

RICHARD T. JAMESON

## Manhandling the Movies

Film is securely *in* now, and to those of us who have always taken it seriously, the feeling is a little strange, even incongruous. Perfectly unremarkable acquaintances who used to shoot home movies now tell you "We made a film last weekend." It's the same home movie but the phrase has changed, and with it an attitude. We may smile behind our friend's back at the pretension, but there are other pretensions not so harmless.

Film-as-a-phenomenon has received infinitely more press than film-as-the-movies-that-are. Film is the art of our time, we are told; we are all children of the movies and instinctively understand them better than any generation that has gone before. And some people have been quickly convinced of this god-given expertise. Undergraduates who barely ever look at the late show and, when questioned, prove to know next to nothing of films and film-makers before 1960 (and some after) publish commissioned Sunday-supplement pieces on the new cinema, the new style, the new audiences, and the revolution which they represent. On a campus where I run one film series and write programme notes for another, members of an experimental course

in film criticism chose to meet at the same time one of the series ran; when their oversight was pointed out to them, they assured us they already knew about the series but hadn't been planning to attend anyway. Talking film beat seeing movies every way from Sunday.

The way some people do talk film, you wonder whether seeing movies would make any difference to them. Perhaps the most troublesome fault is the failure of many to remember what they saw—what scene led into which, and how; whether a film or sequence involved, even conspicuously, camera movement or lack of it, fast cutting or lack of it, a rhythmic pace or a direct line toward resolution; whether Benjamin maliciously punched Mr. Robinson in the stomach or rammed a defensive elbow into his groin. Cocktail conversationalists and lobby orators are one thing, but when such slovenly disregard for movies-as-movies is graduated to a higher order of permanence—the printed page—one must risk sounding a little shrill to raise a protest.

A plethora of film books is coming out now and it should be superfluous to say that none of them, good or bad, should be accorded prece-

dence over the movies they are about. Some are very good indeed; some are infuriatingly bad. Almost definitively the worst is *Man and the Movies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967; \$7.95), a volume of twenty articles by twenty different writers, nearly every one of whom is an academician to some extent. There are three sections: "The Art and Its Forms," which touches bases as diverse as skin flicks, the Western, TV, and the adaptation of eighteenth-century novels; "The Artist and His Work," with bows to Hitchcock (with back occasionally turned), Griffith, Bergman, the Italian Big Three, and others; and "The Personal Encounter" of a poet, two failed screenwriters (one distinguished, one not), two professional critics, and one certified masturbator. Those which are just okay can be listed quickly: Martin C. Battestin's piece on adapting *Tom Jones*; the more-or-less quickies on Bergman, Antonioni, Visconti's *Sandra*, and the Griffith retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (though the author mixes the endings of *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*—little things like that); "The New Mystique of *L'Actuelle*: A View of Cinema in Relation to Our Period-Style" (sort of a mini-*Movie Man* but no revelation to anyone who's being doing his homework); Richard Wilbur's footnote to a couple of his poems; Leslie Fiedler on Hollywood novels and the Hollywood image; and R. V. Cassill's "In the Central Blue," which assumes a form many of his colleagues might confess to have produced—fiction. Though these deserve, for their fidelity to their material and their modest regard for the English language and its grammar, to be set at safe quarantine distance from the rest, they are not worth looking up the book to read. However, John Blotner's invaluable account of "Faulkner in Hollywood" and David Slavitt's analysis of the ills of daily-weekly criticism (he wrote for *Newsweek*) certainly are.

As to the rest—well, so shoddy a job of writing and especially of editing does the book appear that one loses all sense of proportion among the myriad mistakes (that the word "mistake" must be used in regard to critical writing is damning enough). One could write a very para-

noid article on spelling and typos alone (there are three variants of Rossellini), and never have so many gross generalizations been so misapplied ("never," "certainly," "clearly," "only," and "always" pop up at just the wrong moments). Unhappily, there are more than enough serious misjudgments and misrepresentations to get paranoid about.

