

Everyone Was a Fool

The Unruly, Unappreciated, Unparalleled

Genius of Terry Southern

By Max Watman

When Terry Southern died, Joseph McGrath, in an obituary letter to the Guardian, wrote that he would “miss him and his early morning transatlantic phone calls telling me to ‘Be on the lookout for absurdity, at all levels, and report back.’”

How’s this: Just as Los Angeles chose “I Love LA” by Randy Newman as a theme song (“Look at that bum over there man, he’s down on his knees / looks like another perfect day / I love LA”), just as Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” is played at a political rallies (“You end up like a dog that’s been beat too much /Till you spend half your life just covering up”), vice presidential candidate Senator Edwards went on Turner Movie Classics earlier this month and said that “Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” was his favorite movie.

I imagine this is because, at the end, Slim Pickens, a Texan, rides the “nuclear” bomb to earth as if it were a bucking bronc. Senator Edwards said: “I believe that one of the messages Kubrick was trying to send was that putting this kind of power and this potential holocaust in the hands of human beings, no matter who they are, is an extraordinarily dangerous thing.”

That may be what Kubrick was after. But Terry Southern, who co-wrote the script with Kubrick and Peter George, was saying, as he was in all his works, that the world is full of lunatics and fools. Some have bombs, some have bikes. Southern is far from unknown today, but up against the folks he deserves to be in company with — not only Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe, but Hunter S. Thompson, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer (the standard list of white, intoxicated sex fiends) — his reputation doesn’t stack up. But he was better than any of them.

Southern was a frequent collaborator, and several of his better known works — particularly films — are not associated with him, even by their fans. “Easy Rider” is associated with Dennis Hopper; “Dr.Strangelove” with Peter Sellers and Kubrick; New Journalism with Truman Capote and Tom Wolfe. Most people see Terry Southern only when glancing at the “Sgt.Pepper” album cover, on which he appears in sunglasses.

Southern deserves more than that: This is the grand guy who wrote the best hipster fiction ever done, invented the independent film movement, and cracked New Journalism fully grown right out of his skull. He drove across the country and back again while Neil and Jack were still scraping nickels

off the kitchen floor for gas money and dex. He was the blockbuster, bestselling author of “Candy.”

Folks like Kerouac believed that they had successfully separated the world into the hip and the square, and that the hipster was the right-living half of that diagram. Terry Southern believed no such foolishness.

“Easy Rider” displayed his double edge most simply. In that movie there is an obvious conflict between the longhairs and the rednecks, and it is easy to believe that the writers intend that you sympathize with the longhairs. Clearly, the rock ’n’ roll and the wind in the hair are meant to elevate the bikers.

But the bikers make a mess of everything. The hippie commune they visit is a case study in the foolishness of the counterculture. These idiot city kids are living off dead horses and trying to plant crops by throwing seeds on top of sand. The cops and the rednecks in “Easy Rider” are bad news, but so are the hippies, and so are the heroes. “We blew it,” says Wyatt at the end of the movie. Their search for freedom is a complete failure. It ends in violence and death. For Southern, everyone was a fool.

“Candy” was commissioned by Maurice Girodias, the publisher of many groundbreaking books and authors between 1953 and 1973: “Lolita,” “The Story of O,” “The Ginger Man,” “Naked Lunch,” Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, Gregory Corso.

Southern wrote “Candy” with Mason Hoffenberg, under the pseudonym Maxwell Kenton. It is a parody of pornography lightly based upon “Candide,” which bares the absurd naiveté and pathology of each of its characters — the suburban drunkards, the psychiatrists and doctors, the revolutionaries, the spiritualists, the Greenwich Villagers, and one very sick humpback — in a frolic of just more than 200 pages.

“Dear Terry Southern: Mason is not quite clear about when your part of the book will be finished. The writing of that book will soon enter its third year.” Nothing like hiring a couple of hash heads to write a smutty book.

