

How to Rate a Critic

Not long ago producer and director Otto Preminger, whose movies include "Exodus," "The Cardinal," and "Anatomy of a Murder," was invited to appear as a guest at a class in film criticism conducted by SR critic Arthur Knight at the University of Southern California. During the session Mr. Knight, Mr. Preminger, and the students fired enough questions and answers back and forth to provide a rare glimpse into the mind of a film-maker when he considers the effect of critics on his work. This article was compiled and edited from Mr. Preminger's remarks.

I WOULD like to say first that I am speaking solely for myself. I can't speak for the industry. I hate the word "industry." There may be an automobile industry, but not a motion picture industry. Perhaps motion pictures are not a pure art form; but today's important pictures are made by individuals, not by factories or assembly lines. And speaking about the critics as an individual producer, I don't feel that they work—or should work—for me. They work for a newspaper or for a magazine. It is up to their editor and publisher to determine whether the critic functions well for his readers. On the other hand, as a reader—not as a producer—I am entitled to express my opinion about the critic's quality, to criticize him as he criticizes me.

I think critics fulfil a very important function in motion pictures, regardless of whether I agree with them or not. The very fact that newspapers and magazines appoint serious, literate people to occupy themselves with motion pictures, to study them and write about them, raises the medium of motion pictures above the level of most other entertainments. Nobody writes a serious review about the circus, or about the World's Fair or a bullfight. One could divide the critics into two groups. The first tries to write objectively. As far as possible, they detach their own personality and subjective judgment from their knowledge of the medium, and they try to evaluate objectively the picture in terms of craftsmanship, writing, acting, direction, with perhaps at the end a word or two about how they feel personally about it. Then there is another school of critics—and if I were a critic, this is the one I'd belong to. They aren't concerned with objective judgments. They tell their readers how they feel about a picture. In other words, they give an opinion, an opinion that is very often passionate and almost always biased. I don't mean biased in any bad sense; if a man has been writing about pictures for any length of time, inevitably he has formed certain opinions about their makers and a taste for certain

kinds of films, and he naturally wants to influence his readers and guide them. In the best sense he becomes an opinion-maker.

After some time, their readers know how to judge their reviews. I read a review recently of a picture that I had already seen. Particularly one leading critic in New York loved it with passion. And yet I am convinced that most of his readers are not going to want to see that picture.

Now, this critic is a man of integrity. Right or wrong, he writes only what he believes to be true. And this is the important thing; a critic *should* be biased. Why shouldn't he think more of a director who has given him many, at least in his opinion, good pictures than of some unknown? Why shouldn't he expect little from a director whose work he hasn't liked so far? All I ask of a critic is that he really believe what he is writing and that he know something about motion pictures—a basic awareness of craftsmanship. Before he applies his own tastes, he should be able to judge what is good acting, what is good directing, what is good writing. But most film critics have never even gone near a motion picture set. Few critics, for example, really know what a film editor does. Many of them write that some new picture was beautifully—or badly—edited by such and such a cutter. But a cutter doesn't edit anything! The director tells him how to edit every frame; he is merely the *tool* of the director—a very important tool, very essential to the director's work, to be sure. Many critics blindly praise the work of the cameraman. Actually, the cameraman does contribute to the mood of the picture, but only according to the way the director tells him. It is the director who tells the cameraman what to photograph, where to put the camera, when to move it. But most critics don't seem to know these basic facts of film-making.

On the other hand, despite this regrettable lack, the critics are in some measure able to put the brakes on what I would call runaway commercialism. Those who have something to say about

what kind of pictures are being made because they put up the money are often inclined to believe that sensationalism or sex for the sake of sex spells automatic box-office success. Fortunately, there are still those critics who, even after such pictures are successful at the box office, say, "Okay, people are going to see them, but we have the taste and intelligence to think this is shameful." And this kind of criticism has in the long run an educational and upgrading influence.

In spite of the critics, audiences smell out the pictures they want to see. If he doesn't agree, the critic should say, "I realize that the masses are going to see it, but I still think this is a bad film." Thus the critics, by exercising their taste and discrimination, can curb some excesses of bad taste.

