

Introduction

This book brings together a number of movie reviews written a long time ago and in a cultural context very different from the one we know today. If these pieces still have any interest, and I hope they do, it's in large part because they belong to a precious but transient moment in film criticism—before journalism and academia went their widely different ways and it was briefly possible to write about films with serious intent for a wide, popular audience.

The articles in this collection range from 1974 to 1986, a period that saw the emergence of both the so-called film generation—bred out of campus film societies and busy commercial art theaters—and the so-called alternative press, an extension of the underground newspapers of the flower power era into for-profit respectability. Publications like the *SoHo Weekly News*, the *Los Angeles Weekly*, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and the paper where I was lucky enough to be hired as the first staff film critic, the *Chicago Reader*, discovered a formula that largely liberated them from the need to tailor editorial content to the narrow interests of a target audience.

By hooking readers on service features such as extensive event listings and free classified advertising, these publications could allow themselves a certain indulgence when it came to the topics (and lengths) of feature articles and reviews. The *Reader* could comfortably place a fifty thousand-word story about beekeeping on the front page, secure in the knowledge that readers would pick up the paper in any case in order to look for an apartment or learn what band was playing at their favorite club. Working on that principle, it was easy to slip in a two thousand-word review of a three-hour film by a forgotten Portuguese director (*Francisca*, 1981) or an experimental work by an exiled Chilean filmmaker (*City of Pirates*, 1985); if the readers weren't interested, they could always turn directly to the lonelyhearts ads in the back of the paper.

But the true stroke of genius for the alternative press lay in the decision to give its publications away for free—foregoing a thirty-five-cent cover price (most of which would be eaten up by the costs of collection and accounting) in favor of drawing a large circulation. In effect, the alternative publishers were no longer in the business of selling newspapers to readers, but of selling readers to advertisers.

This was a strategy that worked wonderfully well, at least until it was adopted by the new generation of Internet entrepreneurs that emerged in the 90s. Unburdened by the expense of printing and distribution (and

eventually, it seems, of paying contributors a living wage), the Internet sites could deliver “eyeballs” to advertisers even more efficiently than the alternative weeklies. As I write this, most of the weeklies that prospered in the late twentieth century are barely hanging on in the early twenty-first. The luxury of printing long pieces without an obvious demographic appeal is something the weeklies can no longer afford—while, paradoxically, it is a privilege that the Web has actively refused. Although space would seem to be the Net’s cheapest and most extensive resource, it’s rare to find a critical piece that runs to more than a couple of hundred words, even on the sites specifically devoted to film reviews.

As a result, the long-form journalistic review has practically vanished from print publications. Even the *New Yorker*, the last redoubt for sustained critical essays in the popular press, has cut back drastically on the space devoted to film reviews: if Pauline Kael were writing for that publication today, she would barely be able to clear her throat without using up her allotment for the week.

The loss is a significant one, if only because, without the long form review, we’d be deprived not only of Kael’s outpourings in the *New Yorker* (the secret model, with its judicious blend of service features and willfully esoteric journalism, for much of the alternative press), but also of the work of Sam Adams, David Ansen, Stuart Byron, Godfrey Cheshire, Richard Corliss, Manohla Dargis, David Denby, David Edelstein, Scott Foundas, Chris Fujiwara, Owen Gleiberman, Molly Haskell, J. Hoberman, Richard Jameson, Lisa Kennedy, Peter Keough, Stuart Klawans, Andy Klein, Dennis Lim, Janet Maslin, George Morris, Gerald Peary, John Powers, Peter Rainer, Ruby Rich, Carrie Rickey, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Lisa Schwarzbaum, Matt Zoller Seitz, Henry Sheehan, Michael Sragow, Amy Taubin, Charles Taylor, Ella Taylor, Stephanie Zacharek, and many other insightful critics whose careers began and passed through or prospered at the alternative weeklies.

But when a format disappears, sometimes a way of thinking disappears with it. At the moment, American movie criticism seems divided (with some exceptions) between two poles: quick-hit, consumerist sloganeering on Internet review sites and television shows, and full-bore academia, with its dense, uninviting thickets of theoretical jargon. The interested reader has few places to turn in hopes of getting a quick leg up on the work of Pedro Costa or Jia Zhang-ke, to name two working filmmakers whose celebrity would have been assured during the heyday of the alternative press, and consequently their films remain off the radar for most nonprofessional viewers, barely distributed in the United States either theatrically or on home video. Mainstream print publications no longer have the space to cover cultural subjects in depth; the Internet doesn’t have the interest; and academia, at least along its postmodernist branch, has, in the name of overturning the Romantic notion of an all-

powerful, autonomous creator, put the author to death. With the vanishing of that despised figure—so often and unfashionably white, male, and heterosexual—has gone perhaps the simplest, most empirically satisfying way of connecting an audience to a work of art: though a human figure. The author may be a fiction, but he or she remains a most useful one.

