"The Insistence of Memory: The Opening Sequences of Lumet's *Pawnbroker*"

André Bazin has commented concerning the process of adaptation from literature to film that a successful adaptation should be related to the original, yet independent, a new work of art, that it "should result in a restoration of the essence and spirit" of the original, the work "so to speak, multiplied by the cinema" (Harrington, 93). In any consideration of Sidney Lumet's finest literary films, his adaptation of Edward Lewis Wallant's 1961 novel, *The Pawnbroker*, is generally thought to occupy a high place, both in terms of Lumet's handling of themes concerning the Holocaust and of his directorial skills in integrating characterization, societal ironies, visual symbolism, and the ambiguities of time. More loosely adapted from its literary source than such films as *Lovin' Molly* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Lumet's *Pawnbroker* perhaps surpasses Wallant's excellent novel in its realistic and expressionistic representation of the personal costs of repression and self-delusion, of the harrowing prices that must be paid by human beings who attempt—albeit through the most understandable of motives—to become less than fully human beings. Through this shaping of Morton Fine and David Friedkin's sensitive screenplay and his memorable direction of Rod Steiger's luminous performance as the psychologically scarred Sol Nazerman, Lumet creates from a superior novel an independent work of cinematic art which stands, with *Long Day's Journey, Fail Safe, Daniel* and *Prince of the City* as the director's most distinguished literary cinematic achievement.

Lumet's variations from the novel in the opening stages of the action (corresponding to Wallant's first two chapters) are significant indications of his intent to create a separate artistic work though, as typical of Lumet, one fully respectful of the spirit of the original. Wallant's narrator opens the novel in Nazerman's present—the late 1950s—telling us of the heavy crunching of Nazerman's feet as he plods along the Harlem River toward the pawnshop, and of the observant skinny Negro's awareness, "that man *suffer!*" (Wallant 3-4) before the pawnbroker's entrance into the shop, his first conversations with his assistant, Jesus Ortiz, the initial entry of the lost souls of the city's streets who seek cheap dreams for their oratorical awards and blasted table radios, and Sol's angry confrontation with his exploitive and dependent suburban relatives. These early chapters end with Nazerman's hoped-for escape to his "cool, immaculate bed" (28) after the narrator's observation, "The shop creaked with the weight of other people's sorrows; he abided" (25).

In contrast, the film opens with a silent sequence, shot in slow-motion, set deep in Nazerman's past. Two small children run through a field, the boy's hands reaching for a butterfly. Their lovely young mother walks, away from a stream, toward a picnicking elderly Jewish couple, waving and seeming to call out to her husband (a much younger Steiger), filled with love for her family and her children's innocence. Almost unnoticeable amidst such peace, however, are the leaves of the tree above the

young women's head as she waves; blowing in the breeze, the leaves of the bottom branch almost engulf her. The young husband comes toward her and toward the camera, grabbing the children up in his arms and swinging them around and around until suddenly a look of fear is reflected upon the boy's face. Just before the boy's reaction, Lumet shows the old man in medium deep frame, separated from us by strands of high grass which create a well-defined and confining plane of space. At the boy's reaction, Lumet abruptly stops the slow-motion, cutting to the old couple, their chessboard and tablecloth seeming to run downhill and out of the front of the frame, their vulnerability accentuated by the slightly low camera angle that ironically undercuts the audience's typical association of authority associated with such up-angle shots. Through these wordless introductory actions and camera placements, Lumet sets the film's tone as one of steady movement downward from expectation to disillusionment, from Nazerman's apparent security toward his pressing awareness of the imminence of his past.

