Portraits of Hollywood's anonymous craftsmen


What F. Scott Fitzgerald called the "private grammar" of film is so private and so little understood that it might just as well be written in Urdu. At the end of every movie there is an endless crawl of credits that sometimes seems longer (and more interesting) than the picture just seen--often 200-plus names. Outside the business, no one really knows what most of these people do; after more than three decades of writing scripts, I am still not certain whether the best boy works for the gaffer or the grip. Critics talk a good game about film as a collaborative art, but generally they buy into the cult of the director, which suits directors just fine. Even though Michael Mann, Jonathan Demme, and Ridley Scott have mined the Hannibal Lecter franchise with great skill, enormous success, and, in Demme's case, many awards, the latest Lecter incarnation, Red Dragon, becomes "A Brett Rather Film." This is Ratner's best credit since his bio entry on The Internet Movie Database: "Ratner grew up in Miami Beach, the only child of a famous Jewish socialite mother.... He lives in a $3.6 M house in Beverly Hills, and has four assistants."

A director is seen as Napoleon, the Sri Lankan novelist and poet Michael Ondaatje writes in The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film, a figure who is "sweepingly credited with responsibility for story, design, dramatic tension, taste, and even weather." But, Ondaatje adds slyly, "Even Napoleon needed his marshals." Many of these marshals of film--the editors, the cameramen, the production designers, the sound editors, the costume designers, the composers--are legends within the business, however little known outside it, and are in no small way responsible for the look, sound, and texture of the pictures on which they work. Any director would be well served marching into a shoot with Walter Murch as one of his marshals, as he would be with the cameraman Conrad L. Hall, and would have been with Richard Sylbert, the production designer, who died last spring at seventy-three, still too young. Among them they won seven Academy Awards (three for Murch, two each for Hall and Sylbert), and they worked with most of the signature directors of the last half-century--John Huston, John Frankenheimer, Roman Polanski, Francis Ford Coppola, George Roy Hill, Sidney Lumet, Mike Nichols, Hal Ashby, Anthony Minghella, George Lucas, Elia Kazan, Richard Brooks, Warren Beatty, John Schlesinger. And on and on. Their astonishing list of credits could be a history of the movies since the 1950s: Fat City, The Manchurian Candidate, Chinatown, the Godfather trilogy, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Pawnbroker, The Graduate, Shampoo, The English Patient, American Graffiti, Baby Doll, In Cold Blood, Reds, The Day of the Locust. Among others. The questions remain: How does a film editor edit or a sound editor (which is how Murch began in the business and what he now does in conjunction with his film editing) create and mix sound? How does a cameraman light to get the best visual effect? What exactly constitutes production design, and how is it achieved? Perhaps most importantly, what is the relationship between the marshals and their emperor directors, many of whom do not remove their epaulets even in their sleep?

Ondaatje, who has lived in Canada for forty years, met Murch during the shooting of his novel The English Patient, and Murch became not just his instructor in movie grammar but his friend as well, one who is, in Ondaatje's words, "a true oddity in the world of film," "a genuine Renaissance man." Murch is the son of a painter. He has translated the Italian prose of Curzio Malaparte into English poetry, has a collection of odd facts at the tip of his tongue (the moon is 238,713 miles away from Earth), and has campaigned to revive discredited theories of eighteenth-century astronomy. He plays "the music of the spheres" on the piano, based on the distance of the planets from one another and translated by him into musical chords. It is Murch's editing of film that most absorbs Ondaatje: "How to eliminate that slightly superior tone that has emerged in the central character, how to avoid a series of plot bottlenecks later, how to influence or 'save' a scene in the fifty-third
minute of the film by doing something very small in the seventh .... How, even, to disguise the fact that an essential scene was never shot."

