

The Man in the Back Seat

Christian Keathley

Here is a moment from Otto Preminger's *Advise & Consent* (1962) – a scene lasting a mere 20 seconds – that piques my curiosity. A limousine carrying Senate Majority Leader Bob Munson (Walter Pidgeon) and Vice President Harley Hudson (Lew Ayres) pulls up outside Munson's residence hotel in Washington. The driver comes around the back of the car to open the door for Munson, who is already exiting the car and moving left toward the door; as he does, the camera tracks left with his movements. As Munson disappears into the building, the driver secures the back door, and then moves back around to open his own door; as he does, the camera tracks back right, slightly past its original position. In the back seat, we can just see the Vice President slumped down, his face partly obscured by a shadow, a look of concern on his face. The shot holds for a moment or two as the driver gets in the car, and then we cut to inside the lobby of his hotel, where Munson is headed to his room.

Figure 1
Otto Preminger
Advise & Consent,
(1962)



Figure 2
Otto Preminger
Advise & Consent,
(1962)



Figure 3
Otto Preminger
Advise & Consent,
(1962)



This (effectively wordless) scene functions primarily as a transition between two substantive dialogue scenes. But this transition could have just as easily consisted of Munson alone, stepping out of a cab, which we have seen him or others do several times in this and other locations around the city. While the inclusion of Harley in this scene follows logically from the previous one, when the two men were together with the President of the United States, the cut that takes us inside the hotel could have come sooner. It is the deliberate move of the camera, tracking back right, taking the time to show us Harley, that I am interested in. Why was this additional move necessary? Until now, the Vice President has been a minor character as compared to the Majority Leader – so why linger here? A closer shot of Harley in the back seat might have rendered his mood more clearly, and would have communicated to us the point of his presence at the end of the shot. But in his typical fashion, Preminger refuses such a move of clarification. So we are left to wonder.

David Thomson has identified those directors – Hawks, Dreyer, Rossellini, and Renoir among them – whose films are marked by a dislike of expressiveness. “Those directors compose and frame,” he writes, “but only in the way that many novelists try to write lucidly. They share a reluctance to urge meaning into the action through the ingenious placing of the camera.”¹ Victor Perkins would include Preminger in this company: “The visual beauty of his films does

not come from his compositions which, though usually attractive, are always dictated by the need for complete lucidity.”² However – and perhaps paradoxically – what first appears simply as lucid presentation can, in retrospect, appear considerably more complex and even more significant than we first thought. In her book *Reading Hollywood*, Deborah Thomas identifies *Advise & Consent* as a film that works this way. It is, she writes, “a film of retrospection, openly inviting us to revisit it as a condition of our understanding it fully, with much of its significance withheld or unreadable during an initial viewing”³ – this in spite of the fact that we never feel as if things are being withheld. Investigating the significance of this moment of Preminger’s camera lingering on Harley in the backseat of the limo will require some narrative contextualizing.

As *Advise & Consent* opens, the President of the United States – an aging and unwell figure (Franchot Tone) – submits a nomination for a new Secretary of State, Robert A. Leffingwell (Henry Fonda). Leffingwell is a controversial choice, and the film focuses largely on the conflict this nomination prompts within the President’s own party. Primary opposition to Leffingwell comes from a southern senator, Seab Cooley (Charles Laughton); primary support comes from an aggressive, tactless young senator, Van Ackerman (George Grizzard). Senate Majority Leader Bob Munson, a longtime friend and colleague of the President, is charged with leading Leffingwell to confirmation, and his first task is to select a Chair for the Senate subcommittee that will review the nominee. Van Ackerman desperately wants the job, but Munson turns instead to another junior senator, the bright but modest young family man Brig Anderson (Don Murray).

As the hearings proceed, there is much red-baiting: concerns that Leffingwell will appease the Communists, and even the accusation made by one witness (Burgess Meredith) that he was once part of a Communist cell while at the University of Chicago. Though Leffingwell easily refutes this accusation before the subcommittee, it turns out to be true, and when word of it gets to Brig, he refuses to release Leffingwell from subcommittee review for a full Senate vote. His concern is less about Leffingwell’s past than about the fact that the nominee has perjured himself. Brig hopes that the President will withdraw the nomination to avoid a scandal. Van Ackerman – who is unaware of the truth about Leffingwell’s past – feels that Brig isn’t showing clear enough support for the nominee and, out of resentment, digs up secrets from Anderson’s past: a letter and photograph indicating a homosexual relationship while Brig was in the war. Van Ackerman anonymously blackmails Brig, who then, in a panic, flies to New York to try to persuade his former lover to refuse cooperation with whomever it is that is onto this secret (Brig doesn’t know).

On his return flight from New York, Brig bumps into the Vice President, who has until this point been only a minor character. Indeed, as Harley remarks to Brig, he isn’t included in much of any political goings-on, either by the other senators or by the President. Aware of the pressure Brig is under as chair of the Leffingwell subcommittee, and noting his extreme anxiety, Harley (as everyone calls him) offers counsel. At first Brig wants to unburden himself, but then he refuses. Back in Washington late that evening, Harley offers Brig a

ride home, and then, perhaps suspecting that something else is at issue, asks simply and with honest concern, "Are you all right?" Brig doesn't answer, but closes the conversation with a simple, "Goodnight, Harley." From there, Brig goes to his Senate office and, in despair, takes his own life. Early the next morning, Majority Leader Munson and Vice President Hudson take the news to the President, who is inexplicably spending the night on a battleship in the Chesapeake Bay.

One clue to the significance of the moment of Harley in the backseat comes in this scene that immediately precedes it, with the President on board the battleship. As that scene opens, Harley and Munson have given the President the news of Brig's suicide, and Munson assures him that Van Ackerman is behind the blackmail. The conversation then turns to that matter of the Leffingwell nomination. Munson suggests that the President should withdraw the nomination, but the President replies that, with Brig dead, his nominee can be released from the subcommittee for the full Senate vote, where success seems assured. When the President senses Harley's disapproval, he asks, "You think in my place you'd feel any differently about this than I do?" The Vice President replies, "I don't know Mr. President. But the last night I saw Brig Anderson, I saw a man in terrible pain. I wonder if Leffingwell or any one man is worth all of this." The President responds firmly, "Wondering doesn't run a government." Then he curtly dismisses him, as Brig had the night before: "Good night, Harley."

Figure 4
Otto Preminger
Advise & Consent,
(1962)



In his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, David Thomson's entries on all three of these actors remark on their presence in *Advise & Consent*, but it is the entry on Lew Ayres that most privileges the actor's role in *this* film. For Thomson's remarks to resonate, I need to say more about the film's conclusion. In the final scene, as the Senate votes on Leffingwell, it becomes clear that the votes will be deadlocked: the Vice President will have to cast the tie-breaking vote. But just before he is called on to do so, he receives word that the President has died – and he refuses to exercise his right to vote. Leffingwell's nomination is defeated. The Vice President rises to leave the Senate chamber, and everyone else stands in deference and respect. As he passes the Majority Leader, the new President explains, "About the vote, Bob, I'm sorry. I prefer to name my own Secretary of State." Munson replies, "I'll see

what I can do for him, Harley.” Then he corrects himself: “Mr. President.” Thomson writes:

The moment in *Advise & Consent* when Vice President Lew Ayres (still youthful-looking, honest, and likeable) is elevated by the death of Franchot Tone to the biggest opportunity is both touching and ironic – one of those barely visible barbs that Preminger liked to leave in his films. Ayres’ career is sweet with youthful salad days, but bitter with public fickleness. Twice he rose and fell; and still he remained decent and reasonable.⁴

Ayres moved from stardom in the early 1930s to B pictures in too short a time. The films that bookend that decade’s work for him are the lead role as the young man whose innocence is shattered by war in the Academy Award-winning *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), and a touching performance in George Cukor’s *Holiday* (1938). But the war came and Ayres was a conscientious objector. Because of American anger and resentment, his career suffered a fierce boycott. He worked in film only intermittently after the war – mostly in television, only a handful of pictures – and then *Advise & Consent*.

Though he is a secondary (even minor) character throughout most of the film, Ayres’ Vice President is in many ways its moral core. We can return here to the subject of the scene on the ship’s deck. After the President dismisses Harley, Munson stays behind to speak with the President, who expresses impatience with Harley and again laments the possible failure of his nominee – and that this last failure places his Presidential status (historically speaking) in jeopardy. But the final moments of the scene, as the President moves slowly across the ship’s deck, suggest a tone not so much of suspense or anxiety or calculation – all of which have featured here – but one of elegy: something passing, something changing. This changing is hinted at earlier in the scene, by a small formal gesture. For the whole of the scene, the camera’s movements are strictly functional, following the movements of the characters – with one exception: when a reaction by the Vice President prompts the scene’s only expressive use of the camera. The President asks why the Senate can’t just proceed with a vote on his nominee (in effect, callously disregarding the suicide of Brig Anderson); as he turns, the camera ever so slightly dollies forward, very gently underscoring – and thus clearly privileging – Harley’s stunned reaction. In fact, Ayres’ performance doesn’t communicate this at all: the dolly-in does it for him.

This small camera move – like the dolly to the right in the limo scene I began with – is an expressive detail that, as we revisit the film “as a condition of our understanding it fully,” alerts us to our misunderstanding. We thought the film was about the Senate Majority Leader’s attempts to do the will of the President by getting his nominee for Secretary of State approved by the Senate. But there’s another narrative that has gradually overtaken that one: the preparation of Vice President Harley Hudson – a compromise running mate, “the housewives’ delight” – to the assumption of the Executive’s chair. These two moments of cinematic emphasis early in the third act – subtle, deliberate,

precise – both of which highlight Harley, are indications to us that this secondary narrative is about to nudge the primary narrative out of the way. Throughout the film's first two acts, there are a handful of scenes in which Harley appears, and all are carefully placed to make it plausible that he should become President. But it is these two small dolly shots – this gentle guiding of our attention to him on the ship's deck and in the back of his limousine – that make that outcome deeply satisfying. Here, with his ascension to the highest office, Lew Ayres' stardom (symbolically at least) is at last secured, his decency at last rewarded, his loyalty finally unquestioned.

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¹ David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1994), p. 793.

² V. F. Perkins, "Why Preminger?" *The Movie Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 43.

³ Deborah Thomas, *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meaning in American Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), p. 91.

⁴ Thomson, p. 35.