

UNSPooling A LIFE WATCHED BY FILMS¹

Dudley Andrew

By 1970 I had started delving into the areas that I still identify as my chief intellectual concerns: a) film theory and literary theory; b) André Bazin, cinema's most influential theorist; c) French cinema and culture; d) world cinema, beyond Hollywood; e) fiction and film interrelations, especially adaptation. For fifty-three years I've kept such things in the forefront of what I teach, study and write about. How little I've changed.

And how conventional I must seem, one of those souls who feels himself fundamentally unaltered since first having had thoughts about selfhood. Those thoughts came to me around eleven years old; I associate them with my Confirmation. I took the Confirmation name Augustine after reading a book about the saint and talking about him to my father, who was both intellectually curious and Catholic. Was I already unsettled by the conundrum of time and identity that Augustine posed indelibly in the fifth century?

I am the second of eight children. We formed our own environment in Southern California when my parents, leaving relatives behind, uprooted themselves from the Midwest, drawn by the aircraft and budding space industry. Buying into the cheap end of Pacific Palisades when it was still affordable, my parents never took us to a restaurant, not even for a Sunday breakfast. There were no family vacations either. We had each other, the beach, the public library, and the city park. I dedicated myself to reading and baseball. There was the Bay theater too, recently closed like the Criterion here in New Haven. I saw actors on the screen who were equally visible on the streets. So I met Gregory Peck (delivering his newspaper), Doris Day, Jerry Lewis (at his son's birthday party), and David Niven who was afraid I would convert his Anglican son to Catholicism. Grace Kelly sat in front of me at church once. It was hard to pray.

However it was not Hollywood films but novels that fired my imagination. After years of Irish nuns, I lucked into perhaps my most influential teacher in seventh

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and eighth grades: John Mitchell. A nephew of the actor Thomas Mitchell, he was a wry storyteller with a degree in English lit. He had marveled at my elder sister—“smarter than you by far,” he later told me—and, recognizing my ambition, pushed *Great Expectations* on me. He encouraged, then unsparingly critiqued, the short stories I feverishly composed. I discovered Graham Greene at the library. *The Heart of the Matter* and *The Power and the Glory* were books to discuss with my sister and argue about with my father. I’m still reading and writing about Greene, and still discussing books with my sister, who retired after fifty years teaching language and linguistics at the University of Mexico.

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I read a great deal at the beach where I would ride my bike to spend summer days. I threw myself in the waves but never did more than bodysurf. Perhaps intimidated, surfing culture put me off—just like top-twenty tunes which, because I discovered Rachmaninoff and Beethoven thanks to that sister, appalled me. Baseball kept me from being an intolerable snob. When high school presented itself, my parents let me make a mad decision. I entered a junior seminary at the Mission San Fernando. Living away from home, practicing silence and meditation, I carved out an interior life. With time on my hands I read *War and Peace* in a week. Frequent walks in the mission gardens with a friend—to whom I remain attached to this day—taught me far more than the mediocre faculty. It being the year of John F. Kennedy, we debated politics and economics. Without TV or newspapers we explored primary sources—John Maynard Keynes—discovered in the school library where I was assigned to shelve books. Mostly we discussed nineteenth-century Romantics: Emerson, Thoreau, Keats and my favorite, Shelley. Proclaiming self-reliance and rebellion, I left the seminary in my junior year for Loyola high school, where I rose to the top, thanks to the concentration I had developed by learning to study in a room shared with my three boisterous brothers, followed by the disciplined silence of the seminary.

In the years after Sputnik and with my father working at Space Technology Laboratories, I expected to wind up in the sciences. I won an NSF award to spend a high school summer at the University of Nevada exploring atmospheric physics under the direction of Vincent Schaefer, famous for devising cloud-seeding to produce rain. In fact, it was during a driving rainstorm while on an overnight hike high into the Sierras, and literally as lightning struck nearby, that I determined to devote myself to literature, poetry in particular.

