

Film critic Andrew Sarris 1928-2012: An appreciation

Andrew Sarris and American filmmaking

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The World Socialist Web Site is reposting here an article originally published on July 1, 1998. See also the accompanying interview with Andrew Sarris, also from 1998, with a new introduction following his death June 20.

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A review of *"You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet": The American Talking Film, History & Memory, 1927-1949*, by Andrew Sarris, Oxford University Press, New York, 1998.

I have been reading film critic Andrew Sarris on and off for the past 30 years. I consider him the most interesting and perceptive writer on American films over that period.

Sarris wrote for *Film Culture* in the 1950s and 1960s and now writes for the *New York Observer*. He is best known, however, and deservedly so, for his work as film critic on the *Village Voice*, the liberal-radical New York City weekly newspaper, in the 1960s and 1970s. His two major books from that period—the groundbreaking *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968* and *Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969*, a collection of more than 100 reviews and essays—remain my favorites among his works.

Sarris was identified for many years, by admirers and detractors alike, as the leading American proponent of the so-called "auteur theory," first formulated by then-critic and later filmmaker François Truffaut in the French film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1954. Sarris first used the term in an article published in *Film Culture* in 1962. According to this conception of film history, the director's personal vision has been the principal "authorial" element in the best films up to the present time and, therefore, the study of the working out of this vision over the course of an individual filmmaker's career becomes a central task of cinema scholarship.

Sarris's work is distinctive for a number of reasons. More consistently than any previous critic, in the US at least, he turned his attention to what is known as "Hollywood cinema" and treated it systematically and with intellectual seriousness. He had the advantage, of course, of actually knowing what he was talking about, having seen thousands of American films. As he noted in his preface to *The American Cinema*, "To put it bluntly, many alleged authorities on film disguise their ignorance of the American cinema as a form of intellectual snobbery."

Perhaps Sarris's most remarkable accomplishment has been to avoid so many of the simplistic or fashionable approaches to the subject at hand. He has been able, for the most part, to treat the material objectively, i.e., to separate out the truthful and insightful work that was carried out by

remarkable artists at the major film studios from the crass, commercial integument—with all its loaded associations. He has not succumbed either to the temptation to turn the study of Hollywood movies into an exercise in "camp" or nostalgia, nor has he, by and large, inflated out of proportion the significance of the work he has been considering. At his best he takes a remarkably sober and fair-minded, though passionate, look at an extremely complex aesthetic and social phenomenon.

A new work

"You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet": The American Talking Film, History & Memory, 1927-1949 is Sarris's new work, his first major publishing effort since *Politics and Cinema* in 1978. It contains essays of varying lengths on studios, film genres, a host of directors and performers, and a number of brief excursions into what the author calls "Guilty Pleasures"—films or film personalities he ought to be able to resist, but can't.

A reader experiences his own "guilty pleasures" in taking up Sarris's book. Probably no one writing today possesses his knowledge of the subject and takes such pleasure in discussing it. I take on faith Sarris's judgments on a whole range of issues. When he writes, in his discussion of the various studios, that "Movie for movie, Warners was the most reliable source of entertainment through the thirties and forties, even though it was clearly the most budget-conscious of them all," I wouldn't venture to argue.

He goes on, delightfully and, I think, essentially correctly, "What we remember most fondly not only about Warners movies but about Hollywood movies in general are not the endings prescribed by the Hays Office and the mealy-mouthed moguls, but the beginnings and middles, during which all sorts of wickedly subversive mischief could be indulged. Yet from the world-weary showgirl incarnate in Joan Blondell to the delinquents represented by the Dead End Kids, Warners movies more than those from any other studio walked mostly on the shady side of the street."

