Mythologies

By Roland Barthes

The Romans in Films

In Mankiewicz's Julius Caesar, all the characters are wearing fringes. Some have them curly, some straggly, some tufted, some oily, all have them well combed, and the bald are not admitted, although there are plenty to be found in Roman history. Those who have little hair have not been let off for all that, and the hairdresser - the king-pin of the film - has still managed to produce one last lock which duly reaches the top of the forehead, one of those Roman foreheads, whose smallness has at all times indicated a specific mixture of self-righteousness, virtue and conquest.

What then is associated with these insistent fringes? Quite simply the label of Roman-ness. We therefore see here the mainspring of the Spectacle - the sign - operating in the open. The frontal lock overwhelms one with evidence, no one can doubt that he is in Ancient Rome. And this certainty is permanent: the actors speak, act, torment themselves, debate 'questions of universal import', without losing, thanks to this little flag displayed on their foreheads, any of their historical plausibility. Their general representativeness can even expand in complete safety, cross the ocean and the centuries, and merge into the Yankee mugs of Hollywood extras: no matter, everyone is reassured, installed in the quiet certainty of a universe without duplicity, where Romans are Romans thanks to the most legible of signs: hair on the forehead.

A Frenchman, to whose eyes American faces still have something exotic, finds comical the combination of the morphologies of these gangster-sheriffs with the little Roman fringe: it rather looks like an excellent music-hall gag. This is because for the French the sign in this case overshoots the target and discredits itself by letting its aim appear clearly. But this very fringe, when combed on the only naturally Latin forehead in the film, that of Marlon Brando, impresses us and does not make us laugh; and it is not impossible that part of the success of this actor in Europe is due to the perfect 25 integration of Roman capillary habits with the general morphology of the characters he usually portrays. Conversely, one cannot believe in Julius Caesar, whose physiognomy is that of an AngloSaxon lawyer - a face with which one is already acquainted through a thousand bit parts in thrillers or comedies, and a compliant skull on which the hairdresser has raked, with great effort, a lock of hair.

In the category of capillary meanings, here is a sub-sign, that of nocturnal surprises: Portia and Calpurnia, waken up at dead of night, have conspicuously uncombed hair. The former, who is young, expresses disorder by flowing locks: her unreadiness is, so to speak, of the first degree. The latter, who is middle-aged, exhibits a more painstaking vulnerability: a plait winds round her neck and comes to rest on her right shoulder so as to impose the

traditional sign of disorder, asymmetry. But these signs are at the same time excessive and ineffectual: they postulate a 'nature' which they have not even the courage to acknowledge fully: they are not 'fair and square'.

Yet another sign in this Julius Caesar: all the faces sweat constantly. Laborers, soldiers, conspirators, all have their austere and tense features streaming (with Vaseline). And closeups are so frequent that evidently sweat here is an attribute with a purpose. Like the Roman fringe or the nocturnal plait, sweat is a sign. Of what? Of moral feeling. Everyone is sweating because everyone is debating something within himself; we are here supposed to be in the locus of a horribly tormented virtue, that is, in the very locus of tragedy, and it is sweat which has the function of conveying this. The populace, upset by the death of Caesar, then by the arguments of Mark Antony, is sweating, and combining economically, in this single sign, the intensity of its emotion and the simplicity of its condition. And the virtuous men, Brutus, Cassius, Casca, are ceaselessly perspiring too, testifying thereby to the enormous physiological labour produced in them by a virtue just about to give birth to a crime. To sweat is to think - which evidently rests on the postulate, appropriate to a nation of businessmen, that thought is a violent, cataclysmic operation, of which sweat is only 26 the most benign symptom. In the whole film, there is but one man who does not sweat and who remains smooth-faced, unperturbed and watertight: Caesar. Of course Caesar, the object of the crime, remains dry since he does not know, he does not think, and so must keep the firm and polished texture of an exhibit standing isolated in the courtroom. Here again, the sign is ambiguous: it remains on the surface, yet does not for all that give up the attempt to pass itself off as depth. It aims at making people understand (which is laudable) but at the same time suggests that it is spontaneous (which is cheating); it presents itself at once as intentional and irrepressible, artificial and natural, manufactured and discovered. This can lead us to an ethic of signs. Signs ought to present themselves only in two extreme forms: either openly intellectual and so remote that they are reduced to an algebra, as in the Chinese theatre, where a flag on its own signifies a regiment; or deeply rooted, invented, so to speak, on each occasion, revealing an internal, a hidden facet, and indicative of a moment in time, no longer of a concept (as in the art of Stanislavsky, for instance). But the intermediate sign, the fringe of Roman-ness or the sweating of thought, reveals a degraded spectacle, which is equally afraid of simple reality and of total artifice. For although it is a good thing if a spectacle is created to make the world more explicit, it is both reprehensible and deceitful to confuse the sign with what is signified. And it is a duplicity which is peculiar to bourgeois art: between the intellectual and the visceral sign is hypocritically inserted a hybrid, at once elliptical and pretentious, which is pompously christened 'nature'.

