

# Images of Life

The Towering Inferno



John Hayden Mann

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An Experiment in Film Study and Literary Biography

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A photograph of a man in a dark pinstriped suit and glasses, looking down and to the left. He is in a lecture hall with rows of orange chairs visible in the background.

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A terrible musical production in a provincial theatre, or a ball which people of taste find ridiculous, will either evoke memories or else be linked to an order of reveries and preoccupations, far more than some admirable performance at the Opéra or an ultra-smart soirée in the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

Proust

# Introduction



‘It is years of endless detail, hundreds of talented people, millions of dollars – and it may be the new art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.’

1974 publicity campaign

Only Excerpts Follow

Watching *The Towering Inferno* can no doubt be a pleasurable experience. It depicts Hollywood stars at the height of their fame, glamor and fortune. These actors all share a glow that takes us away from our day-to-day selves, our routines, problems and anxieties. Put simply, they provide us with exactly what we signed up for - the need for escapism. But such shine, even at its most alluring, often hides far more interest than what the surface shows.

None of us are under any illusion that *The Towering Inferno* is anything but a successfully realized commercial concept. This is particularly apparent when the subject is more a business deal than an artistic undertaking (*The Towering Inferno* was a one-off corporate merger between 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Warner Bros. studios). Therefore, it is easy to accuse it as a routinely devised American movie, making uncomplicated demands. Like most pictures that rise out of Southern California, it merely makes the audience receptive to the emptiness it provides. Yet here we are only seeing it on one level. It is a brave, if not ridiculous thing to suggest, but *The Towering Inferno* may possibly be a film that holds a myriad of deeper themes. At the risk of sounding even more pretentious, it could even be thinking cinema on a grand scale.

Firstly, if we already accept that this particular piece of cinema is thrilling, spectacular and distracting, then in essence, there is nothing left to add. A pact has been made between the viewer and the creator, and it has kept its promise. Proof of this can be seen in the Extras and Commentaries on the film's DVD re-issue. Such supplementary material shows no opposition, as they are only there to compliment the product. No one

wants to negatively dissect the movie by saying that it isn't what it seems. It would be nonsensical to hear that what we all thought and enjoyed was incorrect. It would also be contrarian, and too unsuitable.

However, if tried, an alternative approach can bring forward new theories, suggesting that the work is capable of offering far more than it delivers. This is not necessarily a rejection of the movie, more an exercise in recognizing the peripheral or the multifaceted elements within it. Consequently, this assumes that even though the film has one identity, it has many dimensions. Only then can it be proven how the film, lacking any profundity to speak of, is worth revisiting as a work of merit.

In order to open the film up in this manner, we must begin with how recent history can bring such significance to the material.

Days after 9/11, there was a short-lived rally-call for a new seriousness. The disaster movie was the very first genre to be put under such scrutiny, and with due cause. Even the least alert could not watch the most famous of Irwin Allen's creations *The Towering Inferno* without now relating it to fact. An archive of catastrophic celluloid was already firmly embedded in the mind, and it pained us to see it repeated in reality. Accordingly, many said of the World Trade Center tragedy that it was "like something you'd see in a movie." This is what springs to mind in unthinking, spontaneous moments. But it is also a reactive use of language that instigates bonding; we are as one, not by referring to past real life disasters but due to our cinematic memories. Special effects crews created our knowledge of how we perceived ourselves in times of catastrophe. As a result, the popular filmic image had, and always will be, our primary source of reference. From this point on (9/11) the Twin Towers would continually deny us the ability to watch *The Towering Inferno* in the way it was supposed to be viewed. It had had its innocence extracted - as it was where we saw the past, yet feared the future. And those deadening feelings engulfed us. That principle photography ended on September 11, 1974 was also hard to ignore, and so plagued us with its timbre.

This is just one instance where the film can be better appraised.

In watching *Inferno* before September 11, 2001, we had no need to project any further. This is because the automatic impulse did not yet exist to do so. But if we saw the film for the very first time post-9/11, we may have thought of specific images as triggers. When seeing Jennifer Jones plummeting backwards out of the glass elevator, our recall could be forgiven for registering *The Falling Man* (an unnamed person falling to his death on that day). In contrast, when coming upon the horrific photograph, we may have reflected back to the first time we viewed *The Towering Inferno*. Again, our own perceptions were forced to transfer, not through our own personal experiences, but through our familiarity with the film.

*The Towering Inferno* is therefore about how it infiltrates and disturbs the seemingly resistant, immune and perfect.

And it is of death itself.

Those of right-mindedness can say that it is crossing the limits of reason to say that several stars of the movie had their lives damaged by what happened in the fiction. That Jennifer Jones had self-perpetuated her daughter's passing by falling, via her own (fictional) fall in the story is ludicrous. It is also unsound to presume that the involvement of Paul Newman's son Scott (as a fireman in the movie) was a premonition for a future appalling event. The film is not and never will be a prophecy for personal tragedy. And yet even the most skeptical has to take pause by such a staggering amount of purely accidental similarities. When considering such superstitious untruths, we see time and time again how reality *does* indeed reside within this fabricated work. Such indirect echoes can be found throughout, more often than not inadvertently and so go largely overlooked. But their inclusion does suggest that arbitrary occurrence can strengthen the most seemingly groundless argument.

We can say to ourselves that we are emotionally sophisticated, unable to be duped, but the fact remains; it cannot go unnoticed that this movie's main appeal lies in its performers and how the actors' private journeys (ungoverned by cinema) are exposed. *The Towering Inferno* may be tired filmmaking outside of the fire sequences, but it

speaks of graver matters with such force, that it can be emotionally and intellectually exhausting. Yes, there will never be a lack of interest in these actors and actresses due to their physical beauty and their ease of movement before the lens, but most probably, it is to do with their relationship to tragedy.

It is widely known that William Holden was “bitter” that he did not receive third billing in the opening credits to the disaster movie. Like many actors, he wasn’t a performer alien to egotistical demands brought on by fear of aging, losing his health and his box office appeal. A sensitive, intelligent man, aware of what was worthwhile and what was being offered to him, he clung to the hope that he could one day achieve a second Oscar (the first coming from Billy Wilder’s *Stalag 17* in 1953). To his credit, his acting range was never limited, but it was his physicality and the changes it underwent from the thirties to the mid-seventies that provided the greatest unease. While in Italy in 1966, Holden had received an eight-month suspended sentence for vehicular manslaughter, almost thirty years after starring in the movie version of *Golden Boy* (1939). From this point on, and aging more than many of his contemporaries (compared to Robert Mitchum, Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster), his once omnipresent energy appeared depleted. The disease of drink may have attributed to this slackening, but it was self-loathing that surely cracked the remnants of past vitalities.

Diderot (from *D’Alembert’s Dream*):

‘How could you have known that that old chap, bent over his stick, with eyes dim and scarcely dragging himself along, and even more a stranger to himself within than without was the same man who only yesterday was walking so sprightly, handling heavy loads, was capable of undertaking the most abstruse thinking, the most delicate as well as the most violent physical acts?’

Outside of the silver frame, Holden had been responsible for ‘violent physical acts,’ taking another’s life by accident. His face in *Inferno* is therefore of endings and

beginnings, of heavy self-judgment and the hard-fought will to ignore the past and move on. If Holden had to be associated with any philosophical thought, he would be a welcomed model not just for Denis Diderot, but Walter Benjamin, George Berkeley, Theodor Adorno and Roland Barthes. Each would see the actor as the personification of, as Diderot uses in *D'Alembert's Dream* 'an example of a man living and dying alternately' and as Berkeley stated 'the same body in different parts of time.' To be able to transform into the loving father to Susan Blakely's Patty Simmons in *Inferno* (as a man who finally recognizes the goodness within him), is to see Holden the actor with a newfound internalized awareness. He had visited personal damnation and managed to make his way back, but the scolding still remained, however cleverly disguised.

It may be said that Steve McQueen ran the same game in parallel. Like Holden, McQueen as Fire Chief O'Hallorhan engaged us, inviting all into his orbit; yet he possessed one difference, *his* very presence told us that he was uniquely formidable. It also hinted how the toll of pleural mesothelioma cancer within the performer (only six years later) would not only test him to his limits, but that he would take on an almost religious fight towards its ruin. Such resilience could never just fall back and concede defeat. McQueen was not normality. The fireman, the cop, the marine or cowboy, a fictional character can be all these things and still not radiate a room. But McQueen did. In fact, it was only in *The Hunter* (1980) when the ravages of the aforementioned disease were caught on camera. His demeanor had changed, with a hollowed out way of movement within his 5 foot 9 frame. Even when placed in a room full of extras, busily going about their actions from the director Buzz Kulik, he did not stand out as he once had. The charisma was battling against the sheer weight of the cruelest examiner, the cinema screen itself. In his previous movies, performers such as Robert Vaughn, Paul Newman, Faye Dunaway and Don Gordon (all in *Inferno*) were always overshadowed by his star power. That his strength was once visible during their scenes together in 1974, gave a falsely optimistic promise that the grandeur would never cease. But by 1980, the truth was out. No one could outwit fate. Not even those who ruled the land of fantasy.

The several names listed above would have seen the decline and so probably clung to *Inferno* as the way in which to remember McQueen without pain. They were again united, purely by the emotional connection of knowing him during the shoot in 1974. Almost all of those who performed in the movie therefore form a Venn diagrammatic relationship, appearing in more than one chapter mostly due to their participations in television and moviemaking of the time. The actor Robert Wagner is one such figure that holds numerous appearances, providing his own complex, and some will say, problematic enigma throughout the work.

Many would agree that his performance in *The Towering Inferno* as public relations chief Dan Bigelow adopts his well-established traits from the 60's, 70's and 80's. We can therefore assume that the actor's work within the movie solidified our understanding of him as an archetype. It was, from a 1974 perspective, his 'present' self (as the future incarnation would only succeed in presenting irony in the *Austin Powers* series). But we also look at Wagner from a 'future' angle when *Inferno* is now played. Thomas Mann's line "The truth is that life has never been able to do without the morbid" is fully tangible in this respect. It is as though his year zero was 1981, and all else that had predated the November of that year was charmed prologue. One can only surmise that it has been an existence lived off memory and sorrow, burdened by intense and consistent media speculation. It is also not unreasonable to say that many will incorrectly see this as self-inflicted (a subconscious need to be viewed as victim). No doubt, the actor's life after the death of his then wife Natalie Wood on a boating accident has been a haunted one. In much the same way, it may even be alleged that when talent leads to tragic consequences, it seems to become the very apex of authenticity. Here, in equally debatable terms, it may be a truthfulness that had never even existed before the camera lens, but once it has occurred, the on-screen image becomes heavier. In this respect, the fact of his spouse's death impacts upon what we shall call the absent component within the film. Hers is as much a feature of *The Towering Inferno* as the actresses present. Even if she is not in the credits, and does not appear on screen, she is still *there* purely due to her absence.

Natalie Wood rejected the part of Susan Franklin that was eventually offered to Faye Dunaway (Wood believed the script to be "mediocre" and she was having a baby at the

time). Therefore, she is both ‘what is not in the film’ and ‘what could have been’. Subsequently, if we wish to create hypothetical regenerations of *Inferno*, then Wood would replace Dunaway and those scenes would take on a different dynamic (possibly a warmer, more complex version of the role). Such suggestions on functionings outside the movie (or related existences) can form spiraling theories, invariably weaker than if focusing on the primary *inside* matters. However, as she was originally asked to partake, she is still within the movie’s scope (she attended the wrap-party and already had a line of noteworthy connections to Steve McQueen, Fred Astaire and Robert Vaughn – which will be addressed later). Additionally, if we choose to travel further down these lines (into yet another alternate-state) we come to others who are also present within the post-’74 movie purely due to their *nonappearance* (Stephanie Powers will also be cited as an integral factor in *The Gentleman and the Demon: William Holden*, as will Mary Jennifer Selznick in *Patterns of Loss: Robert Wagner, Paul Newman, Jennifer Jones* and Ali McGraw in *Transcending Fictions: Steve McQueen, Paul Newman*). These other *Inferno* realities will become more relevant as this paper progresses.

Ultimately, as said, *The Towering Inferno* can still easily be viewed as more a work of Hollywood gloss rather than of intelligent art. The main issue is that the subject isn’t appropriate. That a sentence could share the names of Theodor Adorno and Stephanie Powers belongs to ironic humor, not to academic study. And to ask a reader to place faith in the very idea is possibly gambling too much on one’s credibility. Inflating the movie’s importance when there is very little there, is a postmodern game of self-satisfaction. But the very richness of the material warrants an assessment that has never been tried before. For all its visible flaws, the work holds credibility - with an unknowing ambition.

The introductory statement over the still that includes Newman as architect Doug Roberts and Norman Burton as Will Giddings, declared that the movie ‘may be the new art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.’ It is easy to be derisory of the delusional, but it does show how the producer/director Irwin Allen had envisioned the promise of a motion picture where its technical superiority would be in clear evidence. If he had lived to see the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he may have returned to the project with a renewed understanding of what had been involuntarily formed. His wife Sheila Mathews Allen outlived

him by twenty-two years, and so would have witnessed the ramifications of what was once simply a profitable venture, changed by the events of 9/11, the later life of O.J. Simpson, the final years of the other cast members and seismic changes, whether they be cultural, societal, or political within America.

The author Cormac McCarthy cites in *The Crossing* that “Things separate from their story have no meaning” but this is not true of *The Towering Inferno*. That it is a storyline showing the dynamics of fictional people trapped together and fighting for their lives has always been the general consensus. Only with deeper insight can we find that it is a microcosm of broader histories.

Chapter Excerpts Follow



**Past, Present and Future; Forward  
Motions, Reversals and Stasis**

Film in Three Dimensions

'For it is not possible to remember the future.'

Socrates

From a specific starting point, (let us say when *The Towering Inferno* was shot from May through to September of 1974), the then actor O.J. Simpson may be seen as the most arresting element of the movie's aforesaid larger components. This categorization not only marks him as an outsider belying the film's original intentions, but also as a personification of the philosophical notion 'block time' (showing the present-tense, together with the past and finally, his future self).

To begin, we have to view how his fictional character is established in the then 1974 sense.

When Jennifer Jones (as Lisolette Mueller) is trapped on the 87<sup>th</sup> floor and caught on a CCTV camera, it is Orenthal James Simpson as Chief Security Officer Harry Jernigan who goes to her rescue with a flashlight. This is the first sign on how we will respond to him. The way he (for the sake of this argument, he will be Simpson, *not* Jernigan) runs towards the door with the prop shows how little he knows of human behavior. He darts across the room like a man too overly conscious of his movements, more concerned with how he is appearing than actually doing. By noticing this in the actor, rather than the fictional Jernigan, our suspension of disbelief is weakened, as he appears inauthentic in the superficial sense but more importantly 'not as he seems.' On his way to rescue Lisolette, he comes across the fire's first victim Will Giddings, (the electrical engineer played by Norman Burton). On approaching him, Simpson immediately takes control of the moment, ordering Paul Newman's Doug Roberts to phone for help. Roberts is less useful, struck silent by seeing his colleague (with what we, the spectators, believe are

third degree facial burns). But Simpson is more practical, ignoring his own emotional reaction and like the professional that he is, thinks on his feet.

This all happens around 22 minutes into the film. It is a decent enough exposition for Simpson's character, despite his initial acting stumble. And so the audience is now more settled. Not only reassured that he is one of several dominant figures with whom we can place our faith, but someone who will not make our minds stray too far from his image as a sports and TV star. But this is only the first stage of restructuring the images present.

At the time of shooting *Inferno*, O.J. Simpson's face was unable to show the mechanics that were needed for future duplicities. Contrarily, that same face which smiled at the court's verdict in 1995 was as an obliteration of the golden promise shown in 1974. And it didn't end there. Post court cases and post incarceration, he was in constant flux, proving that even a man who had taken life without remorse could still be 'successful'. The tactlessness of wanting to publish *If I Did It: Confessions of the Killer* was thereby beyond comprehension – just as the residuals from *The Towering Inferno* were still being paid during this period of media intensity. These factors only increase our inability to understand him as a person, both public and private.

The multi-dimensional factor can obviously be seen within all of the performances (every single piece of life ever placed onto film achieves this). But by assessing such moving image histories at our fingertips, we possess more awareness than the subjects did at the time, foreseeing the fates of what are yet to pass. It also is a prophecy realized, placing us god-like, harboring the ultimate knowledge.

“the work's truth content is the more relevant the more conspicuously and intimately it is bound up with its subject matter.”

Kant

Kant is correct, as the ‘seen unseens’ allow for a wider reflectivity upon where the “work’s truth content” can be found. And so here we counter Socrates’ introductory statement, as over forty years on from the film’s release – we *can* remember the actors’ ‘times-to-come’ – and so – “For it is not possible to remember the future” is, in photographic terms, a misnomer. For a more benign example, we can steer our attentions to someone whose lifetime was actually free from such major conversions.

Fred Astaire’s estate will not allow any biopics, so no new incarnations can be established and, as a life led privately with modesty and good sense, there are no known elements to uncover. To that end, repeated viewings of his film history are enough to keep our interests alive. He does not need to change into any negative variations of his old self through age. But he does reflect to his past in no surer way than in a few moments caught on film before he joins the party in the Promenade Room.

Astaire had always transcended beyond mere talent. In the theorist Jeff Nuttall’s view, he was in the same category as those who worked and belonged in any commercial industry, yet also co-existed above it. In Nuttall’s words Astaire “was no ordinary hooper,” acknowledging how the dancer had excelled to the level of artist despite being encased in Hollywood. Just as Bix Beiderbecke and Charles Rene Mackintosh had their geniuses compromised within commercialized ventures, so did he. Clearly evident in *Flying Down To Rio* (Thornton Freeland, 1933), *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, 1935) and other features throughout the forties to the sixties, his talent was sorely needed to detract the viewer from the surrounding mediocrity. He would do the same with *Inferno* – reclaiming the screen, but now purely due to our memories, rather than to his performance. The past therefore becomes the foreground as all else, in the 1974 present, becomes relegated to backdrop.

For that reason, the spectator will find it hard to be awed by him in the part of Harlee Claiborne in *The Towering Inferno*. This character shows no capacity for the marvelous. Yet there is a flicker of what once was, even though his appearance is incontrovertibly an inevitable dimming of the light.

*Inferno* was the very last time he danced on a Hollywood stage before a movie camera. At 74, the mystery was muted, but no one could say that the agility was not completely absent. We first notice it as he almost skips up the steps to the Tower (the Hyatt) with his gift-wrapped box (containing his rented tux and con-merchant's fake documents).\*



His limberness does no harm to our perceptions of what once made perfection. Later, when in his hotel room, he checks his reflection in the full-length mirror (it could never be anything smaller to reflect such poise) before going to the party. It is here that we may ask ‘is it Astaire or a *version* of Astaire that we are witnessing?’ as the signifier not only reverberates with his filmic past, but with his then present. Both are equally valid, as it is an ironic nod to his (and our) previous knowledge. In this second he is no longer Claiborne any more than we are; he has reverted back to his birth name of Frederick Austerlitz, and so we smile *with* him as he breaks the fourth-wall, together with moving between dimensions.

\* the tux receipt is from ‘*Tuxedo Junction – Tux, Bridal and Formal Rentals*’ and is clearly dated 7/4/74 – the actual date of filming.

It is also the only genuine moment of true humor in the entire movie, (where irony *does* appear) indicating that we are no longer slaves to the product and that the directors have allowed us to step outside of their illusion. It could even be where Astaire takes on an almost Brechtian instant, or even a postmodernist slant. Some may see the little boy whose mother took him to dance classes in order to conduct himself as a well-raised American (never to be proletarian or worse, immigrant, which they were). Hence, the carefulness taken in presenting himself as a man of means shows a determination to hide one's truest self.

