

Preminger, Otto

Chris Fujiwara

May 2002 Great Directors Issue 20



b. December 5, 1905, Vienna, Austria.

d. April 23, 1986, New York, USA.

[filmography](#)

[bibliography](#)

[articles in *Senses*](#)

[web resources](#)

Otto Preminger was born in 1905 (not 1906, as usually reported), the son of a prosecutor for the Austrian Empire. Otto studied law but wanted to become an actor, and at 17 joined the company of Max Reinhardt. He rose quickly to director, was chosen to take over Reinhardt's theater on the latter's retirement, and was offered, at age 27, the post of the head of the State Theatre in Vienna. He turned it down on learning that a condition of assuming the post was conversion to Catholicism (the Premingers were Jewish, although Otto was not religious).

Preminger's theater successes came to the attention of film and theater producers in America, and in 1936, he arrived in Hollywood to direct for 20th Century-Fox. His Hollywood career floundered until, in 1944, he was assigned to produce and, eventually, direct the film version of

Vera Caspary's mystery novel *Laura*. The result was a hit that solidified Preminger's reputation and has endured as a classic.



While under contract to 20th Century-Fox, Preminger directed several thrillers that elaborated on the spell of *Laura: Fallen Angel* (1945), *Whirlpool* (1949), *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), *The 13th Letter* (1951), and (on loan to RKO) *Angel Face* (1952). This group of films – to which may be added the Joan Crawford soap opera *Daisy Kenyon* (1947) – remains, for some viewers, the core of the Preminger canon: black-and-white films with ambiguous narratives foregrounding male obsession and female perversity, marked by fluid camera movements and the presence of iconic actors such as Dana Andrews and Gene Tierney.

Preminger launched his career as an independent producer-director with the comedy *The Moon Is Blue* (1953), released without the Production Code's Seal of Approval (withheld on the grounds of supposedly risqué dialogue, including the word "virgin"). He flouted Hollywood censorship again by filming *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), Nelson Algren's novel about a heroin addict.

After *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), which remains, with *Laura*, Preminger's most popular film, he made a series of long, sweeping, all-star blockbusters based on popular novels on social-political themes: *Exodus* (1960), *Advise and Consent* (1962), *The Cardinal* (1963), *In Harm's Way* (1965), *Hurry Sundown* (1966). Though these films were noted for their location shooting and other hallmarks of realism, they met with decreasing respect from critics. One factor in the critical disapproval of Preminger was his public image: notorious for his tyranny on the set, Preminger cultivated his celebrity and became, along with Hitchcock, one of the only Hollywood directors to be widely familiar to the general public.

It would be easy to say that Preminger was *also* an artist, but this is not precisely what needs to be said. "His enemies have never forgiven him for being a director with the personality of a producer," Andrew Sarris wrote. (1) Preminger presents himself through his works as someone essentially detached, impersonal, and objective. In his impassive long takes, different ideologies and points of view battle for dominance; his films emphasise pragmatism but gravitate toward irony, doubt, and enigma. The audience leaves *Exodus*, as Gary Indiana wrote, less certain about the issues surrounding the formation of the state of Israel than when it went in. (2)

To the critics of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Preminger was almost a mystical figure. In 1954, *Angel Face* and *The Moon Is Blue* moved Jacques Rivette to ask "What is *mise en scène*?" and to give this definition, which sums up what attracted the more intellectual French cineastes to American cinema: "the creation of a precise complex of sets and characters, a network of relationships, an architecture of connections, an animated complex that seems suspended in space." (3)



Preminger represents the height of the kind of cinema Rivette defines here (which might be called "classical"): one in which bodies, movements, spaces, gestures, and dialogue are contained within an ever-changing unity, the transcendental comprehension of which is both the task of the work and an elusive promise held out by the medium. Crucial to this conception of cinema is the camera's power to link characters and place. In Preminger's films (as in Nicholas Ray's), shots of the exteriors of buildings, of people entering rooms, etc., are not merely "establishing" shots, preludes whose content is equivalent to their function; rather, such shots are central to a main purpose of the films – to find a visual correlative for the freedom of people to determine their own destinies. Already clear in *Laura*, *Fallen Angel*, and *Daisy Kenyon*, this drive becomes dominant in *Exodus* and *Advise and Consent*, which follow the coming-together and splitting-apart of large casts of characters through a dazzling range of tonalities and settings.