Likewise, I am content to accept at least as a useful guideline Sarris's disclosure that his favorite Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movie "would be a composite: the first half of *Top Hat* —with Irving Berlin's 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails,' 'Isn't This a Lovely Day To Be Caught in the Rain?,' and 'Cheek to Cheek'—and the second half of *Swing Time*—with Jerome Kern's 'The Way You Look Tonight,' 'A Fine Romance,' and 'Never Gonna Dance.' This to say that *Top Hat* starts enchantingly and

ends conventionally, and *Swing Time* starts lethargically and ends ecstatically.”

In his discussion of screwball comedies, a genre that flourished briefly between the mid-1930s and the end of the decade, although the author makes some points I don’t agree with and would like to return to, he observes reasonably enough that none of the “sociological critics,” Sarris’s favorite *bête noires*, have pointed to the significance of the strict enforcement of the studios’ self-imposed Production Code, which banned the realistic depiction of sexual behavior, in 1934.

The author writes: “What then is the source of ‘frustration’ [that these critics had taken note of] in the screwball comedies? I would suggest that this frustration arises inevitably from a situation in which the censors have removed the sex from sex comedies. Here we have all these beautiful people with nothing to do. Let us invent some substitutes for sex.”

The Pantheon

Not surprisingly, for a critic who believes strongly in the centrality of directorial vision, a discussion of the film careers, up to 1949, of 21 filmmakers makes up the bulk of the new book. In *The American Cinema*, published three decades ago, Sarris placed 14 directors in his *Pantheon Directors*: Charles Chaplin, Robert Flaherty, John Ford, D.W. Griffith, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Buster Keaton, Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, F.W. Murnau, Max Ophuls, Jean Renoir, Josef von Sternberg and Orson Welles.

Sarris returns to 11 of those directors—Flaherty is presumably excused from this book as a maker of documentaries, a category of filmmaking that holds little interest for its author; the German Murnau and the Frenchman Renoir did not make their primary contributions to American filmmaking. I don’t know that Sarris has that much to say that is radically new about the remaining members of his pantheon, but the analysis remains of considerable interest.

Of Griffith, for example, he writes: “His art had become so deceptively simple by the time of *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) that most critics assumed that he was in a state of stylistic decline.... Yet today the rough-and-tumble directness and episodic structure of *Lincoln* looks amazingly appropriate for its slyly rambling subject and protagonist. Walter Huston’s Lincoln is no mere wax work, but a living, breathing, chortling projection of Griffith himself in all his cantankerous individuality doing battle with an industry about to drive him from the screen forever.”

In the essay on Welles, Sarris advances the view that *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and not *Citizen Kane*, is the director’s masterpiece. After noting that the former film was “a complete disaster at the box office,” he goes on: “Its abiding unpopularity with the Hollywood mass audience is, however, a proof of its transcendent importance in the coming of age of America. Even in *Kane*, but especially in *Ambersons*, the young, brash Orson Welles had imparted to American movies a long overdue intimation of the mortal limits and disillusioning shortcomings of the American Dream. He dared to suggest that even Americans became old and embittered as the inexorable forces of family, capitalism and ‘progress’ trampled them.”

It should be noted, and Sarris freely acknowledges it, that a certain proportion of the material in the new book has been imported in fairly large chunks from previous writings, either *The American Cinema*, various reviews and articles over the years, or, in the case of Ford and Sternberg, the books he wrote about them. On the one hand, his ability to reprint critical opinions more than 30 years old in some instances speaks to the remarkable perspicacity of many of those earlier comments; on the other, it suggests to me not so much “laziness,” as Sarris tends to see it, as a certain stagnation of thought in the culture as a whole and, in his own work, problems of perspective and purposefulness. This is a point worth returning to.

The Far Side of Paradise

In addition to those members of the *American Cinema*’s pantheon, Sarris discusses in his new book a number of the filmmakers he included in his second-highest category 30 years ago, *The Far Side Of Paradise*, and who were active in the time period in question, 1927-1949—King Vidor, Preston Sturges, Leo McCarey, George Cukor, Frank Capra, George Stevens, Frank Borzage; and one each from two other groupings, *Expressive Esoterica* (John Stahl) and *Make Way For The Clowns!* (Harold Lloyd).

