

I

“Pictures of Provocation”

The expatriate American director Joseph Losey (1909–84) claimed his place among important filmmakers with such rich films as *The Servant* (1963), *King and Country* (1964), *Accident* (1967), *The Go-Between* (1971), and *The Romantic Englishwoman* (1975). His reputation, however, remains unjustifiably problematic. For some he is an allegorist detached from his characters, for others principally a stylist with a penchant for the gothic. Admittedly the body of his work includes both great achievements and failed aspirations; masterful films stand amid misbegotten efforts such as *Modesty Blaise* (1966) and *Boom!* (1968). Moreover, critics have disagreed radically about the very nature and characteristics of his work. The French critic Gilles Jacob, for example, writes of Losey’s “unshakable faith in human nature” (1966, 64), whereas Foster Hirsch concludes that the “world-view” in his films is “essentially negative, their sense of the possibilities of human nature and society deeply pessimistic” (1980, 220). The effort to see Losey’s achievement whole has been further complicated by the drama of his personal history and the several ways of dividing his filmmaking career. After only five feature films in the United States, in the years 1948–51, he was blacklisted and moved to England, never making another film in his own country although he expressed the desire to do so and, on at least one occasion, nearly succeeded. Given the blacklist and Losey’s subsequent exile, the most obvious division of his films is between those produced in Hollywood and those after. But the films he made after Hollywood can also be divided between the English and the European, and the three films he made from screenplays by Harold Pinter can be distinguished from his other English films made both before and after their collaboration. Despite these complications and the range of critical opinions, an overview of Losey’s films reveals a major filmmaker profoundly committed to his art, always

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growing in his command of his medium, willing to take risks that would have daunted a lesser artist, and at his best the director of an impressive number of exhilarating and complex narrative films.

Losey's position as an expatriate who made films in several countries led to his own amused comment in an interview in *American Film* that "there's quite a good deal of confusion in the world as to what I am, in terms of a director. The French now think I'm English. A lot of the English think I'm English. The Italians think I'm French. . . . Anyway, it's unimportant, isn't it? I wanted to make some pictures because I think that I have a certain distance that has made it possible for me to comment on certain European societies and situations in ways that perhaps otherwise I couldn't have done" (1980, 59–60). Losey's outsider status worked both for and against him; he was "at home" everywhere and nowhere. As he suggested, he could bring the fresh perspective of a cultural outsider to conflicts arising from the class system in England or, in a late film like *La Truite* (1982), from the sexual mores of contemporary France. But his status as an independent director also meant continual struggles to get financing for his various projects (more than sixty aborted projects, not to mention the loss of the final editing rights on *Eve* [1962], a film the producers recut and shortened by some forty minutes, thus destroying Losey's original conception of "a film which I think came as close to being a great film as I had ever achieved" [Ciment 1985, 222]). His disappointment with *Eve*, however, was followed by the great success of the first of his three extraordinary films with Harold Pinter, *The Servant*, which marked a turning point in his career.

As his many interviews reveal, Losey was an artist who thought long and deeply about his work, a man of exceptional candor, as ready to judge some of his films harshly as to express his pleasure in others. (He liked *The Prowler* [1951], *The Servant*, and *Accident*, for instance, but of *The Gypsy and the Gentleman* [1958], he confessed with some dismay, "I think it's largely a piece of junk, and I'd just as soon nobody saw it again" [Gow 1971, 39].) He was also generous in his praise of his collaborators: designers John Hubley, Alexandre Trauner, and especially Richard MacDonald, with whom he often worked and who, in Losey's words, "contributed genius"; writers Evan Jones, Alun Owen, David Mercer, Tennessee Williams, and of course Pinter; cinematographer Gerry Fisher; editors Reginald Beck and Reginald Mills; actors such as Stanley Baker, who had some of his best roles (*Blind Date* [1959], *The Criminal* [1960], and *Accident*) in Losey's films, and preeminently Dirk Bogarde, whose five films with Losey, including three to be discussed in this book, were instrumental in transforming a popular leading man in England into one of the finest screen actors in the

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world. Losey's expressed admiration for these and other fellow artists was returned in the form of repeated collaborations, evidence of a bond of sympathy and trust that he referred to more than once and that obviously gratified him deeply.