Narrowness of vision cripples so many judgments, which come down more as dicta. The author of "Films, Television, and Tennis" complains, "It's not uncommon to find eight to ten minutes of plot preceding the credits on a wide-screen, certainly to the detriment of the film's structural integrity. Nothing can account for such a mannerism except its accepted presence on the TV tube and the possibility of a television-trained director's having learned his lessons too well." Richard Peck is so anxious to make his point about TV's influence on film that he overlooks the (to me, at least) obvious: if a film is conceived so that a pre-credit sequence will operate meaningfully and not merely as a "teaser," its structural integrity "certainly" will not be impaired since the pre-credit segment is part of that integrity. *The Ipcress File* opens with the kidnapping of the scientist and the murder of the agent that will bring Harry Palmer into the action as the man's replacement. The camera closes in on the dead agent's eye; cut to Palmer's eye, in extreme close-up, as he wakes to the alarm clock. He sits bolt upright; we see his room as he, near-sighted and without his glasses, sees it; he puts on the glasses and brings the world, his and ours, into focus; and as he begins to get up and dress, the credits begin. Palmer and his point-of-view will, with exceptions as significant as the pre-credit lapse, dominate the rest of the picture. The moment of abeyance as we await the *traditional* beginning, the credits, is not only in order but important to our *experience* of the movie; Peck's implicit dictum would deny us this experience. And what brand of pedagogy is required to set Peck straight when, on the same page, he digs up the mercifully mouldering bones of the photographed-play syndrome: whatever happens indoors and involves dialogue can't be cinema. "Only the

opening sequence of a football game saves *The Fortune Cookie* from deserving the same criticism," already leveled at *The Apartment* as indoor, filmed TV-drama (the new wrinkle). Personally, I found much more to look at in virtually any of Wilder's phone booths, hospital corridors, and apartments than at the stadium, which sequence was surprisingly stiff, considering the possibilities with Jack Lemmon as a TV cameraman. (I wonder whether Bergman's *The Silence* is similarly flawed but for the street scenes, or Bresson's *Trial of Jeanne d'Arc* but for the burning.)

The patent on narrowness, though, must go to Armando Favazza's article on "Fellini: Analyst without Portfolio." Favazza, a psychiatrist with portfolio, might contribute a provocative program note to a Fellini series if only he assured the series coordinator it was all tongue-in-cheek. Generally Fellini seems to know Favazza's rules, but he fluffs a key symbolic sequence in *Juliet of the Spirits*, "a technically poor scene because it is impossible to portray a psychotic episode accurately, although the camera is the best means available to describe *mobility of cathexis, displacement, and condensation*" (italics his, so help me).

Favazza has the right to speak with authority on mobility of cathexis, if not films; and Larry McMurtry had every right to produce a smashing piece on the Western. Instead of seizing his natural advantage, the author of the novel that became *Hud* pays lip service to Robert Warshow, then goes on to trade lamely on terms lifted from Northrop Frye—an understood context of literary criticism rather than an essentially filmic or even Western one. Yet another chance for some really vital Western criticism was unaccountably blown in the name of high-mimetic horse manure.

Not that the writers who do try to establish terms of their own offer encouragement. In what is presumably a key essay—in that it is the editor's and steps off with a declaration for seeking "pure" film theory—W. R. Robinson demonstrates he has no more business putting forth writing of his own than he has in collecting, screening, and adjudging as fit for publication

the writing of others. "The Movies, Too, Will Make You Free" must be read to be believed, and it can't be read. In attempting to argue the greater immediacy of movies as compared to literature (known hereafter as the Light and the Word, respectively), he proves his point by means of the expressive fallacy: his words strangle him. Without plunging into the inky depths of his pure theory, we can get some idea of what he's up to from his third paragraph. He has been talking about Eisenstein's use of montage; then:

In the same vein is Alfred Hitchcock's insistence on using a shot of a glass of champagne going flat as a metaphor for a finished love affair. Though more simple-minded than Eisenstein's theorizing, Hitchcock's attempt at defining something essential to films is actually an assertion of taste—a preference for wit, an intellectual delight in clever analogy instead of the thing directly seen. (This literary quality in Hitchcock's work is one reason why, despite the slightness of his films, he is a favorite among intellectuals.)

