THE POLITICS OF CLOSE ANALYSIS

Roundtable

Across two meetings in 2021, Issue 10 editors Lucy Fife Donaldson and Lisa Purse were joined by *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*'s editors John Gibbs and Doug Pye, and prolific film critic Girish Shambu. In the context of Issue 10's themed dossier, 'The politics of close analysis, and its object', and in an historical moment at which questions of marginalisation, visibility and inclusion are highly pertinent, this roundtable discussion explored the intersection of politics and the practices of film criticism. Our ambition was to consider the past, present and future of film criticism through this lens, in relation to our journal, and its print predecessor *Movie*, directly, but also to other forms and practices of film criticism. Alongside reflection on earlier issues of *Movie*, prior to our discussion we selected two recent examples of writing to read that explicitly pose challenges to how film criticism has engaged or could engage with politics, to act as a springboard for the conversation: Racquel Gates' 'The Last Shall Be First: Aesthetics and Politics in Black Film and Media' (2017) and Shambu's 'Manifesto: For a New Cinephilia' (2019).

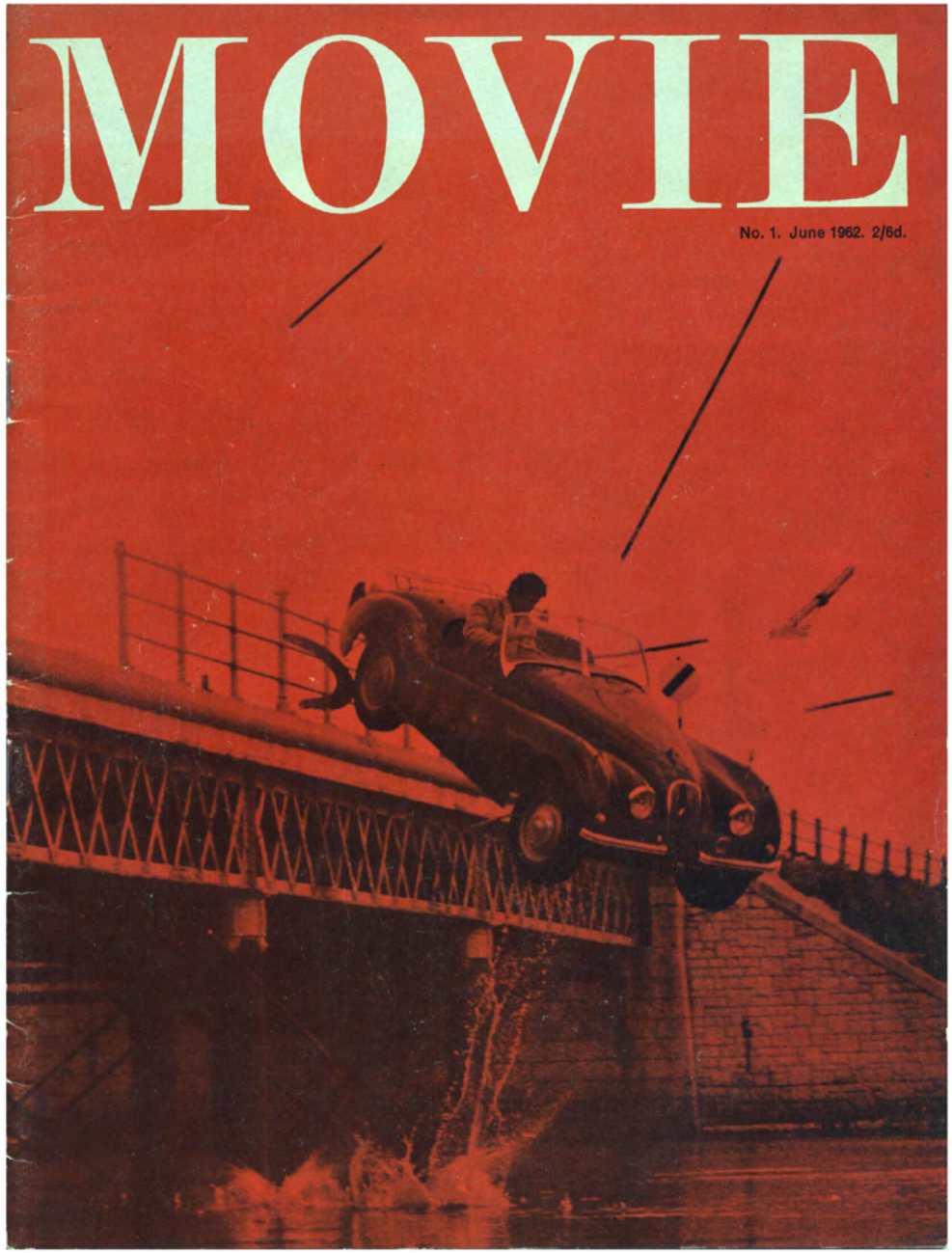
Past / The history of *Movie*

Douglas Pye: If we're going to begin by using the history of *Movie* as some sort of focus, there are perhaps a couple of things to start with. First is that Movie's early interventions could be considered, in some respects, to be political. The current wider concept of politics wasn't available in the same way [as it is now] but there are at least two ways. One was their intervention on behalf of detailed criticism. The other, which is less visible in *Movie*, but was very evidently a motivation, certainly for Victor Perkins, was to do with class. This is in Britain, of course, where class is very much a political, as well as a social and economic issue. John did a very good interview with Victor and a number of other figures whose work went back to that period, during which Victor talked about his own life and motivation.[1] He came from working class family in Devon and found himself eventually at Oxford. If I could just refer to a little bit of that interview where Victor's talking about his motivation in terms of class. He speaks of, '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' (Gibbs 2019: 45-46). I think much of that position would have been more broadly shared [among *Movie* contributors] without necessarily having the same class animus about it. The attempt to resist and to challenge inherited notions and paradigms of value – what could be seen as significant and what couldn't – connects to *Movie*'s pioneering work on Hollywood cinema: to begin to find value and significance in a cinema, which had been – in the English-speaking world – hardly taken seriously at all. What they were doing was saying, in effect, our culture is blinded by inherited prejudice, rooted in class, rooted in educational norms, rooted in traditions of cultural commentary. But blindness isn't a product of the visual field, as it were; when you look, what you find is often what you're looking for. And on the whole, film criticism in Britain had not looked to find artistic value, to find significance in Hollywood movies. Those three things, I think, detailed criticism, Hollywood, and class, they're what we could think of as political dimensions of *Movie*'s early work. But it was never overt in the journal, in those terms. I don't think John, was it?

John Gibbs: No, I don't think so. Another contextual factor was what was called 'committed criticism': others writing about film in the early sixties with a more explicit political motivation, often connected to the New Left, and much less likely to be enthusiastic about Hollywood cinema. Doug was mentioning that, very sadly, Alan Lovell has just died – he had an interesting parallel life to Victor's, and they were friends and critical sparring partners over a long period of time. Alan was a leading voice in committed criticism, which *Movie* found itself opposed to, although there were rapprochements later on. This was another kind of a tradition, which saw value in European cinema, mostly, and which was very sceptical of claims being made for popular Hollywood movies of the day. But returning to those early *Movie* articles, there is an argument about the importance of looking at style in detail in order to make political judgments. In 'Films, Directors and Critics' Ian Cameron criticises the celebration of certain war movies because he feels that reviewers are taking a superficial understanding of what those films might be doing, rather than really engaging with how they're working ([1962] 2010). And when Victor is writing about 'The British Cinema' in the first issue, he's quite sceptical of Dearden's films, for example, and argues explicitly that unless you look at the stylistic choices and the material dimensions of these films you can't understand their position in relation to race or other political issues. The Movie critics' commitment to engaging with form, with style, with the materiality of the medium is often about challenging misjudgements, some of which are explicitly about politics, some of which are just snobbish, some of which are 'fuzzy thinking' (Cameron [1962] 2010: 4). This is a major part of their early commitments, to turn the phrase around slightly.

DP: I think Ian Cameron actually talks, doesn't he, at some point, about detailed criticism as the best way of challenging the prevalent wooliness in the writing on film.

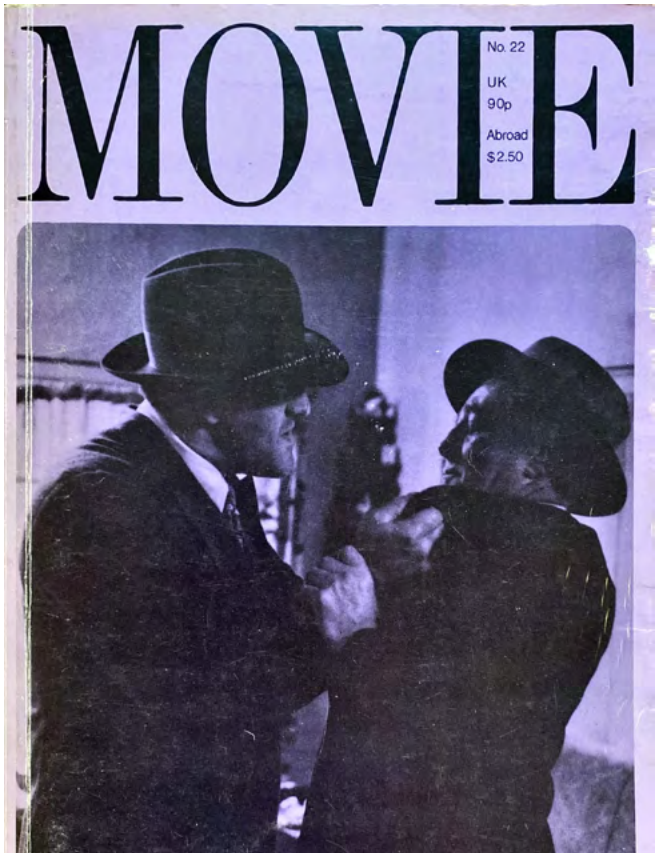
JG: Another thing that's interesting to look back on is that *Movie* is actually quite a broad church and includes a lot of different voices over its history. So two years after 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' appears in *Screen* (1975: 6-18), Laura Mulvey publishes 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama' in *Movie* 25 (1977/78: 53-56). Richard Dyer's 'Four films of Lana



Turner' appears in the same issue (30-52), there are articles on *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Williams: 12-16) and *The Exorcist* (Britton: 16-20), and Doug writes about genre, *Fort Apache* and *Liberty Valance* (1-11). I feel it's worth bringing out the flavour of some of those debates, that there are some 70s voices coming through who aren't necessarily names you associate with the *Movie* tradition, but who found a home for some of their work there. Janey Place and Julianne Burton's article in *Movie* 22, 'Feminist Film Criticism', includes a passage which argues, 'Feminist critics who confine themselves to chronicling changes in narrative content throughout history, cinema, ignoring the fact that the mediation of form is the final arbiter of a particular film's effect on the viewer, can never achieve more than an incomplete understanding of specific films and of the medium itself' (1976: 59). That's a *Movie* argument but infused with a new impulse and direction by Place and Burton as they embrace second wave feminism. There are things about the *Movie* approach which make it amenable to other people coming along and saying, no, this account isn't doing justice to my experience or the film's political importance, and we need to articulate what's really at stake here.

DP: Yes. Which is also to say that between *Movie* 19 (1971/2), the Elia Kazan issue, which was the last of the original format, and *Movie* 20 in 1975, there is a gap of about four years, and the world had changed. There was the initial impact of the new theory being published in *Screen*; *Film as Film* and *The Movie Reader* appeared in 1972 and were attacked by Sam Rohdie, also in *Screen* (1972: 135-145). What then happens is you do begin to get, as John says, these new kinds of input, so that in the 70s and beyond there is, within *Movie*, a much more recognisably political concern with representation, with feminism, with a whole range of things that begin to feed in with people like Andrew Britton.

JG: Yes. *Mandingo* (Richard Fleischer, 1975) is a great example here, isn't it? Andrew Britton's article is in the same issue as Place and Burton's (1976: 1-22); the film itself was very popular, very popular with African American audiences, and completely dismissed by reviewers and the critical



establishment. Doug and Ian Cameron interview Richard Fleischer, and Andrew writes this brilliant article about the film and its political and artistic achievement. This is a popular movie, viewed as pulp – and *Movie* comes along and argues very strongly that this is what we need to be engaging with, that this is an important work of political art.

