

Commitment in cinema criticism

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Instead of starting with any theoretical discussion about the nature of criticism, it may be useful to clear the ground by considering some aspects of its practice at the moment. What basic assumptions, what attitudes do we find common in the writing of present day critics? A first important point is that the cinema has at least achieved respectability.

Thirty years ago it was only a minority who took films seriously: but in their seriousness was passion. They had the inspiration of knowing they were pioneers. The founders and members of the Film Society, the writers and readers of *Close-Up*—these revered the cinema and were burningly aware of its possibilities. It was stimulating rather than discouraging to them that the general attitude of the cultured was contemptuous and undiscerning: names like Griffith, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Gance, Flaherty and Pabst were good enough to fight for. Today you might imagine that the fight had been won. We already have our National Film Theatre, while the National Theatre remains merely a broken promise; the health of the British film industry is discussed frequently and with concern, in the House of Commons; and the posh papers (to borrow John Osborne's useful phrase.) devote space to it, send representatives to its festivals, and honour its golden jubilee with ambitious exhibitions. Yet this wider acceptance seems only to have been won at the price of diluting that original enthusiasm: a great deal of the old seriousness has been lost. It could even be maintained that the significance of the cinema—or rather the acknowleg-

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It is beginning to dawn upon us all that what is needed most today is a criticism of criticism . . . For it is the critic, rather than the work of art, who should be put for a while upon the dissecting table—ERNESTNEWMAN.

It has for some time seemed to me that a criticism which has at heart the interest of liberalism might find its most useful work not in confirming liberalism in its sense of general rightness, but rather in putting under some degree of pressure the liberal ideas and assumptions of the present time—LIONEL TRILLING IN "THE LIBERAL IMAGINATION".

Stand up, stand up for Jesus!—GEORGE DUFFIELD.

merit of its significance—has actually been reduced. It is of course inevitable that the majority of films made for popular entertainment in a capitalist society, where the general educational level is low and popular culture increasingly corrupt, should be of poor artistic quality; nor is it surprising if people whose only experience of the cinema is through such films form a low opinion of it. What is surprising, however, and perhaps significant as well, is a tendency among critics—that is to say among the articulate representatives of the educated minority—to subscribe to this opinion themselves, and even to encourage it.

A particularly striking example of this tendency is the habit of certain writers—and they seem to be growing more rather than less—of turning on the cinema and declaring that it is "not an art". Now I do not intend to pursue this as a serious argument; I simply want to draw attention to the phenomenon of its repeated expression. The classic instance, I suppose, appeared in Miss C. A. Lejeune's column in the *Observer* just nine years ago; and it is worth quoting as the openly professed philosophy of a critic who occupies a leading position in her profession. The article was headed "Taking the Plunge".

A few weeks ago I hinted that I was on the brink of giving up the pretence that films were an art, and settling for the conviction that "most of them are just vulgar and illiterate rubbish, and the rest are good entertainment provided for the relaxation of people whose brains are not at the moment up to anything tougher". At the time of writing I was not prepared to take the full plunge. Today I am. Today I am ready to declare categorically that

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films are not an art; and I feel very much the better for it . . .

. . . It is not within the power of electrical engineering or mechanical contraption to create. They can only reproduce. And what they reproduce is not art . . .

I case I may be judged unfair in quoting an article printed in 1947, should add that Miss Lejeune has given us evidence that her views remain the same. In fact when this year her newspaper backed an exhibition of "Sixty Years of Cinema", her contribution to the catalogue included the statement: "Too much high-flown nonsense is talked about art and culture in relation to films". (She went on to advise her readers: "Cherish the little things: a dance, a tune, a face, a movement of water, a ripple in the corn . . .").

Miss Lejeune is not alone in taking this attitude. To a remarkable extent, in fact, denigration of the cinema, denial of its importance and its significance, has become common among those who write about it professionally. Consider the tone of a recent column of criticism in the *Sunday Times* by Mr. Kenneth Pearson.

Some people consider the film as an art. Others less daring, like myself, would classify it as a craft, capable, on rare occasions, of producing a work of some significance . . .

It is not as if Mr. Pearson were here initiating a real discussion: he is simply leading in to a review of *Trapeze*. What is significant is that such sentiments should be felt to provide an acceptable journalistic opening to a column of cultured film criticism. Mr. Pearson can only write like this because he senses that it is safely fashionable to do so.

Exactly the same fashion is reflected in a recent notice (of *The Rains of Ranchipur*), from the *Times*.

