

# More Than a Touch of Madness

The flawed brilliance of Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's debut film *Performance*

By Dean Goldberg

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On its release in the United States in 1970, *Life* magazine critic Richard Schickel described Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg's debut film *Performance* as 'the most completely worthless film I have seen since I began reviewing' (Schickel 1970). Pretty harsh words from Schickel who, along with Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, had embraced much of the new American and European cinema and had railed against the *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther for denouncing as trash Arthur Penn's breakthrough film, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). One can only guess that watching a couple of bodies being riddled with bullet holes must have been easier to digest than watching three hippies taking a bath in a tub of dirty water. But whatever his cinematic politics, Schickel was not alone. John Simon, then writing in the *New York Times*, wrote:

You do not have to be a drug addict, pederast, sado-masochist, or nitwit to enjoy *Performance*, but being one or more of these things would help [...] [It's] a prime example of the Loathsome Film, a genre that subsists purely on shock value, cheap thrills, decadent artiness, glorification of amorality, and sheer mystification [...] And there is the supreme horror of the film, Mick Jagger, whose lack of talent is equaled only by a repulsiveness of epic proportions [...] It is all mindless intellectual pretension and pathologically revealed-in gratuitous nastiness, and it means nothing. The filmmaker's sensibili-





ties are so jaded, their senses so atrophied, that I doubt they could even feel the swift kick they so richly deserve. (Simon 1970)

Critic Pauline Kael found the film ‘a humorless, messy mixture of crime and decadence and drug-induced hallucination’ (Kael 1980). Clearly, the American establishment from both the left and the right had no idea what to make of this ‘messy mixture’.

Production on *Performance* finished in May 1968, but it would take another two years, three editors and the loss of Roeg’s supervision to complete the film that Warner Bros finally released. Why the film was distributed at all, considering the enmity for its dark, incomprehensible storyline and nearly pornographic content, is the real mystery. To some, *Performance* made the 1969 X-rated *Midnight Cowboy* look like a Disney movie.

Indeed, if Warner Bros was banking on a Beatles-like movie starring the lead singer of Rolling Stones, Mick Jagger, they were greatly disappointed. Not only did the film lack any hit songs but Jagger doesn’t appear until 46 minutes into what looked to some like a perverted gangster film. Instead, the first half of *Performance* offered a deluge of nudity, homosexual romps, and violence in the form of bloody fists, vulgar threats, an acid bath for a Rolls Royce and a brutal head shave for its driver.

When the film was finally screened for Warner Bros executives it was not only summarily hated, but was nearly thrown out with that day’s garbage. It’s been said that a couple of the executives wanted

the negative burned. In the end, it was Donald Cammell and editor Frank Mazzola (who went uncredited) who saw the film through to fruition.

Was *Performance* really as bad as these respected critics said? Did it cross the line from an ‘art’ film to simply a failed attempt at making a movie by two neophytes who had never directed nor helmed a real movie?

Quite a long time ago, I read two quotes attributed to Steven Spielberg that have stayed with me to this day. When asked his opinion of the iconic *Citizen Kane* (1941), Spielberg remarked that it was the greatest student film ever made. In another venue, he opined that perhaps the best film that any good director makes is made the first time they pick up a camera. His rationale was simple: he felt the fewer rules you were governed by, the more inventive your mistakes would be.

Unfortunately, it would take decades before this freshman romp would be hailed by many critics and publications as one of the great films to come out of Britain. In 2011, *Time Out* magazine rated *Performance* #7 on their top fifty British films of all time (Calhoun et al. 2017). It landed between Robert Hamer’s *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949) (#8) and Michael Powell’s *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) (#6).

And while *Performance* was Roeg’s initiation into directing (or more precisely, co-directing) he was soon off making his second film, *Walkabout* (1971) – thought by many to be his best work – after that dismal first screening of *Performance* for studio executives. Yet, almost fifty years after production wrapped on the film, it is easy to imagine that the



*mise-en-scène* of *Performance*, such as it was, was the major influence on Roeg the director, with its fragmented narrative and unusual breaking of both temporal and spatial continuity in film storytelling.

