



ZEROVILLE

by STEVE ERICKSON

WHEN HE WAKES in the early hours before dawn, one morning near the end of summer, he knows he's almost reached the door. Lining the stairway of his house are the enlarged celluloid images of a thousand doors, although really they're all the same door, moving from one location to another, each growing closer to him or, more exactly, he grows closer to each.

It's the first or second summer of the new millennium, depending how you count one or zero. By now Monk's dreams have enough precision that a part of him would like to know, How do you count one or zero, and is it the first summer, or the second? He dreams very efficiently. Over the past two decades the scenes in his dreams have become almost exact replicas of those from the movies that inspired the dreams. Lately when Monk wakes, he knows right away which reel to pull from the wall of shelves around him; he's taken to sleeping on the floor of the library so that when he has such a dream, immediately the film is at his fingertips. Up until now he's known the films well enough that he could put them in the projector and go to the very scene he's looking for, and then begin searching frame by painstaking frame on his editing table.

In the beginning, he barely realized what he was dreaming. Only from his years as a film editor had he developed an affinity for the subconscious of montage, for the idea of the film that even the film maker doesn't know is there, and in the beginning almost twenty years before, when he had the first dream, night after night lie tossed restlessly in a sleep mottled by glimpses, flashes, messages, echoes of one film in particular he had recently seen on videotape-until finally he tracked down a print, paying good money for it. "Eh, you must love this picture, huh?" the guy in the Valley had said to him. It was a porn movie called *Nightdreams* about a woman in a psychiatric ward having a series of carnal hallucinations: in one she's a slave on her knees in the Arab desert, being taken by two men at each end of her; in another she's in Hell being fucked by the Devil ... but while these images slithered into Monk's sleep as visual ephemera, what became clearer with each passing night and each passing dream was the door in the far background. In this particular case the door, just slightly ajar, stood alone on a distant barren veldt, although as far as Monk could tell there was no such image in the film at all.

For some weeks Monk watched the videotape over and over, freezing every new scene trying to find that door that beckoned him every night in his sleep. After a while he gave up and the dreams began to fade and he went back to watching other movies, at home on TV or sometimes-if something he wanted badly enough to see was being shown-going out to a theater or one of the nearby campuses; he hated going out. One night, four months after first seeing

the porn picture, he began having another dream, following a screening at UCLA of an old silent Danish film: there among the stark black-and-white images of forbidding robed inquisitors and a young girl burning at the stake was the door again, this time a little bit closer than it had been before, a little more ajar than before, standing on the edge of a dark woods. The next day Monk returned to the school. "I can't let you take the print," the film department's curator told him.

"What if I use one of your editing rooms here on campus?" Monk asked.

"What are you looking for anyway!"

"I'm not going to hurt the print," Monk said.

"You're not William Jerome the film editor, are you?" No one called Monk that, anyone who still called him anything called him Monk. Something more than a reputation and less than a legend preceded him, built largely around the first picture Polanski made after the murders and then the Friedkin picture and *Your Pale Blue Eyes*; he had received Oscar nominations for the last two. Enough people knew about the troubled production of *Your Pale Blue Eyes* that it may have singularly inspired one of Hollywood's most perennial urban myths: that of the film that's "saved" in the editing room—except that Monk hadn't merely saved the film but transformed it. At Cannes that year, for the only time in the festival's history the jury invented a new award, the Prix Sergei, presented to *Pale Blue Eyes* for "the art of montage at its most revelatory." In the mid- to late seventies Monk had run with that Malibu crowd out at the beach for a while, Marty and Brian and Milius and Schrader and Ashby, and the crazy chick with the tits who played Lois Lane in the *Superman* movies. "What are you doing these days?" the UCLA film curator asked. "I heard you were directing some-thing of your own."

By then it already had been, what, almost three years since Monk had worked on anything, since *Pale Blue Eyes* and the whole business with Zazi. "I'm ... between projects," he answered, not wanting to even get into the Huysmans adaptation that he couldn't yet admit to himself was never going to happen. The curator sighed. "You understand it's on loan," he said, shrugging at a canister on the table next to them that, with a start, Monk realized was the very movie they were talking about, "from the Cinematheque. You have to be very careful."

