

De Niro & De Palma

The Early Films



**The Wedding Party
Greetings**

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THE WEDDING PARTY

CAST

Jill Clayburgh Josephine (Bride)
Charles Pfluger Charlie (Groom)
Valda Setterfield Mrs. Fish (Bride's Mother)
Jennifer Salt Phoebe
Raymond McNally Mr. Fish
John Braswell Reverend Oldfield
Judy Thomas Celeste (Organist)
Sue Ann Converse Nanny
John Quinn Baker

William Finley Alistair (Friend of the Bride)

Robert De Niro Cecil (Friend of the Bride)

Richard Kolmar Jean-Claude / I. Singh / Klaus (Former Boyfriends of the Bridegroom)

Jane Odin Carol (Bridesmaid)

Penny Bridgers Bridesmaid

Nancy Reeder Bridesmaid

Joanna Chapin Bridesmaid

Cynthia Munroe Bridesmaid

Kitty Gallagher Mrs. Lovett

Clara Gallagher Mrs. Greeley

Vivian Muti Mrs. Thatcher

Helmut Pfluger Charlie's Father

CREW

Music **John Herbert McDowell**

Director of Photography **Peter Powell**

A Film by **Cynthia Munroe - Brian De Palma - Wilford Leach**





A LIFE IN CINEMA, A CINEMA IN LIFE

by Brad Stevens

What is the relationship between cinema and life? This is the question Brian De Palma has spent much of his career attempting to answer. Which makes it a little odd that De Palma is often dismissed as a geek-ish cinephile who plays frivolous stylistic games and has no interest in anything existing outside the confines of the movie theatre. There could hardly be a more unjust accusation to aim at an artist whose preoccupation with 'mere' style (for style is inevitably 'mere' in English-language discourses) is rooted in a need to understand how style mediates experience, and, beyond that, why such an act of mediation should be necessary.¹ Although E.M. Forster is hardly the first name that comes to mind when seeking a literary equivalent for De Palma, Peter Burra's 1942 essay on *A Passage to India* is relevant here. Burra sees the arts as having "one common subject for discussion – the life that is lived and known by men; and since it is not at once apparent why men who are intimately involved in living that life should desire to contemplate so immediate an experience in any remoter way, another activity (criticism), as old as themselves, has attended upon the arts from their beginning, which has constantly and variedly, but never quite satisfactorily, attempted to explain the reasons for their being. In the advanced state of everything – of life, that is, and our ideas about life – that we have achieved today, people, including Mr Forster, have set themselves to define the difference between the real life which we live and the life which the arts present to us."²

For De Palma – who, in Burra's terms, is as much a critic as an artist – the relationship between reality and fiction is never unproblematic, never a question of simply representing, in a crude one-to-one manner, something which can be comprehended by paying close attention to surface details (the assumption made by advocates of the 'realist' school). On the contrary, reality can only enter a film via technical devices which are far from neutral. De Palma's obsession with reworking Alfred Hitchcock's masterpieces – taking apart specific components of *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960) in order to grasp their function, to see what happens when they are stretched beyond a

1 - This concern is at its clearest in De Palma's remarkable but little-known *Dionysus in '69* (1970), the record of an avant-garde theatrical production of Euripides' *The Bacchae* staged by William Finley's The Performance Group.

2 - From Peter Burra's introduction to the 1942 Everyman edition of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, reprinted in the Penguin edition.

certain point – suggests that his primary project is to establish how cinema relates to the society which produced it, to ascertain whether Hitchcock's overt stylisation insulates his films within hermetically abstract realms, or constitutes a form of distanciation enabling stringent critiques of patriarchal culture.

That De Palma has been perceived as doing the exact opposite of what he actually does might strike us as deeply ironic, yet it is in some sense appropriate for an auteur whose output is so steeped in ironies, misperceptions and false appearances. Even the overall shape of De Palma's filmography contains an element of misdirection. For while many US directors who achieved success by focusing on human relationships started out making disreputable horror movies (examples include Francis Coppola's *Dementia 13* [1963], Alan Rudolph's *Premonition* [1972] and Oliver Stone's *Seizure* [1974]), De Palma reversed this trajectory,³ his excursions into the horror genre being preceded by a cluster of comedies about young people in 1960s America.

The Wedding Party, his first feature, serves as a neat entry point into De Palma's oeuvre, and to an extent does this precisely because it is so anomalous. Even its credits confuse and mislead. The film is perhaps best known for including Robert De Niro's earliest screen appearance, the cover of Replay's British VHS release from 1983, as well as tapes and DVDs subsequently distributed by Troma, going so far as to imply that he is the star. In fact, De Niro has a relatively minor role, his name misspelled, on both opening and closing credits, as "Robert Denero". *The Wedding Party's* status as De Palma's directorial debut is itself somewhat ambiguous, editor, writer, producer, and director credits all being gathered together under the heading "A film by Cynthia Munroe - Brian De Palma - Wilford Leach".

The Wedding Party was shot during the winter of 1964 and summer of 1965, with editing being completed the following year (the film has a 1966 copyright date). According to De Palma, "I was going to Sarah Lawrence College on an MCA writing fellowship. And I got involved in making movies. I collaborated with a teacher and a very wealthy girl who put up \$100,000 and together we created a 35mm black-and-white feature called *The Wedding Party*. I wound up producing and directing and editing."⁴ Apparently, the original plan was to assemble an anthology, with separate sections directed by De Palma (whose episode was to be called 'Fairy Tale'), Munroe, and three other friends. De Palma eventually decided that the script for Munroe's segment (based on anecdotes he had told her) should be expanded to feature length.

3 - As did Tobe Hooper, whose career as a horror specialist was preceded by the experimental feature *Eggshells* (1969).

4 - Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (Secker & Warburg, 1970).