For Donald Cammell, things did not go as well. It took six years before he would direct another movie, *Bad Seed*, which tanked at the box office. His output after that was nominal and his own tragic story ended with his suicide by a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1996. Roeg, on the other hand, would find a certain amount of fame and would direct important pictures like *Don't Look Now* (1973),<sup>1</sup> *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), *Bad Timing* (1980), *Insignificance* (1985) and *Track 29* (1988), though his career suffered from an inability to break through with a major money-maker as well as to attract a very large audience.

### Memo from Turner

The plot of *Performance* can be simplified in a couple of sentences: bad guy gets in hot water with a crime boss and 'hides in plain sight' in a London flat. Unfortunately, he is found and forced to face the music, literally and figuratively, as he is drawn into a relationship with an over-the-hill rock-and-roll star and his two female companions.

That the film had two distinct parts cannot be ignored. The first part of the film documents, in an intensely stylistic way, the world of London gangsters during the early to mid-1960s. It is sharp-edged, violent and dangerously sexy. Here, there is a clear narrative: Chas (James Fox) belongs to a gang headed by

Harry Flowers (Jackie Shannon). Chas is an enforcer and collector for Flowers and is very good at his job. In fact, he takes as much sadistic pleasure in his profession as he does in his sexual encounters. The film famously begins with a montage of Chas and his girlfriend having rough, but quite straight, sex. Whips and mirrors are involved and while those toys may not be to everyone's liking, it's hard to consider their use as deviant behavior.

Things take a turn for the worse when Flowers's gang takes over a betting shop owned by Joey Maddox (Anthony Valentine). Maddox is an old mate of Chas's and Flowers orders Chas to keep away from his business, which Chas ignores, taking things into his own hands and taunting Maddox after his shop has been trashed. He then takes it upon himself to deliver Maddox personally to Flowers. Later, Flowers, followed by Maddox and some of Flowers's gang, celebrate the new addition to Flowers's family in a local nightclub. Flowers is all smiles as he puts an arm around Maddox: '[It's] [n]ot a takeover my boy, [it's] a merger.' Flowers then turns to the hot and cool Chas and complains about the way Maddox was 'brought in'. After Chas rebuffs his complaint, Flowers's smile disappears.

FLOWERS: Who do you think you are?

CHAS: I know who I am.

FLOWERS: Of course you do, you're Jack the Lad.

And so, the split begins between Flowers and Chas. Later, Chas and Maddox come to blows at Chas's apartment after Maddox and some buddies try to take their revenge. It's a bloody homoerotic collage

with Chas finally shooting Maddox, his boyhood pal. As he holds his gun in two hands, ripped up and bleeding, mostly naked, he intones, 'I am a bullet.'

Chas is then forced to go on the run while Flowers and the gang make plans to find and kill him. Again, this narrative follows a fairly straightforward course, in spite of the many cinematic off-ramps that lead to nowhere. There is even a short but fascinating scene where Chas, his bruised face bandaged, his hair colored with reddish paint, calls his 'mum', informing her that he must leave town and that he plans on going to see his aunt.

MOM: That's the idea Chas. You will take care?

CHAS: Yeah Mom, got to go.

The scene is played straight and works the cliché of some of the old Warner Bros crime films: *he's a very bad boy but still loves his mother*. But there's not a drop of the Cody and Ma Jarrett's Oedipal relationship that's found in Raoul Walsh's 1949 gangster film *White Heat*, although this out-of-place domestic scene has an oddity all its own.

Up until Chas's break with Flowers's gang, *Performance* can be viewed as a craftily-put-together 1960s gangster film, somewhat based on the antics of the notorious Kray brothers, the infamous twins who ran organized crime in London during the 1950s and 1960s and who led a life full of parties, broken bones and homosexual liaisons. In fact, the Kray brothers' trial was going on in London at the time of the production of the film. But while gangsters have been portrayed as deviants of all kinds since the inven-

tion of the cinema, the *strangeness* of Flowers and his gang was, I believe, a radical departure from any trope that had existed at that time. Yet things are about to turn upside down when Chas, waiting for his train, overhears a conversation between a young musician and his mother as the former relates his last conversation with his landlord.

