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Film Scratches: Notes from the Fringe

By Liza Palmer

Keywords: Andrew M. Hulse; *Gasoline* (2007); Ann Seidl; *The Hollywood Librarian* (2007); Overdue Productions; Justin D. Hilliard; *Wednesday* (2006); Striped Socks Productions

Film International invites filmmakers and other related media artists to submit works – particularly those that do not achieve mainstream distribution – for consideration and possible review in this column. Please direct all (either NTSC VHS or any DVD format) submissions to: Liza Palmer, Review Section Editor, Film International, c/o University of North Carolina Wilmington, 601 South College Road, Wilmington, NC 28403-5616, USA. For more information or to suggest topics for future “Film Scratches,” contact Liza at liza.palmer@filmint.nu.

Andrew M. Hulse’s *Gasoline* (2007)

Anyone who has ever lived in rural America will recognize Andrew M. Hulse’s film, *Gasoline*. Anyone who has been young and at the crossroads of youthful self-absorption and adult apathy, struggling to find an outlet for expressing an overabundance of conflicting emotion, will admire it. Filmed on location in Kingston, Laurelville, Meade, and Circleville (a delicious name that has such resonance with

the film’s story), Ohio, *Gasoline* captures the aimlessness of life beyond suburbia – a life not often depicted in American film, except for heartwarming farm-centered dramas that involve hardworking Americans ultimately dominating the land. Inspired by a short story by Sam Shepard, the film, not surprisingly, is harsh and dispassionate, holding no warm, fuzzy message of hope or salvation but rather commenting on the futility of action – taking action doesn’t make you feel better, it isn’t proof of control but it is something to do to fill (or kill) time.

Gasoline is one of those perfect short films – and they don’t come around often. Seventeen minutes in length, it is defined by an efficiency that communicates, resonates more than the longest of narrative films and stays with the viewer, well after it is over. Hulse has clearly invested a considerable amount of time, energy, and money towards achieving a work that is consistent, unified, and polished. Shot on 35mm – an act that at once conveys an ambition and a respect for cinema – the resulting image is lush yet stark. The muted color scheme describes a landscape that exists despite the characters/humans that inhabit it. The sound is masterful with none of the issues that typically plagues short films (i.e. varying levels, unprotected microphones, etc.). And while the nondiegetic music can be a bit heavy handed, at times, for my taste, in an otherwise austere piece, it is still accomplished and not inappropriate in setting a tone. Ultimately, Hulse demonstrates a studied sense and appreciation of his space – an ode to the disinterested backdrop that can be Middle America.

What really distinguishes *Gasoline*, however, is the acting, which so often is the sacrifice in



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films with smaller budgets. JP (Rob Evans), Beth (Laura Ramedei), John (Daniel Abeles), and Amy (Rachel Walker) are a band of acquaintances, sophisticatedly complicated by a delicate web of interrelations (without ever really knowing, the viewer intuits that Beth is dating JP, JP is friends with John, John fancies Amy for lack of anything better to do, and Amy is close with Beth). As JP struggles to come to terms with the sudden and grim death of his father, the three others tag along. The four actors excel at working together to channel meaning through not only their scripted dialogue but also their nuanced movements and gestures. There is an architecture of authenticity among the actors, a believability in their relationships and interrelationships that must be attributed to the skill of director, Hulse. What is beautifully articulated through *Gasoline* is the culture of the young – particularly of young America – which sees the relative maturity of the women expected to account for the impulse of the men. Most poignant is the artifice of young friendships that we convince ourselves is real – so much so that they become and must be real.

To be sure, *Gasoline* is not without faults. Most significant, perhaps, is a point of troubled continuity in the lighting between the shots of the group setting the mattress on fire and the fire actually starting. The former is overcast and the latter is suddenly sunny; this noticeable contrast runs the risk of the act being seen and read as obviously symbolic. I suspect that this was simply a problem with coverage and not intentional. But if this was purposeful on Hulse's part, I feel that futility and austerity

should still be the overarching driving forces of the film. Already, though, Hulse and *Gasoline* have been winning awards: for screenwriting, cinematography, and original score at the 66th Annual First Run Film Festival in New York City; and second prize for the Charles and Lucille King Family Foundation Award for Excellence in Filmmaking (past recipients of these awards notably include Ang Lee and Spike Lee). So, without a doubt, the faults are few.