In his book, *Brian De Palma's Split-Screen: A Life in Film* (2015), Douglas Kessey notes that "The film was autobiographical in that its events were inspired by the wedding of Jared Martin, who had been De Palma's roommate at Columbia University, along with William Finley. De Palma and Finley served as groomsmen at these nuptials, which were held on a Long Island estate in 1963... In the film, the groom is called Charlie (played by Charles Pfluger), while his two friends are Alistair (William Finley, playing a version of himself) and Cecil (Robert De Niro, cast in the De Palma role). Martin's bride, Nancy Fales, is Josephine in the film, played by Jill Clayburgh. These were Clayburgh's and De Niro's very first movie roles. In fact, since De Niro wasn't yet of legal age, his mother had to sign his contract for him."⁵

During an interview conducted in 1969, De Palma remembered going on location without a production manager: "So I ended up waking everybody in the morning, and getting the guy who got drunk out of jail. Consequently, the weaknesses of the movie are due in part to my not having worked things out very well in advance. I'm not a very good producer. After we made *The Wedding Party*, we tried to get a distributor interested. We had about 800 screenings and people saying, 'Well, it's interesting, but...' and it went on and on and on. Because the film wasn't strong enough. So we were stuck. Nobody wanted to show it."⁶ As De Palma recalled a few years later, "We finally opened it ourselves in April 1969, four months after *Greetings* [1968]. It had a tiny run, about six weeks, got some nice reviews, and it died."⁷

Aside from putting up the money, which may well have been far less than the \$100,000 cited by De Palma, Cynthia Munroe appears to have been primarily responsible for the screenplay⁸, with Wilford Leach (who would become a respected theatre director, as well as making a 1983 film of *The Pirates of Penzance*) taking charge of the actors, and De Palma doing everything else. De Palma appears to have regarded Leach's contribution as more intrusive than helpful: "The great irony was, when we co-directed *The Wedding Party*, that's when I saw I knew more about motion picture directing than Wilford did. We had this scene with Bill Finley, Bob De Niro and Charlie Pfluger, where the two boys are trying to convince him not to get married. We were shooting it, and I could see that we were never able to do the shot. Plus, it was not a good shot, because basically we're shooting three guys against a hedge. You weren't getting any value out of the motion of the camera.

5 - Douglas Kessey, *Brian De Palma's Split-Screen: A Life in Film* (University Press of Mississippi, 2015). Jared Martin, who died last year, has a small role in *The Wedding Party* as one of the guests.

6 - Gelmis, 1970

7 - David Bartholomew, 'De Palma of the Paradise', *Cinefantastique* 4:2, 1975. Reprinted in Laurence F. Knapp (ed.), *Brian De Palma: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2003).

8 - 'Cynthia Munroe' was a pseudonym, her real name being Cynthia Moore. She can be glimpsed playing a bridesmaid in *The Wedding Party*, but reportedly died before the editing had been completed.



And Will kept on insisting that we do it this way. And then Will kind of got frustrated, and I said 'Will, let me block this out, because this is not the way... this is shit work.' So I blocked it out a whole different way, broke the whole thing up into a whole bunch of shots. And I made the shot work. And he was wrong."⁹ This recollection reinforces the impression that De Palma was fully in control of the scenes involving Pfluger, Finley and De Niro, whose performances (individually and as a group) strikingly anticipate those of De Niro, Gerrit Graham and Jonathan Warden in *Greetings*.

Superficially, *The Wedding Party* resembles De Palma's mature work only in minor ways; a split-screen effect here, a reference to Hitchcock there. (Alistair tells Charlie that "Every great man knows how to suffer. Bergman knows how to suffer, Fellini knows how to suffer. Even Hitchcock suffers.") More interestingly, Charlie is the first in this director's gallery of feminised male protagonists (obviously pertinent titles would be *Phantom of the Paradise* [1974], *Obsession* [1976], *Blow Out* [1981], *Body Double* [1984] and *Casualties of War* [1989]), those undertones of homosexuality evident in Cecil and Alistair's attempts to dissuade Charlie from getting married – praising a lifestyle in which women are treated as objects, and only male friendships can be taken seriously – foreshadowing that interrogation of the thin line dividing masculine from feminine in *Dressed to Kill* (1980) and *Passion* (2012). And if, on the whole, *The Wedding Party* is very different from those genre exercises upon which its creator's reputation rests, this should not prevent our noticing that, right from the opening scene, De Palma is doing what he would eventually become famous (some might say notorious) for – utilising a wide range of cinematic techniques, never remaining content to let actions and characters speak for themselves (a thoroughly mystified notion in any case), but rather employing *mise en scène* to interrogate the fictional world. As De Palma observed, "Technically, it is very bizarre, although it has a fairly conventional storyline... it's full of jump cuts and improvised scenes, fast forward action and slow motion. Of course, I edited the film so it has practically everything in it as far as experimental techniques."¹⁰

The film begins with Charlie, Alistair and Cecil being driven to an estate where the parents of Charlie's fiancée Josephine live. Much of this sequence is played at accelerated speed, giving it the feel of a slapstick silent comedy; but the proceedings are occasionally interrupted by still frames, and when the three friends, upon arriving at their destination, greet Josephine's (almost exclusively female) relatives, the imagery abruptly shifts to slow motion. On one level, De Palma is commenting sardonically on the tedium of meeting

family members at a social gathering. But this doesn't adequately account for the sheer playfulness which is the scene's (and the film's) predominant tone. De Palma treats onscreen events much as he would later treat those devices he borrowed from Hitchcock, using them as found elements that can be probed to see what they might reveal.

Jean-Luc Godard's impact on De Palma can be discerned from the frequent use of jump cuts, as well as a soundtrack which often seems to have sprung free of the image, what we are listening to bearing only a provisional relationship to what we are seeing (though the result is perhaps more comparable to Richard Lester). But there is also, oddly enough, something here of Jean Renoir, his influence clearly felt in De Palma's juxtaposition of improvisational freedom with a compassionate view of individuals trapped by social obligations which have little relation to, and often directly contradict, their personal desires (the ties of camaraderie linking Charlie with Alistair and Cecil being no less constricting than those matrimonial ones connecting him to Josephine). There are even specific echoes of *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939) – already implicit in the setting – in De Palma's staging of scenes taking place in corridors, hives of frenzied activity where the rapid movement of the performers is negated by the camera's cautious distance.

For all its surface roughness, the seemingly casual fashion in which it has been assembled, *The Wedding Party* is built upon a solid foundation, each character representing a specific stance towards the institution of marriage. The film is rigorously structured around a series of thematic oppositions - female/male, responsibility/irresponsibility, reality/fantasy, maturity/youth, entrapment/freedom, restraint/impulse, tradition/spontaneity, community/solitude - which complexly interact without ever neatly aligning (there is no suggestion that the dilemma they evoke can be satisfactorily resolved). It is this ability to hold two opposed (and perhaps irreconcilable) ideas in a state of tension with no obvious sense of strain that accounts for the charm of De Palma's debut. And if we note that the structural opposition subsuming all others is the one between life and cinema, we will have little difficulty grasping how *The Wedding Party* relates to a body of work in which the demands of the real world rub up against the conventions of an art form dedicated to considering that world at one remove.

