course. Will he go until the end? What kind of note is he going to hit? I want him to play that.” You feel that he wants to help, that he’s interested, surprised, pleased, and at the same time that he would like to be there to help. So he’s changing his drums, he’s thinking of something else, and he’s waiting for the note. We were able to get those kinds of scenes because we recorded live.

I want to ask a couple of things about the audience. For example, the shot of the man who seems to be surreptitiously recording the sets . . .

That’s the real Francis Paudras. I mean, certain jazz fans did record the music during a set, and it’s how a lot of pirate records appeared. And the bad side is that sometimes the musicians were not paid. The good side is that certain records got moments which were incredible, the moments that sometimes you don’t get in an album, where somebody in a club suddenly has a wonderful night and a wonderful solo. And I wanted to show that because I’ve seen that all the time, people recording. And sometimes with bad sound. I mean, you have an album of Lester [Young] or Charlie Parker where you hear the forks, you hear more the noise of the club than the music. But still some of them are very interesting. The audience, well . . . we chose only jazz fans. I mean, some people came from the South of France to be in the movie. We had a teacher who took his holiday to be there at Epinay, the studio, for two weeks during the shooting. We had some musicians. We had the wife and the daughter of Charlie Parker in the crowd. I had the son of Kenny Clarke. I had some jazz critics. I had people who were at the Blue Note at the time. And I wanted them to listen, to really listen, to the music. And when they do things, mark the tempo, that they are right. Because a lot of times in movies, they will be either overdoing or completely out of tempo, out of the beat. So I wanted that to be very precise and noticed. I mean, the extras in some of the films about jazz are absolutely dreadful. I mean, the way they act. They are moving and acting and pretending to be excited, overdoing it like nobody does in a club. In clubs like the Blue Note, people were not dancing, they were listening. In Paris Blues, you see people dancing to New Orleans music, Dixieland music, but not to bebop. And they never know what is the style of the music. So they are mixing Ellington, Armstrong, swing, New Orleans. So the musi-
Dexter Gordon as Dale Turner, Sandra Reeves-Turner as Buttercup, François Cluzet as Francis Borier: ROUND MIDNIGHT

cians always refer to the music but never to a style, never to a real thing. I mean, I never knew what kind of music Paul Newman was writing in Paris Blues, or Sidney Poitier. Was it Dixieland? Was it an Ellington type of arrangement? Was it Stan Kenton? He says, "I would like to write a piece of important music."

Which means nothing.

Nothing. It's absurd.

At one point, you pan from Francis to a very beautiful woman, who's also listening very intently. If this were another kind of movie, their eyes would meet, and something would start to develop between them, and this would be woven into an elaborate plot that would become involved with the jazz and the musicians and everything.

[Laughs] No, I wanted that kind of thing where nothing happens, just people listening. Because I've noticed, especially people who are the real fans, they don't communicate. They are there, they are lost. Especially in that number, which was very emotional, "Body and Soul." I felt it was much more moving that way.

The musicians seem to be in their own individual world, yet still attentive to the other musicians. But they're not that concerned with playing directly to the audience.

Yeah, because if they are well together, they immediately admit that the audience will get it. It's very, very strange, the relationship between the bebop musicians and [audiences]. Except a few people like Dizzy Gillespie, who really try to have a lot of fun with the audience. Bobby Hutcherson, who plays in the film's Blue Note band] told me a wonderful story. It explained the attitude of the musicians. George Coleman was always practicing his own scales, and he was repeating them on the stage. And Miles Davis] got very angry and said, "I don't want you to discover something alone. You have to share that with the audience, and you have to discover it when the audience is there, not when you are alone." And that's very important. You have to discover things when the others are there and the audience is there. It's a real confrontation. And in a way, they are closer to some classical musicians. They think the audience is mature enough to be able to catch that. But at the same time, they were demanding and they were challenging each other.

A question has arisen a few times: "Dexter Gordon is really playing himself, isn't he?" It doesn't seem to me that he is. I was struck by the way when he was trying to get his money directly he says, "I've been straight enough to play my axe . . . and sweetly." That's incredible, and it's obviously acting.

Yes, it is. The word "sweetly" was something he added. First, I think a lot of the great actors and stars are bringing a lot of themselves in the part. I don't mean their ideas or that but their
way of speaking or behaving. I mean, Cooper, Wayne, Bogart—they have their way of deliver-
ing the lines. Jean Gabin. In a way, Dexter is like that, and he has a way of speaking which is very special. The other thing is Dexter was never, never somebody who could be controlled as easily as Dale Turner. He was always a charmer, always a ladies’ man. He had certain moments of his life which are similar to Dale Turner’s. He had downs, he had moments where he would destroy himself, he had a lot of things like that.