In an art-industry beset by a persistent conflict between artistic aspirations and commercial timidity, by a disheartening number of projects planned but unfulfilled, Losey's frustrations with producers, financiers, and distributors both in the United States and abroad were perhaps not greater than those of other major filmmakers. The topic is a sad commonplace in the careers of most of his peers. But in light of his considerable achievements, Losey's unrealized hopes for films based on Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, and most of all, with Harold Pinter, Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* further suggest the imposing range of his interests and the high ambition of his artistry. One can only lament that Losey never had the chance to make these and other films he planned. Many of the films that he did make, however – those we discuss and others we have reluctantly excluded for reasons of space – linger in the memory and compel an admiration that belongs only to an artist of the first rank. More importantly, as this book will argue, several of Losey's finest films challenge and expand one's understanding of film as a narrative medium in their bold exploration of narration as an informing principle of cinematic form and expression.

At present, the most detailed account of Losey's life and the best source for biographical information is Michel Ciment's *Conversations with Losey* (1985), which is based on a series of interviews that begins with a discussion of Losey's early years and continues through his comments on *La Truite*, his next to last film.¹ The book concludes with an afterword by his widow Patricia Losey, who collaborated closely with him over a number of years and who adapted Nell Dunn's stage play for his last film, *Steaming* (1985). Losey's candor, his views of his professional frustrations, his self-criticism, his generosity toward his collaborators, his insecurities, his commitment to his art – all come through with clarity and sometimes wry wit in his extended talks with Ciment. From these interviews, one has an overview not only of the period of his greatest successes, but also of his formative years, his education, his politics, and his apprenticeship in the world of theater and film.

Losey's Midwest background helped both to define him and to provide a culture against which he could rebel. Born in La Crosse, Wisconsin, to

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parents of English, Dutch, and German extraction, he recalled to Ciment his early memories of big houses, large family gatherings, and an Aunt Mary whose “Proustian” house full of Japanese prints and porcelain from around the world provided hospitality for touring celebrities such as Ford Madox Ford, Mark Twain, and Hamlin Garland. Losey also commented on his Episcopalian training, his mother’s snobbishness, and the pervasive prejudices (anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, anti-Norwegian) of a small-town community. When he was sixteen, his father died suddenly of peritonitis; he recalled his subsequent relationship with his mother as difficult and distant, and he was to see her infrequently after he left Wisconsin for Dartmouth College in 1925. In his senior year at Dartmouth Losey broke his back in a freak theater accident. A year in the hospital, which he spent reading and studying, led him to change from medical studies (“a completely false vocation that I’d imposed on myself”) to theater and English literature; after graduation, he completed a masters degree in English at Harvard in 1930. “The back thing was a blessing in disguise,” he told Ciment, “as the black list was a blessing in disguise. The catastrophies in my life seemed to have always worked out for my benefit” (1985, 22).

In 1931 and again in 1935 Losey traveled to Europe. On the latter trip he visited Russia, where he met Vsevolod Meyerhold, the actor and avant-garde theater director, and even directed an English-language production of Clifford Odets’s *Waiting for Lefty* in Moscow. He briefly thought of staying in Russia, but was talked out of the idea by a member of the Politburo who, he later said with characteristic candor, “was really like a breath of fresh air because he cut through all of my nonsense, my idealistic nonsense” (Ciment 1985, 41). In the thirties, Losey became a Marxist, and later in Hollywood he joined the Communist party, a move that was to have a great and disturbing impact on his life. Living in New York City throughout the thirties, he first wrote theater reviews, then worked as a stage manager, and eventually directed plays, working with such writers as Sinclair Lewis and Maxwell Anderson. His New York experience was a blend of theater, politics, and film that led him to work for such politically oriented groups as *The Living Newspaper*, the Federal Theater, the Political Cabaret, and eventually to begin making educational and documentary films. When the war broke out, Losey worked for the United War Relief and then volunteered for the Air Corps, but a dossier of his political activities thwarted his enlistment, and he spent the better part of a year working in radio for NBC. Ironically, before the war ended, he was drafted into the army and ended up making films in the Signal Corps.