Brad Stevens is the author of Monte Hellman: His Life and Films (McFarland, 2003) and Abel Ferrara: The Moral Vision (FAB Press, 2004) and has contributed to Sight & Sound, Video Watchdog, Cahiers du Cinema and other publications.

9 - From Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow's documentary *De Palma* (2016).

10 - Bartholomew, 1975.



GREETINGS

CAST

Robert De Niro Joe Rubin
Gerrit Graham Lloyd Clay
Jonathan Warden Paul Shaw
Richard Hamilton Pop Artist
Megan McCormick Marina
Tina Hirsch Tina [as **Bettina Kugel**]
Jack Cowley Fashion Photographer
Jane Lee Salmons Model
Ashley Oliver Bronx Secretary
Melvin Morgulis "Rat" Vendor
Cynthia Peltz Divorcee
Peter Maloney Earl Roberts
Rutanya Alda Linda (Shoplifter) [as **Ruth Alda**]
Ted Lescault Bookstore Manager
Mona Feit Mystic
M. Dobish T.V. Cameraman
Richard Landis Ex-G.I.
Carol Patton Blonde in Park
Allen Garfield Smut Peddler [as **Alan Garfield**]
Sara-Jo Edlin Nymphomaniac
Roz Kelly Photographer
Ray Tuttle T.V. News Correspondent
Tisa Chiang Vietnamese Girl

CREW

Music Written and Played by **The Children of Paradise**
(**Stephen Soles** - **Eric Kaz** - **Artie Traum**)
Cameraman **Robert Fiore**
Editor **Brian De Palma**
Written by **Charles Hirsch** and **Brian De Palma**
Produced by **Charles Hirsch**
Directed by **Brian De Palma**





BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

by Chris Dumas

1968: tumult, horror, collapse; the spilt blood, the outraged cries, the shattered illusions – and from the rubble spring new illusions, new myths, new outrages. The students: Columbia, le Sorbonne, Mexico City, Japan. Explosions of liberatory disorder against fascist order: the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the Prague Spring, *les événements de Mai*. For the United States, 1968 means the assassinations – Dr King, Bobby Kennedy – and the election of Richard Nixon (*Richard goddamn fucking Nixon!*) to the office of President of the United States. It means black power, “plastics”, *Monday Night Football*, freaks vs straights; it means *The White Album*, Otis Redding, the Mothers of Invention, *Planet of the Apes*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Night of the Living Dead*. And of course, towering over everything, there’s Vietnam. The burning villages. The draft. American soldiers coming home in bags – or not coming home at all. Walter Cronkite in Hue: “We are mired in stalemate.”

This was also the year, in the USA, of the new motion picture rating system: the collapse of the old way of making and controlling images and the advent of specialised, audience-specific ratings like G, M (later GP, then PG), R and X. X didn’t yet mean ‘hardcore’; in 1968, it merely meant ‘adult’ – as in, images and sounds designed for those lucky persons old enough to be sent overseas to get shot. (Somehow, *2001* was rated G.)

Perhaps inevitably, the very first film to be awarded this new X rating was Brian De Palma’s *Greetings* [1968] – a rating that would, in many ways, cast a shadow over his entire career. (“It’s all X to me,” he says in the Baumbach/Paltrow documentary.) *Greetings* contains some breasts, some buttocks, a little nude grappling, a flash of brassiere; at the time, that was enough. It also contains what the members of the Motion Picture Association of America might have considered *antisocial content*: the mechanics (and motivation) for draft-dodging; the mechanics (and motivation) of what was then called ‘computer dating’; the JFK assassination event (as transposed onto a woman’s naked body); the complicated reactions of the Left to Lyndon B. Johnson (whose granitic mug opens and closes the film) – even, and most importantly for De Palma himself, the political-cinematic-ontological challenge posed by Antonioni’s *Blow-up* (1966).

What else could De Palma jam in there? In the background of various shots, you can see Malcolm X (on somebody's wall), Truffaut's book on Alfred Hitchcock and Pauline Kael's *I Lost It at the Movies* (both on somebody's bookshelf), a poster that screams "Abolish HUAC". A Vietnam vet – a real one – makes an appearance and tells *you*, the concerned viewer, what's going on. There's even a demonstration, via close examination of a cheapo East Village rag, of the Lettrist/Situationist principle of *détournement*: take some visual bits of the dominant culture, recombine them in unpleasant and irrational ways, and redistribute, thereby undercutting the semiotics of hegemony... *possibly*. Good times, great oldies.

Greetings, then, is entirely of its historical moment. According to producer and co-writer Charles Hirsch, it was shot for less than \$15,000 in cash, with the rest of the costs deferred: in sum, exactly \$43,100. (In 2018 dollars, that's \$306,000.) This was De Palma's third completed feature, and his first hit; it returned more than a million dollars at the box office, nearly a year before *Easy Rider* rode the counterculture all the way to Fort Knox, so it deserves to be more than just a footnote to histories of the era. To be sure, *Greetings* isn't *The Untouchables* (1987), but unlike *The Wedding Party* (completed in 1966, released in 1969) it's no amateur job either; you can see the intelligence and critical eye of the filmmaker in every shot. Watch the play of background and foreground – in a clothing store, in a public park, in a coffee shop, in a zoo, in a photographer's studio; watch how even the most static shots are conceived for editing, especially the famous moment when Gerrit Graham suddenly looks up into the camera lens and begins shouting about the whitewashing of the events in Dealey Plaza. This is the work of *someone who thinks about images*. As De Palma said in 1969, in an interview later published in Joseph Gelmis's 1970 book *The Film Director as Superstar*:

I don't usually make shots unless there's some reason for them. I'm a very strong believer in the fact that the camera always has to reflect the content. I'm very conscious of the attitude of the camera toward the material, always. [Jean-Luc] Godard was into that nearly ten years ago, of course. But we're just getting into it now, and maybe even more intensely.