*He lived that hotel room life?*

Yes, he had that, but you cannot imagine Dexter being locked up in a room like that or anybody controlling Dexter. I know that. We spent 15, 16 weeks together, and it’s very, very difficult to control him. We had once or twice some problems with him. I mean, he has his own mind, he knows what he’s doing, he has a way of imposing what he wants, which is not Dale Turner. In the other way, Dexter is very, very sharp, very intelligent, and he’s acting in life all the time. Like in the scene that you mentioned, I had a big argument with him, a big discussion, because he wanted to slap Sandra Reeves-Phillips, the woman playing Buttercup [a jazz singer who serves as a kind of den mother to the musicians]. He said, “I have to take revenge on her. I have to knock her down.” And I had one hour of discussion with him trying to show that it was not in line with the character. And he said, “Yes, but me, I would slap her.” I said, “You don’t need it.” When I was arguing, I said to him, “Dexter, do you think that Gary Cooper would hit a wom-
an?” And he thought for a while, and he said, “No.” And it’s how I got the scene. The whole idea of the character is based on something that Thelonious Monk said at the end of his life, when he was asked to play at Carnegie and was being given a lot of money, and he turned that down, and he said, “It’s too late. I’m tired of trying to convince people.”

*When Dale says to the psychiatrist, “I’d really like to rest. I’m tired of everything except the music,” I thought that he meant, “I’d like to rest permanently. I’d like to die. I wish I could be tired of the music, too.”*

Yes, that was the idea. And that is something in the character which is not at all in Dexter. Not at all. Because Dexter is a survivor. Dexter is somebody who is surprising everybody by the way he’s coming back all the time. The biggest fight I had with any actor in my life was with François Cluzet, because François was so much in admiration for Dexter when we had those two or three crises. Which were difficult but, after all, I think they even helped the film, and they are nothing compared to the moments of pleasure and happiness and great emotion that we had on the set. But there was one moment when Dexter was really completely exhausted, and the film was bringing back bad memories, and he was in bad shape. And François was so distressed that he was doing the same thing. François started to drink. We began to be wor-ied, because François was so much in his part, and a lot of people of the crew began to say, “When he will be in New York and the charac-
ters have to separate, that will be very, very difficult. I don’t know if we’re going to be able to get him back.” And I had a one-hour fight on the street. He kept saying, “This is the greatest love story, which I’m leaving” and “The man is dying in front of me.” I said, “Look, Dexter is not dying, Dexter is a sur-
vivor, Dexter in four years from now will be recording a new album, and you will be in the gutter.” After all that, François was absolutely perfect and great. But the film was incredibly emotional to shoot, because the frontier be-
tween life and fiction was always completely thin. At the same time, at certain moments we were in fiction, and suddenly we were getting right into life. And at certain moments when we were thinking, “Oh, this is life,” Dexter had a way of playing an action or having a line which put us back where we started, making a movie. He had an *incredible* attitude for that, which I have seen only with some great, great actors, like Phillippe Noiret. We shot the scene when he wants to get paid, and then about two or three weeks after, we did the shot where he has been paid and he waves the wallet. And suddenly I heard during the take, “I have been paid direct, like anybody.” He has used the line which he has said [in the earlier scene] without telling me. That was a very good dramatic effect. I would have liked to have written that line, and so would David. That’s very, very good thinking. He has an incredible memory. And he’s a little bit like Robert Mitchum. He seems always a little bit away, dozing, his eyes closed, away from
the scene in which he is, and then suddenly he will surprise you, because three months later he will tell you exactly what happened during the scene. And that’s the way he survived, I think, the way he protected himself, because I talked to people who knew him and said he was exactly like that 20 years ago, exactly.

None of the characters expresses any racism; they don’t even seem to be thinking of it. Was this characteristic of French society in general or just this particular world?

