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Towards an Objective Film Criticism

It is always easier to say where criticism ought not to go than to say where it ought to go. The following article, written in cognizance of what has been said on these matters recently in SIGHT & SOUND, OXFORD OPINION, and this journal, takes up this harder prescriptive task.

What kind of film criticism do we want? What kind of things may a critic legitimately say about a film? What is the aim and technique of good film criticism? Every so often these questions possess us all. As a result of them Britain is presently in the grip of a revived commitment debate which, like the last one, grew out of a dissatisfaction with the existing state of film criticism here. The opening shot came from *Oxford Opinion's* Victor Perkins criticizing the BFI pamphlet *Fifty Famous Films 1915-1945*.

highest peak of achievement in (Hollywood's) long traffic with the art of the film . . . For whatever other qualities this film may possess it is primarily a film about people, people who transcend the incidental evil and ugliness of life by their innate qualities of goodness and human courage. And when the meanness and malice of cruel men have done their worst it is the great spirit of Ma Joad . . . (et al.) . . . which remains. It is because of this positive affirmation of life that the film soars to greatness.' So there you are. Run out and get yourself a positive affirmation and, cinematically you're made. You'll have 'the greatest masterpiece the screen has ever produced' on your hands. Fine; but don't ask me to sit through it."

"That is why *The Grapes of Wrath* 'must mark the

Generally the argument has been between those who attacked all criticism, such as that cited above, which could have been written on the basis of the plot summary and involved no knowledge of the film medium, and the professionals. The latter showed a prickly sensitivity to this attack and tried to make out it was a matter of commitment, which it wasn't. It was a fact that

"British film critics have been forced to adopt this method because it is by far the easiest to practice; any fool can blather about positive affirmations. But in an art as new as the cinema it demands intellect, perception and sheer hard work to get to grips with aesthetic questions . . . the assumption [that a great film is made by the director's having his heart in the right place] . . . like the booklet, and like the criticism which it so accurately mirrors, stinks."

There is a good deal of sense in this; but there is also a lot more to be said. Perkins has failed to see the situation of the reviewer. Faced with the average movie output each week and required to say something about it the critic might find nothing of interest apart from the conventionally "dramatic" elements or the sociological interest of the milieu and its presentation. Being a good critic he doesn't just want to rail on about the length or the ineptitude of the direction all the time; he may feel his readers would prefer to hear about what is interesting in the film. Forced into this situation a person must either apprise himself of a minimum knowledge of drama and sociology, or else stop reviewing. Further though, this reasoning does not really apply to the highbrow critic. Sociopolitical discussions of Italian neo-realistic films or juvenile-delinquent films still smack of a certain pretentiousness, a desire to say deep things. But a film cannot be great because it "speaks up for life." That could easily be an intolerably maudlin cliché. A news-reel of people starving moves us but not because it is a great film but because it is good *reportage*; we are moved by facts clearly put before us. Film art should create the required emotions with aesthetic means and in unrealistic concentration. Antonioni's *L'Avventura*

conveys boredom and puzzlement but the viewer is never for a moment bored and puzzled. (This I think is the one silly thing in Noel Burch on *Une Simple Histoire*: he thinks boredom is conveyed by boring the audience. Nothing of the sort—Hanoun's complex cinematic means only appear so naïve because they come off so perfectly.)

Though Perkins and his colleagues are trenchant enough critics of criticism, their own attempts to write analytical criticism have not been particularly successful for obvious reasons. Among these are their rather woolly notions of analysis as being no more than the reading into the technical details of a shot the content it is intended to stress: they tend to concentrate on *explicating* the workings of a film, rather than getting down to actually *explaining* how it works. Their writing is far too descriptive. Thus they waxed ecstatic over the 180° rotary tilt in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* as symbolizing Dean's relation to his mother. In examining the work of a director they fail to reconstruct his development and substitute instead lists of such characteristic shots, covering them with fulsome praise for their "beauty," i.e., visual delight plus meaning.

Presently . . . the Ethiopian called out, "I've caught a thing that I can't see. It smells like Giraffe, and it kicks like Giraffe, but it hasn't any form."

"Don't you trust it," said the Leopard. "Sit on its head till the morning—same as me. They haven't any form—any of 'em."

—KIPLING, "How the Leopard Got His Spots"

At one time *Sight & Sound* did a very good job of analytical criticism, but there is little of it around today. However, *Film Quarterly* readers will be familiar with the attempts made in their pages to restate something on analytical lines. In particular I would instance Noel Burch's long study of Hanoun's *Une Simple*

Histoire; although his remarks were wrapped up in rather pretentious language Burch made a successful effort to get to grips with the problems of how and why this film worked, and of what light this threw on the relation between form and content.