The "we" in that last sentence – "*we're just getting into it now*" – doesn't just mean De Palma and Hirsch; it means Americans, and especially American filmmakers (De Palma's friend Jim McBride, for example, whose *David Holzman's Diary* [1967] is even more insistent on the Godardian influence, or De Palma's other friend Martin Scorsese, whose debt to Godard is best represented by a shot of a fizzing Alka-Seltzer in *Taxi Driver* [1976]). In other words, Americans are just discovering their own social reality – and, true to the Godardian ethic, they are also just discovering the cinema. Notoriously, when De Palma is asked in 1969 (in that same interview) to name his cinematic influences, he

mentions Godard, and only Godard: "If I could be the American Godard, that'd be great." (Later, he does mention Hitchcock, but almost offhandedly: "I'd like to try a change of pace and concentrate on a technical, stylistic exercise.") But De Palma isn't talking about the stylistically combative Godard of *Made in U.S.A.* (1966) or *Week End* (1967); he means the observational Godard, the black-and-white (and Academy-ratio) Godard, the Godard who looks at the culture, at people, and sees – not the Godard who paints everything red. For De Palma, too, that stage will come later.

Godard's eye is cold, even glacial, and supernaturally detached; so, notoriously, is De Palma's. "I think there are more interesting social and political things going on here in the United States than in France," De Palma says (in a wild understatement) in that 1969 interview; if you've spent more than two minutes engaged with the facts of De Palma's biography, then you know that he's a scientist, and you can see what a scientist might find so valuable in Godard – the idea that, with just a girl, a gun, and a camera, you can x-ray an entire way of life, an entire nation. In that same interview, Hirsch pointedly mentions *Masculin féminin* (1965), and indeed that's the Godard film that casts the deepest shadow over *Greetings*. It's a film about young men drifting through their new adulthood, pulled this way and that by offstage events: rock and roll, youth culture, Vietnam/Algeria, and, off in the distance but coming in fast, feminism. (There aren't really any women in *Greetings*, but perhaps there aren't really any women in *Masculin féminin*, either.)

In other words, this is a film about *guys*. Specifically, three of them: Robert De Niro, Gerrit Graham, Jonathan Warden. Warden is the straight man, the confused and passive protagonist caught between the complementary frenzies of the heat-seeking voyeur (De Niro) and the flamboyantly paranoid conspiracy nut (Graham). All their scenes together are great, but they're essentially theatrical: the guys stand there and talk, and the background competes for your attention. (This is at least partially because of the film's budget: camera setups cost money; dolly and track rentals cost money; locations cost money; complex editing costs money. The obvious solution: long static takes. The obvious challenge: keeping the audience engaged.)

Almost by default, then, this is an actors' film. In between science and the cinema, De Palma passed through the theatre, first with the Columbia Players (where he met John Lithgow) and then at Sarah Lawrence, where he first aimed a camera at De Niro. You can see that theatrical training in *Greetings*, where the performers are encouraged to pull their characters from within themselves: "If you cast the right people," De Palma said in 1969, "it's hard to go wrong." (With the rare exception, De Palma seems always to cast the right people.) There are other actors in *Greetings*, of course: there's Rutanya Alda, and the wonderfully slimy Allen Garfield, and a *wait-which-one-is-her* appearance by Tina Hirsch,

the producer's then-wife, who went on to be a crack Hollywood editor (*Death Race 2000* [1975], *Gremlins* [1984], *The West Wing* [1999-2006]). But except for some of the more *vérité* sections of the film – the party, the Vietnam reportage, LBJ – everything rests on the faces and voices of these three guys as they knock around Manhattan, trying to get laid, trying to figure out the truth about the world around them, trying not to get sent overseas to get shot. (Unlike De Palma himself, De Niro's character *does* get sent overseas, although he doesn't get shot. Instead, he comes back hornier than ever, and, like Travis Bickle, ends up redirecting those energies in unpredictable ways. See also: *Hi, Mom!* [1970], formerly known as *Son of Greetings*.)

If you look at the early, pre-disillusionment De Palma, i.e. *Greetings* and the films that immediately followed thereupon – *Dionysus in '69* (1970), *Hi, Mom!*, and even *Get to Know Your Rabbit* (1972), ruined object that it is – and contrast those films with what came later (starting with *Sisters* in 1973), then it's easy to come to the same conclusion about the man, and the trajectory of his career, that so many others did. For example, in Michael Pye and Linda Myles's book *The Movie Brats*, De Palma is spoken of as someone who abandoned the Left:

He made people aware, constantly, that film is something artificial and created. He showed screens within screens; he split the screen in two; he showed cameras at work; he parodied other filmmakers' styles. His was a cinema of ideas, not a simple window on the world.

He changed. His name is now on the board at the 20th Century Fox executive block, a sign that he is one of the handful of important people in the studio. The other names are producers, directors, the studio executives who make the decisions, and the salesmen who market the product. He has joined them. His early ideas still have echoes in the form of his films, but the substance of radical thought has dissolved in bloody special effects...

