

# A Note on Current Film Criticism

Shirley Hamburg

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The chief spokesman for the “independent or underground film-makers” in this country is Jonas Mekas. He resides in New York where he edits an anti-intellectual (anti-art?) rather ethereal, often pretentious magazine, *FILM CULTURE*.

“As long as the ‘lucidly minded’ critics will stay out with their ‘form,’ ‘content,’ ‘art,’ ‘structure,’ ‘clarity,’ ‘importance,’—everything will be all right, just keep them out.

“For the new soul is still a bud, still going through its most dangerous, most sensitive stage.” This is his attitude toward editing his mag.

Doesn’t exactly make one feel welcome, does it?

Are there so many ‘lucidly minded’ film critics in this country that they must be fought off?

And aren’t these “buds” that have to be protected from critical judgments the same film-makers who are so convinced of their importance that they can scarcely conceive of a five-minute film which doesn’t end with what they, no doubt, regard as the ultimate social comment: the mushroom cloud rising.

Those “buds” often behave more like tough nuts.

Another aspect of the current film criticism miasma is the auteur theory; its chief expositor of America is Andrew Sarris, editor of the English version of “*Cahiers du Cinema*”.

The battle raging around this theory has rent film criticism into opposing camps, pitting East Coast against West.

These camps are bringing about agonizing re-appraisals on the editorial pages of existing film magazines.

They are infiltrating critical “discourse about the movies with a host of new words, attitudes and mannerisms as alluring to their users as they are infuriating. That is, when they are not incomprehensible, to most people on the outside.

It is not my intension to talk about the theory here. For that, I refer you to the Spring and Summer, 1963 issues of *FILM CULTURE*, where Sarris nobly plays juggernaut.

When the auteur theory finally comes to being exemplified in the Spring, 1963 number of *FILM CULTURE* (here the entire corpus of American film is ranked (according to the tenets of the theory) we see that Sarris is in love with commercial trash.

So am I! I wouldn’t forfeit watching say, a Spencer Tracy movie for anything, but gad, why the theory? It’s like the guy who can’t say “It’s a lovely day” without first establishing that it is day. And that the term “day” is meaningless without the dialectical concept of “night,” that both these terms have no meaning unless there is a word in which day and night alternate etc.

I guess there is in any art a tendency to turn one’s own preferences into a monomaniac theory.

In film criticism, the more confused the single-minded and dedicated the theorist is, the more likely he is to be regarded as serious and important and deep.

This is in contrast to the relaxed men of good sense whose pluralistic approaches are disregarded as not fundamental enough. Sarris with his joys in Raoul Walsh or Howard Hawks seems a long way from Mekas singing of

Stan Brakhage or Robert Breer as knights who will rescue us from our decay. But to love trash and to feel that you are stifled by it are perhaps very 'close positions.

Does the man who paints the can of Campbell's soup love it or hate it? I think the answer is both: that he is obsessed by it as a fact of our lives and a symbol of America.

While Sarris feels very much at home in *FILM CULTURE*, he doesn't employ the accusatory, paranoid style of Mekas: "You criticize our work from a purist, formalist and classicist point of view. But we say to you: What's the use of cinema if man's soul goes rotten?"

The "you" is, I suppose, the same you who figures in so much (bad) contemporary, prophetic, righteous poetry and prose. The "you" who is responsible for the Bomb and who, by some fantastically self-indulgent thought processes, is turned into the enemy—the critic.

Mekas is not about to be caught in "the tightening web of lies." He refuses "to continue the Big Lie of Culture."

In this scheme, then, does an attempt at clear thinking immediately place the critic in the enemy camp, turn him into the bomb guilty "you"? I think so. If we believe in the necessity (not to mention the beauty) of clear thinking, we are indeed Mekas' enemy.

But can't we ask him: is man's soul going to be in better shape because your work is protected from criticism? How much nonsense dare these men permit themselves?

"Forget ideology," Brakhage tells us, "for film unborn as it is has no language and speaks like an aborigine."

Does being a primitive mean being a fetus?

I don't understand the unborn aborigine talk, but I'm prepared to believe that grunt by grunt, or squeal by squeal, it will be as meaningful as most of *Film Culture*.

I believe that for Mekas culture is indeed a "Big Lie" (The Toothless Mouth of Western Civilization/ kisses/with the bad smell of ideologies/and crematoriums".)

And Sarris, looking for another culture under those seats coated with chewing gum, coming up now and then to announce a "discovery" like Joanne Dru, has he found his spiritual home down there?

I couldn't be in greater accord with Mekas in his hate of critics who approach poetry like pigs (" as The Heavy Boots of Soldiers and Intellect/march/across the flowerfields of the subconscious."

Art is the greatest game, the supreme entertainment, because you discover the game as you play it.

There is only one rule as we learned from Cocteau, "Astonish us!"

In all art we look and listen for what we have not experienced quite that way before. We want to see, to feel, to understand, to respond a new way.

Pedants must not be allowed to spoil the game!

But neither must men who are dedicated to propositions which destroy art by irresponsibility or by pulling that switch of allying themselves with the Low, and deeming it High art, just to evade the bastardization that's in the Middle ("mid-cut" or "kitsch"—Dwight McDonald's terms).

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