

DOUBLE PLAY

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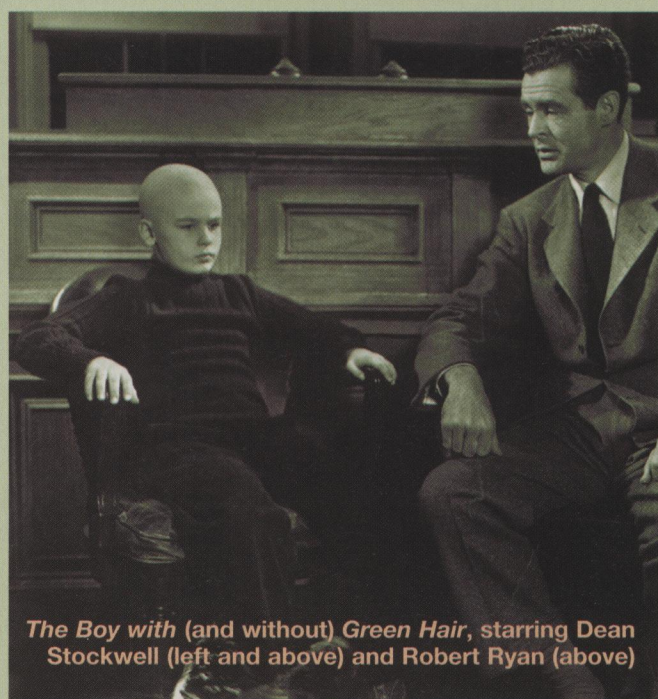
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DOUBLE



Jeanne Moreau and Stanley Baker in *Eve*



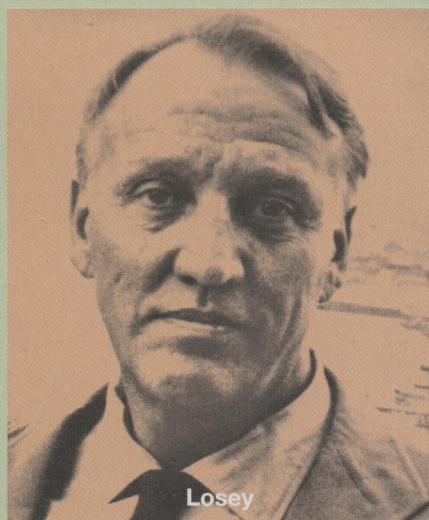
The Boy with (and without) Green Hair, starring Dean Stockwell (left and above) and Robert Ryan (above)

PLAY

CONTINUALLY REINVENTING HIS CAREER AND ELUDING ALL CATEGORIZATION, JOSEPH LOSEY DEFIED THE AXIOM THAT THERE ARE NO SECOND ACTS. BY RICHARD COMBS

“To each his own Losey” is how the critic Tom Milne began his 1967 interview book with Joseph Losey. His tally of Loseys at that point was three: the Hollywood version (1948–52), the early British incarnation (1954–62), and the art-house auteur revealed in *The Servant* (63) and culminating in *Accident* (67). Immediately after that, of course, another one appeared, the internationalist and, for a while, fellow traveler of the Burton-Taylor jet set, the maker of weird, floating fables like *Boom* (68) and *Figures in a Landscape* (70). In 1975, a second exile turned him into a French filmmaker, with four films from *Mr. Klein* (76) to *La Truite* (82).

Other subdivisions might be possible, although five makes a neat number of



Loseys, because each of them is anchored to particular cinematic provinces (if not countries) and production circumstances. But even so, the boundaries don't really stay in place: his collaboration with Harold Pinter, which largely defines the Sixties art-house period, and the supposed refinement it brought to Losey's style, ends four films into the international period with *The Go-Between* (71), and the international frolic *Modesty Blaise* (66) pops up after

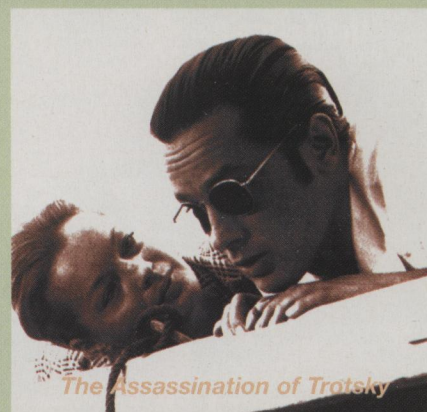
The Servant and *King and Country* (64), just prior to *Accident*. One could even argue that, in terms of stylistic attack, Losey's last American film is not *The Big Night* (51), barely finished before he fled the country and the blacklist, but *The Damned* (a.k.a. *These Are the Damned*) (62), which is also his seventh British film.