Champagne going flat is a metaphor; two people sitting in a hotel room with nothing to say is the real thing. So what! Lubitsch, I think it was, once shot a dialogue between adulterers from their point of view; while they chatted merrily, the camera stayed on an impish bedstead Cupidon. One shot, one scene, the real room, the real thing—and a metaphor. More to the point, one of the most celebrated sequences of the cinematic and un-simple-minded Eisenstein is the raising of the bridge in *October*, and it is a metaphor. It's an actual bridge actually separating two groups of people, but it's also a metaphor for the revolution beyond—or isn't Eisenstein to be allowed these literary overtones? Best ask Robinson, who has the rulebook. And ask which came first, Hitchcock's simple-mindedness or "the slightness of his films"; and also, why Hitchcock's "insistence" on using the champagne image, as if he knew better, knew what the rules say he should have done, and wilfully violated them. Can it be that the editor's deck is stacked?

Hitchcock becomes victim of the same stacking in O. B. Hardison's "The Rhetoric of Hitchcock's Thrillers." This I determined only near

the end of the piece, where Hardison begins to pile up some of what he considers Hitchcock data to support his case. At the first, as with so many of the writers collected in *Man and the Movies*, I just couldn't diagnose what was the article's particular ill—the author's hopeless ignorance about his subject and, for that matter, films and film production in general; his ineptitude as a writer; or just native stupidity. Here's Hardison's opening:

We can start from the axiom that Alfred Hitchcock is one of the greatest professionals in the movie business—probably the greatest. I use the word professional in its most favorable sense: movies are entertainment, and no one entertains more and more consistently than Hitchcock. What the Lincoln Continental is to the Fairlane 500 the Hitchcock film is to the standard production-model Hollywood thriller. The public recognizes this. Hitchcock is one of a very few producers whose name is more important at the box office than the names of his stars. But professionalism has its limits, too. Nobody would seriously compare Hitchcock to a dozen directors and producers who have used the film medium as an art form. Eisenstein, Chaplin, Ford, Bergman, Olivier, Fellini—the list could be expanded—have qualities undreamed of in the world of cops and robbers and pseudo-Freudian melodrama, which is the world where Hitchcock reigns supreme.

Now really, where do we begin? Hitchcock is a producer—not that he ever sees fit to take screen credit for it—but who would start by calling him that? Well, Hardison maybe, since he clearly seems to be nosing in on the Hollywood film as a product (implying once more that neat, vision-splitting adage that “movies,” being “entertainment,” are surely distinct from “cinema,” which is “art”); but this hardly justifies the usage when he glides into speaking of directors and producers with easy interchangeability. “Nobody would seriously compare Hitchcock to a dozen directors and producers who have used the film medium as an art form.” It's a matter of fact, not opinion, that a vociferous contingent have done so; if Hardison is aware of that and meant to say, “I don't see how anyone could seriously compare . . .” then that is what he should have said. And

while he's rewriting that line, let him name one among Hitchcock's fifty features that could remotely be described as a “cops and robbers” flick. Such an observation simply cannot reflect first-hand experience of Hitchcock's work, though it does smack of regurgitated *Live-liest Art* and re-regurgitation of glossy-magazine spreads and studio publicity. And as far as simple logic is concerned, Hardison would do well to note that the “axiom” he starts from isn't an axiom.

In the best tradition of literary criticism, the article immediately dodges into long-winded, general, irrelevantly theoretical categorizing. Hitchcock's films are only occasionally cited when they fortuitously coincide with the theory, although names like James Bond and Mickey Spillane are dropped freely, as if they had universal denotations, not connotations, that said it all. When Hardison is specific he is almost invariably wrong. “That the class theme has remained strong in Hitchcock's American films is evident from his stars. The *noblesse oblige* roles have consistently been given to actors whose upper-class identity is established by accent (modified British) as well as publicity. Ray Milland and Cary Grant are Hitchcock's favorite male stars, with Cary Grant clearly running first.” Yes, clearly—four Hitchcock roles to Milland's one! Doesn't Jimmy Stewart, also with four appearances, qualify for equal billing? But then what happens to the class theory and *noblesse oblige*? Quick, shore up the Platonic ideal with some data on female casting! Here Hardison tries to do something with the modeling backgrounds of three Hitchcock leading ladies (high-fashion models project the upper-class image, etc.). Eva Marie Saint “came to Hitchcock via modeling”?—and via five years as a star, dating from an Oscar-winning, distinctly lower-class role in *On the Waterfront*; surely Kazan's Edie had more to do with her image than *Harper's Bazaar*.