What Murch does, Ondaatje writes, is to move "the bones or arteries of a scene, relocating them so they will alter the look of the features above the skin." In The English Patient, a major in German intelligence threatens to amputate the thumbs of a prisoner played by Willem Dafoe if he does not give up the information the officer is seeking. "Don't cut me," Dafoe says casually. Murch found a later take in which Dafoe's voice quavers with fright when he says, "Don't cut me." He kept the first matter-of-fact line reading, cut away for a moment, then dropped in the second and eliminated all the sound. When the line is repeated, as it was not in the script, followed by the bleed into silence, the viewer feels the immediacy of Dafoe's overpowering terror.

The silence in this scene is a hugely powerful sound effect. At USC film school, sound was Murch's field, and he has built on that academic knowledge ever since. A director who has never worked with him told me recently that what Murch has done with sound is like the jump from Newtonian physics to quantum physics. Murch remembers Roman Polanski talking passionately to a class about "celebrating the authenticity of the sound itself." The example Polanski used, Murch recalls, "was the drip of a faucet and what that tells you about a person, about the apartment they live in, about their relationship to many other things." In The Godfather, when Michael Corleone murders the two men in an Italian restaurant in the Bronx, the background noise is the earsplitting screech of an elevated subway. Neither the train nor the tracks are ever established, but the noise is accepted because the scene takes place in a neighborhood where subways run. It is also abnormally loud, as if the camera were lying on the track itself, so that it becomes a metaphorical counterpoint to the murders happening on-screen. At the end of The Godfather, one of Michael Corleone's soldiers closes the office door on Michael's wife, Kay. Other than the score, the door closing is the last sound in the movie, and Murch tested a number of doors to get the proper ka-lunk that would signify that the closing door effectively shut Kay out of her husband's life.

Editing--sound and film--used to be much more primitive, like surgery without anesthesia. Years ago, an old studio cutter told me that in World War II movies, the Japs (never the Japanese) always flew from the left side of the screen to the right, while the Americans shot at them from right to left. "We've got to be careful to make that guy in Chicago know that whenever he sees a plane flying from left to right, he's seeing a Jap plane," the cutter said. In the first movie Murch edited, Francis Coppola's 1974 film The Conversation, he discovered that good actors, in this case Gene Hackman, instinctively blink where the cutter would naturally make his cut. "Blinks," he says, "are the equivalent of mental punctuation marks--commas, periods, semi-colons." Lesser actors, on the other hand, tend to blink at the wrong time; they are worried about camera placement or what the director thinks, or they are trying to remember a line. Murch has since refined this theory. When he was editing The Talented Mr. Ripley for Minghella, he found that "statistically, a blink will most often happen when the actor is speaking a nonvocalized consonant. I think they're called fricative consonants: an s or an f, th, but not d(uh)--d has a vocal component to it." Murch picks up unconscious signals from actors that are as important to him as a broken twig in the forest is to a hunter. "Some actors might turn their head to the left before they say the word 'but,'" Murch says, "or blink seven times a minute when they're thinking hard." A bad line reading is often useful. "There are a number of times that I've used shots of actors trying to remember their lines," he told Ondaatje. "They are embarrassed, they're excited, they hope they remember the line, and you can see all of this on their face. In a certain context, that's absolutely the wrong thing to use. But placed in a different context, it can be wonderful and magical."

As a learning experience, working on Coppola's The Conversation (the title of Ondaatje's book is, of course, a play on the movie title) could not be improved on. Because Coppola ran out of money, some fifteen pages of script material (or about ten minutes of screen time) were never filmed--
connective establishment shots in the San Francisco locations, some scenes, camera angles, a chase sequence on electric buses. One way that Murch was able to compensate for the unshot film was by capitalizing on Coppola's belief that characters in movies tend to change their clothes more often than people do in real life. "In film there's a costume department interested in showing what it can do," Murch says, "so on the smallest pretext characters will change clothes." The problem, in many movies, is that frequent wardrobe changes lock filmmakers into a more rigid scene structure. In The Conversation, Harry Caul, the character played by Hackman, is rarely out of a cheap transparent plastic raincoat, which allowed Murch to move scenes around out of sequence. Invention was the order of the day. In the script, the electric-bus chase led directly to a realistic dialogue and plot scene in a park. The way Murch and Coppola saved the park scene without its lead-in was to make it a dream of Caul's. "When you have restricted material," Murch says, "you're going to have to restructure things from the original intent, with sometimes felicitous juxtapositions."

