

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

CONFESSIONS OF A

An Interview With
Andrew Sarris



MIDDLE CLASS FILM CRITIC

By Albert Auster
and Leonard Quart

At the end of the conclusion to your introduction in POLITICS AND CINEMA, you state, "My aesthetics have been my politics all along."

I always felt I was one of the art-for-art's-sake boys, and then I found out, as I was viewing more and more things, political considerations kept coming in—in themselves, in respect to the audiences, the critics, the community at large. There was a closer tie between my particular tastes and my political convictions than I had realized. Politics crept into everything, into sexuality, into what stars you liked, into what genres you liked....

But on the whole, I would say that I do not approach film systematically, but intuitively. There is certain Marxist art I have endorsed, such as some of Rosi's films [e.g., *The Mattei Affair*]; and a great deal of Brecht's work is interesting, although many Marxists would consider it problematical. Most serious film art has been of the left—right wing people don't deal in art. They have other means of persuasion. But people of the left are concerned with art and so consequently the preponderance of bad political art would be there, just because more people are involved in it.

In the piece on STATE OF SEIGE, you say, "There is Art and Rev-

olution, and I choose Art."

Well, I'm a bourgeois, a middle-class intellectual. I work at the *Village Voice*, I teach at Columbia. I'm not out in the streets, I'm not out organizing people (even if I wanted to, which I don't). I'm basically a liberal meliorist, trying to improve things gradually, trying to get people

"Politics crept into everything, even the star you liked."

out to vote for better people. I'm one of those people who said we should have voted for Humphrey in 1968, not let Nixon come in by default.... I'm concerned with a relatively stable world in which the arts and culture can survive. I think a revolutionary world would be a world of complete upheaval. Whether the arts would survive in such a world, certainly whether criticism would survive in such a world, I don't know.

One could point to Cuba. Within certain ideological limits, there is a range of films coming out of there.

Cuba, I think, is now being cited by people as a fairly benign example of the situation. Certainly more than Russia or China or places like that. I think that in Cuba there is perhaps somewhat less—well, somewhat more opportunity. And I don't want to

take the simplistic view and say that there is no ideological control in right-wing and even in democratic countries. There is, but it's of a different order....

You have criticized sociological critics for their emphasis on the content, the what of film rather than the how.

I think the problem with sociological criticism is that it's very difficult to do. It's very presumptuous. Very often you have subcritics, people who are not very good, doing sociological criticism. I think it takes much better critics to do it than to do aesthetic criticism.

I find it much easier to say whether a movie's good or not than to say what its impact is on everybody in the audience. I'm never quite sure of that, I'm never quite sure what signals people get from films. It's a very complex area. You have to have a great deal more knowledge. I don't say you have to do mass research, but you have to go into a great many other areas than the cinema—into crowd psychology, into people's private attitudes, and all their other frames of reference.

The great critique of sociological method is not that it shouldn't be done but that it's been oversimplified in the past. I think the tendency for sociological critics is to get a bunch of films and take the synopses of them. From the synopses they deduce the social content. Now the fact of the

matter is that some movies have much greater impact than others, because certain values come more to the fore and are more convincing, and some movies have no impact at all. Sometimes people can draw different conclusions from a film than its apparent ideology would indicate.

What I object to is a simplis-

"Noir films convey people's dark, anarchic feelings."

tic idea that *They* out there are doing it to *Us* in here. It doesn't quite work that way. The filmmaker has people above him and below him and a subculture in California and his audience out here. Also there are different audiences, different subcultures. So a sociological critic has the burden of explaining all this complexity.

Some Hollywood films, coming out of a capitalist matrix, might have some subversive content.

I find Hollywood film a fascinating sociologically, much more than people realize. People talk about the happy ending, but the happy ending can be very hollow. And these films, say, about people who get a house out in the country but everybody is gouging them and they have trouble getting money—it's a hellish view of American life.

The great appeal of *noir* films is that they show the underside, not the official view of American society. All these wretched people around the edges, these worms and moles and gnomes working on the underside of the

"The semioticians act like an appellate court."

culture, you get an idea of the dark side of a society. And the violence conveys the dark violent anarchic feelings people have.

This is a violent, anarchic country. People have tremendous hostility, and it's getting worse. Very few people are voting; people are very cynical about everything and everybody. Very destructive, dangerous—but it's there.

Nowadays of course there's very little official culture, so the sky's the limit. I don't think that's necessarily constructive; a lot of it's very damaging. But I think it is and always has been subversive.