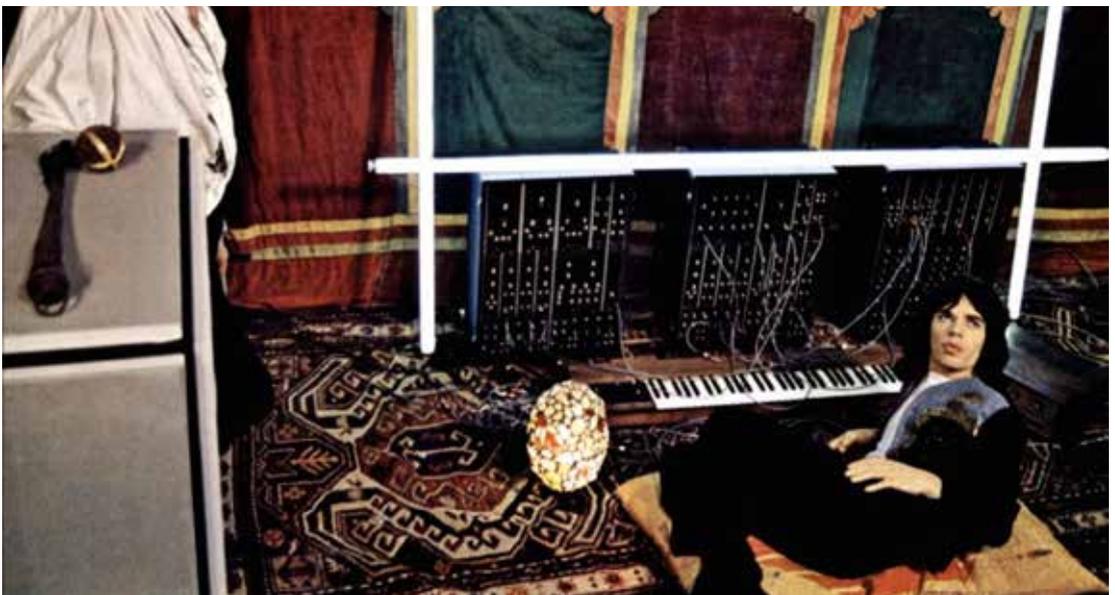
MUSICIAN: I said, 'Turner, you are my landlord, to which I owe 41 pounds back rent which I will send to you from Liverpool... all my things, all my gear...stays right here at 81 Powis Square in this little basement room.' He said, 'Okay my son, go, I shall try to find a tenant who has more respect for another person's life.'

It is this conversation that sets the stage for the film's second narrative.

### The players

While the final film's fragmented narrative alienated many a critic, the first drafts of *Performance* were even more vague. According to Colin MacCabe (1998), author of a slim 80-page book on *Performance*, the first scratchy outline for a film that would morph into *Performance*, titled 'The Liars', began as a '69-page draft', and

tells a story which is both familiar and foreign, a tame ur-tale which has none of the power of its ferocious offspring. The first



third of the film is set in Paris where Cotrelli, a Brooklyn hood, has arrived to carry out a contract killing [...] Cotrelli rents a room from a reclusive musician called Haskin in a flat that also houses a runaway teenage girl, Simon. [...] Haskin is a musician who has resigned from the hit group the Spinal Chords [...] While Simon falls in love with Cotrelli as they spend the day together, Haskin goes on a tour of Chelsea and Soho, taking in all the sights of swinging London and pick up Pherber, a multi-national groupie *avant la lettre*, with whom he ends up in both bed and bath. (MacCabe 1998: 21)

At the time of his writing the draft, Donald Cammell wanted Marlon Brando to star in the film. The two had established a relationship after Cammell had worked as a production assistant on *The Young Lions* (1958). The friendship between Brando and Cammell lasted for years. Brando even tried to help Cammell through the difficult years he suffered through later on in Los Angeles. Ultimately, however Brando didn't like the script and passed. Cammell undertook a drastic rewrite.

The only really vital figure in the whole story is Pherber [...] she exudes a vital force and energy [...] the tones are unmistakably those of Anita Pallenberg, as is also the general description of this German-Italian-jet-setter who may next year decide to become English. In a late interview Cammell was to say

that Pallenberg was one of the great influences on *Performance*. (MacCabe 1998: 22)

In fact, Anita Pallenberg was at the centre of the bohemian soup out of which *Performance* finally sprang. Her reputation was infamous to those who followed the rock-and-roll, jet-setting drug scene. Beautiful, tough, cool, hip and addicted to heroin on-and-off, she represented a dark, sexy combination of European coldness combined with all the steaminess of a furtive coupling in an alley in Tangiers. It was Pallenberg, as Pherber, Turner's mate, who first greeted Chas in Turner's London flat in Powis Square. It was Pallenberg who came to the set as the girlfriend of Keith Richards and former girlfriend of rhythm guitarist and first leader of the Rolling Stones, Brian Jones. It was Pallenberg who was at the centre of the rumours that she and Jagger did not simply simulate sex during their scenes together. And it was Pallenberg who ended up crushed, ragged and addicted in later life, dying at 75 in June of this year.