Lucy Fife Donaldson: Looking back through past issues, as you say, John, it's so striking to see the eclectic nature of what is covered in *Movie* right from the beginning. You have the kind of issues that are about Preminger or Hitchcock, but then in issue three, for example, there is a recreation of *Cuba Sí!* (Chris Marker, 1961), along with its censorship letter, and the articles that Victor wrote about the British film industry. So this idea we might now have of what *Movie* was, and who were the people who are writing in it is to some extent challenged when you go back and look at those earlier issues. Going back to what Doug was talking about, of challenge being the animus to the whole project, in issue one their very first statement is about disagreeing and wanting to disagree with one another. For me, that has always been such an exciting thing about looking back through *Movie*. Of course, there's the detailed criticism, but this sense of challenging the status quo all the way through and also challenging one another, which is brought out through the exciting roundtable discussions that happen at various points across the journal's original run. In those you get not only this sense of the opposition that they're posing outwards, but also that this is an eclectic group coming together who really want to get to grips with certain kinds of questions about film. I think that's an important thing to remember, and to see that coming from the cultural background Doug was describing, is crucial.

Lisa Purse: What's striking me is how much connection there is between Racquel Gates' call in her piece (2017), as one of the inspirations for the dossier, and what's happening at this moment in the 1970s, that Doug started to describe to us. The sense in which the *Movie* critics at the time are saying, hang on, we've got to look at the detail of the film here, we've got to evidence our arguments from that, and see how that then connects out to various questions around ideology, representation, industry, those kinds of structures. And in the same way, Racquel Gates is moved to say, hang on, we must start talking again, about the formal dimensions of cinema, as well as their relationship to questions of taste, and questions of politics, and so on. So I think that's quite interesting. I just wanted to make that point, we're not talking about the present, we're not talking about the future just yet. But to see these as critical interventions, at particular kinds of historical moment; to recognise that there is desire for a form of activist intervention at both of those points in time. And I think that's important, because in the intervening period, the *Movie* tradition is often talked about in quite narrow terms. It's often characterised quite narrowly, and identified by people who aren't perhaps very close to that tradition, as being very connected to the auteurist tradition, which we may talk about in a little while. But looking back at this period that we've been describing, of *Movie* past, as it were, I think it's important to remember that process of historicisation that we're involved in, but also to recognise that that tradition has been mischaracterised by people who don't remember the nuances. And that's interesting, because when we come to the present and the future, you know, we might want to reflect on that characterisation. That kind of narrowing of what we understand *Movie* was trying to do at the time.

And finally, I just wanted to pick up on that question of the broad church versus the rather fraught conversation. So it's not a versus but a broad church full of people who sometimes disagree with each other. And I suppose for me the most

exciting moments were the places where that disagreement comes to the surface. For example, in *Movie* 20 (1975: 1-25), with Victor on the one hand, Jim on the other, debating where one's consideration of Hollywood should start and end, and what value one might place on different parts of American cinema. And Jim's piece on Jon Jost's *Last Chants for a Slow Dance* in *Movie* 27/28 (1980/1: 108-16), where he talks not just about challenging different ideas of what American cinema is, what we mean by American cinema, but he also takes *Movie* to task a little bit in relation to the kinds of things that it was celebrating at the time, and the kinds of things it wasn't really looking at, at the time that he's writing in the early 1980s. He argues, and I'll quote a little bit here, that '*Movie* ought to be interested in independent work in the USA (and elsewhere) in similarly avant-garde or counter-cinema areas, since much of it […] also involves a critique of mainstream illusionist narrative cinema' (109). This is part of a vital discussion that's happening between those different contributors through their writing.

Past / auteurism, criticism and cinephilia

DP: This complicating of the history is really vital, because one of the things that happens all the time, and Lisa's characterised it precisely just now, is that the history is caricatured. Particularly at moments which are culturally fraught, where there are new interventions coming in, new voices trying to make themselves heard, you get these extraordinarily reductive accounts. And one of the things that seems to me crucial about being a film critic and for those of us who are teachers, is to keep aware of the cross currents, the complexities, the different voices within the history. The auteurist thing is part of that, that *Movie* is an auteurist journal. Well actually *Movie* never embraced auteurism in the sense that it's largely come down to us. What *Movie* did embrace was what Victor called director-centred criticism, and of course Victor makes a very significant differentiation between those things in 'Authorship: The Premature Burial' (1990: 57-64) where he takes Peter Wollen particularly, to task and also refers to Andrew Sarris. For him there was a really vital distinction between auteurism, with what he saw as its exaggerated concern with continuities and coherence across a director's work, and other views of cinema which celebrate the creative role of the director.

JG: There's a nice line from Ian Cameron from when I interviewed him, which I could just read if that would be useful, about precisely this point about Sarris and auteurism. He says,

> Sarris, who unlike the rest of us had a regular critical niche (in *The Village Voice*), had – the word 'soundbite' comes to mind – had identified something which was lurking in *Movie* 1 in that histogram of directors. But he had identified this, more strongly than the rest of us, as something that was in effect marketable, and he then took it to absurd lengths – the 'is he / is he not an auteur' view. I would say that all directors are 'auteurs' but the likes of Fred Zinnemann are lousy ones. Whereas Andrew definitely saw auteurship as various levels of state of grace. That was, I think, actually going off in not merely a wrong direction but rather a dangerous one because it allowed everyone else to take a very simplistic attitude to what we were trying to do (Ian Cameron qtd in Gibbs 2019: 42).

DP: Exactly. Those interviews that you did were really valuable. The other thing I just wanted to say, really connects to the perpetuation of reductive notions of history. You mentioned, Lisa, the Racquel Gates piece, which I was very interested in. That gives the kind of emphasis that we would want – you've got to look at how movies articulate their material, you can't just read off representation. But it's very interesting that, what you seem to have to do, particularly after or as part of the great rhetorical moments, is to reinvent the wheel. Because the history's been falsified, it's almost as though you're starting again, we've got to now look at detail. If you actually take account of the history in a fuller sense, then you can see there are continuities, as well as disjunctions, that are available, not just to the white straight population, but to all of us, to everyone. There are continuities that are valuable, and can be taken into a whole range of different contexts, polemical, political, aesthetic.

LP: I think there's something that I'd want to pick up here, which is the interplay in the wider culture between auteur theory and what I guess commercial film critics are doing, what studios are doing to market their work, and who's getting to make films. I'm putting it in very simplistic terms, but I'm suggesting that rather than people looking back and, in a rather cynical way, falsifying the narrative around *Movie* and how inclusive it is, we've got actually quite a complicated interplay between the press, the industry, and more thoughtful ways of engaging with film criticism. We know that there's a body of film critics, for example, who just take the press kit, and replay it and, they're still gatekeepers for their audiences, but they're not saying to themselves, Okay, I'm going to write about this in relation to history of cinema, those kinds of things. So what I'm suggesting is that some of that narrowing of the understanding of what *Movie* has done, perhaps, or what the concept of the auteur is all about is partly a problem of a wider culture, where particular directors are celebrated, because it's good for marketable copy and it's good for marketing film. So that's one of the complicating factors here. And that connects to this question of who gets to make films. So Racquel Gates is looking at this history, and she's not seeing herself particularly well represented in who's being written about it, or indeed who is writing film criticism. So I think it's complicated how that those questions are encountered by people who don't see themselves in those films, and therefore, in the criticism that they're encountering.

JG: I think that's a fair point. I was going to make a couple of observations here. One, we probably ought to distinguish between critics and reviewers. If Victor was here, he'd certainly want to make that distinction, between people who are responding often on very short timescales to what's being released – perhaps they've relied on the press packs, and the narratives that are coming out of production companies themselves, etc. – and a critic in in a more academic sense, or in a sense that Victor would use the word. Robin Wood often makes that distinction in his writing too.

LP: And that's a distinction I was reaching towards. I think that's an important distinction to make.

JG: The other thing, just briefly, before we go into some of the other questions that you raise is the word 'auteur' itself,

which goes through this bizarre inversion. When Andrew Sarris is using it, he's using it to pick out unrecognised directors in the American cinema who are dismissed because they're regarded as part of the machine, not as individuals. But before very long, the word auteur is used to talk about Francis Ford Coppola, or whoever it might be, a new generation who are very much regarded as artists. Somehow it's got twisted around: it's no longer being used to draw attention to the person nobody's noticed, despite them working away producing these extraordinary movies with their collaborators; instead, it's used to refer to somebody who's got an indomitable vision, and they're going to make that film no matter what. It's even used to talk about the director of European Art cinema. There's a weird inversion of the word which perhaps fits into that kind of discussion.

LP: I think that's absolutely right, the myth of the great man of cinema, and that's still very persistent now. And is predominantly white and straight: it's a very clear kind of idea of what artistry is. One of my personal bugbears is things like *Black Swan* (Darren Aronofsky, 2010), and the cultural narrative of the creative woman who can't cope with being brilliant; anyway, that's an aside really, it takes us away from some of the things we've been talking about. But certainly, you're right, that the kinds of narrowing that we're talking about here, when we look back it includes a narrowing of the idea of who can make films and who can be brilliant at making films and who deserves that attention to the texture of the film as a result.

LFD: Do you think it's also a kind of academic narrative about what detailed criticism is or is not, and what it should and should not be and where it sits? That is part of what I think, Doug, you're talking about: people feeling like they might need to reinvent the wheel. I wonder if that's coming out of that way in which detailed criticism and close analysis were deemed to be not 'academic', not what was or should be happening in the academy? The idea that if it's not theory, you're doing it wrong. Of course, it's flourished in the last 20 years and has been reinvigorated in certain ways but there's still a level of gatekeeping.

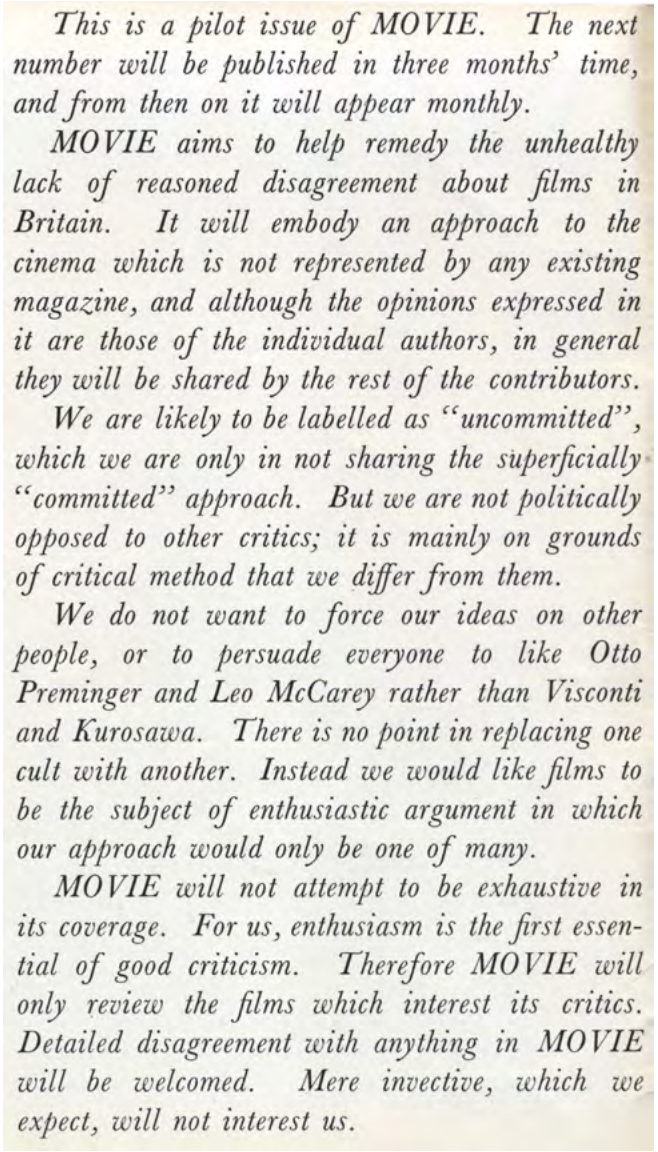
DP: Yes, that's right. I remember a conversation I had, well, maybe 20 years ago, over a research assessment exercise with a social scientist. And this person said, 'Oh, x, y, and z, they just write about individual films'. How do you begin? It's almost as though you're speaking different languages. Only writing about individual films! Well actually, what is the study of cinema rooted in if it's not rooted in individual films? There's a complete paradigm clash going on.

