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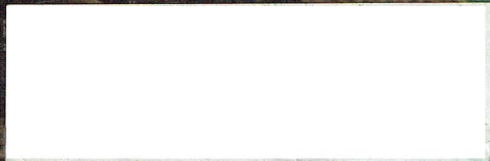
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by Adolph Green

WHY DO CRITICS LOVE
TRASHY FILMS?

ALAN ALDA'S
NEW DIRECTION



In 1937 the New York Film Critics Circle selected *The Life of Emile Zola* as best picture of the year. *Gentleman's Agreement* took the top honor in 1947. A decade later, in 1958, Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones* won the critics' prize, and Kramer was named as best director. In 1967 the award went to *In the Heat of the Night*.

These titles are representative: For a thirty-year period, influential critics in this country tended to favor socially conscious message pictures—heavy-handed but well-meaning liberal tracts exposing anti-Semitism, racial prejudice, and the plight of the oppressed. By contrast, consider one recent movie that received an especially glowing set of reviews from sophisticated New York critics: Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*.

"The first great American movie of the eighties," declared David Denby in *New York* magazine. "One of the most sheerly enjoyable films of recent years," agreed the *New Yorker's* Pauline Kael. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* was only slightly less rapturous: "a witty, romantic, psychological horror film... one succeeding spectacular effect after another." Does anyone need to be convinced that *Dressed to Kill*—which opens with Angie Dickinson masturbating in the shower and ends with a transvestite killer slitting Nancy Allen's throat—is a very different kind of movie from *The Life of Emile Zola* or *Gentleman's Agreement*? Critical taste has clearly gone through a few upheavals.

Another case in point: At the end of 1978, Pauline Kael called the remake of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* "the American movie of the year." Others echoed her praise of this horror film, and in their reviews all the critics referred to the original 1956 film, directed by Don Siegel, as a "classic." The critics in 1956 had a different opinion of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*—or, to be more accurate, they had no opinion at all. As far as I can tell, Siegel's film was not reviewed in a single major publication—not in the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, or the *New Yorker*. Just twenty-five years ago, this "classic" film was considered beneath critical discussion.

In any art there are reevaluations as time passes, but there is also a general agreement on what has value and what does not. That sense of continuity does not exist in movie criticism. For the most part, today's critics are more knowledge-

The new critical fashion: pulp, sleazy, lurid, and decadent as terms of praise.

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able and more passionately devoted to film than critics of the fifties. But their taste isn't necessarily more reliable, and their track record probably won't turn out to be much better. It's worth emphasizing that critics are *always* supremely confident of their opinions, and in another twenty-five years the preferences of today's reviewers may seem every bit as shortsighted as the tastes of yesterday's reviewers seem to us now.

In this analysis of critical fashions, I am observing general trends, and clearly there are exceptions. Some recent critical favorites, like *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Ordinary People*, aren't fundamentally different from the liberal message pictures that pleased critics in the past. On the whole, however, the last quarter century has seen dramatic changes in the way critics approach movies.

The watershed year was 1967. Bosley Crowther retired as the film critic of the *New York Times* (a position he had held for almost thirty years), and Pauline Kael published her first article in the *New Yorker*—a defense of *Bonnie and Clyde*, which Crowther had repeatedly and vehemently attacked. Until then, Crowther had been the dominant voice in American film criti-

cism; many local critics around the country merely paraphrased his reviews. The movies in favor were the movies Crowther liked. When he left the *Times*, everything began to crumble. With increasing fervor, critics slammed the kinds of films that Crowther had endorsed—the earnest, liberal "social problem" pictures—and praised the once-disreputable genre films that Crowther had maligned or simply ignored.

Two critics in particular—Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael—reacted against Crowther. Sarris and Kael burst into prominence as adversaries in a celebrated feud over the auteur theory—a debate that took up several issues of *Film Quarterly* back in 1963. But despite their personal animosity, and their very different appraisals of individual filmmakers, their critical positions have gradually converged. In tandem they have produced the new values in criticism that dominate today.

