

# FILMS, DIRECTORS AND CRITICS

*Why does the camera go up now?*  
Because he's watching the sky.

This question and answer, printed in an interview with Vincente Minnelli from the first *Movie*, have excited more comment than anything else in the magazine. Derek Hill in *The Financial Times* found them so absurd that he used them to dismiss the whole of *Movie* as an expensive joke. I suspect that there were a number of causes behind Mr. Hill's mirth: the idea of asking such questions on minute detail to a director would have seemed pointless to him, particularly when the answer was so simple that he probably took it at once to explode the grandiose theories which the foolish young critics were doubtless hatching about the director's intentions and to stamp him as ambitionless or simple.

Had we found Minnelli's answers stupid, we obviously would not have printed them in *Movie*. And if they were in flat contradiction to our theories about his work, we would certainly have hesitated to use them without comment. Where we differ from Mr. Hill, then, is in our attitude to directors. Apparently our assumptions are still sufficiently strange to need explanation. In aiming to fill that need here, I do not want to say anything particularly new or to provide a defence of our views. Our only defence is that our approach seems to work when actually applied to films. Before starting to recapitulate our assumptions, though, I would like to say a little more about the Minnelli business.

In *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the shot in question occurs just after the death of Lee J. Cobb. Shattered by the discovery that one of his grandsons is a Nazi, he has rushed out into the garden, haunted by the destructive vision of the Four Horsemen. As he collapses to the ground and dies of a heart attack, another grandson (Glenn Ford) rushes out to him, kneels down on the ground and cradles the body in his arms. As he looks up at the sky, sobbing, and sees the vision of the horsemen, the camera cranes up and moves in. Our question and its answer may look a little less rudimentary if one thinks of other reasons why the camera might have craned up. Thus: (1) Emotional: the camera moves up to leave him cowering before the vision. (2) Symbolic: the camera looks down on him in judgement because he feels himself (or the director feels him) responsible in some way for the old man's death. (3) As a way of linking the shot to its successor, which shows the Horsemen in the sky. (4) As orchestration, taking up the bravura of the camera movements which have preceded it. That Minnelli cranes up simply because of the movement of his actor is indicative of his whole method (and confirms what was said elsewhere in the magazine). The camera moves so that we can see Ford's face as clearly as possible. The reason is neither inevitable nor foolish.

The motive for interviewing directors at all is to see how far their ideas of their aims square with the critics' rationalisations from the films. When the director disagrees



*The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962): Julio (Glenn Ford) and Madariaga (Lee J. Cobb)

with the critics this does not mean that the critics are wrong, for, after all, the value of a film depends upon the film itself, and not the director's intentions, which may not be apparent from the finished work.

For talking about one small section of a film in great detail, whether in an interview or in an article, we have been accused of a fascination with technical *trouvailles* at the expense of meaning. The alternative which we find elsewhere is a *gestalt* approach which tries to present an overall picture of the film without going into 'unnecessary' detail, and usually results in giving almost no impression of what the film was actually like for the spectator.

The film critic's raw materials – apart from his own intelligence – are his observations in the cinema: what he sees, hears and feels. By building up our theses about films from these observations, we are going through the same processes as the audience although, of course, our reactions are conscious whereas those induced in the cinema, particularly at the first viewing of a film, tend to be reached unconsciously. We believe that our method is likely to produce criticism which is closer, not just to an objective description of the film itself but to a spectator's experience of the film.

The assumption which underlies all the writing in *Movie* is that the director is the author of a film, the person who gives it any distinctive quality it may have. There are quite large exceptions, with which I shall deal later. On the whole we accept this cinema of directors, although without going to the farthest-out extremes of *la politique des auteurs* which makes it difficult to think of a bad director making a good film and almost impossible to think of a good director making a bad one. One's aesthetic must be sufficiently flexible to cope with the fact that Joseph Pevney, having made dozens of stinkers, can suddenly come up with an admirable western in *The Plunderers*, or that Minnelli, after years of doing wonders often with unpromising material, could produce anything as flat-footed as *The Bells Are Ringing*.

