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*The interview begins with a discussion of the interview the *Movie* editors conducted with Vincente Minnelli and published in the first issue (June 1962). The interview included questions about a sequence from *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962), and provoked a fair amount of critical comment in the press, Ian Cameron responding in the second issue of *Movie* in the article 'Films, Directors and Critics' (republished [here](#)).*

I think in some ways that the interview with Minnelli in the first issue was quite important, not for anything it achieved but for what it was trying to do, for the aspirations that it represents. I don't think we prepared ourselves well enough for it, by which I mean I don't think we understood what being well prepared would consist of, and maybe Minnelli wasn't the person ... but I'm much less convinced of that. It represents a way of thinking about film, the sort of questions you might ask both of a film and of a film-maker. And not one informed by literary criticism!

Q: *Where did you get hold of the technology to conduct the interview?*

That's an interesting question. It took place in MGM's viewing room, with the fragment of film run a couple of times but with no stop and start, 'Let's look at this', the kind of opportunity that an editing table or a video would offer. That's one of the difficulties under which it was done. I think in film teaching there is a real problem with how you dispose the space, the ideal conditions for watching a movie are absolutely un-ideal for discussion. And in that situation, as I remember it, Ian and I were sitting in the row ahead of Minnelli and the MGM person who was with him – so spontaneity of contact was very limited.

Q: *That particular article raised a lot of ire, didn't it?*

People were looking for ways to counter-attack, and that was an opportunity. Retrospectively (I haven't seen it for many, many years) it seems to me unlikely that *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is really a major achievement! And you could understand that initiative, hostile-ly, as simply an expression of a rather juvenile film-mania. Since Minnelli didn't offer the kinds of penetrating account of what he was up to that an Orson Welles can offer, it was a good target. *Movie* had after all been very aggressive. What do you do in response to that? You either keep quiet and hope it will go away, or you find a way of hitting back.

Q: *You weren't able to have any more of those sort of encounters with directors?*

I think it's a pity that we didn't do it again, with the improved technology. Other directors could have engaged in that thing quite happily and, as I say, if we had been better prepared maybe Minnelli could have done too. I think there were opportunities in what he said that we weren't equipped to take up, at that point.

Q: *It seems strange that when the technology did become readily available, and when film studies began to become an academic activity, there isn't a corresponding increase in detailed criticism.*

No. The early history of film studies is so caught up with the passion of theorisation, which I understand precisely as an avoidance of text.

Q: *I suppose one of the really striking things about *Movie* is that you were responding to the films that were on down at the local Odeon rather than some films in an idealised past, or talking about what the films that were around should be.*

I'm not sure I understand that.

Q: *Well it strikes me that it is easier to talk about a group of films thirty years later than it is to talk about them as they are emerging.*

Well, I think one way of understanding it is that *Movie* was asking of journalism something that, on the one hand journalism is incapable of delivering, but on the other journalism claims to deliver. It was asking film reviewing to be film criticism, let's say. Part of the nature of *Movie*'s demand was that criticism should actually be based on more than one viewing of a film – and that's still not accepted. I was startled to learn that one of my colleagues had written an article for *Sight and Sound* on the basis of a single viewing of a film. It seems to me some kind of mad arrogance – accepting that some people's recall can be very much more detailed than mine. But the inaccuracy of most reviewing and of most aspiring criticism in the pre-film-studies era is very impressive. Part of my understanding of where the motivation for *Movie* came from was a desire to make statements about film that *were* accurate in relation to the text (though at that time the habit of talking about films as texts was not in place), where there was some basis in observation for the things one wanted to say about the film. And part of that involved the discipline of checking what you had in mind to write against a further viewing. In some ways the core of *Movie*'s problem, and some of the developments since we first got together, is that matter of the relationship between material observation and evaluation, assessment, interpretation – understanding in other senses. I understand that as relating to a desire (certainly on my part, I don't know how widely this understanding

would be shared) to escape from class-based notions of taste, where understanding is related to the person rather than to the process. Understanding as something which happened, rather than something which was achieved.

Q: *So one of the main motivational factors for getting to grips with the detail of text, the departure from what Ian Cameron calls the 'prevalent woolliness' of existing criticism, was the desire to talk about the objective features of the text rather than one's own response to the text?*

