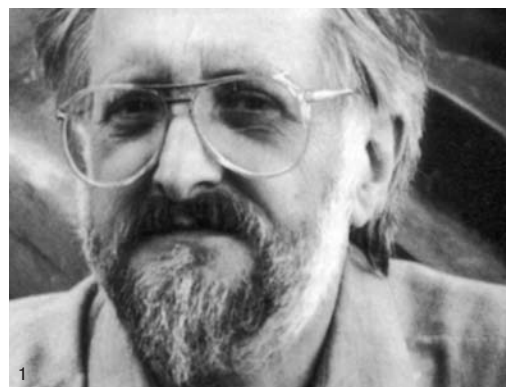


A CRITICAL VOICE



Within a few years of its publication in 1958, the question posed by Andre Bazin's collected works – *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* – would prove unanswerable. The growing visibility of new cinemas, Indian and Japanese especially, at the European film festivals of the 1950s was a hint that his attempt to define cinema's 'essence' – located in the tradition of Renoir and Rossellini – would shortly become untenable. Meanwhile the narrative that Bazin had conceived for Hollywood – with such 'post-Wellesian' directors as Nicholas Ray and Anthony Mann steadily increasing the studio film's alleged level of realism – was itself turning, as Jon Savage has said of pop after the mid-Sixties, from an arrow to a loop. Meeting television's challenge by returning to its roots in spectacular entertainment, Hollywood began to make life hard for the directors so beloved of Bazin and his young protégés at *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Soon, Mann and Ray would be lost to the producers of biblical and classical epics in Europe. *Cahiers'* favourite Hawks' film, *Rio Bravo* (1959), looked less like a Western than a work of post-modern camp; Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (the ultimate 'loop movie'), meanwhile, felt, as David Thomson has noted, "like a master's sudden onset of horror at his own control".

By the mid-Sixties, the explosion of new cinemas - Brazilian, Czech,

New York - and new forms - a slow zoom across a room; a series of stills; a girl and a gun – made the Bazinian quest for a cinematic 'essence' distinctly Quixotic. What was cinema? Anything with sprocket holes.

As cinema was being redefined, its position in the culture was being called into question. It was clear at the end of the Fifties, as VF Perkins argued in *Film as Film*, that "such pictures as Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and Michaelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* offered carrion to the culture-vulture as rich and ripe as any provided by painting, music or literature".

It was this cultural transformation as much as the influence of the *Cahiers* critics – magnified by their success as film-makers from 1958-59 – that revitalised film criticism in Britain by inspiring the young critics – like Perkins and his colleagues at *Movie* magazine - and creating a market for informed exegesis not catered for by the established publication *Sight and Sound*.

Yet more crucial for the study of film in the long term was the debate, initiated in England by such post-'56 cultural critics and historians as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and EP Thompson, and followed up by New Left intellectuals such as Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, over the relationship of the mass media to society at large. This question, initially marginal in film studies, found a rare outlet in the *New Left Review*, where Peter Wollen, writing as Lee Russell, wrote a series of inspired 'structuralist' auteur profiles from 1963.

Within a decade, following the import of reams of French theoretical writings, and nurtured by Whannel's BFI Education Department, this manner of writing about film, would come to dominate the vanguard of what was now called film theory.

It was in this very fertile context, characterised by small, partisan magazines and a lively repertory culture, that Raymond Durnat devised his postgraduate thesis on film aesthetics, a work, begun in 1960, that would find its way on to the pages of *Films and Filming* in the winter of '64/'65, and eventually into hard covers in 1967's *Films & Feelings*. Like all of Durnat's subsequent writings, the thesis belongs to no one school of thought, inhabiting the intellectual no-man's land between the author-focused writings that characterised the *Cahiers* of the late '50s, and the audience-fixed approach taken up, in the BFI's *Screen* magazine especially, in the '70s.

If these schools were opposed in rhetoric, both very much formed by their material circumstances – for the former an embattled position on the Parisian centre-right, in a commercial magazine that, coupled

with the writers' youth and obsessive tendencies, led to grand partisan statements; for the *Screen* school, the post-'68 retreat of radical intellectuals into the academy – Durnat saw them as complementary opposites. His consistent theme is the interaction – "clash of heads" - between audience and film, critic and auteur.

This approach could itself be said to have some basis in material circumstances: in the early to mid-'60s many of the new movies were directed by former critics – not only the films of the nouvelle vague, but also those of such disparate talents as Antonioni and Lindsay Anderson. If this phenomenon accounts for the staggering formal experimentation of the era, it might also explain the sensitivity to formal issues that characterise the best film criticism of the period.

That's not to say that the vast majority of film criticism of the time



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was not fighting old battles, or mired in irrelevance: the primary arbiters of taste in England, especially at *Sight and Sound*, failed to rise to the stylistic challenge set by the new movies. While auteurism, bred with local traditions (for example Robin Wood's Leavisite championing of *Cahiers* auteur-heroes Hitchcock and Hawks), had made some impact on this journal and others, its influence had led not to an appreciation of cinematic style as directorial signature, but rather to the attribution of the 'authorial' tag to the 'worldview' expressed in a given director's work.