Everyone accepts the cinema of directors for France, Italy, Japan, India, Argentina, Sweden and Poland – everywhere, in fact, that the Art is easily identifiable. Critics will talk happily about a Bergman film, or a Mizoguchi film, or even a Carol Reed film. It is only over American movies that the trouble starts, and reviews are like to end with a desultory 'George Cukor directed efficiently'. The reasons are easy enough to find. Hollywood pictures are not so much custom-built as manufactured. The responsibility for them is shared, and the final quality is no more the fault of the director than of such parties as the producer, the set designer, the cameraman or the hairdresser. Only by a happy accident can anything good escape from this industrial complex. The good American film comes to be regarded as the cinematic equivalent of a mutant.

Now there are qualities superimposed on most big studio films (these days there are very few of them indeed) that depend not on the director but the studio: the look of colour films is particularly prone to this sort of control. An extreme example is Fox films in the late forties and early fifties, which are almost immediately recognisable by their photography and music, particularly if these are by the leading exponents – photographers Joseph la Shelle and Joe Mac-Donald and composers Leigh Harline and David Raksin. However, these qualities are rather peripheral, and one common accusation of this sort, that Gregg Toland effectively directed the films he photographed so remarkably, has been disposed of by Andrew Sarris in *Film Culture*: 'Subtract Gregg Toland from Welles and you still have a mountain; subtract Toland from Wyler and you have a molehill'.

The closer one looks at Hollywood films, the less they seem to be accidents. There is a correlation between the quality of the films and the names of their directors. When one notices that such masterpieces as *Scarface*, *Bringing Up Baby* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* were all directed by the same man, one begins to wonder whether the merits of these otherwise dissimilar films might not be explained by this man's talent. On a slightly closer look, one finds that he was also responsible for such generally admired movies as *Twentieth Century*, *Sergeant York*, *Red River* and *Monkey Business*, not to mention *Rio Bravo*, a film which gained little attention on its release and is now accepted as a masterpiece, even by *Sight and Sound*, which greeted its appearance with a singular lack of enthusiasm.



Hawks is just beginning to be accepted in Britain and the U.S. Raoul Walsh, on the other hand, is virtually unknown. Yet if one looks at Walsh's films (or some of them – he has made 200 since he started directing in 1913), one can identify the same talent and highly sympathetic personality behind a British cheapie of 1937, *Jump For Glory*, a 1945 racehorse movie, *Salty O'Rourke*, and more recent works like *Blackbeard the Pirate* (1952), *Battle Cry* (1955), *Esther and the King* (1960) and *Marines Let's Go* (1961). The similarity of these films made in three different countries over a period of 25 years by a director whose name does not spell prestige, who will thus not have an exceptional degree of freedom, should leave no doubt that, provided he has any talent, it is the director, rather than anyone else, who determines what finally appears on the screen.

Part of the neglect of American directors comes from the simple fact that it is easier to accept foreign films as Art: a status word to indicate that the film is worth the critic's serious attention. In foreign language movies, one of the biggest obstacles has been limited: the dialogue. Even if they are bad, subtitles provide a shock-absorber between the dialogue and the audience. Everyone knows that laughable subtitles do not necessarily indicate defects in the original language. But two lines of ill-written dialogue in an American picture will put the critics on their guard. Almost invariably it is duff dialogue that alienates them, not unconvincing motivation, or false movement of actors or pointless camerawork. A recent victim is *The Four Horsemen*, which did have rather more than a couple of bad lines.

When a *Sight and Sound* critic does manage to work up some enthusiasm for an American film, it is usually self-limiting: 'very good ... of its kind'. So we are treated to dimly remembered sections of John Russell Taylor's childhood erotic fantasies about Maria Montez and Veronica Lake as a picture of the forties. Reviews of American films tend to link them together in remarkably ill-assorted pairs. One would be amazed at the current review of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* and *Guns in the Afternoon* (both

'so consciously old-fashioned and nostalgic that, appearing in 1962, they seem almost esoteric') if one had not already been treated to such unlikely joint reviews of *Exodus* plus *Guns of Navarone* and *Psycho* plus *The Apartment*. If the writers of these pieces were literary critics, which, barring a certain illiteracy, they very nearly are, one imagines that they would happily review *Tender is the Night*, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and *Manhattan Transfer* together entirely in terms of American *mal-de-siecle* in the twenties. Any other qualities would be written off in a well-chosen sentence: 'Mr. Dos Passos's narrative technique of intertwining a number of almost unconnected stories does not make for easy comprehension'. *Sight and Sound* has just produced the most accurate piece of unconscious self-criticism in its most recent and most desperate attempt to be hip: a column in which the glad hand of John Russell Taylor is hidden behind the name of Arkadin. 'Why', he opens brightly, 'don't we take horror films more seriously? Well, not seriously seriously ...'.