Every film presents a unique set of problems. On Apocalypse Now, one of the biggest problems (figuratively and realistically) was Marlon Brando. He had a mammoth deal that stipulated a rigid two-week time frame, and he refused to give Coppola a break on either the money or the time. After his arrival on the Philippines location, Brando spent his first week arguing with the director about the script; the production was shut down, which meant that his scenes had to be done in half the time allotted. "He was heavier than he said he would be," Murch says discreetly, "and therefore couldn't reasonably do what his part called for." Not only was Brando the size of a tank but he seemed not to have read Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, on which Apocalypse Now is loosely based. He hated the name Kurtz and had insisted that his character's name be changed to Colonel Leighley, since it was his contention that army officers had flowery southern names. (The southern officer he played in the film made from Carson McCullers's Reflections in a Golden Eye was Major Weldon Penderton.) Coppola had acquiesced to the name change, and shot a number of scenes in which other characters referred to Kurtz as Colonel Leighley. Then, in the Philippines, Brando read Conrad's novel and demanded that his character be called Kurtz, as it was in the book. This meant that it was necessary to rerecord all the previous scenes in which characters talked about Colonel Leighley and the reasons it was necessary to terminate him with extreme prejudice. "The actors' mouths are saying 'Colonel Leighley,'" Murch says, "but in fact we hear them saying 'Colonel Kurtz."

Murch rarely visits a set during shooting because there are too many extraneous factors: "How cold it was when the scene was shot; who was mad at whom; who is in love with whom; how quickly something was done; what was standing just to the left of the frame." He wishes to have as little interplay with actors as possible. "I try never...to see the actors out of costume or out of character," he says. "I only want to see what there is on the screen. Ultimately, that's all the audience is ever going to see....You are studying them the way a sculptor studies a piece of marble before deciding to chisel it--here. So I have to know all the hidden veins and strengths and weaknesses of the rock that I'm working with, in order to know where best to put the chisel." He watches actors over and over in take after take, forward and backward, at twenty-four frames a second and forty-eight frames a second, yet meeting them in the flesh, after the end of a shoot, is disconcerting. "For the most part, they have no idea who I am," he says. "I'm just a person who worked on the film. ...On the other hand, I know them better than anyone!"

Walter Murch edits film; that film is shot by a cameraman, who lights the set and orchestrates the camera movements. In this field, Conrad Hall has few equals and no superiors. I have known him since the late sixties; he was a neighbor when my wife and I lived in Malibu. His father was James Norman Hall, who, with Charles Nordhoff, wrote Mutiny on the Bounty. Conrad was born in Tahiti and has a house there on an island off Papeete, where he spends a part of every year. Like every DP (director of photography) I have ever known, Conrad wanted to direct. Years ago he and his then companion, the actress Katharine Ross, secured the film rights to William Faulkner's novel The Wild Palms, that desperate tale of love gone disastrously awry in the Depression South. Conrad
would direct, and Katharine would play the lead, Charlotte Rittenmeyer, who dies after a bungled abortion. Together they had written the screenplay, and they asked us to read it. I confess that we were uneasy about the request--it seemed a vanity project but the script remains one of the two best I have ever read (the other was Francis Coppola's adaptation of The Great Gatsby, which as a film, not directed by Coppola, became a miscast, lumbering mess). Over the years, Conrad has taken DP jobs that he did not especially wish to do because a producer or studio held out the carrot that if he did the gig, The Wild Palms, with Hall directing, would get the highest consideration. Hollywood promises. From 1977 to 1988, sick of Hollywood and still unable to get The Wild Palms off the ground, he shot only commercials with his old friend, the equally great cameraman Haskell Wexler (himself a two-time Oscar winner, for his work on Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? with Mike Nichols directing, and on Hal Ashby's Bound for Glory).