His actions in the scene are shown in the following order:

He is first caught in a head and shoulder shot, with his mirrored reflection. He checks his bow tie. He touches the deepening creases around his mouth, lower cheek and chin, concentrating on his now aging appearance. He then shrugs it all off, with a carefree smile. He walks over to the bed. He puts on his tux jacket and goes back to look once again at his reflection. His hands fall by his sides, and he holds the pause. He then turns in profile, with his hands on his waist over his burgundy cummerbund. He surveys his still trim physique. He then raises himself just a millimeter by his toes (it is so subtle it may even go unnoticed). With a swift glide, he lifts his right hand to pull up his cuff, just enough to expose his wristwatch. He looks at the time. He then softly claps his hands, rubbing them as he heads back round to his suitcase. He takes out a fake bond document and places it in the inside pocket of his tux. He goes towards the door, but stops as he catches the mirror one final time. It is as if he is saying, "Still got it."

The exquisite was always Astaire's second nature. It was only age that held him back from presenting the old posture or embodying the fluidity in an apparent weightlessness (not that it took an inordinate amount of sweat, mistakes and torn ligaments to get there). Never a child protégé like a Picasso or a Mozart, Astaire was more like Malcolm Gladwell's Beethoven with 10,000 hours plus of practice behind him (without the viewer even seeing the effort employed).

These elements will be explored more in a later chapter, but it is best to end on Astaire as a factor of spacetime or in line with Einstein, the 'extended present' within the above scene. In physics it is referred to as neither past nor future, but as Astaire *does* hint at his past, it is more about taking the time (as he does in the mirror) to contemplate. In Astaire's case, it is on his own cinematic history, and, even though the shortest of moments, it remains distinct, out-of-sync with the rest of the film. Some could say that it is even more insightful of humanness than the scenes of rescue and survival that will soon follow. No special effects are required, and no stunt persons. It is of a man alone, simply reflecting on his once possession of a force that was as natural as the elements of wind, thunder and (let's not forget) fire. He can therefore be forgiven for exhibitionism. To be sure, his imitation of those chemical factors had always persuaded the viewer into accepting the falseness of a human controlling the air as though engineered by CGI. In doing so, he made it look like he could pass so easily as being one of us (while cheating the viewer into falling for an untruth). This is more Harlee Claiborne material – a grifter, and so a deceiver of his victims' hopes.

I watched him at a polite distance, as he walked for his cue to step onto the escalator that would carry him up into the massive hotel lobby which doubled as the atrium of the film's tower. As he waited, he was just perceptibly tapping his feet, keeping time to the music coming over the hotel's muzak system. I can't recall the tune, but it was a classic that could have easily been introduced in one of his musicals. He seemed content, moving his feet, mentally creating some dance routine that would have been the rave of earlier movie audiences, but alas was replaced by exploding buildings and fire.

Tony Piazza, author/actor/extra in *Inferno* (credited as SFPD Officer)

Like this, the aforementioned moment in the mirror is Astaire putting life itself on hold. It is also where he subverts the movie's propelling motion. He allows himself this stillness of time – and it works. It may just as well be a freeze frame for those two seconds. Like a painting from Edward Hopper in the forties, Hockney in the seventies, or Eric Fischl in the eighties; the figure is carefully positioned so the eye can take in the room - and its deliberate lack of any other human life.

If O.J. had done this, it would not mean anything. He was not yet ready to reconsider his personal and professional history. Only as he neared Astaire's then age, would he have been able to ponder the previous years that he had created by his own hands. But Astaire could just stand there motionless (against his true calling), and, despite our need to always see him move, we see a man of worth who does not have to do anything more. It shows an individual's entire life having been lived free from vulgarity, maybe going as far as to have been immersed in splendor. But more contradictory, and perversely, his once impeccable past as an artist of dance - is shown via stasis. It is where *The Towering Inferno* gives us more than we thought.



Divorced from the work's intent: a still moment in time, facing the present, remembering the past

More Excerpts Follow



**Pyrotechnics as Pornography:**  
Robert Wagner, Susan Flannery

“For those whom the sex act has come to seem mechanical and merely the meeting and manipulation of body parts, there often remains a hunger which can be called metaphysical but which is not recognized as such, and which seeks satisfaction in physical danger, or sometimes in torture, suicide, or murder”.

Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*

Pictures of people at their least self-controlled will always find appeal. Whether it being a stuntman inside an inferno or a person reduced for titillation, watching humans entering destructive areas not only gratifies our lesser selves but also, inevitably, leads to tedium. So we view pornography with the same curiosity as when we see victims within a building ablaze; in both cases, the spectator remains responsibly free, then becomes weary of the voyeuristic extremes. As a consequence, we need to examine why this seems such a medium for disengagement.

It could be said that the porn movie and the disaster flick are systems with similarities in mind. They are made within closed-set studios, the actors (or the fire) start and end the performance, the area is cleaned, the surrounding décor is taken down and the actors shower. All is efficient, yet dull in its mechanization. Once edited and projected – both the fire *and* the sex (two words that would probably green-light a Hollywood venture) may even cause enrapture. It could also be assumed that not only is the porn star subjected to humiliation, but also the stunt-person. But sound thought could not say that both were of equal vulnerability. The porn actor or actress is naïve, whereas the actor's stunt replacement understands caution through logic and foresight. And so it is with *The Towering Inferno* that the fire sequences are the money shots, the most alive moments in a deadening movie. It may also be because there is no CGI to cause a further denial of authenticity. All sets and props actually existed in the shooting of *Inferno*; they could be touched, held, able to protect or harm. We can see this physicality even when projected onto a wall in two-dimensions. And so the suspension of disbelief is more willingly accepted as when objects fall (and that includes bodies) we can *see* gravity's force. When we watch CGI, such objects simply 'float' or 'swim' denying them the necessary illusion of matter. Yet it is the fire, and the sheer reality of it being photographed, that takes our greatest focus; as ever throughout existence - we are transfixed.

The Robert Wagner and Susan Flannery, or Dan Bigelow and Lorrie (her character is not credited a surname) micro-narrative in *The Towering Inferno* begins 25 minutes into the film. We presume the action occurs in the early evening, not only due to the losing of the light but on how Bigelow addresses his various underlings, wishing them a good weekend and that he will see them all again on Monday. He also tells one to switch off his phone line, as he will not be taking any more calls that day.

As the Tower's PR chief, he then asks Lorrie (his personal secretary) to assist him in finishing off some paper work. We soon learn that this is simply a ruse so they can be alone together. Once in his office suite, it is made clear that they are lovers. However, the sequence of shots never fails to suggest a surreptitious air. Either this is intended or it is poor direction on Gulliermin's part, as it projects the situation as being clandestine (although neither wears a wedding ring and so it is not adultery). There is also a power

imbalance at play and so he dominates within the hierarchical game even as they prepare for sex.

Flannery, who was known by millions as Dr Laura Spencer in *Days Of Our Lives* (1966 – 1975) and hugely recognized for playing Stephanie Douglas Forrester in *The Bold and the Beautiful* (1987 – 2012) is, for the sake of this paper, what we can call benign; completely honest in her photogenic features that can keep their symmetry no matter what emotional turmoil they are asked to show. It is therefore a face that can sell almost anything. This suggests that there were bright minds at work at NBC and CBS respectively, as the producers and sponsors knew what felt comfortable and secure. She would win the hearts of the nation and make them buy disinfectant. She was commercial gold.

Through the vision of *Inferno* however, she is placed within an arena of the unknown, free from the restraints of a long-term television contract and so rendered vulnerable. From this alternative point, she is the transplantation of the *safe* thrown into the horror of the major studio set up. This adds disturbance for the uninformed viewer, as these presences are now non-compliant, evanescent and disposable. It is also this denial of the commonplace that makes the dread so powerful. The puritanical American studios (and spectator) know that sex is equated with death, and that the freedom of sensual expression cannot be allowed unless it is revenged. It could even be seen as the repression of primal need that the bourgeois crave, yet cannot allow themselves or their fictional characters to have unless it is denounced by shocking means. Flannery is not the only angelic face trapped by her own need for touch in American cinema - and she will not be the last.

But it is more curious to see how Wagner's own mediocrity adds to Flannery's performance. His is an execution lacking the required high standard, and so makes Flannery a superior presence. Her acting ability can even be seen as outshining in the opening seconds of their two-hander, when she takes off her glasses before rubbing her eyes: it is this minutiae as the devil in the detail, but it seems truthful. It is a familiarity that we need before the hell is unleashed.

Another moment worth inspecting is when, by foreshadowing the phone lines disconnection, Wagner has to perform an act within an act, pretending that there is someone on the other end just as Lorrie comes back into the room. Moments later, he confesses that the line was already dead and so there will be no rescue team. The looks that they share (in a two-shot, reverse close up) seem highly plausible, making us believe in their reciprocated lies. There is no need for them to speak, as we can see the thoughts. They both know they are going to die. This is simple film making, yet it works.

Once the fire is introduced, the two icons become expendable. After wrapping a damp towel over his head, he looks back at her and the spectator gets a responsive shot to see what Flannery is thinking. The intelligence comes about in how she plays along with his bravado, still *behaving subservient* to his delusions. Once inside the blaze, now incapable of realizing that he cannot compete with nature's strength, Wagner is replaced by a stunt man (in a very impressive slow-motion long shot), well choreographed as he moves from point to point, always making the wrong turn. As the fire grows closer towards Lorrie, she crouches against the furniture, proceeding to crawl along the carpet, her eyes now full of smoke. She is also choking. It is the most undignified of deaths. Wearing just a blouse and skin-toned pantyhose stockings, she is now without tantalization, simply a woman dressed as she would when alone. It is as though she is refusing the male gaze and so pays the ultimate penalty. Unable to breathe, she throws a chair out of the window to allow for air. This possibly creates a backdraft that bursts open the room's door. The force of the flames either throws her through the plate glass window, or, and this may be the fault of both the editor and director(s), she walks towards it alight, smashing through, diving to her death. Upon watching this scene, Pauline Kael wrote "There is a primitive, frightening power in death by fire." The critic understood that even a movie designed for mass consumption can hold cogent elements. This review in *The New Yorker*, Dec 22 1974, was not through post-millennial reflective distancing, so she could not imply 9/11, and so it was dismissive and derisory. Had she lived to see 2001, she would recognize that the curiosity to see the explicit had taken on a different form. The audience had now become more knowing of the factual conscience or guilt from early 21<sup>st</sup> century disaster. Unfortunately, the future would still ultimately favor the fantastical at the cost of the actual through ever

increasing appetites for CGI blockbusters. In doing so, the spectator has not gained knowledge, wisdom or the value that comes from the lived experience.\*

And yet Kael's statement neglects another facet within what she describes as "the primitive." Had she expanded, she may have noticed how what Freud called 'urethral eroticism' is present in ways that the narrative can never suggest. It is a subliminal link that weaves its way from the Bigelow/Lorrie scenario right up to the climatic scene in the Promenade Room, interacting with more recognizable associations between fire and sexuality.

This will be looked at in more detail in the chapter *Images of Contemplation and Fear*.

'the film's glass-spangled erection burns with an uncontrollable lust  
for spectacle'

Eric Henderson (Slant magazine)

Maybe Wagner and Flannery's love scenes do not singe the frame as equally as the inferno scorches the Tower, but it is more interesting to review how sex, and its ugly mutation of pornography, made Wagner's and Flannery's scene work better than we first believed.

As mentioned, Flannery's performance made Wagner seem better than he was. He could never truly be a lone 'star' as he did not have the gravitas to hold a TV or movie screen without a bold female foil. This was apparent when he co-starred with Stephanie Powers in *Hart to Hart*, but never so evident as when his photograph was taken with his wife, Natalie Wood. The chapter *Patterns of Loss* will focus more specifically on the future events of 1981, but for now, let us look at Wagner as a persona and the codes of masculinity that shaped his identity.

Like his friend Sinatra, the romantic suaveness was only kept in check if the underlying (and camera hidden) coarseness was held at bay. As with pornography, the vulgar is mandatory, and Wagner's 'chemistry' with Flannery (an actress who is proudly not heterosexual, and so his opposite) shows a man battling against a performer who is not only uninterested in him as a bed partner, but someone who steals the screen from him as she does not possess that which he loves – *the tasteless*.

In his autobiography *Pieces of My Heart*, he titles two of chapters in the following ways: “*That Fucking Cunt Will Never Work in My Studio Again!*” and “*I Have a Frozen Cock*”. The former has a photo of Natalie Wood standing alluringly against an interior wall. So the questions we need to pose here is – ‘What kind of man would choose the language of pornography to describe his life (and for that matter his wife), if he wasn't entirely comfortable with this harsher aspect of human nature?’

More Excerpts Follow



**Against Extremities:**

Robert Vaughn

“An element – a possibility – of death”

Robert Vaughn, on the shooting of *The Towering Inferno*

Before Robert Vaughn's contract was signed for *The Towering Inferno*, the actors James Franciscus and John Forsythe were first suggested for the role of Senator Gary Parker. They were only rejected due to their physical similarities to the then current Democrat Senator John Tunney (Franciscus) and to Reagan himself (Forsythe). In the latter's case, the ex-Actors Studio veteran later became the aesthetic ideal for the archetypal WASP patriarch in *Dynasty (1981-1989)*, making the allusions with Reagan spread within the general consciousness. But for the producers of *Inferno*, a firmly apolitical stance was mandatory. They could not allow rightist or leftist audience bias control the box office takings. That the final commercial product had high-profile Republicans as its stars (McQueen, Holden, Astaire, Jones and Wagner - whose wife Jill St. John is a staunch conservative Republican, as was his longtime partner Barbara Stanwyck), together with outspoken Democrats (Vaughn, Newman and

Dunaway) counteracts the original intentions. Again, a contradictory appraisal proves more illuminating.

From the 1970's on, Vaughn would play men not dissimilar to those sited. He knew them well so could adopt their appropriate traits with assurance. These could have been legitimate targets, yet his admiration for Shakespeare's ability to see life through others, taught him that human insecurity has varied forms. In the majority of cases, the scripts would indicate that those who possessed such political shine had shadows larger than most; and even though Vaughn knew that such wide generalizations may exist in large numbers, attempted to challenge the universal beliefs, providing him with over four decades worth of commendable work.

Robert Relyea, one of the producers of *Bullitt* (1968) has said of Vaughn when he adopts such roles: '... as soon as you see him you want to slap his face.' The psychology that resides in *The Towering Inferno's* Senator Gary Parker could be Vaughn's most famous incarnation of this standard. It is only towards the end of the character's own story-arc that he adopts a more altruistic sense by trying to rescue the guests' final means of escape (the breeches buoy as it is being captured by opportunists). Yet Vaughn's authenticity, or rather *impression* of the authentic is so close to how we perceive those whom may urge our contempt, that his acting can almost become unnoticeable.

From the moment we meet the United States Senator at 23.27 in *The Towering Inferno*, he is charming yet authoritarian. As Holden ushers him and other select invitees into the glass elevator at 24.50, Vaughn takes center stage, indicating, with pro forma, towards the skyline by saying, "Have you ever seen the bridge like that?" The fact that he was looking at a blue screen adds more to the viewer's enjoyment (as is knowing that Parker is Vaughn's political antithesis). But here lies a further element of interest and possible polemic.

With Gary Parker, we see a man of high standing, possibly extolling the benefit of individual enterprise and in ownership of the presumed self-interest, rational or not. Like many other fictional figures Vaughn would play around this time, they themselves may never choose to self-investigate, yet the actor is willing to delve into their life's meaning, possessing dimensions far wider than his personas could or *would* attempt. Here, the question arises – ‘why do we automatically assume the Senator to be Rightist?’ This may say as much about our over-simplifications of political/personality personae than we wish to admit. Yet, it may be due to the clues given.

As the senator says quietly to William Holden's Jim Duncan, away from the guests:

“At this rate, it's going to take a couple of hours to get everyone down. So I would suggest that those of us with stout hearts and trim waistlines start using the stairs.”

Therefore, self-preservation comes unsurprisingly into play. But under such life-changing circumstances, maybe even the most liberally minded could be as equally susceptible to the survival instinct. However, if the public views it as a good representation of a type (even a cliché) then the fiction still has the possibility to be successful. It could also be said that previous character inventions themselves have strengthened our perceptions of political personalities and their ‘accuracies’ – and that Vaughn, like many others, has taken note of what constitutes as a realistic interpretation, in that it can be agreed as a ‘true’ mirroring of a ‘political sort’.

The general opinion is that for a movie such as *The Towering Inferno*, such subtleties have no reason to appear. We can impose our own thoughts on any character's political leanings that are unseen in the film, and in doing so, allow ourselves a modicum of self-satisfaction in deepening our experience. But as previously stated, if it was not the creator's wish, then it is derisory to the original article. Therefore, when we look back at Vaughn's work in film and TV, we may be re-writing what we *thought* we knew, even though it is not germane. The silent element or extra dimension will never lessen our respect for the actor or actors, but may subtract the emptiness from this, one of his most

popular works. It is an emptiness that we may need to retain the innocence that the product needs so much, and for it to work at the correct level.

### **The Actor as Politician**

Even when in politics, Robert Vaughn was never outside of the star system. His spell as an orator for the Left both increased his political identity and bolstered his status as a performer. Reagan may have taken note of this and have refashioned his own easy-going nature after aspects of Vaughn, no matter how subconsciously. Vaughn would be modestly entertained by this rather unlikely theory, but as he wrote in his memoirs; as an actor with intelligence, Vaughn was always attracted to those who not only inspired him, but who had lived an excellent life.

In his 2008 autobiography, Robert Vaughn inserted the names of those that he believed were worthy of such distinction. There are no great surprises, and, as he was a person of the Left, they are of the politically liberal, humanistic and artistic spheres. But his ability to recognize those that had lived superbly shows how he viewed his own misgivings as an actor. He knew that if he sought it within himself, it would only lead to dissatisfaction. At first he observed from afar, but through the portal of fame, could get to see greatness at close quarters. For over seventy years, he remained fascinated by those who extended the norm, creating lives not only lived well, but who embodied the sublime.

Vaughn had certainly noticed what Plato called this ‘practical wisdom’ in meeting Martin Luther King, then at the epicenter of his calling. This was one among many interactions within the world of sixties politics, offering him an insider’s awareness of how power is constructed and applied. He also recognized that politics and acting were analogous systems, both following the line that the culture of personality reigns over any dicta, either admirable or banal.

‘Having lived my life among theatrical people, I can say with conviction that I *don’t* want to see Rousseau’s nightmare come to full fruition, in a

world where actors (rather than Plato's philosophers) rule society. Like Plato, I consider the task of making this a better world the noblest human pursuit ...

Vaughn continues:

... But unlike Plato, I wouldn't ban actors from my ideal state. Plato and Rousseau were right to point out the similarity between the arts of the actor and those of the politician. Both use words, gestures, expressions and intonations to play on the emotions of an audience. At their most skillful, both are able to evoke intense sympathy from onlookers, even eliciting approval (at least temporarily) for words and deeds all right-thinking people will condemn.

His background was firmly in the theatre. Even when he was around five years of age, his mother would have him recite 'To Be Or Not To Be,' a sure fire way to stand out within the expected living patterns of lower middle class thirties Missouri. She and his stepfather had worked together as actors in the Chicago Federal Theatre, a group that was disbanded due to pressure from Congress on its communist leanings and connections, and this deviation from respectability, even though leaving himself open to ridicule, gave him hope for future contentment through creative endeavor. It was the much sort after fineness that he so admired in others.

His first experience of viewing the extraordinary came in the forms of Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift on the New York stage, and a little later, in James Dean when attending the same acting class together. Vaughn had become mesmerized by their powers, yet also knew that such majesty was sporadic, absent when taken away from the magic of the light. From these observations, he could not only ponder the differences over those who were great from those who could not touch the soul, but why there is so often a chasm between talent and a well-ordered existence. From his earliest years, he remained committed to searching for such answers.