Well to relate the two, at any rate. I don't think we did, and I don't think we were aiming to, divorce response from the material content. What the material content of the text is, is actually a very difficult question. The status of off-screen sounds, say, and the images they evoke for us seem to me to be part of the material content of the text, but they're not visibly there the way that the wind ruffling the heroine's hair is visibly there. So there is a problem around what is materially present, but that's a problem of an order of sophistication ahead of whether it matters that the camera moves during a particular moment of the film, that a scene is shot indoors or outdoors, and if indoors what sort of environment, etc. etc. Another dimension, given that we were very partisan, is that I think it's important to have a certain kind of respect for the activity of filmmaking, for the intelligence and proficiency of filmmakers – based on the assumption that what they do actually makes some kind of sense that it would be interesting to articulate. And I don't think that's general. On the one hand there was this particular kind of partisanship that made one (then, but to which I would adhere to a large degree) very sceptical of the claims which were being made, and on the other a belief that film criticism conducted itself in much too lordly a fashion, in which it felt that it knew better than the filmmakers. As that Minnelli interview indicates part of our impulse – I think it was *our* impulse, it was certainly mine – was to regard what the filmmakers did as in advance of the critic. So it was the critic who needed educating rather than the filmmaker.

I think all those things become much more pointed when you start teaching. Unless you are happy to stand in

front of the class and issue forth rather vacuously, either on a grand historical level, or on a theoretical level, or on a level of taste – going on and on about how wonderful this is and how they've got to learn how to appreciate it – without specifying the points at which the meaningful complexity of the text can be evident ... I don't think I can quite finish that sentence. Yes I can – the alternative to all those things is precisely to treat the text in a way which makes it available to discussible analysis, where the precision of what you've said about it is open to challenge. The correctness, but also the relevance – is one treating this detail in a way which exaggerates its role in the total production, or that is consonant with the way that the film as a whole seems to be working? Treating detail in a way that opens things up to discussion rather than existing on authority. Claims on authority usually go back to claims about either innate good taste, which is class based, or intellectual supremacy – neither of which are worth having in a class room.

Q: *That's a very interesting perspective, but it wasn't until considerably later that you started teaching, was it?*

In a small way it happened quite quickly, but in a sustained way no.

Q: *What were these early experiences?*

Things like talking to groups of film society members, evening classes and so on. I did a certain amount whenever I got hold of a bit of film that I could take into school. Ian and I, I don't think anybody else, were earning a living once we had left university by supply teaching, in schools that were very far from being nests of privilege. I was teaching mainly English. In my first year of teaching I taught A-level Mechanics but that just reflects the desperate state of London as far as teaching was concerned, but thereafter I taught mainly English. I remember showing the Howard Hawks episode from *Full House* in my English classes in Bermondsey, but there were also various things, mainly documentaries and what you could get on free loan from County Hall. So I used film as much

as possible in teaching, while not seeing myself as truly a teacher – trying to do it decently, but thinking of it as how I was making the money to pursue my interest in film – and Ian was doing something similar in a different school. Then there was, biographically, a gradual progression to involvement with the Education Department of the BFI and in teaching further education at Hornsey College of Art (which was the first place that had a continuous film course). I gradually changed the number of hours I was teaching in schools so as to make more room for film teaching in various contexts. But I think the problems of teaching ten, eleven and twelve year old school kids whose attitude could easily become 'Why do I want to know this? What use is this to me?' was not irrelevant to some of my other activities.

Q: *Moving on to a rather different subject, to what degree do you feel that Cahiers du Cinéma was an influence?*

Ever so important. *Cahiers* was the first place I ever had anything published.

Q: *Really? I didn't know that!*

A letter about *Rio Bravo* was I think my first published effort at film criticism.⁷ It was a response to Luc Moullet's article about *Rio Bravo* which I simply wrote him as a letter but which got published, and that thrilled me a great deal. My French was not good enough to read *Cahiers* with assiduity. It was odd, if your French wasn't terribly good – my French finished at O-level and the further development it has received is entirely from reading French film criticism and watching and listening to French movies – there were some writers that were easy to read. Bazin was ever so easy to read if you didn't have very advanced French, as were the interviews translated from English. I don't know what they would read like to a French eye, or ear. The two things that I think made most impact were: firstly, the degree of seriousness and passion with which a film like *Rio Bravo* was discussed, not the content of the discussion but the tone and fact of it; and secondly, the mode of conversation with filmmakers. I think the interviews were

more important than anything else. These are the *kinds* of questions it makes sense to ask a filmmaker. Partly it's manifest in the asking of them, but also in the way they're then treated by the filmmaker who responds to them as intelligible inquiries. And the reception of *Touch of Evil* was just so much more intelligent in France than it had been here. That was very affecting in a whole range of ways. *Touch of Evil* when it appeared was *such* a thrilling movie. I suppose there's a sort of pretentious adolescent dimension too – feeling that one was one of the few people to appreciate this wonderful, martyred movie. (I think it was important to the whole thing that we were very young.) But the level of discussion that the film received in France, particularly in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and the interviews around it, made an enormous impact.

Q: Was it something of a recognition that someone else was thinking the same things that you were beginning to think yourselves, or was it more 'Goodness, look what they are doing here!'?