Hardison tries to get Saint and his theory through by invoking former models Grace Kelly and, especially, “Tippi” Hedren. This is an invaluable device of lousy theorists and also a symptom of sloppy writing: pick a couple half-

decent examples as bookends for a highly questionable one. The book is full of it (the editor's own article includes a beaut, a reference to the "solemn movies of Antonioni, Visconti, Truffaut, and Resnais"—Truffaut "solemn"?! ) and, looking back to the category-making section of Hardison's piece, we find the examples doubling back on one another, almost comically. Speaking of "the alien milieu in which the hero's adventures occur," he writes: "In *The Lodger* and *Psycho* it is daemonic, but, from the dominant point of view—that of the hero—it is still sane." *The Lodger*, made thirty-four years before the other film, is a fairly straight-on narrative in which a hero is falsely accused and nearly destroyed by an insane world, and for a time the audience may participate in the error; but there is nothing to compare with the point-of-view complexities of *Psycho*. Who is the hero in *Psycho*? For half an hour it is a question of a heroine, Janet Leigh; then there's Tony Perkins, and to say that the world is sane from his point of view is to stretch the phrase to the breaking point. Best refer Hardison to Robin Wood—or to Leo Braudy's recent Hitchcock article in this quarterly—for an examination of the subjective-objective, point-of-view complexities that make the audience the real hero, or at least protagonist, of *Psycho*. *The Lodger* and *Psycho* belong in the same canon, but not the same breath. Hardison may just vaguely be aware of the latter film's depth; he concedes that "*Rope* and *Psycho* carry the thriller world about as far as it can go without being taken seriously." Note that *Rope* is mentioned because the "cut-rate Nietzschean philosophy introduced a lump of serious material," largely verbal and didactic, the sort a literary critic might deal with—and note also the presupposition that Hitchcock's "formulas" won't assimilate anything serious, lumpy or not. "*Psycho*, on the other hand, is reasonably good fun if one can get over the murder scene, which, like Nietzschean philosophy, calls for a more serious follow-up than the movie wants to deliver." Bing! and he's gone on to something else, never bothering to wonder why that murder kinda got to him more than just any old movie murder. *The Lodger*,

*Rope*, *Psycho*: an apprentice piece containing the germs of later masterpieces; a daring experiment in continuous photography with a few loaded speeches conspicuous; an inexhaustibly complex involvement-experience that taps the alien milieu around and within us all—and Hardison tosses them equally into the hopper. *Psycho*'s technical complexity? To the extent that he's aware of it, he has implicitly written it off in dealing with "Hitchcock's thrillers" in general: art vs. rhetoric: the more accomplished the film, the more controlled the directorial hand we sense, the more we are lacquered off from involvement. And so we are, with a theory like Hardison's. The name of the game is presupposition, which not only precedes but precludes experience.

Alan S. Downer's "The Monitor Image," focussing on the early John Huston as a "natural-born film-maker," demonstrates the same thing even more pointedly. Paragraphs and pages are lavished on such matters as wondering whether *The Maltese Falcon* and *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* can be considered "chase" films, or whether *Treasure* is "a masterpiece," "a landmark in American film history," or just "a superior performance . . . each viewing [of which] enriches the spectator's experience." These meaningless categories call to mind an earlier aside: "D. W. Griffith had greatness thrust upon him by critics willing to ignore his abysmal sentimentality and his disconcerting propensity for turning up on the wrong side of any issue he chanced to deal with." The next paragraph begins, "Without making a value judgment at this point . . ." A freshman comp student would be laughed out of class for that, and this man chairs the English department at Princeton. Is a film *what it is*, the energy and personal creative splendor that shows through its structure as an unreeling phenomenon of performance, or is it a quasi-aesthetic accident held at bay by a safety-screen of qualifications and preconceptions? If you're going to turn off the moment a director shows signs of indulging an emotion that has been decreed in poor taste, or disagreeing with your and your friends' view of history, or going after an ambiguous permuta-

tion you don't think worth the bother, why bother with films at all? In the failure to ask that question at every stage of their criticism, men like Downer forfeit their right to be respected, perhaps even to be heard. After carefully tracing Huston's progress for a dozen pages and more, he quickly lops off *The Red Badge of Courage* as a failure and never alludes to Huston's later films except to say "he is quickly bored with projects." And what cardinal sin is committed in *The Red Badge*?

