

An interview with film critic Andrew Sarris

David Walsh
1 July 1998

David Walsh: Could you briefly discuss your early life and how you came to be interested in film?

Andrew Sarris: A lot of people say that they loved movies from an early age. That wasn't really my situation so much. I liked movies. The family story is that when I was three years old I ran into a movie theater, and was just completely entranced by what was on the screen. When my mother came in to get me, I raised such a ruckus that the manager let her stay if she would keep me quiet.

But we didn't go to that many movies when I was a kid. I can remember the posters for *Show Boat* in 1936 at the Loews theater, an expensive theater. We used to go to the Rialto in Brooklyn, in Flatbush. When I was 11 in 1939 I saw 11 double-bills, 22 movies.

In 1946 I was one of 50 civilian students admitted to Columbia. The first year and a half I did fairly well, not great, but fairly well. For the first time my father started to make some money, probably off the books. He was running a boat rental business, row boats. We were right on the beach, in Howard Beach. That was about all my father salvaged. He'd had a lot of real estate. We were rich until about 1931, then he lost everything.

So I had money at that time. I fell in love with movies. I was hit by a truck in 1948 or 1949 after seeing *That Hamilton Woman* for the thirty-seventh time or something. I was crossing the street. After that I was on crutches for about a year, I started going to the movies all the time. My studies completely suffered.

In 1952 I went into the army. I didn't leave the States, this was right after the Korean War. They used to show three movies a week on the army post for free, and so I kept up with American movies in the early 50s. I had a huge backlog of movie memories that I had no idea what to do with. When I got out of the army in 1954 I wasn't getting anywhere, I had writer's block. I thought about teacher's college, just to make a living. I wasn't really doing anything. I was living off my mother. I had no appreciable income.

A couple of things happened. They were giving a film course at the Center of Mass Communications that dealt mostly with sociological subjects and television, which was just starting up. It was one of the first in the US. Very solid,

instructive course. For the first time I started to think systematically about movies.

I met two people in that course. One was Eugene Archer, he'd just come out of the Air Force. He was from somewhere in southern Texas. He was a very strange guy. I've always known nerd types, who had odd qualities, but were wonderful conversationalists. I love to talk. Very serious, he'd only smile occasionally. Very authoritative, but there was humor in it, irony. He was a real film nut, he made me look dilettantish.

The second thing that happened, Jonas Mekas came into the class. He was starting a magazine called *Film Culture*. The first issue had already come out. There were a lot of big names, sponsors, people like Agee, documentarians, the usual fringe people in New York. He had manuscripts, from Europe and elsewhere. They were in different stages of erudition. But their English, their syntax was not too good. He wanted to turn them into reasonable English. I said, I'll do it, if you let me review movies.

There matters stood. That was 1955. In the next five years various things happened. I kept a half-assed job at Fox as a reader. And I'd do occasional articles for *Film Culture*. I did a career article on Carol Reed. I got a fan letter from Australia.

With very little money I took off in 1961 to the Cannes film festival. I had three letters from the *Saturday Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Village Voice*. I didn't write a word about the festival, I got writer's block. I spent six or seven months in Paris, you know, went to the Cinémathèque. When I came back from Paris I just walked into the *Village Voice*, I hadn't given them anything, I right away resumed doing my column. I was lazy, disorganized and very casual about the whole thing. When Pauline Kael attacked me I was amazed that I was considered so important. I didn't react very quickly. I didn't realize what had happened. I had just been plodding along.

DW: You treated films that were either dismissed as trash or worshipped somewhat uncritically in a serious manner. How did you arrive at the intellectual point of being able to do that?

