

Apologia and Auto-Critique

by Raymond Durnat

Raymond Durnat was sent the preceding review of his criticism, and responded with these "footnotes." Italicized quotations are from the Rosenbaum article.

Biography and bibliography. I was a staff writer for Associate British Pictures at Elstree Studios, did postgraduate research in film at the Slade School of Fine Art, and lectured in film at the Royal

College of Art. My Renoir book will be published by the University of California Press; Studio-Vista has announced *Sexual Alienation in the Cinema* for April of this year; and Faber & Faber is publishing a thorough revision of the *Films and Filming Hitchcock* series as *The Strange World of Alfred Hitchcock* this autumn. As for the *Movie Sternberg* piece, I'd been asked by another interested party to write for *Movie* anonymously only, so what looks like nutty self-indulgence was my only way of getting a credit out of it.

Punctuation. "Uncertainly placed commas"—I can't proofread—"and quotation marks"—this was the result of an unhappy early compromise between my academic bent and journalistic constraints. Quotation marks were meant to imply "I know this is a loose use of the word, but it has sense." Now I either define it or don't, and trust the reader to get the idea.

School of thought. I was close to *Positif*, especially in its 1960-'67 period. Surely *Positif* is an established school, and surely I'm within their pale, albeit writing from an Anglo-Saxon tradition (nearer I.A. Richards than F.R. Leavis).

Shifting strategies vs. systematic pursuit. The business of criticism seems to me to be "matters arising," and naturally varies from film to film. I'd rather be wrong but open up a perspective than be prematurely right, i.e., dismiss opportunities for the full intellectual, sensual, emotional experience of reflective hesitation—which seems to me to be of the essence of art, as opposed to brusquer communication (e.g., moral saws, the human sciences).

Convincing the reader to "go back to" LI'L ABNER. Is "going back to it" the only response a critic can hope for? I had a different end in view: to spell out some of the ways in which comedy calls on reality. Lawrence Alloway, of all people, couldn't understand what I was trying to do in the not dissimilar piece on THIS ISLAND EARTH, a film which I've no particular enthusiasm for, either. I was out to show that there are more meanings in ordinary meanings—of the shallow type required for entertainment—than usually spotted by critics, who imagine that only important art can involve people and make poetic and ideological points. I'm looking at movies which are run-of-the-mill yet saturated with something too shallow really to be myth (in the full sense), but too ambivalent to be merely cliché. I'm trying a kind of micro-criticism, more concerned with the molecules of a film's meaning than with the implications of its meaning.

"Nonessential" concepts of good and bad, right and wrong. No, they're essential, but no more so than some other non-moral spiritual axes. Does my work really give an impression of amorality?

Surely I often talk morally, even in the case of THIS ISLAND EARTH.

Godard's ocular masturbation. This passage of mine was rude so that the reader *wouldn't* take it too solemnly as a moral point. At that time, the consensus was taking Godard as a sort of sage of solipsism. I wanted to say that his films weren't just about triumphs over the medium, but about a predicament too absurdist to be tragic in the traditionally dignified way. And, after all, he did right-, or rather left-about turn intellectually soon afterwards. This sort of Portnoy's Complaint of the bourgeois intelligentsia is the shadow side of the "reflective hesitation" I was advocating earlier—hence the suddenly violent metaphor! Besides, those same "Asides" do describe Godard's first two features as "masterpieces," which is high praise, surely.

"Durgnat isolates mythic and archetypal structures that bind the two into an indissoluble whole." The danger is of binding them into an over-schematized, stylized whole—merely a set of conventions. But the alternative sense, of "baseline possibilities" within which each audience reacts differently, is neatly suggested by your "court" metaphor.

"Kael's eye is on the players, while Durgnat's is on the court." I wonder if three subjects for moral judgment are being telescoped here: (1) the moral impact on an audience of a film (what real spectators, in groups, make of it, in fact); (2) the moral assumptions and conclusions of a film when fully and correctly apprehended by a kind of ideal spectator, an *ami inconnu*; and (3) Durgnat's own moral attitudes. Obviously, they interconnect in his writing. But so far as (1) is concerned, Durgnat's moral polarity revolves around the question of honesty and insight (good) as against mystification and easy cliché (bad). Thus, Wilder's STALAG 17 is a better description of capitalist processes than Stevens' GIANT. But nihilist or Fascist films may be good insofar as they undermine everyone else's complacencies, and state uncomfortable truths.