This is the cinema as the cinema should rightly be, not concerned with the psychology of drug addicts and prostitutes, but, in its choice of subject and treatment, warm, vague, extravagant and sentimental.

To reserve your enthusiasm for the more meretricious productions of the cinema is only another way of denying its claim to the same attention as literature, music, painting or any other of the arts. (It is impossible, for instance, to imagine a reputable dramatic critic writing in this way). But what is the reason for such denial? Is it to be ascribed to simple, good-old-English Philistinism? It is difficult to know what other term to apply to the following observation by the critic of the *Observer*:

I have never understood the taste for violence and squalor in the cinema. We know that dreadful things go on all around us; we know that life is grim and we deplore it; but I can see no merit in bringing the misery into our recreation.

The Timorous Philistines

The simple term "Philistinism" is not however quite enough. For this is a word that can cover a number of attitudes. It can be impatient and actionful, like Goering reaching for his revolver—and there are times, when culture has become snobbish and claustrophobic, when this may be useful. (One can remember the occasion—and how long ago it seems—when even Sir Herbert Read was driven to cry "To Hell with Culture!"). But there is another kind of philistinism, timorous rather

than pugnacious, which shrinks from art because art presents a challenge. This can be an even more insidious enemy, because it often disguises itself with the apparatus of culture, professing the very values which it is in the act of destroying. "Do not misunderstand me, please", writes Miss Lejeune, having just declared that a film is nothing but 'bits of celluloid and wire', "I am not intending to belittle the screen". And I do not suppose that this is the conscious intention of the other critics I have quoted, either. But it is what they are doing.

It is a matter of fact, not of opinion, that the cinema is an art. This does not call for theoretical discussion—unless, of course, you enjoy that kind of intellectual exercise. If it is simply the truth we are after, the question has already been answered, empirically. If *L'Atalante*, *Strike*, *Rashomon* and *Louisiana Story* are not works of art, then there is no way of describing them. And if Griffith, Renoir, Jennings and de Sica are not artists, we will have to invent a new word for them.

The importance of the cinema as a cultural and propagandist force is a matter of fact also. Everyone who has seen more than half a dozen films with his eyes open knows that if the cinema does not create the significant social movements of our time, it intimately reflects them. And that it provides a reflection just as intimate—and just as significant—of social stagnation. A further point worth emphasising is that the cinema makes its appeal above all to the youthful: that is to say, above all to those whose minds are unformed, and open to impression.

These facts alone are enough to condemn the thoughtless denigration of the cinema, of which I have given a number of fashionable examples. The consistent impression created by such writing is that films provide at worst a vulgar means of escapism or wish-fulfilment (Bread-and-Circuses), and at best an amusing, rather exotic diversion ("The Arabian Nights" Entertainments of our time"). To apply to them serious standards of criticism, aesthetic or social, is to indulge in "highflown nonsense" and to prove oneself a glum, humourless and boring person.

Leaving aside for a moment the graver implications of such an attitude, we may remark that at the least it is damaging, tolerating the shoddy and the third-rate, and muffling work of importance by a flippant or purely sentimental response. It is impossible to praise things that are bad without injuring things that are good. By celebrating the merits of the trivial and the meretricious, or by being lengthily funny at its expense, we lower the prestige of the cinema, and, indirectly, make it more difficult for anybody to make a good film.

Objectivity and Involvement

Granted, however, that this is not the way to write about the cinema, the basic critical problems still remain. And amongst them—most urgently perhaps—the one which has precipitated this essay. To what extent must we aspire to objectivity, like a sensitive but impersonal reagent; and to what extent must we involve our own convictions, moral as well as aesthetic, social as well as moral? "Sixty Years of Cinema" was a perfect example of the attitude which rejects any such notion of involvement, in favour of an academic objectivity, lightened with decorative touches and a few, purely frivolous, personal indulgences. In this it reflected

current fashion with complete fidelity (at least I can call to mind no criticism levelled at the exhibition for lack of conception or point of view). So widely accepted, in fact, is this approach, so literally does it go without saying, that it is difficult to find any explicit statement of the "uncommitted" position. Some twenty years ago, however, there was a declaration by Alastair Cooke which so exactly performs this function that it still relevant today. It is a "Critic's Testament", delivered by Mr. Cooke when he started reviewing films for the B.B.C., in 1935.