Movies are subversive in the sense that they deal with people's psychic needs.

How would you respond to a hypothetical charge by a semiologist that your criticism is subjective, unsystematic and individualistic?

I would plead guilty, on the whole. A lot of my work has been intuitive. I find we have a long way to go before we can codify what film really is. The means we use to describe it are completely inadequate. I've never written anything on a film that I feel apprehends it.

The question is, are the semiologists doing any better? And I think they touch on interesting connections. A great contribution of semiologists is the understanding that the number of words that exist to describe something in a language restricts the definition of others, that it must all be seen contextually. And I do

believe also that for cinema you cannot talk about one film individually.

My reservation is that the instruments semioticians have used up to now have not been supple enough to handle the multiple perspectives of film.

Also, one of the big critiques of the semioticians and the Levi-Strauss crowd is that by presupposing a structure—a model they build—they can inevitably find connections, because they are defining things in such a way that they can always find them.

I think we, the auteurs, discovered new cinema; we discovered things from the past that had been neglected and ignored. I think these people act more like an appellate court. They don't introduce much new evidence. They use the taste that's established and proceed to use a new method. They're not very active journalistically, most of them. It's still rather new, and I don't want to issue a philistine cackle.

"The past interests me much more than the present."

But what I'm afraid of is that there isn't much communication between them and other people. It's a politics, everybody preaching to the converted, and all closed off. I would like more debate, but I find it very closed off at the moment.

Your book gives the impression that you care about politics, which is very different from many people who have taken up your auteur theories.

I wouldn't characterize people who followed me as being apolitical—they are political in different ways. Some are feminists and Stuart Byron is very close to gay liberation. Many are left, some are right.

I think what we felt in my generation was that a group of humanist critics, for instance, Bosley Crowther and Sigfried Krakauer, had paid so much attention to content and social ideas that forms were completely ignored. And we had to make up for all this lost time. In catching up, we gave the impression that we were little dandies running around talking about tracking shots.... But it's no worse than talking about the lack of adjectives in Hemingway. We wanted to end stylistic illiteracy.

The auteur theory may turn out to be more of a historical tool.

I'm very much into the past. In fact, the past interests me much more than the present. And the future—the future doesn't interest me at all. I think the future is boring. But the present I find very chaotic. I'm always concerned with the classical tradition of the future. The semioticians presume to stand outside history, but I see myself as standing within the historical process.

To me, everything is swirling and we are possessed by the past. We cannot escape it completely. That doesn't mean we should just accept the past; I think we should move forward, but in a skeptical spirit.

Albert Auster is an editor of Cineaste; Leonard Quart is an editor of Marxist Perspectives. This interview took place on WBAI radio in New York, and the interview in full will appear in Cineaste.

FILM

The film critic criticized

By Pat Aufderheide

POLITICS AND CINEMA
by Andrew Sarris
Columbia U. Press, \$12.95

Andrew Sarris (of the *Village Voice*) is, with Pauline Kael (of the *New Yorker*), one of the most influential and serious film critics we have. Unlike most reviewers, they are both consistently concerned to put movies into a wider context. They both know movie history, they both have an elaborate set of Western cultural baggage, and they share a passionate love of going to the movies.

That they detest each other merely adds a little zing to the New York reviewers' scene; and the writing style of each hints at their personality conflicts. Kael is immediate, gutsy, slangily sociological, while Sarris is stuffy, particular, and witty in a way that suggests he can be endlessly amused by his own alliteration. While Kael never turns her criticisms into theory, Sarris is a compulsive theorizer, best known for his assertion of the *auteur* "theory," which asserts the primary importance of a director in determining the style of a film.

In *Politics and Cinema*, Sarris reaches a new high in pomposity. In an introduction that attempts to explain why a critic not known for his political acumen wants to define his latest collection of essays as political, he sinks into grandiose gibberish: "Much of the critical discourse of the past half century has been involved with the sometimes fruitful and sometimes frightful tensions between fact and fiction, reality and truth, sincerity and authenticity."

That over, he settles down to say some interesting things and to make clear why his critical work is important even though it may not have the importance that he ascribes to it. Like Kael, he sees movies as a major American art form, and he identifies evolving styles of expression within the commercial mainstream. And he also has a fairly reliable bullshit detector.