It was partly at the level of taste and enthusiasm. I think I can better understand hating *Touch of Evil* than I can understand being indifferent to it. I think it is clearly a work of genius, and that doesn't mean it's a good film, necessarily. I was teaching a class on *The Magnificent Ambersons* only yesterday, when I was saying that I thought *Citizen Kane* was a work of genius but not a particularly good film. But there's a whole excitement about the kinds of eloquence a film can have in *Touch of Evil*. As I say, even if you think it's a disgusting work, which would not be a stupid way to react, that would need to be placed alongside the recognition that it was so intelligent, energetic, and achieved.

Q: Where were you getting access to magazines like *Arts* and *Cahiers*?

I think Ian brought back issues of *Cahiers* from Paris, and I subscribed as soon as I saw what it was. It had been mentioned in *Sight and Sound*, where one could perceive *Cahiers* in opposition to the posh end of British

film criticism. In fact they were all journalists together at the Cannes Film Festival and so on, and had a closer relationship than one realised. I found some *Cahiers*, I can't remember where, but I came across a great stash of back-numbers in England somewhere, an Oxford bookshop or something like that, which I bought. And there were the odd French film books available. The one I remember is Ado Kyrrou's *Amour-Erotisme et Cinéma* which clearly was imported because the French stood for 'cheeky'. I don't know if you know Kyrrou, he is someone in a different ideological camp to *Cahiers*, but some of his stuff did get published in *Cahiers*. Little bits of that book oddly enough, which I certainly didn't read cover to cover because it was a very thick book, were quite impressive – in terms of attitude and his hatred of *Brief Encounter!* (laughs) I remember it making quite an impression in suggesting different ways in which your values might come into play in relation to film. There was a version of PC in play at that time (well there always is) about, as it were, Official Positions – films ought to support the notion of brotherly love and so on – and that Official Position never accommodates the variety of human interests and appetites. There are various forms of liberation available, but one of them concerns the values you are allowed to bring to your appreciation of the arts.

Q: As well as the values, do you think an interest in *mise-en-scène* was stimulated by *Cahiers*?

Yes. But my understanding of an interest in *mise-en-scène* is that it is just an extension of the question, 'Well, what is interesting about movies?', of trying to find ways in which one's experience and one's enthusiasm can be articulated, and exchanged. It gets tiresome just to say 'Wow!' at one another, or 'Euch!'.

Q: What about the term itself? I notice that you use it in your *Nicholas Ray* article in *Oxford Opinion*. It was a term in the English language at this time, but do you think you picked it up from the French?

There was an article by Tony Richardson in *Sight and Sound* called 'The Metteur-en-scène' which I would have read, for sure. *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin* had been very important to me as an adolescent movie fan reaching for culture. At one point I would have known that article pretty well. It's interesting to me that I made that usage, because I would have guessed it wouldn't have come till later.

Q: You say something like, 'Nicholas Ray subjects a frequently banal narrative to an idiosyncratic *mise-en-scène*'.

But don't you think that's partly because English lacks a word grand enough for direction? Because direction also means which way does traffic go, and has all those traffic cop implications. I don't know if you know the article that I did for *The Movie* on *mise-en-scène*?

Q: 'Moments of Choice'?

Yes – well there I tried to restore some force to the word direction, I was talking about a sense of direction. In some ways I deplore the pretentiousness of *mise-en-scène* as a term, but it occupies a gap in the English language where the word 'direction' isn't strong enough, isn't definite enough. So *mise-en-scène* stands for something like 'the work of the film stylist' rather than just the direction.

Q: I suppose also at that time (in English) the director wasn't the figure she or he would be for *Movie*?

Well, that depended who the director was. At the posh end the director was fully acknowledged – if it was Flaherty, or René Clair. It was in relation to a cinema regarded as routine that the director's work was routine as well. The questions of method and focus are also bound up with questions of taste. Is *Rio Bravo* a film it makes sense to be thrilled by?

Q: I suppose Ray was a figure who *Sight and Sound* weren't entirely hostile toward?

Sight and Sound, if you look back at it, is quite peculiar. It would be quite interesting to know the Penelope Houston version of that history. Certainly in terms of *They Live by Night* they were very supportive, very enthusiastic. But later on their interest became very patronising and I was affronted to my core by the way they received *The Savage Innocents*, which is still one of my favourite films, and which was given such a disgusting dismissal at the back of *Sight and Sound*. Compare the kind of camp indulgence that was extended to *Johnny Guitar* by *Sight and Sound* with the enthusiasm, perhaps in some ways over the top enthusiasm, with which it was received in France. I know which I would regard as preferable. Nicholas Ray was well received as long as he looked like an aberrant figure in Hollywood, but once he seemed to become a Hollywood filmmaker he was to some considerable degree sidelined. I remember at some point there emerged in the pages of *Sight and Sound* the ridiculous thought that perhaps the quality of *They Lived by Night* owed more to John Houseman than Nicholas Ray.