It would be easy to read too much into the ending of this fine film: a dramatic memorial to a deadbeat dad, a chance at redemption, a cry for help. But sometimes a burning mattress is just a burning mattress and it feels right to watch it burn.

For more information about Andrew Hulse and his work, please visit: www.gasolinethefilm.com.

Ann Seidl's *The Hollywood Librarian: A Look at Librarians through Film*

Film International and "Film Scratches" devotees will recall my earlier piece about *The Hollywood Librarian* project ("Librarians of the World, Unite!" in issue 4.1, published in 2006). I was able to catch a glimpse of this, at the moment, hard-to-see film, thanks to a screener DVD from the filmmaker, herself – jealous and impatient readers will have to consult the screening schedule on the film's website to see if it is coming soon to a cinema near you or await the DVD release which, Seidl assures me, she is currently hard at work on. The

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documentary does not disappoint (and I am not just saying that because I, myself, happen to be a librarian). For a first feature, the film is nicely shot and professional looking – not easy accomplishments in this often murky world of DV. The sound is good and the interviews are remarkable for their framing and lighting. Ultimately, *The Hollywood Librarian* is a well-reasoned, eloquent, and enjoyable argument for the continued importance of libraries in the modern democracy.

Interestingly, though, the simultaneous strength and weakness of the film can be found in its alternating use of various clips from Hollywood products that are tangentially related to libraries, librarians, books, or knowledge (i.e. *The Miracle Worker*, 1962, *Storm Center*, 1956, *The Music Man*, 1962, *Cleopatra*, 1963, etc.) and interviews with vibrant and vivacious librarians, scholars, and patrons. Like the well-trained librarian that she is, Seidl has done her research (although she does not always give sources for her statistics!), offering convincing resources and texts in a fairly objective manner and allowing the viewer to draw his/her own conclusions. But the downside of this technique is that Seidl, rather like student writers who let quotes do their work for them, rarely contextualizes the information for the viewer and makes it her own. The end result is slightly dissatisfying, leaving the viewer wishing for more of Seidl's own thoughts. I am not necessarily arguing for a Michael Moore approach here, but there was room for Seidl to infuse *The Hollywood Librarian* with more of herself and the belief system of the average librarian, daily working diligently and passionately on behalf of the rights and privacy of the American patron. So while Seidl's objectivity is certainly appreciated, I was hoping for a better rallying cry.

Most inspirational about the film was its segment towards the end on the closing of the library system in Salinas, California (childhood home of John Steinbeck). We all know or suspect how much effort it takes to maintain an organization like a library, day to day. But a little less well known (and decidedly more fascinating) is how much effort it takes to close a library, day to day – like the calculated, drawn-out killing of a complex organism. The community strives

to keep the branches open and reverse the actions of the city government; but what seems to turn the tide most touchingly are the contributions (both monetary and rhetorical) of the inmates of San Quentin, the same inmates that feature so importantly earlier in the film because of their successful prison library program that trains the inmates to teach and emphasize literacy to their peers. Like the child in Hans Christian Anderson's "The Emperor's New Clothes," inmate Abraham Gasper and his colleagues are the only ones who can persuasively point out the unfortunate paradox in the Salinas situation: At a time when the government is calling for an increase in prison budgets, they slash those of libraries, which are often the sole havens of at-risk children in the United States. As Gasper says so grippingly: "Our plan worked because it was our plan to basically bring shame. Because that was a shameful act and heightened by the fact that an inmate saw it and those in free society didn't." As the film reveals, the Salinas system is eventually saved, thanks to a referendum vote, and the business of re-opening a library can begin.

Certainly, *The Hollywood Librarian* is a competent and engaging film – and definitely a credit to the livelihood of librarianship. Indeed, I foresee its potential as a powerful recruiting tool, just when needed most, if oft-cited reports about the graying of the profession come to be. I worry, though, for its general appeal, especially given its limited relevancy to the realm of international librarianship and its rather specific focus on the current events of today (i.e. the Iraq war), which will only serve to date the film quite quickly. But all that aside, Seidl's deft weaving of the story from the footage and materials she so capably gathered is to be valued and admired. The simple beauty of the San Quentin segment and how it effortlessly echoes later in the film cannot be praised enough. Ultimately, this device serves as hopeful elegy – a delightful and unexpected surprise in what one might (incorrectly) think would be a prosaic film.

For more information about *The Hollywood Librarian*, including a detailed upcoming screening schedule, please visit: <http://www.hollywoodlibrarian.com/index.html>.