The pages that follow are full of authors, artists, and auteurs—as well as a whole range of concomitantly naive notions of self-expression, poetic transcendence, and form considered in hopeless isolation from ideology. In the early 70s, theory had just started to surface in the suddenly ascetic pages of *Cahiers du cinéma*—no more pictures!—and between the insistently stiff covers of the British publication *Screen*. I had been exposed to a few of the basic concepts of what was then still called “structuralism” through forward-looking professors in the English Department of the University of Chicago, and at a certain point word went out in cinephilic circles that it was now *de rigueur* to read Roland Barthes and Christian Metz. Attempts were duly made, but it soon became clear that any real progress in this direction would require mastery of Marx, Freud, and advanced linguistics, something clearly beyond my patience and mental powers. Forty years later, it still is. I’m sure my experience of the cinema has been shaped by theory in more ways than I am aware of. But I have always felt more comfortable talking about films than Film, a prejudice I acquired early on from the pages of a slim, white volume that appeared one day on a shelf in the suburban Chicago library near my home. Titled *The American Cinema*, it joined a dozen or so other books in the small film section. Among them were, most memorably, William K. Everson’s *The Western*, Griffith and Mayer’s *The Movies*, and Daniel Blum’s *Pictorial History of the Silent Screen*, all of which I had checked out and pored over countless times in the first burst of my adolescent film buffery.

But this book was different. There were no illustrations in it, and it was largely concerned with a class of film artist of which I was just becoming aware. As a kid, I’d loved the silent comedians and had a particular fondness for Laurel and Hardy; as a teenager I had just discovered *Citizen Kane*, with its full stock of wonderful tricks and shifting moods. Orson Welles was my new hero, and I was gratified to find that the author of *The American Cinema* had included him in a category called “Pantheon Directors.” But who were these other people?

I knew Keaton and Chaplin, of course, and Hitchcock was the funny fat man on TV who made movies (*Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Marnie*) I wasn’t allowed to see. I knew Griffith’s name from the other books, though apparently his movies could only be seen at a far-off place in New York City called the Museum of Modern Art. The others—Flaherty, Ford, Hawks, Lang, Lubitsch, Murnau, Ophuls, Renoir, Sternberg—were new to me, but the suggestion that they were peers of the great Orson was enough to fire my enthusiasm. I memorized their filmographies and read and reread the

compact, epigrammatic essays that the author, one Andrew Sarris, had appended to them. To my fourteen-year-old self, these lists of titles were like posters in a travel office, representations of exotic places I hoped to visit some day but for the moment remained remote and inaccessible.

Mysteriously, the city fathers of my hometown, the bedroom suburb of Palatine, Illinois, had neglected to establish a local cinematheque. But we did have WGN, the locally owned (by the *Chicago Tribune*) television station, which had a Sunday late-night slot set aside for classic Hollywood films, as well as the erratic overnight programming on the network affiliates. Armed with the newspaper television listings, a well-thumbed copy of *The American Cinema*, and a functioning alarm clock, the dedicated teenage cinephile could see a range of movies that seems amazing by contemporary standards—albeit in the dead of night on a nine-inch black-and-white screen. This was probably not the best way to encounter, say, Sternberg's *The Devil Is a Woman* for the first time (which arrived courtesy of a classic movie series hosted on the *Sun-Times* station, WFLD, by Chicago's leading drama critic, Richard Christiansen). But I took as much pleasure seeing it then, my nose pressed up against the tiny screen in my bedroom, as I did when I finally saw it many years later in a fully restored 35-millimeter print.

By the time I made it to the University of Chicago in 1971, I was thoroughly obsessed with film. My choice of college had been dictated first by a vague plan to earn an advanced degree in English literature that might allow me to find a teaching job someday and second by the fact that the University of Chicago was home to a wonderful institution called the Documentary Film Group.

Doc Films, as it was affectionately and universally known, was (and continues to be) the oldest student-run film society in the United States, having been founded in 1932 by (as the vaguely Soviet name suggests) a coalition of left-leaning activists dedicated to the then-current notion that documentary films could be an agent of social change. By the early 1960s, however, it had become the first university film society to go whole hog for auteurism, thanks to a group member who had returned from a trip to Paris with suitcases stuffed full of back numbers of *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif*. At Doc Films, I met people who not only knew who John Ford and Howard Hawks were, but who could recite the filmographies of Edgar G. Ulmer and Joseph H. Lewis from memory, describe individual shots from forgotten B-movies in rapturous detail, and call up pages of complex dialogue at will.