After the war, Losey worked for MGM, directing a short film, *A Gun in*

His Hand (1945), that received an Academy Award nomination. His chance to direct his first Hollywood feature came when Dore Schary, executive producer at RKO, asked him to make *The Boy with Green Hair* with producer Adrian Scott. But when Scott was subpoenaed in 1947 to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, production plans for the film were suspended. Meanwhile Losey helped stage a large rally at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles for the defenders of the Hollywood Nineteen (before the Nineteen became the Hollywood Ten), and soon after this event, he mounted a celebrated stage production of his close friend Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*, starring Charles Laughton, which was presented in Los Angeles just prior to Brecht's appearance before the HUAC and subsequent hurried departure for Europe. A few months later the production was also staged in New York. Despite these highly visible public activities, Losey somehow survived the first round of blacklisting. Dore Schary again asked him to direct *The Boy with Green Hair*, but of course without Scott as producer. (Schary was himself fired by RKO's owner, Howard Hughes, before *The Boy with Green Hair* [1948] was completed.) This antiracist, pro-peace allegory or fable, which remains popular today, was attacked as a "red" film, a film that, according to Losey, "Hughes tried his best to change"; failing that, Hughes threatened him with a message about his contract: " 'You'll stay here for seven years and you'll never work' " (Ciment 1985, 82). Finally, his friendship with Brecht, his defense of Adrian Scott, his sponsorship of composer Hans Eisler (brother of Gerhardt Eisler, the head of the Communist party in East Germany), and his own party membership all made him vulnerable when the HUAC investigations were revived in 1951.

Losey's blacklisting has been much commented on by himself and others, and it certainly played a crucial role in the direction his career was to take. Without going into great detail, any summary of his attitudes about the blacklisting – about the witch-hunting, the scapegoating, and the betrayal by friends and colleagues – reveals one essential thing, and that is Losey's concern for maintaining a sense of personal integrity both during and after the blacklisting era. As he commented in a radio interview later:

There is the terrible problem – how to be honest, as honest as one can. How not to betray, or seem to betray . . . what one believed and did in extreme youth – whether in the 1930's or during the war or in the post-war period. I don't think anyone in his right mind wants to say "I didn't do this, I didn't stand for this, or I stood for this because I was a dupe," or whatever the escape-hatches may be. Because those

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attitudes or those points of view – no matter how limited they might have been or whatever caused them at the time – they are what one has developed from. They are part of what one is. And if you deny them, you do yourself and everyone else a great disservice, because then you obscure instead of clarifying. (“Speak, Think, Stand Up” 1970, 60)

In Victor Navasky’s *Naming Names*, Losey gives a fascinating account of the events surrounding his being named a Communist, and of his betrayer who some years later offered him an attractive film project that he turned down (1980, 357–59). Controversy marked Losey’s film career from its inception, and the political turmoil of the late forties and early fifties in America eventually turned him from a Hollywood director into an expatriate director. Ironically, as Losey told Gene Phillips: “In a way my being black-listed was one of the best things that ever happened to me because it forced me to go to Europe to continue my career as a film maker. Otherwise I might have stayed on in Hollywood merely making money instead of making pictures I want to make. What could be worse than that?” (1976, 34–5).

Speaking about the didactic qualities of his first two Hollywood features, *The Boy with Green Hair* and *The Lawless* (1950), Losey succinctly put into perspective the kind of films he made not only in the United States, but for his first several years in England:

They were what is called “message” pictures. And they were made by a man – me – and other men and women, who thought we knew the answers or thought we could find answers. I stopped somewhere along the line – I guess at *Eve* maybe – making that kind of picture, and have been much more interested in making pictures of provocation: that is, opening up the mind so people have to examine situations and attitudes and come to their own conclusions. (Ciment 1985, 97)

Interestingly, for a few critics the early melodramas in Hollywood are Losey’s finest. The French critic Pierre Rissient, for example, argues in his book *Losey* (1966) that the American films are his best, simple, unpretentious, and the more successful for these traits. But Losey himself never concurred in this assessment. With typical frankness he told Ciment that *The Boy with Green Hair* “certainly is obviously a first film” (1985, 88). He was dissatisfied with the studio settings (they seemed unrealistic to Losey, who knew from his own experience what small towns were like and who would have preferred location shooting) and frustrated in trying to deal with the film’s mix of fantasy and reality, notably in the war orphan scene that was shot

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in a studio-built glade and even in the charming song and dance fantasy with Pat O'Brien and veteran vaudevillean Walter Catleff. Losey also felt that the film was compromised by mixing a pro-peace message into what was "basically an allegory about racism" (Milne 1968, 66). Similarly, although he liked *The Lawless*, Losey told Milne that the film was "very primitive as a piece of work" (1968, 83), one that, as he said to James Leahy, "belongs to a very early period of thinking for me... I was still trying to get out of my system, I suppose, some of the things which were very much a part of me in the thirties and early forties" (1967, 34–5).

