



JOHN BARRY: SOUNDTRACKING BOND AND BEYOND

Petulia

Petulia

Director: Richard Lester
©/Production Companies:
Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, Petersham Films Ltd
Producer: Raymond Wagner
Associate Producer: Denis O'Dell
Executive Associate Producer: Don Devlin
Production Manager: Emmett Emerson
Location Manager: Harry Zubrinsky
Assistant Director: John Bloss
Continuity: Rita Davison
Casting: Fred Roos
Screenplay: Lawrence B. Marcus
Adaptation: Barbara Turner
Based on the novel by: John Haase
Director of Photography: Nicholas [sic] Roeg
Camera Operators: Paul Wilson, Freddie Cooper
Chief Electrician: Gibby Germaine
Editor: Antony Gibbs
Production Designer: Tony Walton
Associate Art Director: Dean Tavoularis
Set Decorator: Audrey Blasdel
Lightshow: Paul Hawkins
Furnishing: Gumps
Design Consultant: David Hicks
Property Master: Stephen Ferry
Costume Designer: Tony Walton
Wardrobe: Rita Riggs, Ray Summers
Miss Christie's Costumes: Arlette Nastat 'Real'
Make-up: Gus Norin
Hair stylist: Vivian Zavitz
Music/Music Conductor: John Barry
Sound: Francis E. Stahl
Dubbing Mixer: Gerry Humphreys
Dubbing Editor: Don Challis
Cast:
Julie Christie (*Petulia Danner*)
George C. Scott (*Archie Bollen*)
Richard Chamberlain (*David Danner*)
Arthur Hill (*Barney*)
Shirley Knight (*Polo*)
Pippa Scott (*May*)
Kathleen Widdoes (*Wilma*)
Roger Bowen (*Warren*)
Richard Dysart (*hotel receptionist*)
Ruth Kobart, Ellen Geer (*nuns*)
Lou Gilbert (*Mr Howard*)
Nate Esformes (*Mr Mendoza*)
Maria Val (*Mrs Mendoza*)
Vincent Arias (*Oliver*)
Eric Weiss (*Michael*)
Kevin Cooper (*Stevie*)
Joseph Cotten (*Mr Danner*)
The Grateful Dead
Big Brother and the Holding Company members of
the Committee members of the American
Conservatory Theatre Co (ACT)
Austin Pendleton (*intern*) *
Barbara Colby (*patient*) *
René Auberjonois (*salesman*) *
Josephine Nichols (*neighbour*) *
De Ann Mears (*nurse*) *
USA/UK 1968©
105 mins
35mm

* Uncredited

John Barry wrote an unsettling, anxious score for Richard Lester's time capsule of late sixties, psychedelia-era San Francisco. The film also includes cameos from the Grateful Dead and Janis Joplin's Big Brother & the Holding Company. Julie Christie, at the peak of her powers, plays the sexually frustrated Petulia, while Lester's use of rapid flashbacks only adds to the high-60s allure of this slowly unwinding parable. A lost masterpiece.

bfi.org.uk

A contemporary review

Richard Lester's *Petulia* is one of those movies which begins as a succession of glittering, confusing fragments and only gradually develops a narrative line. Or rather, the narrative line is there from the beginning but there is a deliberate effort to prevent you from spotting it too easily; you are admitted to it only by degrees. The danger of the device is that interest is likely to decline as the mystification is dispersed, and this could easily have happened to *Petulia*; fortunately, it does not.

The story, it turns out in this case, is simple to the point of triteness. Archie, a San Francisco doctor (George C. Scott), has a brief affair with a wild and surprising girl called Petulia. He is divorced; she is married. She is beaten up and practically killed by her husband. Archie is in love with her, but he loses her; she goes back to her husband. Time passes, and he sees her from time to time in the distance.

It is the sort of old-fashioned story which needs old-fashioned feeling to make it work. And, surprisingly, this is what it gets. None of Lester's films so far has had much heart, but *Petulia* has. There is altogether a different voice to be heard in it, far from the excited noises of *The Knack*, the Beatles' films, or *How I Won the War*. There is a new and unexpected seriousness of tone, and the film moves on a more resonant imaginative level. It is strikingly beautiful visually, but visual beauty alone won't hold an audience's attention beyond the point when the narrative line becomes clear. *Petulia* succeeds because it makes the audience care.