Last September, Connie came to New York to conduct a master class in cinematography at the American Museum of the Moving Image in Queens. The four pictures he had chosen to show were Day of the Locust, which he shot for John Schlesinger; In Cold Blood, for Richard Brooks; Searching for Bobby Fisher, for Steven Zaillian; and Fat City, for John Huston. He introduced each film and afterward underwent an extensive Q&A. Conrad is now seventy-six, and with a certain rue told my wife and me, "I've reached the age where I get lifetime achievement awards." Last year he did Road to Perdition for Sam Mendes, one of the few directors for whom he will drag himself back from Tahiti, and the studio is touting him for another Oscar. (His first, in 1969, was for Butch Cassidy, with George Hill directing, and thirty years later, in 1999, he won again for Mendes's American Beauty.) "I wouldn't mind a third," he said matter-of-factly.

On a Sunday afternoon, I went to a screening of Fat City. Conrad sat on stage, wearing sandals, a jacket, and a T-shirt. The beard he has worn for as long as I have known him was neatly trimmed, his hair combed forward. What struck me immediately was how simultaneously direct and offhand he was. He refers to a movie he is working on as "the show," and, like all the great film technicians, he has an artisan's pride in the work: there's not that much mystery to movie lighting; it's a job; a job not well done is a job not worth doing. "Overexposing is a technique, just like underexposing is a technique," he once told an interviewer. "It's another tool, that's all."

Fat City was adapted from Leonard Gardner's novel about a down-and-out prizefighter, a has-been who never was, played by Stacy Keach. He lives in a flophouse in Stockton, California, and befriends a young man (Jeff Bridges) who deludes himself that the ring offers salvation from the backbreaking stoop labor in the fields, which is his only other opportunity. The picture, both exteriors and interiors, was shot entirely in Stockton, where the summer heat is relentless (with midday temperatures regularly over a hundred degrees) and the sun cruel and punishing. It is the kind of sun that blinds you when you come from the outside into a dark interior so that the eyes take several seconds to adjust; it was this effect that Conrad sought to duplicate. "I wanted to torture the film, bleach the color out," he said in Queens, "and so I overexposed it three or four stops." Whenever possible, he used natural light, not bumping it with the kind of candlepower he would use in a controlled soundstage environment. "If I saw the light was perfect," he said, "I tried to be naturalistic." Needless to say, the studio complained that the lighting was too dark. Another problem was that a freeway was being built through skid row in Stockton. Every day the redevelopment demolished dozens of buildings, so that pickup shots were difficult to get. "If we shot a gas station one day," he said, "boom, it was gone the next day."

Fat City's boxing background was particularly appealing to Huston, who had been a fighter in his youth, as Gardner, who also wrote the screenplay, had been. Huston saw the picture, Conrad told the audience, as a story about life going down the drain before you had a chance to put in the plug. To this end, he sent Hall out before the start of principal photography to shoot documentary footage for the credit sequence. Conrad put a camper top in the bed of a pickup truck, with a camera and a
zoom lens inside, and for three days he cruised around Stockton's skid row. Shooting out of the camper's windows, using only natural lighting, he filmed derelicts, drunks, the lonely, and the defeated as they congregated outside missions, bars, barbershops, seedy hotels, and evangelical churches, nowhere people with nowhere to go and in no hurry to get there. When Huston showed the first day's rushes to the actors, he included Conrad's documentary footage along with the dialogue scenes. The actors immediately grasped that their own acting was too florid, too fast-paced, for the marginalized rejects they were playing. "They saw how much they overacted," Conrad told an interviewer in Masters of Light: Conversations with Contemporary Cinematographers. "And they could see that in that environment."