His stepfather would die at the age of thirty-nine from cirrhosis of the liver (brought on by drink) while his biological father had passed away just over one year before at forty-seven from a rheumatic heart. This made Vaughn, then only nineteen, aware that death was not purely for the aged, and that one had to lead a life rejecting the vices the unfortunate found hard to resist. This was another nod towards a life of merit. But he was far removed from the pejorative Conservative, despite his conformist appearance that helped him garner a broad popular appeal within such a short space of time.

His autobiography *A Fortunate Life* begins with these lines:

With a modest amount of looks and talent and more than a modicum of serendipity, I've managed to stretch my fifteen minutes of fame into more than half a century of good fortune.

Robert Vaughn was a realist. By twenty, his face had missed perfection, but in 1952, despite his inability to be easily categorized, the American film industry had birthed the teenager, and Vaughn soon immersed himself (by way of his agent) within the new demographic. At first, the young actor was only there to witness, but his expectations were surpassed by meeting the then seventeen year old, Natalie Wood. For Vaughn, their courtship helped towards a formation of identity, yet the spotlight imposed its unnatural factors regulating how the world would perceive them. Such a star-crossed narrative epitomized what Hollywood publicists wanted to provide: chimeras as saintly beings. Vaughn knew full well of his and Wood's own truth, (at twenty-four, he was her senior) and that the filmic alternate of their partnership was creating another language, far more convincing. Wood (being a Hollywood child in the 1940's) helped him gain confidence within such unavoidable effects of being a split-persona. So here was a lesson on acceptance, and of the compromises that come if fully wishing to embrace the ramifications of said good fortune.

Throughout the fifties, requests for TV and film duly arrived. His role in the movie *The Young Philadelphians* (as an alcoholic war veteran) won rave reviews and earned him an Oscar nomination in 1960. He followed it one year later by playing a far-right

American political party leader, possibly based on George Lincoln Rockwell. Despite his capacity for such intensities, these early performances only led Vaughn to being cast as the suave agent of U.N.C.L.E, in one of the most popular TV shows of the decade. This established a fixed-identity, and, as the coalition of show business and politics create the most narcissistic of hybrids (in so much as they feed off one another's illusions), he was warmly welcomed into the inner political sanctum (two of Robert Kennedy's teenage children were fans of the show). The outsider therefore became an insider within the House of Camelot, and there he would remain; right up until travelling the eight-hour journey on the RFK funeral train from New York's Penn Station to Washington D.C. in the June of 1968.

From Napoleon Solo onwards, Vaughn became a dichotomy. As an actor, he would present himself as safe (almost anodyne) yet as a political being he was a non-centrist who advocated social democracy. He was therefore antipathetic towards the Johnson administration and what he saw as a deeply flawed narrative. He voiced his opposition to Vietnam (the first Hollywood actor to do so) and held the position of national chairman for the pressure group Dissenting Democrats. He then went head-to-head with William F. Buckley on the television show *Firing Line*, and spoke at Harvard, USC and UCLA. Inevitable investigations came from the FBI and continued for seven years, finally concluding in 1973 when Vaughn was acquitted of all previous suspicions of being a communist informant and no longer a threat to national security. Within this time, he gained a Ph.D.; his thesis being published two years later in 1972 as *Only Victims: A Study of Show Business Blacklisting*.

Included in his autobiography:

In July of that summer of '52, Ronald Reagan, a former Warner Bros. contract player and president of the Screen Actors Guild who described himself as "the Errol Flynn of the B's", sent a letter on behalf of SAG to MCA granting the agency the blanket right to produce films. Within a few years, MCA, through its television wing Revue Productions, would become the major supplier of television shows in Hollywood.

Although he did not realize it at the time, the SAG president had opened a door that would lead to the Oval Office. In 1954, Taft Schreiber, head of Revue Productions, told Ronnie about a possible job introducing a new weekly television series, *The G.E. Theater*. Schreiber owed his job, at least in part, to that 1952 SAG decision. During his eight years as *G.E.* host and his two years as host of Borax's *Death Valley Days*, Ronnie served as a corporate spokesman, polishing a little speech that lauded free enterprise and attacked America's slide toward "democratic socialism."

Thus, in 1964, when Barry Goldwater was unable to appear at a \$1,000-a-plate fund-raiser at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, Ronnie was asked to pinch-hit by Holmes Tuttle, a friend of Goldwater's Finance Chairman, Henry Salvatore. Reagan's speech was a nationwide hit. In the spring of 1965, forty-one rich businessmen formed "The Friends of Ronald Reagan," and the following year, Reagan became governor of California.

To have such a lifelong interest in the world of his muse The Melancholic Dane showed how Vaughn was intrigued by Truths, whether through moral relativism or philosophical scepticism. It offered him endless revisits to the play, but none that could provide solid evidence of the absolute, either whole or individual. This, he had to find away from the world of the imagination, something that not even Hamlet could contain.

At twenty-six, while on the location shoot for the movie *The Big Show* (a poorly received circus melodrama starring Esther Williams and Cliff Robertson), Vaughn was offered the opportunity to visit the remains of the Dachau concentration camp in Bavaria, southern Germany.

He writes:

Less than a decade and a half had passed since the German defeat in World War II, and Dachau, the first German concentration camp, was just outside

Munich. Cliff, Esther and I visited there before we started filming. It was very much as it had been when the Allied troops had entered the camp for the first time: crematoria, shower rooms plumbed to release killing gas, ditches for blood that spilled after firing squads had murdered inmates. It had not yet become the shrine it was later to be – a reminder of what happened there and in so many other camps throughout Europe and a horrific lesson in man's capacity for brutality towards his fellow man.

The ephemeral world of Hollywood was therefore, in some ways, invalid. But what an actor does in California should only be viewed outside of the context of Dachau. To consider the largest of crimes while pointing a lens at an actor feigning pain is unreasonable and coarse. Vaughn understood that these were two worlds in opposition and that to blend them in the cause of entertainment would merely produce a cinema of asininity. However, from this point on, the actor would search to find projects and roles that touched upon the edges of principled thought or action. These men were often limited in emphatic scope, possessed by their own self-regard, and bereft of core decencies. And yet none were monsters; these were bastions of local and national standing. They would be personified in the 1980 US elections, where a seismic shift occurred in how the public selected their Commander In Chief. It was where verities were no longer spoken, therefore no longer heard or needed; a not-so-further drift from Nixon and his failed attempts at ethical actions (Nixon would resign the presidency during the *Inferno* shoot on August 9<sup>th</sup>). And so such future presidents as George Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Donald Trump were more resourceful with their deceptions, lacking the courage to admit personal responsibility for their moral failures.

Back in 1974, Vaughn, being a keen observer of Washington, may have had the Watergate burglars G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt in mind when accepting the role of Gary Parker. He may also have taken pause to realize that the fictional Senator was still able to perform his mandate (even attend a party at the Tower) while Vaughn's

own colleagues Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had been violently extracted from the equation. This would be another indication of mediocrity's control, and, even if Nixon were no longer serious to the majority, the banality of Reagan's previous life as an actor would prove its worth - and the country would wholeheartedly back such stringently traditional standards in six years time and win him the White House.

Robert Vaughn's perpetual interest in excellence could therefore only be found on the silver screen. He had learnt by his late thirties that more often than not, sincerity could not survive within the arena of politics – and if it could, would inevitably be wiped out by equally steadfast, but far ignorant forces.

In 2003, this writer once sat a few seats behind Vaughn in a cold, rather empty London cinema that was showing a matinee screening of Clint Eastwood's *Mystic River*.

By catching the side-view of the actor's face, one could register the concentrated intensity of the seasoned pro; he not only watched, but observed every minutiae of Sean Penn's performance. Vaughn loved acting when it transcended averageness. And so, even though he sat alone, with dozens of unoccupied seats around him, he could only be described as nothing but 'in good company.'

Robert Vaughn died in his hometown of Connecticut of acute leukemia in 2016, at the age of 83.



Vaughn with co-star Steve McQueen on a break from the *Inferno* shoot (third person unknown)



**Objections to Beauty:**

Faye Dunaway, Susan Blakely

‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us’.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegis*

Irwin Allen would never have viewed the topics within this chapter as being useful to his movie. His choice, as producer, was to create a film that was accessible to all, with realistic special effects that would retain their awe for decades to come. He had manufactured a piece of entertainment that was opposed to any form of academic discourse, made to secure major profits for the two Hollywood studios. He was successful at all of this. And, like all good showmen, he also understood that the appealing female presence was compulsory towards a winning formula. Although others were offered the script for consideration, he and the studios agreed upon two specific actresses’ with dissimilar qualities to satisfy the quota.

Let us begin by suggesting that Susan Blakely's youthful zest was in her warmth and sensuality. Her idolization of the other members of the cast (particularly Paul Newman) showed a mind that still had room to grow, but all on set saw her as highly professional\*. Fred Astaire even asked for her views on his own performance. Faye Dunaway's presence was far more autonomous, projecting an air of detachment (her heart possibly more keen on playing Chekhov than Allen). In doing this, the actress' very *being* proposes a theory on our relationship and reactions to striking beauty; how we are automatically attracted yet have the choice to either engage or ignore (for example, possibly when the person conveys conceitedness). This was Dunaway's main fallibility, and she makes it clearly abundant in her role as Susan Franklin. She was as if stone has attempted to become sexualized and so it results in pure coldness, therefore utterly disconnecting for the viewer.

It would not be too illogical to assume she was purely being deployed for the male gaze alone, despite a micro-narrative concerning an offer to take a new job as a magazine editor. Yet even though she may have had minimal chance to develop Franklin (a great deal of the footage ended up on the cutting room floor), she manages to adopt a presence absent in the script. The cheekbones that could cut were used to little effect in this regard – as it was something other that made one of the most interesting scenes from *Inferno* take deeper root. It was neither for its glamour nor sexual appeal – but for its unconscious relation to terror.

### **Faye Dunaway – Protagonist in Hell**

The creators of *Inferno* knew that showing people confined in small or treacherous spaces sells tickets, and so the glass elevator sequence was included, becoming one of the most defining visuals within the movie and in its life away from the screen. It is where the characters place faith in chance. Their survival is out of their control and so, as the will for either fight or flight is impossible, all they can do is remain. In these moments, Time (both the film's clock and our own) appears expanded. We feel the weight of each second inside the minds of these women, one fireman and the two

Allbright children. The danger of being encased in a transparent elevator exposed to the elements therefore provides a great paradox – a vessel for both claustrophobia and agoraphobic tensions while the spectators below (and us) cannot help but wait surreptitiously for the worst.

At 1.37.45, we have a shot of the elevator beginning its descent, and in those few seconds we believe. It feels authentic. Sheila Matthews Allen's face (the director's wife right up until his death) as Paula Ramsay is so truthful in its lack of awareness, that her reactions seem completely unrehearsed. She, like the other guests, chooses to pause in silence. It is clever direction from either Allen or Guillermin; they know that to have the women panic would reduce the effect – likewise, they knew (we hope) that sometimes, when facing the high probability of one's own death, it is the sudden calmness that creates the unexpected in its most honest form. It is a profound moment within the film and yet one with larger implications.



Firstly, we have to look at the components shown and in linear order.

As this was 1974, all women and children are the first to be offered the opportunity for escape. The elevator only holds a minimum capacity and so a lottery system is established. One of the very few better moments within the entire movie follows - and it is of Dunaway offering her own ticket to another guest, not wishing her fiancé Newman, to notice. However, even this comes with a subtextual message. Dunaway is now shown as a beacon for strength willing to stay with the men and in doing so, not only placing her own future life (and career success) at risk, but also putting others' lives before her own. Therefore, she is labeling herself a woman equally self-governing as the alpha males. As the other female party guests rush towards the elevator's open doors, Dunaway stays, taking on a more masculine attitude (as Allen and Guillermin would see it) rather than emotive. Only when Newman forces her to join the fortunate cluster does she submit to his request and accept the grouping. Yet, as the doors close, Dunaway still takes center place within the unit, therefore remaining our main focus (as she is not only the one possessing 'light' in a darkened space - but by wearing the famous diaphanous gown, she clearly outshines the 'lesser sexuality' of the women around her).

In these few seconds, we see Dunaway as the ideal protester against her own allure. She may have radiated while in the Promenade Room, but now the plunging neckline serves no purpose. It cannot hold the same captivation as when it was first introduced (notice how the dress has now become more relevant than the actress) as it has lost its provocation. It is no longer useful to the changing dynamic, and so is reduced to an emblem of uselessness, *Inferno's* own unintentional objection to beauty. The surrounding women, mostly dressed in highly flammable chiffon therefore make up a picture of bare arms, glass and steel. It is a potent image, and one with many disconcerting associations.

This paper is about what one sees if one chooses to look outside the frame. To recognize facets beyond the peripheries becomes harder when verging on the cusp of taste, yet to ignore the film's relevance to other, more controversial fictions is where the tangential levels become more persuasive, even extreme in their connectivity, and may therefore stray into areas of higher moral issue.

## Replications of Fictionalized Histories

As *Inferno* cannot steal from post-1974 cinematic or televisual representations of catastrophe, it cannot be accused of plagiarism. If the film was created in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then it would have to battle with our locked-in memories of previous movies from the mid-seventies onwards, works that showed people trapped in extreme situations and their fantasticated demises. Even to the now overly saturated eye, they are our universal nightmares, yet purely innocent as they are within the sphere of the screen. The danger lies when such commercial enterprises choose historical atrocities that are seen by the majority as accurate and unequivocal truths. This inadvertently occurs when watching *Inferno* and the elevator sequence of shots - but for this argument to work, we have to assume that we are viewing the movie between the specific timeframe of 1978 to 1993 – a span of five years when three distinct projects gave us a new perspective on how we respond to uncomfortable re-enactments within made-for-profit enterprises.

It is best to go back to the start of the same scene.

Upon understanding that it is the most practical means of survival, the women accept that they will be placed in a relatively small space with others, many of them possibly strangers. We know, as an audience, that this is involuntary confinement as if they remain in the Tower they are sure to perish. In other words, they are willing to accept this leap of faith, and in doing so, supporting the meaning that they do not need to be ordered, governed or driven. The party guests are therefore huddled together, still wearing their evening gowns, just like the men who will soon clamber in selfish haste onto the breeches buoy in their tuxedos and black ties (telling us that the artifice of bourgeois respectability holds no defense when confronted by the demonic).

And so, the actresses are given the correct direction either from Guillermin or Allen (again, it is not easy to tell) and the fear of grave expectancy on their faces is mirrored on our very own. The question here therefore has to be ‘why is this shot so unnerving?’ It may be due to two reasons – primarily, because our immediate senses are focused on what the sound and visions are telling us, and secondly, how our consciousness is now

wired to make connections into areas of thought that we may feel are too unrelated or ill-chosen. The latter is more relevant as once acknowledged, can never be removed. It is these signifiers that remind us of so much more than the movie suggests in its supposed innocence.

### **The Tower and the Absence of Hope**

‘it’s mainly concerned with what happens during the holocaust’  
extract taken from Vincent Canby’s review for  
*The Towering Inferno*, *The New York Times*. December 20<sup>th</sup> 1974

It is illogical to say that the makers of *Inferno* took areas of total irrelevance to add dimension to their product. Neither Dunaway nor Blakely (or any other actor for that matter) could have such accusations imposed upon them. *The Towering Inferno* was completely free of historical material therefore it could do no harm (intentionally or not). Nevertheless, as mentioned, if watching *Inferno* from the years 1978 to 1993 – the movie would be susceptible to redefinitions of its own imaginings. It could no longer be free of associative, underlying resemblances - no matter how removed from its true context.

More Excerpts Follow



### **Susan Blakely – Ingénue of Substance**

Winning the biological lottery (the All-American profile with perfect moue and WASP coloring), gave Susan Blakely a signing with Ford Modeling Agency in 1969, affirmation of reaching success at the age of nineteen. This placed her on the front of *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Italian Vogue* and made her the face of *Cover Girl* makeup. Yet despite all the attention, she was perceptive, instantly understanding the fashion world and its burden on the sharper mind. She probably knew that adoration of the superficial is where one finds comfort in favoring subtraction over substance (as it only offers a taking away), and that it is a both knowing yet ignorant set of simplistic systems. Certainly, she knew that the youthful model owns her personal amount of individual power, but that she cannot act on it completely independently, as it requires representation, legitimacy, manipulation and dominance. Blakely saw that this might be valuable to lives stranded in their own darkness' but that it was salacious in its appetite, a hunger that only decreased once the flesh withers and is no longer profitable. In other words, those who belief they are cheating death are delusional. She also knew how she possessed wider capabilities, and that to be forever associated with the flattening dimensions of fashion would be to her own detriment. This would swiftly lead her to become a professional actress, and in just a few years, land her high billing in one of the most watched television events of the decade.

ABC's *Rich Man, Poor Man* (1976) showed Blakely as an actress who had studied under Sanford Meisner in New York, unafraid of exposing that which her post-war girl Julie Prescott was persuaded to hide (sexual curiosity). It was as though she *was* the small town naïve from Ann Arbor, seduced by her own high expectations, eventually finding that the capitalist dream was the antithesis to her moral needs. She had already lived it, so knew it well enough to emulate. Accordingly, the Golden Globes awarded her with Best Actress. Blakely then searched for the finest parts TV movies had to offer, and no better examples could then be found (from scripts between 1980 and 1982) than within the lives of Eva Braun and Frances Farmer. These were invitations to explore sensibilities broken away from normality, and it is both through our fascinations and equal disgusts that we can only view such things as entertainment. Even though not having the same screen time as Anthony Hopkins (an accomplished Führer), she claimed as much authenticity in *The Bunker* (1981) as the biographical accounts implied. Blakely's brief was hypothetical at best, a conundrum at worst: to humanize that which cannot be easily identified. Blakely therefore took Braun's deficiency as a paradox, delivering a glamorous façade with lines imbued with alternate meanings, and so creating dissimilarity between what is heard and what is said. It showed superficiality and its darkest contradictory intensities.

Such aberrations were distances away from the personal tragedies of movie star Frances Farmer. Even a complex psychology such as Farmer's (she was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic) could not fight against widespread hatred of alternative thought, especially if the gender was not male. While in High School, and with a fondness for Nietzsche, Farmer submitted an essay to a literary competition entitled *God Dies*, a piece verging on juvenilia, yet showing a bravely unique voice. In her autobiography *When Will There Really Be A Morning?* she states "He (Nietzsche) expressed the same doubts ... 'Gott ist tot'. God is dead. This I could understand." Once her life as an actress was in the public domain, Farmer became a target for the lowest corners of criticism, becoming 'a troubled persona,' an outsider inclined to violent attacks, mental illness and comfortable within communist circles (as shown in her visit to the Moscow Arts Theatre in the 1930's). All traits that the majority did not, and would not, accept.

The multipart existences within Braun and Farmer were certainly not present in Blakely's portrayal of Patty Duncan Simmons (Chamberlain's wife and Holden's child in *The Towering Inferno*.) Patty's anxieties were brought on not by her own making but by her husband's madness', and so reducing her to an accessorized product, just one more dimension within a matrix of synthetic desires. Even if she was free of Farmer's witch-hunts and the insanities of Hitler's clique, she was reduced for efficiency to a stock character, wearing a white fur wrap and a chiffon dress with rhinestones.

As a former model, Susan Blakely knew that outward appearances were where peoples' resentments lay.\* In *Inferno*, the character of Patty Duncan Simmons also identifies the same signs – and so it is in her dialogues with Richard Chamberlain that more can be seen - going further than the movie wanted to show.

More Excerpts Follow



**A Case for Poetry:**

Fred Astaire

‘Trace an Infant in the Womb. Mark the train and Succession of its Ideas. Observe how volition comes into the Mind. This may perhaps acquaint you with its nature.’