"I promise."

"But . . . what are you looking for?" And it was almost a week before Monk found it, poring over the film exhaustively: there it was; and then, going back to the porn flick, as with the *Joan of Arc* picture he went through frame by frame until he found it—and what could such a thing mean? That buried in a 1928 silent classic made eight thousand miles away and a 1982 porn movie was, in a single frame that no one could see when the films were run, in a single frame that revealed itself in the sort of clandestine bulletins only Monk

received, was the same single door, on the edge of a woods in one picture, an open desolate veldt in the other. From both movies Monk extracted the frames and enlarged them, so that above his bed where he slept, the two doors loomed side by side.

Over the weeks before he wakes near the end of the first or second summer of the new millennium, he sees her on the hillside that cascades below his house. The first time she's near the bottom, where the road that eventually leads to him begins to wind its way upward. He sees her standing there looking up at him, and the next moment she's gone; the next time he sees her, one dusk several days later, she's moved up the hill but stands motionless as before, like in *Last Year at Marienbad*, where people are as statues on its vast terrace, except this woman plays all the statues, posed against the chaparral. Each time Monk sees her, she moves closer up the hill.

At some point in his long-ago career editing movies, he discovered that by cutting to a character's right or left profile, he could expose something about her. He could expose the side that was true and the side that was false, he could expose the side that was good and the side that was evil, he could expose the side that punished and the side that received, the side that dominated and the side that submitted. It was different with each person and each profile: what was represented by one actor's right might be represented by some-one else's left. But once Monk deciphered which was which, a new visual vocabulary of meaning became available. "I would never betray you," one lover might say to another in a given scene; but by choosing; one take over the other, one profile over the other.

Monk could bare credibility or mendacity, irrespective of the actor's intention, or the director's or the writer's.

This provided a *modus operandi* for all of Monk's work. It provided the prevailing logic by which all other decisions were made. As people had right profiles and lefts, places and moments had them as well; in a film, every shot was a profile, and by cutting from rights to other rights, or from rights to lefts or lefts to lefts, he could subliminally reinforce or sabotage the audience's perceptions. In Monk's mind this was the key that would unlock the secret of adapting Joris-Karl Huysmans' nineteenth-century decadent French novel *La Bas* that was to be Monk's directorial debut, before two things happened that aborted the project altogether. The first and less important was the change in the movie business in the late seventies and early eighties that consigned to exile the renegade film movement out of which Monk had originally emerged; a disruption in the very sensibility of moviemaking; profound enough to render the later technological changes irrelevant. It's just as well, Monk would muse much later, staring out the windows of the house, that my career was over before I ever had to deal with digital: computers and all that? No, I was born

to cut film, not move around ones and zeros.

The second, more important thing happened one morning when Monk stood before the mirror shaving. With his razor he was negotiating a mole on one side of his chin when it occurred to him that what he always thought of as his left side was in fact his right, that his perception of his own right and left was based on the same reflective reversal by which an entire species, staring into mirrors or glass or lakes over the millennia, had always confused rights and lefts. This realization could only confound Monk's aesthetic, which was to say that what he always thought of as his good side was in fact his evil, that what he always thought of as his true side was in fact his false. By the time Monk's blade had flicked the final streak of shaving cream, both his aspirations as a director and his career as a film editor were over, not to mention his relationship with Zerk. "I would never betray you," she had told him in a hushed turn to her left though she believed was her right-or in fact she had she not said it to him at all, but rather he said it to her, in a reversal of the right and left of speaker and spoken-to?

By the time Monk moved into the house in the Hollywood Hills, he had been living on the edge awhile. Money from his film career finally running out after years of austere living, he vacated his loft in the industrial section of L.A.; the truth was he was slumming in the Hollywood Hills house, it wasn't his at all. It belonged to an old friend Monk hadn't seen since their school days at Emerson College, D, and he had dropped by one day to find the door open as though someone had run out to the local convenience store for beer and would return any moment. But no one came back and Monk just stayed on, waiting for inevitable eviction. The house was stacked in three levels against a hillside, the top floor being at street level. On the third and bottom floor of the house Monk found the room that now served as his film library; lining the walls had been a sprawling, massive blue calendar that marked time according to the chronology of the apocalypse. Monk moved in his reels of film and put up the enlarged stills of the door he had extorted from thousands of miles and a century of celluloid. The time had long since passed when he really expected anyone to return, but he still thought of the house as anyone's but his.

