

Film Programs



American Nonsense: Frank Tashlin

April 11, 2008 - April 18, 2008



Artists and Models, April 16
Paramount Pictures/Photofest

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"Tashlin is the original pop-culture Pop Artist."—J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*

Look at the films of Douglas Sirk through a filter of Warner Bros. cartoons, and you might see something like the comedies of Frank Tashlin. Like Sirk, Tashlin (1913–1972) depicted a fifties America of glaring colors and alienated culture—a world of illusions, imitations of life. But for Tashlin, the gaudy fantasies of a media-saturated public, the visions of consumer excess and packaged sex—travesties of biology—are objects of both parody and aesthetic celebration. He tagged his subject matter as

"the nonsense of what we call civilization."

Tashlin's first movies, made in the thirties and forties, were cartoons. Later, his live-action films flaunt an energetic disregard for the physical limits of reality; they deploy actors like Jayne Mansfield and Jerry Lewis as living cartoons, exaggerated gestural figures on an abstract ground. And what a ground—Tashlin gave new meaning to the phrase "broad comedy," exploiting the possibilities of the CinemaScope frame like no other comic director. Our small sampling of Tashlin's work celebrates that wide, wide screen in films that are even bigger, louder, and funnier than American life.

Juliet Clark
Editor



Film Programs



American Nonsense: Frank Tashlin

Friday, April 11, 2008

7:00 p.m. *The Girl Can't Help It*
Frank Tashlin (U.S., 1956)

New Print

Jayne Mansfield's "got a lot of what they call the most," as the song goes, and her maximal measurements are in perfect proportion with Tashlin's hyperbolic CinemaScope satire of sex, money, and rock 'n' roll. Gangster Edmond O'Brien wants his protégée Mansfield to be a star—any kind of star—so he hires jaundiced agent Tom Ewell to sell her as a "singer"; their marketing campaign provides excuses for appearances by Fats Domino, Little Richard, Gene Vincent, and Eddie Cochran, among others. Sashaying through an abstract world of hard, shiny surfaces and complementary colors, milk bottles clutched to her chest like something out of an alcoholic hallucination, Mansfield generates cartoon reactions in every man she meets, but her own fantasies are strictly domestic. In true Tashlin fashion, *The Girl Can't Help It* is finally about the emptiness of ambition; the film's very crassness, acidic yet tinged with weird sympathy, is its integrity.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Herbert Baker, Tashlin, based on a story by Garson Kanin. Photographed by Leon Shamroy. With Tom Ewell, Jayne Mansfield, Edmond O'Brien, Julie London. (99 mins, Color, 'Scope, 35mm, From Criterion/20th Century Fox)



Film Programs



American Nonsense: Frank Tashlin

Sunday, April 13, 2008

5:00 p.m. **Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?**

Frank Tashlin (U.S., 1957)

Laden with Brechtian gags, pop-modern design, and the linguistic tics of the three- (or seven-) martini-lunch crowd, Tashlin's masterpiece is a brilliantly composed ode to and exposé of the media business, which is to say American

culture. Tony Randall plays Rockwell Hunter, a midlevel TV adman who can only dream of winning the key to the executive washroom—until he lands the endorsement of mock-Marilyn Rita Marlowe (Jayne Mansfield) for the Stay-Put Lipstick account. In need of a lover for public purposes, Rita chooses the convenient Rock ("his name sounds very influential") and suddenly he's the biggest thing since chlorophyll, a cartoon figure of manhood in an oversized suit and elevator shoes. "Success will fit you like a shroud," prophesies the prexy of the agency. When Rock glimpses the coveted executive toilet, he sheds tears of hideous joy; witnessing this world in which all desires are both vulgar and abstract, you could either laugh or cry. But don't worry, everything will be solvey-solvey.

