



ABOVE Nicholas Ray, Alan Bell, Victor Perkins
Sylt, Germany, 1968

V.F. PERKINS 1936–2016

A tribute

As most readers are likely to be aware, V.F. Perkins, founder editor of *Movie* and of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, pioneer of film education and of serious film criticism in the UK, died last July.

Tributes to Victor have been extensive. A special [website](#) hosted by the Department of Film & Television at the University of Warwick brings together a bibliography with many personal recollections by former students and colleagues. *Sight and Sound* published a fine [obituary](#) by Alex Jacoby, and [Film Studies for Free](#) commissioned and published a series of videographic tributes, and collated those elements of Victor's work which are available online. These materials include an interview in which Victor reflects on his critical practice and imperatives, filmed at the Academy of Fine Arts Saar, at Saarbrücken; this in turn has been reworked by Ian Garwood to capture a series of '[choice moments](#)'. In this issue, we offer our own tribute: reprinting two of Victor's most important articles for *Movie* and publishing an obituary by Charles Barr, a long-standing member of *Movie's* editorial board.

In the early 1960s, Victor was central to the battle around the significance of film style which was to reshape English language approaches to writing and thinking about the

cinema. In *Oxford Opinion*, in the new film section edited by Ian Cameron, Victor attacked a BFI booklet, *Fifty Famous Films, 1914-45*, which he felt embodied 'the standards and prejudices of this country's cinematic establishment' (1960: 36). When he, Cameron and Mark Shivas went on – with the addition of Paul Mayersberg – to launch *Movie* two years later, the first issue included an equally stinging attack on the new British cinema, an article which also has contemporary criticism and reviewing in its sights, and which ends with the phrase 'until it is accepted that style is worthy of passionate feeling and detailed analysis there will be no change' (1962: 7). It was not just a case of attacking the shortcomings of existing critical practice, however. Victor's work was at the heart of *Movie's* project: demonstrating the importance of film style through a detailed, substantive criticism.

Victor's own [tribute to Ian Cameron](#), published in the first issue of *Movie: a journal of film criticism*, gives a fine evocation of this moment of starting out (2010). Readers looking for further history of the emergence of *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie*, might also seek out *The life of mise-en-scène: visual style and British film criticism, 1946-78* (Gibbs 2013) which draws on interviews with Victor, Ian, Charles Barr and Alan Lovell as well as analysis of often inaccessible articles.

The two pieces selected here reflect two of Victor's most important interests as a critic, filmmakers whose work he returned to over decades: Nicholas Ray and Max Ophuls. In the case of the former, we have selected 'The Cinema of Nicholas Ray', from the 9th issue of *Movie*. This article is a development of an earlier piece in the film pages of *Oxford Opinion*, and both articles indicate the importance of film style in general, and of Ray's work in particular, to making an argument about the value of popular cinema. In this passage Victor employs the 'textures' and 'dynamics' of Ray's films as evidence to attack the 'occasionally valid, often silly, and always dangerous' distinction between 'commercial' and 'personal' cinema:

It is quite legitimate, for example, to point out that Nicholas Ray has frequently been obliged to work from a scenario with which he was not satisfied: *Run for Cover*, *Hot Blood*, *Party Girl*; that many of his films have been mutilated after completion: *The James Brothers*, *Bitter Victory*, *Wind Across*

the Everglades, *The Savage Innocents*, *King of Kings*; and that the stories of *The Lusty Men*, *Johnny Guitar* and *Bigger than Life* might look uninviting on paper. But film is not paper, and never can be except in the wishful imagination of a critic who regards his eyes only as the things that he reads with. The distinction between personal and commercial cinema has become a weapon for use against films which do not impress by the obvious seriousness of their stories and dialogue. The director's contribution is as irrelevant to the critical success of *They Live by Night* and *Rebel Without a Cause* as it is to the critical neglect of *Johnny Guitar*, *Bigger than Life*, or *Wind across the Everglades*. (1963: 5)

Victor returned to write about Ray's work at regular intervals, including one of his most recently published [works](#). A screening of *The Savage Innocents* (1960), then extremely difficult to see, moved him to tears at the Widescreen conference in Bradford, in 2003. He also became a personal friend of Ray's, working with him on an unproduced script in the 1970s.

From Victor's work on Ophuls, we have selected 'Letter from an Unknown Woman', originally published in *Movie* 29/30, an article which leads us to understand things about the film by exploring one of its most atypical sequences. The article analyses the passage of the film that depicts Lisa's exile in Linz, and appreciates both the sequence's particular qualities and its relationships to the film as a whole, through both contrast and continuity. Moreover, the article's extraordinary engagement with the specific details of the sequence represents one of the most remarkable and sustained achievements of the kind of detailed criticism with which *Movie* is particularly associated.

We finish this editorial with a personal reflection which provides an insight into working with Victor in the latter days of *Movie*, and the creation of this, its successor. Edward Gallafent writes:

I was the last person to be invited to join the Editorial Board of *Movie*, and one of the initiators of the setting up of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* online. Some while before I had submitted a draft of an article on *Home from the Hill* (Vincente Minnelli, 1960) to the journal, and this led to my first encounter with Victor Perkins as a *Movie* editor. (At that

time we were both teaching at the University of Warwick, in different departments, Victor in Film and myself in the English department.) This was before the film was available in any electronic form; Victor contacted me and proposed that the department would hire a print and that we would watch it together and discuss my ideas. I recall clearly that after the screening Victor began the discussion on a generous note, remarking that I had certainly been right about one aspect that he had not previously noticed; this was followed by a careful and thorough discussion of where my readings could be refined, or revised, or extended. Very typically, but slightly confusing me at the time, Victor did not commit himself – or *Movie* – to publishing the piece. I was to come to understand that with this piece of writing, as with so much of his own, his scrupulous view of quality was everything. His position was – it is good, but is it good enough, as good as it could be?

The article, much revised after my discussions with Victor, was finally published, and later I was invited to join the board. My recollections of those meetings were that while there were issues of the practicalities and timing of publishing, or grand schemes for new initiatives, Victor's passionate commitment was to push for the published pieces to be of the highest possible quality. This was not a matter of his agreement with or dissent from specific intellectual positions. It was more a matter of asking if the pieces met, in the eyes of their writers, the high standard that he assumed they must set themselves, just as he did with his own writing.

In 2008, when a few of us were beginning to raise the possibility of reframing *Movie* as an online journal, Victor was unfailingly enthusiastic. His arguments for high standards were as important and as passionate as ever, and in the debate as to whether to charge for online access, he was a firm supporter of making it freely available. Once the journal was launched he continued, despite some ill health, to attend the editorial board meetings and contributed to them with the zest and wit that expressed the pleasure he found in both formal and less formal discussions of film. For all of us, he was a generous, friendly mentor and that invaluable thing, an honest critic. Just as his presence inspired

us then, his memory will continue to inform our work and our conversations.

Works cited

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