AS: I think it's a combination of things in my makeup. My

father was very grandiose, he was very Victor Hugo. I always took great subjects. So I have a grandiosity and a kind of seriousness. I also had an awareness of neglected writers, critics. James Agee, Otis Ferguson. I had read these people and they were more socially conscious. So was I for a while. I used to put the Stanley Kramer films on my 10-best list and leave the Hitchcocks off. André Bazin and the French critics, and the New Wave way of looking at American movies, that was one of the big influences, specific influences. So gradually my whole orientation changed. But my manner of speaking.... Everyone asked, who is he? I wrote with a kind of seriousness, as if I were writing the final word. I was learning to write as I was writing.

Also, I was a contrarian. I always felt there was something underneath everything. I was an original conspiracy theorist, you know. My favorite genre was the spy genre. I was always thinking of things under the surface, that nothing was what it seemed, there was some other explanation. So all of these things created this tone, which infuriated a lot of people.

DW: What is unique about film as a medium, in your view?

AS: Film has everything. I think it's an emotional medium, above all. Anyone who depends on movies to educate himself, I think, is on the wrong track. What you derive from a film depends very much on what you bring to it. It allows you to focus emotionally on things you already know. It brings things to a point. Like music. Film is the art to which all other arts aspire. It produces the most sublime emotions.

I'm something of a Christian. What concerns me are issues like guilt and redemption. The dramatic progress to self-knowledge.

DW: I found one of your comments in the new book on Ernst Lubitsch revealing. You write about a screening of Lubitsch's *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), 'the timing of every shot, every gesture, every movement was so impeccably precise and economically expressive that an entire classical tradition unfolded before a stunned audience. Contemporary sloppiness of construction brought on by the blind worship of 'energy' makes it almost too easy to appreciate Lubitsch's uncanny sense of the stylized limits of a civilized taste. Almost any old movie looks classical today.'

AS: There was always a technical floor under movies, you know, and there was a kind of restraint, there were things you didn't try, you didn't do. A nondisruptive quality that, at its best, amounted to a kind of serenity. I didn't mean to give a blank check to old movies. I look at some of them on Turner Classic Movies and they're stupefyingly boring and tedious, and they shut out so many things.

One of the hooks that people have picked up on is that I'm

a nostalgia freak, 'Oh, the good old days.' I deal with the best of the movies, but I'm not implying that today is not interesting. I'm fascinated by what's happening right now. The fascination comes in the explosion of content, the type of things you can deal with. But form, not so much.

DW: How do you feel about the reception to your own writing?

AS: I've gotten to the age now where I think I'm being given a free ride to a certain extent. So I think I'm overrated; I was underrated at one time. I'm satisfied with the reaction to this book. I'm aware of things that are certainly not beyond criticism. I use the aphorism that I'm too much a journalist for the academics, and that I'm too academic for the journalists. I'm a mixed bag, like movies. I'm not pure, I'm not this or that. I'm a lot of things. Sometimes rather flat, banal, lazy perhaps.

DW: We don't see eye to eye on political issues, but the growing social polarization is an issue that disturbs many people. Do you think the situation is tenable?

AS: I think things are awful in that sense. I don't see how any fair-minded person with any eyesight can say that the situation is ideal. We've reached in political debate a stage of bourgeois complacency such as even a bourgeois like me finds unthinkable. Years ago I used to read *The New Republic* every week. It was never a radical publication.... I stopped reading it because it depressed me. I got depressed because every week there was a variation of the same thing, people consenting to their own exploitation.

I'm a doomsday person. I keep waiting for the stock market to go down 3,000 points or something. It will. The big beneficiaries, however, would be the worst sort of Christian fundamentalist Republicans.

I can see all the ways that you're right, but I don't think it makes any difference. If you're right, I'll shake your hand, 'Yes, people have come to their senses. They now realize the system cannot continue, this exploitation of human beings, this selfishness, this greed, this horrible ... whatever.' Things are pretty awful for most people. I feel like I'm sitting in the Winter Palace and the crowds are gathering outside. I'm fairly comfortable. I don't have to worry about where my next meal is coming from. But I'm old, too. I'm secure. But I can understand the pain out there.

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[1 July 1998]



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