In this connection, I should like to point out that not every movie is a movie simply because it's printed on celluloid, just as a burlesque show cannot be equated to *Hamlet* simply because both are presented in a theater that has a proscenium and a curtain. Pictures are made for different purposes, and commercial success is only one of them. I don't say that I don't want success for my films; but I often read a story that I know could be very successful, and I still would not want to waste a year or eighteen months of my life on it. Now, a critic who can make clear the difference between burlesque and Shakespeare is performing a very valuable function—provided, of course, that he doesn't then slide into that kind of partisanship in which every Italian picture is considered to be Shakespeare, and every American picture trash.

YOU can't defend your work against criticism; you must accept it. In my own case, I can't always tell why I did a scene a certain way, nor can I always say that I did it right, nor even that I would probably do it the same way again. To be a bit pretentious about it, this is part of the creative process. Once the picture is finished, it stands there on its own and speaks for itself. And whether the critics like it or dislike it, I am completely helpless to explain or defend it. I can merely say that this is a story that appealed to me, and this is the way I saw it.

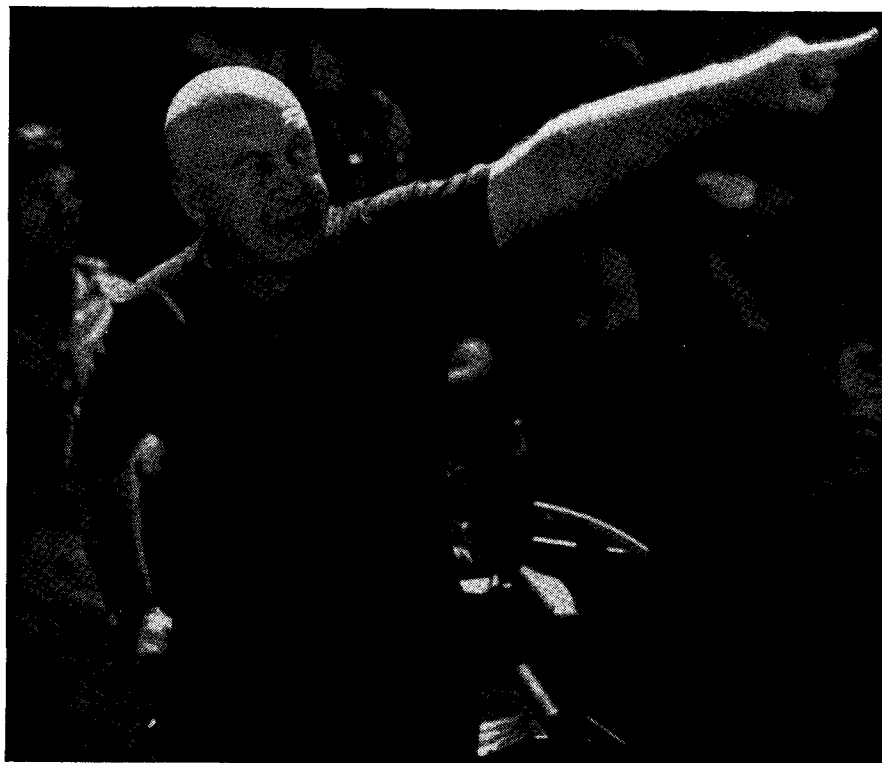
No doubt this has something to do with the way I work—which is, incidentally, the way many of today's independent producers work. I read constantly until I get interested in something that is so exciting that, paradoxically, I lose my judgment. I stop analyzing and feel I simply have to do it. Then, while working on the script, again I become very critical. I can see scenes that would be effective pictorially but wrong dramatically, characters who would be appealing but otherwise useless. So we eliminate, add, start over again. But

eventually, once more, there comes that moment when all reason ceases. It becomes a love affair, it becomes a passion. Perhaps this is why you go wrong quite often, but without it I doubt that anybody could endure all you have to go through to bring a picture to the screen.