While new visual and narrative ideas were not too unusual for a film shot in 1968, by the second half of *Performance*, both Roeg and Cammell literally and figuratively take a razor and slash through the rules of conventional storytelling.

What takes *Performance* to a whole different level of trickery and visual slight-of-hand is the cinematic McGuffin that Roeg would end up chasing his entire life – searching for that *thing* that can't be found, chasing a spectre that cannot be seen. An amazing thought really, trying to narratively get between the frames to see what's behind the refracted image pro-





jected on the screen. Images aware of the *nature of things* rather than themselves. This ultimately leads Roeg to make the fourth wall more opaque, not less.

And so, 46 minutes into the film, Chas opens the door to Turner's house at 81 Powis Square and steps into an entirely different world, and for better or worse (depending on your point of view) the film becomes something else entirely. While the hunt for Chas doesn't stop, the movie cracks open like an eggshell that reveals not a bright yellow yolk, but an unformed embryo.

And it all begins with a slightly nasty dance between Chas and Pherber.

### It's only rock and roll?

Perhaps much to Warner Bros's chagrin, Mick Jagger and his band, the Rolling Stones, penned and played only one song in the film: 'Memo from Turner', which was unabashedly demonic rather than a cool, hip musical tune that the executives at Warner's were hoping for. That said, the soundtrack is debatably the best soundtrack of any British film ever made – produced by Jack Nitzsche, with music and vocals featuring soul singer Merry Clayton (the original female singer on the Stones's hit 'Gimme Shelter'); Ry Cooder, slide guitar extraordinaire; and a young Randy Newman. The soundtrack is a fascinating compilation of sounds: non-structured musical environments, blues and rock and roll, as well as featuring one of the first rap performances by a group (called the Last Poets). Nitzsche himself was an unfocused art-

ist who died in 2000 at 63 after having a stroke a few years earlier, but at that time he was *the* producer for some of the most talented musicians of that era. Unfortunately, his demons got the best of him and he slid into depression and addiction. The music, like the film, is unsentimental, coldly beautiful and sexy as hell. Nitzsche was experimenting with Moog-like sounds, discordant melodies and (like his mentor Phil Spector) lots of musical layers. But for many music critics it was Merry Clayton's enormous vocal range, the combination of eerie melodies mixed with gospel roots, that managed to capture an emotional response that was both mesmerizing and seductive while still full of a dreadful sense of mystery – so much the musical equivalent of the film itself.

### Back to (Powis) Square one?

But the narrative, that ambiguous, debated, much misunderstood word, is complicated. And it was the perceived lack of a cohesive narrative during the second half of the film that frustrated the American producers so intensely. Part of their disappointment was that the second half had no story, as the executives understood how narrative and plot should unfold. And in a very real sense they were spot on. The first half of the film follows the traditional Hollywood setup; indeed, it's pretty much a traditional gangster movie. But that narrative falls away as soon as Chas pushes the bell to Turner's flat.

Of course, for cinema academics the definition of narrative can sometimes be elusive. In an article



titled 'Martin Scorsese Breaks Down the Difference Between Narrative and Plot', Justin Morrow cites E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*:

[Forster] famously delineated the difference between story and plot as follows: a plot, according to Forster, is a narrative of events, with the emphasis on causality.' He illustrated the difference famously: 'The king died and then the queen died is the story. The king died and then the queen died of grief is the plot.' (Morrow 2014)

But Morrow then goes on to explain that

Forster's definition of story doesn't hold up for film, of course, though it helps us approach a definition, if only by point of comparison. Perhaps, in film, a plot could be said to be the sequence of (causally related) events that make up the narrative. The plot it [sic] *what happens*. The story in a movie, on the other hand, is *why* it happens, and *how*. If you look to any film, you can see this principle at work. For instance, to cite a Scorsese work, while the plot of *Taxi Driver* might be summed up as, 'Travis, an unstable and paranoid Vietnam vet, takes a job as a taxi driver, unsuccessfully tries to meet women, attempts to assassinate a presidential candidate, and finally fixates on saving a teenaged prostitute, killing her pimp and ironically becoming a kind of hero in the process,' the story

might be, 'Travis, an alienated young man, looks for and fails to find human connection in the urban jungle, where he finally explodes in a burst of violence.' (Morrow 2014)