I am pleased by Sarris’s comment that King Vidor, whom I believe he undervalued three decades ago, has risen in his estimation “over the decades.... In retrospect, Vidor’s vitality seems ageless, and his emotionally volcanic images are especially appropriate for partings and reunions, and for the visual opposition of individuals to masses.”

In his comments about George Cukor, Sarris explains that a recent biography of the director could not have been published during his lifetime “because of its eye-opening description of an elegantly gay life flourishing amid an industry quaking in fear of the self-appointed media guardians of virtue, morality, conformity, and decency.”

He takes Katharine Hepburn to task for her insensitive remark, in a 1983 autobiography, that Cukor had not been “macho” enough to direct her and Spencer Tracy in *Woman of the Year* in 1942. He rightfully observes: “It is a singularly unfortunate comment, the reader might think, to make about one’s movie mentor, who, along with the producer David O. Selznick, virtually molded Ms. Hepburn in *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), and who later directed her in nine of her most felicitous performances, among them *Adam’s Rib* and *The Philadelphia Story*.”

The most “radical” change of opinion that the critic owns up to in his new book concerns Billy Wilder (*Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Stalag 17*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment*, etc.) In *The American Cinema* Sarris had been quite harsh in his assessment, describing Wilder as “too cynical to believe in his own cynicism,” and noting that even “his best films ... are marred by the director’s penchant for gross caricature, especially with peripheral characters.”

He now feels that he “grossly under-rated Billy Wilder, perhaps more so than any other American director.” He asserts that the director’s “apparent cynicism was the only way he could make his raging romanticism palatable.” This smacks to me a little of sophistry—the same could be said, with differing degrees of truthfulness, about virtually any

genuine cynic. I also found Sarris's comments about a conversation with Wilder, even taking into account the desire to make a thorough *mea culpa*, a bit sycophantic ("Time had not dimmed the mischievous wit in his eye, or dulled the razor-sharp wit"!)). In any event, it would annoy Sarris, but I find the discussion of Wilder something of a tempest in a teapot. I suspect he underrated him in 1968 and is guilty of overrating him now. I tend to prefer Sarris's writing in what he calls his "polemical period."

The section *Actors and Actresses* ought more properly to be called *Actresses and Actors*, for the author's heart certainly tends to lie in discussions of the screen appearances and appearance of female stars, a tendency that continues unabated in the final chapter, *Guilty Pleasures*. (In the 1960s, Sarris once reported, when asked to define the cinema in three words, he replied with "more delirium than discretion: 'Girls! Girls! Girls!'") The chapter begins with a quote from the British critic Kenneth Tynan about Greta Garbo, "What, when drunk, one sees in other women, one sees in Garbo sober," and proceeds from there. I'm not complaining about his predilections, just taking note.

Sarris writes feelingly about Garbo, Bette Davis, Margaret Sullavan, Ingrid Bergman, Irene Dunne, Myrna Loy, Norma Shearer, Jean Harlow, Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Katharine Hepburn, Carole Lombard and Vivien Leigh, and "guilty pleasures" Louise Brooks, Mary Astor, Anne Baxter and Wanda Hendrix.

The biography of Stanwyck, born in Brooklyn in 1907, who dropped out of school to work in a department store in Flatbush at 15, danced in a chorus line, and at 19 starred on Broadway, "reads like one of the plebeian sob stories they used to make into movies in the twenties and thirties," Sarris notes. The extraordinary moments she generated in her best films "did not arise from Stanwyck's saving herself for the projects in which she believed, but rather from a lifetime of playing every scene to the hilt, and giving every role everything she had, down to her toes and back to the earliest yearnings of Ruby Stevens from Brooklyn."