While shooting a film, I let anybody see my rushes—even the critics. But I don't ask them, "How do you like it?" One thing a director must never do is ask someone else's opinion. He must be the leader, the one who directs. He tells the writer how to write, the actors how to act, the editor how to edit. That is his function. Whether he was right or wrong is finally decided by the public and by the critics. Actually, I don't even believe too much in previews, where a picture is tried out on the public before it is quite finished. When you write a book, you don't distribute it to a thousand people before you publish it and ask, "How did you like Chapter IV?" Only in the American theater are there out-of-town try-outs; in France or Germany you open a play after some dress rehearsals, and it is either successful or it isn't. The writer doesn't change it around according to audience reactions. And this is the way it should be in motion pictures. This is what a director is for. He creates something because he believes that this is the way it should be done.

NOW, back to the critics. I work very hard when I make a picture. I enjoy it, but I am under tremendous pressure every minute during production. Naturally, after all that effort, I hope everybody will like it. No artist paints a painting or sings a song without wanting people to like it. Of course, it is much easier to overlook the fact that someone dislikes it who talks only to his friends about it than if that someone is writing as critic for a publication with some 2,000,000 readers. Every motion picture maker would rather have good reviews than bad, regardless of whether he has respect for the critic or not. I have educated myself not to care too much. I don't get overjoyed over raves, or particularly depressed about bad reviews. While I don't like to measure success in terms of money, still the real success of a picture lies in how many people come, enjoy it, and tell their friends to come. So, although a bad review would not make me change my method or my point of view on my next picture, the complete failure of a picture to win the public—like my *Saint Joan*—would make me stop, and think, and analyze. Again, my analysis might be right or wrong, but on that basis I would try not to make the same mistake a second time.

In short, I don't think the critic works for the film-maker—and I don't think he



Otto Preminger on a movie set: "The critic should be biased."

should. Rather, he should be a guide for his readers. The better he is, the more often will his readers be satisfied when they go to the movies, and the more often will they follow him in the future. If a critic is right often enough for his readers, he builds his power, he wields an influence. This is particularly true of a more specialized magazine with a relatively homogenous readership. Its film critics seem to keep pace with their readers, who in turn look to them for guidance. And whether I agree with

them or not doesn't matter in the least. I shall probably go on making the same kind of pictures, pictures that entertain through provoking or stimulating people's thoughts. Therein is my satisfaction. But I don't overrate it. I still have the perspective to know that making pictures is not the most important thing in the world. The scientist who wins the Nobel Prize for cancer research probably contributes at least as much to mankind as the man who produces *In Harm's Way*.

The Mortgaged Wife

By Barbara Overmyer

HERE in the Hopper Highlands
the houses wave with flagstones
and whirlybird-sprinkled lawns

as the whistle from the platform
sings the seven-o-seven
straight to the Loop the loop

where he signs his name, his endorsement
of this check in check out
receivable weekly.

Ostensibly for the League of Women Voters
or Marching for Dimes
I hit the streets.

My book is full of Green Stamps
stuck with hope and spit
redeemable for premiums some day.

The Controversial Search For Value

By THOM ANDERSON

THE CONTROVERSY in American film criticism over the so-called auteur theory has been a remarkable example of the triumph of polemic over reasoned debate and disinterested judgment. This controversy has continued for so long that it is surprising how little attempt has been to place these polemics in a context that would enable readers to agree or disagree intelligently.

It all began with Pauline Kael's lengthy broadside aimed at Andrew Sarris in the spring 1963 *Film Quarterly*, which was closely followed by Dwight Macdonald's wide-ranging *Esquire* attack against the pathetic fallacies of film criticism, the latest battle in his lifelong war against those intellectual pretensions that have been protected, and indeed made sacred, by their very harmlessness and ineffectuality. Then their victims—Andrew Sarris and the editors of *Movie*—lined up for the counterattack. Finally there have come the commentators, standing above the battle and pointing out the foibles of both sides. They might be expected to complete the dialectic of this debate and thereby effect some sort of synthesis. However, not even the commentators have risen above the narrow confines of Pauline Kael's first attack.