Although Huston began with a firm idea, he allowed himself to be distracted. First the central idea was that courage was as unreasoning as cowardice. Later it became the pointlessness of the hero's courage in helping to capture a fragment of wall (the *Treasure* theme). Then it was that the youth was simply a victim of fate; he gets on a sort of roulette wheel for a few days and is finally flung off. As the patchwork picture emerged from the MCM factory, the audience was told, in solemn narration, that this was the story of how a youth became a man. Thus deprived of a monitor image, *The Red Badge of Courage* could have neither style nor unity and, questions of art aside, could not yield a satisfying dramatic experience to its audience.

"The monitor image" is a TV-era way of saying a director has an aim to accomplish and an approach about which to coordinate all the component aspects of the film and film-making. Huston violated Downer's figure. Stepping off with a comparatively simplistic goal, he began to feel the size of his subject, sense out its permutations and realize the need to come to terms with them, or at least try. Downer does not note that the themes he names in no way exclude one another—indeed, they imply each other—neither does he recall from his reading of *Picture* that the patchworkiness and the solemn narration were the doing of studio execs and cutters. Even in its present form Huston's film remains a rich and stirring effort. But Downer cannot bother to mention that, so busy is he pushing his neat (and essentially very old) conceit. He brings his paper to a suspiciously swift and complimentary rhetorical finish about the artists who have had to work for big sprawling vital popular audiences.

For scuttling a director's ship as soon as he gets off the course which theory has plotted, a critic deserves our opprobrium. What do we heap on one who adjusts the films to suit the schema? Arguably the most offensive article in the entire book is R. H. W. Dillard's "Even a Man Who Is Pure in Heart: Poetry and Danger in the Horror Film." It should be junked for eclecticism of styles alone, opening with a come-along-down-Memory-Lane introduction, careening from my-first-visit-to-a-horror-movie to academic balderdash about Bwili of Lol-narong (you remember—the old Shamanist myth), making a pit stop for a hurt-and-misunderstood apologia for a stinking horror flick he helped write (with the book's co-editor), and then—fully fourteen pages old—settling down for some specific treatment of actual movies. He establishes (quite thoroughly and convincingly, for those who need the convincing) a hierarchy of monster-heroes, building up from the werewolf through the mummy and the vampire to a genuinely tragic creation, the Frankenstein monster. Dillard is lavish with dates and the names of characters and bit players, all the material a hobbyist ought to command. But when he closes in on sequences—rarely—the patina begins to look flaky. "A good example" to prove one of his points about Browning's *Dracula* is "the scene where Van Helsing tricks Dracula into looking into a mirror which will not reflect his image, proving him to be a vampire; Lugosi's hiss as he whips the cloak before his eyes is the anguished sound of the primordial serpent exposed as Satan himself." Aside from Dillard's own throaty melodramatics, it's the right idea but the wrong scene—or, to be precise, two right scenes wrongly compressed into one. Lugosi isn't even wearing his cloak when Edward Van Sloan asks him to come look at something interesting, and he strikes the mirror to the floor without speaking or hissing, which is quite enough to freeze the room and the audience until he recovers himself and takes his leave. After about half an hour of running time, Lugosi does turn up in the same room to get the man who knows too much, and nearly manages it until Van Sloan thrusts a crucifix at him; and *that* is when the magnificent

hiss and the whipping of the cloak take place. Another hobbyist's peevish complaint over trivia? Perhaps the error in itself is slight, but Dillard himself calls it "a good example." And when such a mistake next occurs, its implications are somewhat more offensive than the dandruff of bad memory.

Dillard's development of the Frankenstein monster as tragic hero has reached something like a crescendo, with the films of James Whale being discussed in the same paragraph as *The Seventh Seal* and *The Virgin Spring* (which—don't get me wrong—is very good to see). Above all else Dillard prefers *The Bride of Frankenstein*, which he proceeds to describe in his (hopefully) inimitable way:

The film begins, after a brief prologue featuring Elsa Lanchester as Mary Shelley, in a primordial darkness of place and spirit, lit only by the dying embers of the burning windmill. Two old peasants have remained after the mob has left, hoping to loot the structure of whatever they can find undamaged by the fire. Their greed leads them only to the monster, who rises from the watery depths of the mill with the old woman's help; he has killed her husband below, and he kills her. Sin breeds death, and the destroyer still lives after a baptism in human violence, fire, and water.