The credit sequence—which in the finished film was edited into a fifty-second montage—dissolves from the street into the cramped fleabag where Keach, as the retired fighter Tully, is lying on a bed in his underwear and a ratty polo shirt, vacant eyes contemplating the deadening day ahead. The room was an actual location, tiny and blisteringly hot. There was a window and, outside the window, a small balcony. Tully reaches for a cigarette on his bedside table, crumples the empty package, throws it away, and then searches under his pillow and among the magazines strewn around the bed for a match. He swings around, sits on the edge of the bed, gets up, and takes two steps across the room to the sink and the chair, where his trousers are hanging. There are no matches in the pants. He walks to a table against the wall where there are several bottles of booze but no matches. Then he comes back across the room in front of the camera and rifles through a jacket hanging on a hook on the wall. Still no matches. Tully turns and shuffles back to the bed. After a moment he gets up once more, walks to the chair, the unlit cigarette drooping from his mouth, and puts on his trousers, socks, and shoes.

It is an amazing scene that locks a character into place: two minutes and fifteen seconds without a single cut or line of dialogue. "I love that shot," Hall said in Masters of Light. "It's such perfect cinema." His camera was always on Keach; sometimes Tully's face is out of frame as the camera focuses on his bulky body going to fat. To facilitate rotating the camera as Keach walks the perimeter of the room, Hall laid down a short dolly track by the door. He used only the source lighting that came in through the window, except for the moment when Keach searches through his jacket; then a grip on the balcony flashed a light that allowed Conrad to frame Tully in silhouette. Hall operated the camera himself in this scene. Normally DPs use an operator once the scene is set up (the DP stands aside and supervises his crew and the lighting), but Connie, when he was younger, preferred to do his own operating. Lighting a scene and then not operating the camera, he says, is like playing the violin and letting someone else do the finger movements. Now, as a septuagenarian, he thinks his reflexes might be suspect and cause him to jerk the camera when an imperceptible movement is needed. In recent years, his operator was often his son, Conrad W. Hall, called Win, now a DP on his own, but Connie still misses operating. He explained why at an American Film Institute seminar: "It gives me the greatest emotional satisfaction of anything I do except seeing a terrific shot in the dailies."

The production designer on Fat City was Richard Sylbert; it was one of the two pictures he and Conrad did together (the other was Tequila Sunrise, with Robert Towne directing). Sylbert wanted to emulate an Edward Hopper palette, according to Hall, and when he found a location or built a set he finished it in the washed-out blues and yellows and ochers of Hopper's coffee shop in Nighthawks and the semi-deserted theater in New York Movie. I had met Dick even before I knew Conrad; my wife and I are godparents to his older daughter. He was formidably smart, and to say that he did not suffer fools was an understatement; he thought most people were. There was no subject he did not know more about than you, and he would punctuate his case with references to Goethe, Wittgenstein, Homer, Mozart, and Bessie Smith. A conversation with him was intimidating; he took no prisoners and shot the wounded. His fluent bad-rap helped wear out his welcome with a few directors, but if you weren't the target it was inventively funny. Of a young director who had green-
and-silver spiked hair, he said, "This guy was right on time." Of another production designer: "He's got red suspenders and no reputation." And of designers in general: "A lot of designers are what I call hummers. It's like as if Mozart said to someone, 'I've got this great piece of music, but I don't play the piano. You play the piano and I'll hum.'"

He was born in Brooklyn, and his voice never lost its hint. His brother, Paul, an identical twin, is also a much-sought-after production designer. (Paul won an Oscar for Heaven Can Wait, with Warren Beatty directing.) They both studied painting at the Tyler School of Art, at Temple University, and then moved to New York, where they painted sets and scenery. It was the early days of live television; nobody knew anything, and youth was no impediment to rapid advancement. "The game is making choices," he said in 1974. "You make these choices because you're solving problems with them. Dramatic problems, not technical problems. There are millions of good technicians in Hollywood who can solve your technical problems. But if you haven't got a good idea, you can't make a choice."