Notre Dame proved an ideal place to shape myself for the career I would follow. Technically an English major, I took many philosophy courses, and was admitted to graduate seminars on Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. These were the years of Vatican II. A half dozen of us renegades thought to shake the foundations of this Catholic university, taking over the philosophy society, the literary magazine, staging dada plays, and doing all we could to shock listeners to the campus radio station with our weekly “Bastille Hour.” And shock them I did with Jack Smith’s notorious *Flaming Creatures*. The police had been alerted to that screening and broke into the projection

booth to seize the print from me. It was an unsettling time even during the summers. In July after my sophomore year, I pitched semi-pro for the Watts Giants, my brother and I the only white players on the team during the riots. Fires nearby grew close enough during one game for the manager to send me home.

Despite these extracurricular activities—and the dramatic moments they sometimes entailed—I excelled in classes, which were largely solid and challenging. Still, more inspirational than my professors were several prominent visiting speakers. At the time Notre Dame had a mediocre graduate population. So we bumptious intellectuals were prodded by our professors to take the first row in these lectures. I got to see, and then meet, Paul Tillich, Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, and—crucial to me—Gabriel Marcel. Marcel had taught my sister for a term at Seattle University; the titles of his books, *The Mystery of Being* and *Homo Viator*, stoked the existentialism I proudly upheld, which was considered dangerous by many of Notre Dame's faculty. A decade later, on my very first day outside the US, I read of his death in *Le Monde* and raced to attend his funeral at Saint-Sulpice. Playwright, aesthete, philosopher, he greatly influenced André Bazin and Paul Ricoeur who were about to become my models.

By chance, Notre Dame hosted an active film society which, having sampled LA's art houses, I kept my eye on. I remember the moment when I understood I wanted to put serious films into conversation with novels and philosophy. Alone on campus at Thanksgiving my freshman year, I marked the feast day by eating a hotdog at a lunch counter in South Bend, thinking myself Dostoevsky's Underground Man. (Doubtless I was already planning this autobiography.) That week, with undergraduates gone, a large contingent of nuns roamed campus during some conference of theirs. Recognizing an opportunity, the film society had arranged an Orson Welles festival. I volunteered to take tickets. I watched *Citizen Kane*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Othello*, and *The Trial* three times each. Memorizing films the way I did poetry took me to a new level of aesthetic engagement with what I could see was the art of my era. The brooding threnody of these movies fit the November skies and my mood. I read what I could about Welles and got to know the leaders of the society. I had found my niche.

Returning from LA after Christmas and in September, I would hold forth on the New Wave films that I was able to see as they came out. Once during a single séance, I watched Truffaut's first three features (*400 Blows*, *Shoot the Piano Player*, *Jules and Jim*) back-to-back-to-back. Our faculty advisor, Don Costello, with whom I remain close, was completing his book, *Fellini's Road*. We screened *Juliet of the Spirits* and Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* at his home. We put together a series of Satyajit Ray films and another of recent Polish works, turning out program notes and delivering enthusiastic introductions. A surprising amount of money was made, kept in a box under Geof Bartz' bed. With some of it we bought a 16 mm Bolex on which I made my first film. Geof made his first one too, subsequently going on to win four Academy Awards for editing. Last year he finished the one on Nancy Pelosi. In our tiny basement office, we read and discussed *Cahiers du Cinéma*, which had an English edition for a time.

I wrote criticism for the student paper, meeting Stephanie there, the first female editor they had ever had. I can even recall the title of the column I was working on: “*A Man and a Woman...and a dog.*” Perhaps you remember Claude Lelouch’s hit? I mercilessly demoted it while lifting Agnès Varda’s acerbic *Le Bonheur*, whose even more stylish cinematography poked a hole in the inflated balloon of romantic love. Nevertheless, my romance with Stevie began right there.

My senior year was exceptional, as I was one of three “collegiate scholars” absolved from taking courses to produce instead a year-long thesis under faculty supervision. Don Costello worked with me on my treatise: “Surface and Depth in the Fiction Film.” He encouraged me to send off one chapter for publication, perhaps the most prestigious of my career: *Tri-Quarterly* brought out “The Status of Objects in Antonioni,” putting my name on the cover alongside that of Susan Sontag, John Hollander, E.M. Cioran, and other prominent writers. I wanted more of that.