It's from the windows of this house where Monk watches the woman advance up the hill in frozen *Marienbad* poses that he also surveys the city in a panorama that almost justifies it. In the distance to the southeast is the cityscape of what might ironically be called a downtown-to the extent L.A. ever has had such a thing-that desperately scrambled skyward in anticipation of the Olympics back in the eighties. Directly below, occasionally blurring into Monk's view between the hills' knolls and gullies, is Sunset Boulevard, an asphalted urban timeline with not simply geo-graphical addresses but temporal ones, from the utopian sixties in the west where hippies rampaged the gutters to the anarchic late seventies at the boulevard's far eastern end, where could be

found Madame Wong's and the Chinatown punk scene. Back then Zanzibar Paladin had begun as bass player for the band the Rubicons before another singer's overdose bequeathed to her the mic and punk stardom, which was never the oxymoron punk culture liked to pretend.

The Rubicons played both Madame Wong's and, before it closed, the Starwood at Santa Monica Boulevard and Crescent Heights-and what was the club down on Pico, just west of the 405? By the time the Rubicons' *Tick Tock* was released, Zazi with her Soledad Miranda face already had been cast in *Your Pale Blue Eyes*, which Monk was brought onto after the studio replaced the director. Even in her first picture Zazi was canny enough to understand the advantages of befriending the editor who was going to choose which takes of her to use in the final film. As it happened, Monk had seen Zazi play at one of the local clubs not long before and perhaps could be excused for believing in some sort of fate at work, not having even been in a club since *Ciro's* closed a decade before. "What's this?" Zazi said the first night she came to Monk's loft; she held in her hand the small model of a church that sat on a bookshelf. Standing in his small kitchen uncorking a bottle of red, Monk stared at Zazi holding the model a long time as he contemplated an answer. When was the moment in a relationship for such illicit biography, assuming this was to be a relationship at all. When was the moment for any sort of biography, illicit or not? "It's a church," he finally answered, knowing there was no way that could be enough.

"A church!"

"Uh, I designed it," he mumbled, "when I was a graduate student in architecture, at Emerson Divinity." Raised in northeastern Pennsylvania in a strict fundamentalist faith, Monk nonetheless had found the main advantage of divinity college was the small theater in the next town over, where he could see all the movies that had been prohibited to him as a child and adolescent.

"There is," Zazi said, cat eyes narrowing as she peered closely at the model's tiny, solid walls, "no way in."

"Yes," Monk said, "the review committee was struck by that it', well." It never occurred to them that it might rather be a church with no way out. Passing from one of righteous hands to the other, the model had been appraised, scrutinized, scoured for an entrance. "Mr. Jerome," the chairman finally intoned, "is this some sort of joke?" "I don't see," the student had answered, what's so funny, to which the chairman said, "Neither do we." He seemed so angry that for a moment Monk thought he might hurl the model to the floor like Moses hurling tablets, or Jesus a box of merchant's gold in the temple-at which point the committee would have seen the true sacrilege of Monk's thesis: that sealed inside, in the place where an altar might be presumed, was a tiny movie screen, white and blank because Monk had racked his brain to no avail trying to think of a single perfect image. L.A., on the other hand, is the cathedral of no walls, nothing but ways in, built upon the dream of a species when and where the world had

run out of space and time to dream. In his loft that night Monk and Zazi had the most demented sex of his life. "Through sensuality," she purred in his ear in the dark, tightening the collar around his neck and giving the chain a yank, "we make death not a lonely individual experience but an ecstatic collective one," and then another yank, "don't we, Mister Church Builder?"