Q: *In the light of his later work?*

Well also in the light of Houseman's other work. But that just indicates the degree to which you haven't looked at *They Live by Night* to see where it's coming from, how it is being what it is being. The suggestion that somehow the producer could be responsible for the ways that things are lit, where the camera is, what the actors are doing is evidence of misunderstanding. I think it's probably based on the notion that the film is the script essentially, that all you need from a director is an *effective* realisation of the script.

Q: *What about the MacMahonists, were they an important influence?*

I don't think I can remember. Ian may have told you about a visit to London by a group of MacMahonists, including Pierre Rissient who is now a film producer. I think they were personally impressive. Again, in terms of the sort of liberation of attitudes that *could* be expressed or inhabited, I think there were some important things that came out of

some writing by Michel Mourlet, as well as Luc Moullet, both of whose writing / critical personae were fairly wild. The idea that you might take a committed interest in the violence of a violent movie, within the very staid conditions of English culture, was quite an incitement.

Q: *Michel Mourlet strikes me as the least 'English' of the French critics. I was thinking also of the way in which they liked Preminger and Losey, figures who were to become important to Movie. Was that an influence?*

I think it probably was. Once the initial connection had been made, I think I was inclined to take quite a lot of guidance from the French about what films to discover, or rediscover. I was trying to think when did Preminger ... oh well, for me it was with *Carmen Jones*, so that was the connection I would have made. *Carmen Jones* was a film that I had enjoyed enormously, and seen several times just out of enjoyment (in, I guess, my late teens). But I'm not sure how much else I'd seen until *Cahiers* gave the incentive to chase Preminger movies in Sunday screenings at the Astoria, Brixton and all that stuff. So I think we took quite a lot of guidance about who it would be worth considering, or re-considering – like Sirk! Losey was ever so important. I can't remember the chronology of it, but interviewing Losey and discovering the depth of detail to which the film could be designed and intended – this was specifically around *The Criminal* and *Blind Date* – was enormously important. And also his response – he was obviously tickled pink to find people taking the detail of the texture of his work seriously. But he personally, certainly for me, acted as an enormously strong validation of the idea that film makers knew what they were doing.

Q: *That interview appears in the joint issue of Oxford Opinion and Granta, but I think that takes place after you had actually left Oxford.*

Yes. It's funny, he was enormously important but I didn't actually like any Losey films much after that point.

Q: *What particular reason was there?*

Well I think he was someone for whom it was a misfortune not to be able and required to carry on within the popular forms. I think his move into Art cinema didn't do him any good, didn't do his *work* any good. That's not to say, obviously, that to continue working under the kind of conditions under which *The Damned* was made was somehow preferable.

Q: *I'm wondering whether this is related to ideas around discretion, or invisibility?*

I certainly don't give a damn about invisibility. Part of my own critical quest is precisely to make visible (laughs), and *Touch of Evil* is certainly not remarkable for the invisibility of the direction, or *Johnny Guitar* or any of Nick Ray's work. I think there's a question about *integration*, which can sometimes become a kind of seamlessness. But what is visible is so much related to what one is prepared to look for and at. I just think that if you go in for a flamboyant style the odds get longer. If you win it's fantastic, if you don't it's the more miserable. So there's something to do with the degree of emphasis needing to be consonant with the scale of feeling or of thought.

Q: *Is it also to do with a coherent strategy across the whole work?*

Not as a demand, because most of the films that one treasures are films with lots of good bits, rather than perfect, and many of the greatest movies are in various ways seriously flawed, I would say. But there's got to be enough of an armature there, as it were, to act as support for the key moments.

Q: *I mention it because it strikes me that by the time of Film as Film you are talking more about the way in which a film might be, I suppose, a 'systematised whole' as opposed to the Movie articles.*

Yes that's right, and I think that *Film as Film* slightly overdoes coherence really. It's odd in a way, because the general statements of that book strongly emphasise coherence and

yet it never talks about a single complete movie, it's always with bits.

Q: *I suppose the nearest you come is with Psycho.*

It is the nearest. I don't want to run away from the importance of integration it's just that in the rhetoric of the book, and in relation to the context to which I felt myself to be writing, I think that word is possibly overdone. But as I remember it, the book itself says that coherence is a fairly minimal claim. After coherence, what? I hope it says that.

