

## Nearer My Agee to Thee (1965)<sup>1</sup>

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Manny Farber

Unbeknown to most moviegoers, the saddest story in films concerns the emergence of brutal scorekeeper critics, led by Susan Sontag and Andy Sarris, an odd duo, hard and soft—a Simone de Beauvoir and a boneless Soupy Sales—whose special commodities include chutzpah, the ability to convert any perception into a wisecrack or squashed metaphor, and the mobility of a Hollywood sex queen for being where the action is. The protean, ubiquitous Miss Sontag is catlike at showing up in influential gatherings, panel shows, magazines, taking over the show with a matter-of-fact attitude, a flat voice, and a confidence that her knowledge is all-purpose (if contracted, she'd show up in Vietnam).

These writers may be a mystery to the average reader, but one or the other has initiated or firmed up every recent murmur in the American scene: camp as a new estheticism based on distance between art and audience; the placing of Jean Luc Godard, an imitation American, at the top of modern art films; and Alfred Hitchcock, who is a sort of Francophile, at the peak of the pre-1960s films. Particularly they've torn down the selections of the '40s critic, who was a prospector always repanning and sifting for buried American truth and subconscious life. The American landscapes bewitched James Agee and his fellows, but their biggest realization was to give the sense of the Hollywood film as "corpuscular," in constant flux.

Sarris and his mimic, Peter Bogdanovich, have shrewdly suggested that the American critic in the '40s was a philistine compared to those in *Sight and Sound* and the French film magazines. The only trouble with this deviling of Agee and company is that the shadowy conditions of all this now overrated Hollywood art had long ago been accurately spelled out by Otis Ferguson's columns in *The New Republic*, and, to a lesser extent, by Agee's own columns in *The Nation*. Agee, who never noticed Robert Aldrich or Raoul Walsh and hardly mentions Howard Hawks, is always committed, centered in the least important film. Sarris, whose oft-repeated brand for older American criticism is that it was isolated, provincial, in love with poor people, and anti-Hollywood, is seldom inside the film. Using axiomatic statements, working in short paragraphs, incorporating a French journalist's taste, he appears to remove himself, in the most inanimate voice, from the film.

One of the favorite modes of expression of the new blackboard critic is an "of course" construction implying an authority that it is useless to challenge. "Of course, all the spies" in Hitchcock's earliest films were fascist. Untrue: the Cecil Parker, George Sanders villains are never more than grim, tactile evil, undefined in politics and nationality.

1. This article was originally published in *Cavalier*, December 1965, and collected in: FARBER, Manny (2009). Farber on Film. *The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber*. POLITO, Robert (Ed.). New York. The Library of America. To preserve the original text we don't

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Godard is the preferred modern for the new critic. He has their eclectic style, never letting you forget he is of a select yet catholic aestheticism. In Miss Sontag's canniest, most extended analysis of a film—Godard's *My Life to Live*-- the film is a "beautiful, perfect" work without one reference to acting, scenery, or any other aspect of the movie image.

The trouble with this new criticism, at its most nimbly exact (Miss Sontag) or pointlessly sniping and arrogant (Eugene Archer in the *Sunday Times*), is that it appears to sift through the film's problem, depersonalizing as it goes. Sarris can rub out an accurately savage despair (Fredric March's banker in *The Best Years of Our Lives*) simply by listing other performances (Bogart's defectively mannered Sam Spade), carrying the authority for his put-down of March in his voice. He is forced into the same illusiveness building Godard as a genius: All of Godard's limitations are rubbed out in paradox which ends with the unspoken thought that isn't it funny Godard, the most realistic director, is self-conscious?

Another trouble is that the new critic—a genial combatant, doing a free-fall parachute jump onto stray truths, then leaving a critical puzzle for someone else—simplifies the Hollywood past into chaos. In one small Richard Schickel paragraph, *The Informer*, a film of garbled Irish rhythms and speech and badly lit like early Carol Reed, becomes "one of the best films"—"unrelenting in its realism," the first example of John Ford's covert, rebellious, antistudio genius. *The Informer* is a typical Model T Ford: German expressionism in an early talkie, made "cinematic" by having the talkers take short strolls to nowhere; except for Joe Sawyer's subtlety as an Irish tough, the realism runs to the "Irish mist" turtleneck sweaters sold in 1940 department stores, barroom and death scenes in which the actors move in Disneyish packs and formations.

The idea of John Ford, an iconoclast sneaking shots past his fond patron, Darryl Zanuck, brutally rearranges the facts about

a conventionalist who went to sleep inside the mannered reflexes of Fox studio style. Ford ended up (*The Searchers*) doing a glumly humorous, elephantine, Melville-type spoof of a movie pattern he helped establish along with the two Henry's—Hathaway and King. The style of this pattern, which amounts to a broadening, deepening and swirling arrangement of Zanuck pace (episodic, zippier than MGM's), character (balloon-like Americana), and space (exotically prettied Rockwell Kent), was antedated long before the hard-to-bear *Informer* in the lyrical *Young Mr Lincoln*, *Mohawk Trail*, and the Mudd biography.

The ironic fact is that, while these critics rip away at Agee's antebellum taste, they are his direct descendants. They have taken over his tensionless, hypnotic language effect and his success as a gambler (*Man's Hope* on a level with Homer; *GI Joe* almost out of sight for greatness) gives these scoreboard critics the courage to gamble with every word.

Agee's criticism was actually the start of a major detour from hawking the image to verbal stunting. The great Agee defect, apparent in the deadly dull, humorless prep-school letters to Father Flye, was a ravishment with bard-type giant artist. Pinned down by this maniacal yen for perfect craftsmanship, Agee operated on his writing until it took over his criticism.

A monster technique became the critic, while the enormous IQ became pigmyized by the devious things he found he could do with pure skill. He used a dozen public-voiced mechanisms for pumping up or deflating actor or film: There is no great courage shown in the love scenes of *Nightmare Alley*; beneath the cat's cradle of sensitive things he could wrongfully say about *Sunset Boulevard* Agee was a fall guy for candor, the honestly corny (Billy Wilder films) or the honestly archaic (*Monsieur Verdoux*). Agee's reviewing progressed through the years into simplification, taking the cunning artist exactly as he hoped to be taken, but the writing ear and

sense of timing are such that he strikes fear in the reader with his arrogant, omnipotent decisions in unbeatable prose.

What we have now in the new criticism is a semi-pro, speeded-up version of Agee's additive, tensionless language with its flagrant escalations. Agee at his most famous is a simplifier impersonating a zealously objective writer operating with tons of passion: "Buster Keaton's face ranked almost with Lincoln's as an early American stereotype, it was haunting, handsome, almost beautiful, yet it was irreducibly funny".

Keaton's face has a French quality, like the famous "weeping Frenchman" photo of Fernandel; it is closer to a caricature of handsomeness, the

body was funny and important for positional geometric comedy, the face came in a slow last for humor.

The big story in film criticism is a two-part serial: The first involves the persistence of the sentimentalized, misread Agee review, and the second concerns the arrival in power of the Sarris-Sontag classifier, who can pack so much authority into a subordinate clause. Like so many unhappy art events, the second involvement might not have happened had Agee's writing in *The Nation* been correctly assessed for what it was--the first important film criticism to show a decided variance between the critic's words and what actually went on in the film. •

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