Now while all such criticism is done by individuals, this does not mean that all judgments must be merely subjective. The first serious alternative offered to subjectivism was commitment. Burch's discussion, which is too long to quote, is clearly something quasi-objective to say the least, and in that it argues that form determines content, it would seem squarely uncommitted.

Here is a case then where objectivity has been achieved without commitment. But some people may even be surprised at the suggestion that some critics expected to reach objectivity through commitment. All values, they may say, are subjective tastes. It must be remembered, though, that in "Stand Up! Stand Up!" Lindsay Anderson said this subjectivity of morals was a thing to which he found himself "totally opposed." Let me try to show how he had come to think that objectivity in the arts as in morals could be achieved via commitment.

The commitment debate arises ultimately from the disappointment intellectuals experience when they first find out that it seems to be impossible to achieve objective judgments in the arts. The idea that there are true and discoverable critical principles has proved highly contentious. From this failure to find true principles some people inferred the nonexistence of any true principles. This seemed to open the doors to subjectivism and total relativism, a prospect which appalled some. Since all principles are equally undemonstrable, they argued, which you choose must be a subjective or irrational decision. However, once you have made that initial irrational choice the situation changes: you then have a set of clear-cut principles which are true-for-you and which can be applied objectively.

The answer to this is that criticism is written by individuals; it is not a dish for which there is a recipe, just as there is none for film-making.

Therefore commitment or the lack of it cannot be a part of this nonexistent recipe. Moreover, the critic who pretends to objectivity cannot overcome subjectivism by shifting it back one stage to a subjectively-arrived-at commitment.

Now as I too dislike subjectivism and the sort of pseudo-objectivism achieved by commitment I shall now try to formulate a solution to this basic problem as *my* alternative to subjectivism. I believe we can have rational film criticism because we can *learn* and come to *agree* about the meaning and value of films. But I think such rational criticism can only be created within a tradition which institutionalizes *discussion* of critical interpretations and evaluations: rationality consists in critical discussion which needs to be institutionalized if it is to be promoted. The steps of my argument are these.

(a) In seeking such an objective criticism we must not be overoptimistic and demand too much. Criticism and creation are human activities which cannot be programmed or replaced by a set of principles to be mechanically applied. We are logically limited by the fact that no criticism can replace the art to which it refers: in the end only the film can speak. "What the . . . film says *is* how it says it, so that no textbook distinction between form and content is possible," wrote John Taylor (*Sight & Sound*, Winter 1956-1957, p. 164).

(b) But not demanding too much does not mean giving up the hope of objectivity. We often agree in judgments, especially adverse ones, and common sense tells us this is not a random matter. We should analyze our reasons for disliking a particular film and see how far we agree in reasoning; and we should see whether we dislike other films for the same reasons. This requires very detailed analytical criticism: what did *those* placements and *that* movement mean in the context of that shot; what did *that* shot mean in that sequence; do *those* sequences gel into anything coherent, and so on.

(c) Much turns on our setting up too strong adequacy criteria for objectivity. Surely the model of objectivity is science, and here it does

not mean “detachment”—which in any case is impossible to achieve. Philosophers of science argue that scientific statements are objective to the extent that they are intersubjectively testable or criticizable. That is, no matter who sets up or observes the test experiment they will agree on the results. There is no harm in film criticism copying science to the extent of making clear-cut statements about the way the film works, the effects it has, which the reader can easily test for himself when he sees the film. Since he has a clear-cut statement and the same film before him, he can argue about it: both as to meaning and, stemming from this, value. One man can laud *Umberto D* because of the way it stresses human values; another can reply that our pity is aroused by simply *presenting* pitiful situations rather than artistically transmuting them.

(d) Were such a tradition of analysis and discussion set up we should be clear about what sort of principles we can expect it to produce. They would be tentative canons subject to revision in the light of criticism. Above all they would be negative, not positive principles; good art like the good life is hard to legislate for, hard even to agree upon; but bad art, like moral evil, provokes a wide measure of agreement. Our principles can therefore be expected to be negative limiting principles stating what to avoid, what not to do, what is no good. They would also have to be framed in such a way that they merely outlined incompetence, and did not close off the way for such innovators as Welles, Hanoun, Antonioni—all of whose unorthodoxies could easily have been mistaken for ignorant rule-breaking.