Q: *A final question about French criticism – you mentioned how Bazin was easy to read, a lot of critics have attempted to place your work in relation to Bazin. Is that something you accept?*

Oh sure. I still think he's ever so insightful. And again the concern with the concrete – even though he is often inaccurate, as all detailed criticism of that time is – the concern with the concrete as the basis for any large understanding of what you advance, was important. It seems to me a waste of time to pick nits from Bazin because that's easy to do, as with any critical work of the past. I think what Bazin has to say about the connection between cinema and time and the war against time (he expresses it in terms of mummification at one point) is deeper than anyone has yet taken the subject. I think there's a strong connection between the cinema and the human fear of loss, or difficulties with loss, that Bazin points towards.

Q: *How does he fit in with ideas around the composition of the individual shot, as opposed to the montage-derived theories (Eisenstein / Pudovkin) that were prevalent at the time?*

There was a standard text of the time that was Ernest Lindgren's *The Art of the Film* and that itself made a kind of potpourri of ideas from Arnheim & Balázs and Eisenstein & Pudovkin, all of which one read in the quest for something that would enable one to notice and articulate more in one's enjoyment of film and which didn't seem to actually be very helpful. So, certainly in my case,

after a period of attempted submission to their authority one felt the need for something else, something that actually seemed to work. Eisenstein was more interesting than the others, again because of the degree to which he wanted to engage with particular moments, particular images and combinations of images. Without a knowledge of its cultural context, however, I think it's only semi-readable, so it only acts as an incentive rather than the detail of his ideas becoming available. Again, Bazin is so important for offering the sense that cinema isn't something that we understand. Whereas the tone of Arnheim, Balázs, Lindgren and so on, is that we *do* understand cinema and this is how we understand it. With Bazin you get the sense 'no we don't understand it, so let's start trying' which is much more enabling. Something that I quote to myself and students quite often without having the words exactly right – good God, I'm not even certain of the source, I think it's Schnabel who said of Beethoven's piano sonatas – 'This is music much better than it can ever be played'. I think of criticism very much in those terms, that criticism should aspire to be as good as the films that it's about, but it never will be. It should be based on the sense that our understanding is not yet adequate to the achievements of the great filmmakers, without being abject about it. In many respects I'm quite an arrogant person. Even introducing the question of my personality at this point represents a kind of arrogance – a manifestation of the fact that, that's a correct statement! Without a certain kind of confidence that you have, or will have, something worth saying you can hardly publish or go into the teaching business. But that arrogance, or confidence, needs keeping in check, balancing. Our understanding has to work to be worthy of the objects of understanding. I operate a lot of the time in opposition to the notion of authority, cultural authority essentially. Again, it presents some interesting quandaries as a teacher because I want to offer what I've got usefully to offer, but I don't want students to be overly impressed by my knowledge and understanding. In a way, I want them to pick and mix from what they think they can get out of me.

Q: *It's often suggested that Movie applied methods of literary criticism to film. Is there any validity in this view?*

Well, I expect there must be, and I don't see why it would be a particularly vicious accusation. The reason I say there must be – apart from Robin Wood who was at that time a very convinced admirer, one might say disciple, of Leavis – is that despite the fact that I regard my own literary training as minimal (much thinner than I would like it to be), I think what's in the air culturally is so pervasive. I didn't study literature but I certainly read the book reviews in *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times* and *Encounter* and so on. So the literary values represented in Kenneth Tynan's or Harold Hobson's theatre criticism (I don't know if these names mean anything to you, but they were important figures of the cultural journalism of my formative years) and the degree to which, for instance, the culture of *Sight and Sound* was a literary culture, would mean that one would have absorbed a lot of those values, those ways of thinking and expressing things. I suppose the relevance of the question is related to the fact that one of one's charges against criticism as practised at that time was that it was literary. In a sense, I think I could have done with the support of a much more sophisticated and developed literary background than I then (or now!) commanded.

Q: *Then there might have been the danger that you wouldn't have been looking at Hollywood films in the first place – you might have taken on values which were hostile to popular culture. Though it didn't slow down Robin Wood very much!*

That's right. There is something about the connection between modernism and snobbism that I think one was looking to avoid. The degree to which modernism as a crusade or a particular vehicle (I'm talking speculatively at this point), as a particular set of commitments – a commitment against the popular, against the comprehensible, against ease of enjoyment – isn't somehow motivated by a desire for exclusivity. That seems to me clearly the case in some expressions of modernism, how centrally it is the case with modernism as a whole I'm really too ignorant to say, but it is a suspicion that I carry.

Q: *One of the claims that is sometimes made is that your interest in close analysis was directly derived from knowledge of Richards and the American New Critics.*

Well it wasn't. It wasn't in the sense of having properly read any of their work. My question would be whether that wasn't so generally in the cultural air that necessarily one absorbed it – and if that's where the motivation to close inspection comes from then I'm very grateful to them!