When their romance went badly, was it worse that Zazi had left a woman for him, her first physical relationship with a man, was there that much more at stake for her, had it been that much more a leap of faith for her, so that when they wouldn't take their attraction to a fatal end, it was that much more a betrayal? Not to mention the rumor after the split, of Zazi's pregnancy and abortion, which sent a pang through the heart Monk no longer believed he had. Then Zazi's movie career nova'ed, imploding into nothingness, and she disappeared: "I would never betray you," but the more Monk thought about it, the harder it was to remember which of them had said it. Maybe it didn't matter. He left only so that she couldn't leave first. Now he watches a woman advance up the hillside in *Marienbad* freeze-frames, in sight one moment and invisible the next, as though someone is excising frames of her from the film of his life.

"So what do you think?" Monk asked one afternoon years later, returning to UCLA to show the film department's curator what he had found. Over the months that followed his discovery of the common door in the porn and Joan of Arc films, Monk began having more dreams and finding more doors in movies old and new, near and far-flung, foreign and domestic, celebrated and obscure. At the top of a Himalayan monastery when Kathleen Byron's jealous, lust-mad nun tries to push Deborah Kerr into the abyss and flings herself off instead, what seemed to an audience like attempted murder was a leap for the door that hovered in space just beyond the porticos, the same door that was the adobe hut just above Marlon Brando's shredded and bloody right shoulder as Kathleen Maiden lashes him with a whip. The same door that was there on the lake, not in the boathouse on the far shoreline but floating above the water itself, where lush Gene Tierney in dark glasses and bloodred lipstick coolly watches drown her husband's meddlesome brother as he frantically cries to her to save him. Monk excavated methodically, turning off the films' sound completely and replacing it with the music of new L.A. noir on the CD player-Ornette Coleman's *Virgin Beauty*, X's *Unheard Music*, Japanese film scores-and from each and every one of these movies he would excise a single secret frame until, put together, the frames formed an altogether different film. The film that slowly closed in on a door that swung ever more open into a black void behind it. The curator shrugged, looking at a dozen of the frames laid out on the light table before him. "It's ... a door." The two men stood staring at the light table for some time. "Is it supposed to mean something?"

Monk bit his lip. For a moment he was tempted to try to explain.

Then he decided against it. "It means," he finally said, "that some-one else sees it too. It means," he said, "that someone else sees what I see." Maybe it even means, he wondered, that I haven't lost my mind.

Ten days before the end of the first (or second) summer of the new millennium, Monk awakes in the early morning hours before dawn to find the door nearer than ever, just within reach. In a pink wall, it stands clearly open.

A month ago, he had his new and final dream. It was of a movie he had never seen before, but so clear that he could describe it in detail: a young Japanese model arrives one day at an art gallery showing an exhibition of bondage photos for which she's posing. There she sees a man running his hands over a sculpture of her; feeling as though his hands are on her own body, she flees the gallery. Later that night in her apartment, distressed from her traumatic day, she makes an appointment for a massage. The masseur who arrives is blind, and the woman is startled to find she recognizes his touch. "I have eyes in my fingers," he announces, and just as he's chloroforming her into unconsciousness, she rips the dark glasses from his face to recognize him as the man from the gallery. When she comes to, she's in a strange warehouse, cavernous as a cathedral. On the walls are the sculptures of eyes, noses, mouths, torsos, arms and legs, and as she scurries among the shadows trying to elude her abductor, who can smell her scent and hear her panicked breath, she scrambles over the monumental replications of reclining female bodies, lurking in the valley of monumental breasts, darting in the race for monumental thighs.

"It's called *Moju*," explained the film school curator to Monk over the telephone. "In the States it's been released variously as *Warehouse* and *Blind Beast*. Director's name is Masumura, a former law student who drifted into movies after the war-not respectable enough to receive the sort of attention Ozu or Kurasawa get, but Antonioni among others championed him. Where did you say you saw it?" It took a week for the curator to run down on the Internet a print that had made its way from Tokyo to East L.A. to London to Paris back to a small collectibles shop at Vesey and Church in lower west Manhattan. Driving out on Sunset Boulevard to UCLA to buy the film with practically every cent he had left, Monk felt a strange sense of urgency.