Despite Losey's perceptive criticism of his early films, this stage in his career reveals something more than merely a politically committed neophyte director learning his craft. For instance, *The Boy with Green Hair*, quite apart from its troubled production history, merits attention not just as the first feature of a filmmaker who went on to a distinguished career, but as a film that demonstrates its director's already considerable strengths. Whatever its limits, the film remains not just a well-meaning if obvious work of earnest social criticism, but a promising film of charm and sensitivity, marked by excellent performances by Pat O'Brien, Robert Ryan, and especially the twelve-year-old Dean Stockwell. Indeed Losey's skill with actors would be remarked on by many performers who worked with him subsequently. The film contains affecting scenes of prejudice and betrayal by the boy's peers and the community's leaders. The boy's green hair, more effective as a symbol of his individuality, his "color" difference, than as a symbol of renewal or peace, is, with the townspeople's approval, cut off in the barbershop scene that is simultaneously poignant and discomfiting. Adults and children alike witness the shaving of the boy's head, revealing the power of their conformist thinking and, ironically, compromising their own individuality as well. Thus, in his first film Losey expressed a theme that he would turn to again and again – the cowardly and ultimately hypocritical responses of characters confronting ethical dilemmas in which they betray themselves as well as others.

Although Losey ascribed to *The Prowler*, his third film, "a kind of Hollywood polish which I don't admire and don't strive for," he also counted it "a very smooth picture... which really doesn't date" (Ciment 1985, 104). Certainly, of his early films it is the one that best suggests the directions his mature work would take. Written by Hugo Butler and Dalton Trumbo, both of whom were to be blacklisted (Trumbo was uncredited because he had already been identified as one of the Hollywood Ten), *The Prowler* is an effective film noir about a morally adrift policeman who contrives to murder a beautiful woman's older husband (allegedly mistaking him for a

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prowler) in order to get the woman and her money for himself. If the plot seems conventional film noir fare for the early fifties, Losey's handling of the material pushes against the somewhat overworked patterns of the genre. The character of the wife Susan (Evelyn Keyes), for instance, reverses the usual *femme fatale*. Unlike the wife in *Double Indemnity*, who betrays her lover after luring him into murdering her husband, Susan is the one manipulated. She responds ambivalently to Garwood (Van Heflin), the policeman who becomes her lover, one minute defending her husband and rejecting Garwood's advances and the next desperate in her desire for him. An easy mark for the hypocritical cop, she becomes Garwood's unknowing accomplice, playing her role perfectly because she is unaware of his schemes. Materialistic and manipulative, Garwood is a predator who will not be deterred. Although the initial prowler is never seen (the opening camera shot constitutes the viewer's voyeuristic gaze and Susan's discovery of our look), Garwood quickly becomes the prowling intruder. His successful schemes founded on deceiving others are based on self-deception as well. But however crudely ambitious, Garwood is something more than a cardboard character. Both calculating and naive, crass and genuinely confused by his conflicting values that make him see Susan as his ticket to the good life and his only hope for a relationship that will break through his loneliness, Garwood is an alternately repellent and pathetic victim of his self-destructive action. In his moral and psychological isolation, he seems oddly to pursue loneliness even as he tries to live out his dream.

Significantly, in its provocative study of the policeman, *The Prowler* anticipates two elements that will appear with increasing frequency in Losey's films – his complex use of physical settings as an element of characterization, and the motif of the intruder. The married couple's large and somewhat vulgar house so impressive to the envious policeman; the motel that he buys with the money gained from his murder of the husband and marriage to the unwitting widow; and the stark desert ghost town in which his corrupt dream comes to an end – all reveal the hapless murderer's character and his perverse enactment of an American success story. Like so many of Losey's characters, Garwood is not just a loner but an intruder, an outsider who enters a closed social world only to disrupt or subvert that world or be destroyed by it. In Garwood's case, both of these things happen. Indeed, in many respects he is a quintessential Losey character – competitive, hypocritical, manipulative, sexually opportunistic, internally divided, and self-destructive. Garwood is the progenitor of Barrett in *The Servant*, Stephen in *Accident*, and Robert Klein in *Mr. Klein* (1976), a man whose temporary success in fulfilling his dream ultimately damns him.