Crucially, the disruptions, the chopping and changing, don't just make up the pattern of his career but are at work in individual films—certainly in the best of them. Losey was never really a comfortable filmmaker in any of his national habitats, and, in his films, along with a focus on clashes of ego and energy goes an uneasy compacting of different styles and influences. In fact, the different Losey “periods” are best followed not in sequence but in a kind of crisscross through his work virtually from the word go—the word go being *The Boy with Green Hair* (48), an apparently naive morality tale with its own weird divergences of mood and style.

If the five Losey periods don't work as periods, then we can reconfigure them on a different principle—as arenas, perhaps, for defining encounters of the artist with his material, of characters with themselves and/or their significant others. As the cop (Stanley Baker) says in *Blind Date* (58) after the artist (Hardy Krüger) recounts how he met his lover, “That's not a meeting you described. That's a collision.”

1. The Assassination of Trotsky

With Losey it's not necessary to begin at the beginning, or even with the most completely achieved films. *The Assassination of Trotsky* (72) comes from the international period, when the consensus was that Losey had lost his way, and it received some of the harshest reviews of his career. One scene attracted particular opprobrium: the visit by the mysterious assassin-to-be (Alain Delon) to a bullfight



prior to his encounter with his victim (Richard Burton). However, the film is not, as was assumed, offering the bullfight as a metaphor for that encounter. The metaphor belongs to the assassin; he is trying to internalize it to explain his action and as a stimulus to performing it. After he and his girlfriend have fled the arena, the film remains to reveal the real outcome of that show: the dragging away of the dead bull and its dismem-

A retrospective of Joseph Losey's films will be presented at the Walter Reade Theater May 12-27.

berment as meat. The bullfight has a double existence: as an assassin's metaphor and as a separate violent event in a world of violent events that will include the killing of Trotsky.

This self-actualizing of a protagonist may seem a fairly ordinary dramatic device, but in Losey it has a special play, leading, variously, to autonomy, inaccessibility, isolation, to individual—even Nietzschean—ambition that will touch off, paradoxically, an acute sense of social networks, of systems within systems,

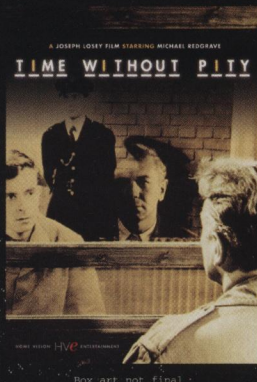
JOSEPH LOSEY

From Blacklist to A-list

INNOVATIVE AND INDEPENDENT, Joseph Losey will forever be remembered for his ability to turn standard genre films into works of incisive social commentary and surprising humanity.

"Spectacular. An emotion twister, the acting is first-rate."

-NEW YORK POST



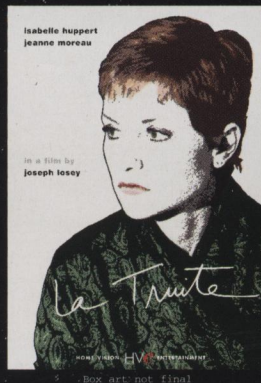
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- Filmography for Joseph Losey and selected filmographies for Michael Redgrave and Leo McKern
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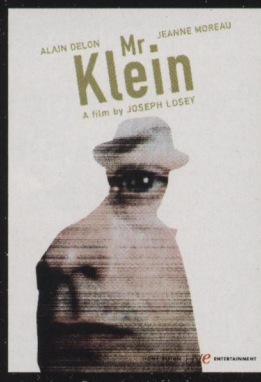
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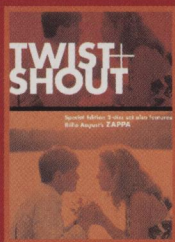
-Kathleen Carroll, NY DAILY NEWS



coming soon: MR. KLEIN

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Night-Owl Alert: TCM will be showing three films by Joseph Losey in the wee hours of May 2: *Finger of Guilt* (2 a.m.), *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* (3:30 a.m.), and *The Boy with Green Hair* (5:30 a.m.).

plots behind plots, schemers behind schemers. So many Losey films depend on the presence of these arch-schemers, and a mystery—or fuzziness—about their designs. Does the servant conspire to take over his master? If so, when? If not, does it just happen out of the dynamic between them? When does the upper-class lover of the poor artist in *Blind Date* decide to implicate him in murder?