JG: We're talking about two kinds of Academy here, though aren't we? We're talking about the academic Academy — I'm sure we'll come back to the ways in which some of the insights and interventions of 70s theory have fed into critical approaches, including *Movie*'s own approaches, and helped us to identify new targets to explore in what might be political criticism. And then there's the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, where interesting questions would concern its membership, what kinds of films get nominated for Oscars or win Oscars, all those kinds of debates. Of course, you're right Lisa: the critical discourse – or the 'reviewer' discourse – can create a feedback loop. The Golden Globes are currently under discussion, aren't they, in terms of their lack of diversity. Let's just remember there are two different academies at stake, which are often at odds in interesting ways as well.

Girish Shambu: I think we need one or more articles that look back at *Movie* and its history in a fine-grained way to dispel some of these received notions of what *Movie* was about. Of course, this problem of thin and flattened histories is common and endemic to every field. For example, the narrative that we see crop up sometimes in social media discussions of feminism: that 1970s feminism was mostly white, that women of colour were absent. But when you look at the historical record (books, films, archival photographs, oral histories, etc), it's clear the movement was much more diverse than we often realise. I'd be eager to read accounts of *Movie* history written through the lens of matters that are acquiring great importance and urgency today, such as gender and race – both in terms of the makers of films discussed in the magazine and also the critics doing the writing. Doug and John, you've both spent so many years both being part of (and helping make the history of) the magazine, and also studying it – you'd be ideally positioned to take on such a project, if you felt so inclined!

LFD: So it's not only the films that require that kind of fine-grained engagement, but the criticism itself. For me, as a writer and as a reader, the moments where you get to have that very detailed engagement with what you're attending to is part of the pleasure of detailed critical engagement. We've talked about some of those conversations happening in *Movie* itself, and I think that's why those roundtables, particularly the *Movie* 20 discussion, are so exciting because you get to see the granularity of people's thinking about what it is that criticism should do and what they want it to do, and how they view each other. In that roundtable, leading from a discussion about ideology and politics where they are using those words to mean slightly different things, Robin Wood and Victor Perkins get into a conversation about subjectivity and the idea of what you should be doing as a critic. It's so invigorating to see that kind of discussion happen in that kind of detailed exchange. It's always been the thing that I value most about detailed criticism, the capacity to reflect on what it is that it's doing. The challenge that we were talking about before, becomes that invitation to disagree, to be a jumping off point, to share enthusiasm. So enthusiasm is a word that they use in the *Movie* 1 statement, and looking at your book, Girish, *The New Cinephilia* (2020), enthusiasm is a word that you use and value. So I was really struck by the parallels between that and thinking about enthusiasm as not just a starting point for criticism, but as a political act.

DP: There's quite a lot there. But enthusiasm. It's very difficult to write good criticism about movies, you're not, in some sense, enthusiastic about. That's one reason why in *Movie*, on the whole, people would write about the films that they were enthusiastic about. It wasn't a case of 'we need to write about this, Robin, you do this, Jim, you do that'. The *Movie* books were the same, you pitched something that you're really enthusiastic about. That's not to say, of course, that you don't also engage with things that you're not enthusiastic about – there can also be enthusiasm to expose what's bad or overvalued. But the energy of wishing to persuade others that



This is a pilot issue of MOVIE. The next number will be published in three months' time, and from then on it will appear monthly.

MOVIE aims to help remedy the unhealthy lack of reasoned disagreement about films in Britain. It will embody an approach to the cinema which is not represented by any existing magazine, and although the opinions expressed in it are those of the individual authors, in general they will be shared by the rest of the contributors.

We are likely to be labelled as "uncommitted", which we are only in not sharing the superficially "committed" approach. But we are not politically opposed to other critics; it is mainly on grounds of critical method that we differ from them.

We do not want to force our ideas on other people, or to persuade everyone to like Otto Preminger and Leo McCarey rather than Visconti and Kurosawa. There is no point in replacing one cult with another. Instead we would like films to be the subject of enthusiastic argument in which our approach would only be one of many.

MOVIE will not attempt to be exhaustive in its coverage. For us, enthusiasm is the first essential of good criticism. Therefore MOVIE will only review the films which interest its critics. Detailed disagreement with anything in MOVIE will be welcomed. Mere invective, which we expect, will not interest us.

Opening statement of purpose from the first issue of *Movie*

what you found in the movie is there and valuable, that seems to be a characteristic of what I take to be good criticism. And it always has a context.

Cinephilia's been touched on and cinephilia and enthusiasm seem very much to go together, don't they – though I'm not sure they're necessarily bedfellows. So I doubt you can have cinephilia without enthusiasm, but you can certainly have enthusiasm without cinephilia.

LFD: So then, what is crucial to recognise is how much that enthusiasm immediately starts you thinking of what you value, what kind of judgments are being made, and to recognise that those are all coming out of something. One thing that Victor says to Robin in that discussion, after Robin has said that he doesn't see a distinction between him and the audience. Victor replies, 'part of what you're saying makes me want to be very awkward' and he points out that there are assumptions behind what Robin is pointing out about a film, that you're never an isolated individual, coming out of nowhere. So in that conversation we can see him being very careful about remembering we are people coming from a particular culture and that we need to recognise what our reference points are, and more than that, that criticism is coming out of a set of assumptions informed by that background. I thought that was a revealing moment in that discussion, and a useful one for us more broadly. It might be an obvious point, but I think an important one that is always present, even when not explicitly stated.

JG: Cinephilia was described as a cult recently, wasn't it, by B. Ruby Rich, lead editor of *Film Quarterly*, in a good keynote address, where she was articulating her own position on the value of criticism? I always felt that *Movie*'s criticism gets enthusiastic about things because they're important in certain kinds of ways – and in certain periods of history that's been an explicitly political commitment. At other times, it might not have been thought about in quite those terms, but it doesn't mean that it's not engaged in why these things are valuable because of what they tell us about the world and our ways of understanding it and what we can do with it. Maybe it's a tribute to the educational context that I came through. When I arrived in the Department [of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading], having been studying zoology and psychology, I found a space where everyone was completely committed to engaging in the politics of the world, trying to create a more inclusive and a better world. And as a result I've already always seen the work through that lens, always felt that was part of our endeavour. I can't do better than the concluding lines of your Manifesto, Girish, but I've never thought of the project of detailed criticism being divorced from trying to engage with politics.

Past / money and institutional support

DP: One thing to add here is the question of the economics of publishing. It's still very much an issue, of course, even though many journals are now online. *Movie* was entirely independent, it had no institutional backing. The BFI had some grants available to support small journals, if I remember rightly, and Ian Cameron would meet Penelope Houston for lunch to talk about *Movie*. So there were I think occasional grants, but funding was always a struggle and it's hardly surprising that publication became very irregular. The difference between *Movie* and *Screen* was that *Screen* was institutionally supported. It originated, as the journal of The Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT), very much as a journal for teachers and evolved by the early 70s into a journal of theory. The economics of publishing and distribution are really vital dimensions of the history of film criticism and theory but they're not much discussed. Now, of course, *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* is online and open access, with all the wonderful advantages that that gives, but it still takes a good deal of labour to produce. We're fortunate in our institutional affiliations – it appears via Warwick University's website, and while we used to do our own design work, more recently we've worked with design students studying graphic communication at Reading to do the design as part of their coursework, and we also make a contribution to our student fund to engage their services, which is great. But there is still an issue around how you sustain a serious journal that is not institutionally funded. You do need sometimes to pay people, and a lot of work is done for free, such as Lucy's excellent copy editing, and the Board's editorial work more generally. What you ultimately depend on is the goodwill of people to sustain

it because they actually believe in the project, which is great. But it's constantly an issue. That lack of a consistent funding stream that enables you to do the spadework.

JG: This also presses on the issue of access. *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* is Platinum or Diamond open access in the sense that you neither have to pay to contribute nor to read, which is, of course, a good thing to be in the modern world. Doug and I were quite taken aback when Chris Keathley calculated that the issues of the original *Movie* are only available in two US university libraries or something extraordinarily small like that. He'd been talking to other people who've been trying to track it down and having great difficulty. So that's another one of the contextual issues, or one of the other issues of being a small scale journal. How do you ensure that that work reaches the full range of people who might be interested in reading it, especially if the journal comes out intermittently, as was the case with *Movie*?

DP: Yes, *Movie* had a distributor in the States based in New York. You could subscribe of course but beyond subscription level, we were never sure how far beyond New York and its environs it actually got. But certainly, it is very difficult to access. To have a conversation about the history, the basic primary materials need to be available, and across the English-speaking world, they're not. It's not digitised, though there have been many discussions about getting it digitised. There were some old digitised versions in circulation, done without authorisation by enthusiasts – but there's no official digital version that an institution can buy, for instance, and make accessible to students.

Present / enthusiasm and curiosity

LP: I was wondering if we could just return to that question of the use of the term enthusiasm, and perhaps tailor our attention to what the present in terms of film criticism looks like and might look like. Because enthusiasm, of course, is political in the sense that it's a set of selections, which depend on your level of access, and there's questions of privilege, and there's questions of other people's access to distribution channels, and so on. So if I can say there is an 'ethics of enthusiasm' when one is putting enthusiasm into print in some way. Now, I mean, print in the broadest sense, so on a blog, on Twitter, or championing it in a publication, a journal, that kind of thing. So I'm just staying with that idea of a thoughtful form of film criticism: when we think about the ethics of enthusiasm, what does that mean to us? And what are we seeing in the landscape around us? In terms of other forms of film criticism? Before I let you all answer, I should say that this is a very changed landscape in terms of the platforms by which we access that film criticism. There's been an explosion over the last 20 years of online criticism of various kinds, and that online criticism has hung its hat on a number of different hooks, so there are some people who are writing very much in the narrow, I would suggest, iteration of auteurist criticism. You've got the bloggers talking about Michael Bay as auteur, or whatever, I don't mean to dismiss that work, it's just that it suffers from some of the narrowness we were talking about earlier. We've got lots of other things going on. People have talked about the democratisation of film criticism during this period, and so on. So can we maybe just focus on the idea of the ethics of enthusiasm and think about the current landscape of film criticism and how we're encountering it, and how we might be intervening into it?

GS: Your phrase, Lisa – ethics of enthusiasm – is lovely and evocative. I'm thinking that an ethics of enthusiasm would need to address two things: both our narrower object of love, cinema, and also something larger: the world. I think of the experience of 'new cinephilia' as being one that is always deeply engaged with both – and shuttling back and forth between them. In other words: how can individual films both give us pleasure and also deepen our engagement with the world – and (in reverse) how can our knowledge and experience of and in the world enrich (more with each passing year) our experience of viewing and thinking about cinema. The ethics of enthusiasm, in my view, would lead us not to all films equally but more to those films that speak of, or are in contact with, marginalisation. Specifically, films and filmmakers and themes and critical paradigms that traditional cinephilia has neglected. Speaking personally, I have lived in the West most of my adult life, and most of the films that I've seen have been made by a minority population – straight white men – because they dominate film culture in every way: volume of output, visibility, amount of critical writing, etc. But over the last decade, the bulk of my viewing has been the films made by women, people of colour, queer people and other marginalised makers, because even though these works are far fewer in number, less visible, less written about, they collectively represent the work of the majority! So, I seek out this cinema both because it brings me great pleasure and because it immerses me in experiences and subjectivities often different from my own and frequently marginalised in our culture – which also feeds into the gratification and pleasure I receive from these works.