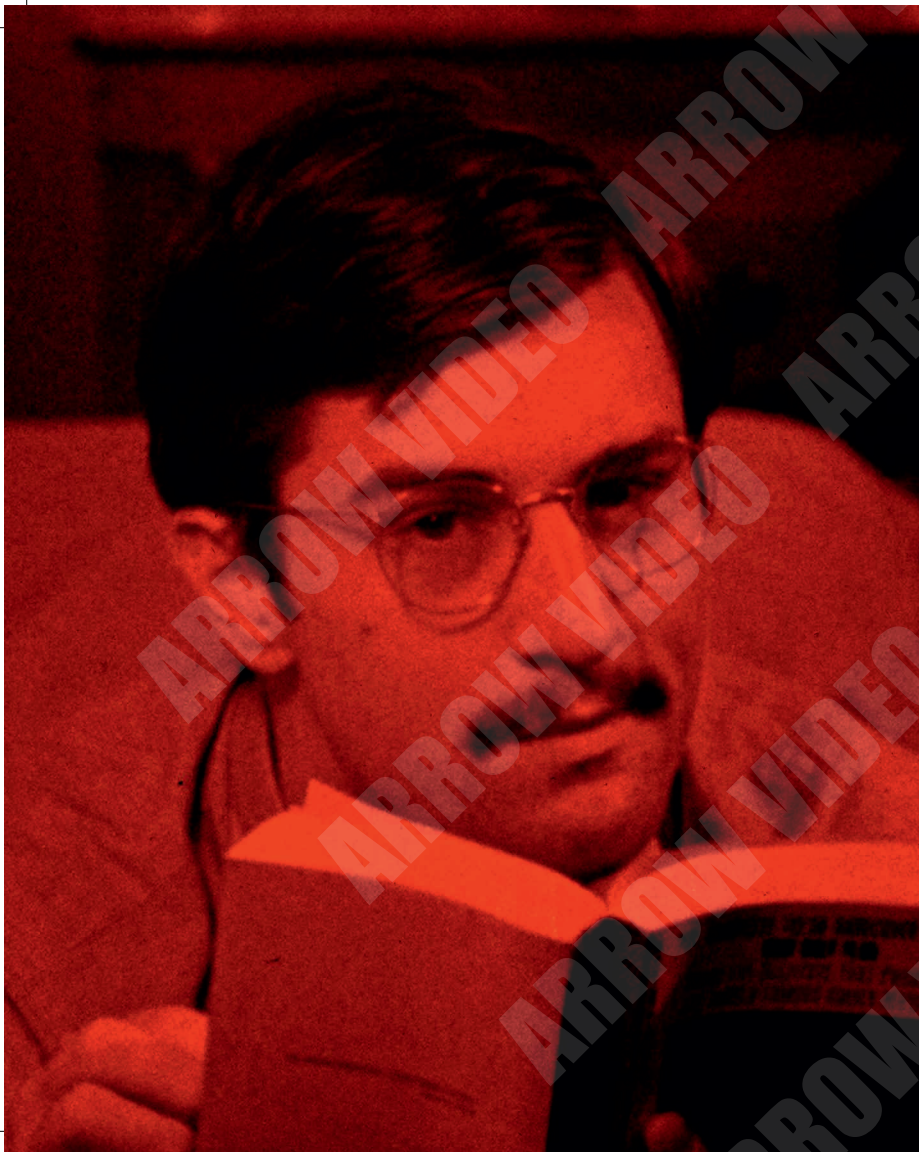
That was published in 1979, a year before De Palma really started to get into trouble. Even here, before he became known as a thief (of Hitchcock) and a counter-insurgent (against Reagan-era feminism), you can trace the logic of the accusations: he sold out, he gave up, he trampled on the red flag of revolution. But, like so many other received notions of the post-Skywalker era, it ain't necessarily so. De Palma never abandoned Godard; what he *did* abandon – and what Godard abandoned, too – was hope. (This is not to say that *La Chinoise* [1967] or *Hi, Mom!* are models of unambiguous commitment to antifascist street action... although Godard did pass through Mao, which De Palma – unlike, say, Bert

Schneider – did not. On the other hand, it does seem to me that, from a certain perspective, *Mission: Impossible* [1996] and *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* [1980] are pretty much the same movie.) Anyway, if you're a serious De Palma head and you already know all of this stuff, let me suggest a thought experiment about hope and its necessary abandonment: what if De Palma had *not* been fired by Warner Bros, and *Get to Know Your Rabbit* had actually been a hit? What would the '70s and '80s have looked like? Go tie *that* one on.

Two final notes. First: it makes it much more nauseating to watch, but consider the punchline of *Greetings*, the Vietnam scene. Does it not remind you, *avant la lettre*, of a certain later De Palma film, a film based on certain events that took place in 1966, events which were reported in *The New Yorker* one year after the release of *Greetings*? Second: my favourite line in the movie occurs during a scene outside the headquarters of the draft board (the real location – they shot there without a permit by pretending to be working on a documentary about GIs). De Niro, intending to get out of the draft by pretending to be *too militaristic and trigger-happy* (!!!), spies a hunched-over young man in a brown corduroy jacket diffidently smoking a cigarette on the steps, obviously waiting his turn before the draft board. De Niro grabs the kid, manhandles him a little, tries to pump up his masculinity and get him ready to sacrifice himself to Uncle Sam. The kid, of course, is Brian De Palma. His one line, spoken to (of all people) Robert De Niro: "*You talkin' to me?*"

Chris Dumas is the author of Un-American Psycho: Brian De Palma and the Political Invisible (Intellect Press, 2012).





THE FILM DIRECTOR AS SUPERSTAR: BRIAN DE PALMA

by Joseph Gelmis

"With rare exceptions, the studios are only interested in filmmakers who've established track records."

Greetings was one of the most celebrated successes among independent films in 1968-69. The film was shot in two weeks at a cost of \$43,100. The distributor had projected a million-dollar gross. And the film's producer and director, both in their twenties, suddenly had money for two more films thrust upon them.

Brian De Palma, the director of *Greetings*, was born in Philadelphia in September 1940 and majored in science at Columbia University. His first feature, *The Wedding Party*, a collaborative experiment, was shot in 1965 but did not get a theatrical release until 1969 – after the success of *Greetings*. His second feature, *Murder à la Mod* [1968], had opened at a revival house in Greenwich Village and died a quiet death after receiving mixed notices.

Charles Hirsch, De Palma's producer and partner, was born in New York, December 1942. He attended Penn State, made a couple of shorts, but decided he was no director.

The following interview was held in Manhattan last spring after the first day of shooting on their new film, which was untitled and referred to only as *Son of Greetings*. To make it, they had twice their previous budget (\$95,000) and double the shooting time (a month). And, for the summer, they were planning to make a thriller with about a \$400,000 budget.

Greetings was an episodic topical satire about evading the draft, computer dating, voyeurism as a life style, and the conspiracy theory of President Kennedy's assassination. Unlike the competition – films about youth by patronising middle-aged producers – *Greetings* displayed an understanding of the sensibilities of its heroes that made it popular with draft-age audiences.

Hirsch and De Palma are friends of independent filmmaker Jim McBride. De Palma borrowed from McBride his technique of tape-recording the sessions in which the actors create their own dialogue in rehearsals. And he planned to use in his new film a segment about a housewife filming her memoirs, which he derived from McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* [1968].

JOSEPH GELMIS: *How did you each get involved in making films?*

CHARLES HIRSCH: When I got out of college, Jim McBride and I founded the Huntington Hartford film centre at the Gallery of Modern Art. We were there for six months and then got fired because we didn't make any money. After that, I ran the Garrick Cinema, a revival house, for about a year and a half. I was the manager and the booker. And then I made two disastrous shorts. I wrote and produced and directed them. They're both in my closet now, and that's where they belong. Then in January 1967, I went to Universal Pictures as Director of New Talent. I was Director of New Talent because I knew more young filmmakers than anyone else.

