films or foreclose on critical options but, rather, open up new perspectives on the film.

NOTES

1. As one of many examples, Jurij Lotman, in *Semiotics of Cinema* (tr. Mark E. Suino, Michigan Slavic Contributions, Ann Arbor, 1976) begins by acknowledging the long history of film sound, but later asserts: “The pictorial language . . . is dominant. If we peel off the photographic level from a . . . complete film, we are doing much the same thing as a linguist who studies . . . speech activity in general. On a certain level this approach is not only possible, but even necessary.”


18. The universality of “bourgeois” practices does not of course prove that they are innocuous, but it does throw doubt on analyses that take their ideological thrust for granted.


20. Sound and image can of course be made to interfere with each other. In Fassbinder’s *In a Year of Thirteen Moons* many auditors are probably distracted from Volker Spengler’s reminiscences in a slaughterhouse by the sight of mechanized steer-killing in the background. More often the two channels interact synergistically. In Larry Gotthiem’s *Mouches Volantes*, which permutes a set of visual sequences alternately with silence and with an unrelated conversation, each sequence with sound acquires a greater apparent spatial depth than its silent counterpart.

21. Alan Williams, “Is Sound Recording Like a Language?”, *YFS*.

22. Tom Levin, op. cit., is in error when he states that “there is no acoustic equivalent of the freeze frame.” The freeze is not literally frozen but repeated, a technique that can easily be applied to sound. An example occurs at the end of Bellochio’s *Fists in the Pocket* when Lou Castel falls into a fit and dies: as the image freezes, the high note of an operatic aria that is playing on a phonograph is also “frozen”—that is, prolonged by looping.

23. I am indebted to Yvette Biro for confirming that the original Hungarian phrase for “to turn gray” has similar connotations to its English translation.


Reviews

STOP MAKING SENSE


With astonishing swiftness, the rock ‘n’ roll documentary—the “rockumentary,” if you will—developed a routine as predictable as the B western. D. A. Pennebaker’s epochal *Don’t Look Back* (1967) and *Monterey Pop* (1968) are the obvious prototypes, their makeshift mix of concert sequences, *cinéma vérité* backstage passages, and color commentary by semi-articulate scene-makers inspiring virtual xeroxes from enterprising film-maker/groups desperate for screen subject matter. Early on, the form attained a creative summit with the yin/yang dialectics of *Woodstock* (1970) and *Gimme Shelter* (1971), but from there it was mostly downhill. Throughout the next decade, bands from Abba to Zappa put their acts on celluloid in what had become a cinematic analog to vanity publishing: Alice Cooper’s *Welcome to My Nightmare*, AC/DC’s *Let There Be Rock*, Blue Oyster Cult and Black Sabbath’s *Black and Blue*, or Paul McCartney’s *Rockshow*. Well before the Roll-
ing Stones lumbered forward with *Let's Spend the Night Together* (1983), the rock concert film looked as atrophied as the dinosaur talent it presented.

Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984) put the final nail in the generic coffin. An hilarious send-up of rock-doc conventions and pretensions, it was a lovingly crafted hatchet job of such convincing authenticity that preview audiences reportedly swallowed the scam whole. In tracking what could be the last American tour of an aging troupe of heavy metal kids, *Spinal Tap*'s ingratiating documentarian/narrator Marty DiBergi (Reiner) treats his subject with the kind of earnestness the BBC usually reserves for the Battle of Stalingrad. Like Woody Allen in *Zelig*, Reiner fabricates archival footage with an almost eerie sense of period detail (he has Summer of Love TV psychedelia down cold) and his conceptual co-conspirators (Christopher Guest, Michael McKean, and Harry Shearer) impersonate the endearingly dense Limey rockers without (literally) missing a beat. However, their note-for-note assaults on fatuous rock music (sample lyric from "Big Bottom"): "My baby fits me like a flesh tuxedo/I'd love to sink her with my pink torpedo") are less ferocious than the trashing given the "rockumentary" form itself. In the end, the salvific power of rock 'n' roll is rather touchingly asserted; it's the genre that's tapped out.