The Poor and the Proletariat

Charlie Chaplin's latest gag has been to transfer half of his Soviet prize into the funds of the Abbé Pierre. At bottom, this amounts to establishing an identity between the nature of the poor man and that of the proletarian. Chaplin has always seen the proletarian under the guise of the poor man: hence the broadly human force of his representations but

also their political ambiguity. This is quite evident in this admirable film, Modern Times, in which he repeatedly approaches the proletarian theme, but never endorses it politically. What he presents us with is the proletarian still blind and mystified, defined by the immediate character of his needs, and his total alienation at the hands of his masters (the employers and the police).

For Chaplin, the proletarian is still the man who is hungry; the representations of hunger are always epic with him: excessive size of the sandwiches, rivers of milk, fruit which one tosses aside hardly touched. Ironically, the food-dispensing machine (which is part of the employers' world) delivers only fragmented and obviously flavorless nutriment. Ensnared in his starvation, Chaplin-Man is always just below political awareness. A strike is a catastrophe for him because it threatens a man truly blinded by his hunger; this man achieves an awareness of the working-class condition only when the poor man and the proletarian coincide under the gaze (and the blows) of the police. Historically, Man according to Chaplin roughly corresponds to the worker of the French Restoration, rebelling against the machines, at a loss before strikes, fascinated by the problem of bread-winning (in the literal sense of the word), but as yet unable to reach a knowledge of political causes and an insistence on a collective strategy.

But it is precisely because Chaplin portrays a kind of primitive proletarian, still outside Revolution, that the representative force of the latter is immense. No socialist work has yet succeeded in expressing the humiliated condition of the worker with so much violence and generosity. Brecht alone, perhaps, has glimpsed the necessity, for socialist art, of always taking Man on the eve of Revolution, that is to say, alone, still blind, on the point of having his eyes opened to the revolutionary light by the 'natural' excess of his wretchedness. Other works, in showing the worker already engaged in a conscious fight, subsumed under the Cause and the Party, give an account of a political reality which is necessary, but lacks aesthetic force.

Now Chaplin, in conformity with Brecht's idea, shows the public its blindness by presenting at the same time a man who is blind and what is in front of him. To see someone who does not see is the best way to be intensely aware of what he does not see: thus, at a Punch and Judy show, it is the children who announce to Punch what he pretends not to see. For instance, Charlie Chaplin is in a cell, pampered by the warders, and lives there according to the ideal of the American petit-bourgeois: with legs crossed, he reads the paper under a portrait of Lincoln; but his delightfully self-satisfied posture discredits this ideal completely, so that it is no longer possible for anyone to take refuge in it without noticing the new alienation which it contains. The slightest ensnarements are thus made harmless, and the man who is poor is repeatedly cut off from temptation. All told, it is perhaps because of this that Chaplin-Man triumphs over everything: because he escapes from everything, eschews any kind of sleeping partner, and never invests in man anything but man himself. His anarchy, politically open to discussion, perhaps represents the most efficient form of revolution in the realm of art.