JG: *Who did you convince of that?*

CH: A guy who was Head of Publicity and who is now the Director of New Talent. I met him at a party. Anyway, at Universal, the idea was to start a short film programme to subsidise young filmmakers, have them make shorts, and if the shorts were good, make features. I found seven or eight guys immediately. But it was too fast for the studio. Nothing happened. I was constantly stalled. And there were a lot of ego problems involved.

One day I was just looking around desperately, trying to get something going. And I discovered that Brian had done two features. Brian and I met and became friendly and started writing things together, on company time and money. He got paid for one treatment they were going to do – and it's still very good, if you know anybody who wants to make a film about a mass murderer.

What finally happened was he said, "Get out from behind your desk. Let's go make a movie." I kept saying no. But I had a vacation coming up by March of 1968. So we did all the pre-production work on our film, and then we shot it during my vacation.

JG: *What was your background, Brian?*

BRIAN DE PALMA: I started making movies when I was at Columbia University as a sophomore. I was with the Columbia Players, and I had a background in photography. I was

obsessed with the idea of directing the Players. But they wouldn't let undergraduates direct them, so I was frustrated. I figured I'd go out and direct movies instead.

I bought a Bolex 16mm movie camera second-hand for about \$150. I hocked everything I had and used my allowance over a period of a year and a half to finance a long, 40-minute short called *Icarus* [1960]. It was pretentious and disastrous. But it was a beginning.

Then I made another film called *660124, The Story of an IBM Card* [1961], which was pretentious but a little better, technically. Then I finally made a short called *Wotan's Wake* [1962], which won a lot of prizes. It was the Rosenthal Award, and all the awards that were available to short films in 1962-63.

JG: *What practical good did winning the awards do?*

BDP: Not much good. You think, wow, terrific, the world's really ready for you. But you find you haven't gotten anywhere. The third short did go into distribution, through Canyon Cinema, and I got \$1,000 from the Rosenthal Award.

By then I was going to Sarah Lawrence College on an MCA writing fellowship. And I got involved in making movies. I collaborated with a teacher and a very wealthy girl, who put up \$100,000, and together we created a 35mm black and white feature called *The Wedding Party*.

I wound up producing and directing and editing. I went out on location without a production manager. So I ended up waking everybody in the morning, and getting the guy who got drunk out of jail. Consequently, the weaknesses of the movie are due in part to my not having worked things out very well in advance. I'm not a very good producer.

After we made *The Wedding Party*, we tried to get a distributor interested. We had about 800 screenings and people saying, "Well, it's interesting, but..." and it went on and on and on. Because the film wasn't strong enough. So we were stuck. Nobody wanted to show it. We're finally opening it now ourselves, since the success of *Greetings*.

Then I started to make documentaries. I made one with another guy in England, and one for the Treasury Department, and then we made one about the Op Art opening at the Museum of Modern Art called *The Responsive Eye* [1966], which is very good and very successful. It's distributed by Pathé Contemporary and makes lots of money. I shot it in four hours, with synched sound. I had to other guys shooting people's reactions to the paintings, and the paintings themselves.



Through the company that we formed, we made enough money from the Treasury movie to go on and make my second feature, *Murder à la Mod* [1968]. It was a sophisticated thriller patterned after *Psycho* [1960]. I'm very turned on to Hitchcock and I like that kind of filmmaking, putting all those little pieces of film together.

Murder à la Mod was a film I did completely. It has many weaknesses and strengths. It's both good and bad. The only thing you learn about making features is that you've got to keep doing it and get over those weaknesses. We couldn't get a distributor for that movie, either. We opened it at the Gate Theater in the East Village. The *Times* gave it a nice review. But it died. That was the end of *Murder à la Mod*.

JG: How did you talk people into financing *Greetings*?

CH: *Greetings* was just an idea. On my part, I was very much influenced by Godard's *Masculin Féminin* [1965]. The idea of a kid and contemporary problems. So Brian and I wrote an outline together which evolved into *Greetings*. While we were in pre-production, I was raising money. And I kept raising money right through the production, whenever Brian said we needed more to film a scene.

What made it possible was my having worked at Universal Pictures. People extend you a lot of credit, because they think that you're the fair-haired young boy at Universal, and that they're going to get all of MCA's business. Therefore, they'd better be nice to you. And you don't tell them they're wrong.

So I got \$20,000 of credit extended to me at the lab – which is unheard of – for \$1,000 cash. Then, after an unsuccessful 16mm version of the film had been shot and abandoned, we started again in 35mm. It's easier to use 35mm, because there's only one kind of film – colour. Shooting in 35mm was more theatrical. We only shot three to one, which is unusual. Ordinarily, as in this movie we're shooting now, it's more like six feet of film shot to every foot of film that appears in the final print.

In raising the money, of course I hit my parents. I got a couple of thousand from them. Then I hit myself. I had a Bolex. I sold it. And I sold some stock. So I got another \$1,500 that way. And then I got two investors for the film, when I thought it was going to be a cheap \$20,000 16mm film. I raised \$7,000 - \$5,000 from one and \$2,000 from the other – and gave them large percentages of the film. I hadn't given percentages to myself or my parents. That was just: "Hey, Ma, give me a thousand bucks." But with these investors, I had to be very business-like. So I convinced them that the film was going to make money. And I didn't even believe it myself at that time.

Greetings was shot for under \$15,000 cash and the rest was all deferred. The total cost of the film was \$43,100, which includes about \$4,000 of mistakes made when we started in 16mm, rentals, and other things. I paid out very little money. I gave away 28% of the what's called the producer's share of the profits. Brian and I are taking out a chunk apiece, first. A fair one. But after that, whatever comes in, 30% goes to the two major investors and 28% goes to the cast and crew.

JG: What made you switch from 16mm to 35mm?

BDP: Two problems. One, the fact that the commercial labs have the attitude about 16mm that it's for newsreels and junk. That's why our first version in 16mm was badly scratched – because they just don't take that much care with it. The other reason was that I felt that the weakest part about the film was the way it looked. The performances and the ideas were good. But it looked terrible. We had shot about a week's work, an immense amount of footage – I'd been shooting four and five scenes a day. And it would have meant going back to reshoot it.

So Chuck was already \$4,000 in debt with this useless footage. And I was saying, "The only thing we can do is go forward and shoot in 35mm." The fact he did it still amazes me. He was really scared. And so was I.