There has been no attempt to present the debate in a broader historical perspective—one that can very easily be supplied. Actually the auteur theory, or *la politique des auteurs*, as its French version is more properly called, began with an article by François Truffaut called "*Une certaine tendance du cinéma français*," which appeared in the January 1954 issue of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the French film magazine that has since become famous for its praise of American directors unrecognized in their homeland, such as Howard Hawks, Samuel Fuller, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk, and Frank Tashlin. Truffaut did not present a theory; instead he presented a review of the French cinema with the view that directors, rather than scenarists, are properly the real creators of a cinema that can stand on its own with the other arts. This seems a modest idea, but we forget how much the weight of critical opinion has swung in his favor, even before the vogue of the auteur theory in the United States.

At that time, the French cinema was dominated in the minds of most critics

not by Jean Renoir or by Robert Bresson, but by men like Aurenche and Bost, the team of scenarists who collaborated on *Symphony Pastorale*, *Forbidden Games*, *Devil in the Flesh*, and many other celebrated films. Truffaut believed that neglected men like Max Ophüls, Jacques Becker, and Abel Gance were authors (auteurs) just as much as were Aurenche and Bost. Perhaps from this description of the situation of the French film in the early Fifties, we can partially understand the French fondness for the American cinema, which was not dominated by academic concepts of montage, by literature and the scenarists, by bourgeois conventions, or by a phony psychological realism—a domination felt very heavily by French cinema in what was called the Tradition of Quality.

However, Truffaut did not claim that directors were inevitably the auteur—which is supposedly the central principle of the auteur theory—instead he merely complained that most French films were dominated by the scenarios. Truffaut did not intend to create a system or theory or artistic values. He was not writing for history; his was a specific response to a specific problem at a specific time. Truffaut has emphasized in recent statements the transitory, polemical nature of the *politique* as he suggested it in 1954: "You see, the 'Politique des Auteurs'—I don't want to reneg on it today—but nevertheless it was timely; it intervened; it came up at a time when it was necessary to the situation as it was in France. I practice it, I believe in it today still, but on a much more limited number of directors . . . really . . . I think there are good Bergmans and bad Bergmans, good Aldrich and bad, very uneven, Aldrich. . . ."

It is unlikely that American critics who attack the auteur theory today would find any fault with Truffaut's article. Even those critics who once praised the Tradition of Quality have abandoned it now. But the article did create a polemical atmosphere in which certain auteurs were eulogized beyond their merits, as Truffaut admits, "The absence of great auteurs ten years ago brought us to the point of even inventing a few—and I must admit there were many of those." The *Cahiers* critics felt it necessary to choose sides behind those directors who upheld their idea of a personal cinema, so they divided the

cinema into those they were for and those they were against, and therefore defended not single works but careers. In those days, Truffaut was fond of quoting Giraudoux's aphorism, "There are no art works, there are only artists." This sentence probably sums up best that tendency in criticism to which was applied the phrase *la politique des auteurs*, a catch-phrase from Truffaut's article that in this context one might fairly translate literally as a politics about authors. As a result, *Cahiers* became monotonously favorable to any film made by a director who had been canonized as an auteur.

IT was against this excess that Andre Bazin, editor and founder of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, wrote his celebrated article, "*De la politique des auteurs*," which should have ended the auteur theory debate for good. Bazin thought there were good Minnelli and bad Minnelli, good Welles and bad Welles. He agreed to the auteur credo that real film-making talent does not wither away with age but rather matures; however, he suggested an all-important qualification: "Talent is permanent, but not infallible." He offered many examples of works in other mediums which vividly demonstrated their creators' fallibility, e.g., the plays of Voltaire, "Wellington's Victory" by Beethoven. Bazin found it odd that a theory that is debatable at best when applied to literature or painting, arts in which the work is wholly attributable to one man, should be applied to the cinema and especially to the American cinema, where factors of production play such an important part in the quality of the film, the creator being uniquely at the mercy of his patrons.

Bazin's article effectively ended the vogue of *la politique des auteurs* in France. It is now completely dead, and Truffaut's recent statements were truly post-mortems. However, the youngest critics have lost none of the audacity that marked the critical writings of their immediate elders who have gone on into film production. If the younger critics formally ignore the auteur theory, they write just as passionately about films and still champion directors ignored by English-speaking critics, such as Vittorio Cottafavi, director of Italian spectacles such as *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* and *Revolt of the Gladiators*.

Why, then, has Andrew Sarris revived