Berkeley, *Notebook A: 629 from Philosophical Commentaries*

The writer Phillip Roth’s protagonist Mickey Sabbath is, in the author’s 1995 novel *Sabbath’s Theater*, a champion of nihilism. Eleven years younger than Astaire was in 1974, the sixty-four year old character can only access the divine through depravity. He is purely for the self, turned on by filth. Afraid of what he believes to be the closeness of death, he also offends the dimming of the light (his way of confronting annihilation on equal terms) through the darkest of humor. He is a libertine, but also a Dostoyevskian ‘unattractive man’ breaking boundaries that good sense tells us should go untouched. He is Fred Astaire’s antithesis. The question could then arise as to why use such an example to start a chapter on the gentlemanly performer? And for that matter, even place a George Berkeley statement for the introduction?

On film, more than any other actor in *The Towering Inferno*, Frederick Austerlitz (Astaire’s birth name) transcends his own life existence. Even his non-existence in death is not total, as his inclusion in cinema is the ultimate defiance of *not being*. On

paper, Mickey Sabbath is equally eternal. His is also the denial of nothingness, but one made through insolence and Roth's literary excellence. Therefore, the fictional Sabbath (through Roth) and the factual Astaire both ward off fate through poeticizing the body. With Astaire, it was joy made from grace in motion, while Sabbath knows that we should never be vessels for virtue, and if one's preference is for immoralities, then they should be taken to their furthest extremes. But Sabbath and Astaire share more than just obsessions. They are both illusionists, or even show-offs; one fully deserving of our attentions, while the other garners disrespect through our disgusts. Ultimately, Mickey Sabbath is a demented puppeteer, using trickery to molest his audience - while Astaire chooses the wondrous to enthrall that same gaze.

In his movies, Astaire showed us a world of impeccable manners; how a tuxedo should be worn, how to walk across a room or to sit at a dining table and take out a cigarette. He was an Apollonian element not just in Hollywood but also in life itself. Sabbath, the hedonist, believes that sexual perversion, crudity, cheating, lying and fakery are his only ways to survive, that they are necessities to be explored (and deplored) before his own demise. He therefore wants to press our noses into his public gratifications and for us to be repulsed. Contrasts indeed. But when Astaire becomes Harlee Claiborne in *The Towering Inferno* they are of a similar ilk. Maybe this is where Fred Astaire's lifelong interest in the 'sickness' can be better understood. Astaire was like Phillip Roth himself; his wish to lead an orderly private life was just as much a necessity for peace of mind as much as to investigate hell and its existence within human consciousness.

In 1974, Astaire held the calm self-assurance that comes from reaching old age having achieved greatness. Now with the kindest elderly features in American cinema, he had made his mark by gliding through simulacrum of high society. But as Harlee Claiborne he had signed on to act against this primary image. Certainly, it may be of a man who had experienced gaiety, but even at the time of *Top Hat* (1935), Astaire knew of the other side; the modest upbringing in Omaha, where life was cut short through working on the railway and in the beer factories. Claiborne possibly came from that same milieu, having taken a stand against what could have been his sole destiny. Through self-direction, his (like Astaire himself) very existence became the daily use of fantasy – to amaze the spectator and rid them of cash (wasn't Hollywood's use of Astaire the same?)

and, like Sabbath, devoted his time to becoming a singular man with an uncommon purpose.

He seduces Jennifer Jones' character Lisolette Mueller in the most charming and non-threatening manner. It never even suggests a desire for sex (as unlike Sabbath, it would be inappropriate rather than a plague upon propriety). Claiborne's line to his 'Mark' (Jones) is that he lives in the South of France where he has a villa, and that he loves playing on the American stock market. The audience knows that he is a two-bit con artist selling a thousand false shares to gullible wealthy women of a certain age. Yet even as the grifter he seems clean, untainted by what he knows from the street. If this was a screenplay by Mamet, he could be a remnant from *Glengarry Glen Ross (1983)*, but Astaire would never express the linguistics of foulness (his ears were never attuned to the words of blue collar Nebraska, as only the sound of the Union Pacific Trains rhythms would inspire him as a boy).

When he does eventually confess to Mueller that he is a failure, selling his trickster wares across the country in the hope of the big win, does he appear as yet another capitalist, disappointing the truest regions of self through attempting to screw the world. Here, he admits that even his name is a ruse, an identity as false as his need for aloneness. Therefore, the character who had previously shied away from emotional attachment and personal responsibility (torn from human touch) is now willing to surrender to normality. And so he is still like Sabbath, also aware of his own revulsions. But Astaire had already chosen previous movies that held darkness as the true catalyst, despite the *memento mori* ('remember how we are all to die') being hidden.

In Stanley Kramer's *On The Beach (1959)* people await their deaths in a post World War III southern hemisphere. The only safe place left on earth is now a radiation-free Australia. The population survives in an almost sundrenched casualness, yet with the fear (and denial) of the oncoming storm of nuclear fallout. It is a concept too simplistic once transposed to film, from the slightly finer novel by the ex-racing car driver Nevil Shute.

Fred Astaire takes on the role of Julian Osborne, a scientist with moral concerns. He, like Shute himself, is also a racing enthusiast. Around two-thirds into the picture, he enters the Australian Grand Prix, eventually taking first place as the other drivers are killed either by accident or their own preferences. This is the most haunting of ideas. Osborne knows all too well that his colleagues are welcoming death, and that they are willing to face it head on through an emotional high. He finally greets it on his own terms, inside his garage by sitting in the very same car, turning on the exhaust and ending his life by carbon monoxide inhalation. The character takes to it swiftly with a positive determination. He, just as much as Sabbath, had taken everything that living had to give with no regrets. It is in opposition to Astaire's own dance routines and their escapes from annihilation. Alternative thought may therefore suggest that his choreography was a constant reminder of fatality. Seeing the body excel in beautiful shapes could also be seen as watching the ephemeral as its most upsetting, as it is where we are all united under the same cloud despite our material possessions, social status and human desires (*the Danse Macabre*).

### **Arguments for Berkeley**

Using the aforesaid George Berkeley alongside Roth and Astaire risks the danger of false attribution. But one is inclined to note the relevance of the Bishop of Cloyne and his theories on the *Universal Cause/Author of Nature (God)* to Astaire, the Episcopalian performer.

Firstly, it is best to return back to Roth's irascible invention.

Berkeley, unlike Mickey Sabbath, believed that no ideas exist that are worse than non-being. Roth's protagonist may have balked at this, yet still agreed with Berkeley that 'there is some other spirit ... repugnant that (it) should subsist by themselves.' Here, God has no control over these unnatural agents in opposition to regularity and order - 'Hence arises endless scruples and errors of dangerous consequence in morality.' For

Berkeley, 'sensible ideas' were the only way towards divinity. He states in *Philosophical Commentaries* '... thought is to the Mind or him self *as dancing to the Dancer.*'

He continues:

'... the will of man hath no other object, than barely the motion of the limbs of his body; but that such a motion should be attended by, or excite any idea in the mind of another, depends wholly on the will of the Creator.'

Therefore, Berkeley's belief was that heavenly governing controls us and that we incorporate it into *being* in order to attain true balance. It would also enable a harmonious existence between the natural world, art, mathematics and reason. Accordingly, it would erase all that is 'repugnant' (again, removed from Sabbath).

If Berkeley insists that 'the will is the motion of the soul' and that it in itself is steered by the Deity, then Astaire could be seen as the ideal model. From the mid-fifties onwards (specifically after his wife Phyllis' death), Astaire did find personal solace through continuing to practice his Episcopalian faith. This is well documented and shows a linkage between superior artistic skill, emotional loss and belief. He needed the spiritual to help him through the largest grief he had yet experienced. He also required the time to contemplate unfairness, not just in regards to the victim but also the survivor themselves. Suffering was a thing that did truly exist, but Astaire had to find reason to make it comprehensible. If he had known of Berkeley, he may have found that there is 'No Ideas perfectly void of all pain & uneasiness.' But Astaire sort to find his own future not purely by a reliance on theological suggestion. Even if his was an idiosyncratic nature that could, as Berkeley suggests, be an example of preordainment, he never strongly publicized deeply held beliefs and never spoke of any kind of spiritual epiphany either early or later in life. But the fact remains; Fred Astaire was transcendent through his divine motions – and so too in the gentle guise as Death's main aggressor.

More Excerpts Follow



**The Gentleman and the Demon:**

William Holden

‘The chief characteristic of the inner experience is not visible action, but *déchirement*, an inner suffering ... he actively chooses his sundering’

Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*

Out of all of the faces throughout *Inferno*, William Holden’s is the one where Georges Bataille’s *déchirement*, seems to effortlessly apply. It not only allows the viewer longer access to process the simulacra and its hidden worth, but it is of significance and death.

As his image fills the shots, it shows the nature of a man and, if one is inclined, the workings of fate. Memories die with the person, but once cremated onto Hollywood film, the visage becomes an unraveling of private tragedies, a string of visual patterns on the hard toil required to shape one’s life. If controlled by freeze frame, the face holds far more interest for 24 seconds than at 24 *frames* per second. It portrays the years

enchained by drink, tobacco and the regret of vasectomy. It continues with the breakup from his children and his wife, his lovers and the weight of conscience in having killed a stranger. Here, the thought that no worse can ever be brought upon one is cemented. It is an implosive element and it persists relentlessly, concluding only seven years after the *Inferno* shoot with his accidental death by "exsanguination" and "blunt laceration of scalp," alone in the bedroom of his apartment.

So does the viewer lose or gain value by watching such a thing? In Homer's *Odyssey*, Menelaus states "I please my heart with tears" and, even though *Inferno* is largely luminous with the beauty of life, it is also a reflection of the souls that have passed through, largely by concentrating on the limits of time.

Proust:

'... one can understand that the word 'death' should have no meaning for him; situated outside time, why should he fear his future?'

But Holden did fear the years ahead. Never free of the Dionysian (despite the Southern Californian light) his was the simple fact of a face caught by the lens 'a minute freed from the order of time'\* providing us with the clearest visions of the inescapable self. Subverting Proust, it is the remembrance of things to come.

To better understand, it is best to backtrack.

Jim Duncan (Holden) in *The Towering Inferno* shows the world a picture of a man unafraid of ambition. He uses free enterprise as a means towards greatness, knowing how to compete in the marketplace, expand his aims and overcome regulatory obstacles. Full of confidence, he is probably the most successful buildings contractor in San Francisco, maybe even throughout the entire west coast. Yet as the film progresses, Duncan becomes increasingly vulnerable by both his fight against the film's main

antagonist (the fire) and the power of the fourth natural element, and the true savior of all involved; the water from above.

William Holden knew that he would have to take on the physical demands within the climatic water tank scene, rather than hand them over to a stunt man. It was his contribution to the admirable work already performed by his colleagues (neither McQueen nor Newman had required body-doubles in their previous mid-shots). The other performers concerned were Jack Collins, Felton Perry, Gregory Sierra and Fred Astaire, each willing and able to test their fears before the camera. As the detonations begin and the water-cans are released, there is no denying the apprehension on their faces. All of these actors are subjected to something not usually captured in Hollywood movies: the appearance of vulnerability. However, if we take what we *know* – possibly more than what we *see* - then it is not illogical to interpret one specific moment that is alive with more complexity. It is found within a single shot of Holden as the character James Duncan.

Once the floods are unleashed, Duncan is as susceptible as every other male present. But in order to help his friend Mayor Bob Ramsay (Jack Collins), he has to release himself from the rope that is attached to a nearby pillar. Once free, he is stricken by the blast. His spine is hit with such force that he tries to gain balance by holding onto a balcony rail. He (not only Duncan, but now Holden) then raises a hand to his crown, looking as though he is counting the seconds before the camera is to be turned off.

It is hard to find evidence on how and why this shot came about. Irwin Allen or John Guillermin could have envisioned it in pre-production or raised it on the actual day of the shoot. If the directors' *were* the source, it is not unwise to believe that the seasoned actor would have held no aversions. But upon hearing Allen yell, "Cut!" Holden may have walked away with a self-deprecating laugh, bowing his head in his towel, both unsatisfied and possibly ashamed. This would be the correct way of registering what is in the frame. Neither Allen nor Guillermin would have suggested that it is an insight into Duncan's innermost realms (or that the power of the spray was as strong as the feelings that he held against himself for cutting financial corners). Depth was unnecessary.

However, here it is relevant to bring in Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the anxious or tormented individual. The philosopher's opinion was controversial, but not entirely free of rationality. In basic lexis, if the subject is bound by mental instability, then, in essence, they are more liberated from the constraints of the balanced thinker. Through this, the *choice* of ending one's life creates a freedom, allowing for self-infliction or a will that can easily volunteer for pain without argument. It is to also undergo an ordeal as the ultimate damning of one's most intimately held failures.

Under such an approach, it could be said that Jim Duncan (in his penultimate scene) finally accepts his immoral self and that due punishment, however tenuous, is welcomed (so we are already in the terrain of that which goes beyond the human eye). Unfortunately, by acknowledging this, it is also easy to come to the wrong conclusions. Yet what *does* appear through such a seemingly hypothetical dissection is that we may now no longer be speaking purely of Duncan the fictional character.

While the images of professional stunt men being washed across the floor increase the overall chaos of the scene, William Holden may himself have conjured up the idea, thinking that something extra would deviate from the cliché of having called in a substitute. Even though Fred Astaire, Jack Collins, Paul Newman and Steve McQueen were all exposed to the same water effects (and no one person was braver than the others), Holden may have believed that more should be shown. He was a natural exhibitionist, but there is something in those few seconds from 2.33.11 that indicates a second-self. The visible surface level of his *primary-self* (William Holden the famous figure) may have been deliberately set-aside. Even if he never steered away from enjoying his existence in travelling the world, staying in the finest hotels and knowing the most beautiful women in Hollywood, here was his chance for audiences to view their hero going through an ordeal that was, without doubt, an exercise in subversion.

If we do take deconstruction as a viable exercise, then we must ask ourselves if this is still too hollow. If viewing the shot on its own, it is difficult to attribute anything remotely substantial. To suggest that it portrays a man already aware of his nearness to death, and a chance to grasp what it may actually feel like to die, is overextending. But, as in each moment of life that goes unexamined, there is always room for investigation.

It is highly likely that Holden saw it as a visual key fit for his fictional character's story arc. Jim Duncan had lived his professional life without ignoring the devil's advice (at one point, Chamberlain's Roger Simmons correctly accuses him of accepting four other subcontractors, as well as himself, to shave off the Tower's expenses). And so Duncan's delinquencies are displayed, and we see a weak man under an admirable façade. Certainly, the character may have thought the force of the water was not enough; that he could take, or deserved, a harsher thrashing - but could this really pertain to Holden himself? The sight of the successful businessman Duncan means (for the spectator) a chance to see 'Bill' submit to torture and survive. Does this also show that the actor wanted to prove how his soul was stronger than others (and his enemies) were led to believe?

The aforementioned scene is not the only chance to see how low Jim Duncan can descend. Holden would share an earlier moment with Robert Vaughn as Senator Gary Parker, (at 1:10:41) where the two men hatch a plan to escape from the Promenade Room. Despite its short screen time, this provides a clearer assessment of the contractor's instinctive impulses. Unconcerned by social or group conscience, Duncan does not take long to accept Parker's suggestion as he takes him aside, away from the crowd, to voice his proposal. Here, Duncan is shown as a capitalist dependent on an equally mercenary mind, two individualists existing outside civic or ethical practice. It plays into our preconceptions of the elite and natural instincts for clandestine operations and ultimately, betrayal of others (together with self and human grace itself.)

Firstly, in order to kick open a locked south-exit doorway, they require the help of the Latino bartender Carlos (played by the aforementioned actor Gregory Sierra of Puerto Rican descent). Even if the non-WASP employee had no involvement in the covert idea and would probably be ordered not to follow them, he is still required as muscle. Here, Vaughn would have seen this as being so invisible, that it can never fully register to an apolitical audience (Godard would have made it a Marxist critique, illustrating how by coercing with the American ruling class, the low-paid foreign worker becomes infected by those who do not need his mind nor his soul.)

With Vaughn being a social democrat and Holden being a Republican on close terms with Reagan (Holden was best man at his wedding to Nancy Davis in 1952\*), the two actors would have smiled at the scenario. Each man respected the other, and each had their reasons for being political opposites, yet as gentlemen, they found similarities as participants in the phantasmagoria of show business. Vaughn has mentioned in a *Behind the Scenes* documentary on *Inferno* that it was fascinating for him to have his dressing room positioned opposite Holden's and to sit down, hearing the older actor's tales of Hollywood's Golden Age. It is also possible that Holden, a man of high personal standards, kept his own contradictory truths veiled. The demons would not be spoken of, even though their presence was a relentless aide-mémoire at failed promise.

‘While facing the camera he (the performer) knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has little contact with it as any article made in a factory ... The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the ‘spell of the personality,’ the phony spell of a commodity.’

Walter Benjamin

Holden's keenness in introducing himself to the relatives of his co-stars told us how much he savored human contact. In greeting them on the *Inferno* set with his customary charm, he was making a stand against the conditions that had reduced him to a mechanically reproduced ‘prop’ ‘... chosen for its characteristics and ... inserted in the proper place’ (Rudolph Arnheim). He understood, as Democritus knew, that the truth is in the depths and that in order to maintain his stability, he would have to work harder at detaching himself from what he had once so openly invited (fame). To turn the mediocrity of the *Inferno* script into a higher purpose would have been one minor goal in reversing such a process of alienation.

## Stephanie Powers

Famous for lightweight TV roles, critics have, maybe correctly, never taken those afraid of intensity seriously. But if the world is to be seen as it truly is, then irony, if replacing substance, lessens us all. This means that laughter, if coming from insult, is always inferior to the knowledge that the camera cannot capture.

In caring for Holden during the final decade of his life, Stephanie Powers proved to be the opposite of her superficial persona from *Hart to Hart*. But from 1972 to towards the end of his life, Powers grew to know the true measure of the man. Unfortunately, it proved to be a task beyond her, and the relationship broke down in incremental stages under the weight of exhaustion. Yet Holden believed that Powers was his most compatible life partner, and, to a large degree, she was. But to house a spirit that can bring so much damage (and destroy those closest to them) was a reminder of Aurelius, (to paraphrase) ‘that we degrade ourselves when we wear a mask and do or say something artificial or fake.’ This could easily have been written with Holden, and with Holden alone in mind. He *did* lower himself, and Powers like Audrey Hepburn and Capucine before her, was caught in his fiery storm.

And it is here that yet another concealed factor within *Inferno* becomes clearer.

As stated, the actor had already aged more than his years at the time of playing Jim Duncan. This may have alerted Powers to the transience of what she was emotionally attached to, and that to rely on Holden being a constant in her life was nothing but optimistic (there was also a twenty-four age difference between them). And so, upon hearing the news of his death on her car radio on November 12 1981, Stephanie Powers could have felt that the inevitable had naturally come to pass. Even if her reaction was automatic shock, her subconscious had probably already been reconciled to the fact; that his fate had played out as predicted. That she and Holden had actually been separated for some time would do little to dull the pain. Subsequently, the decision to continue driving to the studio to shoot *Hart To Hart* shows equal amounts of resilience and acceptance; but there was far more. As her co-star Robert Wagner said of that moment ‘there was much attendant guilt’.

Arriving dazed at the Universal lot, she immediately found support from the actor. Their friendship was a far cry from the showy (yet believable) frisson that made duped so many millions and made the TV show a hit. But like Robert Vaughn\* with the death of his father (also from alcoholism), it took its toll on the one who remained.

The triviality of her small-screen roles would never match the conscience she possessed. Holden must have recognized this, and blamed himself in the lone hours for exposing a soul so prone to defeat\*. Therefore, as throughout the buried messaging in *The Towering Inferno*, one dies and one lives. But as with the other performers, this comes with an extra weight. Coincidence within the hidden frame overshadows any human capacity to rationalize life's apparent randomness. How could it not - particularly when Robert Wagner would suffer the same onus less than two weeks later (upon the death of Natalie Wood)? Such shattering moments are where the camera and life come together in the darkest of marriages. So how can it possibly ever go unsaid that these sequences of grief do not fuel the film's true power?