In a recent attack on Kael in the *Village Voice*, Sarris said that he originally advocated the auteur theory in order to challenge the "prevailing overemphasis on sociological analysis," which characterized film criticism at the time. Critical values were undoubtedly distorted when Stanley Kramer was more highly regarded than Alfred Hitchcock. A corrective was desperately needed, and Sarris provided a

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valuable service in calling attention to the expressive visual style of several underrated American directors. By now the battle has been won: Hitchcock, Hawks, and Ford have received the attention they deserve. But critical values have gone to the opposite extreme. Today many auteur-influenced critics are reluctant to praise any movie on a serious subject, lest they be confused with the middlebrow critics of the fifties.

On the other hand, B-movie directors like Don Siegel and Samuel Fuller, enshrined by auteur critics in the early sixties, have now been canonized by all the media. Siegel's *Escape From Alcatraz* and Fuller's *The Big Red One* got superb reviews, though both films are routine potboilers with primitive plots and monochromatic, stick figure characterizations. Yet Vincent Canby wrote of *Alcatraz*, "It's the kind of movie that could be more profitably studied in film courses than all the works of Bergman and Fellini combined." And in the *Wall Street Journal*, Joy Gould Boyum proclaimed *The Big Red One* "the finest film so far this year."

Other mindless action movies have been equally overrated. Stone-faced Clint Eastwood, for example, is a recent recipient of the auteurs' accolades. *Bronco Billy* (which Eastwood directed and also starred in) received some of the best reviews of the year—from Janet Maslin in the *New York Times*, Tom Allen in the *Village Voice*, Richard Corliss in *Time*, and many others. Twenty-five years ago, *Bronco Billy* would have been quite correctly dismissed as a tedious, trivial, and jingoistic comedy. But the auteur critics are infatuated with homespun Americana, old-fashioned western motifs, and iconic movie stars. Their prejudices have prevailed over saner critical values.

The basic premise of the auteur theory has always been that a good director transcends a pulpy or banal plot with an eloquent visual style. Once this argument appeared in the pages of *Film Culture* to defend subliterate movies like Fuller's

Shock Corridor and Siegel's *Baby Face Nelson*. The argument is no more convincing when it is printed in *Time* or *Newsweek* to defend films like *Halloween*, *The Fury*, and *Dressed to Kill*, which are conceded to have ridiculous stories but are supposedly "redeemed" by the director's panning shots or furtive humorous touches.

Consider David Ansen's rave review of John Carpenter's *Halloween*, a monotonous, single-minded scare show about an escaped lunatic who stalks teenage girls. Ansen wrote in *Newsweek*, "*Halloween* is a superb exercise in the art of suspense, and it has no socially redeeming value whatsoever. . . . Its plot comes straight from the pulp primer. . . . But Carpenter's style is another matter. From the movie's dazzling prologue in 1963 to its chilling conclusion in 1978, we are being pummeled by a master manipulator." You may think that sounds more like a warning than a recommendation, but the new movie criticism has invented a very bizarre set of values—and a most peculiar language. Words like "pulp," "sleazy," "dirty," "lurid," "decadent" are frequently used as terms of praise.

Like *Halloween*, *The Fury* is a nonsensical thriller; Brian De Palma's film is a load of gibberish concerning spies, telekinetic teenagers, kidnapping, and bloody revenge. In his review, Ansen admitted in a parenthesis that "there is a major snag in John Farris's story," but he praised De Palma as "a true movie decadent with a profligate, trick-happy style, an orgiastic approach to violence, and a lurid fetish for blood." And in *New York* magazine Molly Haskell claimed that "the director of *Carrie* once again combines B-movie sleaze with A-movie elegance and brings it off." It was Pauline Kael, however, who wrote the most glowing review of *The Fury*: "The visual poetry of *The Fury* is so strong that its narrative and verbal inadequacies do not matter."