On every film, he would take hundreds of photographs of the various locations he was considering, usually black-and-white Polaroids, because he wanted no reality input on his own color scheme. If he found a particular brick he liked, he would have fiberglass molds of it fabricated into four-by-twelve sheets; when the brick was installed on a set, he would kick it and throw things at it to make sure it looked real. Everything began with a script, and he could be merciless about a screenplay's absurdities and failures of continuity. As a designer, he tried to reduce each script into a simple visual metaphor that would create a mood and advance the story. His training as a painter was the bedrock of his designing. He learned early that to ensure a set was right he had to do all the initial plans and sketches and elevations himself. "If you don't, you have no control over the picture," he said. "I don't trust anyone." A control freak, but not a hummer.

Before he was thirty, Sylbert had designed Baby Doll and A Face in the Crowd for Elia Kazan. His credits piled up—Splendor in the Grass, again for Kazan, and The Manchurian Candidate, for Frankenheimer. In 1966 he won his first Academy Award for Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? with Mike Nichols directing Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor as George and Martha, the drunken, burned-out college professor and his poisonous wife whose frayed marriage is kept from disintegrating by the imaginary son they have invented. Virginia Woolf is a clear example of Sylbert's attention to detail. "George and Martha are two human pack rats," he once said in a conversation at AFI. "They're slobs...who have collected shit from every sabbatical for the last twenty years." From this idea, he created a perfect academic slum; on a shelf in the bedroom, he placed a copy of A. S. Neill's Summerhill School, a controversial book about progressive child rearing. It was a touch that almost no one would pick up, but it lent verisimilitude to the blighted lives of George and Martha. "When you put Summerhill behind the head of a man who has a fantasy child," he said at AFI, "you're already doing something." It seemed to my wife and me that the only questionable choice was a copy of The Paris Review on a table overflowing with magazines and books and papers and drinks. Delicately, we suggested to Dick that George and Martha would think The Paris Review effete, and that they were more likely to have a copy of The Partisan Review on that table. He did not hesitate. "That was Mike's idea," he said.

In all, Sylbert did six pictures for Nichols, including The Graduate, Carnal Knowledge, and Catch-22. Like Murch and Hall, he liked to work with the same people over and over: "You don't have to introduce yourself every time," he said. I recall seeing him in New York when he was about to start building sets for Carnal Knowledge, a film based on Jules Feiffer's script about the dysfunctional sexual relationships of two former college roommates, played by Jack Nicholson and Art Garfunkel. Although set in Manhattan, the picture was under budgetary constraints and had to be shot on soundstages in Vancouver. At dinner I asked what he was doing, and he said, "Looking at some moldings in West Side apartments"—the kind of moldings with generations of grime buried under
layers of bubbling, peeling paint. "Every door in that movie is in a corner," Sylbert said at AFI. "To get out of a room or go into the next room, you've got to walk into the corner. That's what the dramatic situation really is."

Chinatown, Shampoo, Reds, and The Cotton Club each earned Sylbert an Oscar nomination, though not another statuette. Chinatown, with Roman Polanski directing, took place in the middle of a drought. All the grass was painted brown, and the buildings white, to capture the sense of heat. To heighten the effect, Polanski arranged and re-arranged the shooting schedule so that there was never a cloud in the sky during any exterior sequence. In Shampoo, a story of narcissism gone haywire in the person of a Beverly Hills hairdresser played by Warren Beatty (who also produced), there is a mirror in every scene, and in most locations, from beauty parlors to homes small and large, there is some variation of the piss-elegant latticework that defined time and place.

It was on Dick Tracy, with Beatty starring, producing, and directing, that Sylbert did perhaps his most extravagant work. The project had been around for years, with a number of name directors attached--all of whom tried to do it realistically. It was Beatty's conceit to invent a parallel universe, without reference points of time or place. "It was like being a trapeze acrobat who's left one bar and hasn't grabbed the next," Sylbert recalled at AFI. "It's all phony. You can't use any of the things you remember, all the cleverness you've learned over three decades, all the things you've been brilliant at--color, texture, detail. You can't use anything you've used before." Any hint of realism was out: "You're not here to make people believe that someone's nose pickings are on the doorknob in the bathroom." The trick was to create an entire generic city, with bridges, railroad tracks, a dock, a cemetery, streets, alleys. Everything was painted on a matte (a backdrop that can be photographed; Xanadu in Citizen Kane was a matte, as was Tara in Gone with the Wind). The cars were from the late 1930s, with new grilles to make them nonspecific; the colors were as loud as the Fat City colors were muted--purples and yellows and greens. For his work on Dick Tracy, Sylbert won his second Oscar.