CH: Once you get into debt past a couple of hundred dollars you become a big shot. Technically, *Greetings* is doing very well and has already taken in \$130,000 in New York alone. But I'm still \$31,000 in debt on it. Now I don't have to worry too much about it, because it looks like I'm going to get it back. But when I went into debt, it was weird. I had a lot of status. People thought, "That Chuck, he owes 30 grand. He's a big deal all right." So what happens is that once you're in debt past a certain point it all becomes unreal and you don't worry about it anymore.

JG: What sort of preparations were involved in writing and making *Greetings*?

CH: It works this way. We start on a general theme. And we get a broad idea. Then we put in all the incidents. Brian puts in most of them. And then I say, "This has to go here, this has to go there." We both like to screw girls, so the girl-chasing part of the three guys' obsession in *Greetings* was easy enough. And I'm a bit of a voyeur. But Brian's a real voyeur – so that element was Brian's contribution. And he's a bit of a Kennedy conspiracy buff. But I'm the nut. So we put those two things in. And then I give an order to it. I say, "Here's a beginning and a middle and an end," and I give it to Brian. The Brian, when he rehearses with the cast, develops the dialogue.

JG: *Would you describe the process?*

BDP: It's one way to make movies, hardly the only way. But for this kind of situation, where we deal with basically political material, it's all in the casting. If you cast the right people, it's hard to go wrong. I try to use very real people. Like in the new film we're doing, we have a black militant. Not an actor. But a young kid who's radical and who's not play-acting. So once you get the people who really know the material and feel strongly about it, they can work up scenes like nothing you've ever done.

I constantly shape the material. We tape-record the rehearsals when the actors are working out the dialogue in the scenes. Then we make a transcript. Then I constantly move the material around, shaping it, compressing it, putting in lines that I think are good to point up the scenes. Very seldom do I ever let an actor learn a script, learn the lines. For this movie we're doing now, I'm the only one who has a script. I'm the only one who knows how all the parts and dialogue and scenes fit together.

When we have a script prepared in a conventional way it tends to be organized along a certain set fashion, which looks great on paper. Then you give it back to the actors. And it has an arbitrary shape. I prefer spontaneous confusion which has a central impetus carrying it.

The thing that we do, that others seldom do, is to rehearse out actors intensely. For this new movie, we've been rehearsing nearly eight weeks. They know the shape of the scene. Once I've got that in my head, what the material is, then I go home and think out formal ideas of how I'm going to shoot the material. When the actors get there, I just run them through it a couple of times and then go.

Most of the time I get things on one take. If you have the right elements, and they've built up their own material and you get them on camera and work them up to the right degree, they can carry it right through. It's like they've been through that path and they know where they're going.

JG: *Where did you get the three lead actors in Greetings?*

BDP: The assassination buff was a sophomore at Columbia. He handled most of the intellectual material. He's a very bright guy. Most actors aren't that sharp. I have to have actors who can really think on their feet. Usually, since they make up their own material, it has to be very close to them. Like the painter in the zoo who's talking about his "blow-up"

paintings, he's a real artist. And the guy at the party coming back from Vietnam and talking about his experiences, he was a real GI.

What you have to understand is that I don't write lines for anyone. They create their own material. Of course we create the situations. But they're cast so close to type that our character who plays an intellectual *is* an intellectual and does have strong feelings about the assassination of President Kennedy. And *all* those guys *are* afraid of being drafted.

Every time we went down to Whitehall Street everybody was scared stiff because next week *he* was going to go down for real, or he had just come back from taking his physical the previous week. All the problems were very close to the cast and the crew. There's nothing in that material that had to be interjected.

JG: *Those were location shots of the front steps of the Whitehall draft induction centre?*

BDP: Yes. All the guys standing on the steps the first time you see the place are the whole crew of *Greetings*. We told anybody who asked what we were doing there that we were shooting a documentary about GIs.

JG: *Where did you get the crew? It was a non-union picture, wasn't it?*

BDP: It certainly was. We had a crew of eight, made up of friends and relatives and students from NYU – anyone who wanted the chance to work on a feature film for \$50 or half percent interest. It took us two weeks to shoot.

There wasn't much material to edit, really, in *Greetings*. It wasn't very interesting to put together. We shot in four-minute takes, mostly. So it was just a matter of stringing together a series of episodes.

JG: *What was your reason for shooting in complete four-minute takes?*

BDP: When you've got enough footage for a 90-minute film and have so little time to do it you have to conceive things in very large chunks. So most of the scenes were shot in planes, where two things are going on and playing against each other constantly.

I don't usually make shots unless there's some reason for them. I'm a very strong believer in the fact that the camera always has to reflect the content. I'm very conscious of the attitude of the camera toward the material, always. Godard was into that nearly ten years ago, of course. But we're just getting into it now, and maybe even more intensely.



Every shot should have a justification, a justification relative to the material. For instance, take the scene where the guy is tracing the course of the assassination bullet on the naked girl and the camera is overhead. The strength of that is the fact that you get used to that position – overhead and looking down on them. When he turns around, it's suddenly a shock. Because you never thought he would look up. He might have been expected to look left or right. But having him all the way around and look up at us gave the scene enough structural interest to help me get away with a four-minute take.

Plus the fact you have a nude girl on the bed anyway, so people will sit there and watch that while he's drawing the angles of entry of the bullet on her back. So that entire action is holding the shot as a whole together. Yet *Greetings* is long and talky. It bothers me. I like films that use cuts to build suspense. There's not much of that in *Greetings*. But that's something we didn't anticipate when we started.

JG: *How did you learn the technical aspects of filmmaking?*

BDP: I have a very good scientific background. I used to build computers in high school. I know all about sound, optics, and cameras. I never considered myself an artist. I was going to be a physicist. I did all the work on my shorts, all the shooting, all the cutting, put all the sound in.

JG: *Who are the influences on you as a filmmaker?*

BDP: Godard's a terrific influence, of course, if I could be the American Godard, that would be great. I think there are more interesting social and political things going on here in the United States than in France. And if we can have some kind of sounding board through movies, if Chuck and I could develop the material and evolve the structure and a style for it, that's the millennium.

JG: *Why doesn't anything ever come out of the young talents programmes the studios periodically inaugurate?*

BDP: With rare exceptions, the studios are only interested in filmmakers who've established track records. I know every up and coming director there is in town. The studios do too. There are at least a half-dozen young talents who've already shown they know how to make films but couldn't convince a studio to finance or distribute a project. They weren't interested in me until they saw the grosses for *Greetings*, which Universal had refused to handle when we first offered it to them. Nobody takes a chance on you until you've got a film that's earned some money, so you've got to raise the money for that first film yourself.