A striking example of the type appears in one of Losey's earliest films, *The Prowler* (51), in which resentful cop Van Heflin bases his self-actualization not on metaphor but on the complaint that the world depends on "pull," on getting the right breaks, and manipulates his well-off lover (Evelyn Keyes) into marriage after murdering her husband. Tracked to a ghost town hideout, he is shot down by police as he scrabbles up a hill of rock and shale—the most prosaic and concrete of climaxes and yet a metaphor for that unscalable vertical world he had envisaged.

2. *The Boy with Green Hair*

Losey's actual beginning, of course, looks like nothing else in his career: a parable, a children's story, a moral fable, a quasi-mystical message film, which he found constricting to shoot (on the RKO backlot) and that was twisted in the making when studio boss Howard Hughes tried to cross its pacifist message with lines declaring the need for readiness for war with the Russians. But even in its conception, *The Boy with Green Hair* isn't clear-cut, with at least two messages intersecting each other: the plight of the boy (Dean Stockwell), a war orphan whose hair turns green as a symbol of hope for life renewed in the midst of war, and the social prejudice this (then) unusual



pigmentation excites. According to Losey, "It was not an antiwar picture as a concept, as a device—it was anti-racist."

Actually, and fortunately, the film's resonances don't stop with these two messages but extend into a realm of their own, which might be called quasi-mystical, or romantic, or magical-religious-existential. The film's opening image is one of the most stunning in all Losey's work: in a police station at night, three cops are grouped in the center (a distinctly Edward Hopper-ish image), firing questions—"All we want to know is your name," "If you'll just tell us what town you're from"—at someone we can't see. They then part to reveal the boy, his head now completely shaved. A child psychologist (Robert Ryan) is introduced to him—"This is Mr. Nobody, who lives no place"—and asks the boy to "begin at the beginning" of his troubles. "Okay then," says the boy defiantly, and echoing David Copperfield, "I was born."

Some of his dialogue turns up word for word (including the open sesame of "Let's begin at the beginning") 14 years later, on the rocky coast of Dorset, with a mystical fable neatly replaced by a science-fiction one in *The Damned*. Here, a group of children, irradiated by accident from birth, war orphans in their own right, are being nurtured in a secret government complex to become the "very seeds of life," radiation-proof, when the inevitable nuclear holocaust has destroyed everyone else (life itself is the affliction, the special distinction, which the boy's green hair symbolizes). The children, meanwhile, dream of a different outcome—"Our parents will come and open the magic door for us"—just as the young hero of *The Go-Between* uses magic to defend himself in a hostile adult environment.

"Who killed our children's hopes?" cries the gangland lawyer (Luther Adler) forced to defend a child murderer in *M* (51). The fourth of Losey's five Hollywood films is a remake of Fritz Lang that has always seemed—and usually been dismissed as—a freakish project, though it would fit well with the films above. It is undoubtedly one of Losey's mixed (or muddled) genre exercises, but it contains some extraordinary scenes, not least the con-

fession of the killer (David Wayne), at bay before a lynch mob, of his own tormented childhood, and the defense of the corrupt, drunken lawyer, whose pleas ("Life's too much for him") finally lead to his blurring himself with the man ("My client is a drunkard"). As Raymond Durgnat summarized the dynamic of Losey's early scenarios and heroes: "They begin as reporters, prowlers, strangers on the prowl, and stumble, often too late, upon the fact that those whom they set out to observe, exploit, punish, or shrug off, were a possible end to their isolation."

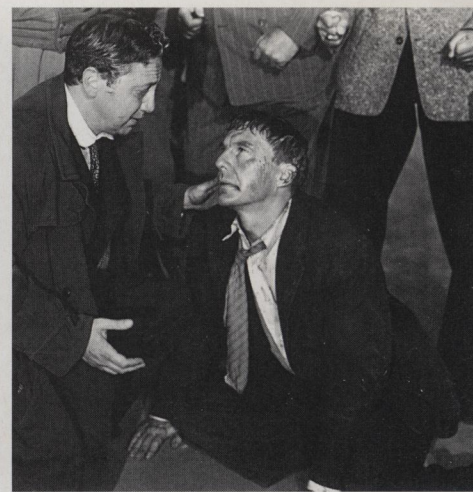
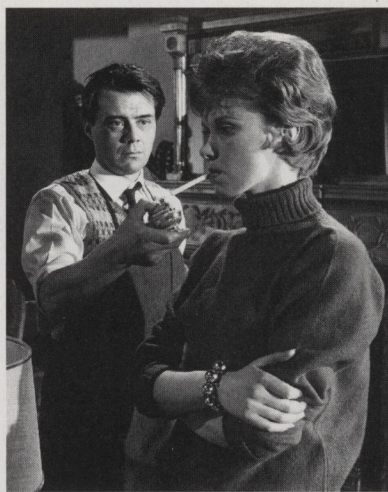
3. *Eve*