DP: It's very interesting, isn't it, the question of what's initially available to you. You grow up accepting the world pretty much as it's given to you, so what cinema was, for my generation, was what was at the local cinemas. I wouldn't have seen European film, a non-English language film until university. Curiosity seems to be an interesting and potentially linking term here. It is enthusiasm which gets you engaged in movies, wanting to explore them more. Enthusiasm won't necessarily take you into these other areas that you're talking about Girish. Curiosity will. And curiosity in the first instance may not engender enthusiasm, because very often, when you begin to explore a cinema that is culturally extremely different to yours it can be very disorientating. In my first encounters with Japanese cinema, for instance, there were things I responded to very powerfully, but there were extraordinary levels of puzzlement and cultural uncertainty. In our close analysis seminars (John's very familiar with this), when we're often looking at movies that most of us have just seen for the first time, one of the questions I tend to ask is, 'what kind of thing is this?' 'What kind of thing is it we're dealing with?' Back to the university moment – the first time I saw *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961) I had no idea what kind

of thing it was, though I suspect that's not how I expressed my response at the time. I certainly wasn't enthusiastic about it. But later curiosity kicked in when I picked up that there was a connection to the new novel, and bits and pieces of what was going on in French culture became clearer, some of the intellectual and cultural threads that fed Resnais and Robbe-Grillet, and I guess enthusiasm began to grow. It might not have done of course. But several years later when I started teaching film, Resnais was one of the first directors I taught. So the process is a very interesting one, but it's potentially very tangled and one doesn't want to simplify it. Curiosity can take you into new areas. Those new areas might repel you, but somewhere along the line, if you're curious enough, something might happen and enthusiasm grows. You can also be totally put off. Is anybody's first experience of Renoir's *La Regle du Jeu* (1939) an experience of unbridled enthusiasm? Often the response is more 'what the hell is going on here?' What are these performances? It's only when you begin – if you're curious – to penetrate beyond that. But you begin gently, slowly, slowly and enthusiasm builds: oh, my God, that's what he's doing.

The other thing I wanted to add in was subjectivity has been mentioned and obviously, enthusiasm is a dimension of subjectivity. We can never rest with that but we can't escape it either. And that was one of the great disasters of grand film theory of the 70s. The aim to produce a scientific criticism, which was in some sense free of subjectivity. It was nonsense, but it was obfuscatory nonsense, so that it was very difficult for people who simply couldn't understand it to challenge it. When Andrew Britton did mount a brilliant challenge, 'The Ideology of *Screen*' (1978/9: 2-28), they just ignored him.

JG: I was going to ask Girish a follow up question – how have you made the journey to these cinemas that hadn't been part of the terrain for you previously? And are there barriers to doing so for other people? I partly ask that in the question from the perspective of students today. When Lisa and I were at university, there were four channels on British television but there were a lot more films, and films from different contexts, free to view. There were double-bill matinees of studio Hollywood cinema every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, and when you turned on the television late evening in the week there might be an Indian film on or there might be a French new wave film. And you didn't spend the next hour and a half flicking through the channels on your remote, you settled in and watched one of these things, and you learnt about these films. What you couldn't do then, of course, is order an DVD of a film from another part of the world, or earlier moment in film history, or access through the internet some of the range of voices that we can do today. But to take advantage of what's available you've also got to have your curiosity sparked, haven't you? And if we're dependent on the algorithm on the streaming service integrated with our television or laptop, how do we find out about the range of cinema or television history? So, I'd love to hear your thoughts on that, and how young people who don't have a lifetime of cinephilia and going to the Toronto International Film Festival are able to access the range of material available? Is there an issue there?

GS: That's a good question, John. I find that any cinephile who spends time on social media today encounters little bits of information all day long. You're in a sea of little bits of information floating all around you. I find that I'm constantly writing down or bookmarking titles of films or websites or essays or books. I'm also slow and poor at making my way through these lists, mainly because of the super-abundance of availability today – vastly more than my cinephile self of 20 years ago would have had access to. I'm sure this also speaks to my economic and location privilege (a middle-class person living in the urban USA). So, I think the problem of access in many (not all) ways is less than it used to be. This problem of super-abundance is exacerbated by the fact that cinephiles in general simply have less time in their lives today to devote to watching, thinking about and enjoying cinema. Economic pressures felt more acutely by younger generations of cinephiles and the overall toll of the world simply falling apart (the rise of fascism, the climate apocalypse, the outright war against women and people of colour) – all of this has had a role to play in preventing the possibility of (as one of the traditional definitions of cinephilia has it) 'organising one's life around films'. Still, over the pandemic, something interesting happened: a lot of relatively smaller websites started streaming films that are very difficult to access: experimental work, films by directors of color, by women. For example, the wonderful programs curated and mounted by Daniella Shreir, the editor of the feminist film journal *Another Gaze* for her streaming platform Another Screen.[2] Because the films only play for a few weeks, you only have a limited window in which to catch them, which personally has been a good discipline for me. So, I think the pandemic has also increased access to films that were previously very difficult to access. This enthusiasm and curiosity discussion also has me wondering about something else. There's a tension between the fact that film criticism is most often about a certain delimited object, an individual film: everything begins with the individual film text. And the tension here is that our curiosity is not limited only to the individual film, especially in a medium like film, which is fundamentally based (both in fiction and nonfiction cinema) on the capture of images of the world. What are the places where that initial spark of curiosity leads us? It might begin with the individual film, but then this curiosity often also gets projected outward from the object into the world. And so the cinephile also feels an obligation to learn about the outside world, to acquire knowledge about it, because that's important to us both as citizens of the world and as film lovers. And this allows us to appreciate film in a deeper, richer way, the more we are aware of the contexts that surround it, the contexts in which a film is embedded. I feel like when I watch films now, I'm leaving the film for periods of time, more than I ever did. More than before, it's igniting my curiosity about the wider world in a pronounced way. As a cinephile, I'm coming to grips with the fact that a lot of my time is now spent not on the film proper, but on things that surround it. But I want to find ways to bring those things back to the film, find pathways to re-enter the film through these contexts.

JG: And do you think that's because you've changed your approach? Or because the films that you're watching are provoking you to enter that exploration in a new way?

GS: That's a very good question. I think both are happening. I think the impulse to move beyond the text, to link it up to the world in deep and serious and meaningful ways just

feels more urgent at this hard, painful, incendiary historical moment (compared to say, 20 years ago).

JG: We had just survived the Millennium bug, of course, and the end of history. But Bush and Blair hadn't invaded Iraq at that point, so it was a halcyon moment, perhaps.

GS: And climate change is just something that we didn't really and truly acknowledge and recognise at the time. How could this not transform our thinking? And our existence?

JG: You'll notice that Robin Wood is writing about climate change 30 years ago, certainly 20 years ago, in some of his books, and posing the question of what does the film critic do in the context of a world which is heading towards ecological catastrophe.

GS: I find Robin, maybe of all the *Movie* writers, is the one I return to the most. I feel a powerful personal resonance with his voice, the way he always self-reflexively situates himself in relation to the film he's writing about. I love how self-critical he is, how personal honesty is an important value for him. I speak of him in the present tense because, although he is gone, his writings feel ever alive to me.

JG: Someone once asked me what book had most impacted on me, intellectually. I said *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (1989) and they burst out laughing. But they obviously hadn't read it.

DP: Girish, I love that account of your recent intellectual adventures, as it were, and the way they've developed. But there are other dimensions to this super abundance, this remarkable availability, the multiplicity of platforms and so on. You do have to deal with it but it can engender, for instance, intellectual and cultural guilt. There is so much out there. That's not a recent thing, but it has just expanded exponentially. Social media is both a blessing and a terrible curse. You're bombarded with tempting offers to take you off into all sorts of directions, so you subscribe to more streaming channels. You've got a life to lead as well. So, the only way of negotiating this is you have to make hard choices, and try to stop yourself feeling guilty that there are millions of things that you're not getting any grip on at all. And a kind of intellectual paralysis can very easily set in. I don't think lock down and the whole COVID year has helped, with that intellectual paralysis. So we have to find – if we're engaged critically, if we want to write or produce audio visual essays – we have to find our way through this in a way which enables us to focus, to produce the kinds of work that we want to produce. And the things we focus on are inevitably going to take the most time. And we've got to find some way, not of shutting out the rest of the world and everything that's out there, but saying, maybe at some point I'll get there. But balancing the immediate and the detailed engagement with this wider sense of a universe out there can be paralysing. Anyway, that's not to be at all sceptical about what you said, which sounds wonderful, but there is another side to this multiplicity of stuff. At one point, you could still track, you could make your way through availability, not with ease, but with relative confidence. It is much more difficult now. The world is too much with us.

Present / responsibility and curation

LFD: Does that mean that the role of film criticism in itself has to got change? I completely agree with what we were just saying about Robin Wood and that self-reflective mode of criticism, particularly the way in which he's always working something out while writing, which is the thing that I feel motivates really good criticism. So it's not just unbridled enthusiasm. It's the things that you were saying, Doug, about the things that maybe puzzle you, or the things that you were describing, Girish, as pushing you out. So criticism is this act of opening outwards, it's never about closing down. That's one of the things that I really love about Racquel Gates' piece, that it's a series of working through things she needs to work out or state in moving to a larger conversation. You can never say everything about something, it's not exhaustive, but rather it's that enthusiasm is an offer of another kind of conversation. If that is the thing that we're valuing about criticism, and our role, if we think in those terms, as gatekeepers in the face of all of this content, then the questions of how we navigate through it, or how we come to it, how we make sense of it ourselves are worth reflecting on. Do you think criticism itself has to change or recognise those issues? Are there things that we do differently now than we would have done 20, 50, however, many years ago? I'm wondering about the project of criticism and how it might have to change.

GS: I think the landscape of film criticism has changed enormously in the last couple of decades. In the 1990s, when I first became a cinephile and started reading and loving film criticism, there was a relatively small number of critics writing for a large number of cinephile readers. This meant that the handful of critics I read on a regular basis – almost all white folks, such as J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum and Pauline Kael – took on the aura of heroes in my mind. But as we transitioned from 20th century 'old cinephilia' to the 'new cinephilia' of the Internet era, the number of critics I began to read regularly just exploded. They may not all be as prolific or as widely read and experienced as the foremost critics of earlier generations, but these younger critics are collectively more diverse, and representative of a broader population. They bring fresh, new perspectives, write from distinct life experiences (as women and people of colour, for example), and give film criticism a much wider range of voices. These days – despite the singular voices of these critics – I tend not to view film criticism as primarily the work of a handful of heroes (which was probably a masculinist tendency on the part of my younger self, anyway!). Film criticism today seems more like a large, collective project to me. The pieces they write may not always be grand or long-form or ambitious, but they often teach me something, even if they are often modest in scope. In the print era past, I often placed a huge responsibility on the relatively few critics I read (and idolised), but now I see the weight of that project being borne by a much larger and much more varied group of critics. Despite all that has been lost – print space for film criticism, for instance – I see this as a net gain.

DP: But there's more than one dimension to the responsibility, isn't there? You're not wanting to put the kind of weight on the small number of critics that you started by reading. Certainly for me too, there was a tiny number of critics that I first started reading. So your expectations of, the responsibility you would put on critics, have changed, but there is

the responsibility of the critic too. It's true that out there are many people sharing on a variety of platforms in a variety of ways, their responses to movies, and the context of movies and so on. But, when we're talking about criticism, and the future of criticism, it seems to me vital that there are people out there who also feel the responsibility to look in detail. And that requires looking not just at individual films, but looking closely – very much Racquel Gate's point. If you don't look at the detail of films, what you end up with is a mess of subjectivity, reductiveness, impressionistic observations. In some of which you can pick up wonderful resonant phrases and ideas from people, but if there isn't that disciplined, detailed assessment, appreciation of movies, then the discourse has no root, no basis, nothing is feeding it. And the risk then is that what we end up doing is valuing things that really shouldn't be valued, and valuing them because their heart seems to be in the right place, or they're representing things that we approve of, and then we're back precisely to where *Movie* started in trying to combat that. The responsibility of the critic, it's not a singular thing. As part of the *Movie* tradition, our commitment in *Movie: a Journal of Film Criticism*, is to the close examination of films, but as we've indicated, it's never just a formal analysis, it always connects to wider issues, however they're conceived. So I just wanted to jump to the other dimension of responsibility, as it were, the responsibility of the critic; it's not just the responsibility of the receiver and the weight that you put on the things that you're reading. There's a need for that constant engagement with the texture, the detail of movies, the ways in which they articulate their material.