*'What decisions I have made'* as well as *'I should always have done better'* were lines not from any movie, but ones that William Holden must certainly have voiced in his silent debates. It is not too unreasonable to even envision him arriving home to Powers and talking disparagingly of the *Inferno* script (records prove that he didn't like the screenplay). But the Stirling Silliphant text sometimes leaned in his favor. One deleted scene saved him from the cardboard cutout of Jim Duncan, portraying him as a character of hidden decency. Powers could have even seen the old pride shining through upon hearing of this, but then witness the man she so loved crumble once again when the footage was cut from the final print. It would have been yet another chance to show his ability to outperform the solid, yet workmanlike cast around him – and so allow his narcissism (that every actor needs) to help him through.

\* a special-guest-star in *The Girl from Uncle* in which Powers took the leading role.

In the removed scene, Dan Bigelow (Wagner) lets Duncan know that they still need the party to go ahead, despite the warnings. Both men are known to place money before ethics, and so, when faced with issues of public safety, they are accustomed to taking the wrong path. Individualist capitalism is all they know. In a way, this segment shows that Bigelow is therefore another architect of the disaster, making him equally blameworthy as Chamberlain's Roger Simmons. Yet Duncan questions Bigelow's view; and here we would have seen another level come to light. Holden's Jim Duncan was a man of humane principle after all, and the demon of selfishness, self-centeredness, or whatever we wish to call it, was rejected for goodness.

It was an opportunity for him to be the man he had always aimed to be.

More Excerpts Follow

\* It has been said that Wood was apparently jealous of her husband's romantic scenes with Stephanie Powers in *Hart To Hart*. In hindsight, Holden's jealousy towards Wagner is also likely.

**The Glass Inferno:**

From The Fountainhead to Masayuki Nagare



‘... the majority of Greek Philosophers, and most of all Aristotle, thought that all things had purposes built into them by nature – ends or goals which they could not but seek to fulfill.’

- Isaiah Berlin

*The Towering Inferno* is all about the spaces we occupy. For the first quarter of the movie, it is about the way people and interiors interplay; how we move, drink, converse, and dance within the hermetically sealed. It is also about how we have sex. The rest of the picture is how a building's linearity can become abstracted beyond use and understanding. Designed to maximize the visitor's experience, the inhabitants now have to confront a rejection of ergonomics, surviving within confinement or the exterior void (people crashing through windows into the night sky). The offices, lobbies, hotel rooms, staircases and corridors now transmogrify from places to non-places, denouncing the aesthetic of architectural beauty. In doing so, geometric compositions are remolded against all regularity and purpose. They invite danger.

The Promenade Room's calm décor is particularly subjected to this minefield. At the start of the movie, it could be set for anything from an anniversary banquet to a wedding breakfast, to a corporate function or a bar mitzvah. This means that we can see how distortion is foreseen within every piece of Perspex, wood, fiberglass and cardboard (again, simulacra playing tricks on our visual intelligence). It could even have been aware of Marx's line that capitalism is where 'all that is solid melts into air.'

Alberto Manguel in his essay *In Search of Libraries Past* states:

'the space often retains something like a shadow, a rustling, a whiff of what took place there ... It has a peculiar phantom quality, not so much that of a site abandoned as that of a site about to come into full existence.'

With this in mind, the Tower's 'full existence' only comes to pass once the fire begins. The flames are the content provider turning compositional balance into twisted opposition. Even Newman may recognize a staircase, but then pause, as his mind has to reformulate his very own creation. And so the odds are stacked against the victims. The building is no longer a playground for the rich, connected and beautiful of San Francisco. It becomes an assault course that many find unable to complete.

Brad Stevens in his *Sight and Sound* piece titled *The Comfort of Disaster (Movies)*:

'disaster always stood for those radical elements violently opposed to traditional (and implicitly privileged) lifestyles.'

So all that glitters is put under question. Reduced to cinder, we can see that that which was once so worshipped, could now be showing its true value. Maybe this is the work's most legitimate subtext. That only an anarchic force can reveal how empty

these fantasy domains really are, and that dereliction is the only way to get us back to a finer sense of perspective. As Graham Greene said ‘destruction is a form of creation’ and so we learn (yet again) that status and commodities are not where the truest of truths lie.

‘Venice’s reality as a city combines two extremes almost without transition: a glorious, unexampled, and shining creativity, and a history of sordid, labyrinthine corruption and profound degradation.’

#### Lord Byron’s trip to Venice

The above ‘corruption’ and ‘degradation’ could be suited to *Inferno*’s excessive wealth, (both materially and metaphysically). One may therefore ask ‘is it only capitalism’s worst elements that destroys the Tower?’ Surely there needs to be more involved.

It could be that it is simply nature’s cry (whether it be fire or water) that needs to be heard over the sound of the unethical. It could even be God against this second Tower of Babel (but the Tower was never constructed for various tongues, only the language of profit). Or could it merely be unregulated capitalists and their realization that such striving, without humility, is a cost too high. *Inferno* could indeed be a mixture of theological theory, ecological myth and, if Ayn Rand is to be implied, Objectivism. All are viable within the narrative.

That the main male antagonists are capitalists reaffirms a Marxist reading. It is about the owner’s reliance on skilled labor to execute his personal vision. He employs the wage earner to abandon all notions of self, in order to fulfill his own highest hopes. In Marx’s view, Richard Chamberlain’s Roger Simmons, Holden’s Jim Duncan and even Newman’s Doug Roberts are more inline with Ludwig Feuerbach’s opinion that man, not

God, is the only true author of the world's design. Ayn Rand would agree. Her "man exists for his own sake" means that there should only be one creator, and all that is possible stems purely from the individual. Alienation becomes the worker's norm, while control and power is blessed upon the possessor. But if God's anger is aimed at the edifice, then so too is heaven's command of nature in equal measure. According to Judeo-Christian view, all living things come from the law of God (in this, nature may indeed have the best architecture as it is shaped by God's hands). The Tower's earthly fire and its savior in water are therefore due to His providence. But neither Rand nor Marx would have entertained any such notion. Philosophically polar opposites, they would remain equally steadfast that the Divine had no part in the conversation.

It was man. And only he (the masculine, not feminine) was to blame. And so the male hand as creator, thinker and financier, is the bringer of the cruelest destinies.

During the shoot of 1974, another male hand was present. As previously stated, when kept within the limits of the film itself, *Inferno* shows only a shadowed portrait of reality. Once out of the frame, this cinematic imagery becomes secondary to authenticity. We find these elements hard to digest, as we no longer feel safe considering them. They can bleed into our subconscious, and so place fear within us, as we cannot register how the movie and actual life events can be so entwined. This goes for the said participator involved.

### **The Banker's Heart**

Made from 200 tons of black granite, the modernist sculptor Masayuki Nagare's piece *Transcendence* commissioned in 1969 by the A.P. Giannini Plaza at 555 California Street is shown in ground-level exterior shots in *The Towering Inferno* (as Senator Gary Parker played by Robert Vaughn, walks towards the Tower's entrance). The object represents the artist's signatory style *warehada* (where the skin is cut or cracked open). Known to locals as *The Banker's Heart*, a label coined by the San Francisco Chronicle

columnist Herb Caen, *Transcendence* was a forerunner to the more famous *Cloud Fortress*, a work that possesses meaning far wider than envisioned at its conception. Also known as *The World Trade Center Plaza Sculpture*, it is equally austere, exposing a wound as a need to recall that that has forever gone. Polished on its surface yet coarse within, it was located between buildings Four and Five of the Twin Towers, and demolished by New York City emergency services days after the 2001 attacks. This was done in order to gain better access to the site.

It may be implied that the artist's hand in both *Inferno* and its true-life equivalent thus blurs the line in how we perceive such metaphors as information. When asked in 2007 what his thoughts were of his relation to 9/11, Nagare said " ... the sculpture has itself turned into memory now." The artist would never be asked the same of the movie\*, because it is mere entertainment. Therefore, Nagare correctly places the sculpture as a more serious element of factual existence (above the film) and will not concede to the idea of *The Towering Inferno* openly inviting such 'events to come'.

Yet it could still be said that the once indestructible *Cloud Fortress* saw the change of time between its completion in 1975 (just one year after the release of *Inferno*) and September 2001 and, in witnessing the carnage, was denied its own future. The unequivocal facts are there; it was dismantled in order for the very first steps towards humanity to begin (as it only served to be in the way of the common good.) In other words, it had no practical reason to exist. It was purely a superficial element and one that a higher morality could not help but destroy.

And the word 'superficial' is very important here.

If Irwin Allen's desire were to make art, like Nagare, it would be anathema to the popular classes. It would also fail in distracting us from our many nightmares. In a way, the product is what capitalist success should look like. Yet it can never be just a work of industrialized commercial art. Its extraneous narratives are born purely from its lack of self-knowledge (a knowledge that would only be added through time.) Undoubtedly, a wry celebration of all that is safe and glamorous, it is also a slyly (almost unnoticeable)

damning representation on capitalist practice in the late twentieth century, and how corporate powers can easily slide into heinous decisions without conscience.

The fact that the building is a colossus toppled by its very excess neatly shows how easily capitalism relies on the ruin and loss in order to find reasons for re-construction. Jobs are created and everyone is satisfied that renewal (and money) is once again life's driving force. Richard Chamberlain's character could therefore be seen as a hero (he destroys in order for future profits to grow). It is a rational game of 'everyone wins,' until the death toll mounts in the heads of those with Randian moral certainty.

\* Notes

In this regard alone, the movie has outlasted it. *The Towering Inferno* can still be viewed in its ideal state (as cinema) but *Cloud Fortress* now only exists in reproduced imagery. There has never been any need to rescind 'the film' in order to regain some kind of normality after calamity. Consequently, the movie itself can be seen as a positive, whereas *Fortress* (note the name) possesses only negative connotations as the object's eventual end came via catastrophe. Nagare's ethos that he is "always trying to represent in three dimensions something that exists only in human memory" becomes inexplicably tied to all our recollections, yet *The Towering Inferno* cannot *only* be as reminiscence. Within seconds it can be streamed online and so it is just as 'alive' as when it was premiered. It is still a useful entity, but only so much as it is there to capture and entertain.

More Excerpts Follow



**Patterns of Loss:**

Paul Newman, Jennifer Jones, Robert Wagner

‘For Death must be somewhere in a society; it is no longer (or less intensely) in religion, it must be elsewhere; perhaps in this image which produces Death while trying to preserve life’

Roland Barthes

The film (*Inferno*) doesn’t have the strength of character to follow through and present itself as a meditation on arbitrary, horrible, unpredictable death.

[antagonyecstasy.com](http://antagonyecstasy.com)

Firstly, the latter statement is inaccurate. Many, like the online reviewer can easily condemn *The Towering Inferno* for being graceless in the worst possible sense. But this would be saying it stands only as an untrue piece of cinema. Yes, the crass approach to pondering human mortality is where it finds its strength (and many weaknesses) to entertain, but as aforementioned, it’s millions of photographed single frames forming life as we recognize it, also convinces due to its connectivity to fact.

We could cite the fact of the veteran actor Norman Burton (the fictional fires very first victim) being killed in a car crash in 2003, only days away from his seventieth birthday. But this is definitely too forced. Every film ever made will have this shadowed aspect. However, when dramatic death occurs to the young, when time should be forcing them forward, we are naturally drawn to questions such as ‘what circumstances led to this tragedy?’ *The Towering Inferno* does not hold any answers in of itself, but it does give clues as to where we should be looking.

And yet this raises yet another question – Should we actually damn this movie (and this very writer) for relentlessly dredging up the morbid? Even if such funerary elements are within *Inferno*, is it still proper to probe the unnatural passing of others, just because they are involved by way of coincidence to this silly work. But if we view the histories of Scott Newman, Mary Jennifer Selznick and Natalie Wood (and that of their families), we can clearly see where the links appear and how the experience of watching *Inferno* can be infused with a greater emotional charge.

Maybe it is because we need to hear of others who have had to confront the awful, and hope that if we were placed in similar situations then we could cope just as well. We also dread the opposite; that we could fall apart, just as they once surely did. And so we need to know how others dealt with the horrendous, and maybe learn something in the process. But we must remember that with Scott Newman, Mary Jennifer Selznick and Natalie Wood - we are also star-struck. Our relationship with them is sprinkled with detachment, so we can easily deal with knowing of their plights - at a safe distance.

And here is yet another level.

That these people ‘went before us’ means that we have the inclination to smile inwardly, as we can now see how they, those born into or coupled to ‘superhumans’, actually had less than our more common selves. The children Mary Jennifer and Scott (of Paul Newman and Jennifer Jones respectively) and Natalie Wood (the wife of Robert Wagner) moved on, while we continue at our smaller, slower, less celebrated paces. And so, in many ways, we win (if *schadenfreude* is viewed as a natural component of the human condition). Consequently, we sit watching them over and over again measuring one’s own life’s fortunes against those who once ascended so highly. It is here that *Inferno* becomes the gratification that comes from turning towards the most unsettling of actualities. It is also where fiction uncovers wider human truths that we learn more of what it is *to be*.

The following individuals were all taken far too early. If another way of detailing with their specific biographies were possible (without relating them to *The Towering Inferno*), they would have been chosen. But *Inferno*'s sheer mass of information proves that it stands as the only way to examine the dreadful.



Robert Wagner, Irwin Allen and Natalie Wood on the *Inferno* set

**Robert Wagner:**

**(Natalie Wood – Absence as the Salient Element)**

If there were ever such a thing as bewitchment, then it would likely have been found in Natalie Wood's gaze. For the male voyeur, she was a dream, where the subconscious cannot help but create fantasies, some certainly unchained from decent thought. But this craving was different to what men had towards Marilyn Monroe. Monroe was the exaggeration of sexuality thereby unapproachable. Wood could be the girlfriend, the domesticated wife and the harlot; it was a multiple dynamic that could pass for normality and yet be terrifying at the same time. This was where she found her true command.

Maybe it was this particular attribute that made her survive within the man-made circus (Irwin's style was often compared to P.T Barnum). In their view she was 'availability' through her roles of Maria in *West Side Story* (1961) and as Gypsy Rose Lee; capable of anything so long as it was to tease and then deliver. Yet this gorgeousness hid a resilience that was both admired and feared. The insightful could see the more negative elements buried behind those eyes and *shen* appeal – and so this raises the question; was she really only there to satisfy our sensual imaginings?

She seemed able to constantly shake off the industry's relentless demands and compromises in order to maintain her sanity. Her choice of appearing in the made-for-television *The Cracker Factory* (1979) proves her interest in serious matters, showing that Wood had faultless intuition when it came to representing one woman's desperate search for that most personal and valuable of conquests; stability of mind. The story concerns a housewife suffering from alcoholism and her eventual recovery within a well-operated treatment center. Her portrayal was laudable, reminding us that her previous parts in *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) and *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969) only hinted at larger possibilities. However, she, like Newman and Holden, would make some less than astute choices. *Meteor* (released the same year as *The Cracker Factory*) was an apocalyptic drama that failed to gain the acclaim or popularity of *Inferno*, despite its impressive cast. This is interesting, as Wood may have seen something back in *Inferno* that she had regretted not signing up for. *Meteor* was her chance to rectify the previous and also an opportunity to adopt a Russian accent (unfortunately without losing her Californian twang). Maybe this was a homecoming of

sorts, a chance to act with the caliber of Sean Connery, Karl Malden, Martin Landau and Henry Fonda while presenting a fictionalized woman born in the same country as that of her parents.

The turn of the century Russian/Ukrainian immigrant predilection for suspicion, solemnity and superstition would have established darkened shadows on the sensitive American child. It would provide a thread that would run throughout her entire life, consisting of disparities unwilling to be amalgamated: mostly the safety of home and community against the fear of the other and outsider. However, her inquisitiveness would make sure that all contradictions would never go unnoticed. She was an artist as well as a lifelong devotee of Russian orthodoxy, and so more able than many to see what stood around her. After all, she was a paradox herself: dating the (supposedly) bisexual and drug addicted Nicholas Ray and the equally anti-bourgeois Dennis Hopper, but to then go on and choose Robert Wagner as her husband (twice over).

She was persuaded to aim high by her domineering mother, whose wish for her middle daughter was for fame via the stage, and more importantly, an elevation to the silver screen; the epitome of American success to the immigrant eye. Therefore, in regard to this examination of lives attached to *The Towering Inferno*, she is what can be termed as the fingerprints in the painting. The film's main appeal lies in such components, and the details of Natalie Wood's manifestation show a cruelty once the surface is eroded. Unfortunately, this enhances the work's true authentic clout.

In February of 2018, global news channels were yet again full of the *Splendor* incident. New credible witnesses were supposedly now found, eager to come forward and release years of silence. Such an attempt at re-writing history or cementing the truth were, as always, exercises in futility. The facts will always remain indeterminable. It is also where the ceaseless sway of this particular tragedy lies.

In the photos published from her funeral, Wagner's demeanor discloses very little. There seems to be a contentious element, as though some mourners question his 'actorly' presence (because we are so accustomed to his languid onscreen nature), as it appears to negate the authentic. Through this, a divide between how they see *their* loss and how they view Wagner is constructed. In their eyes, simplified replies from substantial questions are insufficient, as much as his preferred opting for the silent gesture. TV news footage and a few black and white stills at the cemetery are all we have to go on – but the sheer fact that it is only *these* images in the public domain means that we have no alternative, and so our interpretations are limited. We can only examine the evidence that we see; we cannot view the other photos of Natalie's family and friends reaching out, their hands giving him reassurance and comfort. In this regard, a second, unseen version may exist (like *Inferno*) one that shows another narrative, broadening what we can believe to be true.

It may be interesting to note that Fred Astaire was among the small, though select Hollywood community who attended the funeral. So the gentle genius, possibly the most non-violent male ever presented on screen, was together again with Robert J. Wagner six years after *Inferno's* release. Even though they never shared a single scene together, they had shared TV moments as father and son in *It Takes a Thief* (1968 – 1970) and had been good friends for many years (Wagner always saw Astaire as the personification of the Hollywood ideal ever since seeing the older actor playing golf while Wagner was still an aspiring actor.)

In a way, Astaire was as in the simulacrum, Wagner's 'parent' once again but this time in close proximity to his son's controversy. In that fall of 1981, the *Hart to Hart* actor would have recognized this at the time and possibly, even sensed the disappointment from his paternal mentor. More than likely, Wagner was the only darkened spirit that Astaire had nurtured. But the veteran actor's support remained strong, showing no doubt in his junior's testaments and suffering.

In his autobiography, *Pieces of My Heart*, Wagner writes:

Nine days after Natalie died, I went back to work on *Hart to Hart*. I had lost ten pounds and most of my emotional equilibrium. Stefanie Powers was in only marginally better shape than I was, (*author's note: as she was mourning the death of Bill Holden*) but she shepherded me through it. She never let me out of her sight, and if I blew my lines or got upset, she smoothed everything over. On December 12, the police concluded that Natalie's death was a tragic accident, and the case was closed.

Wagner then goes on to say how the LA celebrity coroner of the time, Thomas Noguchi, had been making speculative assumptions (as he had done over the death of Holden). But the events surrounding William Holden's death did not possess the same unfortunate connection to the hotheadedness and self-satisfied manners that so many found off-putting in Wagner. Therefore, we may look at the backs of the heads of the mourners and think that they appear aloof, judgmental or even, perhaps, disdainful.

Is this because we read too much into it?