Preminger defines his characters in terms of the social and institutional structures that protect them and that sometimes conceal them. Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews), the detective hero of *Laura*, makes his crucial assertion of individuality – his admission that he is in love with Laura (Gene Tierney) – through a paradoxical and revealing retreat to the impersonality of procedure, when he takes her to headquarters for questioning. His admission – "It was getting so I felt I needed official surroundings" – could be the motto for other Preminger heroes, such as

Fermoyle (Tom Tryon) in *The Cardinal*.

Preminger's concern with the contrasting discourses and gestures possible within a given structure makes his films a privileged terrain for the study of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "speech genres." (4) Throughout *Advise and Consent*, perhaps his richest film from this point of view, Preminger explores situations in which characters switch from one speech mode to another, depending on who else is present. And one of the film's central themes is expressed in the concept of the "Washington, D.C. lie": a statement uttered in the tacit understanding that the addressee not only knows it to be false, but also knows that the sender knows that the addressee knows it to be false.



Anatomy of a Murder presents a somewhat similar duality: on the one hand, the official transcript of the trial excludes outbursts by the lawyers and improper testimony, but on the other hand, as the attorneys are aware, the jury hears and understands everything. The film itself becomes a trial – not only in the sense that the film's viewers are invited to come to their own decisions about the truth of what is said, but in that every utterance takes up a definite position with respect to what has previously been uttered.

Some of the most haunting scenes in Preminger films are those in which dialogue ceases, multivoicedness dies down, and a character is left to confront his or her own enigma in silence: e.g., McPherson in Laura's apartment; Dan (Dana Andrews) with the milk bottle in *Daisy Kenyon*; Diana (Jean Simmons) waiting for Frank (Robert Mitchum) in the empty house in *Angel Face*; the brief solitudes of Cécile (Jean Seberg) in *Bonjour Tristesse* (1958); Brig (Don Murray) returning to his office to commit suicide in *Advise and Consent*; Fermoyle in his room in Vienna in *The Cardinal*; Henry (Michael Caine) alone in his house in *Hurry Sundown*. In such scenes, Preminger emphasises the terror and loneliness of the secret emptinesses that surround the fora where dialogue and understanding take place.

The primary appeal to Reason made by every Preminger film thus acknowledges, in a second movement, its own provenance in the irrational to which, in a third, it returns. Reason is a fiction that is constructed to explain the inexplicable events of the narrative (*Bunny Lake Is Missing* [1965] is the ultimate demonstration of this process).

The end of a Preminger shot often has a hallucinatory, fantastic power, as if the scene, suddenly vacated by the narrative, were exposed to the threat – constantly present in Preminger – of the insignificant (cf. the smashed clock at the end of *Laura* and the camera peering down at a garbage can at the end of *Anatomy of a Murder*). At the end of the dance-hall sequence in *Carmen Jones* (1954), after Carmen (Dorothy Dandridge) and Joe (Harry Belafonte) have gone offscreen, the camera stays on the front of the house, through the curtained windows of which we see people dancing inside. Or, at the end of the party scene in *Advise and Consent*, Van Ackerman (George Grizzard) approaches the camera and beckons to his offscreen driver as the shot dissolves. The entire final section of *Angel Face* is a terrifying descent into nothingness. The threat of such a collapse haunts *Bonjour Tristesse*, with its repeated dissolves between color past and black-and-white present.