One can imagine what Warner Bros's enmity must have been like for such a film-school-like rationale. Jack Warner was still the head of the studio famous for telling a 'good yarn', and new generation or not, as far as the executives were concerned, *Performance* abandoned the story for a one-hour drug-filled soft-porn movie.

### Between the buttons

One of the creative conceits of *Performance* that turns off many viewers is the seemingly casually eclectic collage of art, literature and psychological analysis. Indeed, the film is filled to the brim with allusions, iconography, aural denotations and illusionary dialogue.

Was this a result of too many mushrooms ingested on the set? Perhaps, but so what? The alleged abuse of cocaine by Martin Scorsese and Robert DeNiro during the production of *Taxi Driver* (1976) is never foremost in the minds of film critics or academics. While the concept of Chas 'turning on, tuning in and dropping out' is very different in manner from the narrative of *Taxi Driver*, it is more likely the cinematic equivalent of Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* (1954) that needs to be examined to understand the key characters of *Performance*, rather than the

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voyeuristic tradition of following plot and narrative that is the essence of *Taxi Driver* as well as most traditional cinema. We don't watch *Performance* as it unspools its events as much as we react to each event in a visceral, almost anti-intellectual way, in spite of our best intentions, hence the vehemence of Schickel's (1970) review.

In regards to Cammell's intellectual desires, his interest in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, as well as Carl Jung's ponderings, it all falls fairly flat. As in *Citizen Kane*, too much was poured into the cup, spilling some of the film's original elements into a psychedelic puddle. Cammell should have had more confidence in his own work. In the end, it's not references to the elite list of writers or philosophers that moves *Performance* out of the mainstream, but the determination of Roeg to get in between the written word and out of the rubric of narrative film-making as an end to itself, however radical the *mise-en-scène*. John Izod, author of *The Films of Nicolas Roeg* (1992), describes this eloquently:

By this point the film has established its fractured surface by more than radical intercutting and sound overlap [...] Its texture has been 'made strange' by a scatter of devices [...] such fissures in the surface of the narrative will eventually draw our attention to cer-

tain aspects of the way the human mind functions when preconscious signals intrude into the stratum of consciousness. (Izod 1992: 30)

Izod had been describing in some detail the visual and audio disconnects, such as the wail of high-pitched sound in the court scene at the beginning of the film while the Barrister lays out his case to the jury, for a defendant to whom Chas has just issued a warning to keep his boss, Harry Flowers, out of the scandal. That the sound is non-diegetic is beyond the point – that the sound might very well be the voice of this cinematic universe in turmoil is of more importance.

After his work in *Performance*, Roeg began his most creative period with *Walkabout*, *Don't Look Now*, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *Bad Timing*. Stylistically, he had created in his oeuvre a sensibility that examines the relationships of things organic and inorganic; seen and unseen; of sexual, philosophical and intellectual ambiguity. 'There is no truth, everything is permitted,' says Turner to Chas, taking his quote from *Alamut*, a 1938 novel by Vladimir Bartol which tells the story of the *Hashshashin* ('Assassins').<sup>2</sup> And while there is no doubt that this quote was a confirmation of the hedonism and orgiastic indulgences of the day – especially for those who enjoyed celebrity – the reality was that it was instead the Assassin's Creed, not a free pass for group sex. That said, like any other

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sociological phenomenon, the film did serve as a primer for traditional moral-code-breaking. Ironically, the issues and visuals that the Warner Bros executives found so deplorable were, in large part, merely the consequence of the maturity and evolution of the 1960s rebellion against the mainstream. Did the studio really expect that they would get another *Hard Day's Night* (1964)? I think not. By the time of production, the film world had crossed the thematic divide from generational angst (think *Rebel Without a Cause* [1955]) to *Easy Rider* and the aforementioned *Midnight Cowboy* (both 1969), while the world of rock and roll had moved from pop to 'Sympathy for the Devil' (the opening track on the Rolling Stones's 1968 album *Beggars Banquet*), 'The End' (the final song on The Doors's eponymously titled 1967 album) and other hard-driving androgynous groups like Led Zeppelin.