Of character actress Mary Astor, he writes, "Timing is almost everything in acting careers, and Mary Astor kept perfect time for about five or six years when she was still young enough to suggest with ever so slightly ironic a smile the joys of sex, and yet old enough and experienced enough to perceive the trickery and deception involved in the chase."

Dissatisfactions

The book has much to recommend it as a collection of informed and generally well argued opinions—whether one agrees with them all or not—about filmmaking, individual films and the changing attitudes toward films and filmmaking. It teaches, it moves, it delights.

It also dissatisfies, and dissatisfies a good deal. First, I continue to have difficulties after all these years with certain stylistic tendencies, or what seem to be merely stylistic tendencies. I've never been fond of Sarris's addiction to alliteration, punning and such, nor to his occasional descent into facetiousness. He occasionally forgets that there is a difference between unpretentiousness and unseriousness, and that the latter unnecessarily calls into question some of the important points he has to make.

Nor am I fond of his tendency at times to substitute the journalistic phrase for a concrete answer to an aesthetic problem. Justifying this as the triumph of "feeling over thought," or "magic over logic," doesn't get anyone very far. As Sarris noted in our conversation, his writing tends toward a "rhetorical flow." On occasion it appears, in fact, as though his conclusions flow from the needs of the rhetoric and not from the logic of the material or the evidence on the screen. One draws the slightly worrying conclusion in such cases that the author is prepared to sacrifice precision of assessment, to round off a judgment for the sake of a subjectively striking or pungent conclusion.

More significantly, one is continually disturbed when reading the new book by the sense that, to use Sarris's phrase, it doesn't cohere, it doesn't entirely flow. There is something formless about the book. It is precisely *a collection of insights*, more or less interesting, but not amounting to an argument of any particular kind except, I suppose, that the history of the American cinema is fascinating and that "it never seems to yield up all its meanings and beauties and associations the first time around." This doesn't seem to me adequate three decades after *The American Cinema*.

In his introduction Sarris asserts that in writing a history of the American sound film, "one can never finish; one can only stop. After many years I have decided to stop.... I could work until the next millennium ... but my marvelously patient editor has urged me to cease and desist, and I do so with a sense of relief." This is an oddly dispirited way to begin a book.

In a certain sense the problem Sarris refers to arises in the study of any complex historical process—every event or process is connected to every other, and every moment or deed acts upon and is acted upon by every other moment or deed. There is no absolute beginning or end to any history. But surely the purpose of writing a history is to sort out the essential from the inessential on the basis of a coherent perspective, a perspective which is in part derived from or at least deepened by the study itself.

"Methodologies of the moment"

The introduction, in fact, amounts to an argument against the possibility of any perspective independent of the films themselves. "Movies can be shown to pass beyond the parameters of any methodology of the moment, be it sociology or semiotics, technology or stylistics, dramatic narrative or symbolic iconography." Of course they can, but what does that prove? That these methodologies are inadequate, or that any methodology will be inadequate? One is simply left by this conception with one's nose placed directly against the screen, prohibited from looking up or down, right or left. There is no reason to believe that immersion by itself will yield entirely positive results.

If a specter has haunted Sarris throughout his career, it certainly has been Marxism. One cannot go very far in any of his works without encountering jabs or pokes at "Marxists," "the Left," "the sociological critic," etc. "The Left critic" is invariably involved in some retrograde activity, generally underestimating or misevaluating an artist dear to Sarris's heart.

The irony, of course, one hastens to add, is that Sarris, in my view, has

usually been correct in these one-sided aesthetic polemics and the “Left critic”—who, although unnamed, is unfortunately far from imaginary—usually wrong. However, what constitutes this “Left” that he has been invoking throughout much of his career, and which is by now something of a straw man? Either the discredited Stalinist “Left” or the quasi-Stalinist New Left and those of its ideological adherents who are still around. These trends are hostile to Marxism as an objectively truthful and liberating ideology and hostile to (and threatened by) aesthetic value in art.