Eve (62) was Losey's watershed, or Waterloo, the film where he tried to break with his past as a jobbing director in the U.S.



and U.K. film industries and produce both a personal testament ("It was a film in which I was not only working out my sexual, personal relationships, but also working out my exile") and his most elaborate exercise in style. The relationship between callous, high-class prostitute Eve (Jeanne Moreau) and insecure Welsh writer Tyvian Jones (Stanley Baker) is wedded to the decor and architecture of Venice and Rome, which in turn is wedded to a vision of the bourgeois, materialist prison Tyvian and Eve inhabit.

In the end, Losey's testament was severely cut in a highly publicized row with the producers. But the very purity of statement and style that he was trying for may have been the real misdirection. Impurity was the circumstance in which Losey's art had flourished in the past: the hybrid genres, the melodramatic plots, the pulp sources (*Eve* shares that much,



being based on a James Hadley Chase pot-boiler). Losey's camera drifting after his heroine through the frozen stone landscape of the Piazza San Marco was seen as a bid to join the modernist cinema of Antonioni (detached, ambiguous, alienated). But equally dense, tactile, and disturbing (and perhaps even more alienating) is the emphasis on decor, on stone, rock, and, of course, a myriad of mirrors, that had already featured in films as diverse as *The Prowler*, *The Criminal* (60), and *The Damned*.

Losey has said (in his interview book with Michel Ciment) that *Eve* also sprang from his love of Venice: "It immediately made visually specific all my preoccupations with mirror vision, left-handedness, sexual reversals, the fragmentation of water." But splitting, reversals, and ambidextrousness had always been part of Losey, creating a riot of doubleness more entertaining than the hieratic posing of *Eve*. There are the teddy boys of *The Damned*, with leader Oliver Reed's rolled umbrella and arch slang ("Forward into battle, dear chaps"), grouped around a unicorn statue in the town center. The romantic or magic reversals of *The Boy with Green Hair* are also never far away in Losey.

There are the two proletarians of *Blind Date*, one who has become a hard-boiled cop and the other who's a naive artist (a miner's son, no less; an unneurotic Tyvian Jones). And there's a strikingly double dramatic structure in this film: the first part is anchored in the flat of the dead prostitute/lover, with the cop probing the artist with questions about a crime that hasn't been revealed yet in a style that can only be called Pinter-before-the-fact.

Losey's career in the theater is another important arena, both a specific period and a background to everything he did in film. It also makes nonsense of the assumption that the first collaboration with Pinter, on *The Servant*, was a revolution for Losey, taming his excesses and indulgences, and that their three films together constitute a special, elevated plateau in his work. In fact, *The Servant* is so rich because it incorporates the Pinter idiom with many of the tensions of pre-Sixties Losey, while *Accident* and *The Go-Between* are more attenuated exercises in the idiom.

Part of the richness of *The Servant* is the indeterminability of its subject (even Losey couldn't say what, exactly, it was about). Is the master-servant reversal an incident in the class war, or something more spiritual, mystical, ghostly? Durnat says: "Thinking he has bought Barrett's soul, Tony loses his own," and that in his overweening desire to please, "Barrett gives his master his soul—and exchange is no robbery." The master (James Fox) is Mr. Nobody, the servant (Dirk Bogarde) is Mr. Know-It-All—a relation of householder to intruder that *The Assassination of Trotsky* reverses. In *Accident*, one might note the unexpected magic of the night of the accident: a white horse (not a unicorn) beneath a full moon and the princess (Jacqueline Sassard) asleep amidst a froth of ostrich feathers in the death car.

4. Figures in a Landscape

Far from the stones and gargoyles of Old Europe, the most visually ravishing moment that Losey, the celebrated *metteur en décor*, ever put onscreen may be the opalescent dawn of the first shot of

Figures in a Landscape. The distant speck of a helicopter hovers at the point where this wash deepens into the blue of the sea; in the next shot, two silhouetted men are running, their hands tied behind their backs, along the seashore. For a while, without dialogue or explanation, the camera magnificently maps out this corrida. Close tracking shots follow the men as they crash through a forest; seen from inside, the helicopter sweeps down valleys and up cliff faces, scattering birds and flushing out a herd of horses (the wildlife one would never associate with Losey



but that has a kind of underbrush presence throughout his films).