JG: *How did you finally get a distributor for Greetings?*

CH: We were getting pretty desperate and even thinking of opening it at Jonas Mekas's basement (the New York Filmmakers Cinémathèque). Someone knew the son of the guy who runs Sigma III, and we invited him to see the film. He saw it and made an offer. At that point, we thought: "My God, an offer." So we accepted. And it was a big mistake. Because there aren't many guys whose first independent film is successful. But of those guys, nearly all of them make bad distribution deals. They're as innocent as some foreign directors. For instance, *Dear John* [*Käre John*, 1963] was sold in the US for \$30,000 and made millions. *A Man and a Woman* [*Un homme et une femme*, 1966] was sold for \$40,000 and made \$8,000,000. So we've joined the ranks of successful filmmakers who've dealt themselves out of the major share of the profits of their film. If *Greetings* made a fortune, Sigma III is going to get nearly 80% of all the profits. I call that giving it away.

JG: *What is your relationship with the unions on the new film?*

BDP: The unions say you can't make a non-union picture. So we work undercover. There's been absolute secrecy in the making of this new movie. No publicity at all, because of how the actors' union almost wrecked Bob Downey's picture *Putney Swope* [1969] by scaring off his leading actor.

We hate the pressure of being forced into a bigger budget for the wrong reasons. For this kind of material, we've got to keep down the budget. I don't want to be smart-assed about the unions. But why should I be spending all my money on unions when I'd rather put it into talent and the other areas like that?

JG: *Are there enough technicians and actors around to work outside the unions with you?*

BDP: Sure. Actors prefer our kind of movie. We give them a chance to do their own thing. And there's another aspect to our kind of production. It's an entity. There's a strong solidarity of purpose. We're all in it together the whole time. There isn't any of the big-budget operation, where some people fly in for four days' work and then fly out.

We can't just hire technicians. Suppose I had a union crew here. All those guys are 400 years old. I would probably have very little rapport with them on any level. You know, "We come, we do our job, we leave as soon as possible." There can't be that kind of feeling on a movie like this. Everybody's committed, politically, because they like the material, in all ways.

There's virtually no problem with amateurs not being serious enough to keep showing up for work. The fact is, for this kind of movie, kids can handle it. Kids can make features. Kids can do these things. We don't need all this union nonsense. You're looking for content and style. You don't need heavy equipment. I admit our sound isn't going to be perfect, because it's not shot in a studio. But that seems to me less important than the kind of freedom and flexibility in space and time you can have by shooting films this way.

JG: *What is it that everybody is so committed to in your new film?*

BDP: This film is much more radical than *Greetings*. It deals with the obscenity of the white middle class. And we are white middle class, Chuck and I and everybody we know. So we're making a movie about the white middle class. And we're using the blacks to reflect the white culture. Because the blacks stand outside the system and they see what we are.

The film is divided into three parts. There's a housewife's diary, which gives you an interior view of one apartment in a white middle-class housing project. And there's a pseudo cinéma vérité documentary on National Intellectual Television, called *NIT Journal* – and it's the documentary of the revolution, the outside, the black view of the white middle class. And then there's the white voyeur, carried over from *Greetings* and now working on an entire housing project as his grand opus. He has the overview of the whole thing.

Within the documentary section we have something called *Be Black Baby*, which is an environmental play in which white middle-class audiences are painted black so they can be put through the black experience. The thing that holds this documentary together is that it's a journal of the day in the life of a black revolutionary. He's part of the troupe putting on the *Be Black Baby* play.

I got the idea for the housewife making a film diary of her life from *David Holzman's Diary*. She starts out with home movies. It gets more and more obsessive. She's very concerned with *things*. She has a scene where she talks about her body the way she talks about chairs and objects. Everything becomes an object for her.

The section with the voyeur is going to be intercut between these other two worlds. The voyeur is like a character in a John Barth novel who takes on whatever happens to him. He's environmental. As soon as the environment changes, like a chameleon, he joins it. A voyeur is always outside. But once he gets in, he becomes revolutionised. And he's in the front ranks when the revolution comes.

The *NIT Journal* is being shot in 16mm black and white. The woman's diary is being shot in 16mm colour. Because it's all things she could conceivably shoot herself. The rest of the movie, the overview, is all shot in 35mm colour. They're constantly weaving into each other. Finally they all come together in the housing project. It's a film that says that the only way to deal with the white middle class is to blow it up.

JG: *What's the movie you're hoping to do this summer?*

BDP: It's probably going to be a Hitchcockian suspense movie, which I think will be good for us. I'd like to try a change of pace and concentrate on a technical, stylistic exercise. I'm interested in things like split-screen and 3D. I'd like to work in a different form for a while. I wouldn't mind doing something like *Psycho* the next time, something that reprieves me from the political and moral dilemmas of our society for a while.

ABOUT THE RESTORATIONS

The Wedding Party and *Greetings* have been exclusively restored by Arrow Films for this release.

The Wedding Party is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with mono audio. The original 35mm camera negative element was scanned in 2K resolution on a 4K Arriscan at OCN Labs, CT. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The original mono mix was remastered from the optical negative reels at OCN Labs.

All materials for this restoration were made available by Troma Entertainment Inc.

Greetings is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with mono audio. An original 35mm camera Internegative element was scanned in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director at EFilm, Burbank. The film was graded on Digital Vision's Nucoda Film Master and restored at R3Store Studios in London. The original mono mix was remastered from the optical negative reels at Deluxe Audio Services, Hollywood.

All materials for this restoration were made available by Charles Hirsch and Academy Film Service.

Restorations Supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**
R3Store Studios **Gerry Gedge, Jo Griffin, Andrew O'Hagan, Rich Watson**
EFilm **David Morales**
Deluxe Audio Services **Jordan Perry**
OCN Labs **Joe Rubin**
MGM **Scott Grossman**
Troma Entertainment Inc. **Levi White**
Academy Film Service **Rick Zide**

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Technical Producer **James White**
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SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, James Blackford, Chris Dumas, Daniel Griffith, Scott Grossman,
Charles Hirsch, Glenn Kenny, David Mackenzie, Christina Newland, Brad Stevens, Rick Zide



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