In the new work the “sociological critic” is at it again, and again, in the immediate sense, Sarris is correct against him. But it seems to me he draws unwarranted conclusions from that fact.

After citing a passage from *Hollywood in the Thirties* by John Baxter, which paints a picture of New Year’s Eve 1929, including the plays and films then available, from the simplistic point of view that the Wall Street crash several months before had immediately ushered in an entirely new period, Sarris comments that the paragraphs “reflect the irresistible temptation of many film historians to correlate sociological history with movie history.” He goes on to remark that the Crash did not produce an instant economic disaster and that “the Depression that followed the Crash took a relatively long time to take full hold.” Furthermore, his research indicates, “One could go on and on through the entire roster of 1930 releases in a vain search for the cutting edge that snipped off the twenties from the thirties.”

This is undoubtedly true and so are his assertions that “film history can never be synchronized with so-called real history,” and that “to demand instant topicality of the cinema is to reduce the medium to a news broadcast. One would never expect such haste from a supposedly serious and reflective art-form.” I couldn’t agree more. This entirely concurs with the dialectical conclusions reached by *genuine* Marxists, in particular Leon Trotsky, and serious artists who considered these problems, such as Oscar Wilde and André Breton. The latter, while a collaborator and supporter of Trotsky, wrote, “We confidently deny that the art of a period might consist of the pure and simple imitation of its surface manifestations.”

But what does Sarris draw from these correct and important points? Not very much, unfortunately. He leaves the thought hanging in midair. Apparently one is to conclude that because “the *manifest content* of a period,” in Breton’s words, is not expressed directly in art, and because a properly nuanced perspective is difficult to develop, there might not be any connection *at all* between art and its historical period and that perhaps one can *never* arrive at an objectively truthful perspective.

The Depression and the Production Code

Again pointing to the apparent absence of films in the 1930s reflective of Depression conditions, Sarris comments, “Actually, many of the changes between decades for movies had more to do with the coming of sound and the tightening of censorship than with worldwide economic convulsions.” In the section on screwball comedies, Sarris sounds a similar theme, noting that “The big turning point in movies between 1933 and 1934 can be attributed less to the emergence of the New Deal than to the resurgence of the censors.”

By the spring of 1933, 15 million people were out of work; between 1929 and 1933 the gross national product fell 29 percent; between 1929 and 1932 net farm income fell by two-thirds. To suggest that such a period, in which millions were thrown into misery, many reduced to near-starvation in some rural areas, would find no *natural* and *instinctive* reflection in artistic work seems to me a symptom of the sort of present-day “complacency” to which Sarris refers in our conversation. After all, the Depression was not a mere topical event, but a crisis that threatened the social order. Millions of people were shaken by the events, whether they were still employed, still in business, or not.

If the Depression did not find full-blown expression in studio films, and it did not, I don’t believe this can merely be attributed to the inadequacy or inappropriateness of art as a means of reflecting social life. Doesn’t the fact suggest, first of all, that the films of the 1930s were something less than the spontaneous reflection of artistic or popular thought, as Sarris seems to imply, but the highly mediated products of corporate entities, themselves under close government scrutiny, which might not be enthusiastic sponsors of films about harsh economic or social conditions?

This is not meant as a condemnation of the best filmmakers of the day, who continued to make many extraordinary and, within quite definite limits, highly truthful films, but merely to underscore the very contradictory circumstances within which they worked. In my view, Sarris cuts himself off from probing the matter sufficiently because of a political bias. (In any event, I think he seriously underestimates the degree to which economic and political life shaped the mentality and “feel” of 1930s films. To note, “There were plenty of poor folks in the twenties [in films], and plenty of wild parties in the thirties,” hardly grasps the contradictions at work. What is not shown is often at least as telling as what is.)