This sentence might be taken as a capsule summary of the auteur theory. Kael

once denounced the auteur critics for being "connoisseurs of trash." But in her most famous and influential article, "Trash, Art, and the Movies" (published in 1969), she declared her belief that trashy Hollywood movies contained subversive moments of truth, while the "art" films praised by the schoolteachers were desiccated and dead. Like Sarris's early articles on the auteur theory, this "Trash" essay was a reaction to the prevailing standards in criticism. And like Sarris's theory, it served a valuable purpose in urging us to look for artistry in unfashionable American movies. But a once-provocative argument has hardened into a rigid and untenable catechism. Even more disturbing, Kael's engaging maverick position—appealing precisely because it was an eccentric minority viewpoint—has overpowered all other approaches to movie criticism.

You can see the ascendancy of this viewpoint in the way critics blithely overlooked the narrative gaps, flimsy characterizations, and manipulative crudeness of *Dressed to Kill*. More recently, the revolting horror film *Scanners* has received equally ecstatic reviews. In *Time*, Richard Corliss praised writer-director David Cronenberg as "a man of vivid ideas and images. He can clothe his plots in sinuous camera movements and dynamite film tricks."

The *Washington Post's* Gary Arnold lauded *Scanners* as an "unusually brainy chiller," though the only brains discernible in this umpteenth *Frankenstein* clone are those that spurt toward the camera when one character's head explodes. Visually, most of the imagination goes into designing the gruesome special effects of veins bursting and eyes popping; Cronenberg misses the most hypnotic possibilities in a tale of ESP and mind control.

One question recurs in reading contemporary movie criticism: For whom are today's critics writing? Most of the people who go to see films like *Scanners*, *Halloween*, and *Dressed to Kill* don't read the *New Yorker* or the *New York Times*; they don't read at all. And I'm sure the people who do read those publications never see most of the movies praised in their pages. Critics have lost touch with intelligent readers.

I shouldn't give the impression that all the movies admired by today's critics are trashy exploitation movies (though it does

sometimes seem that way). Some of the new critics also have a taste for soft, sentimental little pictures like *Hearts of the West*, *Hooper*, *Citizens Band*, and *Head Over Heels*—thin, wan comedies whose main virtue is their modesty.

Melvin and Howard was recently named best picture of 1980 by the National Society of Film Critics, and its director, Jonathan Demme, and screenwriter, Bo Goldman, won awards from the New York Film Critics Circle. *Melvin and Howard* is a sweet little nothing of a movie—an affectionate, well-detailed, but utterly unmemorable slice of Americana. It may be thematically less ambitious than *The Elephant Man*, *Raging Bull*, *Breaker Morant*, or *Altered States*, but ten years from now, will it really be remembered as a better movie?

Whether the films are sweet and innocuous or seamy and sadistic, today's critical favorites share certain characteristics: They all have flimsy stories with a surprising lack of sustained dramatic tension, and they all aim very low. No one could possibly mistake them for the "important" films praised by Bosley Crowther in the fifties. They're defiantly unimportant.

While junky, trivial movies win the laurels, many good, serious, adult films are underrated by the reviewers desperate to be hip. Movies that once would have won universal acclaim—*Julia*, *Coming Home*, *Norma Rae*, *Promises in the Dark*—are now mocked or dismissed in many major publications. They may be lauded by easy marks like Rex Reed or Gene Shalit, but they cannot count on the unanimous endorsements they once would have collected. Obviously it is healthy that critics no longer automatically praise a film for having good intentions or a weighty, "important" subject. The problem now is that it seems many critics automatically *reject* a film with serious intentions and a socially significant theme.

Of *Julia*, for example, Pauline Kael wrote, "This is conservative—classical humanist—moviemaking," and those words were not meant as compliments. Vincent Canby called it "a film that is both well meaning and on the side of the angels but, with the exception of a half-dozen scenes, lifeless." Yet the truth is that Jane Fonda's characterization of Lillian Hellman adds considerable life to the anti-Fascist polemic. Hellman is depicted as an often weak and frightened woman, irresistibly attracted to money and glamour. There are sharp, biting moments in the portrait, for instance when Hellman ex-

hibits a social climber's hunger to rub elbows with Hemingway.