—Juliet Clark

• Written by Tashlin, based on the play by George Axelrod. Photographed by Joe MacDonald. With Tony Randall, Jayne Mansfield, Betsy Drake, Joan Blondell. (95 mins, Color, 'Scope, 35mm, From Criterion/20th Century Fox)



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American Nonsense: Frank Tashlin

Wednesday, April 16, 2008

6:30 p.m. Artists and Models

Frank Tashlin (U.S., 1955)

The art here is commercial, and that's the beauty of it. In Tashlin's cultural geography, Greenwich Village and Madison Avenue are the same neighborhood, and satire is indistinguishable from toon-tinted aesthetic exuberance. While Dean Martin ekes out a living caressing scarlet paint onto enormous billboard

lips, Jerry Lewis nurtures an obsession with the Bat Lady of pulp comic books, his idiot imaginings intersecting with reality at odd angles. In the atelier upstairs, comics illustrator Dorothy Malone and Bat Lady model Shirley MacLaine manufacture the fantasies that feed juvenile minds like Lewis's, and Malone's publisher pushes for ever more gore—these books are for kids, after all. Leave it to the French to bring all this back into the territory of capital-A Art: Jean-Luc Godard called the film "an acme of stupidity, but an acme in the same way as (Flaubert's) *Bouvard et Pécuchet*," and Jacques Rivette cited it as the inspiration for *Céline and Julie Go Boating*.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Tashlin, Hal Kanter, Herbert Baker. Photographed by Daniel L. Fapp. With Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, Shirley MacLaine, Dorothy Malone. (109 mins, Color, 'Scope, 35mm, Permission Paramount)



Film Programs



American Nonsense: Frank Tashlin

Wednesday, April 16, 2008

8:30 p.m. **It's Only Money**

Frank Tashlin (U.S., 1962)

Jerry Lewis is Lester March, a TV repairman and would-be detective without a clue—call him Sherlock Jr., Jr. Inspired by admiration for a private-eye friend and too many detective novels, Lester sets out to solve a televised mystery: a wealthy spinster (Mae Questel of Betty Boop fame) is searching for her long-lost nephew and heir, whose ancestral portrait bears an uncanny resemblance to Lester himself. A crooked lawyer and a sinister butler impede the hapless sleuth's progress with a series of near-fatal interventions. Recruited to direct an already prepared production, Tashlin brought to it his typical flair for reality-defying gags (try

parallel parking à la Lewis), mock-Hitchcock cinematography, and a fascination with the perils of modern technology, from vacuum cleaners run amok to a platoon of man-eating lawnmowers to, of course, television.

—Juliet Clark

• Written by John Fenton Murray. Photographed by W. Wallace Kelley. With Jerry Lewis, Zachary Scott, Joan O'Brien, Mae Questel. (84 mins, B&W, 'Scope, 35mm, From Paramount)



Film Programs



American Nonsense: Frank Tashlin

Friday, April 18, 2008

7:00 p.m. **Bachelor Flat**

Frank Tashlin (U.S., 1962)

Tashlin's treatise on "the difference between us and our British cousins" doesn't offer many insights into the British temperament, but it says a lot about us. Terry-Thomas plays a visiting professor of anthropology at a California university, an umbrella-carrying Englishman in sunny Malibu. It seems that anglophilia runs

deep among American women, much to the proper professor's discomfiture; when Tuesday Weld prances into his apartment in her tiny shorts, our hero mistakes his future stepdaughter for yet another amorous co-ed, leading to some squeamish situations. The pleasure here is less in the farcical plot than in the numerous tossed-off gags lampooning American excess, including the excess of the CinemaScope frame—the sequence of a dachshund dragging a giant dinosaur bone along the beach is "one of the most dynamic studies in montage this side of Sergei Eisenstein" (Dave Kehr, *New York Times*). Even the fadeouts are in color.

—Juliet Clark

- Written by Tashlin, Budd Grossman. Photographed by Daniel L. Fapp. With Tuesday Weld, Richard Beymer, Terry-Thomas, Celeste Holm. (91 mins, Color, 'Scope, 35mm, From Criterion/20th Century Fox)