I worked with him once, in 1997, when my wife and I did a three-week production rewrite on the thriller Red Corner for our friend, the director Jon Avnet. Red Corner was about an American businessman framed for a murder in Beijing and sent to prison to await trial before a kangaroo court. The subject matter negated the possibility of shooting in China, so Avnet, Sylbert, and various assistants spent weeks in Beijing soaking up atmosphere, bootlegging footage of Tiananmen Square, and photographing everything--street signs, facades, doors, sidewalks, manhole covers. Back in California, Sylbert began building an entire Beijing neighborhood, or hutong, on seven acres of wetlands near Los Angeles International Airport. He had a crew of 242, working three shifts, and finished the job in ten weeks. The hutong was frighteningly real, a plywood, plaster, and plastic tangle of alleys and courtyards and dead ends. In the streets and the apartments were much of the junk he had shipped back from China in five cargo containers--old newspapers, empty bottles of Chinese beer, 300 old bicycles, garbage cans, even some aging jeeps and VW taxis with authentic plates and registration stickers. My wife and I walked through the set with him; he would stop and kick a door and order another layer of paint because the aging did not measure up. The touch he most particularly liked was a bump in one of the streets; there had been an earthquake in Beijing in the late nineteenth century, and the bump was one of its legacies.

Dick died of cancer last March. A week or so before his death my wife and I talked to him on the telephone. The hospital had not smoothed his rough edges. He fired a few rounds at some people and movies he did not care for, talked about future projects, his and ours, and never mentioned his illness. After he died I received a letter from the novelist Richard Ford that perfectly summed him up. When Ford was a young college instructor, Dick, who was then a production vice president at Paramount, brought him out to Hollywood to work on the script of his first novel. One night they had dinner in a medium-bad French restaurant near the studio. Dick was late. When he arrived, he was
in the effortlessly stylish L. L. Bean wardrobe he always wore—safari jacket, khakis with cuffs, loafers with white socks, a bandanna knotted around his neck. "I remember that dinner so vividly," Richard wrote. "I remember Dick coming to the table, where the management had set a big vase of cut flowers. ...'Pretty flowers,' I said. 'Yeah,' Dick said, then turned to the waiter and said, 'Strike the flowers.'"

What Walter Murch and Conrad Hall understand, and Richard Sylbert understood, is that they were subordinate to the director. "A talented director lays out opportunities that can be seized by other people," Murch told Michael Ondaatje. "This is the real function of a director....And then to protect that communal vision by accepting or rejecting certain contributions. The director is ultimately the immune system of the film." When Hall first began with Richard Brooks, the director said, "Well, kid, I suppose you want to be a director." Hall said he did. "Direct your own fucking picture," Brooks told him, "not mine." Brooks and Hall ultimately did three films together. Sylbert saw himself as the director's "seeing eye dog" and stayed away from those who wanted to intrude on his duties. "I never work for them," he said. "I'm not a stenographer, I don't take dictation."

Whatever their enormous skills, Murch, Hall, and Sylbert could not make a bad picture good, but they could make a good picture better. Yet outside the movie industry their work, their artistry, is essentially anonymous. Critics sometimes mention them; a film is "artfully" edited, or "beautifully" photographed, or "meticulously" designed, but those are just adverbs, without any real understanding of what it takes to cover Leighley with Kurtz, or do a two-minute tracking shot in a ten-by-twelve room without a cut, or put a bump in a Beijing street out near LAX. To the people at the cineplex, Walter Murch, Conrad Hall, and Richard Sylbert are just three guys who worked on the movie.


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By John Gregory Dunne

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