Durgnat's "unwavering hatred" for Sight and Sound. I'd say "consistent disagreement"; I hope I don't read as if I'm negative and rooted in hatred. It's true that *Sight and Sound* has often given me a useful chopping block, and that it did deserve attack, if only because it was both so generally accepted, and itself so extremely destructive and dismissive, during its very bad period (1956-'68, roughly). Probably there isn't any sustained focus for my work, in the sense of an overriding preoccupation, because, like your traditional liberal humanist, I'm interested in everything to do with art—and with art because it has to do with human experience. *Nihil humanum alienum a me puto*, if my rusty Latin is correct.

I try to follow where films go, and prefer films which persuade me that they are right and I was wrong in my initial reflexes about them. Inevitably, the tone of my "moral judgment" is somewhat muted, not to say mellowed.

Freud-Wood and Jung-Durgnat on BELLE DE JOUR. I know the contrast is only an analogy, but I'm nearer Freud than Wood in my pessimism about moralistic rationalization, and about any hope of civilizing the unconscious. Wood, like F.R. Leavis, is Puritanical, and I'm not; but it's worth remembering that Puritanism is only one moral position, and a minority one. I suspect that Buñuel's mixture of Jesuitical casuistry, inverted Marxist "pessimism of the intelligence," and the Surrealist inversion of Freud is beyond the capabilities of the Puritan position, however evolved. To understand Buñuel, you have either to be innocent of Puritanism, or to have taken it beyond the point where its internal incoherences appear. Otherwise, you either dismiss it or just goggle at the shock and riddle of it all.

"It is hardly necessary to agree with Buñuel's definitions of normality in order to accept the film." I agree with you, but your tone implies that normal people can hardly be expected to agree with Buñuel's definitions of normality. I think many normal people would. We know that his "normality" involves a fullness of passion, an *amour fou*, a "real"ization of the essence of dream-life, as against hypochondriacal notions of emotional decorum. If you can accept Marlene Dietrich's saloon girl in *DESTINY*, or Norman Mailer on the wisdom of prostitutes, you can accept Buñuel's *Séverine*. Buñuel's film is full of saddening ironies, and I'm sure he knows it. It's sad and intricate because we can sense that *Séverine* and her husband should accept her repressed life—and they don't, forcing her to live it out in that imperfect, indeed tragic, way. Buñuel is inviting us to consider the myopia, errors, and cowardice which everyone in the film shows, at one time or another—just like us—all tangled up with misdirected hopes and acts of courage—just like us—and ending in frustration—which is common enough.

Buñuel has Séverine's "deepest desires gratified." I don't quite see her afternoons as quite so fine as "deepest" might suggest, although I agree with your general drift. A major reason for art is to enable us to share—and sensitize ourselves to—both the surface and the structure of experiences existing on temperamental and moral coordinates different from our own. It's what you're slowest to approve of that teaches you most. (I don't say that whatever you disapprove of is therefore good.)

Robin Wood's "traditional standpoint" toward "positive values." Do you really

think that there is just one tradition of positive values in our culture? Then how do you square, say, George Eliot, Nietzsche, Kafka, Bessie Smith? I'd have thought that one of our problems was precisely the cynicism induced by our multitude of conflicting moral and spiritual cultures, and the very great difficulty of creating a synthesis which is neither weak nor narrow.

Rosenbaum on Wood on BIGGER THAN LIFE. Oh, I obviously must see *BIGGER THAN LIFE*!

Wood's "Sunday school lessons." Perhaps Wood does take some moral as a precondition of a film's being morally satisfying, but he does distinguish the full experience from the moral summary thereof.

Wood and Durgnat "could learn a lot from each other." I've disagreed with Robin Wood throughout my Hitchcock book. I hope I've done so in a way that shows how much I respect him, and how much I've learned from him—which is a lot. Critics presumably hope to be learned from (or else why write?) and to learn (or else why read?). It would be interesting to know whether Robin Wood has ever learned anything from Raymond Durgnat, or whether he thinks Durgnat is as morally sick as Rosenbaum's account implies he ought. Certainly another neo-Leavisite, David Holbrook, thinks Durgnat is revolting ("d for dirt, or Durgnat, section"). I wrote about *BELLE DE JOUR* with-

out knowing Robin Wood was writing about it too, and remain unconvinced, along Rosenbaum's lines.

Yet the feeling persists that Rosenbaum's real interest is his "friendly enemy" relationship with Wood, and that the Durgnat bit is a framework around it! Perhaps Durgnat disappears behind his own eclecticism, and even the critical *persona* can't be seen—or seems relatively sloppy and boring. I'd hate to think it really was!