The film's next sequence continues Lumet's marked departure from the novel, as the director quickly cuts to the present day: from a long establishing shot we observe a suburban scene, eleven identical houses, all yards fenced off in neat geometric designs, and Nazerman seated lifelessly on a lounge chair in one of the many backyards. As the camera slowly tracks in on Nazerman, he is sharply framed at four angles by the fencepost behind him, a telegraph pole to frame left, a steel utility pole in front frame, and an almost leafless tree to frame right, caught as we will soon observe, by the economic trap he has built in his effort to separate himself from life and human feeling. The ensuing scene with Nazerman's dependent relatives echoes much of the action in chapter two of the novel, except that Lumet sets it out of doors. By moving the action to the back yard, the director does not merely "open up" this section of the novel, but ironically suggests that these comfortable suburbanites will gain little benefit from proximity to the natural world because their behavior is so conditioned and ritualized. As Nazerman's sister-in-law, Bertha, offers him a lemonade and a section of the *New York Times* in preparation for her incipient extortion of yet more money from him for the family's hoped-for trip to Europe, the camera angles sharply down on the pawnbroker, isolating him in a corner of the left of the frame; soon after "Uncle Sol" is framed above by four sets of telephone wires as well as four additional sets of wires at the top of the frame and, a moment later, as Nazerman spurns both the drink and the newspaper, his head seems pressed in by the framing, harshly angled steel tubing of his chair. Nazerman seems as lost in a dream, oppressed by his family, yet cut off from them, as from the neighbor in the distant background seen watering his grass.

As Lumet satirizies the bourgeois depths to which the sacrifices of the Holocaust have fallen, there seems yet some hope in the younger generation of Nazerman's relatives. His nephew, Morton, more prominent in the novel than in the film, is revealed here as estranged, like the pawnbroker, from the rest of the family as he sits on the fence near Sol, teased by the rest of the family for his interests in art and painting. Morton's sister, Joan, though she listens to bland popular music on her transistor radio and fantasizes about the Dutch modern furniture she wishes to buy for her impending marriage, emerges as more sensitive here than in the novel as she taunts Morton's art and then, in a scene only in the film, flaunting her physical charms at the camera, steals her brother's paintings of nudes and runs by Nazerman's chair, showing her uncle the pictures. While she seems to possess only a realistic aesthetic sense according to her comment, "Don't you know, Morton, girls just aren't built that way?" Lumet suggests a deeper motive as Nazerman puts his arms up over his head when Joan runs by him as if to ward off the visual sexuality she offers her uncle. Joan may sense Nazerman's isolation from humanity and attempt subtly to stimulate him back into some sort of organic response. This surmise gains probability as Bertha, original to the film, mentions the approach of Nazerman's 25th wedding anniversary

to her sister, Ruth, and Joan testily reminds her mother that "Uncle Solly knows how beautiful, Mother; he was married to her." At this, Lumet makes his first of four jarring intercuts to the pawnbroker's past, as his long-dead wife (the lovely dark Ruth of the wordless opening sequence) appears in two staccato flash shots beneath the tree, which each last but 2/10 of a second onscreen and are each juxtaposed to Sol's reactions to Bertha as she insensitively repeats the approaching wedding anniversary. As Bertha describes Ruth's beauty, the third flash cut is of a second's duration, but the fourth lasts just a tenth of a second, symbolically revealing Nazarman's deeply rooted need to repress the memory of Ruth's beauty, even of her existence. Yet Lumet makes the pawnbroker more sympathetic than his family because of his realism in some things: as Bertha and her educator husband attempt to connive him into financing their trip to Europe and apostrophize the Continent with clichés about its "charm" being lent by age, Nazarman sarcastically refers to its atmosphere as "rather like a stink." Just at this point, Joan, the most organic force in his family, struts provocatively into the camera with her coffee, allowing us to see only Nazerman's right arm and leg. Not only is the pawnbroker cut off from sexual feeling, but most in his bourgeois family separate him further through their sentimentality, wanting more to "do" the old world rather than to see it as Nazerman considers it really to have been.

