

Film critic Andrew Sarris 1928-2012: An appreciation

An interview with film critic Andrew Sarris

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26 June 2012

The World Socialist Web Site is reposting here an interview with film critic Andrew Sarris, who died June 20, which was originally published on July 1, 1998. See also the accompanying review of his book and analysis of his career.

American film critic Andrew Sarris, who exercised a strong influence on several decades of writing and thinking about movies, died in New York City on June 20 at the age of 83. His wife, the critic and writer Molly Haskell, reported that he had been in ill health for some time.

In the 1960s, 1970s and beyond, in New York's *Village Voice* in particular, Sarris consistently offered intelligent and sensitive analysis of international cinema. Avoiding, at his best, both snobbery and false populism, he treated the field with the seriousness and urgency it deserved. The critic rendered objective and insightful judgment on the French "New Wave," Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Blake Edwards and Jerry Lewis alike.

Moreover, in his major work, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, Sarris drew an important balance-sheet of the results of forty years of Hollywood filmmaking, making a wide and often youthful audience far more aware of the remarkable accomplishments of many American directors, including D.W. Griffith, Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, John Ford, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Anthony Mann, Raoul Walsh, Samuel Fuller, Frank Borzage, George Cukor and many others.

Sarris belonged to a generation that appreciated both artistry and substance in filmmaking. He did not make a fetish of the "visual" aspects of cinema. As he told me in a conversation in 1998, it was the "dramatic-literary" quality that interested him the most. I think Sarris found stories about human beings, their difficulties and pleasures, endlessly fascinating. Cheap, post-modern theories about the inability of imagery to capture objective reality did not intrigue him. Certain things he took for granted, including the capacity of art to tell the truth, or to attempt to tell the truth about life.

Sarris was shaped intellectually by the Cold War period and as much as he thought of himself as a contrarian, I think he underestimated the extent to which filmmaking and cultural life in general, including the circles in which he traveled, had been damaged by the purge of left-wing elements. In his case, in my view, this tended to take the form of inveighing a little too easily against "left" straw men, who often favored "socially conscious" or "progressive" works at the expense of what Sarris considered to be (and sometimes were) more psychologically and artistically complex films.

The very fact that such a pronounced divide existed, between "political" and "artistic" filmmaking reflected some of the difficulties of the period:

the ideological choice seemed to many to be between a "left" dominated by Stalinism and other repressive bureaucracies, on the one hand, and "democratic" imperialism, on the other, which claimed to be defending artistic and "cultural freedom" (often through the secret offices of the CIA). This created innumerable problems for artists and critics alike.

The review re-posted today from 1998 reflects my attitude, which is both respectful and critical, toward Sarris' work.

Sarris tended to paint himself as a worldly skeptic and even cynic, but I think that too had something to do with the weight of the relatively stagnant times. In my relatively brief relationship with him, I found him kind and helpful, and deeply passionate and enthusiastic about art *and* politics.

I contacted Sarris in May 1996 after reading his quite sympathetic review in the *New York Observer* of Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* (1995), about left-wing, anti-Stalinist forces fighting in the Spanish Civil War. I referred to my appreciation of his review and his entire body of work, and also included my comment on the film, which had appeared in the *International Workers Bulletin*.

Sarris wrote back (on his portable typewriter): "Thank you for your kind and gracious words. They are deeply appreciated. No, I'm not offended by being described as 'subversive.' I'm not sure I deserve the honor and privilege of being called that in this fundamentally unjust world. I suppose that what I've tried to do is solve the mysteries of life through the clues left behind by films, but the deeper I've gotten into the labyrinth the more perplexed I've become. ..."

"I enjoyed reading your critique of *Land and Freedom*. Its measured tone, its humane spirit, its moral balance, the review's as well as the film's, remind me of the glory days of the old *Partisan Review*. I enjoyed also the interview with [screenwriter] Jim Allen. Your elegant prose reminds me, sadly, that we all operate within a tiny enclave, and all around us are the brutish bigots and the foolish philistines. But then I envy your stubborn spirit in fighting the good fight when most of the world seems to be blindly worshipping the false Messiahs of the so-called free market. Thank you again for boosting my spirits with your letter, and happy moviegoing."

We organized and conducted the interview re-posted below, at his Manhattan apartment, in June 1998. He was very generous during the conversation, rushing off, for example, to his personal library and lending me a book on the filmmaker Anthony Mann.

In reply to the review of his new book, "*You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet*," which accompanied the interview in the WSWS on July 1, 1998 and

contained some sharp criticism, Sarris replied in another typewritten letter, in a fairly objective manner. He termed my criticism "tough love," and once again referred to his pessimism about society, in contrast to the views expressed in the WSWs.

Sarris wrote, in part: "I feel a little sad after reading your analysis, not because of your valid criticism, but because you still believe you can make a difference. ... Perhaps, our biggest difference is that I believe in Freud as you believe in Marx, and never the twain shall meet. But I believe what I write even when I don't write it very well. The situation is hopeless, but not serious. Call me when you are in New York. You are the Other, and I enjoy trying to be lucid enough to be worthy of your respect which I appreciate most sincerely."

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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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