Throughout *In Harm's Way*, images assault each other rather than complement each other or succeed each other logically. The narrative principle of the film is, simply, the driving away of one image by the next. The pure abstract expression of this principle is the stunning end credits, in which shots of waves chase each other off the screen with increasing violence, giving way to shots of explosions that grow in intensity and scope (culminating in the atomic), and finally to a shot of the earth seen from outer space – the last position of the consciousness that takes indifferent account of the random human activity charted by the film.



The tremendous fluidity of Preminger's films is nowhere more a celebration of nothingness than in *In Harm's Way*. Preminger gives a definition of what's left after all the actions in the narrative have cancelled each other out: the negative ecstasy of the film's completely hostile and inexplicable landscape in which we, along with the film's characters, are lost. The film's cast of stars of the past, present, and future is a fragmented and dispersed body that stands in for ours and that experiences, in our place, terrible destruction.

Barthes, cited by Rivette: "there is a text from the moment one can say: things are circulating." (5) In *In Harm's Way* and *Hurry Sundown*, this moment is somewhat imprecise. One watches the film and has to be carried along with it for a while before the issues at stake sort

themselves out. The people, places, things on screen are clear (in the "monumental" way Rivette describes: "closed in on themselves, turned inward, exactly as a statue can be, presenting themselves without immediately stating an identity"), (6) but what we are to make of them is not. Hence the illusion, which Preminger cultivates in film after film (*Bonjour Tristesse*, *Advise and Consent*, *Such Good Friends* [1971]), of a first-order reality into which the viewer is thrust without introductions, and with whose objects and rules one gradually makes acquaintance without ever penetrating into their soul. But the euphoria of weightlessness thus instilled is merely a deception that permits Preminger to fulfill what Rivette sees as the role of the cinema: "to take people out of their cocoons and plunge them into horror." (7)

Hurry Sundown is the pivotal film in what some have seen as a vulgarisation of style and hystericisation of content in Preminger's late period. His next film, *Skidoo* (1968), was reviled by most reviewers as the director's pathetically foolish and heavy-handed attempt to get "with it." Viewed unencumbered by the prejudices of its time, the film looks visionary. The generation-gap farce of *Skidoo* makes both the old and the young seem absurd and reprehensible, but it also preserves them and uplifts them beyond good and evil; in *Skidoo* Preminger is not trying to be with it – he is with it *a priori* because of the match-up between his own negativity and that of the time and the scene he documents. What seemed to contemporary reviewers a disintegration of Preminger's style and a loss of his control is an intentional effort to smash the frame, comparable to certain devices in Godard's films of the same period, although because Preminger remained a mainstream, establishment filmmaker, in his work this anti-cinema impulse appeared, to some, tainted with corruption and opportunism.



Preminger's late films show the resurgence of a characteristic present in a hard-to-classify cycle from the middle of Preminger's Golden Age: *Angel Face*, *The Moon Is Blue*, *River of No Return* (1954), and *Carmen Jones*. In these films, the condition of Preminger's noted "objectivity" is that the world he is describing is totally artificial. The beginning of *The Moon Is Blue* – in which what we take at first to be the Manhattan skyline turns out to be a diorama in a window – seals off this world in the most direct and arbitrary way, and at an almost explicit level of fantasy, as if the film were intended to demonstrate the moral and psychological consequences of an original misrecognition. The extent to which Preminger's long takes insist on closure, on the subordination of all elements to the limits of time and place, is remarkable for the classical Hollywood cinema, which is usually only "realist" within a small area bounded by a larger area that is purely fantastic. In *River of No Return* (a film whose stylistic motto might be: never do in two shots what can be done in one), CinemaScope becomes an enclosure and a measure of the characters, with an arbitrariness that takes us far from tragedy and also far from irony.

With *Tell Me That You Love Me*, *Junie Moon* (1970), Preminger turns himself, and the cinema, inside out. *Exodus*, *Advise and Consent*, *The Cardinal*, and *In Harm's Way* examine the possibilities for conscience, freedom, and poetry within the vast spaces of history, mega-institutions, and Panavision. In *Junie Moon*, we seem to witness the collapsing of the great, impersonal Premingerian point of view, as if the wrong end of a telescope were being held to the eye. If Preminger's blockbusters seek to show power without succumbing to it, to show power in its death, *Junie Moon* is the pathetic revenge of the powerless, Preminger's atonement for having been too fascinated with the cinema as power.