So why all the fuss and rejection? Whereas the American hippie baby boomer generation might have been born from the beat generation, it was a much older collection of texts that surrounded the new British 'post-'bohemianism, coming from a more literary and diverse library. Their inspiration came from the works of Jean Genet, Aleister Crowley, Jorge Luis Borges and Michel Foucault, while their American counterparts were much more isolationist and naïve. Their legendary heroes were Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, et al., and while the 'collage' effect leaped from Jonas Mekas's mutilation of the actual film strip to be projected, to Andy Warhol's sexually ambiguous gang of mainstream deserters, the latter especially made for particularly amateurish 1960s cinema. Warhol's oeuvre was as narratively superficial as his soup-can art. It was film as an open eye, no blinks or rest, just displays of gender and narcotic confusion to be assimilated by the audience, digested and thrown back on the imaginary wall of thoughtfulness that hung like a giant piece of abstract art. It declared, 'make of this what you wish.'

Conversely, *Performance* is an intensely British film and clearly must be considered in that context. In fact, the scene where Turner/Jagger picks up an acoustic guitar and begins to wail out a Robert Johnson blues song, might be the most disingenuous and out-of-context scene in the whole film. In spite of what Warner Bros wanted, *Performance* was simply not a Mick Jagger star vehicle. It was not an acoustic but an electric film, and the movie never belonged solely to Jagger.

So, while Roeg and Cammell's film may have been promoted as a 'trip' film, it was antithetical to Warhol's *cinéma-vérité* genre, and really had nothing in common with those films produced by and for 'the younger generation'.

In fact, both Cammell and Roeg came from the very conservative English studio system. However radical Cammell's artistic influences, he was eager to join the jet set of elite film-makers. Roeg had already garnered a reputation for himself as Director of Photography on John Schlesinger's *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967), Richard Lester's *Petulia* (1968) and François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966). Before that he had worked second unit on a handful of films including David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). All this is to say that however radical and confrontational *Performance* might have been to audiences at that time, it was not created by a group of ambitious film-makers fresh out of film school. And while the film-makers might have been out to show their own personal, intellectual and spiritual disenchantments and ambitions, *Performance* was made for a major studio and expected to make money and bring in the growing audience of 18–25-year-olds and, it was hoped by these young film-makers, at the very least, to be acknowledged as a true work of cinema by the critics.

No one can dispute the tangle of art and commerce that infects every film that gets distribution, especially in the past few decades. What the film-makers did manage to accomplish was to present the battle between rational thought and a very personal form of demonic possession. Certainly, Roeg improved at articulating the intriguing idea of cinematic morphology, an idea that I offer as an alternative to a more semiotic analysis. Roeg couldn't care less about establishing a visual iconography; in fact, his ideas are rather antithetical to that end – reality is not contextual but rather ephemeral – a very scary thought on the surface.

As a director, Roeg has become known as what is dismayingly called a 'cult figure'. His career, though relatively successful, pretty much ended with a thud. Many would agree that his 1974 film adapted from a story by Daphne DuMaurier, *Don't Look Now*, was his most successful film on all fronts, commercially as well as creatively. That film seemed to encourage the best work from all involved, as well as having an excellent plot and narrative to play with.

But again, like Welles and his *Citizen Kane* before him, Roeg was looking to expand the looking glass to include a myriad of mirrors, literally and figuratively. *Performance* is a film that does achieve a sort of madness and along the way we are treated to an incredible musical score, a virtuoso performance of camerawork and a sexy, scary, fascinating drug-induced battle that falls somewhere between self-worship and self-destruction. And while the rumours and backstory surrounding *Performance* might have created its cultish attraction, it is the film itself that stands as a breakthrough in cinematic language, having taken its place as one of Britain's greatest and most revolutionary films.

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### Contributor's details

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### Endnotes

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1. Rated #1 on *Time Out's* 2011 list.

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2. *Hashshashin* (Persian for 'Assassins') is a name that refers to the Nizari Ismailis, a Persian sect that formed in the late eleventh century from a split within Ismailism, a branch of Shia Islam. Bartol's novel is the inspiration behind the video game, book and film franchise *Assassin's Creed* (2007–present).

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