Lumet defers until the film's third major sequence the social and moral stink in which Nazerman spends his days. Over the film's credits, the director shows the pawnbroker driving to Harlem to begin his day's work. Backed by Quincy Jones's apt jazz scoring, Nazerman drives through the grainy seaminess of Harlem, black men lounging purposelessly in front of bars, a man carrying a window which reflects the detritus of the streets, dirty sidewalks, old newspapers filling curbs, garbage cans. The camera views the streets from the viewpoint of his darkened face, observing storefronts filled with odd sneakers, old coats, and oppressive building structures, like the elevated train tracks, which form such a prominent visual part of the film's final sequence. Parking in front of a fence on 119th Street, Nazerman walks toward the camera in a very long shot, past a litter-filled field, toward the shop. Shot from high angle as if to emphasize his ironic status as an unconscious victim in this scene of social victimization, Nazerman, slumped slightly, walks along the compressed corridor of the street, pressed in by dirty buildings, their top edges angling back toward rear frame making even narrower the path Nazerman has chosen to walk, the only accompanying sound the continual rattling of the elevated train at frame right. Shading his eyes from two small black girls who also move toward us, as he touches his glasses no wedding ring can be observed on his left hand.

Lumet's wordless title sequence is one of his most memorable studies in human desolation. This isolation, as Wallant underscores in the novel, is shared with Nazerman—though he cannot yet understand this—by the people of the streets whom he exploits through his pawnbroking business. Lumet captures this effectively at the end of the title sequence as, cutting to one of the apartments across from the elevated up the street from the pawnshop, he shoots over the shoulder of a middle-aged Hispanic woman down at the street. In deep frame is Nazerman, slouching slowly toward the shop just after the elevated train has passed in that direction. Lumet's fine compositional detail associates Nazerman with the mechanical object: he is framed by Lumet by the building and the elevated, and through the bars on the woman's window just to her left; toward which he proceeds. The director's depth composition reveals Nazerman both as a man apart and yet unwittingly in relationship to the flow of street humanity to which the woman is solidly joined. As this scene continues, the woman is revealed as the long-sufffering mother of Ortiz, Nazerman's assistant, whom her son regales with vows of his intent to leave a life of petty street crime for a "strictly legit" job in the pawnshop.

It is only after these sequences establishing Nazerman's isolation and pursuit by his past that Lumet returns to the material in the novel's first chapter. Described by

Wallant as "a man with no allegiances" (7) Nazerman is shown by the director in relation to Ortiz, ambitious to please the pawnbroker and to learn his trade, and to the two young men trying to pawn, respectively, the old oratory trophy and a worthless radio. But Lumet visually reveals both the pawnbroker and the street youths as similarly victims of their social and psychological environment: both master and man are shot behind layers of wire screening. In fact, Lumet's first shot of Nazerman shows him, from slightly high angle, seemingly trapped behind his barred windows behind the counter. Jesus Ortiz is frequently so revealed, as if to emphasize the shared union of the street's victims. As the pawnbroker summarily dismisses his first morning customer, the young man with the oratory award, Lumet frames Nazerman as backed also by wire framing. The cage of Nazerman's experience is thus visually reinforced at several places in the film's narrative.

Lumet makes significant additions to the novel in the episode involving Nazerman's second vistor that morning, the heavy-set older Negro woman, Mrs. Harmon, with her eternal bric-abrac to sell, committed to laughter, believing "mightily in salvaging what you could" (16). In the film the episode is both funnier and sadder, as the old woman, conscious of the absurdity of her bearing two large candlesticks for the examination of a man who she knows will regard them with barely concealed indifference, assertively enters the pawnshop wailing, "Man the lifeboats, heah I am agin'." Lumet shoots her from slightly high angle as if rooting her amidst the papers and other detritus she rummages in among her things. Bent over and burdened, Mrs. Harmon can still find humor in the debasement of the pawning process: "Each time it seems the boat's gettin' deeper and deeper into the water..." then pausing with a look at Nazerman she says quietly, "Ain't it a wonder a body stay afloat as long as it do?" commenting indirectly on her awareness of the pawnbroker's own tenuous station in the ghetto of his mind, trapped among his own victims. As she speaks her final lines from the novel in departure from the shop, "I see you again, Mistuh Nazerman, that for sure. Take care now, hear?" Lumet frames her completely enclosed by the heavy door frame she will depart and re-enter by, again and again. But she is morally a victor in comparison with her overlord, for her mind is so concentrated on his welfare as she leaves—unlike the novel, she is not smiling; her face in extreme closeup is stern but pitying—that she forgets both the pawn ticket and the two dollars she extracted with such difficulty from Nazerman.