This renunciation of power affects the cinematic sign. Preminger's tendency toward the banalisation of the image – a tendency that accounts for a large part of the mystique of *River of No Return* and *Carmen Jones* – is magnified in *Junie Moon* by the eruption of the zoom, which seems to signal a general devaluation of the image as such: on the one hand, there's a suspicion of the image's seductive power and an insistence on marring it, making it impossible for the non-perverse viewer to fall in love with the image; on the other hand, the image is reduced to a convenient milieu, lacking intrinsic compositional interest and making no claim to grace or order, for characters who loosely redefine its limits as they move.

Junie Moon is two films: one, a film that criticises the power of the sign by dwelling on the sign's proximity to death, and that therefore can be assigned a relation to the main currents of Preminger's work (it is noteworthy, for example, that both it and *Exodus* end with characters leaving a funeral, and that both endings explicitly renounce closure, gathering up and amplifying the reverberations of the deaths in question). Two, a film that places itself, or wants to, beyond the power or even the powerlessness of the sign, beyond powers and signs to work on the audience, in spite of the audience, as pure affect – as pure love, to take the title at its word, and the telling of it: a telling that grabs the viewer as it lets him/her go, a telling that works to liberate the hearer, that allows him to die.

Such Good Friends continues Preminger's stylistic divergence from his pre-*Skidoo* work, only to reach an updated version of the reserve and ambiguity of the '40s melodramas. Like Preminger's great films, *Such Good Friends* accepts the moral weakness of people and the inaccessibility of their motives, while seeking to trace, through their behavior and beliefs, eternity at work changing them into the forms they assume. The final disappearance of the heroine (Dyan Cannon) into Central Park recalls the enigmatically open ending of *Bonjour Tristesse*: a point from which no advance is indicated, but which could lead to anything.

The final movement in Preminger's work is the most hopeless: in *Rosebud* (1975), the professionalism of the hero, secret agent Martin (Peter

O'Toole), is a cynical adjustment to what Jean Baudrillard called a permanent "transpolitical" situation ("end of the scene of history. equilibrium of terror and dissuasion.."). (8) *Rosebud* is the emptiest of Preminger's films; its world is unconvincing from top to bottom, completing the progression marked by *Skidoo*, *Junie Moon*, and *Such Good Friends* – three films in which realism is no longer the point because for Preminger, it's the world that has become unreal. Finally, *The Human Factor* (1979), that most humane of last testaments, is a sorrowful portrait of *détente*. The hero, Castle (Nicol Williamson), is the ultimate Premingerian sophisticate: a double agent whose fate is to embody, and to pay the ultimate stakes in, a historical struggle that has become theoretical.

Preminger is an increasingly attractive figure. He represents the beauty, arrogance, and mystique of classical American cinema and embodies its highest values of craftsmanship and respect for the audience. He also represents – at a high level of formal complexity – a configuration of power, the visual, and loss that still defines cinematic seduction.



Filmography

The Great Love (Die Grosse Liebe) (1931)

Under Your Spell (1936)

Danger – Love at Work (1937)

Margin for Error (1943)

In the Meantime, Darling (1944)

Laura (1944)

A Royal Scandal (1945)

Fallen Angel (1945)

Centennial Summer (1946)

Forever Amber (1947)



Daisy Kenyon (1947)

That Lady in Ermine (1948) (Preminger completed the film without credit after the death of Ernst Lubitsch, the credited director)

The Fan (1949)

Whirlpool (1949)

Where the Sidewalk Ends (1950)

The 13th Letter (1951)

Angel Face (1952)

The Moon is Blue (1953)

Die Jungfrau auf dem Dach (1953) (German-language version of *The Moon Is Blue*, with different actors)

River of No Return (1954)