Maybe his detractors would say that, like O.J. Simpson, he was a mediocre actor, but at her funeral he showed magnificence. One may therefore jump to incorrect assumptions. Nietzschean ideas of an older outmoded morality where power, dominance and narcissism, (but also self-destruction) are the core facets, may be labeled against him. But many would be accurate in assuming that the echoes of Wood pervaded his better conscience, and if not, (let us say if the transition to normal life was as easy as his public persona exhibited) then Wagner is a far more complex and dangerous man. The maxim that 'some things that don't speak say everything' may be a generality and yet we cannot ignore such a phrase when it is heard from such a large a chorus of censure. Self-absorption and lack of curiosity stunts a career. Maybe Robert Wagner was more interested in the attributing benefits than the work itself: the women, the money and the sparkle - to escape answerability.

Once agent to Robert Redford, Richard Gregson (Wood's second husband and father to their only child Natasha) described his first meeting with Wagner after the actress' death in his 2012 book *Behind the Screen Door: Tales from the Hollywood Hills*. He remembers Wagner as having a face 'ravaged by grief' and that 'like the decent man he was, he felt a terrible accountability'. There is no logical reason to doubt the impression



that Wagner made. Both men had given their lives to be with Wood, Wagner even returning for re-marriage. To picture the two men alone, in private, trying to understand their loss appeared like a denouement from classic tragedy. Of course, there would have been things left unsaid lingering in the air, but as Gregson saw it that day, Wagner was a soul burdened with immense self-loathing. This, he has made known many times since.

But it is more curious to see how the mediocrity captured in 1974 makes his post *Inferno* multi-dimensional. In Allen's disaster piece, we notice his familiar hammy expressions

and hear his dulcet tone fully knowing that to reward the banalized with our time is to our own cost. But, we may scrutinize it nonetheless, due to its very lack of credibility.

Throughout his lengthy career, the actor was never a man with a reputation for excellence. Unlike his contemporaries, such as James Dean, Robert Duvall and Gene Hackman (all born in the same year as Wagner), he never had anything at stake with each new performance. In more recent times, Kevin Spacey may have believed (and led others) to see greatness when it was only infrequent, but Wagner never even had that choice.

Robert Vaughn's autobiography tells of their meeting in 2006 while they were appearing in the crime drama show *Hustle* for BBC television. The episode was mostly shot on location in Marina Del Ray, near to where *Splendor* was anchored on the night of Wood's death. Robert Vaughn is gentle on the subject giving Wagner the benefit of graceful silence. Wagner and Vaughn had both been her lovers, and both knew of her phobia of "dark waters". A harbinger some may say, and it would not be too strange to ponder over the fact of her using such words, heedless of their furtive power.

And so the pattern within *Inferno* increases.



Paul Newman:

(Scott Newman - Son of Hollywood)

Martin Heidegger believed that the death of others was more painful due to the signification of absence, which is where the greatest suffering lies. He saw others' passings as "penetrating" in their utter invasion of the living person's soul. It is also because it is where the force of its negative power awakes us to our own inevitable journey towards the end of life. As we never experience the aftereffects of our own deaths, the one's left-behind are therefore caught between two systems of grief: the loss of a loved one, and the equally devastating realization of its shadow over our own mortality. It makes our own time speed up, and even if we become wiser to the inevitable, we still have to deal with the memory of those who have already departed.

At the very start of *The Towering Inferno*, Paul Newman and William Holden share a scene in an elevator. This is the first dialogue within the movie and it is a mediocre exposition to the characters identities and where the story is heading. It is also where Newman's aforementioned coolness comes across as insouciance. Watching the two-hander unfold, it is as though he has given up acting and the man can no longer be bothered. Holden is more professional. Newman's senior by twelve years, he had seen a death that he himself had created. Newman would see the passing of his troubled son in a few years time and, like Holden, take his own share of the blame. The difference between the two is visible. Holden shows the weight of life experience that Newman can only feign. This is Heidegger territory.

The actors would join again in the atrocious Irwin Allen produced *When Time Ran Out* (1980). Nothing in the public domain is known of what the men said to one another on set, but Holden would have recognized a changed spirit within his co-star. Still amiable and fun loving while on location and in the studio, Newman, since playing opposite Holden in *Inferno*, had lost a child and the newfound agony, although often hidden, was noticeable to similar holders of shame and guilt.

Appearing in an Irwin Allen movie would be safely distanced from any soul-searching terrain, but how could Newman not catch reminders of his son during those painful moments in *The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet 1982)? Indeed, from that year on, right up until his final feature, Newman would project a very different persona on screen.

Before Scott Newman's death at just twenty-eight, Paul Newman could navigate all that handsomeness brings with an air of casualness. There were never any outward signs of vanity, as even when young, the preppy actor recognized that such aesthetics often produced states of animosity from others. Not just because of the envy it can bring out in heterosexual men, but due to the submerged fear of wanting to look at the face and never get bored. With Newman, it was always how physical majesty could inflict more unease than comfort. Owning features not as primal as Brando's or as androgynous as Dean's, Paul Newman was always the *safe* American Adonis, but never a blank beauty. His intelligence saved him from this. He also knew that good looks lead to a confidence that is unearned.

How Scott Newman lived around his father's appearance in the home, on the billboard, in the magazines and on the TV is therefore open to debate. As spectators, fans and film critics, we will never know the complexities of these private existences. We do however know that the life choices made possible through beauty, power and money can multiply extremes and the dangers they can invite. Paul Newman knew more than many, that in the majority of cases when success touches a parent, it is the child who suffers the most.

Scott's billing in *The Towering Inferno*'s closing credits as the 'Young Fireman', was a testimonial embarrassment to himself and no doubt, to his father. The elder Newman had encouraged the boy to grab the potentials on offer, and, like the good father that he was, became concerned when the younger actor never seemed to find his footing. Firstly, he did not possess his father's drive, but it was also much more obvious to any eye upon seeing the young hopeful walk into a room or onto a soundstage. Although handsome as a teenager, he could never adopt the aura that his father maintained outright. Scott was an ordinary kid, just like hundreds of others around him in High School, the burger bar, the sports stadium and even Prep School. He did not, and could never replicate his father's control and finesse.

To give his son an opportunity to break into the movies, Newman, the ultimate insider, got him work on various Hollywood projects. But Scott's self reliance was as important to him as his aims to stand apart from his father. He opposed any coaching from

Newman, believing that he could climb the summit on his own worth. As with any child and parent who share the same profession, the offspring needs to break away from the elder's style and that formerly used pathway to success. But it is still a constant rivalry for power, no matter how much the roads may differ.

Consequently, the only way to outshine the model of exceptionalism at home was to either abandon all similar ambitions, or, if the flawlessness was too indomitable (and it was), then to choose the opposite direction. To someone still developing, this would allow total freedom from the family spell. The consequences proved modest, but it was a step he was willing to take.

Either through bravery or an obsession entrenched through fear (of all that was around him), he found success could be achieved through stunt work. That his most famous film (*Inferno*) was where he played a man suffering from the dread of heights is ironic, as Scott's particular liking of parachute jumping and high-rise feats kept him in paid employment for several years. Yet once his efforts were showing little to no returns, a reliance on alcohol and drugs became a regular necessity, and the highly qualified, professional thrills of confronting near death experiences gradually began to fade. Newman, like any parent, had not sought anything from his son, apart from the natural need for respect, and the son had desires for the same in return. But as ever, the more the parent succeeded, the more the son's own failures were emphasized. The condensed Wikipedia rundown of his life reads of the many unfortunate circumstances (some stated, others understandably unknown outside of the family) that would multiply both his legitimate and imaginary neuroses of inadequacy.

The following is taken from his Wikipedia page, as of Aug 2020:

‘(Scott) Newman later played an acrophobic firefighter in *The Towering Inferno*, in which his father co-starred. Although they had no dialogue together because Scott's scenes were with Steve McQueen, both Newman's can be seen in the film's finale. Paul's character is on the steps with Faye Dunaway, while Scott is one of

the two firemen carrying a man on a stretcher down the plaza steps to California Street at the Bank of America building in San Francisco.’

This is the only piece of Hollywood celluloid where father and son are in the same shot.

And it lasts only a few seconds.

Of all the movies Paul Newman starred in, why is *The Towering Inferno* the only one where he can see himself, and his child, both participating in the joy that comes from being admired and possibly adored? And why – and this is not a hypothetical question – does it hit a more powerful note when it is an image of grand scale human sadness? So what would Paul Newman have thought when revisiting it after Scott’s death? Could he even watch it? He had always regarded the entire movie as junk, but would he notice, if he were using his honesty, that the fictional tragedy on the screen was the most relevant representation of their times together; him taking center stage while his son is reduced to the background?

The fact of Scott Newman’s untimely death on November 20 1978 at the age of twenty-eight is what broke the enviable picture of Newman, the star. Caused by an accidental overdose of alcohol and narcotics, he never had the chance to age, therefore reflect on his accomplishments, however minor, when placed against his father. To Scott, low sense of worth matched with self-hatred was a life force. For Paul, the death of his only son (from his first wife Jackie Witte) proved to be a kind of death in itself. It could not be any other way.

But for the sake of this exercise, let us say that Newman may have returned to the aforementioned scene. If his strength could master it, he could see that it provided an image of that which is both present and absent.

Barthes:

‘... the (fictional) cinema combines two poses; the actor’s ‘this-has-been’ and the role’s, so that I can never see or see again in a film certain actors whom I know to be dead without a kind of melancholy; the melancholy of Photography itself.’

And:

‘I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.’

Finally:

‘I shudder ... over a catastrophe which has already occurred.’

How telling then, that the senior had always radiated the dazzling epitome of male beauty, yet the child (who so wanted the same blue eyes) was the one who remained in (as Barthes would say) ‘the reality of the past’, where the image of youth is fixed with nothing to counteract it (not like photos of Paul Newman in his later, aged years).

The temporary loss of selfhood and the associated complexities that can beset a parent is so common, that to ponder over Newman’s specific sadness will not provide any new revelations. But let us just ponder on this; Scott’s biggest moment in *The Towering Inferno* is with Harlee Claiborne (Fred Astaire) during the final five minutes of the movie. He has to subtly deliver the fact that Lisolette Mueller (Jennifer Jones, and Claiborne’s love interest) has been killed. So here was Newman’s colleague (Astaire)

receiving the news of death, given by a man of then only twenty-four, who would take his own life in just a few years time. The fact that Harlee Claiborne was supposed to be Astaire's then age (seventy-five) meant that the older actor would see another thirteen years of life (he died at eighty-eight) while Scott, only survived for a further four. In total, Astaire would have had sixty more years when compared to the boy. More vitally, Newman would spend thirty years of his life without his son.

Milo O'Shea (his co-star in *The Verdict*):

“He personally has been through a great deal. Losing his son was a terrible blow both to him and Joanne. You can't push that off, not when you have a great wound like that. It has had a great effect on his work and his life. He really is feeling his way into a deeper part of himself, to a layer that has never been exposed before”.

(extract taken from biography on *Newman – A Life*, by Shawn Levy)

This 'layer' cannot be brought to light without catastrophe. In a way, Newman was given a new dimension, a tragic level that was necessary to become the actor he had always aspired to be. But it could never have been a price he had wanted to pay. Yet he adapted, finally awakened to the fact that the authentic life can never be absent of pain.

‘If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life – and only then will I be free to become myself’

Heidegger



**Jennifer Jones:**

(Mary Jennifer Selznick – The Reactionary Nature)

Harlee Claiborne : Do you, er, do you believe in destiny?

Lisolette Mueller: (grins) I believe in all good things.

Like Scott Newman, Jennifer Jones' daughter Mary Jennifer would also skip the genetic jackpot embodied by her mother. Growing into an attractive, but less than stunning young woman, she was nevertheless plain in Hollywood terms. She did not possess that mostly unspoken physical trait that anyone who knows a star can understand; that her/his features are often unsettling once away from the camera, yet such proportions fall into place when before the lens (even the word 'photogenic' may mean that the genes are purely there to be photographed, and that that is their only reason to exist). Accordingly, these movie stars do not have the ability of becoming more attractive through their physical presence, as they are only alluring in two dimensions. The scent of a human, the fact of there being life under the flesh, these are denied whilst on screen. The actor also reaffirms their glamour by a writer's crafted words, a lighting technician's brilliance and ultimately, above all else, a director's orders. And so, the actor who appears as though perfection can be personified may be a disappointment once met outside of the frame.

As with the Newman's, Mary Jennifer had to co-habit with this luminosity. The added trouble was that her mother Jennifer Jones did not disappoint when in person. This may, or may not be, further proof that beauty can ruin the many caught in its sphere. But it definitely does belong within the tree of multiple complex factors that spread throughout their particular lives.

Jennifer Jones as Lisolette Mueller in *The Towering Inferno* presents us with a modest, satisfactory performance. Her role is really only there to include a female character of a certain age, who espouses decency, maternal warmth and courage. But her part should have no relevance to the events of May 11 1976; the day her only daughter jumped to her death from the rooftop of a twenty-two storied building. However, it is here that what

should be inappropriate on the grounds of good sense and reason, is where the most interest lies.

Primarily, we can never truly say that Mary had taken her mother's fictional role in *Inferno* as an example of the kind of madness that she herself savored. Maybe those few seconds of screen time had not even registered to a girl always impelled towards daring antics, especially when it involved dangerous heights. And so, if this is the case, then Mary Jennifer's suicide should have no place in such a commonplace movie. If anything, it should be placed within documentary. To include her within the film's deconstruction would only be valid if her mother's role is often referenced. Regrettably, it is.

Jean Baudrillard once spoke of "art totally penetrating reality", a total semblance, where the factual and the fictional collide in the universal simulacrum. Unfortunately, if we are using *Inferno* as the example of a correlation, then this *is* how Jennifer Jones and her late daughter's histories will always mesh. They cannot be purely appraised by the benign incidents of life, as they only stand connected by a comparison that is violent. Like O.J. Simpson in a later chapter, it is with some, that the horrifying is unable to avoid.

We know that escapism purges us from our own fears. The relief in seeing someone else fall to their deaths is primal. They went before us. We are still here. Yet when Lisolette (Jones) plummets backwards from the glass elevator, her death resonates with all of us who feel uneasy with saturnine theory and twisted coincidence. It is made all the more unnerving as she is protecting a child just before she falls. She hands the youngster to the only male present (a fireman) as her body is thrown outwards. How can this moment not infer the psycho-emotional battle that has been made so public on her and her daughter's relationship?

'The sins of the mother' is too cruel a saying. But what took the child towards the brink of suicide on so many occasions – and finally make that decisive action at the age of just twenty-one? An act that was so similar to the very specific death that millions had seen her very mother suffer only less than two years before.

In Jean Stein's superb account of Hollywood *West of Eden – An American Place* (2016) a meticulously researched chapter is given to Jennifer Jones. It reads as an unremitting narrative of dysfunction and despair, of life crashing against the unrealistic expectations that Beverly Hills demands. The statements from Jones' son Robert Walker Jnr in particular give the reader the most authenticated evidence available.

There is no better place on which to start.

Born in Tulsa in 1919 as Phylis Isley, to parents who worked in the circus and movie theater trade, Jennifer Jones naturally gravitated towards performance. Her first husband Robert Walker (Snr) was, like her, a sensitive kid, full of angst, vulnerable but impetuous; contradictions that she could understand. They married in New York as teenagers, both studying at the American Academy of Dramatic Art. His talent for acting was more obvious, but his various neuroses such as feelings of ineptitude and hopelessness prevented him from a long career. Their first child Robert Walker Jnr was born in 1940, while their second Michael, came eleven months later. Michael would also suffer from mental health issues, and like his father, was too sensitive to the world, a born sufferer, but the possessor of a generous heart.

Jones and Walker swiftly moved to California where she was immediately signed to David O' Selznick. Robert's boy-next-door charisma also made the transition from stage to film quick and easy. They appeared on screen together only once in *Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell, 1944) where they epitomized naivety and innocence, seeing no need to elevate the scripts anodyne quality. Lines such as "Gee – I'm sorry" and "he doesn't scare me, not any more", was dialogue aimed at the home-front masses of '44. Yet they adhered to the rules, staying true to the material as though they knew nothing else. In a way, it appears to have been born with them. They replicated the style of their co-star Shirley Temple (another natural for insipid material but performed with such a sparkling high ability, that it cannot go unrecognized as excellence). With the almost constant aid of Max Steiner's treacle soaked Oscar winning score, it was rightwing story-making at its finest; it could even be played as a double bill with a Tom and Jerry cartoon and the two would appear perfectly aligned. As with *Inferno*, the movie was saccharine in places, but did hold unseen hauntings - as their marriage was fracturing at the time.

After divorcing Walker, she found comfort and guidance in Selznick. He proved to show understanding of her shame in having experienced a parochial upbringing, and confident that she could be transformed. Although having dated him since the filming of *Since You Went Away*, they did not marry until five years later in 1949. Walker, unable to battle with alcoholism, died at the age of thirty-two in 1951. The cause was accidental death while intoxicated, having allowed sodium amytal to be injected into his system as a mild tranquilizer by his therapist.

Now living a grander lifestyle with Selznick and her two sons, Jones continued to suffer anxieties, often based around paranoia and low self esteem (she hated having her photograph taken). Believed to have had two miscarriages before Mary Jennifer was born in 1954, she took to a private chaos, distancing others and causing rifts within the marriage and disconnects with her children, especially her daughter:

I'd never seen anybody fight with their mother the way they did. Mary Jennifer would disappear into her room with claw marks on her from Jennifer. And big Jennifer often wouldn't come to dinner because she had battle scars. I mean, they were at each other physically. I never saw it happening, I just saw the aftermath. I'd sit in Mary Jennifer's room waiting for her to come back from her mother's room. She'd come back out, and her hair would be all disheveled, and then we wouldn't see Jennifer for dinner, they'd arrive, and she wouldn't come out.

Fabienne Guerin (*West of Eden*)

Jones had also found it hard to deal with her deeply troubled second son, Michael. As his brother revealed in Jean Stein's book: "(Michael had) major problems that prevented from functioning as a human being".\* From taking on numerous stints in lowly employment, to attempting AA and trying to curb his habit of three to four packs of cigarettes a day, he failed at all he put his efforts into. With a mind too individual to survive the conformity around him, he only found solace in aloneness. He died of a heart

attack in 2007, two years before Jennifer's own passing at ninety (not ninety-one as Wikipedia suggests). Due to her dementia, she wasn't aware of his later illnesses of enthesyema and acute osteoporosis.

After Selznick died in 1965, many thought Jennifer would be unable to deal with the loss. The reality is that she was traumatized from the break up of an ongoing affair with her married therapist Fig Newton. This led her to a much publicized suicide attempt in 1967.

Her final marriage to industrialist, philanthropist (and Republican) Norton Winfred Smith was where she eventually found the peace she needed (he also loaned his modern art collection for the *Inferno* interior sets). Maybe the facts of Smith's own son having committed suicide back in 1969 led the two of them closer after the loss of Mary Jennifer in 1976. Smith had already accepted that a part of him was forever broken, and that he would aid Jennifer as she steered the same course. From mother to mourner is not rare, but for someone like Jones, reality was often too hard a burden to consider.

Like her mother as a young starlet, Mary Jennifer Selznick had the constant sense of inadequacy within Hollywood's upper circles. Although unlike Jennifer, she had a reactionary nature that was more than just predictable rebellion. Destructive tendencies towards objects, matched with a lackluster approach to her wellbeing were becoming more noticeable to family and friends. The few who knew Mary as a teenager believed she was bipolar. Yet it was also as though she had chosen a volatile existence on purpose, and, often as with her mother in her own worst episodes, saw inner discord as a natural state of being. Berkeley said, '*No agent can be conceiv'd indifferent as to pain or pleasure*' but Mary Jennifer was born of Jones. They breathed the same breath. Therefore, the child's desire to be reckless was cause for further alarm after admitting to thoughts of taking her own life (like her mother when she was hauled from the ocean at Malibu Beach Cove in '67). The fact that Mary Jennifer appeared casual of her allusion was shocking to most, but within time became a standard acknowledgment of the inevitable.