Andrew Sarris, of course, was a god to us. Every Doc Films member carried a paperback copy of *The American Cinema*, invariably wrapped with rubber bands to compensate for the Dutton edition's flimsy binding. As you worked your way through each filmography, you would underline the titles you had seen. This dedication to a sacred text was

something we shared with some of the other cultists then proliferating on the proudly radical campus—the humorless Maoists, with their Little Red Books.

But apart from envying the sleek plastic binding that the Chinese had wisely provided for the words of their helmsman, we had little to do with the political groups. Firm believers in Sarris's dedication to the trees rather than the forest, we were determined to rescue film culture from the sociologists and ideologues who then dominated the small amount of serious literature on the subject. For us, the best movies were those that reflected the sensibility of a single artist—namely, a director who could shepherd all of the various elements that constituted the cinematic product, both human (actors, technicians, screenwriters) and cultural (genre conventions and industrial economics), into a distinctive vision.

Today, that notion may seem both commonplace and quaint, but in the early 1970s it was enough to unleash passions on an epic scale. What riled people was not the idea that directors could conceivably be “authors” of films—a notion that dates back to D. W. Griffith—but that claims of artistic significance were being made for vulgar Hollywood product. Hollywood, as everyone knew, was the world capital of crassness and cheap commercialism, the place art went to die—and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathanael West were there to tell us all about it, in cruel detail.

And so, to suggest that films such as *Vertigo* and *The Searchers* were something other than obvious potboilers—as Sarris and the Sarrisites, following the example of the young French critics, had begun to do—was to challenge an entire ingrained belief system. Auteurism openly attacked the assumption that the European cinema was more emotionally mature and intellectually sophisticated than its adolescent Hollywood counterpart; that the East Coast literary establishment enjoyed an obvious moral and intellectual superiority over the West Coast movie crowd; and that a popular art form was inherently inferior to the elitist culture of the theater, museum, and concert hall.

When the discussion could be lured away from the safe, brightly lit terrain of A-list directors like Hitchcock and Ford and down the dark and dangerous back alleys of B-moviemakers like Edgar G. Ulmer and Joseph H. Lewis, it was generally enough for the anti-auteurist forces to cite a few titles—like Ulmer's *Babes in Bagdad* or Lewis's *Gun Crazy*—to carry the day. Nothing so lurid could possibly be taken seriously. But, as Sarris suggested in his introduction to *The American Cinema*, auteurism depends on a see-for-yourself curiosity rather than blanket dismissals of genres and styles. If, on close inspection, *Babes in Bagdad* turns out to be less momentous than *Ulysses* or *The Rite of Spring*, it remains a strange, sympathetic little film, poignantly illustrative of the lengths to which its doomed director would go in his determination to pursue his art against all odds. And if *Gun Crazy* turned out to be something like a masterpiece,

new terms would have to be invented to account for it; the old literary standards just wouldn't do.

Looking back, it seems as if the auteurists lost a fair number of battles—particularly when the opponent was the wily Pauline Kael—but still resoundingly won the war. Hitchcock and Ford, and increasingly Ulmer and Lewis, are part of the syllabus of every Introduction to Film course, and even in postmodernist academia the pool of films under discussion continues largely to consist of the auteurist canon. In the end, even Kael seemed to come around, though her pantheon had its own distinctive population: not Hitchcock and Ford, but Brian de Palma and Philip Kaufman, as if she preferred the self-conscious imitation to the real thing.

Sarris, alas, was not all seeing. Published in 1968, which now seems so clearly a watershed year, *The American Cinema* offers few glimpses of the coming revolution. Arthur Penn, whose *Bonnie and Clyde* had in 1967 helped sound the death knell for classical Hollywood, appears only as a vague figure on the horizon; Sarris dismisses him in a few sentences for his early, not always successful attempts to merge Hollywood genres and East Coast theatrical aspirations. Francis Ford Coppola, whose 1972 *The Godfather* would open the studio gates to a new generation of university-trained directors, gets only a brief mention for his optimistically titled apprentice film, *You're a Big Boy Now*. Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman, Jerry Schatzberg, Steven Spielberg, and the rest of the founding figures of the "New American Cinema" of the 1970s make no appearance at all.

