

THE ART THAT MATTERS

A Look at Today's Film Scene by the Under-Thirties

■ Observe the lines queuing for tickets outside any movie theater in the world and you will see a predominantly youthful audience. It has been estimated that at least 70 per cent of current box-office revenue comes from young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine. Film is the art form that speaks most urgently and persuasively to today's under-thirties, and as a result vast numbers of youth-oriented productions are spilling onto the screen.

Usually we learn about these films through the eyes of over-thirty critics. This special section gives the under-thirties a chance to be heard. We have turned the following pages over to four writers in their twenties—each of them an expert and articulate spokesman for his generation.

Larry Cohen, twenty-two, former film and fine arts editor of the University of Wisconsin student newspaper *The Daily Cardinal*, served as guest editor for the section. His opening article, "The New Audience: From Andy Hardy to Arlo Guthrie" (page 8), analyzes the treatment of "youth" both as an on- and off-screen commodity. Stephen Koch, twenty-seven, author of the novel *Night Watch*, explores the new relationship between printed word and visual image in "Fiction and Film: A Search for New Sources" (page 12). R. J. Monaco, twenty-nine, a poet currently at work on a screenplay for Warner Brothers, evaluates the burgeoning phenomenon of university film courses in "You're Only as Young as They Think You Are" (page 15). And Shari Steiner, twenty-eight, Rome-based correspondent for *Vanity Fair* and the *Herald Tribune* (Paris), compares the young film audience in Europe to that in America and finds the differences to be "A Question of Self-Image" (page 18).

Although these under-thirty writers differ considerably in the way they view specific productions, there is underlying agreement among them that film is the art that matters.

—THE EDITORS.

The New Audience: From Andy Hardy to Arlo Guthrie

by LARRY COHEN

According to the headline of an article that appeared late last May in *The New York Times*, buried with the film advertisements on page 36, "Young Writers Say They Don't Read." The five interviewed authors, all of whom were respectably under thirty, announced that they rarely if ever opened a book. "It's just easier to go to a movie and let it all wash over you," one of them said.

There were, of course, prominent exceptions to this impatient rule. Hermann Hesse and J. R. R. Tolkien both have large youthful followings. So does Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who was singled out because "he writes cinematically." But most authors met a grimmer, much less cordial fate. Reading was regarded as an academic pastime, and most books were relegated to the level and enthusiasm of a chore. The article came to an abrupt close with one of those statements that must have chilled the warmest hardbound heart. One of the young writers, Sally Grimes, who had previously spent some time composing obituary notices for the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, committed her own cool piece of manslaughter by concluding: "I find I'm reading less and less. I really don't know why."

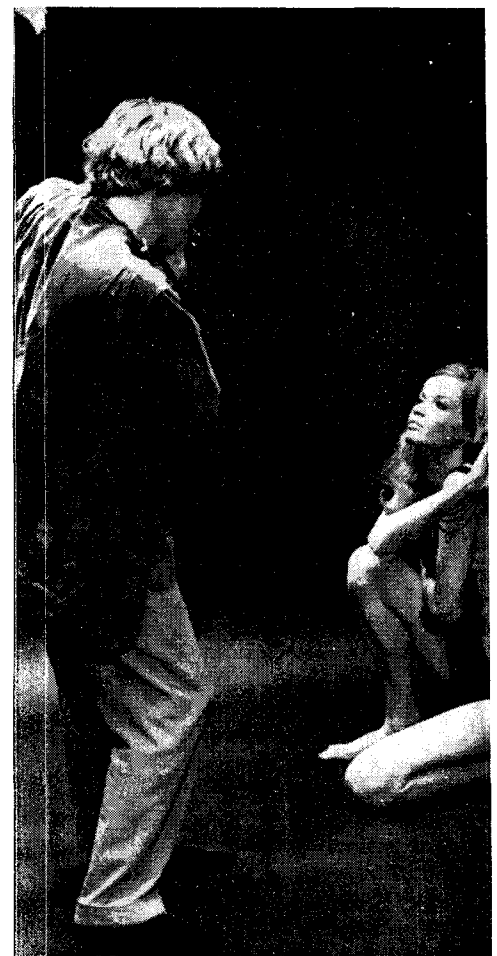
It occurs to me that the content of such a remark is less important than the tone with which it appears to have been said. Just think about what she's announcing. The death of literature? Hardly. The temporary disaffection of a substantial cross section of young writers (and young readers) with books? Maybe, despite the fact that the paperback market place is currently a veritable gold mine and new soft-cover publications such as *New American Review* and *US* have whopping, young readerships.

But listen to the statement rather than just its meaning. What resounds is something casual and half-shaded, something innocent and perhaps even

unconscious. The remark sounds like an afterthought, as if the speaker was deaf to any echo. There is nothing guilty about such a confession, no sense that the Furies of Literature are about to swoop down upon her for heresy. It is the nonchalance that says everything, the pronouncement itself relatively little. For the mood to which Miss Grimes and the other young writers are subscribing may well be an accurate expression of a new sensibility, one which is defined in part by its very lack of guilt about not being well-read and, on the other hand, by its overtly positive enthusiasm about film. In its openness and bluntness, "I really don't know why" reflects 1969 and a large new audience.

These changes in emphasis are so recent that it's extremely difficult to pin down their source with any real exactitude. There are clues, however, and a quick personal flashback to four years ago, around the time I graduated from high school, brings to mind a different picture. The kids with whom I grew up were avid readers; some of them even lay awake late at night and sweated out plans for writing the Great American Novel. Vietnam and a pervasive drug scene were not substantial issues yet; like us, they were in their pubescent stages, and the day they would be taken for granted as realities seemed a long way off. Literature still had its grip on us and we on it. For, McLuhan and television notwithstanding, the primary frame of reference from which we derived our formal tastes and plans for the future was still verbal. Our own Great Expectations used writers like Ken Kesey, Thomas Pynchon, J. D. Salinger, and Nathanael West as models and sources of passionate discussion.

Significantly mitigating this classical orientation was a film course I took in my senior year with about thirty other kids. We spent the first part of a fall semester staring at supposedly familiar objects—a leaf or our thumb,



Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up" served as "a primer in technique."

for example—and discovered the hard way what Joseph Conrad meant when he argued that his purpose was to make us *see*. With our thumbs out of our mouths, we then began looking at films by Griffith, Chaplin, Eisenstein, and Welles. *Potemkin* and *Citizen Kane* served as textbooks; we dissected their sequences frame by frame and assimilated a new vocabulary, learning how a movie was put together and why it still worked decades later. While most of our friends were surrendering themselves to term papers on Milton or even to diagramming the perennial sentence, we were reading the late James Agee's movie criticism and screenplays, using Arthur Knight's *The Liveliest Art* to gain a historical context, and worrying about montage and nonlinear structures. In retrospect, we already were taking films personally and seriously.

By 1969, what has happened is simply this: the young audience for books has not so much shrunk as the young audience for motion pictures has appreciably grown and become more vocal. As a breed, the kids of the late Fifties and early Sixties—the ones who had avidly attended university creative writing courses or earnestly imagined themselves as editors for a New York publishing house—were now generally anachronistic. For that matter, almost no one I knew at col-