‘Art imitates life’ is a well-known maxim. Yet in reality, life-imitating art is a far more expected occurrence. Maybe this is because the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the first time in history that the human race could see their truest selves emulated on a screen. To not be seduced or even influenced by the words and images during Hollywood’s first eighty plus years was nigh impossible. Audiences took in the information like a dream, as emotion overpowered intellect and the feel and appearance of illusion told us how we should be (if we wanted to exist better than we were). It also showed more than we would like to admit. For many, it was and will always be too hard to handle. And so we cover our eyes in fear.

For those whose lives were based solely on keeping up this magic, it proved nothing but injurious. Purely copying the make-believe is in opposition to all that truly matters (or all that makes life worth living). Accordingly, before we examine the awful facts of a mother and progeny within this vortex (and it *is* a vortex), it is worthwhile looking at how Jennifer Jones and the previous actor in this chapter shared a scene that, as already said, ‘told us more than we would like to address’.

It is the most fitting way of introducing comparisons within *The Towering Inferno*, before excavating the specifics of the Jennifer Jones and her daughter, Mary Jennifer.

### **The Towering Inferno and The Stairwell Scene**

In the series of shots that are commonly known as The Stairwell Scene, Jennifer Jones, Paul Newman and the two children played by Mike Lookinland and Carlene Gower manage to hold our attentions no matter on how many times we have view the segment. All four performers were working at their very best here, and we can even become, dare one say, entranced. For example, to look at the eyes of the boy (Lookinland) as he plays the character Phillip is to see that he is totally in the moment. The same goes for the girl (Gower) as Angela. They are possibly even more authentic than the veteran actress and the Hollywood A Lister. So why does this section, also sometimes referred to as The Fire

Stairs Scene never get weary? Is it because Allen and Guillermin knew that we want to see close-ups of glamorous faces with their makeup melting and their hair losing its lacquer? Or could it be that the gloss of earlier scenes had been too synthetic, and that all we really wanted to see was that perfection contorted, broken and the odor of the perfume changing to that of sweat?

It is best to start at the beginning.

Phillip and Angela's mother is already at ground zero being attended to on a stretcher. Having been rescued by O.J. Simpson, the deaf (and mute) character Mrs Albright, played by Carol McEvoy, is now out of the movie. Most would say thank goodness due to her sentimental presence (Stirling Silliphant always had a tendency for hammering home sympathetic signifiers). But once subtracted, her children are left in the far more reliable hands of the world's two most perfect parents (rather than with the 'limitations' of a disabled 1974 single mother). However this new, and what we should subliminally see as an 'improved' family, has to tackle a hazardous journey on a collapsed stairwell down to level 83. They do so with a united trepidation that appears completely without artifice. This was most likely due to the fact of the actors climbing over a real set, with all the risks in clear sight of the crew.

The amazing thing is that the dynamics between the four actors projects how families can rise amongst the darkest moments together. Like the best of adoptive parents, the fictional characters of Lisolette Mueller and Doug Roberts had put the children's safety before their own. The children have already listened to Roberts' confident directions, overcoming their justified anxiety of climbing down the warped iron railings. Once in the clear, Jones is the last to place blind faith in Newman's guidance. These carefully orchestrated images then transform from what we are seeing – into what we are thinking.

Jones starts her descent by kicking off her elegant footwear. If looking close enough, her shaking can be noticed through her orchid silk evening dress. The tension is so palpable, that we may even hold our own breaths, mimicking exactly what she does on screen.

More Excerpts Follow



Onlookers allowed near the set on 555 California Street

**Political Externals in the Dream Factory:**

20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Warner Bros. in 1974

‘Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce’

Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer,  
*The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*

A champion of Samuel Beckett, Theodore Adorno would condemn *The Towering Inferno* due to its refusal for provocation. He would see it as yet another capitalist assault through banality without a fully serious motive. Had he have lived to see the movie, it would reaffirm that violation does not inform or grant insights, in so much as it is neither a remedy nor a window into ideas. All in all, the film lacked the political necessities of Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1940) and the scope of humanity as seen in Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993). Therefore, such ‘violence’ is so deeply embedded that it can only be recognized (and criticized) through a reactionary lens.

If taken at face value alone, the movie is as though the counter culture never happened. The bourgeois party is shown without cynicism or malice. It means to appeal. It is also there to be envied. But does it really ridicule our intelligence?

Hegel has stated that the bourgeois drama builds to a crescendo of “forgiveness and the promise of freedom”. *The Towering Inferno* achieves this with ease. This judgment that the work is rightwing (and a commodity that succeeds in its objective) holds some ground; the explosions, the stunts and the banal dialogue prove that this is not cinema for the mind. It may even take pride in being made for the suburban provincial. And so it is entertainment pure and simple, not enlightenment. Yet the party guests are somehow damned for their conformism, if not sheer decadence (as though Buñuel had had a hand in the story’s creation). But this is not a wry examination placing private enterprise as its target – it is where the true conflict takes place.

Firstly, the audience sees themselves as the guests (or rather as they would wish to be at a glamorous event) and yet they are the victims whose suffering is spectacularly orchestrated. Moreover, there is an undeniable joy in them seeing such horrors (but the viewer still cannot work out why it satisfies, even delights).

More Excerpts Follow



**The Language of Unreason:**

OJ Simpson

‘... Unreason, since it represents private passions, makes strife inevitable.’

Bertrand Russell, *The Ancestry of Fascism*

To write any more than is already available on Orenthal James Simpson may be committing to the unnecessary. Everything seems to have already been said. Whether in print or online, a plethora of material exists and continues to grow with each new interview that he permits. Here, the use of the word *plethora* needs to be defined by its synonyms: ‘overabundance’, ‘glut’ ‘superfluity’ and ‘embarrassment’. Each is equally fitting, yet the exhaustive and superlative works *O.J.; Made in America (2016)* and *The People vs. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story (2016)* will always stand tall as the definitive accounts of the man’s history. Therefore, if further examinations were to be undertaken, they would have to consider the subject’s existence through different means - primarily as a phenomenon of the heterogeneous new languages within late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century western culture.

In order to gain a better understanding of these areas, it is best to focus on O.J. as a pluralistic concept; largely as the character Harry Jernigan in *The Towering Inferno* (banality, infantilism, commodification) as instigator for amoral reaction (postmodernism, deviation, ironicism) and as the model sample where inner, private thinking delivers binary outside meanings (the divided self, egoism). It will also study these particular 'languages' within the context of politics and general societal trends.

In his autobiography *A Fortunate Life*, Robert Vaughn inserts a well-known photograph of the cast of *The Towering Inferno* taken during the shoot. All of the film's major players are present apart from Susan Flannery and Susan Blakely. The performers smile at the camera, all arm-in-arm, dressed in their costumes in a single line. Vaughn is placed at the very end of the viewer's right, his left hand free and by his side. His other arm is linked to the actor situated to his right\*. It is something that Vaughn may have pondered over while editing the book; that the arm belonged to a figure that would cause extremely vast divisions in American opinion in exactly two decades time. It is here, caught in the moment of the camera's shutter, where a chasm between 'us' and 'them' is created (in the same way sections of society felt when hearing his legal defense team in 1995). In both, sincerity steers away from its original meaning, providing lies as convincing and functional as if they were solid truths. Here, the absence of reason can be a positive to those needing comfort in nothing greater than the one-dimensional personality. Such a world is made up of black and white with no nuanced elements to uncover. But O.J. 'the product', although suited to over simplifications, possesses ambiguities often in due relation, or in detriment, to the facts. Therefore, in the 1974 publicity shot of the *Inferno* cast, he was already holding so much more than an absolute complete and utter blank promise.

In *The Towering Inferno*, O.J. 'The Juice' Simpson gives the most dishonest performance ever made on screen. He may be acting the hero with a small degree of talent, but it is also where the innocence of reason and the language of good sense are wiped clean. But why are we so enthralled at this dualism? More seriously, why do we accept the nonverbal, concealed messages of inhuman action so easily? This last question is openly taken from Neil Postman's 1985 work *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse*

*in the Age of Show Business*; “Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice”. In this, it could be said that Postman senses that a lack of moral outcry will merely bring about nescience. Consequently, the susceptible (the consumer masses) become responsive to these semantics, either by the ego (reason) being overpowered by the id (the baser desires) or simple receptiveness to the *sound of images*; for instance, if the picture *appears* to be approachable and strong, there is more chance for the anti-rational and monstrous to also *appear* benign.

It is best to consider other philosophical trains of thought while viewing O.J. within this subject-positioning sense. In Hobbesian terms, Simpson has never held the social contract line of thinking. Hobbes’ *contractarianism* (that self-interest will lead one to act morally) or even Kantian *contractualism* (unmotivated by self-interest, as by respecting others all will act with rational honor) do not apply to him (as he would still be acquitted of the acts that many would see as damnable within a just society). Therefore, language and reason become disparate forms. However, if all he is doing is mimicking what he thinks we *should be* seeing (after all, he is an actor), then we are the foolish ones. In this case, he is not so much a Running back pretending to be a Security Chief - but a cold-blooded taker of lives.

Those of common sense can easily decipher that *the good* that was once shown (by his *Inferno* and pre-1994 self) was just a sham, and the instability that caused the deaths of Nicole Brown and Ron Goldman showed not only incoherence, where rationality was disconnected from normality, but also of a subhuman confidence. Some may even say that it was this, matched with extreme bravado that spurred him at the start of his career. As Simpson was already without conscience, this ability for amorality could have easily empowered both his early and later entrepreneurialism. It is possible that he would never have arrived at such heights without such multi-factorial traits, as he saw himself as unbeatable, knowing that innate narcissism, if controlled by a modicum of self-awareness, could be beneficial to success. And yet newfound footage from a 2006 interview hints that he is not entirely free of factual self-reflections. ‘*The Lost Confession*’ may indeed show more than it tells – and to many, it is Simpson’s final, although skewed admittance to the murder itself. This is curious, as for the first time he

no longer exists outside his own language, or rather the verbal and the visual now work together. As vocalizations are no longer fabricated and the spirit of violent action is confessed in Freudian slips (“I can see ... and I remember I grabbed the knife ... blood and stuff around”) the once silent memory becomes sound over the small microphone attached to his shirt. So why did the network choose not to show it? Many believe that it was due to fear of unsettling a nation that could not handle such things only five years after 9/11. It is also said that those within the jury needed a rebalance of power (Black America versus the LAPD) therefore by readdressing the verdict as null and void, the people would be denied what they had so wished to achieve. The credibility of the American legal system would also be put into question, while the smiling brand name of O.J. would be incompatible to his newfound voice. Primarily, the 1995 ‘language of honesty’ would be seen as insignificant.

In 1962, the historian Daniel J. Boorstin wrote – “fantasy is more real than reality” and that Americans were “the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so ‘realistic’ that (we) can live in them”. O.J. attempted to do just that back in the mid-nineties, using elements of make-believe to find his own personal untruth in which to continue with his life. But by 2017, (post-incarceration) the self-made man who had once reveled in breaking the greatest moral boundary was now confronting his final phase, reconciling himself to lodging in Nevada, in order to be close to the children from his first marriage to Marguerite L. Whitley. And so, while others who were once connected to *The Towering Inferno* passed away far too young in life (Steve McQueen, Scott Newman, Jennifer Mary Selznick and Natalie Wood) Simpson lived on to older age. Even William Holden died at only 63. And so O.J. (still the global superstar) would have also witnessed the deaths of Fred Astaire, Paul Newman and Robert Vaughn; all post 70, but men who lived their lives perspicaciously. In contrast, Simpson’s was inescapable to the fiery rages within. He was a man who had once strayed into the sphere of inhumanity and so, through his personal choices, was now a prisoner within his own realm of unreason.

Bertrand Russell;

‘The revolt against *reason* began as a revolt against *reasoning* ... The political outcome of this point of view was the doctrine of the Rights of Man, as preached during the American and French Revolutions. But at the very moment when the Temple of Reason seemed to be nearing completion, a mine was laid by which, in the end, the whole edifice was blown sky-high. The man who laid the mine was David Hume.’

He continues:

‘... his almost unexampled combination of acuteness with intellectual honesty led him to certain devastating conclusions: that induction is a habit without logical justification, and that the belief in causation is little better than a superstition.’

Russell concludes:

‘sanity has meant superficiality, and profundity has meant some degree of madness.’

### **O.J. as Political Symptom**

At the time of Orenthal James’ arrest on June 17 1994, Bill Clinton had served over two years as president. Despite having a lawsuit filed against him from the Arkansas state employee Paula Jones on May 6, Clinton was able to retain his position with little crisis of conscience. As throughout the nineties, such allegations of sexual misconduct never hindered his approvals rating. These highly publicized (and transparent) facts were successfully handled either through Machiavellian means or mere legal good fortune. Although minor in relation to O.J. Simpson’s crime, Clinton’s first harassment case launched an era where ethics could be rendered as bereft of matter (or the sub-

average becomes the median). Yet such situations therefore raised the question; if politics becomes the acceptance of mediocrity, then does our taste for the substantial in other areas of life also decline?

Clinton's successor was a more stolid being. Firmly in possession of sexual self-control, George W. Bush was thoroughly unlike the former. But despite his contrariety, he and Simpson had their similarities. In much the same manner as O.J., Bush became an object of ridicule, a lost being, too inexperienced to cope with his state of undeserved power. Like all small men, both he and Simpson entrusted those of wider capabilities, enablers who could control their inept affairs without moral conscience. Bush had Cheney and Rumsfeld, while O.J. had Alan Dershowitz, Robert Kardashian, Johnnie Cochran, F. Lee Bailey and Robert Shapiro. All confounded the law by non-negotiable rationale, hiding their lack of principles by employing ambiguities, sometimes unwarranted, often needless. It was only Kardashian who would eventually show remorse.

On December 5 2008, Simpson finally lost his winning streak, being sentenced to thirty-three years imprisonment for armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and kidnapping. The verdict came only two months after Barak Obama's move to the White House. And so, as Obama became the predominant African American male, O.J. was largely hidden from view. Incarcerated until October 2017, O.J. was behind walls at the Lovelock Correctional Center throughout the two Obama terms, only to be granted parole just over seven and a half months after Trump's inauguration. Coincidences such as these can wrongly infer that O.J. and Trump are in historical symmetry. Some may even go so far as to say that O.J. is as *white* as Trump ("I'm not Black. I'm O.J." which will be addressed later) but no one can doubt that each has the same ability to attract the most jaundiced of attentions. Like Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld (maybe even Clinton) with their crimes either grand or questionable, there can be no pity for them, but our interests remain forever strong.

Typifying Neil Postman's "congenial adjuncts" between athletics, show biz, news, and, if comparisons between him and the elite political class are to be believed, those of the highest power, O.J. was just as the men cited. Moreover, as this amiable assistance between disciplines was being erased, it made differentiation harder to clarify.

Subsequently, it is where amalgamations became the norm. For instance, if O.J. wanted to be a political emblem, then he could do so in many capacities: playing golf with Trump (which he did), attend Trump's wedding to his second wife (which he did) and, in 2017, saying that "The one thing I can say about The Donald is The Donald is fun". This Venn diagrammatic nature could even be Simpson's eventual epitaph: that Orenthal James was all these things in separate senses, but also managed to play them as one, where every aspect mingled in accord.

The imagination does not have to be too stretched to see how these men of government and O.J. are as equally fallible to breaking the boundaries of decency - and so insulting civility with their consequent 'getting away with it'. It may also be true that all remain guiltless, but in projecting their egos with such blatancy, their self-importance spoke a newer language, gaining even greater strength merely from the attention it courted. This rhetoric was reductionist, a risible vocabulary of infantilism, gruff and nonsense. It would also be the first case of what this extended chapter will call The Language of Unreason.

But how, amongst these American males, is O.J. still the one we view as being unequivocally bestial? Maybe this is because his own physical being had caused the death of innocents. It could also be the shameless display of arrogance at the hearings back in 1995. Nevertheless, in October 2017, 43 years after shooting *The Towering Inferno*, he had morphed yet again, reinventing himself by his own inadequacies into a different brand of villain; no longer roguish and photogenic, he was now an ex-con as nothing more than tragic myth. Now residing in Nevada within a highly priced gated community, it was a life as bland as it had once been glorious. It was an existence of watching competitive sports on daytime TV, of fast food being delivered to his door, of playing golf (but known to cheat), of visiting bars and restaurants on the Vegas strip, and of counting his money from NFL and Screen Actors Guild pensions (even though the sound of his self-applauded performances were now lost in silence). Furthermore, when out, with full entourage of hangers-on, he openly survived beyond logic. Mostly made up of female selfie-hunters, these bejeweled peroxide blondes were as close as one could get to American 'politicized' horror. As Susan Blakely's Eva Braun nestled with Hitler, so O.J.'s female admirers clung to the spectorial in the failed man. Indulging on the periphery and blind from the breakdown of ethical formation, they

sustained his delusions through the sycophancy of ignorance. Some may have even laughed at the irony. For others, it could even have been sexual. The former is less likely, the latter still possible. However, as in Trump, where there is terror there is gallows humor. Draped in bling, these women chose to fall for the flattery of his compliments, even if he had lowered himself to the heights of Las Vegas loser. Whether it was an hour spent with him over a beer, or just a few seconds in asking for his autograph, it was susceptibility to fame via notoriety, a lifelong testament to the weakness of one's character. As for the male fans, it would be mere macho posturing, a dare to see how close one could get to another man, equally robust, but one who had killed the mother of his own children. They may even have tried to sell his beer stained napkins on eBay. Such judgments were obviously poor, but it also raises a more telling question - would these same Nevada denizens and tourists have agreed to share a few wisecracks over a drink with Bush? For that matter, would they have willingly joked with Cheney in a conversation on Guantanamo Bay, or with Rumsfeld on his pseudo-philosophical jargon? Would they have even voted on 8 November 2016 for a man without any prior experience in government? The answer is possibly 'no' to the first two, 'yes' to the last.

Like Trump, OJ is a non-conformist, but a procrustean still, both needing the cushioning of conventional simplifications. This usually makes for banal readings but each man is anything but. Since his acquittal in 1995, O.J. Simpson was still relevant for an ironic postmodern world. And it is here that we find the second interpretation of The Language of Unreason.

Let us first focus on this latter version.

If in a social grouping, the aforementioned naïve will probably smile when O.J.'s name appears in the opening credits to *The Towering Inferno*. This is to let the others *know* of their *knowingness*. Once the actor makes his first entrance as Jernigan, some may even chuckle. Others could cringe, but then succumb to the jocularity, despite it coming from

the darkest of places. Hence, we need to ask why does the immature (and possibly the cultural-sophisticate) do this with Simpson, but not with those who have also taken life? One could also ask why we show no amused reaction when we see the rapists Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby? Maybe comedy is the so-called 'tragedy plus time' (Woody Allen), but on October 3, 1995, no one of clear mind could have smiled at the jury's verdict. The world, outside of a specific demographic, chastised the decision on how the legal technicalities had overpowered the decency required. It made the entire judicial process an obliteration of duty. So does time really readjust our moral bearings so that we can find laughter in the act of murder itself? And how does the Language of Unreason become the rhetoric that many of us choose when confronted by the immoral – even when viewed from the distancing of our screen as we watch *The Towering Inferno*?

More Excerpts Follow



**Transcending Fictions:**

Steve McQueen, Paul Newman

‘Our separate fictions add up to joint reality’

- Stanislav Lev

If one grew up in the 60's, 70's or 80's, it was often heard how people found it difficult to differentiate between Paul Newman and Steve McQueen. To many they were seen as one; the blond haired, blue-eyed, average sized actor who appeared in American movies whether they be westerns, adventure yarns or modern day dramas. The regularity of their faces appearing on a television screen during public holidays (especially in *The Great Escape*, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and of course *The Towering Inferno*) had re-established assuring images of the male All-American hero. They even blended so well, that any film would be roughly the same as every other. For many, distinguishing them was too hard a trick to learn.