“Candy” sold an estimated 7 million copies, many of them pirated. Girodias was tireless in his battle against censorship, and obviously he had a bizarre ability to find quality lit, but his true gift was the hustle. Girodias was a great swindler: His main trick was claiming that the books he published were works for hire, and that the copyrights on the work were his. He had paid Southern and Hoffenberg \$300. Though “Candy” was clearly motivated by sexy humor rather than flat out prurience, the censors banned it repeatedly, flummoxing copyright problems further.

This is typical of Southern's life. His was a weird, sad, journey: He chased success and got knocked in the knees. He fought good fights, but got tangled in his own proclivities. For every whopping success, there was a concurrent flop. For every "Barbarella," there was a "Telephone." He was a transplanted Texan who had served in the Army, and then ascended into the world of cool: in Paris with Plimpton and co., in England writing the first movie the Beatles made, on the Rolling Stones' tour plane drinking Tequila Sunrises with Truman Capote. The money never came fast enough, and the recognition and successful work arrived unpredictably, if at all. On an October Wednesday in 1995, he collapsed on the steps of Dodge Hall at Columbia University, where he was teaching screenwriting. He died Sunday. He was broke.

At his best, when somehow unfettered (I suppose most of all from himself), Southern was unmatched. He visited Mississippi in 1962, the day after Faulkner's funeral. The resultant piece is one of the tightest, finest, and funniest pieces of subjective journalism ever written. It opens:

In an age gone stale through the complex or bureaucratic interdependencies, with its tenuous labyrinth of technical specializations, each contingent upon the next, and all aimed to converge into a single totality of meaning, it is a refreshing moment indeed when one comes across an area of human endeavor absolutely sufficient unto itself, pure and free, no strings attached — the cherished and almost forgotten l'art pour l'art. Such is the work being carried forward now at the Dixie National Baton Twirling Institute.

Standing in the town square, asking for directions, he notes:

Next to the benches, about three feet apart, are two public drinking fountains, and I notice that the one boldly marked "For Colored" is sitting squarely in the shadow cast by the justice symbol on the courthouse façade — to be entered later, of course, in my writer's notebook, under "Imagery, sociochiaroscurian, hack."

Terry Southern drives around town looking for moonshine. He ogles the pert and perky twirlers. Just off screen, disaster brews: That summer, the registration of James Meredith at Ole Miss would cause a riot by the end of which two people would be dead.

A few pages in: "During the twirling exhibition I fell into conversation with a couple of graduate law students ... Ole Miss prides itself, among other things, on having the only law school in the state which is accredited by the American Bar Association — so that these two graduate law students were not without some claim to representing a certain level of relative advancement in the community of scholars." Talk quickly turns to the forthcoming registration of Mr. Meredith, a civil rights activist and the first black student at Ole Miss. The law students suggest that dope will be found

in Meredith's room, "dope, a gun, something — anything, just plant it in theah an' find it!" This, they claim will be the work of hot-headed undergraduates. "You know how they feel?" And then the two law students begin to sing to the tune of John Brown's Body: "'Oh we'll bury all the niggers in the Mississippi mud....,' singing it rather loudly it seemed to me — I mean if they were just documenting a point in a private conversation."

Then it's back out to the twirlers. "Do you find that your costume is an advantage in your work?" I asked the first seventeen-year-old Georgia Peach I came across, she wearing something like a handkerchief-size confederate flag."

Terry Southern was attuned to madness in the world, and played straight to it. Unlike Hunter Thompson, who forces his own madness on the world in order to illustrate the madness already inherent, Southern simply observed. Norman Mailer is a man of big opinions: Southern seemed to have none. His casual style was brilliantly tuned to make you believe he was a camera.

But of course he was not. He was a conjurer. It's all misdirection and humor and all pointed towards his steady goal: Trounce the self-righteous. He turned his pen to the smug. Intellectuals, the counter culture, doctors, generals, artists, racists, hipsters, all were mowed down by Southern. He was astonished by the insanity of the world.

But he always showed his hand. This might be a crazy, ridiculous place, but the Grand Guy was always game, especially for something intoxicating or female.

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