Concurrent with the rock-doc's apparent demise was the ascent of the small-screen music promotion clip that consummated the long-pending marriage between rock 'n' roll and television. MTV, of course, rode the rock video wave to cable solvency and despotic sway over the record industry through a non-stop, saturation dissemination of three-minute vignettes depicting the filial sympathies of Twisted Sister, the defiant feminism of Madonna, and the social conscience of Billy Idol. For the (ostensibly) narrative film with a rock sound track, the commercial rewards of the trans-media tie-in are irresistible; motion picture production and marketing strategies have adapted accordingly, viz. *Flashdance*, *Footloose*, or *Purple Rain*. At the same time, MTV's seemingly bottomless cache of clips offers so
many variations on the three basic video music themes (fairly straightforward, lip-synched performances, medium-priced two-set stories, and elaborate, interpretative “concept” pieces) that a theatrical concert film is hard-pressed to maintain its commercial, let alone artistic, viability. Within the movie industry, after all, investor faith in concert films has never been high and, as the saying goes, “How many ways can you shoot a lead riff?”

Answering that and other musical questions is the Talking Heads’ *Stop Making Sense*, the *My Dinner with André* of rock documentaries. Cinematic style (director Jonathan Demme) defers to theatrical content (head David Byrne) in this deceptively modest record of the band’s dazzling 1983 stage show. “Presented” (without a trace of irony) by MTV and profiting mightily from its relentless promotion, *Stop Making Sense* revitalizes a dormant genre with the conservative prescription of a good product plainly packaged. For Demme, the playing’s the thing; this party’s simple. No crowd atmospherics, background filler, or filmic pyrotechnics deflect attention from the musical performance. Assuming an unobtrusive, best-seat-in-the-house vantage, he presents the Talking Heads at face value, cut to essentials in a very full 88-minute set. Demme’s directorial technique is so sparse and free of auteurist assertion that the New York Film Critics Circle refused to deem the effort a true documentary. (That’ll teach him to showcase the talent.) To be sure, the creative contribution of multi-hyphenate artist David Byrne is everywhere (design, lighting, sound, etc.), but whatever the correct categorization or accreditation, this is a rapturously entertaining musical feature because, above all, the Heads give great concert.

Graduates of the mid-70s CBGB’s/Max’s School of American Punk, the Talking Heads (guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Byrne, bassist Tina Weymouth, guitarist/keyboards Jerry Harrison, and drummer Chris Frantz) always stood out in class, but only after the albums *Remain in Light* (1980) and *Speaking in Tongues* (1983) did their commercial showing fulfill the promise of their critical stock. Welding avant-garde aspirations to Top Forty accessibility, the Heads’ audacious musical and theatrical ventures (mainly in the direction of Africa and Japan, respectively) are studied yet heartfelt, intellectually challenging yet eminently danceable. Lately, the mind/body split has tilted increasingly towards rhythm (stop making sense) over rationality (talking heads), just as Byrne’s stage persona has blossomed from near-catatonic stiffness to dancing tomfoolery. With the addition of Alex Weir (guitar), Bernie Worrell (keyboards), Steve Scales (percussion), and Edna Holt and Lynn Mabry (backing vocals), the band’s membership has expanded to suit its new sensibilities.