The worst sufferer from restricted admiration has been Hitchcock. *Psycho* was passed over as one big laugh. As a joke it could not possibly be anything else. *Psycho*'s joke content is very large, but that doesn't mean that it is only a joke. Example: the scene of Janet Leigh and Anthony Perkins getting acquainted is both an ingeniously executed *double entendre* on stuffing birds and very real and touching picture of two people, isolated from others by their actions, voluntary or otherwise, trying to talk to each other.

The great weakness of *la politique des auteurs* is its rigidity: its adherents tend to be, as they say, totally committed to a cinema of directors. There are, however, quite a few films whose authors are not their directors. The various film versions of Paddy Chayefsky's works are all primarily Chayefsky movies rather than Delbert Mann, or John Cromwell, or even Richard Brooks movies. Given a weak director the effective author of a film can be its photographer (Lucien Ballard, *Al Capone*), composer (Jerome Moross, *The Big Country*), producer (Arthur Freed, *Light in the Piazza*) or star (John Wayne, *The Comancheros*). None of those films was more than moderately good. Occasionally, though, something really remarkable can come from an efficient director with magnificent collaborators. Such a film was Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca*, which contained Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Paul Henreid, Claude Rains, Sidney Greenstreet, Conrad Veidt, Peter Lorre and Marcel Dalio, and was somehow missed from John Russell Taylor's knee-high panorama of the forties. More recently we have *The Sins of Rachel Cade*, which, although directed by the excellent Gordon Douglas, was above all an Angie Dickenson movie, being entirely shaped by personality and deriving all its power, which was considerable, from her performance.

Many films also have an iconographical interest, which is something quite apart from any aesthetic merits they may have. This interest comes from their relationship either to conditions external to their making (things as diverse as the discovery of the H bomb or current trends in automobile design, which influenced the design of the submarine in *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*) or to other films. Joseph Newman's *Spin of a Coin* (*The George Raft Story*) is fascinating because of its similarity to other period gangster movies: the sequences are built in the same way towards a climax of slaughter – only in this case the burst of gunfire is replaced by equally staccato laughter, for instance, as Al Capone (played by Neville Brand, who was Capone in Karlson's *The Scarface Mob*) tells Georgie (Ray Danton, whose performance is an extension of his previous *Legs Diamond*

in Boetticher's film) how much he liked his performance as Capone in *Scarface*, the climactic scene of which has been reconstructed for us. This sort of kick is also available even more lavishly in Vincente Minnelli's amazing new *Two Weeks in Another Town*, where faded movie star Kirk Douglas sits in a viewing theatre watching a film he has previously made with the director for whom he is now working in the dubbing room. The film is *The Bad and the Beautiful*, which Minnelli made ten years ago with Douglas, as well as the same writer, producer and composer (Charles Schnee, John Houseman and David Raksin). In another Joseph Newman movie, *The Big Bankroll* (*Arnold Rothstein, King of the roaring Twenties*), it is assumed that the audience has seen the earlier movies which found it necessary to explain how bootlegging and protection worked. *The Big Bankroll* (in spite of 26 missing minutes in the British version one of the very best of its kind) builds on the knowledge it assumes to tell the story of Arnold Rothstein, who turned the mechanics of corruption to his own ends.

A few films are interesting for a related reason: the picture of their audience which they provide. The best example is Delmer Daves, who makes movies for stenographers and provides them with just what they wish to see. His pictures may be trivial, dishonest, immoral – Daves' movies have every fault in the book except bad production values – but they do provide a picture of the girl Daves is aiming his films at (very successfully, it seems). However irritating one may find Suzanne Pleshette in *Lovers Must Learn* (*Rome Adventure*), one has to admit that her performance is brilliantly pitched at just the right level of gush.

While one can appreciate films for their iconographical significance or as a critique of their audience, any merit they may have still comes from their director, much more than from any other source. Although finally our belief in the cinema of directors can only be justified through continuous application of our ideas in *Movie*, I want to conclude this article with an extended example of the part played by the director, based on three films, two of them well-liked, more or less, British offerings, J. Lee Thompson's *The Guns of Navarone* and David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai*, the third a much less well respected American film, Don Siegel's *Hell is for Heroes*.