I think it’s completely true. It was very true of what was around the jazz musicians at that time in France. James Baldwin even wrote that there is racism in France, but you don’t have any racism on the Left Bank. If I had put the story in ’49 or ’50, I could have shown Lester or Don Byas arriving in France and being surprised (that was told to me by several witnesses) that they could go in by the main door. The problem was that in ’59 [when the film is set] I could not make such a statement. The other thing is, I talked to a lot, a lot, of musicians about Lester, and they were never mentioning [racism], never. Sometimes Lester was talking about it, like I have in the film where Dale talks to the camera about the Army. But never with self-pity, with some humor in it. It was not part of their discussion. Maybe because they knew it too much and didn’t have to talk about it. The only thing that Lester said was that he had done D. B. Blues, Detention Barracks Blues, and that was his revenge upon those racists. I used one or two lines which are typically Lester. At the beginning, when Dale says, “No cold eyes in Paris,” that means no racists in Paris. But there was no more than that. In a way, for me, it’s stronger. I had thought of putting in some lines. I even recorded Dexter speaking about his first tour in the South in the forties, when he arrived in a city in the South for the first time, and the driver asked somebody where is the colored bar. He said it was a shock for him, because he was from Los Angeles and his father was a doctor. When I tried to get that in the film, that looked like, “OK, I forgot to speak about it. I’m bringing in a few lines about it.” I hate to have scenes where a character is explaining to another character something that the other character should know. Like “You can come now through the main door.” They know it. I’m sure that Dale Turner has come several times to Paris. He knows it. In ’59, everybody knew it. In a lot of films, you have explanations which are designed for the audience but not for the character. We tried to avoid that. And again—this is something important—I think the same way that in the jazz the notes that the people don’t play are as important as the notes that they play, the lines which are not there are as important as the lines which are there.

I want to bring up a possible relationship between Dale Turner and the painter in A Sunday in the Country. It’s the only film I’ve seen about an artist who may be a failure and seems to consider himself one, partly because his work has gone out of fashion but also because he feels that he has become a perfectly competent sort of painter but not one of the great people who blaze new frontiers. This seems like another example of the link between pain and beauty.

I think the two characters are very much related, although they are the opposites. One didn’t dare enough, maybe, and the other went maybe too far. In fact, the emotions are exactly the same, the fears are the same. Whatever you were not bold enough, or even if you were very brave or innovative, you always have the same fear, you always have the same obsession that maybe you didn’t go far enough, maybe you could have done it better, that you did only part of what you should have done. They are two films which are based on, I would say, a musical storyline. I asked Bruno de Keyser to do a photography which would be closer to the film noir, closer to the work of people like John Alton. The color, the design, the mood is the
opposite. [But] the way that the camera is trying to work in it, to move to build certain emotions, for me is exactly the same. Whether the camera is trying to move for me is always related with music and with the emotion of the character more than with the movement of the character.

_It seems as though, contrary to some other movies about jazz, you can’t really make a jazz film and also have an elaborate plot. You must get rid of the plot so you can fill all that space up with details that are analogous to what the musicians create with the music._

Exactly. And I think because the life and the emotion of the musicians are a challenge, in a sense, to plots. They have a life which is so based on emotion that any conventional storyline is reducing the emotion, is reducing the true spirit. You have to be completely free in terms of writing and directing, completely free. For instance, for me, a film like _Children of a Lesser God_, which everybody seems to admire very much, has a very conventional plot. Very, very old fashioned. I mean, it’s like an old-fashioned play of the thirties a little brought up to date. Well acted, very well acted.

_David Rayfiel did some work on Out of Africa, a $30 some-odd million big studio prestige Academy Award winner that does not have a plot._