As a critic I am without politics and without class. For a film hero I am prepared to take John Barrymore, George Robey, a Battleship, Mickey Mouse, or an Italian Straw Hat. I hope that everyone who wants to make a lot of money in films will make it, that every girl who aches to become a star overnight will become one . . . My malice extends only to those who have a dull talent . . .

It is fascinating to find Mr. Cooke, in 1935, expressing both the essential attitude and the characteristic tone of a number of critics today. There is the claim to a liberal standpoint, "without politics and without class", that tolerantly estimates every work on its own merits. Immediately, however, the liberalism is negated by a sort of facetious self-parody: "I hope that everyone who wants to make a lot of money in films will make it . . ." Taken seriously, this would imply abandonment of any standards at all. But of course its purpose is exactly to ensure that the writer is *not* taken seriously; to prove that he does not take himself too seriously either. Scorn of "highbrow nonsense about art and culture" is only round the corner from here, and so is the pursuit of "fun". It is the "dull" talent that the critic really disapproves of: he wants to be entertained.

The examples of criticism I have quoted in the foregoing pages all derive from assumptions similar to these: the holding of liberal, or humane values; the proviso that these must not be taken too far; the adoption of a tone which enables the writer to evade through humour. The fundamental issues are baulked.

Art and Showmanship

I hope I will be pardoned if I say that I find this distinction between form and content somewhat naïf. It is the essence of poetry (in any medium) that the thing said cannot be critically distinguished from the way of saying it. Perhaps we see here the pernicious influence of a school of "Film Appreciation" which analyses every film according to certain textbook conceptions of technique, and which is as insensitive to meaning as it is to subtleties of individual style. In fact,

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since these aesthetic principles are never precisely formulated, and since close analysis of statement or implication is considered irrelevant, criticism has no alternative but to fall back on an entirely subjective kind of "impressionism". Hence the extreme over-use of terms like "moving", "deeply moving", "strangely unmoving", etc. Particularly striking in this connection is a recent pronouncement of critical method by Kenneth Tynan, the best of our contemporary theatre critics. "What counts", says Mr. Tynan, "is not their [i.e., theatre critics'] opinion, but the art with which it is expressed . . . The subtlest and best-informed of men will still be a bad critic if his style is bad. It is irrelevant whether his opinion is 'right' or 'wrong' . . ." In other words, in criticism as in art, it is showmanship that counts.

Effect, then, is more important than meaning. From this position it is only a step to a conception of art that actually rejects significance. Some time ago an article of mine was published in SIGHT AND SOUND which closely examined the social implications of *On the Waterfront*. I was amazed, not by the number of people who disagreed with me, but by the number of people who thought that this sort of thing was somehow *beyond the function* of criticism. Most significant was a comment on the article which appeared in *The Times*:

Films are the folk-lore, the character and aspirations of the nations made visible, yet it would be unwise to search too keenly in every scene of boy-meets-girl for political or any other symbolism . . . People like Mr. Anderson perform a valuable service when they draw attention to hidden significances and covert propaganda, but the normal person will go on regarding the screen with the unseeing gaze Watson fixed on the bowler—and perhaps be none the worse for it.

Analytical criticism, it is here implied, is unwise, abnormal—even when it exposes covert propaganda. The logically following epithet, I fear, is "subversive".

No Brave Causes

It is over ten years now since we (the junior officers) nailed a red flag to the roof of the mess at the foot of Annan Parbat, to celebrate the glorious news from home. (I mean of course the result of the 1945 election). The colonel did not approve, but even he seemed to feel that a new era might be upon us; and no disciplinary action was taken.

It is also over ten years since Humphrey Jennings, in a film made for the British government, linked the lives of a farmer and an engine driver, an R.A.F. pilot, a coal miner, and a baby called Timothy. It is as beautiful a film today as it was then, but it has gained sadness; for the questions it asked about the future do not seem to be getting the hoped-for answers. From one point of view this is paradoxical. We have had our social revolution: we have a fine system of social security; and our technological achievements are something to be proud of. How then to explain the prevalence of cynicism, the baffled idealism and the emotional fatigue? Why are so many young voices resentful and defeatist rather than pugnacious and affirming?

I suppose people of our generation aren't able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the 'thirties and 'forties,

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when we were still kids. There aren't any good, brave causes left. If the big bang does come, and we all get killed off, it won't be in aid of the old-fashioned, grand design. It'll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus . . .

Most critics have attempted to write off John Osborne's hero (this a quotation from *Look Back in Anger*) as a negligible, bad-mannered young bounder, "racked with uncertainty and rotten with self-pity". Predictably, they have shirked the task of analysing his boulderishness: the writer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, from whom I have taken this comment, can find no virtue either in Jimmy Porter or the play, even though he admits that "there is something about this nagging young man which audiences recognise as giving him some vital connection with the social system". As to what this "something" is, we are not enlightened; characteristically this is the end, not the beginning, of the examination of the play.

In so far as Jimmy Porter's grievances are social at all (and it should be realised that the play is primarily the study of a temperament), they are not material grievances. The young people who respond so unmistakably to *Look Back in Anger* are responding to its outspoken attacks on certain venerable sacred cows, and also to its bitter impatience with the moral vacuum in which, they feel, public life, and cultural life, is today being conducted. The class resentment is only part of it. If there "aren't any good, brave causes left" (or if that is the feeling in the air), the fault is not so much that of the Right; the Tory element in politics and art, as of the Left, the progressives, the liberals in the broadest sense of that long-suffering word. The manner in which the British political Left has muffled its chance to capture the imagination and allegiance of the nation is too obvious to need dwelling on: from the peaceful revolution of '45 to "You Can Trust Mr. Attlee", and Mr. Gaitskell in pin-stripe trousers helping with the family washing-up, the descent has been sure, steady and well-publicised. Less easily—or at least less often—remarked has been the steady draining away of vitality from what we may call the cultural left, its increasing modishness, and its more and more marked aversion from emotional simplicity or moral commitment.

The Left Establishment

"We are all existentialists nowadays, at least in the same vague, popular sense that it was ever true to say we were all socialists . . ." This is the prevailing tone—over-allusive, fatigued, intellectually snobbish—of the *New Statesman* intellectual of today; while the indefatigable Mr. Kingsley Martin, on the front page, continues to chastise the Labour Party for its lack of realism, and to warn it that it may "drift further and further away from the realities of working-class life".* We cannot but smile at such wild discrepancies, but really this sort of thing is sad rather than funny; and, particularly because, of the two remarks, it is the second that is outdated. (The contemporary liberal intellectual is far less diverted by the realities of working-class life than by the variation between "U" and "Non-U" usage).

A particularly pregnant example of the kind of

debilitation I am describing is offered by the recent (August 18, 1956) review in the *New Statesman* of the "Family of Man" exhibition. "What strikes one most" writes Mr. John Raymond "about this amazing cross-section of men and women is its unity—a unity of fear". Affirmation and the pursuit of happiness (which are the theme of the exhibition) being out of fashion, Mr. Raymond stands to make a distinctly smarter impression if he jettisons Mr. Steichen's statement, and substitutes something more up-to-the-minute of his own. The crucial passage in this argument so perfectly crystallises its pseudo-liberal attitude that readers must bear with me while I quote it in full.

What is Mr. Steichen's message? 'All men are created equal'; 'No man is an island/entire of himself; Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision'; 'We must love one another or die'? Judging by the Bomb that ends the whole affair, Auden's discarded line appears to be the text that the sponsors are bent on hammering home. If only Timbuctoo can learn to love Old Trafford, the lion will lie down with the lamb, our bombs can be beaten into atomic ploughshares and Walt Whitman's "new city of friends" can be turned into reality. Such a jejune MOTIF does poor justice to the riches of this collection, even when eked out by the trite international maxims that stud the walls—"The world of man dances in laughter and tears" (Kabir); "Clasp the hands and know the thoughts of men in other lands?" (Masefield); "Eat bread and salt and speak the truth" (Russia) . . .

Such accomplished perversity demands analysis if its subtleties are to be fully appreciated. Confronted by the tremendous issues raised by this exhibition, the enlightened Mr. Raymond is at no loss for a protective shield of sophisticated cross-references. His piece is headed "All The Conspirators"—a quotation from *Julius Caesar* which is wholly inapposite, but has the merit of connoting Shakespeare and (more important) the first novel of Christopher Isherwood. The reference to Auden settles us even more firmly within the charmed circle: this gospel is limited not just to the (comparatively large) number of people who can pick out Auden's line from the group of quotations listed at the beginning of the paragraph, but to the selecter elite who are aware that Auden has omitted the line from the latest edition of his short poems. His position of cultural superiority thus established—Walt Whitman is another O.K. reference, and may safely be patronised—Mr. Raymond can proceed confidently to dismiss as a "jejune motif" such poetic conceptions as the lion lying down with the lamb; the sword beaten into the ploughshare; and Whitman's "New city of friends". This is the point where the hard work of writing a criticism of the exhibition is smoothly side-stepped; instead of pointing out where Mr. Steichen fails to measure up *poetically* to the texts he has chosen, Raymond dismisses the text themselves, and with them an aspiration which has long found a place in the hearts of men, and still does today. The sickness with which this dismissal is effected is alarming, because it shows Raymond's sense that he is writing with, not against the current. It needs only the word bomb with a capital

*Both these quotations are taken from the same issue of the "New Statesman", December, 1955.