What makes the film dramatic, and not simply "well meaning," is the contrast between Hellman—an enlightened but essentially cautious woman—and her friend Julia, who fearlessly sacrifices herself for what she believes. Fonda supplies the human quirks that make the character something more than a liberal role model.

And she accomplishes the same thing in *Coming Home*. In *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll spoke for a majority of critics when he complained, "*Coming Home* stacks the cards in a good cause; nevertheless, the cards are stacked." That dismissal fails to do justice to the richness of the characterizations and performances. Fonda doesn't condescend to the stereotype of the repressed military wife; when she stands at attention while "The Star-Spangled Banner" is played on television, we feel the character straining to accept the patriotic pieties. Fonda makes us experience the gradual transformation of her character; that might be the definition of drama.

The same dramatic urgency strengthens Jon Voight's performance. In the early scenes he doesn't make the paraplegic a noble, saintly hero. He's bitter, vicious, self-pitying—and recognizably human. *Coming Home* gets into trouble toward the end, when it tries to broaden its scope. But the first half is as powerful as anything seen in recent American movies—not because of its antiwar message, but because of the dramatic tension in the evolving relationship of Fonda and Voight.

To take another example, Robert Redford's recent *Brubaker* has been unfairly derided as a simpleminded prison reform movie. Vincent Canby—who can be as predictable in his suspicion of "social problem" pictures as his predecessor, Bosley Crowther, was in his susceptibility to those same kinds of films—once again trotted out the new catechism: "*Brubaker* is an earnest, right-minded, consistently unsurprising movie. . . . *Brubaker* is not so much a character as he is an admirable if unrealistic point of view."

In fact, *Brubaker* is not wholly admirable; he is presented throughout the film as an obstinate and arrogant crusader whose unwillingness to compromise defeats his own ideals. The aim of the film is not simply to expose wretched prison conditions in this country; it also raises questions about the tactics needed to achieve reform, and it's a complex and provoking inquiry. We are constantly torn

between respect for Brubaker's integrity and uneasiness over his stubbornness.

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ll of these films have flaws, but the critics who describe them as dull and sanctimonious aren't really paying attention; they're allowing their prejudice against this *kind* of film to blind them to what is actually on screen. Forget the messages of these movies; they hold your attention because they have strong characters and strong stories, and that is something you can't say for *Bronco Billy*, *The Big Red One*, *Halloween*, or *Dressed to Kill*. In their determination to overturn the critical standards of the past, reviewers have lost sight of the foundations of dramatic storytelling.

It is true that the greatest movies have strong stories expressed in a rich visual style, but subject matter and story—even if no more than competently expressed—count for more than empty visual pyrotechnics. A genius like Fellini may be able to sustain a movie through the fertility of his visual imagination, but lesser talents like Brian De Palma and John Carpenter can't transcend their hokey stories through technical razzle-dazzle.

Yet it's probably too late to get this point across to the filmmakers. Encouraged by some high-powered critics, directors now believe that they can "create" movies without stories. The results have been disastrous. Brian De Palma's best movie, *Carrie*, came from a very solid story written by Stephen King. The raw power of King's novel gave *Carrie* a dramatic momentum that none of De Palma's more "personal" films has matched.

In other words, criticism influences not simply what we think about movies, but what we actually see. That's why an analysis of critical fashions has more than academic interest. The new critical dogma is just as grotesquely distorted as the gospel that reigned in the fifties. After all, most of those "important" pictures despised by today's critics are nothing more than examples of what Pauline Kael called the "classical humanist" tradition in the arts. That tradition does have its limitations, but it's not a contemptible tradition. Something is seriously out of kilter when intelligent critics feel ashamed to endorse films that celebrate enduring human values. ★

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