Perhaps Sarris suspected that the system he celebrated in *The American Cinema* had come to the end of its time; perhaps only at the moment of its passing could classical Hollywood be appreciated for the artistic marvels it had produced rather than dismissed for the commercial compromises and mountains of meretriciousness it had also yielded in abundance. In any case the American cinema would never be the same after the publication of *The American Cinema*: the richness and stability of the studio system, with its reliable formulas, balance of genres, and dependable audience, became a thing of the past.

If classical Hollywood operated like an assembly line, turning out product on a strict schedule to meet a largely predictable demand, the new Hollywood was more like a casino. Huge sums of money were bet on unknown filmmakers and unclassifiable screenplays, in the hope that one project out of twenty would hit the jackpot and turn a profit spectacular enough to make up for the losses on the others.

At first, the casino atmosphere was exhilarating. Anything seemed to be possible, much as it did in the similar period of chaos and uncertainty that accompanied the transition to talking films in 1927–30. A few young filmmakers, newly empowered by runaway hits, succeeded in imposing an exaggerated, European-flavored notion of authorship on American

films. (Paradoxically, these young directors became known as “auteurs” in the popular press, appropriating a term of art originally intended to honor the humble studio craftsmen the new generation was determined to displace.)

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But as the conspicuous commercial failures began to pile up—a category that included everything from deeply felt, personal films like Monte Hellman’s *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971) to seemingly surefire popular entertainments like Blake Edwards’s *Darling Lili* (1970)—the inevitable reaction set in. In 1975, Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* pointed the way to a brutal new commercialism, based on saturation advertising on television and wide release patterns that bypassed the old downtown, first-run theaters in favor of suburban shopping malls. When George Lucas took the formula a step further with *Star Wars* (now and forever known as *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope*) in 1977, the studios were happy and relieved to follow him. The wayward auteur was replaced with an almost fanatical adherence to the rules and regulations of juvenile genre filmmaking. Ancient Saturday morning formulas (horror, science-fiction, the action-adventure intrigues of the serials) were reproduced as simply as possible (though often with a new, protective edge of self-mocking knowingness) in the hope of providing visceral thrills for young filmgoers and nostalgic reveries for their parents. The adult dramas of the early 70s were banished from the multiplexes, as the Hollywood establishment concentrated on pleasing the taste of the average American fourteen-year-old boy.

That transformation, too, is part of the hidden storyline of this book. My tenure at the *Reader* (1974 to 1986) overlapped with the late stages of the transition from classical to postclassical Hollywood, which at the time felt more like a collapse into chaos than progress toward a new paradigm. A few lions of the old guard were still around, making their last films—Alfred Hitchcock (*Family Plot*), Billy Wilder (*Fedora*), Robert Aldrich (*Twilight’s Last Gleaming*), Otto Preminger (*The Human Factor*)—to the general indifference of audiences and critics. Meanwhile, a new generation was rising that didn’t seem to care for the classical virtues of a calibrated visual style and a carefully modulated narrative rhythm. Some of the newcomers seemed tremendously exciting—filmmakers such as John Cassavetes, Jonathan Demme, Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader, and Albert Brooks—while others seemed to be flailing around, better at demolishing old models (Robert Altman, Brian De Palma, Bob Rafelson) than building new ones.

My fascination with the old way of doing things may well have blinded me to new developments. I never could muster much enthusiasm for the work of Woody Allen (*Annie Hall*), Bob Fosse (*All That Jazz*), Hal Ashby (*Coming Home*), Michael Mann (*Thief*), and the many other filmmakers of the period who seemed to be flying blind, with only a limited sense of the tradition that had produced them. I preferred filmmakers who

built on the past, who seemed dedicated not to trampling on the classical model but trying to reconfigure it. The same year, 1976, in which Don Siegel and John Huston were creating elegiac genre films like *The Shootist* and *The Man Who Would Be King*, Walter Hill released his neonoir *The Driver* and Clint Eastwood delivered *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, both brilliant variations on old genre structures that opened established forms to new levels of stylization and moral insight. Thirty years later, Eastwood stands almost alone as a plausible candidate for the Last Classicist, perhaps the only working American filmmaker whose practical experience dates back to the 1950s.

My search for continuity led me to the work of John Carpenter, George Romero, and Joe Dante—all genre directors whose imaginations seemed liberated by the formal and thematic constraints imposed by the horror movie. In an important way, they seemed to enjoy more freedom than the big budget, mainstream moviemakers, like Spielberg, Lucas, Coppola, and Mike Nichols, whose work had to conform to an Oscar-friendly decorum. The new horror films were exempt from the unhealthy demands of good taste, and their examples were followed by a burgeoning field of low-budget, exploitation filmmakers. The 70s and early 80s would have been much less without the subversive genre pictures released by Roger Corman's New World Pictures (Paul Bartel's *Death Race 2000*, Stephanie Rothman's *The Velvet Vampire*, Michael Miller's *Jackson County Jail*), not to mention the even more obscure exploitation films that emerged from long-gone outfits like Crown International, Dimension Pictures, and Brynston Distributing.