Q: *The position I'm taking in relation to this material is to suggest that you weren't consciously saying 'Aha! So and so works like this, let's try this with film', but that some of these ideas would be readily available in the culture. For example it has been suggested that Movie's interest in coherence comes from Leavis, but you don't have to look very far to see that this isn't just true of Leavis, it's true of a whole tradition that stretches back at least as far as Aristotle.*

Yes, and I think the attack on coherence in the seventies was largely phoney anyway. It doesn't represent a commitment to some other set of values that could be articulated aesthetically.

Q: *You think that that argument rather lost its way?*

Yes ... but things hang on awfully long after they ought to have died. I think you would do much better to ask for some more precise specifications of what this word coherence is, of the work it's doing. But to deny that it represents an important consideration? Returning to the idea about literary criticism as an incentive to close analysis – I would think that its importance would come from coinciding with this other, differently motivated, desire to find ways of talking in *concrete* terms about, or finding the supports for, the judgements and interpretations that one wanted to offer. One thing that I remember impressed me in a negative way in puzzling through some of these problems (and I don't think one can sufficiently stress the stumbling way in which things move) was a piece that Penelope Houston wrote in *Sight and Sound* about Cukor which attempted close analysis. It actually had frame stills from a sequence, of *It Should Happen to You* I think, about

which she managed to say absolutely nothing of interest.² I'd approached this article ever so sympathetically (it was a good time before *Movie* got going, I think – I'm not sure about the date). I remember I thought 'Great, she's really going to do it!', and being very disappointed that from closely inspecting this sequence she had found nothing interesting to say. I think that stayed with me as representing something that ought to be possible, you ought to be able to do this.

I don't know what Penelope Houston studied at University, maybe her basis was literary? What did Lindsay Anderson do, and Gavin Lambert? What you rebel against is almost as important as what you embrace. That may be just an example of the complexity of where things come from, but I certainly remember that article in both strongly positive and strongly negative terms. A sense of 'yes this is what should be being done, but it hasn't been'. I think part of that progression for me also came out of my discontent with the things I had tried to write on the journalistic basis, on the having-seen-it-once-and-now-do-a-couple-of-paragraphs-for-*Isis* sort of basis, and not thinking the results were worth anybody's time.

Music criticism is interesting, I think, because since as long as I can remember (and my sense of it is that there's a long history) music criticism has always had this difficulty about the relationship between the grand generalisation about music, talking about it in terms of affective values and emotional values, and the technicalities of key changes and cross-rhythms. I could see *Movie's* efforts and what has followed them as much in relation to that problem, which it seems to me music criticism still is largely unable to cope with. I read as much music criticism as I did literary criticism. Gombrich was another quite key figure but of a somewhat later stage.

Q: *What sort of period?*

More or less in the period after leaving Oxford. I think Paul Mayersberg introduced me to Gombrich, and when I first started teaching at what was then Bulmershe I read quite a bit of Gombrich and thought that his method of discussion was more concrete and more available than

most of the art criticism I had previously encountered. Again, it achieved a better balance between the specific and the general than much criticism seemed to do.

Q: *So your first encounter with Gombrich would have been about the time when you started *Movie*?*

Probably about the start, yes. I couldn't say for sure.

Q: *Something I noticed about *Movie* writing: there is a lot of focus on the way in which effects work on the spectator almost below the level of consciousness. Whereas perhaps later *mise-en-scène* type criticism is more interested in the way in which the *mise-en-scène* 'presents' rather than 'represents' – I am thinking about the Brechtian approaches that were applied to melodrama.*

Well, Brecht came tremendously into the air didn't he? The first great Brecht champion that I was aware of was Kenneth Tynan, so there was an earlier period of Brechtianism before the *Screen* version hit us – and of course there was the Losey-Brecht connection to encourage one. But I was, and remain, pretty ignorant about Brecht. I guess my own absorption of the Brechtian dimensions of current cultural discourse in the sixties and seventies would be just that, rather than a truly informed and assessed position. But you were asking something about ...?

Q: *The interest in trying to pin down the ways in which a spectator may respond without being conscious of it.*

With hindsight, I would say that has a lot to do with the problem of the relationship between what multiple and detailed viewings can reveal to one and what one understands to be available to the ordinary viewer. But in saying that, I would want to emphasise ever so strongly that the ordinary viewer isn't somebody else, the ordinary viewer is me the first time I see the film, or when I see it in a relaxed frame of mind, or when I see it without some of the information that I subsequently acquire. So I'm not wishing to estrange myself from some inexpert figure. I'm saying that gathered information puts one in a different position, and then there is precisely the question about the

relationship between one's developed view of something and the occasion on which the film now articulated in this way was, or was not, available. Is one relating to some kind of ideally positioned viewing of the film? What is the status of these detailed observations, their relevance to the experience of someone, initially oneself but then others, whose enjoyment and appreciation of the work one is hoping to assist? It would certainly be a radical disadvantage to an observation or an interpretation one advanced if one had to concede that this was not a view that could possibly have been reached by someone in the course of seeing and responding to the film. But on the other hand one is trying to improve oneself as a spectator, to make oneself a better receiver of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* or *Bringing up Baby*.