Carmen Jones (1954)

The Man with the Golden Arm (1955)



The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell (1955)

Saint Joan (1957)

Bonjour Tristesse (1958)

Porgy and Bess (1959)

Anatomy of a Murder (1959)

Exodus (1960)

Advise and Consent (1962)

The Cardinal (1963)

In Harm's Way (1965)



Bunny Lake Is Missing (1965)

Hurry Sundown (1967)

Skidoo (1968)

Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon (1970)

Such Good Friends (1971)

Rosebud (1975)

The Human Factor (1979)

□

Select Bibliography

Books and Articles:

Bächler, Odile, *Laura*. Synopsis, edited by Francis Vanoye, no. 25. Paris: Editions Nathan, 1995.

Carluccio, Giulia, and Cena, Linda, *Otto Preminger*. La Nuova Italia: Florence, 1991.

Cameron, Ian, ed. *Movie Reader*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972.

Coursodon, Jean-Pierre, and Sauvage, Pierre, *American Directors*. Vol. 1. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983.

Daney, Serge, *La Maison cinéma et le monde: 1. Le Temps des Cahiers 1962-1981*. Paris: P.O.L., 2001.

Frischauer, Willi, *Behind the Scenes of Otto Preminger: An Unauthorized Biography*. New York: William Morrow, 1974.

Gershuny, Theodore, *Soon To Be a Major Motion Picture: The Anatomy of an All-Star, Big-Budget, Multimillion-Dollar Disaster*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980.

Grob, Norbert; Aurich, Rolf; and Jacobson, Wolfgang, eds., *Otto Preminger*. Berlin: Jovis, 1999.

Indiana, Gary, "Otto Hypnosis," *Village Voice*, August 10, 1993, p. 54.

Legrand, Gérard, *Cinémanie*. Paris: Editions Stock, 1979

Legrand, Gérard; Lourcelles, Jacques; and Mardore, Michel, *Otto Preminger*. *Rétrospectives*, edited by Dominique Païni and Charles Tatum, Jr. Crisnée, Belgium: Editions Yellow Now, 1993.

Lourcelles, Jacques, *Otto Preminger*. *Cinéma d'aujourd'hui*, edited by Pierre Lherminier, no. 34. Paris: Editions Seghers, 1965.

Lyons, Donald, "Preminger's Brass." *Film Comment* (July/August 1990): 47-51.

Perkins, V. F., *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1972.

Pratley, Gerald, *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971.

Preminger, Otto, *Preminger: An Autobiography*. New York: Doubleday, 1977.

Rivette, Jacques, "Entretien avec Otto Preminger." *Cahiers du cinéma* 29 (December 1953): 7-15.

Rivette, Jacques, "The Essential." Translated by Liz Heron. In *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, edited by Jim Hillier, pp. 132-5. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Rosenbaum, Jonathan, "Otto Preminger." In *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary, The Major Film-makers*, edited by Richard Roud, vol. 2, pp. 794-9. New York: Viking Press, 1980.

Thomson, David. *Movie Man*. New York: Stein and Day, 1967.

Special Issues and Sections of Periodicals:

Avant-scène du cinéma 211/212 (July/September 1978).

Cahiers du cinéma 121 (July 1961).

Cahiers du cinéma 552 (December 2000).

On Film Vol. 1, No. 0 (1970).

Présence du cinéma 11 (February 1962).

□

Articles in *Senses of Cinema*

Betty Grable Finally Dances by Martha P. Nochimson (on *That Lady in Ermine*)

Where the Sidewalk Ends by Boris Trbic

□

Web Resources

Compiled by Michelle Carey

Chicago Reader: Bodies in Motion

Review of *Bonjour Tristesse* by Fred Camper, with emphasis on Preminger's visual style.

Otto Preminger

German language page with general overview. If reading in English translation, there is the bonus joy of discovering the director's funny name in translation.

"Acting Like Children": Dana Andrews on Working With Otto Preminger

The actor speaks about being on set with the great director. This page also features the interview as a media file to download.

