

BOOK REVIEWS

After the awards season – the critics. Who reads critics anyhow? It seems publishers like them – they sell; it seems the fans devour them – they reinforce opinion. This year, in keeping with the flood of books on the cinema, the critics have deluged the market. All your pet critics are here and a few more. Heading the list as usual is Pauline Kael in her latest, **Deeper Into Movies**, \$14.95.

What is a critic? What is the difference between a critic and a reviewer? A reviewer sees a movie and within hours writes his piece on it. A critic is able to see the movie several times. His work is published after the tumult and the shouting dies. The distributors and producers like to talk about the “critics”. It is a word that carries the prestige movie people crave. The term critic, like color and wide-screen, has become an economic factor in selling a movie.

There are disputes as to how much a critic can make or break a movie. Here the true critic is excluded. The reviewer can reinforce opinion and at times create it, but even these values are argued. In Toronto a favorable review by Clyde Gilmour increases attendance. It is doubtful if Martin Knelman commands this distinction. Often these two reviewers can enforce a stay of execution, but unless there is the “word of mouth” to reinforce it, the film dies.

One reason why the audiences follow the reviewers is to make sure that they see the “right” movies. The public wants the “winner”. Risking their own opinion seems to frighten them. The TV rating world is with us. It increases sales, but also defeats many films that deserve to be seen.

When the reviewer turns critic, a movie can often get a second life. Critics and published criticism possibly help to create repertory cinema and sustain it. Because certain writers on films have something of perception to say their work survives. These published writers defy clear definition-reviewer or critic.

Kael's **Deeper Into Movies**, covers her work for the *New Yorker* from September 1969, to March 1972. Her style is witty, personal and astute. She has no rival as a reviewer. It is said she reviews audiences and society, at the same time as she does the movies, “A college-professor friend of mine in San Francisco, who has always tried to stay in tune with his students, looked at his class recently and realized it was time to take off his beads.” From this first sentence the reader is aware that at the other end of the pen is a mind that com-

mands attention. On Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers*, her points are clear. Allegations are backed up with historical background. “Ken Russell is establishing a reputation based on a profusion of bad ideas, a richer mix of the same ideas that used to make Hollywood biographies of artists such campy drivel.” A rich mixture in itself. Here is the back-up. “Russell's excesses are laced with imagery from experimental ‘symbolic’ films of the thirties, such as Watson's *Lit in Sodom* . . . He (Russell) has a distinctive way of effects borrowed from Expressionist painters (especially Schiele) for erotic horror-bony, wasted bodies, red mouths and red underclothes, and so on . . . he includes bits of imitation *Ivan the Terrible* . . . Russell's damned panache makes everything shameful and unclean.”

The reader often regrets that Kael doesn't like a certain favorite movie. Read her reviews, and her points make you squirm, because you didn't know better. You can still like your favourite film, even though she starts a change in your opinion. She never puts the reader down.

Honesty is the factor that draws the movie lover to her work. She has the guts to make this statement, “I didn't write a column last week because the new movies defeated me – I couldn't think of anything worth saying about them. You come out of a movie like *There's a Girl in My Soup* or *I Love My Wife*, feeling that your pocket has been picked and your mind has been stunted.”

Another reason why film buffs read Kael is her ability to entertain. In short she engages the reader's mind – the true definition of entertainment. It is interesting to note that a number of the film production companies have bought up some of the publishing houses. Men in the traditional entertainment business have seen the decline of the theater and the movie houses. The public in the face of city unrest is demanding more arm-chair entertainment (Watergate must have top rating now!) i.e. home movies, television, games and books, etc. The promoters are producing specific lines simply as entertainment as opposed to academic learning. It will be men from the entertainment business who will promote books in the future, not publishers. Kael's books, four of them, outsell all other critics combined, because her books entertain.

The Primal Screen, Andrew Sarris, \$11.50 arrived a little later. Sarris writes for the *Village Voice*. He too is widely

admired and has his following. Sarris is the fighting critic. There is a sense of battle in his criticism. Before the reader gets into the movies, he has to have the background of battle in his nostrils. Sarris writes about, “. . . the battle records of Sarris-Kael, Sarris-Macdonald, and Sarris-Simon. In these you will find the “gruesome details.” Unfortunately Sarris soon irritates the reader by such statements as “When my own writings are inadequately appreciated by some book reviewer, I suddenly experience a twinge of remorse for all the victims of my judicial (and I hope judicious) sentences. Just a twinge, mind you, not a lasting pain, and with a glass or two of Vermont Cassis I am back on the job again in a state of magisterial calm.” **The Primal Screen**, a pun on **The Primal Scream** by Dr. Janov (by kind permission) contains writings on film and related subjects. Whereas Kael can integrate related subjects into her film criticism (some object to this), Sarris has to bore the reader with such items as *The Dostoyevsky Game*, Jack Kerouac and George Orwell. His essay on Orwell is a hysterical piece that is pathetic. Perhaps these essays are a form of primal screamwriting that Sarris has invented. It may be therapy for Sarris, but it makes for dull, redundant reading.