In view of this argument the oracular tendencies of present critics must go. They must be more humble in putting forward interpretations and evaluations for discussion. They should stop pretending their colleagues do not exist and pay attention to everything published before their deadline and, *if they disagree, if they want to say something different, they should argue their case in terms of what has already been said.*

Take, for example, *Psycho*. Because of press

show discomforts most of the British newspaper critics attacked it violently. Then the magazines came out and what did we find:

A reprehensible affair, perhaps; but it is a bit late in the day to start moralising about what Hitchcock chooses to do, and how—in this case brilliantly—he chooses to do it. (—Penelope Houston in *The Monthly Film Bulletin*)

Psycho reflects the disease that is currently riddling the whole Western Cinema, particularly Britain and the United States. It underestimates its audience; it turns something of human consequence into a fairground sideshow . . .

Unlike the nauseating *Peeping Tom*, *Psycho* attempts no real depth of characterisation or any real analysis of motives. (—Peter Baker in *Films and Filming*)

Now of course they do read each other: one critic called the psychology at the end bogus and without exception they all retailed that line thereby demonstrating they knew nothing of psychology or Hitchcock. The psychology was actually immaculate and beautifully put over, as one might have expected with Hitch. They swallow what others say without admitting it and, in Baker's case, go so far as to make statements about *Psycho* and *Peeping Tom* which clearly disqualify all their film criticism. In *Oxford Opinion* we are led a little deeper but no time is spent on the statements of other critics.

The style of the greater part of the film is a strange blend of lewdness and puritanism which betrays an attitude of scandalised amusement—the misanthropic attitude, indeed, of a gossip.

They then analyze the relish with which this is told, the juicy details with which it is embellished, and its theme, appearances, and respectability.

How does a film which I believe is accurately described as a work of gossip attain the stature not just of a work of art . . . but of great art? The answer depends upon one further subtlety in Hitchcock's technique; the director has interposed between himself and the audience a second personality—that of the gossip. Once or twice in the

course of the film we are confronted with an image which questions our whole response to the picture and forces us to ask whether this is really so amusing. I am thinking in particular of Norman's tired and isolated silhouette stretching above the quicksand. In the last three images—Mrs. Bates, the skull, and again the quicksand—the director steps forward in his own person to give the question a definite negative. It is not a subject fit for a gossip; it is fit only for a tragedian. And that is what Hitchcock finally shows himself to be. (—Victor Perkins)

(e) It would probably also help critics if they abandoned the idea that a work of art is a product of inspiration with a clear-cut and decidable meaning and value. Better the more realistic working assumption that it is a product of time, thought, hard work, and often compromise, and that it nevertheless retains a certain ineffable mystery. The little evidence we have available, such as Lindsay Anderson's *Making a Film* (about Thorold Dickinson's *Secret People*), Cocteau's *Diary of a Film*, and Lillian Ross's *Picture*, suggests very strongly that trying to pin down from outside just who is responsible for what in any film is an extremely hazardous process. Those who talk boldly of the recognizable "style" of a director can point to things like *Garment Jungle* where Aldrich's idiosyncrasies can easily be spotted. But how to account for the similar finish of films photographed by Toland, Wong Howe, or Ballard no matter who the director; how to tell which scenes in *Song Without End* or *Gone With the Wind* were done by Cukor?

Film critics would do well to remember that a film is to its director far more like what a building is to its architect than what an action painting is to its artist. How the good film, like the good building, manages to retain a certain mystery and aesthetic value despite all this can only be discovered if we pool our analyses and ideas in discussion.

With this in mind we arrive at some interesting conclusions about the way criticism should be written. First, it is the critic's duty to see the film several times and to study it in as great detail as he can, if he intends to write seriously about it. Second, it is his job to read

and absorb all available information on, and discussion of, the making of the film and the artist responsible for it. Third, he should clearly articulate his own prejudices, preferences, or tastes in matters political, aesthetic, critical, and so on and not reify them into "obviously true" theories. Fourth, the critic should not take for granted films of merit; it is amazing enough that anything good appears at all; we should not be jaded but grateful. Fifth and last, a critic should be a person who loves and enjoys the medium he is criticizing; who tries to communicate those occasional hours there in the darkness when one gets an almost physical thrill from the perfection and power of a *Citizen Kane*, a *Place in the Sun*, an *Ashes and Diamonds*, a *Death of a Cyclist*, a *L'Avventura* and who, in the end, wants to deepen and enrich the experience of those who, encouraged by his writing, go to see the film.