Commanding center stage is Byrne, the group’s front man and the film’s star. With his sunken eyes, skin wrapped tight around cadaverous skull, lanky physique, and law student élan, he is an unlikely rock god, a fragile, ascetic figure who also has something of the serial killer about him. Merely by sticking back his hair or donning a pair of black-framed glasses, he can look more alien than Ziggy Stardust. Byrne’s trademark body language—ostrich-like head movements, herky-jerky shoulders, free-floating limbs, and pliable visage—seems to defy the laws of gravity and anatomy with the same disdain. Acting out each song as a distinct mini-drama, he brings an amazing emery, exuberance, and range of expression to a repertoire replete with show-stoppers. Declaring the evangelic cadences from the signature tune “Once in a Lifetime” (“You may find yourself/In a beautiful house/With a beautiful wife/And you may ask yourself/Well, how did I get here?”), he is entranced and entrancing, a pained visionary striking palm to forehead in futile realization (“same as it ever was”). Elsewhere, he is by turns paranoiac (“Psycho Killer”), wistful (“Heaven”), funky (“Swamp”), ecstatic (“Life After Wartime”), and serene (“Naive Melody [This Must Be the Place]”). Always, his incarnations are gripping theater.

Lyrical, the Talking Heads’ chief songwriter is often drawn to the dark and defected, but even the bleakest of Byrnnian visions (imagine: life without headphones in a post-nuke universe) is enlightened by the band’s sheer joy in performance. Their community of musical interest and the pleasing spectacle of racial/sexual cooperation invest the show.
with a warm, familial feeling that, artsy bows to theatrical distanciation notwithstanding, bridges the gap between beholder and beheld. The concert opens with Byrne walking onstage alone, armed only with guitar and cassette player. “I’ve got a tape I want to play,” he says, and launches into “Psycho Killer” with the tape blaring a prerecorded accompaniment. As the road crew obtrusively sets up equipment, each successive song adds more personnel, first bass (“Heaven”), next drums (“Thank You for Sending Me an Angel”), then guitar (“Found a Job”), until the band functions at full force for “Slippery People,” a real rave-up. The change is gradual and the point obvious, but the pay-off is electrifying when the whole becomes greater than the parts.

Favoring medium and long shots that frame the players in partnership, Demme visually affirms the cozy unity. On “Naive Melody,” a lovely ode to domestic romance, a side view from the wings catches the performers upfront swaying softly together in time; the screen-length portrait that opens “Life After Wartime” shows them jogging in place, a team of athletes ready to take the field. For anyone who knows the Talking Heads only through their records, the vigor, playfulness, and sense of humor that animate their live show is a revelation. Steve Scales showboats buoyantly, the Tom Tom Club (a Heads offshoot piloted by Frantz and Weymouth) waltzes through a strobe light nod to psychedelia, a slide show projects randomly appropriate words and images backscreen, and Byrne does the hip shake thing in his outlandish, oversized “Big Suit.” Byrne’s byplay with back-up singers Holt and Mabry, a matched set whose black beauty and cascading choreography regularly upstages the lead vocalist, makes for some especially felicitous footage. Whether jockeying for position at the microphone on “What a Day That Was” or gleefully facing off to mime a guitar showdown, they must be having fun.

Naturally, many of Demme’s directorial decisions are dictated by the nature of the Talking Heads’ stage show; he has little choice but to follow the follow spot. In the film’s production notes, he acknowledges that their act was “an incredibly cinematic show” to begin with, and that the movie version is but “the way to see it to best advantage.” Working with Byrne, himself a director of the evocative music videos for “Once in a Lifetime” and “Burning Down the House,” Demme settled on a screen strategy that kept faith with the theatricality of the original production. Only in the lighting design does the filmed record unquestionably surpass the live show. For the actual filming, the band did four consecutive dates at the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood; staying with the one venue permitted the lighting design a greater precision, complexity, and artistry than would have been possible on the road. Besides its visual delights, the gorgeous chiaroscuro bathing the band (captured in rich black, white, and red textures by cinematographer Jordan Cronenweth) accentuates the lyrical mood, as in the changing shadow play for the “Swamp”/“What a Day That Was”/“Naive Melody” sequence. Although each show was covered by eight cameras (six locked in, one hand-held, and one Panaglide), Demme relies extensively on straight-ahead long takes, shunning the amphetamine editing pace of the TV rock video. Cinematic counterpoints to the music are rare: a few fast reverse angles to complement Byrne’s backward angles during “Psycho Killer:” a knowing insert of Chris Frantz when Tina Weymouth sings of her “lucky boyfriend.” The opening follow shot of Byrne’s white sneakers approaching the stage and several quick views of the crowd when the lights come up at the show’s finale are about as intrusive as the man behind the camera gets. Finally, the sound is superb, more than state of the art: 24 tracks recorded digitally for film, for the first time in movie history.