'B' and the facetious jingle of Timbuctoo and Old Trafford to discredit the positive ideal of human brotherhood which is the essential inspiration of the whole exhibition.

I have given care to an examination of this passage, not because in itself Mr. Raymond's reaction to "The Family of Man" is very important, but because of his ability skilfully to express the social and cultural attitudes of his class and time. The really shocking thing about such a piece is that nobody is shocked by it. (The only comment it aroused among readers of the *New Statesman* was a letter pointing out that a quotation from Schiller had been wrongly attributed to Goethe). The commitments, in fact, of the liberal intellectuals are now so taken for granted that they have ceased to have any force whatever; and to speak out for them is to run the risk of appearing simple. Mr. Raymond can end his review with a pessimistic quotation from Lord Russell—"Brief and powerless is Man's life . . ."—without fear of arousing the slightest protest from the readers of a radical left-wing periodical. His style, though intellectually more pretentious, echoes the uncommitted Mr. Cooke twenty years before him: sceptical, amused, implicitly mistrustful of affirmation, even while continuing to pay indulgent lip-service to it.

"Mere Critics?"

Readers of this review will probably by now be feeling that I have strayed far from my subject: indeed, if they take it for granted that "non-partisan aesthetic judgment" is the sole province of a critic, they are bound to do so. But my whole point that criticism (film criticism included) cannot exist in a vacuum; and that writers who insist that their functions are so restricted are merely indulging in a voluntary self-emasculation. "I am not a moralist . . ." insisted Mr. Cooke, "I am merely a critic". Why should anyone be content to be a *mere* critic? "I have little or no idea where I am going", wrote Mr. Tynan on becoming dramatic critic of the *Observer*, ". . . I see myself predominantly as a lock. If the key, which is the work of arts, fits snugly into my mechanism of bias and preference, I click and rejoice; if not, I am helpless . . ." But one searches in vain for some basis for this critical philosophy of passivity and self-restriction. A critic has his special gift, but is he any less a man than the rest

of us? The moral faculty, and the intellectual faculty are essential instruments to him. They are certainly no less important than the ability to write vivid and evocative reportage.

I have discussed quite extensively in this essay what seems to me the prevalent tone of contemporary liberal writing. I am not of course using the word "liberal" in any political sense, but rather as applied to the general humanism that makes liberals of practically all of us today (nominally at least). Everyone believes in social and artistic liberty, even if we differ about the means of achieving them; everyone believes in the importance of the individual, in freedom of speech, assembly and worship, in tolerance and mutual aid. The fact that it is almost impossible to express these beliefs except in terms of platitude does not in itself discredit them. That affirmation should have become the prerogative of politicians and blurb-writers is shameful. But this only means that belief has to be rescued, not that it must be abandoned.

Our ideals—moral, social and poetic—must be defended, with intelligence as well as emotion; and also with intransigence. To look back (and around) in anger may be a necessary beginning: but as Jimmy Porter himself demands, "The voice that cries out doesn't have to be a weakling's, does it?" That is why I have evoked that image of the red flag over an officers' mess near Delhi—not to suggest that I necessarily see our only answer in communism. Nor does the fact that I have quoted Duffield's hymn in the title of this essay imply that I am pinning my hopes to a Christian revival. I do not believe that humanism is exhausted; nor that we are without rebels capable of defending its cause. This is a responsibility to accept. (But responsibility is not conformism).

The cinema is not apart from all this; nor is it something to be denigrated or patronised. It is a vital and significant medium, and all of us who concern ourselves with it automatically take on an equivalent responsibility. And in so far as film criticism is being written here and now, and deals with an art intimately related to the society in which we live, it cannot escape its wider commitments. Essentially, in fact there is no such thing as insignificant art. It is merely a question of the openness with which our commitments are stated. I do not believe that we should keep quiet about them.

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