Bunny Lake is Missing – The Best Movie You'll Never See

Features introduction and basic story, cast list and information, poster gallery, photo gallery, VHS/DVD availability and soundtrack information.

Otto Preminger's *Skidoo* (1969)

Part of the *Subterranean Cinema* site, this page has a brief description and some stills from the film (including one of Groucho Marx smoking a joint!).

Pure Flight or Exodus: Otto Preminger's Film About Israel

A critical essay on *Exodus* and its depiction of the deportation of 4500 displaced people to Palestine and then to Germany.

Mr Freeze#2 – Otto Preminger

Not especially informative on his cinema but a lot of fun – see Preminger as a villain in a 1966 episode of *Batman* and read all about it.

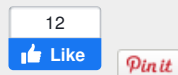


Click [here](#) to search for Otto Preminger DVDs, videos and books at

Endnotes

1. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968, p. 103.
2. Gary Indiana, "Otto Hypnosis," *Village Voice*, August 10, 1993, p. 54.
3. Jim Hillier, ed., *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, edited by Jim Hillier, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 134.
4. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
5. Jonathan Rosenbaum, ed., *Rivette: Texts and Interviews*, London: British Film Institute, 1977, p. 50.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid, p. 35.
8. Jean Baudrillard, *Les stratégies fatales*, Paris: Editions Grasset, 1983, p. 29.

SHARE ON:



←
Through Clouds: A Discussion of *Kandahar* and *Beneath Clouds*

→
Welcome to Issue 21 of our journal!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Fujiwara

Chris Fujiwara is a film critic and programmer who has written several books on cinema, including *Jacques Tourneur: The Cinema of Nightfall* (2001), *The World and Its Double: The Life and Work of Otto Preminger* (2007), and *Jerry Lewis* (2008). He also edited the book *Defining Moments in Movies* (2007). He has lectured on film aesthetics and film history at Tokyo University, Yale University, Rhode Island School of Design, and elsewhere. From 2012 to 2014 he was Artistic Director of Edinburgh International Film Festival.

RELATED POSTS



READ THE SENSES OF CINEMA WORLD POLL 2019

*World
Poll*

INTRODUCTION

PART 1

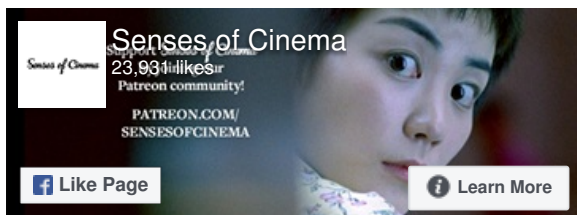
PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

PART 5

JOIN US



Senses of Cinema

Founded in 1999, Senses of Cinema is one of the first online film journals of its kind and has set the standard for professional, high quality film-related content on the Internet.

© Senses of Cinema 2019

STAFF MEMBERS

Editors:

Michelle Carey • Daniel Fairfax • Fiona Villella • César Albarrán-Torres

CONTRIBUTING PARTNER



DONATE TO SENSES

Click [here](#) to make a donation. If you are an Australian resident, any donations over \$2 are tax deductible.

SEARCH



Otto Preminger's seven-time Academy Award nominee *Anatomy of a Murder* is a Hollywood landmark - now available to buy on new @Criterion Blu-ray from the #BFIShop 🍌. More. Read the article. Share. NBC News @NBCNews 7 month ago. Kirk Douglas played an instrumental role in helping to end the Hollywood blacklist against suspected communist sympathizers, along with movie director Otto Preminger. More. Read the article. Share. Craig Calcaterra @craigcalcaterra 8 month ago. Nicknamed "Otto the Terrible" for his legendary tantrums on Hollywood sets, Otto Preminger cajoled countless stars in dozens of films from the 1930s through the 1970s. His movies ranged from the delicately crafted suspense classic *Laura*, to the colossal epic *Exodus*, and included many commercial and critical successes as well as failures.