Q: *I was thinking of that example from The Man who Knew too Much, which compares the two versions of the film. In the example the second version was preferable because it works without the spectator having to 'translate' the mother holding the son's button.*

Again, I have not read it for a long time, but I think I would now be very unhappy with most of the attempts at, so to speak, spectator psychology in *Film as Film* – and I've got less and less interested in the whole area of attempting to establish the pattern of thought and feeling of the movie spectator. I think it almost inevitably gets you into a very mechanical understanding of our imaginative engagements with film or any other kind of fiction. I don't deride other people's attempts to make sensible articulations in this area, though I think a lot that isn't sensible goes on. It's not something I have remained interested in, or feel an aptitude for exploring. On the other hand one of the unacknowledged, or insufficiently acknowledged, dimensions of popular movie making is that one of the controlling objectives of the movie is to hold the spectator's emotional attachment to particular characters and their goals. I think that is crucial to the form of most Hollywood movies. So understanding the form means at least understanding the movie's conception of how the audience can

respond. I remember with some embarrassment certain bits of *Film as Film* which seem to me to involve a rather mechanistic psychology of the audience.

Q: *In retrospect, do you feel you were witnessing the death of mise-en-scène in 1975?*

(laughs) I certainly think something changed. I think that the students I teach are correct when they perceive that there is a difference between what they think of as old movies, and what they think of as current movies, which can go back as far as *Bonnie and Clyde*. *Bonnie and Clyde* was made before they were born, but there is a sense in which *Bonnie and Clyde* and other films immediately adjacent to it represent markers for the movement from old movies to new movies. A whole host of things changed, of course. I think every answer I give you is going to be a convoluted version of 'I don't know'.

I think that Golden Ageism has a foundation, that is I think that the best movies of the twenties, thirties, forties, fifties were better than the best movies that we're getting now. There were always, and always are likely to be, oceans of crap, and a greater number of misfires than successes. Even among people who are working dedicatedly and ambitiously, you're more likely to get it wrong than to get it right.

My sense of things is that, in an odd kind of way, the British cinema has conquered the world. Exactly what I then objected to about British cinema actually became the way movies were made internationally, with no middle ground between pretension and triviality. So I find it almost impossible to choose between latter-day Martin Scorsese and *Twister*. They seem to me to be equally impoverished. But maybe I'm missing the rich ones. I'm ever so mistrustful of my view of something having seen it once. On the other hand, when you see it once you do or don't derive from that viewing the motivation to go back and see it more than once. It seems to me that there's an awful lot of meretricious crap of *The Piano* kind that gets acclaimed, that sits in the *Lawrence of Arabia* position. I'm absolutely unrepentant about it, I went back to *Lawrence*

of *Arabia* in an attempt to see the neglected masterpiece, or the unseen masterpiece, and still regard it as a turgid, self-deluded piece of work. And I went with every effort to respond, given that I'm very impressed by the fact that, for instance, Nick Ray admired it a lot.

So I think there is a question about whether movies have been in a trough, from which they may or may not emerge. Whether the difference between my quite distanced feeling about current movies, even though I actually enjoy a fair number of them, and the zeal that some of the students can feel for them is simply an age gap and my view of things is very middle, or post-middle, aged? – I'm quite open to that possibility, not that there's anything that I would be able to do about it. My sense, however, is that movies have gone into a trough. The whole concept of the Hollywood Classical Cinema, for instance, depends on an unacknowledged dimension which is that you call something classical on grounds of quality as well as on other grounds. The concept of calling it *classical* cinema is absolutely incoherent unless you import into it the notion of significant achievement.

I watch *ER* and *Homicide* with more enthusiasm than I go to the movies. Of course, I'm tempted by the thought that television is the place where one should now look for significant achievements. On the other hand, the claims I want to make for *ER* or *Homicide* at their best, although genuine, do not have the depth of the claims I would wish to make for *Notorious*. I don't know how much of any of that constitutes elements of an answer to your question. One thing about *mise-en-scène*, is that evidently carefully thought strategies of presentation exist as much now as then. Whatever else you say about *The Piano* it's very calculated in its *mise-en-scène*.

Q: *Does The Piano have the same sort of delicate shifts in point of view as, say, the opening of Caught?*

Well it's conceivable that it does, but that's not my impression. But I think there is a dangerous stupidity about opining too freely on stuff that I have seen precisely as an ordinary cinema-goer. I know that I know more than

average cinema-goers, but if you see it once, in a particular mood, in a particular state of liveliness or exhaustion, what value should be attached to anything you have to say? It has the value of any interest that people find in it, but one shouldn't get very convinced about it for one's own sake.