But the difference between Newman and McQueen can be put down to one simple exercise. Take a poll of one hundred male viewers and ask them who they prefer to watch *move* on screen.

It would probably be 100% Steve McQueen.

Even at the start of his career, McQueen was a young man of individual character. Newman was not. Whereas the former had a solid sense of self (willingly accepting what drives the id) Newman always seemed to be looking for a model on which to emulate. Yet from the age fifty onwards, Newman improved, meeting the standard of his competitor. With *Fort Apache the Bronx*, *Absence of Malice*, *The Verdict*, *The Color of Money* and *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, there was no need for mere handsomeness to help him along. The soul had successfully matured his features and erased most of what had gone before.

In an interview that Newman gave to *Vogue* in 1994, the journalist Betsy Carter wrote of the subject in regard to the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking:

‘As (Stephen) Hawking was stripped bare by disease, age has forced Newman to consider where his ego really lives.’

Newman himself had brought up Hawking during the conversation. Hawking was a constant reminder of fighting against one’s own limitations and although tragic in the obvious sense, the most uplifting example of human thought pushing ideas beyond their known capacity.

Newman stated:

“(Stephen) Hawkins might have the right attitude. He has said that the gift was in his head, and he was almost relieved that the responsibility for other physical burdens of his body was out of his hands.”

Then sixty-nine, Newman was more aware of the body becoming devoid of ability, while the mind continued to thrive. He was therefore grateful to be on the cusp of seventy with the same ambition that he once possessed as a youth. He became better known for his philanthropic endeavors, choosing his pursuits with clear determination and placing universal humanitarian benefits over all else. He had outgrown his twenties, thirties, forties and fifties and had matured with a genuine generosity of heart.

McQueen on the other hand, did not have the same fortune as was given to Newman.

While Newman championed good causes (including The Scott Newman Center & Rowdy Ridge), supported progressive political programs and gained critical acclaim for his finest work on film (all up until 2005), McQueen was thrown into the abyss, confronting the greatest adversary; he died on November 7, 1980.

For Steve McQueen, mesothelioma cancer was fame's broken promise. It proved that not even those with the utmost glow could outwit fate, no matter how formidable one appeared. That he would succumb to the disease shocked all, but mostly those who fed so willingly off his illusion. On celluloid, pain is only in two dimensions (as one dimension has been divorced from truth), but when reality becomes visible, all deceptions crumble as do parts of ourselves. We find it hard to be in the presence of true suffering, particularly if the one we are losing has always been our personification of perfection.

His fans wrongly thought that he was invincible. Like how he uses the rubber ball when incarcerated in the cooler in *The Great Escape*, he had always been in firm control of his powers. Everyone can remember how the baseball hits the floor and bounces off the wall so easily into his catcher's glove. The fact that he could no longer grasp the next step with such outright confidence meant, possibly for the first time in his life, that he was facing something greater than himself. But if he knew that death would come so early and that a pact with the devil could have been made – would he have left Hollywood sooner?

The excesses in drink, drugs, cars and money had not amounted to a life of virtue. That he died with the Holy Bible on his chest (given to him by the Reverend Billy Graham) showed he was making peace with himself, and the ones he believed he had wronged. Yet

McQueen's secrets did not die with him. His ex-wives, friends, co-stars and children would eventually tell the world of his many vices and faults. They had to balance the bad years against the good, reconciling to the fact that he was an individual who followed his instincts; sometimes compassionate, sometimes naïve - and sometimes wholly destructive.

In his final months, McQueen was unrelenting in his search for a cure. After all, he never surrendered to anyone or anything. It was an image of staunchness that was as authentic a representation of the man as any. Courage won from sickness is probably the greatest achievement, as to fight against disease is to go against the body's natural law. And so like everyone, a titanic struggle is either embraced or rejected through sheer exhaustion or fear. His situation was therefore so different to that of Hawking and Newman. They were given further chances to exceed their previous wins.

As the cancer worsened, he sought a simpler way of being. He chose to retire to a life spent on the back porch surrounded by nature, just like that of a romantic western pioneer. But then he was always of the American wilderness even when in New York or LA. That is what made him differ so much from Newman. McQueen was always untouched by contemporary convention. He had finally chosen a private existence over the ethereal nature of stardom. And for him – it worked.

McQueen's ashes were released into the Pacific Ocean on November 9, 1980 (as William Holden's would be just over one year later). His time spent around water both in life and on film had made it an apt way to depart. Even though McQueen's desires had always been earthy, he was also drawn to the paradoxes of water. From his stint in the merchant marines, to movies such as *The Sand Pebbles*, *Papillon* and *The Towering Inferno*, water had been both a form a danger and a savior, contradictions that he could understand. In *The Sand Pebbles*, the river was the gunboat's perennial hazard; in *Papillon* it served as his path to freedom (as well as permanently damaging the actor's lungs), while *Inferno* used it to bless the damning fire and purify what little remained. The final scene even shows him placing his sootened fire helmet under some running water to wash off the residue of tragedy. This must have been McQueen's idea, as it is pure Method acting.

But using water purely as a cleansing was ignoring what made it so interesting; as it also breathed hatred and could destroy those who believed it could be tamed. Those same words could apply equally to McQueen as with *The Towering Inferno*. The man could be as the cruelest tempest, squall, hurricane or thunderstorm – any word easily suits that side of his temperament. And all that knew him well say that it stemmed from his upbringing.

Brought up by an alcoholic mother and then sent to a reform school, McQueen never had the average child's destiny. "Look, I'm not an educated guy. I was a street kid. I did time", is what he told *Inferno*'s screenwriter Sterling Silliphant during discussions on the *Inferno* script (McQueen believed that his character was too eloquent). In reality, hardship for McQueen was not only a burden but also an aid. Some of the many men in his mother's life showed him the ways of male behavior at its basest forms. It therefore gave him the chance to observe lives that were breaking apart. These men knew what it was like to lose. So the boy watched, listened - and remembered.

When on film, McQueen showed this history with each smile and grimace. No matter how many others joined him in a scene, they were reduced to mere satellites around his light. It was all about ownership of the entire situation.

Paul Newman would have been well aware of his co-stars natural force. He may even have scrutinized it, seeing a sizable talent that he feared he could never reach. One thing in Newman and the world's eyes was for certain; to convey so much by saying so little was McQueen's forte. The actor would even rip pages from scripts if he thought they were too literal. He also rarely ever wanted to co-operate on the art of acting, but then again, a boy born into a place where people did nothing but scorn, could never be completely open with others. However, either known or unknown to Newman, Steve McQueen had actually harbored a long held competitive streak against his senior of five years.

They had entered their careers in television around the same time, both impatient for success. McQueen's first movie for cinema release was coincidentally an uncredited bit part in Robert Wise's *Somebody Up There Likes Me* (1956), in which Newman was the lead. The envy festered further when the former hit gold with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

(1958) opposite Elizabeth Taylor, while McQueen could only manage starring in *The Blob* (1958). But forward sixteen years, and McQueen could demand a larger slice of the pie. By the time of negotiations for *The Towering Inferno*, he could get what he wanted without much opposition. Yet the details within the *Inferno* contract were cause for his concern. Initially bothered that Newman had twelve more lines of dialogue, he kept on fighting, relentlessly. Such debates ended without too much compromise, but none were more infamous than whose name should appear first over the title sequence.

In having 'McQueen' and 'Newman' unevenly staggered in the opening credits (with McQueen's first, but lower), Newman was relegated to second billing. Even though Newman's was higher, in McQueen's mind he had finally won the only thing that mattered; his name preceded Newman's. This was a perfect example on how McQueen lived. To have a rival, any rival, was the only way he could feel truly alive.

But it is interesting to note that McQueen never sought our approval. Others caught in the Hollywood star system crave it for personal healing, but he simply didn't care, and maybe that is why we are more attracted. Lesser individuals do require such reassurance, and that is why we become bored so easily. Steve McQueen showed no interest in our gaze, he just needed to *be*. He possessed that what separates a movie star from the regular actor.

It might have been narcissism at its noblest.

## **Inferno**

In *The Towering Inferno*, Paul Newman and Steve McQueen share only one scene during the first act of the film. From the moment they meet, the creators' only allow them the shortest time within the same frame. It would be too much for the audience to take (and ruin the *true* suspense of the film) if Newman stayed with McQueen throughout. That they have their separate narratives means their male-on-male battle is held back until the final quarter. So the main question here is, 'Do we eventually wish to see one man defeat the other?' Surely this cannot be intended. Yet it hangs in the air nonetheless. *The Towering Inferno* is therefore no buddy movie; it is a clash of the vanities.

The two leads initially meet outside of the building. Doing a 'walk and talk', they discuss the calamity about to unfold. Barely concealing his aversion, McQueen's Fire Chief will not even meet the eyes of Newman's architect. This is because he wrongly assumes that it is Roberts' (Newman's) fault alone. Any architect's reveling in his triumph of the skyline is what bites O'Hallorhan the most. With this clearly expressed antagonism, the tone is set.

Let us put this into another perspective. O'Hallorhan (McQueen) is a blue-collar guy. In contrast, Roberts went to architectural school, probably Ivy League (Yale was Newman's alma mater), and so we have two characters from different ends of the socio-cultural-economic spectrum. It is clear that O'Hallorhan can instantly pick up on Roberts as a 'type' - lazy in his ethics and accustomed to easy gains. The tension remains in the viewer's mind until they finally reunite for the big finale. However, we (the audience) then learn that O'Hallorhan is too prejudiced to be wholly correct in his assumption. This is where his character arc changes, and his bias loses out to intelligent reason.

As they fix the explosives to the water tanks, O'Hallorhan finally sees that Roberts is carrying the weight of responsibility. Yet although he is now more impressed, it still does not appear enough for the fire fighter to fully pardon. In his mind, Roberts should still be put in his place for such a grave oversight. If Roberts had been diligent in supervising every aspect of the building's design, the nightmare would not have occurred. In other words, O'Hallorhan wishes that Roberts lived his professional life as he has to his own

calling. O'Hallorhan expects exceptionalism, and when he does not find it in others, he is disappointed.

That Roberts chose to bed Faye Dunaway instead of being scrupulous is thankfully unknown to him. As viewers, we saw that this is what indeed happened, and so we know more than the Fire Chief. The facts were there; Roberts placed his own need for sexual pleasure before the safety of others. It also goes against the true moral lesson of the tale.

The British film critic Mark Kermode saw *The Towering Inferno* as the “most ‘thoughtful disaster movie ending, altogether more down to earth as architect Paul Newman sits at the foot of his ruined tower”. Here, Newman’s character *has* rejected self-interest determination (at the start of the movie, Roberts tells Jim Duncan that he wants to “sleep like a winner”). By once achieving this, Roberts now knows that if individualism (and with that libertarianism) is taken on by the many, it by no way creates a more civil society. Co-operation of minds will always provide a better solution. It is how Newman’s civic organizations SeriousFun Children’s Network and Safe Water Network have flourished since their respective inceptions in 1988 and 2006. Paul Newman’s Doug Roberts could never have envisioned such enterprises back at the very start of the movie. He was simply lording over his own invention, playing smartass but within the wrong game.

There is no clearer description of the final scene between the two leads as the one below by author Marshall Terrill:

The last scene of the film finds Paul Newman and Faye Dunaway reunited as lovers on the steps of the skyscraper that had claimed so many lives. McQueen slowly walks past the hallway where his brave firefighters are lined up in body bags. He makes his way to his car, but not before spotting Newman and Dunaway. The fire chief warns the architect, “You know, they’ll keep building ‘em higher and higher. And I’ll keep eatin’ smoke until one of you guys asks *us* - how to build ‘em.”

Looking over his shoulder, viewing the smoking ruins, Newman says,  
“Okay, I’m asking.” McQueen responds, “You know where to find me.  
(a slight pause)  
So long, architect.”

McQueen gets the last word.

This chapter will try to make a convincing defense of *Inferno*’s fabrications in relation to the factual events of each actor’s lives. As said, it is a gamble to deconstruct that which has only a tenuous link to personal histories. But there are so many intersections that they should be made evident. It will hope to show Lev’s line ‘separate fictions add up to joint reality’ can truly be ascribed in all seriousness and sensitivity.



### **Newman as Doug Roberts**

At the time of *Inferno's* release in 1974, audiences were very used to looking at the geometry of Paul Newman's features. Here was a surface that seemed so hard to ignore. Even if he had ever played a child killer - the eyes, nose, mouth and strong jaw would tell us that all would be swell. They read safety, strength and reassurance against all that was irregular, disagreeable, ugly – and Republican.

But that perfection could also be unsettling in its inability to express a wide gamut of emotions. For a major movie star, he somehow managed to say just enough in the simplest way. Maybe that is how an actor becomes so popular with so many. Like his

one-time protégé Tom Cruise, he appealed to everyone by being a guy who got away with so little. Never one for self-love (as with Cruise), he knew his looks had opened doors, but by 1974 this reliance had the danger of becoming colorless. There is no better proof of this phase in Newman's career than in how he plays Doug Roberts. The character's lack of visual clues tied in effortlessly with Newman's reservations towards acting at the time. So we are introduced to Doug Roberts on his day of all days, but as an actor who is only waiting for the wrap party, Newman's mind is elsewhere.

However, as the architect who hopes that his name will still go in history, his eyes have not entirely lost their light. One could say that Roberts is still like an overgrown college kid, coming top of his class. This wunderkind in Silliphant's mind may be middle aged, but at least he has the spirit of an optimist - and with that comes immature over-confidence. Like the glowing graduate, he is the alpha male just as the American public likes it: cocky while standing on a plinth (not for once does the American Dream admit that changes in his life will eventually defeat him). To play further on this, an outtake from the very first shots show Newman joking around with the helicopter pilot (played by Jim Burns) as he scans the pages of Playboy magazine. Humorlessness is mostly found in the jock that still has so much to learn.

So we soon gather that Newman's Roberts (although not a chauvinist as Bigelow or Simmons), is susceptible to bromidic masculinity. He can easily shift from being a nice guy to a player (Newman made his career on this), being a man every other male respects as being cool headed, but also goofy. He is therefore, in the eyes of safe entertainment, a born leader.

Newman once spoke about the American predilection for status and competition in the aforementioned interview with Betsy Carter:

“I can understand how people get captivated by the game, by eating the whole thing until it consumes them. It's not greed that consumes them, it's the goddamn game of it. I mean, why does someone want

to be the richest guy in the world? What is the measure of success?  
What you acquire or what you give away?"

But *Inferno* puts him through the eventual trial where he has to confront his love of “the game”. A journey like this tests his true strength - and gives him the chance to come out of it with a concept entirely opposite to him: humility. A New-man indeed.

It is worth noting Mark Kermode’s theory here. He has said that even though McQueen initially turned down the role of the architect Roberts (as he wanted to be seen as more heroic), it is in fact Roberts who places his own life on the line for others. Newman plays these later scenes with conviction, showing the face of shame, and as Roberts is an emotionally intelligent character, clearly reads how McQueen’s O’Hallorhan sees a man who has failed not only himself, but others.

When Newman’s character is first notified of the electrical problem within the Tower, he appears interested, but not overly worried. He dismisses Will Giddings’ (played by Norman Burton) anxiety over such a minor issue with an assured smile. It is the same face that grinned at his secretary Bess (Sandra Deel) when she told him that Dunaway was waiting for him in his office. Roberts sees both Giddings and Bess as good colleagues, but as the ultimate creator of the Tower, he can only allocate levels of concern to himself. He is exactly the same with Holden in the elevator scene. Jim Duncan may have delivered the money to construct the thing, but the artistic and engineering mind of Roberts surpasses all. It is this ego that has placed him at this current pinnacle of achievement – and even if he is a Democrat (which Roberts surely is), he still has to reign supreme over others (Clintonism before its time).

More Excerpts Follow



### **McQueen as Fire Chief O'Hallorhan**

Many biographers have stated how Steve McQueen was conflicted when it came to women. A simultaneous husband and an adulterer, he appreciated their physical beauty but thought less of their minds. Like Marlon Brando, he used and abandoned women as revenge on his mother. Confucius said 'In his errors a man is true to type. Observe the errors and you will know the man.'

In *The Towering Inferno*, Steve McQueen never speaks to a woman throughout the entire movie. Not once. Yet Newman is shown face to face with Faye Dunaway, Susan Blakely and Jennifer Jones. His character can interact with the opposite sex, co-operate, understand and make love. McQueen, the known misogynist, is alone. He has no time for female warmth or advice. He only talks to other men.

As anyone knows from his previous movie roles opposite *Inferno's* female participants - Natalie Wood in *Love with the Proper Stranger* (Robert Mulligan, 1963), Faye Dunaway in *The Thomas Crown Affair* (Norman Jewison, 1968) and Ali McGraw in *The Getaway* (Sam Peckinpah, 1972) he always had to take control. If a woman's allure appeared to govern the screen, he would have to tackle it down to the ground. McQueen never cared for treating women differently to men. They were only there to be outdone. So seeing as there isn't a single frame with him and an actress in *Inferno* (with dialogue) seems like something of his very own and specific choosing.

In hindsight, to give him a love interest would not only be unnecessary to the plot but to O'Hallorhan as a character. He is like *Shane*, just coming into town to clear up and then leave. The Fire Chief does not need to play lover boy or even make any attempt to call his wife at home (a deleted scene shows him married with children, living in a houseboat). Yet in private, McQueen needed a woman - and not just as a conventional equal.

The actor wanted someone who would unnerve him. In a way, he wanted to be both the captor as well as the prey. Discarding women after intercourse brought thrills, as he was a seeker of the negative, the unthinking and the inconsiderate. Like the womanizer Kierkegaard, he was also an aesthete. But unlike the philosopher, he didn't find the need to rationalize. And so he subverts what we are seeing. His wide placed eyes and heart-shaped face beneath the light hair should be of an angel, therefore the visual identity becomes a dichotomy. He could be as dark as the most heinous manipulator, but look as though he belonged in a live action 1970's Disney movie. Maybe this is what drew so much appeal from women. The female gaze is just as unreliable as its more hardened and heartless opposite.

‘I have yet to meet the man who is as fond of virtue as he is of beauty in women’.

- Confucius

## **Ali McGraw**

Perfectly tanned and offset with the whitest (though crooked) smile, his second wife Ali McGraw was made of intelligence and searching curiosity. Her eyes, although not as bedazzling as Wood’s (one of McQueen’s previous lovers), had the ability to cut through McQueen’s veneer and see the contentions within. She loved the time they spent together, as it was living the fine line between the purest form of joy and the thrill of the unexpected. Often, it is only the young who accept this juxtaposition, but as she was already thirty-four when they married, a certain immaturity was surely present. She, like so many other women taken in by McQueen, wanted to be close to the heat. But the consequences were many rather than few. His mistreatment of McGraw forced her to stay away from moviemaking for five years.

Her autobiography *Moving Pictures* published at the age of fifty, is the best testament to her life before, during and after McQueen. There is no better telling of the many stages in her personal development, even if it does not exactly tunnel into her deeper reasons for the choices made. Yet little is mentioned on *The Towering Inferno* and her involvement within and around the movie. For that, Marshall Terrill’s first biography on McQueen, *Steve McQueen: Portrait of an American Rebel (1993)*, gives a thorough account. The following section therefore uses facts from this definitive work, and places them in the renewed context of this appraisal. To this writer’s knowledge, there is a no chronicler of the actor’s life more comprehensive than Terrill.

Like Stephanie Powers and Natalie Wood, Ali McGraw is an ‘absent presence’ in *Inferno*’s purview. From visiting McQueen on set, to joining him during pre-production meetings and preparations, she was very much a part of the film’s creation. That she doesn’t appear in the credits does not lessen her importance.

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