Yeah. It’s true, but I mean, that’s great. It’s one of the qualities of David sometimes. _Jeremiah Johnson_, which he wrote lots for, has the same quality. Very often, people I think are making a mistake between plot and story, between what should be synopses of the plot and what is really in the film. And that very strong belief in some American critics and even in part of the audience, in which they approach the screenplay as a stage play. And very often I’ve heard things like, “In this film you don’t have the third act.” Or “The first act is brilliant.” In the films which I admire, from _The Grapes of Wrath_ to _The Sun Shines Bright_, _My Darling Clementine_, _The Rules of the Game_, _La Grande Illusion_, _Casque d’Or_, _The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp—I can name a thousand films—I wonder, “Where are the acts?”_ I mean, if they were asking me, I would _never_ know it. But even in the _teaching_ in schools . . . I mean, I’ve been to Sundance, and I’ve heard a lot of writers talking about that: “You don’t have a first act.” _Where_ is the first act? I don’t know. [But] it’s not only now. I think it’s a very old belief. Which is never true. I mean, you would never have Michael Powell, never have Jean Renoir, Jean Grémillon, Jean Vigo talking about acts. Or [Luigi] Comencini. Never. Never. They would talk in terms of fluidity. They would talk in terms of construction. And sometimes I’ve seen certain critics puzzled by films by [Maurice] Pialat, [Jacques] Doillon, or by _A Week’s Vacation_ because they don’t see a construction, which means a real progression where people go from A to B to C to D. I still believe very much for me that film is very, very close to music, and it should have the same construction, with counterpoint, with a melody which has a counterpoint behind, or a variation. Like a fugue. The films which are done like a kind of chronicle, like a series of moments—like Dos Passos, let’s say—with breakings, different stories, getting them together . . . a little less now, but they seem to puzzle a lot of people. They say, “There is not much of a plot.” I know that on _A Week’s Vacation_ I worked very, very hard, and I think in its genre that screenplay and that film are completely, completely successful. And I think that a person who would talk about not finding a plot there, they do not see what the film is about. They do not understand that you can have things which are giving you the impression that you are seeing moments of the life of somebody or a series of emotions. I mean, a construction closer to impressionism, closer to music than to a stage play. On the other hand, I have found _always_ that a lot of plays admired in this country—let’s say Arthur Miller—are deadly boring because they are so staged, so built, and so obsessed by construction that I see the mechanics but I don’t see any inspiration, any language. I mean, Tennessee Williams is much more interesting than Arthur Miller even if the plays sometimes are not so well built. They are built through poetry, through language, through lyricism, where Arthur Miller is like having two ideas which are repeated over for five or six hours. In fact—it’s true of France, too—you have a certain type of critic or audience who like the screenplay to give the impression that they are intelligent and that they have understood certain deep things about subjects which are important. And they feel, “My
God, I'm quite bright.” I mean, a lot of films have that kind of attitude. I like films which puzzle you a little bit. I like _Leo the Last_, by [John] Boorman, where you don’t know what to make out of it. I think it’s a supermasterpiece, it’s a great, great film, great film. I like _Badlands_, which I think is a very important film. At the same time, when I see a film like _The Color of Money_, I say, “My God, I would like one day to be able to do that kind of very, very beautiful demonstration of what direction is about.” The good films, at the same time they inspire you and they make you feel very, very modest. I know that certain directors say that it’s depressing to see a film which is so great because you feel that you will never do it. I don’t feel at all like that. Yesterday, after seeing _The Color of Money_, I immediately wanted to start to work on a film set again and try to see if I could do as well in certain things.

LYNDA K. BUNDTZEN

Monstrous Mothers
Medusa, Grendel, and now Alien

Will there be a sequel to _Aliens_? Its depiction of female fecundity, prolific and devouring, is so powerful and fictively generative, it would be hard for an equally profit-hungry movie industry to resist another visitation by the Alien Mama and her spawn. The Company in _Aliens_ certainly seems eager for the monster’s survival. In both the original _Alien_ and the current sequel, a sleazy Company man (actually an android in _Alien_), stirred by the profit-motive, is engaged in nefarious dirty tricks to return an alien embryo to the Company’s labs on earth. The lingering question at the end of _Aliens_ is whether, in fact, the Company man Burke has succeeded—whether the figures encapsulated in space-sleep for the return journey harbor an Alien embryo. The image of sleeping beauties and heroines Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and the young girl she saves, Newt (Carrie Henn), is disquieting. The Alien is an elusive, slippery parasite, with incredible ability to pop up and out of the most unlikely places. The last Alien appearance in this film occurs after the space ship leaves the infected planet. Just when the audience believes all danger is past—following what seemed to be a final harrowing escape by Ripley and Newt—the android Bishop is pierced through his belly by what first looks like an Alien birth and is then revealed to be the Alien Mama herself. She has somehow managed to maneuver her dragon’s girth undetected on to the departing space ship, and roars into life for a final showdown with Ripley. With this improbable return after the story seemed to have climaxEd, an unsteady audience may well wonder if the film’s ingenious writer-director James Cameron hasn’t still another ending in mind, and if not ends, sequels.

Within the thematic structure of the narrative, however, there are even more compelling reasons to expect the Alien’s eternal return. The disquietude we may feel gazing at the virginal sleep of Ripley and her foster daughter Newt is a result, I believe, of our intuition that it disguises the potential threat they apparently have defeated and escaped. Narrative instability is reinforced cinematically in the camera’s final dissolve from a medium shot of the sleeping Ripley and Newt to a close-up that invites a quizzical inspection from the audience: what are we looking for in these ostensibly peaceful figures? Defeat and escape from the female and Alien other is, I will show, only provisional and temporary. _Aliens_, I will argue, is a profoundly disturbing allegory about contemporary feminism, and it is far from resolving the issues it explores about woman’s nature vs. her culture-making aspirations.

The heroine of _Aliens_ is no feminist ideo-