Q: *One purely technical question, is it possible to remember what the term melodrama meant to you in 1960?*

I don't think I would have thought of *Written on the Wind*, for instance, as a melodrama. But memory may be a problem here. My impression is that I would mainly have used melodrama as a term of abuse. I think nowadays we've lost sight of the fact that it can legitimately be a term of abuse, can refer to outrageous and artistically unproductive contrivance, exaggeration of effects without any decent dramatic basis. That's a different hobbyhorse.

Very interestingly, Orson Welles said that Shakespeare wrote melodrama, and that made a big impression on me – in precisely one of the interviews around about the time of *Touch of Evil*.⁴ So that reappraisal of the word was already around, but you see I think I'd have made a distinction, I wouldn't have thought of *Touch of Evil*... *Touch of Evil* is a much more complicated case... I wouldn't have thought of *Written on the Wind* as a melodrama, I'd have said it was a drama. And I would have thought you could legitimately discuss whether, say, *Rebel Without a Cause* was flawed by its melodramatic elements. But Welles certainly had this very interesting thing about melodrama in one of his interviews where against the grain he was saying 'Well, *Othello*'s a melodrama, fantastic melodrama, and Shakespeare never wrote tragedy, what he wrote was melodrama'. So that was a change in the cultural currency of melodrama. I don't think I had any problems about whether *Psycho* and *Touch of Evil* were great movies, but I wasn't really, at that point, concerned to position them in relation to a notion of melodrama. Asked about it I would have said that melodrama was something more like Saturday morning serials, cliff hangers.

Q: *More in the way the industry was using the term – as Steven Neale detailed in his paper for the Melodrama Conference – where Hitchcock is melodrama, adventure is melodrama?*

Yes, the orientation to suspense – and I would have thought a villain was crucial to melodrama. My understanding of melodrama in the fifties would have been related to the whole notion of the Gaslight melodrama, to Todd Slaughter. That whole tradition which existed almost only in parody, rather than in its authentic forms. There was a serial on the radio called *Dick Barton* – it was like *The Archers* except that it was cops & robbers and spies and it always ended with the hero in jeopardy – which would have satisfied my notion then of what melodrama was.

Extra information from correspondence, 19.12.97:

Mourlet was never one of the writers that I found it easy to understand through the language barrier. Perhaps it was more necessary with him than with some others to have a familiarity with the French / Parisian cultural context in relation to which he was operating. So epithets like 'Charlton Heston is an axiom' could have a value as provocation and defiance that was largely independent of the wider context of the argument / polemic.

I was inclined to accept any claim for Hollywood directors as significant artists; so, for instance, I thought worthwhile to investigate Joseph L Mankiewicz's oeuvre with the assumption that there was excellence to be discovered. He now appears to me to have been remarkably heavy handed, often – as in *Guys and Dolls* – dismayingly so. However I think it was and is advantageous to approach as many films as possible with the supposition that they have depth and excellence which one is charged to discover.

I do not think that Losey's direction was ever remarkable for its reticence, perhaps it is the importance he gave to achieving precision and eloquence in the performances – alongside the rhetorics of the image and montage – that distinguished him in the British context in which we 'discovered' him.

I remember being rather impressed by the Rissient party's emphatic preference for *The Big Sky* over *River of No Return*. Although I have never shared that preference, the notion that Hawks' style showed up an excess of ornamentation and elaboration in Preminger's gave me a lot to think over.

Your question about the technology for the Minnelli interview combined with your letter's enquiry about the date of my involvement in film education to remind me of something that might illuminate a little corner of the history. When I went to work in the BFI Education Department I discovered a Prevost editing table on the premises and it became enormously important to me as an aid to film study. It was very important in my preparation of a series of Schools TV programmes on film, and I remember using it to prepare a lecture for the BFI's summer school on the western – on the mise-en-scène of the first ten minutes of *The Left Handed Gun*. This was in the period when I was working, on and off, on *Film as Film*. It sounds mad but I believe it's true that I was the one person around the BFI who used the Prevost to facilitate analysis rather than simply as an alternative way to run a movie when the viewing theatre was unavailable. This experience established with me the notion that technologies to assist textual work were essential to the proper development of film as an academic and critical pursuit, so I started campaigning for the purchase of a Prevost machine as soon as I found myself in charge of Film Studies at Bulmershe.

¹ (1959) 'Hawksienne Albion', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 100 (October), 38.

² (1955) 'Cukor and the Kanins', *Sight and Sound*, 24. 4, (Spring), 186–191, 220. The sequence in question is actually from *The Marrying Kind*.

³ (1958) 'Entretien avec Orson Welles (II)', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 87 (September), 2–26. (p. 7)