Lumet omits the short scene from this part of the novel involving Leventhal, the Jewish policeman who vaguely threatens to bribe Nazerman for suspected illegality in his pawnshop business. Rather than Wallant's uncharacteristically blatant implication of a partnership in crime among the people of the streets, even fellow "landsmen" (13), Lumet reveals dramatically the stasis and moral emptiness of this ghettoized world. In an important variation in structure from the novel, Lumet moves the first sequence involving the aspiring intellectual, George Smith, from a less emphatic position in Chapter 3 to a point immediately following Mrs. Harmon's departure into the street. In contrast to the street noise, carrying with it the sense that endless streams of dead-ended people come to the pawnshop with pitiful scraps of their lives and dreams, Jesus Ortiz proudly announces that he wants to catalogue every item of merchandise in the store in three cross-indexed lists, so as to learn his trade well and to be of greater value to Nazerman. But as Smith enters the shop on the pretext of re-pawning the same lamp repeatedly, in his ritual arrival in hopes of connecting with another learned man in conversation, Nazerman is shot in a separate plane of space from Smith, and from Ortiz, who both needs and cares for him; the pawnbroker is seen within the innermost compartment of his office, enclosed completely by wire partitions. Lumet depicts Nazerman as emotionally disconnected from Smith who, in Wallant's novel, manages to evoke momentary sympathy from the pawnbroker, albeit perhaps merely because "their talk created a small, faintly warming buzz in the pawnshop (50). In the film, the sad old man, luminously revealed by Lumet through

Juano Hernandez, is simply "Mr. Smith," whose vain attempts to sustain conversation with the pawnbroker, in order to provide a slim interval of light in his deadened days, are met only with cold indifference.

Speaking haltingly throughout the scene, Smith slowly enters the shop mumbling about Herbert Spencer, an apt philosopher to underscore the determined aspect of these lives, as shadows from the mesh wiring of Nazerman's screened countergate cross both his lamp and his face. He pauses for breath after almost every phrase, partially because of his decrepitude, but centrally because his mind strains for adequate expression of his desire to talk to the educated Nazerman—formerly an instructor at the University of Cracow—about his new-found learning. Lumet builds sympathy for Smith in part by omitting the novel's details of Smith's nightly fantasies of pederasty (48, 199, 208), but more importantly by employing the character to reveal the intensity of Nazerman's need to avoid intimacy with anyone. In lines absent from the novel, Smith mumbles pleadingly, "From time to time, I like to drop in here, Mr. Nazerman, because a man gets hungry for talk, good talk." Ignoring his need, Nazerman merely bounces his marker on the pawn ticket in exact syncopation to Smith's words, measuring the time until his hoped-for-departure. Significantly, after marking the pile of pawn tickets before him, Nazerman puts them on the pointed spike that will release him at the end of the film from his moral neutrality. As Smith glances up periodically in hope of gaining Nazerman's interest, the shopkeeper just sips his milk—with a napkin wrapped around the glass so that he cannot feel the moisture. In one of Lumet's most distinguished closeups, Smith finally leaves, having accepted the pittance for the lamp, with "two dollars will be quite all right. I apologize for talking so much, Mr. Nazerman . . . forgive me? with the shadows from Nazerman's cage crossing his face. As the day progresses, others will also thrust Nazerman from the assumed safety of his emotional numbing—the mobster, Rodriguez, the social worker, Miss Birchfield, and most tellingly, Jesus Ortiz—all of whom are eventually bringing Nazerman gradually closer to the ultimate realization that he is, inescapably, joined to all the sad and isolated people of his ghetto.

Frank R. Cunningham
The University of South Dakota

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