Michel Ciment suggested to Losey that many of his films are fables in the American tradition, "Manichaean, Puritan-inspired ... creating allegories like *Moby Dick* or *The Scarlet Letter*." Losey agreed but found this "a weakness because it's a way of evading," com-



From left, Van Heflin and Evelyn Keyes in *The Prowler*; Dirk Bogarde and Wendy Craig in *The Servant*; Luther Adler and David Wayne in *M*; *These Are the Damned*; Micheline Presle and Hardy Krüger in *Blind Date*.

pared to realist psychological traditions. His three films between the Pinter book-ends of *Accident* and *The Go-Between*—*Boom*, *Secret Ceremony* (68), and *Figures in a Landscape*—offer themselves most clearly as fables. With its cycle of careless parenting/cursed childhood, *Secret Ceremony* could belong with the “blighted hopes” dramas of *M* and *The Damned*. Dealing the least in explanation, *Figures* is the most fabulous.

And, again, perhaps, it is only Losey’s theater background that makes all three possible, because where language enters it must be hyperbolic, specifying character while at the same time ridiculing it, rendering the notion of self-sufficient, psychologically “real” characters absurd. *Figures* is the riskiest proposition, with a Pinteresque screenplay by one of its stars, Robert Shaw (also a dramatist and novelist). It plays out the conflict between the older fugitive (Shaw) and the younger (Malcolm McDowell) in all the Pinter registers of class, generational, and sexual paranoia, but completely detached from his social landscape. It is Losey’s most experimental film, and it excitingly adumbrates an even more experimental one, made entirely in the style of its opening sequences.

5. Mr. Klein

Mr. Klein (Alain Delon), the hero of Losey’s greatest (and last great) film after *The Servant*, is also a kind of repository of his career. Klein is an art dealer; he brings together all those signs of status, icons of identity, even clues to *policier* mysteries that have proliferated through the preceding three decades. In Losey’s first British film, *The Sleeping Tiger* (54), a police inspector peers at a Miró on the wall

of a psychiatrist’s office as if it were an ink-blot test of personality. Jan, the young artist of *Blind Date*, identifies a small picture (“It’s 17th century, a study for a larger portrait, probably Van Dyck”) that’s plucked from the less high-toned bric-a-brac of a murder scene and will point to the identity (or at least the social milieu) of the real murderer.

A similar trail, or research with more psychic reverberations, is followed through *Mr. Klein*. Klein is first seen haggling over “a portrait of a Dutch gentleman” by Adriaen Van Ostade. It is 1942, and his client is a Jew, desperate to leave Paris before the imminent roundup of the Jewish population. The deal is done, and from that moment Klein finds himself being mysteriously mirrored by another Mr. Klein, a Jewish version, whose mail is redirected to him and whose identity is steadily foisted onto him. As he tries to unpick this mystery, Klein discovers a “nostalgia” for his own origins, leading to the revelation of “another race” of Kleins in Holland. As his world collapses around him, he begins clutching the Van Ostade portrait as an emblem of identity. His pursuit of the other Klein finally takes him, blindly, to the stockades of the roundup and a cattle car to the concentration camps.

The art that begins as a commercial commodity (and the art market goes multinational in *La Truite* [82]) becomes identity’s last holding point and a conduit to wider identifications. Neither stream excludes the other; it’s as if there is a constant cycling process, a cycle of sublimation, which could take in other sublimations as well. Losey has said that the effort of repudiating his religious upbringing, and the guilt surrounding that, found “an outlet in political

commitment” that “took on a religious bent.” From which it has found its way back to the heavily religious iconography of his films: the great stone angels that fly through *Eve* and *Secret Ceremony*; the bells that can be relied on to toll in Venice, Oxford, and Mexico City.

It’s all significantly Catholic, perhaps a sublimation-within-repudiation of Losey’s Episcopalian upbringing. But Lenora (Elizabeth Taylor) in the confessional box of *Secret Ceremony* also complains: “For three years, I’ve been wandering from



place to place like a Jew,” which is where, through the other Mr. Klein, she might meet the exiled Losey. “Politically, I was persecuted, a Jew, so to speak,” he told Michael Ciment. Jew, Catholic, and Episcopalian—there’s mirror vision and left-handedness here, too, perhaps. More fragmentation in the water.

The author is indebted to David Thompson for invaluable assistance in the preparation of this article.

Richard Combs is a regular contributor to FILM COMMENT.