A Danforth fellowship opened up graduate schools to me. I chose Columbia to test out filmmaking in their MFA program, knowing I could study literary criticism simultaneously. I made insignificant short films while listening to Lionel Trilling and Margaret Mead. Mostly I went to movies, plays, and operas. I saw all twelve Czech films that came over after the Prague Spring and was overwhelmed by Bergman’s *Persona* and even more by *Battle of Algiers*, which set the militant tone of the following months. School was a washout after Martin Luther King’s assassination. We boycotted classes, renounced our degrees, occupied buildings. I was a fellow-traveler yet found myself locked overnight on campus as police on horseback prodded us unsuccessfully to exit the gates. Susan Sontag showed up to cheer us on. My face got caught on camera, pictured on a national Sunday supplement that my mother worried would cost my father his security clearance. And he just then had a major heart attack. I was called back home, told I might be needed thereafter, with siblings still in grade school. The draft board was after me too and, thanks to a low lottery number later on, would aim to induct me. What was I going to do now that Columbia had effectively imploded?

In this most tumultuous period, I needed a father to rely on. And with dramatic timing two appeared simultaneously right in the midst of the strike: Sam Becker and André Bazin. A slim volume of Bazin’s collection *What Is Cinema?* had just come out, arguably the most influential book of film theory ever published. I was stunned by it; where could I pursue such topics and in such a way? The answer jumped out at me as I skimmed the *New York Times* while picketing in front of Low Library. A two-inch squib carried the headline: “PhD thesis written on Single Movie,” and went on: “The University of Iowa has accepted Edward Perry’s 350-page treatise applying neo-aristotelian literary criticism to Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Eclipse*.” Now this was a film I had just published on. I said, “Whoa. I want to go there!” Given my Danforth fellowship, instant acceptance came back from Sam Becker, a top-notch social scientist of what is now called media, who had just taken charge of Iowa’s Department of Speech and Dramatic Art. He would rule that department and support me for over two

decades. We both felt alienated from the unit's name and he would ultimately turn it into the Department of Communication Arts: "Communication" for him, "Arts" for me and my film colleagues, or so I like to think, for he fostered film's independent fiefdom that by administrative happenstance had been funded since the 1950s by the state to produce television shows. No one noticed that when those shows dried up, the money was siphoned off to graduate film studies. Even before Ted Perry's dissertation there had been notable ones on Sergei Eisenstein films and on Pudovkin's film theory, supervised by old-fashioned but rigorous scholars of classical rhetoric and dramatic theory.

I felt allergic to courses in speech and rhetoric and found the department's required seminars in classical, Renaissance, and modern dramatic theory fussy next to the two-semester history of literary theory that Angelo Bertocci taught in Comparative Literature. In any case, cumulatively, these five 16-week seminars dug a deep reservoir that ever since I've used to irrigate my understanding of literary and film theory. The next year I refused to take an obligatory course in persuasion in favor of Robert Scholes on French narrative, Bertocci on structuralism, and Gayatri Spivak on the prose of poets (Rilke, Valéry, Yeats). And so I bolted from the Department of Speech and Dramatic Art to a freewheeling "modern letters" program in English designed by Scholes. Becker didn't begrudge this; in fact, he hired me to teach film theory the next year, when Ted Perry left for Texas, for I boasted the highest reigning film degree in Iowa City after Columbia awarded me the MFA upon receipt of a thesis on Alain Resnais. Also Becker believed in me. Teaching film theory helped protect me from the draft, and it greatly accelerated my dissertation on Bazin, which I completed in spring 1972. English right away offered me a joint appointment that kept me from being tempted by outside offers. Till the end of the century, shuttling between the film program, English, and comp lit, my home would be Iowa. Or I should call it "my home base," for I traveled often, recognizing I needed to encounter a world of films and the world beyond films.

All the while Becker and I would tussle amicably over "communication versus art," and "expression versus persuasion." Naturally persuasion wins by definition but not without spectacular bouts. I still marvel that such a pragmatist as he could encourage me to explore the truly useless uses of film. I recall throwing down the gauntlet at one faculty meeting in the eighties, bellowing the catchphrase that I had just read in Gilles Deleuze: "communication is the inverse of expression," effectively insisting that the more one communicates, the less one expresses, and the more one emits one's feelings, the less information gets across. Now that I think of it, just by bellowing this position, I was giving an example of my point because the point was deeply *felt*, but it wasn't *understood* on the other side of the table.