Reviewing *Zabriskie Point*, Sarris takes a full page to get to the film. He begins with a long story of the situation in which he is writing then, “It is now Sunday afternoon, February 8, 1970, as I sit staring at my docile typewriter.” This hardly catches the reader's interest. He begins on the film after three or four hundred words on his dreary inability to write the review. “*Zabriskie Point*, an outsider's view of America, is as much a delight to the eyes as it is a disappointment to the mind, or at least to that part of the mind that relishes complications and consummations in its dramatic entertainments.” His style is so consciously literary, his sentences so contrived that the point he is trying to make is lost. Kael does not pussy foot about on this film. “*Zabriskie Point* is a disaster, but as one might guess, Antonioni does not make an ordinary sort of disaster. This is a huge jerry-built, crumbling ruin of a movie.” Alas Sarris goes on and on in his convolutions. He ends his review with one of the most vomitous lines in film criticism. “But no one who takes cinema seriously can afford to pass up this latest canvas from the palette of the Michelangelo for our time and our own medium.”

DAVID BEARD

American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane, Edited by Stanley Kauffmann with Bruce Henstell. pp. 443, \$4.75, paper. What this book does is important to those interested in the art and history of film criticism. It dispels the myth that serious film criticism began with James Agee. No one is knocking Agee, but the public has a habit of getting a fixed idea about something, i.e. Ravel only wrote one great piece of music, The Bolero, or that 1943 was the year all film criticism began. The book is an anthology of American film critics. It is a sampler of lesser known, but not lesser critics. Critics such as Edmund Wilson, Otis Ferguson, Robert E. Sherwood, Mark van Doren and Gilbert Seldes are included along with many others. To read informed critics writing at the time about Intolerance, The Great Train Robbery, is worthwhile. A sample from the Philadelphia Inquirer of June 26th, 1904 gives the flavour. "There is a great amount of shooting. The smoke of the pistols is plainly seen, and men drop dead right and left, but no sound is heard. Nevertheless, while witnessing the exhibition women put their fingers in their ears to shut out the noise of the firing." Many a director would envy that sort of praise today. The last essay, Radio Boy Makes Good (Citizen Kane) by Gilbert Seldes might surprise those who think that the modern critic is the only one worth reading. ●

A lot can happen before you get it in the can

Your casting is perfect, your cameraman the best around, all is ready to shoot . . . then your lead breaks his leg or your film stock is faulty or the weather turns bad or the lab messes up and you're in trouble But that's the film game, isn't it? It is, unless you play it smart and protect yourself

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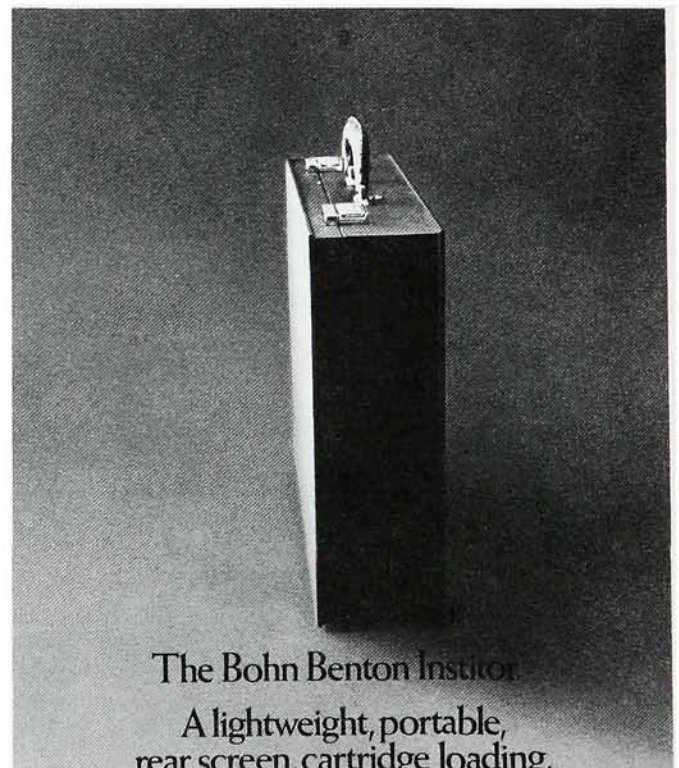
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