GS: I agree, Doug. I would add that it is, particularly, scholars who model this close and sustained engagement with the cinematic complex of formal detail since they have the luxury of time in comparison to working critics who might have tighter deadlines and who might be freelancers juggling multiple gigs to make a living. And because the work of scholars – both in academic journals and in public-facing outlets – is more visible in film culture than it has ever been before thanks to social media, it is also more available for all critics to read and learn from. At the same time, I want to point out that we should not forget the flesh-and-blood critic who is performing the work of close analysis: this person is not a neutral, universal Critic but someone whose engagement with a film is always embodied, and filtered through their life experience as a woman and / or Black person and / or queer person, etc. Formal analysis that emerges from a deep, lived consciousness of these factors has something new to say about even those films that straight, white male critics might have been writing about for a very long time.

DP: That is precisely the thing that made Robin Wood unique among the *Movie* critics, that his life was on the page all the time. And his life changed and he made it clear, by and large. Another thing about the *Movie* tradition, but it's also true about much traditional criticism, is that it is written in a mode – 'impersonality' isn't quite right – that doesn't reveal in the way that Robin's work did. Your family situation, your gender orientation, or any of those things remain, depending on the language you use, suppressed or unrevealed, irrelevant. And you're absolutely right. Precisely because the wider political context, cultural context has changed, we're getting a lot of new voices, not just women's voices, but a variety of ethnicities, identities, nationalities. It is necessary for them to break down that inherited mode – 'keep your life out of it'. There is a momentum or a necessity, to actually put yourself on the line in a way that Robin did, which I've never done and which on the whole, the other *Movie* writers didn't. I do think that has been a very important shift.

LP: What was striking me, Girish, when you were speaking was that you were talking very much as a consumer really of these different perspectives that you're encountering and so on. And I was thinking that also writing about film, thoughtfully sharing films with others and so on is an act of curation. And that *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* as a journal, a curated group of perspectives on films or accounts of films, is still engaged in that process today, as you are in your own blog, in your own writing, Girish, as well. So I wondered if we could perhaps just for a moment reflect on the ethics of that act of curation. Because I think that there's something interesting here, when we talk about curiosity, and enthusiasm, and so on: we can think about it in the abstract, and we can think about it in terms of our own lived experience of particular moments that we encounter. But when we're thinking about representing that work, or those encounters we are curating it seems to me that that's where activism has a place. That's where an ethical selection, which perhaps tries to counteract some of those histories of marginalisation, which are also part of this history that we're talking about, need to be considered. We need to think about them and reflect on our practices of curation. And in a way, it speaks to Doug's point as well, that huge heterogeneity of all possible things you could encounter. What do you choose to look at? Sometimes that's a very personal choice: do I have the energy to encounter something which is very distant from my own cultural situatedness? Sometimes, yes, and sometimes no, and that's fine. But when we're running a journal, when we're writing in a journal, or if we're writing on a blog, we are also involved in inviting enthusiasm from others. That seems important to me. And as those wider conversations about histories of marginalisation have acquired a particular force and sharpness in our current context, it seems even more important to have that conversation on the surface of things. I'm not suggesting we're going to come up with answers here, but I thought we should at least register that.

JG: That's interesting, Lisa. I suspect, for all of us, there are quite complex personal reasons that have shaped the choices about the films that we're moved to write about. I'm thinking about your own engagement with certain forms of action cinema, for example, and visual effects. I hope I'm not putting words in your mouth but I think I can see where some of these enthusiasms come from, because I know you. What made me want to write about *Imitation of Life* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992)? As Doug says, in certain traditions of writing that's effaced, Victor being a good example. As we've said, there are all kinds of things which motivated Victor which you might not have got to know about unless you knew Victor. He's often regarded as not being a political figure but Victor was actually a very political person, wasn't he, Doug?

DP: Extremely political, and with very trenchant views, but you would hardly know that from the criticism.

LFD: I think you can define it in certain ways, but I'm thinking in particular about his affinity for films like *Letter for an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophuls, 1948), which centres a woman's experience, like many films that he wrote about.

One of my favourite pieces is his writing on *In a Lonely Place* (Nicholas Ray, 1950), where he describes the first time that Dix (Humphrey Bogart) sees Laurel (Gloria Grahame) (1992). I've always felt that as this lovely moment of recognising how Humphrey Bogart sees her, but also, Laurel as a person and how Gloria Grahame's performance evokes that. So yes, his work is not on the face of it hugely political, but I think there's something about things that he embraced, and the kind of films that he wanted to write about and who he wanted to write about in those films that always spoke to me as kind of political acts.

DP: I think that's right, and quite interesting to look at the chronology. Victor was a huge enthusiast for *Letter from an Unknown Woman*; he taught it throughout his career. He first actually put words to paper as it were, in the late 60s, in the scripts for a schools television series – a very remarkable BBC series – but then he didn't write about it until, what's the first piece John, the early 80s? He wrote about it three times. And I have no doubt that the ways in which he writes – and that's true of the *In a Lonely Place* piece which is later still, in the early 90s – no doubt that the ways in which he writes about those films and about women within those films, is, I don't want to say influenced by, but aware of those debates within feminism and the wider culture. Remember too, he had been married to Tessa who was a feminist sociologist. So you don't find those things directly referred to but I'm sure they feed the ways in which Victor articulates his responses to Lisa (Joan Fontaine) in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* particularly, and sees her ideological entrapment. To some extent his language changes, it doesn't take on the language of ideological analysis, but it's lurking.

JG: And Maud (Barbara Bel Geddes) in *Caught* (Max Ophuls, 1949) for that matter.

DP: Yes. That's right.

LFD: One thing that I'm thinking about in response to Lisa's question concerning the ethics of selection, is that it doesn't feel like it's enough. Not that it's not enough, but that responsibility of there being so many choices you could make, so the need to be very conscious of the choices that you do make, as well as the intellectual challenge to yourself, along the lines that you were talking about, Girish. It's both a confluence of a natural curiosity, and being aware that when there are so many choices that you could make, you want to make choices that push you beyond what is comfortable or familiar.

DP: Yes, if criticism becomes comfortable, then there's something a bit wrong with it. Criticism should always be pushing at something. Otherwise, what is it? We haven't talked a lot explicitly about value, though it's been threaded through the discussion in various ways, but of course, it's the issue which lurks very close to the surface as soon as you talk about criticism, because criticism as we generally think about it is involved with elucidation, interpretation, and evaluation, and where value resides, therefore, becomes an absolutely crucial set of questions. Value can reside, depending on where you're coming from and what your context is, and what the perspectives are you bring to bear. You can find value in a whole variety of different things, which don't necessarily have to include, for instance, aesthetic complexity.

LP: And I think this is why I wanted to use the word activism. Maybe I can just be a bit grumpy for a minute. It's important to recognise that for people in communities that have been marginalised, culturally, there is a history of trauma that is associated with that marginalisation, and we quite often pretend that that's not there, because it makes people uncomfortable. Okay, so we want to politely negotiate a renewed space of some kind, a more centred space. We don't want to make a big fuss. I'm using 'we' in a very inverted comments way, right? I think for a start, what's really invigorating about the wider cultural conversation around marginalisation now is people have stopped trying to make other people feel comfortable. But they have also started to acknowledge out loud that there is a trauma associated with marginalisation and that actually that trauma demands a change in practices of curation. And I think that's really important for us to acknowledge in a conversation like this. It is not to dismiss all of the qualities of close analysis and connection outwards to political and cultural and social contexts that have been the meat and drink of key elements of *Movie*'s practices as a journal and in terms of a collection of contributors, or indeed other kinds of film critics in that history and in the present. It's just to say that active curation is actually really quite critical for us to openly reflect on. It doesn't mean that we all have to speak from our own perspectives in a way that is very explicit. It just means that that act of curation seems to matter very much and should matter. And, of course, I think probably I'm speaking to the converted in a sense, but I think we need to register it as part of this conversation. And that maybe I'll leave it there. But I think it's worth saying.

GS: That really makes sense to me, Lisa. One great example for me in this regard is the work of B. Ruby Rich, the editor-in-chief at *Film Quarterly*, who has always been deeply conscious of the ethics and politics of curation. She has, over the course of the last 8 years, done an absolutely astonishing job of assembling a wide range of writers – women, BIPOC, queer folks, disabled people – from around the world to write for the journal. *Film Quarterly* has had dossiers on Black cinema, new Brazilian cinema, Asian American films, Arab Spring cinema, etc. The clear and accessible style of writing in the journal is also somewhat different from some other journals in the film and media studies discipline because of Ruby's own extensive experience as a journalist since the 1970s. Which helps the work travel and reach a large number of people and have an effect on the ground that helps change the landscape of film culture.

DP: That's very important. Ruby Rich's takeover at *Film Quarterly* has been fascinating. To actually see the effects of that. You're right Lisa, when you introduced curation quite a while ago we didn't entirely pick it up, the distinction between curation and the act of criticism. One of the things that we at *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* have found difficult, consistently, is attracting writers who actually will write within the brief that we have. Obviously, one way of doing that is by invitation, to go out there and to say okay we will focus on this particular topic, would you like to contribute? But – I think there's been some experience of this in earlier issues of the journal – invitation also is difficult, or it can take you into difficult places because you have to make it clear that what you produce won't automatically appear in the journal. There's

editorial control, there's blind reviewing, there are criteria to do with the brief of the journal that have to be met. I was just skimming through the questions/topics for our discussion, a number of which we haven't yet directly touched on. One of your last ones is, How do we make criticism accessible to a wider range of people and inclusive of different kinds of films? Well, clearly curation and invitation are vital to that. We can't simply wait for people to approach us.

Present / publishing and the Academy

JG: It is an interesting problem, isn't it? On launching *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, one of the things that we deliberately tried to do is to challenge a few preconceptions about what sorts of films we'd be interested in, what sorts of filmmakers. And if you look at the films that have appeared on the cover, and if you looked at the range of film and television that's been written about inside, we've definitely tried to seek out a greater diversity of subjects. But we do still have an issue of attracting as many contributors as we'd like to. It's partly because writing detailed criticism is a difficult thing, but there does seem to be something about the tradition of doing that, that is making it difficult for us to connect to as diverse an array of voices as we'd like to. Maybe there are people who'd be able to answer why that's the case better than I can.

DP: It may well be that *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, when people are choosing where to send their work, simply doesn't register in the top three or four that they tend to go for. Clearly people within the Academy, academics, particularly young academics who are making their way, have got to look at what are seen as priorities in the ways in which they publish. So presumably you get some brownie points for publishing in *Screen*, you probably don't get all that many for publishing in *Movie*. I don't know if that's the case, but I rather suspect it might be.

LP: It could be a factor. The other thing that strikes me, though, is that the academic traditions of writing about film have tended, in recent years, to solidify in particular areas. So we, I think, are relatively unusual in having a detail-focused form of criticism as the centre of the methodology. I'm often in conference settings, particularly in a North American context, where people enthuse about how enlightening it is to have some plain-speaking analysis of the close detail of the film to anchor one's points, but what they're saying is, I don't really get to see this methodology very often. So I think that some of those traditions of how we teach film in higher education in these different kinds of contexts also affect how comfortable people are in applying that methodology to their own work, and that means that that narrows the field of contributors who might flourish within the *Movie* context.

DP: Robert Ray is very interesting on that in his recent collection in the series that John and I edit.[3] He's always been very eloquent about the disastrous effect of film theory in US film departments.

JG: Particularly the tenure track and the demand to publish. There are other things he's exploring there, but it's partly that writing detailed criticism is a time consuming business and you do have to spend a lot of time with the television programme, the movie, the object of study.