Whereas before some instinct had led Monk to the precise place where the hidden image was to be located, now he found himself searching the entire film. From its beginning to its end Monk prowled each scene as the young woman, imprisoned in the blind man's strange studio where he sculpts a statue of her, eventually becomes blinded herself by the endless darkness. Soon she seduces her captor, scheming to escape, only to submit willingly, becoming not just the model of his art but the art itself, the blind sculptor lopping off real arms, real limbs. Days passed as Monk searched. In the house the film unspooled from one floor to the next, loops of film hanging from the rafters like webs. As Monk felt time slipping away, as he felt himself racing to meet some dead-line he neither knew nor understood, music without latitudes or hours that had been playing on the CD player-Duke Ellington's "Transbluency," Joy Division's "Decade"-strange female chants satellite-broadcasted from Tuva-finally lapsed into silence. Years of film unwound from the library to the screening room up to the living room as Monk viewed over every frame. In small handwritten signs fixed to the walls and draped with film strips, he charted the celluloid's narrative topography, psychic territories: *Obsession*.

Seduction. Submission.

The days turned into weeks. Monk stalked the film's secret door on foot, sleeping less and then not at all. He grew more delirious with fatigue as he also grew more frantic; some irrevocable moment was at hand. Racking his brain to no avail, he sought a single perfect image of the door amid the walls of the movie's warehouse, among the bodies of the movie's characters. Soon he was chopping up the film viciously, as though the frame he was looking for was hidden not only from him but from the film itself, as though it might only be found somewhere within the film's flesh. Little pieces of black celluloid littered the floor like the ash and granite of toppled towers, up and down the stairs beneath a thousand stills of the door from a thousand other films, each growing closer. Isn't this dream mine to edit as I choose? Monk wondered. To cut as I choose? To flop right profiles with left and left profiles with rights, to reverse the utopian and anarchic ends of the boulevard as I choose? Outside he was certain he heard approach a Monumentalist Age, somewhere within the collision between an age of reckoning and an age of chaos. Mere blockbusterism! he howled to himself: what is it before the true monuments of tile epoch come? Stumbling through the dark of his house, he ran his hands along the walls to follow up the stair the trail of enlarged stills-*I have eyes in my fingers-only to feel bare walls instead, and to find all the stills of the door gone. The door at the base of the spiraling steeple where James Stewart's eyes glint with rage at Kim Novak. The door*

in the Hollywood cottage where a stormy Bogart loves and loses a terrified Gloria Grahame. The door

in a far medieval corridor as Vincent Price's depraved masquerade ball swirls by and Plague laps at the outer palace walls. The door

beneath the stone bridge that crosses a chateau moat where Brigitte Lahaie, nude beneath a black cloak, holds a bloody scythe. The door

in the Venice archway just beyond Janet Leigh's window, as Orson Welles leers over her in her sleep, pulling gloves onto fat hands. The door

that is anonymous among all the doors of a labyrinthine complex where Eddie Constantine pursues Anna Karina into the future. The door

in the corner of a balcony where, taking refuge from a party, Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift in each other's embrace are made of nothing but light and shards of the Void, the most beautiful couple in the history of movies. He the male version of her, she the female version of him. Down through the history of the movies, Monk will ponder at the end, what Wanderer has left these clues for him, in the form of the Movie of the Future, hidden one frame at a time in every movie ever made? Who has invaded every movie ever made in order to leave a single image among the twenty-four frames every second? What does it mean that there are the same number of frames per second as there are hours in a day? What does it mean that every second of a film is a

day in the life of a secret film that someone has been waiting for Monk to find. In the final hours before dawn, Monk startles himself out of sleep, sits up from the library floor to the vision in his eyes, and stumbles to his feet to find all the images of the door on his walls gone except the last, now finally revealed itself to him, at the top of the stair within his reach. It is there, in a wall that is the color of a woman's body.

Or did whoever made this secret film of the future mean to show him a way out, or a way in? Outside, something in the hills casts a shadow. In his entryway, he still sees just well enough to make out someone's silhouette. Zerk But he can't even be sure he has said it out loud.

Monk takes the knob in his hand. The door swings into a black gust. He's disconcerted to note that what in all the movies has always swung from left to right now swings from right to left. Momentarily he hesitates-somewhere nearby, at the foot of the hills and the coordinates of chaos, there seeps up from the ground a deluge-then steps through.