Sarris can point accurately to the effect movies have had on other modern art, and he suggests in an article on semiotics: "One has only to flip through a few pages of *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Ragtime* to realize the extent to which cinema is repaying its debt to literature." He can as well explore the effects of movies on our everyday assumptions, as when he discusses "The Nasty Nazis": "In a sense, every narrative, dramatic, and documentary 'treatment' of the Holocaust only cheapened it and made it more titillatingly thinkable."

Message films bring out his most coy impudence. He speaks undeniable truth with the courage of a little boy denouncing the emperor's new clothes. "Even the converted," he claims, "stay away in droves from the cinematic ceremonies of political revivalism." He is often right in attacking simplistic social message cinema, and especially right in suggesting that reductionist message films can have the opposite effect that they intend. In a sustained snipe attack on *State of Siege* he declares that "If [Costa-Gavras and Solinas] do not rationalize

or justify assassination by the Tupamaros, they certainly romanticize and sentimentalize it." And anyone who has had to sit through Francis Ford Coppola's *The Rain People* will sympathize with Sarris' tired complaint: "People who go out looking for America always seem to know in advance what they are going to find. Alienation and Anomie, Loneliness and Lethargy, Late Night Whining and Daily Paranoia."

Whether or not you like the tone, the remarks are acute, and too rare in popular film criti-

that, like Uruguay, practice "some form of repressive torture."

Sarris fears the loss of his first amendment rights, which guarantee him the right to do something that he himself sees at times as frivolous. He argues persuasively that self-interest motivates his pluralism, that "the very flawed system in which I matured turns out to be essential to my continued existence." He is an artist, complete with muse, sanctuary, and a "proper role."

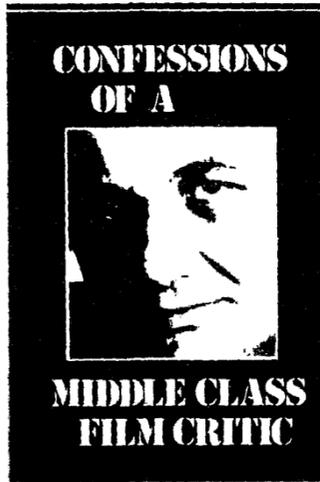
Sarris is frequently right in puncturing romantic left fantasies lingering from bygone demonstrations. But, like his *auteur* theory, his political statements are too grand and sweeping. He reduces the left to a gross caricature, and is left sitting prissily on an existential island:

"I prefer to see left and right as arbitrary points on a circle of human illusions rotating endlessly around lonely, alienated exiles from Eden in search of a meaning to life before the darkness of death... Art and Revolution. Choose One. I choose Art."

From his personalist confessional, only overtly political arguments and acts register as political. Sarris makes a simple equation between politics and government, between political film and didactic message, and between democracy and freedom of speech.

But if Sarris' definition of politics is perhaps most interesting as a self-definition of the artist in a bourgeois democracy, his film criticism still bears reading and rereading. In part, it's because of his enthusiasm for and broad understanding of the film medium. And in part it's because of his iconoclasm, even if it is self-important. He'll never endorse a film because it's "correct," although he will defend to the ticket office your right to see it.

Sarris' essays take liberal analysis of film about as far as it can go. *Politics and Cinema* thus makes clear the need for a socialist film criticism that can transcend killing moralism. His work, and its limits, suggest the need for a criticism that can comprehend the social arrangements that bound our modern art, and the history of that art in itself, as well as the sexy, idle fun of being at the movies. ■



Sarris takes liberal analysis of film as far as it can go.

cism. But linking all the pieces in this book together with the concept of "politics" forces the pieces into a mold that doesn't always fit. It also reveals some cheap assumptions about politics on Sarris' part.

Take one of his opening statements: "I prefer tinkering with society to smashing it to smithereens." It's a familiar false opposition: either vote every two years or throw a bomb. That caricaturing runs throughout the book. Many of his arguments depend on a devilish stereotype of the left, an entity with "apocalyptic fantasies," believing that elections are "not nearly as thrilling as the monster rallies in Moscow, Peking, Havana and Hanoi." If things are not better in commieland, he argues, then you can't knock it here. He wonders if Algeria, Cuba and North Vietnam are not also "dictatorial regimes"

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GORILLA THEATER

During the holiday season in Santiago, Chile, the best-attended film was *Jaws II*. Meanwhile, in South Africa, *Superman* broke box-office records, beating out the last record-setter, the pro-

mercenary film, *The Wild Geese*.

LOVE AND LENINISM

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