As to the relation between the Depression and the Production Code, I believe Sarris largely misses the point. One can only draw *his* conclusions by entirely leaving out of account the explosive political and social conditions prevailing in the US by 1934. While it is true that there was no immediate upheaval in response to the devastation, by 1932 there were clear signs of incipient revolt: The Ford Hunger March and the mass funeral for its victims in March, the “Bonus March” in the summer, strikes by farmers and sharecroppers. Resistance reached a new level by 1934 with the outbreak of three widely-supported strikes, led by left-wing Socialists, Trotskyists and Communist Party members—the Toledo Auto-Lite strike, Minneapolis truck drivers’ and San Francisco dock workers’ strikes—which signaled the emergence of a potentially insurrectionary working class movement. Sit-down strikes began in late 1936 and involved some 400,000 workers the following year. (They even managed to find a weak echo in Hollywood, in Tay Garnett’s *Stand-In*, for example.) The rapid development of the CIO movement, embracing hundreds of thousands of industrial workers, was a further expression of this reality, as well as the efforts of the pro-Roosevelt labor bureaucracy to discipline and render it harmless.

It seems to me that any objective examination of the decision to strictly enforce the Production Code as of July 1, 1934 would have to take those facts into account. To suggest that its imposition had nothing to do with wider events and concerns—i.e., a general and legitimate nervousness within the ruling class about the breakdown of all sorts of moral and social taboos and the more far-reaching consequences of such a breakdown—seems to me inordinately narrow. Or, to put it more bluntly, the imposition of the Production Code was *precisely one of the means* by which the film industry and its overseers made certain that the realities of

the Depression would not find reflection on screen. (No, while the Code banned depiction of all sorts of sexual and antisocial behavior, it did *not* ban inciting class hatred and exposing social ills. Did it need to?)

If there is no connection *whatsoever*, after all, between a film and social life, then what is its essential content? Even if one accepts, as anyone serious about aesthetics must, that the most significant art concerns itself with the *more enduring* features of human life and not simply topicalities, the historically-conditioned form of those features is not a matter of indifference. Films are not made, for example, about “Love,” they are made about love between particular individuals to whom romance, sex and a variety of other matters mean something quite specific. The artist is not a disembodied, unbounded spirit hovering over the ages, and art “cannot have at its disposal any other material except that which is given to it by the world of three dimensions and by the narrower world of class society.” (Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*)

In my view, the resistance that Sarris puts up against the “sociological critics” and the Stalinist Left had a positive content at one point. It directed him toward a study of the material on its own terms and toward its intrinsic beauty and power. I think this has now worn thin. The rejection of *false and mechanically imposed perspectives* cannot in and of itself eternally serve as a perspective. Sarris strikes one as somewhat rudderless in his critical work today. (A certain discouragement with the course of political life has also, I suspect, taken its toll.) One of the forms this takes in his new book is an occasional tendency toward a strained and high-flown lyricism; there are too many abstract paeans to the sweet mysteries of life (and love) for my taste. In his criticism in the *Observer* it takes the form of a tendency to approve of too much of what he reviews, in my opinion, in the name of the magic of the cinema.

Whatever I consider to be its shortcomings, “*You Ain’t Heard Nothin’ Yet*” is essential reading for anyone serious about film history and cultural history generally. Any objections I raise against Sarris’s work need to be viewed in the context of an overall insistence that *one cannot even seriously approach* American cinema without working over and through his critical writings.

Books by Andrew Sarris:

The Films of Josef von Sternberg (1966)
Interviews with Film Directors (1967)
The Film (1968)
The American Cinema, Directors and Directions, 1929-1968 (1968)
Film 68/69 (with Hollis Alpert) (1969)
Confessions of a Cultist: On the Cinema 1955-1969 (1970)
The Primal Screen: Essays on Film and Related Subjects (1972)
The John Ford Movie Industry (1975) Politics and Cinema (1975)
St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia (editor) (1997)



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