At the same time, the movie past was being rediscovered in a more systematic, better-funded way than ever before. It is during the 1980s that the film preservation movement got going in earnest, as institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, the Library of Congress, the British Film Institute, the Cinémathèque Française, the Deutsche Kinemathek, the Cineteca Bologna, George Eastman House, and the UCLA Film and Television Archive expanded their mission beyond the acquisition of vintage prints and into the brave new world of restorations. Cinephiles who had learned to be content with 16-millimeter collectors' prints and the battered inventories of the local studio exchanges could suddenly access the masterpieces of Sternberg and Griffith with something like their original visual qualities.

With these newly restored titles popping up at local museums, film societies, and even the occasional commercial theater (as was the case with Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, a disaster on its first release but an instant classic on its second), the past and the present commingled on the same repertory calendar. Old movies were never more with us, allowing scholarly filmmakers like Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, and, in France, Bertrand Tavernier to build their work on firm foundations

that would be immediately familiar to most filmgoers. This interest in the movie past was furthered by the explosive growth of home viewing in the wake of the VHS, and then DVD, revolution, which effectively all but destroyed repertory cinemas. But that's another story, played out after I left the *Reader* in 1986.

Some of the pieces in this book will seem naive or simply mistaken, and I have made no effort to cover up my errors of taste or fact, nor to smooth out my sometimes infelicitous prose. Still, I hope this volume will offer a sense of what it was like to live and work through a period of tumult and possibility, when movies were central to the cultural discourse, and we had the time and inclination to take them seriously.

A Note on the Selections

The introduction draws on my “An Auteurist Adolescence,” originally published in *Citizen Sarris, American Film Critic*, edited by Emanuel Levy (Scarecrow Press, 2001).

The pieces selected for the first three parts of this book (“The Best,” “The End of Classical Hollywood,” and “Other Visions”) are, with one exception, reviews of movies I included in my list of the top ten films of the year—in the case of “The Best,” each film headed my list. The exception is the review of Godard’s *Detective*, which I chose to include as a testament to his importance during this period. The selections within sections are arranged by date of publication.

Part 4 contains pieces on “Revivals and Retrospectives” that opened in Chicago during my years at the *Reader* and so allowed me to write about some of my favorite films and filmmakers. There’s one “ringer” in this section: “Hitch’s Riddle.” Five of Hitchcock’s films were rereleased in the fall of 1983, and “Hitch’s Riddle,” my revision and expansion of the reviews I wrote at that time, appeared in *Film Comment* in 1984.

The appendix contains my top ten list from each year of my *Reader* tenure; the list for 1986 was prepared for the *Chicago Tribune*, but I’ve included it since I was still at the *Reader* for much of the year.

A Final Note

I left the *Reader* to join the staff of the venerable *Chicago Tribune*, a daily newspaper with a long history and its own Gothic tower perched on Michigan Avenue. I recruited Jonathan Rosenbaum, an old friend from the festival circuit, to take my job at the *Reader*, where he continued to take full advantage of the freedoms of the alternative press to create an extraordinary body of original criticism, up to his (semi) retirement in 2008. The demands of the *Tribune* job were quite different from what I had been used to at the *Reader*: instead of writing extended reviews of one or two films a week, I was required to turn out shorter pieces on six or seven releases—whatever presented itself to the public each

Friday. What had been a nicely distanced, contemplative job turned into an adrenaline-fueled assignment on the front lines, where I had to contend with everything that came down the pike rather than picking and choosing my topics.

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The *Tribune* gig afforded its own kind of pleasure and exhilaration—not so much that of doing a job well, but doing it on time—and I stayed with it for several years, eventually moving to New York to work for the tabloid *Daily News* in 1993. That experience, considerably less congenial, ended in 1999, and since then I have mostly been associated with the *New York Times*, where I have been writing reviews, Sunday think pieces, and (most gratifyingly) a weekly column on film history (lightly disguised as reviews of new DVDs). It's been a good run, and I wouldn't trade my daily newspaper experiences for anything. But the freedom I knew at the *Chicago Reader* is something I suspect I will never recover, mingled as it was with the energy of youth and the excitement of charging headlong into uncharted territory.