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With his Hollywood career brought to a close by the HUAC investigations and the resulting blacklisting of directors, writers, and actors on the political left, Losey directed in Italy in 1952 the first film to be made abroad by a blacklisted artist (*Stranger on the Prowl* [*Imbarco a Mezzanotte*]). Eventually settling in England, he directed several films, including *The Sleeping Tiger* (1954) and *The Intimate Stranger* (1956), under various pseudonyms – using for the latter film the name Joseph Walton (his first and middle names).² (*The Intimate Stranger* seems a displaced paradigm for the situation confronting a victim of the blacklist; its plot centers on an American film editor on the Hollywood “bad boys” list, now a successful executive producer in England, whose career is nearly ruined when an American woman unjustly accuses him of a past affair.) Ironically, with these two films, and *Time Without Pity* (1957) and *Blind Date* (1959), Losey continued to collaborate with fellow American victims of the blacklist, including Carl Foreman, Howard Koch, Ben Barzman, and Millard Lampell. But, importantly, because the prohibitions of the blacklist often extended to English films with American financial backing or dependent on American distribution (*Time Without Pity* was an exception), he had no control over his material, which was basically routine studio melodrama.

“Partly because of the typecasting nonsense in Hollywood,” Losey told Milne, “after my first film I had been cast in the role of a director of melodrama. So of course when I began to work again here, I was, in the case of *The Sleeping Tiger*, handed a piece of sensational melodrama” (1968, 43). *The Sleeping Tiger* is little more than a Freudian melodrama wherein a psychiatrist studies the criminal mind by taking a delinquent (Dirk Bogarde in his first Losey film) into his home, thus creating a situation that threatens the psychiatrist’s marriage to a younger American woman whose passionate nature is barely concealed beneath her gratifications in the material and class advantages of her marriage. *Time Without Pity*, which also has Freudian overtones, attacks capital punishment in a tale of a guilt-ridden, alcoholic father fighting the clock, the bottle, the authorities, and the real murderer to save his falsely accused son from execution. A more interesting film, *Blind Date*, is a skillful murder mystery with a clever twist, certainly not political except in the most extended sense. The film’s most vital relationship is between the accused, a naive young Dutch artist involved with the discontented wife of an important Englishman who has powerful establishment connections, and a rude Welsh detective (Stanley Baker in his first film with Losey) who is determined to expose the truth of the crime regardless of social consequences and pressure from his own departmental superiors. *The Criminal*, whose original script Losey judged “very, very bad . . . a parody

of a Warner Brothers prison film” (Ciment 1985, 184), emerges from the later script by Alun Owen as both an evocative exposé of English prison life and a character study of an independent but small-time operator who dies when he competes with a formidable criminal syndicate whose power he does not comprehend.

These films, along with *The Damned* (1963), an effective polemic against the horrors of nuclear warfare, are not insignificant. Their importance, however, lies principally in what they reveal of Losey’s growing sense of how to merge themes that mattered to him with the power of individualized characters set within particular social worlds, which are revealed by complex cinematic means. Losey acknowledged both his need for and frustration with the message films of this period in his artistic growth when, in speaking to Milne about *Time Without Pity*, which was adapted from a successful mystery melodrama by Emlyn Williams, he said: “We had to turn it upside down to try to make it into something with ‘something to say.’ I think by this time I and others in my position were somewhat hysterical in our hammering out, no matter how small the point, and probably somewhat bitter too” (1968, 44). As his work matured – and as he gained more control over his choice of material – Losey backed away from the temptations of melodrama. Even when melodramatic elements were inescapably part of a story, he sought to undercut the more obvious aspects. In *Time Without Pity*, for example, unlike the play on which it was based, the identity of the murderer is revealed at the very beginning of the film. Increasingly, Losey made his way to the center of a personal vision that outgrew (without forsaking) his simpler outrage at social or political injustice. Social themes, even “messages,” had not lost their significance for him altogether, but they were subsumed by more complex attitudes and artistic forms. Thus, he remarked to Milne after the release of *Accident*: “There aren’t any ready-made answers. . . . You can only provide a stimulation which I think at its best is some sort of complete artistic statement, which therefore is form and emotion” (42). This formulation – art as a fusion of form and emotion – is the key to understanding the development of Losey’s artistic temperament and achievement.

Losey’s personal artistic struggle became one of understanding the complexities and ambiguities of his characters’ sexual obsessions and will to power, which are inextricably bound to their moral failings and their self-destructiveness. As he told Milne, “With *Eve* I wanted to make a picture – as I still and always do – about the particular destruction and anguish and waste of most sexual relations, whether heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or whatever” (1968, 27). *Eve*, *The Servant*, *Accident*, *The Go-Between*,