LFD: I think there is absolutely the straight jacket of being an academic and having to fulfil certain things and, as you say, the very constituent that we would love to see more of, the early career researcher, are most imperilled by where they publish, where they put their energies. But also, the invitation is a bit of a double-edged sword, isn't it? An invitation can expand, and I'm thinking of Ruby Rich's idea of criticism as expanding the room, which I think is such a lovely phrase and I believe is what we want to do. But an invitation can also replicate the room that you're already in, it doesn't necessarily open the door to another room. So it's more a question of how do we reach beyond the people who are already part of that conversation and draw other people in? I think that's coming back to those questions of curation, asking who was part of that conversation, and reflecting on how much that can replicate itself and not draw on other voices. So the issue is what are the mechanisms to genuinely draw other people in, who you don't know about?

GS: I can recall the 2013 SCMS conference in Chicago, where Lesley Stern (whose presence I miss so much!) was one of the speakers at a session called "Surface Tensions: The Fates and Stakes of Close Analysis." It drew a massive crowd that filled the banquet room. Which made me realise that there is enormous interest among film scholars in detailed close analysis. Two wonderful examples that spring to mind immediately are the scholars Racquel Gates and Michael Gillespie, whose writings on Black cinema pay close, imaginative attention to film form and aesthetics. In the terrific manifesto that they co-authored for *Film Quarterly* (2019), they insist on the importance of formal analysis, while also highlighting the importance of looking at a remarkable range of Black film and media including independent films, TV, and experimental cinema. I think the challenge is to create the kind of environment – for example, at a journal – that would attract people from different sub-disciplines within cinema studies who are interested in close analysis.

LP: There are some correspondences to the economic history of the journal, as you signalled earlier, Doug – to the contemporary space in which we're operating, where it's not just good will. I wanted to add, that there might be dimensions of precarity, or I was thinking about how we threw the net quite wide in relation to issue 10 and the dossier and we were encouraging people to talk about historically marginalised topics, for example, or focusing on marginalised groups, but we're asking a range of people who are experiencing various levels of precarity, or other kinds of institutional pressures, some of which precisely emerge from, you know, those social processes of marginalisation and exclusion, that people have been documenting more broadly in the public space. So I think it's interesting, this whole question of the economics. I think it's got a very specific history in relation to *Movie*, but we come back to economics when thinking of the ways that film criticism gets out there, and who gets to speak it. What I've

noticed is that, for example, scholars of colour tend to bear the weight of lots of requests, because there are less scholars of colour in institutions due to racist histories of education and recruitment. And so because of these kinds of structural, sectoral, and institutional problems that we talked about before, that's just one example of the ways in which actually, there are various kinds of pressures acting on that space of who gets to speak this criticism, and on behalf of whom, as it were.

LFD: I think you highlighted the fact that *Movie*, as one example, is not available in the US to many people, but I think the same is true of the UK. That presents a difficulty, on the one hand, of explaining what *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*'s position is, precisely because people aren't familiar with it. I also wanted to pick up on John's point about open access, and that being such an important part of the journal's publishing model. I think that is borne out of that desire to remove barriers, because we have seen that there are barriers to accessing *Movie*, which also extends to the project of republishing things that haven't been accessible, and making sure that those continuities between print and online journal are represented. There's such an issue in academic publishing at the moment, that there are all of these barriers to publishing, mostly economic, which reinforce the problem of precarity. No one is paid to publish their work; in fact, you're more likely to be asked to pay in order to publish your work, and while our funding means that we can't pay contributors, we can at least make sure it's all freely available and easily accessible. I think we can't underestimate how important the model of open access publishing is to the journal as it exists.

DP: It was extremely fortunate, wasn't it, that when we wanted to produce the successor to *Movie*, the online option was available. We could not have afforded a print publication. Who's going to pay the printer? So that would have been completely out of the question – even half a generation ago it would have been impossible.

JG: As Lucy says, it was also a positive choice in the context of trying to make it as available as possible. Girish, you have experience, of course, of running an open access web-based journal.

GS: Right. Adrian Martin and I co-founded *LOLA* in 2011, and we ran the journal for 6 years, producing 7 issues in all.[4] We had no institutional support, and we featured no advertising of any kind on the site – the whole project was financed by personal funds. We were also enormously fortunate to have a skilled and experienced tech person, Bill Mousoulis, who is a filmmaker and one of the founders of the website *Senses of Cinema*. To be honest, given our resource constraints, there was no way we could have run a print journal, but *LOLA* was fortunate to have a sizable, global cinephile readership.

Present / The 'politics of style' in contemporary criticism

LP: We talked about the history of the – we came up with this phrase – politics of style, and we had that lovely discussion about Victor Perkins and the way that he was very attentive to the way that female representation works in some of these films that he looked at, for example. I wondered where are we seeing current film criticism engaging with the politics of style in whatever way we want to interpret that. Where do we see it? How do we see it manifest?

GS: There are a couple of current examples I could cite that are fresh in my mind. One is the wonderful multihyphenate (critic / scholar / poet / podcaster / activist) So Mayer on Lizzie Borden's 1986 film *Working Girls* in the DVD/blu-ray liner essay for Criterion Collection (2021). Their essay is titled 'Have you heard of surplus value?', which is a line from the film, and it takes up a dizzying variety of topics, such as labour practices of sex work, and women's work more generally, under neoliberal capitalism. And it also explores multiple contexts, such as Borden's career, the history of Marxist feminism, the gentrification of New York, all of which illuminate the analysis. But what's equally remarkable is the close attention the essay pays to cinematic language, like camerawork, décor, and bodily gesture. Erika Balsom's new book on James Benning's 2004 experimental film *Ten Skies* is remarkable (2021). As you might know, the film features 10 shots of skies, and no shots of the ground: it's just clouds and the sky. As you would expect, Balsom pays minute attention to the form of the film, its style, visual compositions, colour, sound, and so on, but she also discusses, in a deep and insightful way, a range of issues that might appear unlikely at first glance given the premise of the film: such as climate change, American masculinity, the war film, the post-9/11 US "war on terror," and so on. I admire the ambition and reach of these writers and the way that film form, style and aesthetics are integral to their discussion.

DP: I'm just wondering about the phrase 'the politics of style' and how we understand it. It links two key terms with complex histories. So, what do we understand by politics? There's quite a broad range of issues just in those examples you've mentioned. And what do we mean when we talk about style? John and I were talking about our introduction to *Style and Meaning* where we quote the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that gives 28 entries for style (2005). Do we mean just the formal decisions? Or are we looking at a broad, more comprehensive concept of, and practice of, style-based analysis?

JG: It sounds like in the two examples Girish has just given us, he's using 'style' to refer to the decisions made by the filmmakers and the resulting material features of the film – how they shaped the material on a moment by moment basis and how that might then become meaningful.

DP: Absolutely. Style is the heart of the material process of articulation. Not just formal elements, but the interrelationships, as bones and cartilage articulate, and articulation in the sense of speaking, of making meaning. There's a lot of writing which is style-centred in some sense, that doesn't do that. And it's not worthless writing. So it's just wanting to tease out agreement or disagreement about how we're using key terms, and what sorts of baggage we're carrying through the conversation, as we use them.

LFD: Like us making the distinction, if we're being attentive to terms, about politics with a small p and politics with a big P. And where the politics of style is coming from, or maybe not even where it's coming from, but where it's going. The kinds of traditions that we're talking about are perhaps more invested in thinking through a politically informed meaningfulness, rather than an overt Politics. So a tradition of style-based

criticism that is seeking to value films that are speaking from a political perspective, but not declaratively, makes sense.

DP: Yes. Or finding within movies, as one comes to appreciate them more deeply and perhaps from a greater variety of viewpoints, implications, assumptions, whatever, that were not necessarily part of the conscious project of the film. Or, more positively, a mix of material and meaning, some of which is worked into the dramatic and thematic web, and some of which is not. So, those two things: one where the film engages as part of its articulation, as you say, with these political issues, and second, those films which almost inadvertently, because of their context, and because of the material that they're drawing on – perhaps drawing on very intensely – contain things, meanings, that were not necessarily part of the overt project of the film. An example from a very familiar movie. In *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956) there's a decision to make some women blonde and others (or is it only one?) dark haired. What's the significance of that? Debbie (Natalie Wood), the character who's captured by the Comanche and not only survives but has become an apparently well-adjusted young woman, is dark haired. Her sister, Lucy (Pippa Edwards), who is captured and then murdered, and is from the outset seen as hysterical and terrified, is blonde. The white captives that we see in that terrifying scene in the film in the cavalry office, are blonde. And two of them seem to have been driven mad by captivity. So what's at stake here? There's a long tradition within American culture of such representations in relation to the West. In Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), you have two half-sisters, one of whom is blonde and one of whom is dark haired. Alice – blonde and blue-eyed – is delicate and frightened; Cora, dark haired and much more resilient. Cora is actually mixed race, which complicates things but also points up how these representations are bound up from the outset with the implications of whiteness. I'm not at all sure that's something that would have been in the forefront of Ford's mind, but he was working within a tradition. There are aspects of the tradition that the film dramatises critically and profoundly, and others, like this, that bring implications from the tradition but are much less worked on and integrated into the whole. The tradition speaks, as it were. And speaks 'politically.'

This is the sort of thing I was thinking about, in terms of a reading which is not exactly against the grain in the way of many symptomatic readings, but is picking up something which one might at first just accept and not think of as particularly striking or significant.

JG: It partly connects with all those interesting discussions that you were part of, Doug, around genre and conventions, and the meanings embedded in those conventions and the ways in which filmmakers can either unthinkingly reproduce them or engage in an exciting, critical dialogue. The values that are bound up in those conventions can – as organised in the most interesting films – reveal extraordinary tensions, complexities and ideological structures. And it's difficult to guess whether the makers themselves were fully aware of this or the extent to which it was a function of the shared forms with which they were working, isn't it?

DP: It is. Those things come out of the intensity with which they engage with conventions which, seen abstractly, appear to carry the most reactionary and unpleasant of meanings.

JG: We should mention Deborah Thomas' article on *Two Rode Together*, which is directly concerned with some of these questions, in issue 9 of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* (2020).

LFD: We could see that as part of the work of criticism as well, that the job of the critic is to illuminate the film's meaningfulness but also to put it in conversation with context, with convention or tradition, and not to collapse what the makers may or may not have been doing, but to think through what meanings are produced. Thinking about the questions of how we're doing that now, where we're seeing that now, particularly when you're looking at older films, there's a question of how you come to an articulation of a film that was of a particular time? How do you reassess it? How might you want to make a claim about the film, particularly when those traditions or conventions are uncomfortable or even offensive? What we might judge differently in 2022?

JG: There is an interesting tension here. There are plenty of examples of films where we think 'well, that's very much of its time', and excuse the film to some lesser or greater degree. Then there are situations where things that were always present in a film come into focus in a new, revealing way. We were talking about Victor and Ophuls in relation to this earlier in the conversation, and how his position might have been informed by wider movements in thinking about culture over time, and perhaps through his relationship with Tessa. In the case of some films, we look back and say, 'you wouldn't get away with that these days, that's awful, shameful' and other films we suddenly think, 'oh my goodness', we can suddenly see what this film is articulating and exploring in a way that wasn't available to us before we had those political perspectives; we are in a particular moment in culture and time when we're now able to have that engagement with the work.

Present / the personal is political

LFD: Another dimension of politics and style is the politics of the critic. I mean that with a small p, although it could be either. I think the examples that you gave us, Girish, it strikes me that they're just the kind of writers who are engaging with the politics of their circumstances, and are bringing new kinds of perspectives to thinking about style. So that question of who gets to speak about films, who gets to write about films is very important, precisely because of that, because of what people bring to the film, in their articulation of its articulation.

LP: Yes, that's a good point Lucy. We've talked about the personal dimension to the lived experience of viewing, and the lack of visibility that people experience if they're from particular marginalised communities. That can drive the politics of the critic, and you see that with, say, So Mayer being really angry about stuff, and rightly so. It's actually really invigorating to read an angry critic. Perhaps that's just me and where

I'm at! Girish is talking about this current historical moment, and the pleasure of experiencing lots of different perspectives now. There's so much out there that you can get to, and then to just see something from that person's perspective. And I don't think that means it's a partial analysis or assessment or evaluation. I think you can have both, and we see that in many of the examples we've talked about today already.