Absolutely false! The old couple are the parents of the little girl drowned in the first Frankenstein. The wife pleads with her husband to come away, but he vows not to leave till he has seen the blackened bones of the monster. He falls through what remains of the weakened structure, and the rest transpires as described. The hell of it is that Whale's film does involve "a baptism in human violence, fire, and water," a scathing look at a "humane" world that re-enacts the crucifixion of something like a Christ. Dillard chooses to get at the Christ-parallel by way of generalizations and that peculiarly hellfire-and-brimstone kind of rhetoric that punctuates so many learned articles. He might have achieved this by specific reference to the film (e.g., Whale stages a crucifixion at a place of rocks and shoots the monster, bound and upraised on the pole, from

three or four angles so everyone but English professors will get the point); he certainly needn't resort to a rewrite job.

"The best criticism is always an act of love," Alan Downer says in the middle of promises that he won't write the kind of criticism he then goes on to write. Robinson, in his introduction, avers, "These writers consistently bare an individual involvement with the movies . . ." And indeed, most of the learned gentlemen collected the covers of *Man and the Movies* pause somewhere or other to assure us they love the movies, they really do. They demurely confess to having had their innocence raped by the movies. Then there's that fellow lying on the chill linoleum floor masturbating over the fan magazine still of Jean Harlow. They flaunt this love and trade on it; a Davis or a Hepburn should be dispatched to tell them the movies aren't having any today, thank you. For surely the necessary concomitant of love is fidelity and responsibility, and where in *Man and the Movies* are these qualities honored?

In John Blotner's "Faulkner in Hollywood," for one. The finest entry in the book is the one that has perhaps least to say about specific films. Blotner knows and respects his subject. He gives us Faulkner the man and Faulkner the writer and shows how in Hollywood of the thirties and forties it was hard for the two to be one. Anecdotes, sketches, impressions of afternoons in the scripting offices, Faulkner superbly squelching Gable on a hunting trip with Hawks, then becoming great friends with him—of these Blotner writes with grace and respect. Small matter that Blotner tends to dismiss most of the pictures Faulkner worked on apart from Hawks, that there is no indication he has necessarily seen them, that a few (*Slave Ship*, *Flesh*) are not entirely negligible—Blotner only notes Faulkner's feelings toward them, when he can, and the popular and critical reception of the films in their day; he isn't out to fool anyone about his filmic expertise, least of all himself.

And why is it so important? Why is it worth getting this mad about? Because the writers in *Man and the Movies* obviously feel they're in

the vanguard of a new and literate movie generation, although many of their presuppositions are at least as old as the coming of talkies. They're all getting together in the book and they all love movies (let's hear it for movies!) and wasn't it easy to get into print? And that's just what's wrong. Words in print command too much power to be abused, especially while people remember what they read better than what they see on the screen. The printed page enjoys a permanence, an accessibility, that celluloid does not. For the reader, there's no re-winding *Dracula* or *The 39 Steps* to check a vague suspicion that something in the latest movie book is amiss. The reader can't be sure of facts—but the writer should be. If he isn't and if he gets caught, any reasonable reader must doubt the validity of his abstract theory and opinion since his concrete facts just ain't. I've no objection if this be taken as an *auteur* theory of critics, which is implicit in a state-

ment of one of the few writers collected here I have expressed some admiration for. It is David Slavitt, and I am barely giving his remarks a context different from his own:

I suppose another way of putting all this would be to say that the film critic cannot take his identity from the art form, because the movies don't offer any identity. He can't take it from the magazine [read "book"] because, except in very special circumstances, he will be either uncomfortable or impossibly restricted [or perhaps right at home]. And he can't take it from literary and intellectual fashion, because that way lies even surer madness than in the movies themselves. What he must do is what those few movie critics who have amounted to anything have done—and that is find it, somehow, somewhere, in himself.

Considering what most of the other writers in *Man and the Movies* found in themselves, I trust they didn't expect to be loved in return.