**David Byrne of the Talking Heads.**
Evading rock-doc cliches and rock-vid encroachments with equal agility, *Stop Making Sense* is as good a concert film as has ever been made. Picking the right band always helps, of course; so does having the sense to stop making cinemah and let it play. Demme's restraint and care may not be flashy, but for the job of work at hand it is splendidly effective. It can also be surprisingly innovative: in a medium shot from stage right, Jerry Harrison, foreground, is cooking away on "Found a Job" in what looks like a fresh, new way to shoot a lead riff.

—THOMAS DOHERTY

THE COTTON CLUB


Let there be no more mourning at the bar about Francis Coppola's latest film, *The Cotton Club*. This particular director, whose recent works have shown a determined effort to move away from the subject-matter of his most successful films (*The Godfather*, Parts I and II), has already suffered enough critical slings and arrows. The horrific details of preparation and production of *The Cotton Club* were revealed last summer in *New York* magazine, so that one approached the finished product with high expectations and suspended apprehension. As it turns out, *The Cotton Club* is not what one hoped for—a tribute to black entertainers who recreated and transformed the traditions of vaudeville into an individualistic, sophisticated lyricism. Instead, submerged in the atmosphere of the "Roaring Twenties," white gangsters rub shoulders with white patrons from downtown Manhattan, all caught-up in a dusky Prohibition haze of glamour.

The very words of the title carry within them the mythic aspects of a dream of Harlem past; even in the memories of those performers who actually worked in the Cotton Club, the place is marked by the privations of the Depression (which lasted longer for blacks than for the white population) and the sociological explosions of its successive decades. Perhaps all of these things were a part of producer Robert Evans's original "vision," as he has described his initial attraction to the story of Harlem's most famous nightclub. But the thoroughgoing gangster film that one sees here is of interest only as an experimental contribution to that genre because all of the musical performers are secondary, no matter how often they attempt to surmount the conventional violence around them.

The true drama of a film called *The Cotton Club* should lie in the indomitability of segregated black artists who were able to lose themselves in ecstasies of escapist jazz song and dance. For a time, they were able to enjoy an era of prosperity, but after 1929, their grim struggle to survive was an ironic contrast to the glitter and artifice of their costumes and stage grins. One can sense the dilemma facing Robert Evans, but then there is always that apprehensiveness among Hollywood producers about "black films" that would cause him to seek a bankable realization of his vision. The compromise screenplay that William Kennedy and Francis Coppola have created is a strange mélange of gangster traditions and occasional bursts of lyric behavior; the former often obscures the latter so that there are moments when the spectator tries to look through and beyond the heads and shoulders of conversing actors to see the dancers in the background. The spectre of Mario Puzo (given original story credit along with Kennedy and Coppola) haunts the film whenever blood splatters and machine guns roar. *The Cotton Club* is quite cinematic—the production design of Richard Sylbert has evoked a Harlem nightclub that would have made Carl Van Vechten shout hurrahs because the orange-lit, Art-deco environment conveys an aesthete's view of a place that never quite existed. But the real Cotton Club's glamor was in the show, not in the club's decor. The club's excitements were in the illicit liquor and the extraordinary mixture of clientele—that shudderingly exciting sense of forbidden adventure when high and lower classes competed for the sexual revelations of the Negro-as-exotique.

The spell of that sort of environment is attempted from the beginning of the film—the mournful horns and steady, rhythmic beat of the music add to the illuminating images of befeathered, mulatto chorus girls moving with