GS: I'm often drawn back to a Richard Dyer essay from the late 1990s, which is an overview of the film studies discipline (1998). It's a short piece in which he identifies two poles in film studies: the formal-aesthetic pole, and the social-ideological pole. To be located at one of these two extremes is a problem. Because, for example, viewing cinema from the formal-aesthetic pole means that one's investments excessively lie in cinema as a unique medium with unique powers of expressivity – but this position lacks a serious and sustained engagement with social or ideological issues that are crucial in the world today. And thus, one has to ask: what are the stakes in occupying this position – in being wholly committed to the formal-aesthetic? How is this helping to engage with what's happening in the world today? On the other hand, being located at the social-ideological pole means using cinema simply as a pretext for writing about larger issues in the world – which is also unsatisfactory. So, the task for the critic and cinephile becomes: how to synthesise these poles in a way that draws deeply from both, that gives equal time and substance to both? Speaking just for myself, having come of age as a cinephile during the 'old cinephilia' heyday of auteurism, for the longest time I was much more invested in aesthetic appreciation of film, and not very interested in making sustained, deep connections between 'film' and 'world'. But especially in the last decade or so, I've been much more interested in trying to split my time between both, spending equal effort learning about both. If there's a general prescription here, I would say: as cinephiles, our challenge (different for each one of us) is to try to move, a little bit with each passing year, towards the pole that's more distant from where we currently are. Thus helping to better synthesise these two sets of tools (formal-aesthetic analysis and social-ideological analysis) in order to produce more complex and balanced criticism.

JG: Quite a few of the people we celebrated earlier in the conversation have been interesting precisely because they're good at moving between those two poles, or making the links between the question of detailed articulation and how that illuminates a matter that's of political significance. Not exclusively, but a lot of the work that we were talking about in part one of this discussion – the Robin Wood or the Andrew Britton – was certainly engaged in that process, wasn't it?

DP: Absolutely – we pointed to the increasing overtness of ideological/social concerns in *Movie* writing from the 70s on. It's very useful to pose the two extremes and clearly they have existed. But it needs some caution: John mentioned earlier that there were other strands of writing, parallel to early *Movie*, that were very politically engaged. And we suggested that *Movie* was informed by the wider culture in various ways.

But the other thing that I was taking from where you started, Girish, about all these voices, relates to how, in the introduction to *Style and Meaning*, we were thinking about what criticism is or should be. And I say 'should be' because, looking back, I'm sure that quite a number of the things I've written over the years really didn't come across as invitations to conversation! But what we were arguing – and it was something Victor insisted on – is that criticism should invite dialogue. What I say about a movie is not 'truth' – as Victor says, it's not a proof, it's an argument. And it's an argument that needs to be engaged with, that you can take to the next time you see the movie, and you can come back and say, 'No, well hang on a minute', or, 'Actually, that's fine as far as it goes, but …' or, 'Actually, you've got this completely wrong'. Each piece of criticism is not a hermetic thing, although it can appear like that. Part of the problem with published criticism is that when it's any good, it can seem – to students, for instance – so convincing as to seem almost beyond dialogue. What they don't see is the process that went into it. All the messy thoughts, the blind alleys, the conversation you have with yourself. Ideally, criticism needs to be an invitation to a conversation with others, not just implicitly, but perhaps explicitly too. The conversation may be provoked directly by what you say, or it may be less direct, like the kind of thing you're talking about Girish, where as you develop your own criticism, you're drawing on this range of other things that you're coming across and feeding them in. I'm sure we can all see that in our own work, where were we when we started? At what point did this sort of perspective begin to come in? Criticism as a dialogue, criticism as an invitation to conversation.

LP: If I can just pick out one final thing from Girish's comments. That question of self reflection, I think is really important. That you might on a reasonably regular basis say, okay, what position am I writing from? And I think that's perhaps one of the things that Girish you were finding in Dyer: the encouragement to reflect on one's own position. I think that that's quite an interesting challenge when one has developed a writing style and also in the context of the mainstream press and blogging and the institutional context encouraging us to adopt an authoritative persona. That's been a fairly conventional way to speak about film. What I find exciting about the increased foregrounding of one's own personal lived experience in some of this work now, is that it makes that invitation to dialogue very explicit in a way that perhaps some of those more conventionally authoritative ways of speaking have suppressed it? And one has to know the rules of the game to know there's a dialogue, as it were, and these other ways of speaking criticism, I think, can actually make that more explicit.

LFD: I absolutely agree. One thing that I've been thinking about during the course of our conversation particularly as we talked about people like Robin Wood, and how much we valued the ways in which he was engaging in a personal reflection on his work and tastes, is that you can see that personal reflection is coming out of a particular identity position. I wanted to bring that together with what Lisa said, about Racquel Gates not feeling like she was included, so she had to intervene. I was thinking about that conversation and the kind of value that we were placing on Robin's work and how personal that was for him, and that not seeing yourself in those main spaces means that you have to think about identity more, that you are forced into a position of reflection if you are not the 'norm'. If you are not the straight white man, that you are inevitably placed in a position where you have to think about that. Coming back to Girish's point about the two

poles, if you're out of the convention, you might feel like you have to approach things from that social-cultural perspective, because that's precisely what you're forced to think about. I have that feeling reading Racquel Gates' piece, that you have to fight your way through being forced into a certain position in order to get to the aesthetic part and so explicit engagement with politics is crucial. I agree that those two approaches are not divorced in the writing that we're talking about, but that maybe perceptually they are, or they have been traditionally, divorced. Similarly to you Girish, I am now more conscious of those things, that there are issues of identity politics that are more important to me now than they once were, because I'm being forced to think about them.

GS: I think that our moment poses certain special challenges for the film critic and cinephile, because in addition to all the time we need to spend watching, thinking, discussing and writing about cinema, it has become imperative to cultivate a similar, deep understanding of the social / political / economic / ecological issues in the world that cannot be kept apart from our analyses of films. Further, they demand not casual invocations but substantive engagement in our film writing. And this is a daunting task: it takes great time and effort to develop our understanding of those issues before we can incorporate them into our writing in a significant and assured way that interweaves them, puts them into intimate conversation with the aesthetic complex mobilised by a particular film. This is a new kind of work – at least in scale if not in kind – that sets anew the terms of our engagement with cinema.

LP: Yes, that's very interesting, because I was thinking about how in social media in particular, that question of who gets to speak is also very fraught from a different direction, right? So the 'you don't get the right to speak on our behalf', for example, is one of the kinds of debates that happens. So it's a fraught context if one wants to speak one's criticism across different platforms as well, and depending on what one is choosing to speak about. I don't mean that in a particularly fearful way, it's just interesting. It's another layer on top of the one that you've described, Girish. Is it the right moment to talk about how video essays have intervened into this space as well, because it feels like, when we talk about film criticism, and it taking different forms and evolving, we're also talking about the arrival of the video essay, which itself has manifested as a spectrum or a proliferation of different modes. And whether we want to introduce the term politics, whether we just want to sit with what it is as criticism?

Present / videographic criticism

LFD: Pondering this question about where are we seeing work that's invested in the politics of style, I definitely thought of the ways in which video essays are doing that work, and that you're seeing different kinds of interventions. Also that there's something about the encouragement of the form in general; not that every piece of videographic work is actually thinking about style, but you're having to deal with style by making the video essay, so that's encouraged people to think through those things more prominently. But I think of your work, John, 'Say, have you seen the Carioca?' (2019), as a really lovely example of using the form to think through other kinds of questions of history, of identity, and that it would be very difficult to do what you do there in writing. I think what you achieve in that essay gives a really exciting example of thinking about the intersections of style and politics. In relation to what we've been talking about in relationship to criticism of authority and hierarchies I also think of people like Ian Garwood, Liz Greene, Cydnii Wilde Harris, Kevin B Lee (and many more), all of whom are bringing multiple perspectives to that question of what is the politics of style.

JG: I think you're right, absolutely, that one of the exciting things about videographic work is that it insists you think about form. All good criticism involves finding the right form for the argument but it's a particularly dynamic experience when you're working videographically. As you and Lisa are both suggesting, there is a wonderful plurality of things going on in the field of audiovisual essays. I was interested in trying to produce work in this area because of what it offers for extending the methods of style-based criticism, a new and dynamic set of ways of engaging an audience with evidence and analysis. But from the outset, I was attracted by the kinds of access it might provide for people who might not have an affinity for written criticism. I'm thinking about that from a student point of view, in particular. We've all had those students in our classes who have been brilliant in discussion but haven't been able to capture that understanding on the page, despite their and our best efforts. But maybe they would be great at articulating their understanding in the form of a video essay, of one kind or another? This has proved to be thrillingly the case. And again, as you suggest, part of the fun is that video essays are an area of development in both the academic field and the wider cultural conversation.

LFD: When we were having our conversation about the issue of institutionalisation, of how publications are supported, accessed and so on, I was thinking about the huge number of other journals and magazines that were interested in film criticism from the 1960s and 70s that have completely disappeared. But we might say that videographic criticism is going through a similar moment, that the plurality, abundance and access to videographic work produced by scholars and film enthusiasts alike is not completely dissimilar to that moment of the 60s and 70s where there were lots of platforms for film writing. For Catherine Grant, Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell and others involved in the Middlebury workshop and *[In]Transition*, the issue of access is certainly hugely important, that those projects are underpinned by collective experience and collective expression. We were talking about the messiness of criticism being hidden and only getting to see the final thing, but here we have a journal where you're much more aware of the process through mechanisms like the open peer review being published alongside the finished piece.

DP: There is this debate about the 'scholarly videographic essay', the kind of work that would have some sort of status within the Academy, God help us. And part of the way in which that's developed – and *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* does this too – is to get the makers to write a statement of a few hundred words, to actually contextualise what they're doing. Something similar happened with practice as research that was submitted for the UK Research Assessment Exercise. And then in *[In]Transition*, they go a stage further, as Lucy says, and publish the reviews, so that you actually

have alongside the work maybe a couple of thousand words of commentary, explanation and context. There's something very interesting about the use of language to validate in a way the scholarly status of videographic work. It can even seem quite paradoxical when in quite a lot of videographic work there seems an impulse to escape language and particularly to avoid voiceover. It's a different but related issue but I've seen the argument that voiceover is somehow hostile to the essence of the form of videographic criticism. I'm always very sceptical when essences of forms are raised. Like movies, videographic criticism is a messy hybrid – or a rich mix if you prefer – and it's the hybridity that should be celebrated.

JG: One quick observation: the opportunity to develop an open peer review process was a major motivation for Jason Mittell's involvement in launching *[in]Transition* (2017).

LP: I agree with you Doug, about being suspicious of when people invoke essences. I think there's an interesting question around voice, which is the history of the technology of the recorded voice and what it does to people who aren't big, booming, blokes. That way in which recording technology has not really been designed to accommodate women's voices, for example, and one can think of other voices that weren't really accommodated either. This is an important context when we speak about whose voice is featured in the video essay's voice over narration, and who feels comfortable to do that kind of voiceover narration. Some of those who eschew voice over and find other video essay forms for their reflections on a film are doing so for these and related reasons. Jace Alexander Casey's decision to have a computer voice narrate her 'New Forms of Racism in the Post-Cinematic Dispositif' video essay (2017) is a potent political choice in light of this history and her video essay's argument.

JG: Ian Garwood's excellent 'The Place of Voiceover in Academic Audiovisual Film and Television Criticism' (2016), addresses some of these questions directly.

LFD: It comes back to what we were talking about before, the idea of the film critic as the authority, so when we're talking about the film critic as part of a conversation, as much as the video essay can open a space for further access, it can also reinforce some of that authority of someone to speak.

JG: Potentially in a more seamless way than sometimes appears with a piece of written work. Yes.

DP: It's difficult, isn't it? I take absolutely these points particularly about male voiceover... But your gender is a bit inescapable. John and I were having an interesting discussion, because we've been trying to get together a video essay on Max Ophuls' film *Le Plaisir* (1952), which partly draws on some writing that I did some time ago.[5] A good deal of the essay would be about the representation in the film of women and also the use in the film of male voiceover. We haven't talked about it in great detail, but fairly rapidly we began to kick against the question of 'Well, okay, what happens when we add to Ophuls' male voiceover, our male voiceover?' And clearly, it's not an answer to that to say, 'Oh, well, we'll get a woman to do the voiceover' because the woman would just be a 'front,' as it were.