All three contain the simple moral that war is futile and degrading; all three use one of the basic war stories: the strategic action of considerable importance which devolves on a very few men. *Navarone* sets out with the obvious intention of telling a rattling good yarn about the way our chaps heroically battled against almost impossible odds to knock out the Jerry guns. Even this it almost fails to do by disastrously overplaying its suspense potential in a lengthy sequence of spurious thrills as the team crawl up a crumbling cardboard cliff so early in the movie that everyone will need to survive to justify their billing on the credits. However, its worst sin is stopping off at least twice in the course of the narrative for dialogue meditations on the nastiness of war, which the audience is meant to accept and which would in themselves be perfectly sympathetic, if slightly superfluous, in a film that refused to present war as enjoyable. But here their effect is completely vitiated by the rest of the action, and in context they seem almost hypocritical. I have a feeling that the failure is not inherent in the script but comes from the lack of any firm control in the direction. Even the one moment which could hardly help having some force, the shooting of Gia Scala as a collaborator, in the film has none. Here admittedly the script does side-step by letting Irene Papas, who is Greek and only a secondary character, forestall Peck and Niven in shooting

her, when they are both more directly affected by the responsibility for her death. But even allowing for this, the lack of conviction is total.

*Hell is for Heroes* is based on a short story by Robert Pirosh which could easily have been turned into the sort of plug for the gallantry of the American fighting man which William Wellman made 13 years ago from a Pirosh story in *Battleground* (recently re-released with Anthony Mann's remarkable ex-3D western *The Naked Spur*). I am not concerned here with the central theme of the film which is embodied in the Steve McQueen character, the psychopath who makes an ideal soldier but goes to pieces outside the field of combat. Two sequences are particularly relevant to my purpose here as they could have easily degenerated to the same level as *Kwai* and *Navarone*. In the first, three soldiers set out at night on a manoeuvre to trick the enemy into thinking that they are sending out large patrols and therefore have the front well-manned. The idea is to take empty ammunition tins out into no-man's land, fill them with stones and rattle them by remote control from their position by means of lengths of telephone wire. The noise of these would be picked up by the enemies' ground microphones and all hell would be let loose to meet the ghost patrol. Siegel does not tell us what they are doing until their mission is almost completed. We take the episode seriously, which is right because it is serious and no less dangerous than a real patrol. If he had shown us beforehand exactly what they were doing, the episode would have been invested for us in the safety of our cinema seats with a feeling of fun, of fooling the enemy. Never once in the film do we get this feeling.

The last sequence does for once sum up the whole film by its picture of the contribution an individual can make to the action. In serious trouble after leading an abortive attack on the crucial pillbox, which has resulted in the death of two of his companions, McQueen takes it upon himself to put the pillbox out of action. He manages by a suicidal charge to get close enough to lob a satchel charge into the mouth of the box. Inevitably he is shot. Seeing the charge thrown out

of the pillbox, he staggers forward, grabs it and rolls into the mouth of the box with it as it explodes. A flame-thrower is played on the mouth of the pillbox to make sure it is out of action. The last shot of the film is a long shot of a general advance beginning along the section of the front around the pillbox. The advance is obviously going to be very costly. The camera zooms into the mouth of the pillbox and the end title is superimposed. The zoom in from the general view to the detail emphasises the smallness of the gain from McQueen's death. One pillbox has been put out of action, and as the advance continues that pillbox ceases to have any significance. It is left behind a dead, almost abstract object. Unlike *Navarone*, there is no conflict between the intended content and the form which expresses it.

Contrast with the last shot of *Hell is for Heroes* the end of *Bridge on the River Kwai*. James Donald stands surveying the wreckage after the destruction of the bridge. 'Madness, madness', he says, and the camera soars back away from him in a mood of triumph which is taken up by the martial music on the soundtrack. In the contradiction between the sentiments expressed by the dialogue and the meaning contained in the treatment, critics have noticed only the former. *Bridge on the River Kwai*'s anti-war content is widely accepted to be impeccable. But *Hell is for Heroes*, where the ideas are expressed by the whole form of the film, can pass nearly unnoticed and even be described as equivocal in its attitude to war. The lack of perception which results in this kind of fuzzy thinking is the best argument for a detailed criticism.

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*Hell is for Heroes* (1962): Reese (Steve McQueen) secures the satchel charge