It was *Sight and Sound's* failure to connect the two concepts - summed up in Penelope Houston's dictum: "cinema is about human relationships, not about spatial relationships" - that Durnat's thesis set out to counter. His rejoinder - that Houston ruled out "the possibility, surely obvious, that since cinema is a visual medium, that spatial relationships might themselves be metaphors for human relationships" - tore up the false style/content dichotomy held in place by the orthodox critics of the time as surely as the *Cahiers* school had exploded the high/low division in the previous decade.

Durnat was not alone in his revolt against *Sight and Sound's* moral and stylistic Puritanism. The devotion of the young writers of *Movie* to such allegedly 'decorative' aspects of cinema as camera style aroused the scorn of their older

colleagues. Wollen/Russell's work, published at around the same time as Durnat's thesis, by concentrating on the sets of thematic oppositions found in the work of auteurs – for example the dialectic in Hawks' work between his 'confident' adventure movies and 'humiliating' comedies – rather than the repetitive elements that constitute a 'worldview', pioneered a critical approach that showed up the pusillanimity of *Sight and Sound's* recourse to unexamined subjective judgements dressed up as 'immutable' humanist truths.

Durnat, who wrote a celebrated assessment of Michael Powell for *Movie* as O.O.Green in 1965, shared the eye for stylistic nuance that characterised the magazine; but unlike his younger colleagues, and in common with Wollen/Russell, he was perhaps less concerned with auteurs as auteurs, and more interested in what they had to say: "*Kiss Me Deadly* isn't important because it tells us anything about an individual called Robert Aldrich. Aldrich is important because *Kiss Me Deadly* reveals something about America, and about us all".

And yet, while one never finds in Durnat the kind of moralistic concern for directors' worldviews that one finds in Robin Wood (1965 model) or Pauline Kael (whom he termed, with devastating accuracy, a "social worker manqué"), neither does he provide the kind of 'scientific' analysis of narrative structures that Wollen, especially

1. Raymond Durnat
2. *Psycho* dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, 1960
3. *W R* dir. by Dusan Makaveyev, 1971
4. *Kiss Me Deadly* dir. by Robert Aldrich, 1955



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after his conversion to semiotics after 1968, aimed towards. This refusal to systematize his thoughts to degree required by most academic publishers helps to explain – along with his customary factual errors, crazed digressions, and weakness for the gonzo-esque coinage – why Durnat was never going to find the theory-led film discourse of the Seventies quite as welcoming an arena as the more liberal critical zeitgeist of the 1960s.

That said, by engaging with, rather than rejecting, film theory, championing the notion of "montage-within-the-shot" against more orthodox readings of Eisenstein, Durnat made a far more productive contribution to the debates of the era than his long book drought from the mid-'70s might suggest. His 1999 monograph on Makavejev's *WR: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) is a case in point: while the subject is pure *Screen* fodder, conforming as it does to Wollen's 1972 definition of the revolutionary 'counter-cinema', only a critic as intellectually supple as Durnat could have brought out its full richness. His last book, 2002's *A Long Hard Look At 'Psycho'* might well be the most convincing argument against the idea of an ordered film 'grammar' to date.

The absence of dogma is what makes Durnat's work essential for any lover of film. While dogma of the sort carried by the earlier *Sight and Sound* is more or less absent today,

film culture is under an ever-present threat from dogma's cousin, consensus. No critic or theorist since Bazin has set out to define cinema's essence, yet Bazin's ideas, modified, are dangerously widespread; Kiarostami's Bazinian long takes, location shooting and 'authenticity' are very much a part of what makes him the critic's auteur of choice. In the face of such unanimity (even if one is in sympathy with it), one longs for a Durnatian broadside, like the one he provided for a generally sycophantic *Movie* reader on Jean-Luc Godard in 1969: "Godard wears dark glasses to hide from the world the fact that he's in a permanent state of ocular masturbation, rubbing himself off against anything and everything on which his eye alights."

Cinema no longer has to fight to be considered an art-form, yet its critical constituency is catastrophically narrow; as the current editor of *Sight and Sound*, Nick James, has said, to appreciate the full richness of contemporary cinema "requires a knowledge of cinema... that's difficult to acquire unless you can import DVDs, are fortunate enough to live in London or visit the major film festivals." This narrowness, which almost guarantees critical consensus, is a malady to which Durnat's conception of a kind of maverick 'ideal' viewer, "l'homme moyen morale", is the ideal remedy. And if viewing films at the festivals has in some quarters become a kind of act - Cannes 2002 brought home variations on the soliloquy "to see (*The Gangs of New York* showreel) or not to see (*Irreversible*)" - Durnat's performance - "the Aznavour role in *Tirez sur le Pianiste* as it would be if Jerry Lewis were interpreting it" – is as inspirational as it is singular. **V**

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