Potentially a way of trying to escape the tyranny of the male voiceover is, of course, not to use voiceover. But you're still a male filmmaker, making choices about putting bits of video together and presumably trying to create perspectives. That's what I mean by there are, inevitable partialities that come with your gender identity. I can take away my voice, but I'm still making the decisions. Does the fact that I'm making the decisions, but my voice isn't there anymore, is that more liberating in some way? Does that allow a greater degree of freedom for the spectator? Not sure how one squares that small circle; it seems to me in a way that you may appear to be solving one problem but maybe you just kicked it into a different mode of discourse.

JG: And *Le Plaisir*, of course, is film which deliberately problematises its narrator.

DP: Exactly.

JG: Which is why we were having debates about this in the first place. But it does raise interesting questions.

LP: What's interesting about that is, you didn't ask for a solution, but it seems to me that you could say what you've said, at the outset of your essay, and then people take it and run with it, don't they? This question of being self-reflective, on the page or in the video. That's what Jason Mittell's pushing towards, right? It's about exposing the workings, the process, and thereby making that process more available to a wider range of people.

DP: So that's good. We had not thought in detail, but we had begun to wonder about trying to do that kind of thing in a more questioning way.

Present / authority and accessibility

LP: As you can tell, I'm completely preoccupied these days with how to better democratise some of these things, without that being an incredibly naive statement. It's clear that

there are some barriers that one can't possibly overcome as an individual film critic. But earlier we talked about the kinds of objects we put in front of people, as critics as well, and I think that for me is part of the 'how,' and we've talked about some of the challenges in that process of selection and prioritisation and curation. So for me, that is a key part of the whole question.

LFD: I think we've talked quite a lot about the 'how,' in terms of the conversation that we've been having about self-reflection as part of criticism. I think that last point, that exposing what's going on makes things more accessible, is right. So seeing that reflection is a springboard to making that conversation happen, rather than it being the critic and their criticism being hermetically sealed and impenetrable. That's been a really helpful conversation for me and I think it's useful to think of it as an ongoing process.

GS: Lucy, your point about self-reflection as a springboard to conversation makes me think (yet again) of Robin Wood, and how each time one of his books came out in a new edition, he would seize the chance to write a long foreword (sometimes dozens of pages!) that would situate the edition in his own personal and intellectual trajectory since the previous edition – that would foreground his own personal, lived experience and show its interconnections with the way he approached cinema, and how this was constantly evolving. There is bravery and honesty in this kind of self-situating, self-interrogating, self-assessing practice. And I think it also invites other people to engage more with your work than if it were more impersonal, authoritative, neutral and objective in tone.

I must say: it is also a kind of practice I find not very common among straight white male critics in the history of film criticism.

LFD: I absolutely agree. That's what I've been thinking about as well, in terms of how that practice sets out an opening for you to engage with as well. Whatever that person's position is, you don't have to agree with it, it doesn't have to be yours, but it gives you a foothold. That in itself is inviting.

LP: I think that's absolutely right. For me, it's quite an essential part of it. We talked earlier about the institutional context and for me it seems crucial to make sure that you're a clear speaking academic, you know, that people actually understand what on earth you're talking about. I don't think any of us in this roundtable are particular fans of the obfuscatory assertions of academic authority that we might find in certain branches of academia or from certain scholars and I'm pleased to see that, that that's a tradition. And I think in the same way, I'm excited by the both the range of critics that we are now seeing across these different platforms that we're talking about, but also that they are wanting to bring their life experience. It's precisely for the reasons that Girish mentions he admires about Robin: because it becomes a conversation. And it's not about jumping on one political soapbox or another, it's actually about opening up that conversation. And I think that what's really interesting, if you're not a straight white male, speaking from my own position is that you have to think very carefully, particularly early on in your career, about how safe you think it is to speak about certain films in certain kinds of ways. Whether that's going to be positively received, which, of course, is terribly important early on. So if one sort of extrapolates from that, there are lots of people thinking that way, in all kinds of contexts, not just institutional contexts, or perhaps in very difficult institutional contexts. So we're talking about swathes of people who may be interested in and fantastically good at speaking about the form of film and its connections with the world who persuade themselves away from it. It feels very important to me that that kind of inclusive way of speaking about film, is there, not as a pose, not as a worthy thing. Really actually just to try and include more voices at the table.

LFD: Yes, it's really vital to think about how revealing personally it can be to respond to a film whether in person or in print, and, as you say, that can be a daunting process, if you're not sure where you stand. It makes me think about the practices of criticism that I was lucky enough to have as models and to be involved in, with The Sewing Circle and similar spaces, which I found incredibly helpful for practising responding to a film with a group of other people in front of whom I felt comfortable expressing myself.[6] Not everyone has access to those kinds of forums and, as you say, particularly at the beginning of your career, giving a paper at a conference, it can be quite nerve-wracking thinking what's going to happen if you don't have a platform of theory to stand on, it's just you and the film or whatever object that you're thinking about. So yes, I think that's a really good point.

LP: And I was thinking maybe back to the 'safety' of the canon, really, because I remember being very concerned when I was first teaching. I felt at the time I couldn't possibly teach a lesbian film because I was a lesbian: it would be seen by the student – this is I'm sure all conjecture on my part – but it would have been seen by the students as a kind of a way of 'pushing my agenda'. I was teaching first in the early 2000s, and I think it was a very different space really, politically, I mean, in the UK context, certainly, than it had been when John was reminiscing about the 1980s and the way that the department, that we both moved through, manifested itself at that point, in terms of its really vibrant political scene. I didn't see that when I was starting teaching, in that context, and in the student population at that time, and I was extremely concerned. I certainly did not want to be accused of pushing an agenda, and I wasn't sure that I wanted to tie my colours to the mast in that way, as it were: I wanted to be taken seriously as an academic and a scholar and a tutor, so there were no 'chinks in the armour' that I wanted to give away there. Much later, at (virtual) *SCMS* in March 2021, I went to a great session, 'Beyond Resemblance: Theorizing Representation and Methods in Media Studies'. Jillian Baez, Racquel Gates, and Kristen Warner, all wonderful African American scholars, were talking (among other things) about how they are sometimes challenged in the classroom. Students demand, 'Why are we looking at this', and can really rail against aspects of the curriculum they are finding uncomfortable. So, I think we encounter this question of who can speak, in all kinds of ways in all parts of our lives, when we're speaking about film as teachers, as well as scholars, and it can be fraught, as we've said before, and I think that we often in our lives wear a number of hats, and we may be teaching as well as practising film criticism, and all of these lived experiences, of negotiation of your space and status, and freedom to speak, affect both how you speak as a critic, but also how you might want to.

LFD: Absolutely. I remember when I first started teaching, in 2007, how resistant students were to talking about gender, for instance; we're talking about musicals, or Hitchcock, so how could we possibly talk about gender or identity? It's really

encouraging to think how much that has shifted – I've just spent a whole week where all of the conversations that I've had with students are about interrogating institutions, authority, gatekeeping and hierarchy in relation to filmmaking and how we write about film. These are the things that I want to talk about and they're keen to talk about it. I can't imagine having the same kind of conversation with students 13 years ago.

LP: So what's exciting about that, I think, is that there's an implication that the audience for criticism is ready to have that conversation, not being just enabled and able to, but actually being ready to have it.

Looking to the future

DP: I was interested in another question which is in some ways related: what are the arguments we'd want to leave behind? And perhaps there are some answers to that kind of implicit in some of the things that we've been more recently saying, but I just wondered what people's views were about that. I'm very uncertain, certainly in relation to the discussions we've had about the nature of criticism that we want to encourage, the significance of detailed criticism and style-based criticism, I wouldn't want to leave any of that, I want to carry that forward and encourage it to be developed in every new context, including the wider political (big or small p) context that we've been touching on, as a basis for working on film. But do other people have a sense that there are really arguments that we should consign to history?

GS: Rather than leaving anything behind or 'consigning it to history' (which has echoes of the problematic 'cancel culture' debate), for me it's a question of identifying what has been centred in the past – and what can be centred now to pursue avenues that have been overlooked or marginalised. For example, historically there has been an enormous investment in auteurist cinephilia – the director's vision and genius, their individualistic and heroic struggle against forces that seek to curb or dilute their vision, and the fight for sole creative control. But in this present moment of rich and imaginative TV, this traditional auteurist model is being productively questioned, and we are seeing a focus on dispersed authorship. The show *Reservation Dogs* (FX, 2021-) – which has an all-Native writers' room – is a good illustration of this (and one of the very best things I saw on a screen, big or small, last year). The show was created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi, but the episodes have been written and directed by a variety of people. And yet, the show has a remarkable coherence, a set of values and ethos that is rooted in community. It is brilliantly entertaining, funny, and moving, and it is not made for (and addressed to) a primarily white audience. It's available for everyone to see and enjoy but it's primarily made for other Native people, which gives it a powerful authenticity. Not only is it a show that centres communities that have been disenfranchised in moving-image history and criticism, it is also helping to decentre the genius auteur model and in its place centre new models of reading, analysing and appreciating moving-image work.

LFD: I really like that idea of decentering certain things, rather than getting rid of them. Maybe it's a question of thinking about critical vocabulary too, that there are certain kinds of words, like 'genius', that aren't helpful. Also that through a critique of auteurism, for example, you don't want to just displace that onto something else that's equally unhelpful. So it's about dismantling certain structures as criterions of value. What are the words or ways of thinking that we might be want to let go? That's not to say we should cancel them, but what words and structures are not valuable?

DP: I think that in some ways, the role of the auteur and auteur approaches in relation to the history of criticism has been a bit overplayed and undifferentiated. At the same time, what we have to recognise is that the approach to the director that developed in *Cahiers* and then was picked up by *Movie* and so on, was hugely productive and not just productive in terms of identifying individual directors, but actually in opening up a whole popular cinema, Hollywood, to serious discussion, pretty much for the first time, certainly in the English-speaking world. But as those discourses have developed, they've developed to take much more account of collaboration, so there's more work – on the designers, the writers, the cinematographers, often these people who worked together time and time again. And we need more of the work that digs away in the archive. It's not to devalue the coordinating and creative role of the director, or to claim that authorship should be given to somebody else, it's to acknowledge that, actually, the processes – as we were talking about earlier on – have always been hugely collaborative. And no single person could ever have been responsible for those movies. So decentering the auteur, I'm all for that. I think we should regard the more extreme versions of auteur theory as an historical moment, and the field has moved on. And where we move to is not necessarily to get rid of the notion of the director as a central figure within this collaborative world.

LP: In lots of ways, I'm sympathetic to that perspective. I think what's interesting, though, is you talked about the way in which that focus on the director opened up an area that was previously consigned to the margins of film criticism. What are the mechanisms by which we can similarly open up those sites that have been historically marginalised? The question of what is valued seems to be shifting now, and I'm encouraged by that, but it needs emphasising. I was thinking, for example, of the kinds of marginalised groups that cannot get funding for movies in the conventional sense, that find themselves making web series on the internet instead, try and build up cash for something in the future. The kinds of people who might necessarily have to work in an extremely collaborative way where actually the director isn't really a thing, that actually what you've got is interplay between a number of creatives who are working on an absolute shoestring. One can argue the importance of valuing shoestring budget filmmaking, but I don't see that always playing out in the kind of objects that we bring before us in more formal settings like journals. So for me, it's about taking the opportunity to recentre people who haven't had that central place in terms of who is the object of criticism, and it's also about being quite reflective about what we have and have not historically valued in terms of production budgets and all the rest of it, and trying to deal with the proliferation of moving image works that we find so as to try and be as expansive as possible, which brings its own problems of course in term of examining form, but I'm okay with that. I'm kind of okay with the discomfort.

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Endnotes

[1] See *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* issue 8 (2019)
[2] See https://www.anothergaze.com and http://another-screen.com
[3] *Palgrave Close Readings in Film and Television:* https://link.springer.com/series/14712
[4] http://www.lolajournal.com
[5] This has now been published in *NECSUS'* (Gibbs & Pye 2022)
[6] The Sewing Circle is a close reading group established in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading.