# CONVOY YOUR ENTHUSIASM (8)

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*One of 25 installments in a* [*series of enthusiastic posts*](http://hilobrow.com/tag/convoy-enthusiasm/) *analyzing and celebrating some of our favorite action movies from the Seventies (1974–1983).*

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**QUINTET | d. ROBERT ALTMAN | 1979**

The 1970s saw a lot of action on the drive-in and grindhouse screen, but back home and on the street the decade mostly felt like entropy. The bleak decay of cold war and world recession triggered reflexes of drugged numbness in everyday life and cathartic bloodshed at the movies. Robert Altman saw through to the persistent sense of menace, and wound the pace all the way down, in his 1979 anti-actioner *Quintet*.

It’s slow-motion chase, funereal casino, glamour-free survival struggle; all the attributes of midcentury adventure fantasy are here, but seem suspended in ice. Figuratively — a refracted haze frames the screen from start to finish — and literally, as the film takes place during a future ice age, picturing the remnants of humanity temporarily hanging on. Filmed entirely on location during winter in the exposed ruins of Montreal’s utopian “Expo 67” site, the harshness of the scenario radiates to the viewer; a fire of sympathetic suffering to place us in the middle of the drama more deeply than many a spectatorial military or martial-arts thriller would.

This movie is made not to adrenalize but mesmerize. We follow protagonist Paul Newman’s every move as he trudges around the skeletal complex that seems made entirely of steel stairs and mirrored windows, following the mysterious man who has just murdered his family, until a third man equally inexplicably slits the first one’s throat. We shift in the uncomfortable inevitability as other characters (all marked as each other’s prey in a real-stakes role-playing game that these last humans use to pass the end-times) meet with crude, intentionally conspicuous mutilations or impalements, or as another background extra is found eaten by dogs or dead of frostbite. Foreboding keeps us frozen to the screen.

*Quintet* was widely seen as one of Altman’s worst follies, but its stoic tone, stilted speech, stark aesthetic and somnambulant pace create one of the most cohesive works of art and convincing other worlds in this entire era of moviemaking. And one of the least obvious allegories of the desolate, deceptively festive times in which it was made. A “golden age” of film was waning, authorities were never to be respected again, and *Quintet* closed up the decade with a hero’s journey to nowhere.

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