I trust *you* understand what I mean, because I'm communicating now when I say that I was devoted to the incommunicable, to the sublimely expressive, to what I found so ineffable in films like Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari*. I was entranced



Ugetsu: Tales of the Hazy Moon (Mizoguchi 1953).

by its title that in English reads *The Tale of the Hazy Moon after Rainfall*; to somehow capture the ineffable was my mission. Meanwhile, my closest colleague, Franklin Miller, together with Leighton Pierce (teaching at Yale this term) was making experimental films that were like visual koans. We didn't think film communicated anything important. Instead, it explored the unknowable in the world, in us, and in itself. My belligerent rhetoric—bellowing, let's call it, which is always rhetorical—was part of a department which prized debate. One antagonist screamed back, “Don't talk to me about aesthetics! I had my aesthetics snipped off at birth.” He and I fought like estranged brothers, except in our mutual devotion to Kenneth Burke and to Sam, who was our father, overseeing our department and custodian of a field we dueled to change or, in the case of Film Studies, protect.

For, with my film colleagues Rick Altman and Lauren Rabinovitz, we had built an enviable field that began populating the discipline with our graduates, many of whom are really well-known. Three had a huge effect on Yale: Don Crafton, my first student, helped found the Film Study Center here; Angela Dalle Vacche followed him in History of Art for another nine years; and David Rodowick bent American Studies and Comparative Literature toward cinema, working with Brigitte Peucker to create the film major in the mid-80s. Yale had long been ready for advanced film study. Geoffrey Hartman who had been at Iowa just before I got there remembers trying to start serious films studies here. My Iowa colleague Tom Whitaker, who became chair

of English at Yale, was a specialist in drama and was sympathetic. There have always been objections to film from traditional literary scholars, but Yale was hardly traditional, and it was easy to see the impact of Yale literary theory on the kind of film scholarship I stood for. I had worked with a very young Gayatri Spivak when she was translating *Of Grammatology*; Derrida came out regularly. Iowa felt part of the Yale literary project. After all, René Wellek had co-authored the foundational *Theory of Literature* with Austin Warren at Iowa. And so Sam Becker, ever a father, sanctioned my move here – encouraged it, in fact – having sent his own accomplished children and grandchildren here to be educated. Craig is currently the Ribicoff Visiting Lecturer at the Law School where he once was editor of the *Yale Law Journal*.

I had far greater struggles communicating with my own father than with Becker or with deans at Iowa and Yale, especially during the Vietnam years. He was an electrical engineer who was in fact a communications expert. Had I even glanced at his work, most of which was hidden because classified, I would have noted some rapport between what he was doing then and what I stand for now. Both of us cared about using technology to probe the universe. In the manifesto *What Cinema Is!* that I published a decade ago, inverting Bazin's famous title *What Is Cinema?* and substituting an exclamation for his question mark, I argue that film's primary value comes in the mode not of spectacle, nor of communication, nor certainly of entertainment, but of discovery. All its other values are minor in comparison because persuasion and the transmission of ideas are common to all media. Cinema probes the night sky of the audio-visual universe to bring us information from phenomena that without its technological sensors we would be ignorant of, putting humans in contact with the nonhuman.

Now my father had in fact been in charge of the communications system on the Mariner 4 space probe, the mission that provided the first pictures of Mars in 1965. I remember him heading to Cal Tech's Jet Propulsion Laboratory to watch those pictures slowly fill in. Although the Earth is just twelve to fifteen minutes away from Mars by speed of light, it took four days for the three-watt transmitter to release the twenty pictures that the mariner had captured and stored on its four-track tape recorder. Things were really primitive. The transmitter could only manage eight bits a second, meaning that it took eight hours to fill in the two hundred lines of a single, highly pixelated image. This is discovering! This is registering the unknown. This, in fact, is the mode of cinema, as far as I can tell. I wouldn't consider it communication, and I wouldn't consider it television. I don't know what Sam Becker would have said. I should have asked him.

Around 1969 my path was set, first by my father who had insisted I work assiduously to do something exceptional in whatever field, second by Becker who set me free to shape a nascent film program and gave me leave (and leaves) to write what I wanted, and third by Bazin, who I immediately knew would make that career significant, both through his two thousand six hundred articles (which I collected and am

still translating) and in his brilliant assessment of cinema's unique status as an impure art, a mortal yet incomparable phenomenon.

Not long ago I realized that my father, Sam Becker, and Bazin were born within five years of each other and that all three were involved in some way with electronic communication. In 1950, the year Sam became an instructor in broadcasting at Iowa, I was five and distinctly remember my father assembling our family's first TV, with its ten-inch-diameter round screen. It's possible I could have watched a program that originated from Iowa's television center, which Sam soon ran. The year 1950 was also when Bazin started writing about TV, since TB confined him to bed at thirty-two years old. I've translated thirty of his many articles on TV. Of course during the fifties, I simply consumed that medium like every kid, until I petulantly stopped consuming it. I gave it up for cinema when I learned how to drive in 1961 and could head to those art theaters. That was right at the beginning of the French New Wave. Then came college with that thriving cine club and no TV to compete with it. So I've been a snob about this ever since, snubbing my fathers. I applauded Chris Marker who claimed, "It only counts if the people you watch are larger than you are" and Jean-Luc Godard, who added, "When you go to the cinema you look up. When you watch television you look down." This has been my confession: to stand sanctimoniously on the other side of both television and communication.

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It has not been easy to watch my field, including our program at Yale, recently change its name and mission from "Cinema Studies" to "Film and Media Studies." But Yale is doing it right. Our most recent chair, John Peters, whom I helped hire away from Iowa where he, too, was a son of Sam Becker, is a deeply philosophical humanist. He and I team-taught the program's graduate "Foundations" course in 2021. It was a great experience for the two of us and for the nearly twenty graduate students, perhaps because both of us teach literature as well and instinctively foster the humanistic disciplines of interpretation and history rather than the sociology of mass culture and new media that saturates the Facebook generation.

I believe the cinema, like me, needs a range of arts within which to thrive. That's why I have appreciated and enjoyed such happy work environments. At Iowa I was close enough to the Writers' Workshop that Jorie Graham and I conferred about our leaving Iowa City at the same moment. John Irving had written *The World According to Garp* in my house during my first year abroad. I went to Jack Leggett's up the block after Anthony Burgess read from his newest book. T. C. Boyle often sat beside me on the bus to campus. Leggett brought Michael Cunningham and Denis Johnson into my view. In the 70s, Iowa was also a hotbed of the avant-garde. The museum held a major dada archive and put on Fluxus events. Iowa won a large Rockefeller grant for its Center for New Performing Arts, bringing Robert Wilson for a time and letting loose my filmmaking colleague Franklin Miller, with his video quantizer. The postmodern novelist Robert Coover shot a 16 mm movie right next to my basement classroom, premiering it memorably in his living room, close by our home.

So you can see why I might turn down an offer to remain at UCLA in 1978 after having taught there for a year. It had been a great year too, my parents happily housing the five of us since only my youngest brother remained. There were dinners with Truffaut and with Alain Robbe-Grillet and invitations to publish interviews in the *LA Times* when European directors arrived in town, something that happened weekly, it seemed. Screenings of rare films kept me driving along Sunset Boulevard to campus even on days I wasn't teaching. I realized that remaining there would mean driving into an endless tunnel of cinema, surrounded by nothing but films and film culture. Whereas I needed the poetry readings at Prairie Lights bookstore, and the classical and experimental music and art that was so convenient and so much a part of everyday life in Iowa City. I also needed to breathe and discuss new ideas, something I did incessantly with the prominent film scholars I was allowed to bring for eight weeks from Europe each fall, and from the short term stays of Fredric Jameson, who befriended me for lending him hard-to-find Taiwanese videos, and Natalie Zemon Davis, to whom I gave a rare betamax copy of *Les Camissards* about which she would write a wonderful essay.

I have found here at Yale much the same naturally broad cultural life. I still talk regularly to Jameson, for instance (at his farmhouse in Killingworth), and still attend lectures and symposia across many disciplines, far more than I can handle. Stevie and I go to lots of concerts, early music especially, plus the Baroque opera. As for variety in movies, almost nightly we can see something in one of the three theaters Yale has equipped with 35 mm and DCP. Since our program's faculty and grad students all combine film studies with another discipline, my horizon expands with the films and filmmakers they lobby to bring to campus. Each fall, one or another brilliant newcomer arrives with expertise in some area of cinema I am sure to become enthralled with. Film series are proposed and funded; discussions follow the films. And everyone, fueled by common experiences, pursues distinct lines of thought and research. Thanks to the brilliance and versatility of so many of our doctoral students, this formula has kept the program vibrant, right up to the Covid era. The field has profited from these PhDs, so many of whom now hold leadership positions where they can keep cinema crucial to the humanities while strategically decentered.

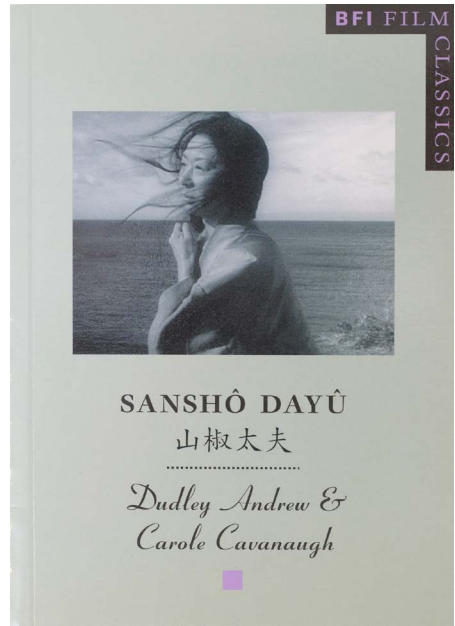
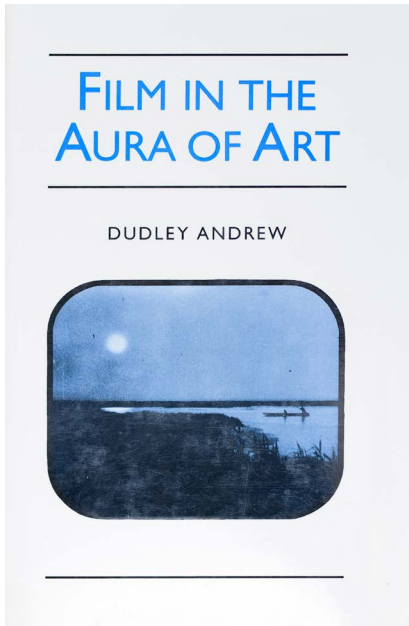
Always looking beyond the American culture of which I am undeniably a product, I have often relied on team-teaching. Right away at Iowa I taught expressionism with a well-known German professor; then with Janet Altman (a Yale PhD in French), came Romance from Chrétien de Troyes through *Les Liaisons dangereuses* to Eric Rohmer. Out of my depth, I nevertheless taught the visual and musical arts of Vienna and Paris with composer Richard Hervig. Most central were the several classes Steve Ungar and I offered on Popular Front Paris, resulting in our Harvard Press book. Most of what I know of Indian culture came from Sanskrit scholar Philip Lutgendorf when we offered perhaps America's first course on Bollywood. At Yale I've had wonderful experiences not just with John Peters but also with Chris Miller on Francophone African lit and

film, with John MacKay, and several times with the redoubtable David Bromwich. Teaching at the margins of what I know, crossing into new territories that others command has been a necessity for me, broadening my understanding of what lies at the edges of what I care about. For that's where cinema sits, at the edges of art, even slightly outside it, as something inhuman, and thus not quite an art at all. This is why my colleagues have tolerated me. Cinema lures them because it is off-center and, at its best, intractable and seemingly unteachable; it resists customary ways of seeing and thinking about art in culture. Congenitally bound to a physical world in flux, it is full of surprises.

My own first instinct, going back to my undergraduate thesis, was to domesticate unruly films with centuries of poetics, effectively letting literary criticism colonize this new continent I was intent to explore, fleshing out symbols in *The Virgin Spring* and *La Dolce Vita*, graphing the shape of *Citizen Kane's* flashback structure while enumerating the reinforcing layers of its texture (receding perspective, reverberating sound, dark lighting, darker music). But something remains unexplained in great films, something I had felt immediately in that initial contact with Welles. Certain sequences, like the one of Isabel's death in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, defy literary and art-historical analysis. How did Welles script the shifting light and visual movement that doesn't just recount the fact of her death and its impact on Major Amberson and her son, George, but physically expresses this loss as a vertiginous effect that Booth Tarkington's novel inspired but cannot convey.

French thinkers and filmmakers have brought me close to understanding what I'm after. Roland Barthes was looking for ineffable literary effects in the 1970s when I shook his hand while taking a seminar with Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov. Formerly a narrative structuralist, Barthes sought to corner literary specificity somewhere between narratology and figuration. He confessed that film finally eluded him, but he showed me where to look. The haunting finale of *Ugetsu*, for instance, could readily be approached by standard narratology, given the film's Buddhist balance between character oppositions, between light and dark, presence and absence, rises and falls, departures and returns. But a surplus remains that structuralism could not account for; nor could the powerful psychoanalysis of the day, as enticing as I found its ingenious readings, explain what feels most important in *Ugetsu*, in Welles, in *Sunrise*. In 1984 I published analyses of the surplus of meaning in these and six other films. This collection, *Film in the Aura of Art*, was bookended with chapters on hermeneutics and on how and why to approach film.

I took my hermeneutics straight from Paul Ricoeur, who seemed ever to have gotten where I needed to go without my knowing it, stage after stage. I discovered him at each of his steps: first his writings on symbolism, then his critique of structuralism; then his Yale Terry lectures on psychoanalysis and its limits; then came his hermeneutics, the drive to comprehend a fertile text after explaining what you could of its composition. The goal: to produce new meaning in contact with a text, including the



Covers from *Film in the Aura of Art* (1986) and *Sansho Dayu* (2000).



The seduction of art (*Ugetsu*, Mizoguchi 1953)

accretion of earlier interpretations that have become part of the text. I believe interpretation establishes how a text from the recent or distant past changes the reader (or viewer) in the present moment while being itself changed, since every new reader projects it into the future. That was, and remains, my goal in studying films. As for teaching them, Ricoeur again crystallized my beliefs, this time in the very title of his book *Soi-même comme un autre* (*Oneself as Another*). To be in a screening room here at Yale, watching films from elsewhere in the world, I tell my students to let themselves be “as” another, thereby changing the way things look for a time, while not losing themselves as they expand in the process. The “as” in Ricoeur’s title is the “as” of metaphor, and metaphor, poets know, alters the hue and feeling of an entire field with its startling, seemingly inappropriate overlay.

I was present at the University of Chicago in 1975 when Derrida and Ricoeur sparred memorably over metaphor. Whereas at Yale, Paul de Man and Jameson were making allegory the key literary figure, since it confers on the reader a certain power over the text, I stuck with metaphor and the continual unfolding of meaning from within the text’s fictional attribution. I made this clear when I followed *The Major Film Theories*, my one best-seller, with *Concepts in Film Theory*. In that book, the concepts of figuration and interpretation crown a series of chapters on perception, representation, signification, narration, identification, and adaptation. Bazin was the hero of *Major Film Theories*, Ricoeur of *Concepts in Film Theory*. Thankfully both men outlasted the bashing each received during the 1970s period of “theory terror” when so-called “ideology critique” excoriated any hint of belief in creativity, in artistic genius, or in the preternatural and unpredictable power of a text. My biography of Bazin, despite or perhaps because of its rather Franciscan tone, helped resuscitate him in his native country when its 1983 translation opened some previously jaundiced eyes, particularly those of Serge Daney, the second most influential French film critic.

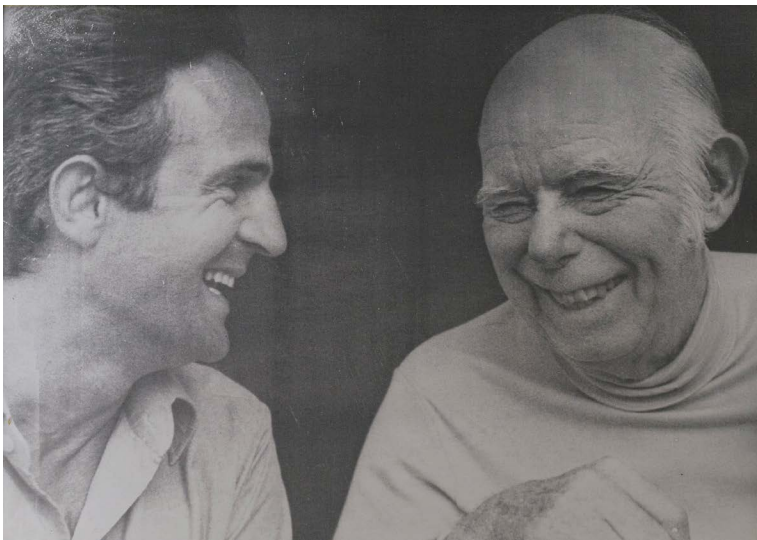
Daney spoke the sentence that has become my mantra: “Cinema has everything to do with reality, but reality is not what you see represented.” The screen holds projections of traces grabbed from our audio-visual surround that, coordinated up by a filmmaker, point somewhere beyond the screen toward a truth of relations; we should look deeply into the screen so as to follow its traces and fathom what lies beyond it. The truest cinema is the least spectacular. Bazin once said of the amateur 1951 film *Kon Tiki* that it was at its summit when there was nothing to see on screen, when the cameraman had to put down his 16 mm Bolex to pick up a harpoon and defend the raft against a charging killer whale. The blank screen, he observed, was the very image of danger. It would be the same with other austere films, like *Diary of a Country Priest*, also 1950. His brilliant essay on Bresson’s style moves toward its conclusion this way:

In the disappearance of the image and its replacement simply by the text of the novel, we experience irrefutable aesthetic evidence, a sublime achievement of pure cinema. Just as the blank page of Mallarmé and the silence of Rimbaud

is language at the highest state, the screen, free of images and handed back to literature, is the triumph of cinematographic realism. The black cross on the white screen, as awkwardly drawn as on the average memorial card, the only trace left by the assumption of the image, is a witness to something the reality of which is itself but a sign.

Wanting to understand the man who could write that, wanting to understand this masterpiece of the cinema, and wanting to understand the cinema as somehow beyond or beneath art, I needed to get to France. My pathway there had been prepared by François Truffaut as early as 1973, when we met during one of his annual trips to visit Jean Renoir. Owing everything to Bazin who had extricated him from jail, adopted him, and launched his career as a critic, Truffaut, having learnt of my dissertation, cleared the way for me. Legends of the New Wave like Eric Rohmer, Alain Resnais, and Chris Marker gave me generous interviews. After its French translation Truffaut flew me to Cannes where I sat beside Robert Bresson during the first screening of his final film, *L'Argent*.

Meanwhile I was using my semesters in Paris to watch every film from the 30s available. After 1984, I had moved on from “pure film theory” and wanted to go beyond interpreting masterworks as isolated texts. How do films open up in the light of the culture in which they incubated, and how do they in turn open up cultural history? My brother Paul, who had been my catcher when I was pitching, finished his PhD in physiology, by happenstance, at Iowa. Fluent in Japanese, he co-authored a sourcebook with me on Kenji Mizoguchi. My love of *Ugetsu* only deepened in recognizing its place in Japanese culture and arts. I would later meet Mizoguchi’s constant scriptwriter and cameraman. In short, I became a critic working with historical and living archives. My most scholarly works are unquestionably two thick books on French film and culture during the Popular Front. I pray they are not too academic.



Jean Renoir and
François Truffaut

Jean Renoir is the hero of these books and I count meeting him the highpoint of my career. Stephanie and I sat on a couch beside him as we watched a film I had brought to him that I had discovered in the UCLA archives. This was in fact a film he had started to make but had to abandon when Mussolini exiled him from Italy: *Tosca*. He had never seen the sequences he had shot, nor what his beloved assistant, Carl Koch, who carried a German passport, had completed. A small Degas painting was taken down to reveal a square hole in the wall through which the projection light could shine. And so there I was showing his own film to Jean Renoir while glancing sideways at his aged profile and, on the wall beyond him, at the painting *Jean as a Huntsman*, one of his father's masterpieces. "This is continuity," I thought: Renoir as a young boy in 1902, Renoir in 1939 when he was in my estimation the most brilliant and perspicacious artist alive, and Renoir in 1978, partially paralyzed by a stroke, but still a font of creativity, dictating novels that would be published. I could sense the continuity of his life, touching it as I did for those ninety minutes. And I could hope for some continuity in my own life and for its continued relevance. I've tried to convey that here today.

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Notes

- 1 Serge Daney, "The films that watched us grow up" in *Perseverance* (Paris: P.O.L., 1994), a phrase taken from Jean-Louis Schefer in *Ordinary Man of Cinema*. (NY: Semiotext(e), 2016).