The Knack fantasised reality; it was a commentary on a situation, not the situation itself. Lester's problem has always been how to approach the human substance without blushing too much. It's a bit embarrassing, telling a story; and it's not less embarrassing to have to tell a straight love story between a phlegmatic doctor and a kooky Julie Christie. The method he adopts somehow has to carry him through this embarrassment. Hence the obscurity of *Petulia*'s beginning, with its near subliminal shots, time sequence out of order, and counterpointed sound.

Hence also the formal patterns and parallel situations in the story. Petulia's husband David (Richard Chamberlain) is given to fits of extreme sadistic violence; so is his father (Joseph Cotten). The violence is somehow connected with having a lot of money; and if money is an infection and violence a symptom, Petulia has the disease too, for she is also impulsive and violent; and she passes on her violence to Archie, who uncharacteristically flares up in a scene with his divorced wife Polo (radiantly played by Shirley Knight).

JOHN BARRY: SOUNDTRACKING BOND AND BEYOND

Never Let Go

Fri 2 Feb 20:10; Sun 11 Feb 15:30

Petulia

Sat 3 Feb 16:00; Thu 15 Feb 20:40

The Ipcress File

Sat 3 Feb 18:30; Sat 10 Feb 20:50

Deadfall

Sat 3 Feb 20:30; Sun 25 Feb 18:15

Goldfinger

Sun 4 Feb 16:10 (+ intro by Eddi Fiegel, journalist, author and John Barry biographer); Wed 21 Feb 20:45

You Only Live Twice

Sun 4 Feb 18:40; Tue 6 Feb 20:30 (+ intro)

Four in the Morning

Mon 5 Feb 20:30; Tue 13 Feb 17:45

Spies, Swingers and Shadows: The Films and Scores of John Barry

Tue 6 Feb 18:10

The Whisperers

Fri 9 Feb 18:00; Sat 24 Feb 20:40

John Barry on TV

Sat 10 Feb 18:00

Boom

Sat 24 Feb 15:10; Wed 28 Feb 18:00

Midnight Cowboy

Sat 24 Feb 17:50; Wed 28 Feb 20:45

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

**SIGHT
AND
SOUND**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Power and marriage are connected. Archie is outside it, a useless visitor of his children on Sundays, a powerless outsider when it comes to rescuing Petulia from her appalling family, and at the end a mere spectator beside her triumphant pregnancy. Archie is a doctor, and it is Petulia who first makes a pass – more than a pass, an assault – at him; but Petulia has first seen him, through the window of an operating theatre, working on the broken leg of Oliver, the small Mexican boy she has been looking after. Later she collapses in his room after her husband has cracked one of her ribs, and later still when she is beaten nearly to the point of death, it is only Archie's expertness as a doctor which saves her life. In other words, she seeks out a lover who will also be a healer. Oliver's leg is broken when he is run over in the street, and the story opens at an accident-prevention function ('Shake for Highway Safety'). All these links seem to me to add a pleasing complexity, but not density, to the film; they are part of the surface.

George C. Scott plays Archie in a similarly indirect way. He visits his children, takes them to Alcatraz (a pity about this, as *Point Blank* has already made use of this location) or to the zoo, but his attention is elsewhere. With Polo and her new man, he is trapped, embarrassed, anxious to get away. His friends make a ham-fisted attempt to get him to go back to Polo but it is as if they are talking another language. He retreats into his work, becoming more and more isolated. From time to time he catches glimpses of Petulia, but she is not the same person. In a totally self-denying way, this seems to me to be almost a great performance, except that the word 'great' does violence to its poise and feeling and reserve. Julie Christie seems to me very well cast in relation to Scott: he is not a handsome man or an obvious sexual warrior, and the results of the irruption into his life of someone with her looks and directness of approach are predictable but accurately and movingly observed.

Shot in nine weeks largely in San Francisco, with dazzling colour photography by Nicolas Roeg, for British audiences it will be rather like watching Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success*. Something American in these American-born directors reasserts itself, not merely in the setting; there is a sudden adjustment of scale to a larger and more serious society. In Mackendrick's case, something subsequently went wrong. But for Lester, after this brilliantly executed and deeply felt film, one can only have the highest hopes. And – I almost forgot to say – it is often very funny. I liked especially the visit to the automated motel, conceived on skin-flick lines, with radar-controlled king-size key and electric bed; and the scene with the woman in the hospital being told that the television set in her room is only a dummy to encourage her to hire a real one. The screenplay, by Lawrence Marcus, derives from a novel by John Haase.

James Price, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1968