

Termite Makes Right. The Subterranean Criticism of Manny Farber¹

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Now that *The New York Times* has put Manny Farber on record as the best still-life painter of his generation, it seems a bit perverse to shift the spotlight to his movie criticism. But the fact is that the 64-year-old Farber is an artist-essayist on the level of Fernand Leger or Robert Smithson. His writing, intermittently published in an odd assortment of journals between 1942 and 1977, combines the historical perspicacity of Andrew Sarris and the verbal punch of Pauline Kael with an eccentric individualism that's all its own.

Farber has the strongest visual bias in American film criticism. Playing both ends against the middlebrow, his pieces are thick with inside references to painting, photography, and comic strips. ('I don't get why other critics don't pay more attention to what's going on in the other arts,' he says.) Like the surrealists, he's fond of destroying narrative continuity by taking in a film in random, 15-minute chunks. On meeting Farber, his appearance is as striking as his method. A prominent forehead and jaw connote intelligent pugnacity, while the rest of his features cluster mid-face to give him the stylized appearance of a kindly Chester Gould character. 'What he really looks like,' critic Richard Thompson once wrote, 'is philosopher-

king of all the bums in all the grind houses in the world, bringing a Promethean message to us from Plato's cave world of the triple feature.'

Part of that message is embodied in a key 1962 essay that originally appeared in *Film Culture*. (The same astonishing issue also contains Sarris's *Notes on the Auteur Theory*, Jack Smith's *The Perfect Cinematic Appositiveness of Maria Montez*, and Kael's review of *Shoot the Piano Player* [*Tirez sur le pianiste*, François Truffaut, 1960]) Farber's contribution, *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*, is the snappiest jeremiad I've ever read. Its target is films that are inflated, over-wrought, precious, 'tied to the realm of celebrity and affluence' – white elephant stuff, in which the artist tries 'to pin the viewer to the wall and slug him with wet towels of artiness and significance.' Against this beast (personified by Antonioni, Truffaut, and the then modish Tony Richardson) Farber raises the red flag of termite art, a mysterious form that flourishes in dark corners where 'the spotlight of culture is nowhere in evidence.' Farber's termites include journalists, pulp writers, B-movie directors, and comic-strip artists – intuitive, unself-conscious professionals who have 'no ambitions towards gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything.'

1. This article was originally published in *Village Voice*, 20-26 Mai 1981. Deep thanks to Jim Hoberman for permission to reproduce this article.

Although I interpreted it to suit myself, Farber's white elephant/termite dichotomy was crucial for me. I got my first regular writing gig in 1972 for a shortlived successor to the *East Village Other* that was known as the *New York Ace* and operated out of a fetid basement on West 16th Street. Under the rubric *Terminal Termite*, I tried to work out a kind of Farber-inspired cultural criticism capable of ping-ponging back and forth between Brakhage movies and Coca-Cola commercials. After a few of these, the editor asked me to please explicate my 'incomprehensible logo' and 'buglike theory of art' (a reference, he probably thought, to our working conditions). I composed a tribute to Farber that segued seamlessly into a rabid attack on such current white elephants as *2001* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Performance* (Donald Cammell y Nicolas Roeg, 1970), and *El Topo* (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1970). With that issue, the *Ace* folded.

Actually, I had stumbled across Farber a few years earlier, in the pages of Dan Talbot's *Film: An Anthology*, which included Farber's 1957 essay *Underground Films*. A hard-boiled paean to a then-unsung cadre of action directors (Hawks, Walsh, Wellman, Mann, Karlson), *Underground Films* took Farber three years to write and was originally intended for *Vogue*. This exciting, if morose, manifesto not only anticipated the discoveries of the French auteurs, it audaciously valorized the style and mise-en-scene of a movie over its plot. Farber's 'hardgrained cheapsters' thrived on precisely that material that was most hackneyed and childish. Typically, he compared them to basketball layers who did their best shooting from the worst angle on the court.

Underground Films contains all of Farber's attributes – the pop-culture connoisseurship, the canonization of a peripheral form, the authoritative painter's jargon worked into a nervy, wise-cracking, baroque prose style. (All that's missing is his trademark reference to Cezanne's 'niggling, tingling' brushwork.) Like Raymond Chandler, Ben Hecht, or S. J. Perelman – who once wrote 'With men who know rococo best,

it's Farber two to one' – Farber could twist the American vernacular into something like a salt pretzel. 'The films of the Hawks-Wellman group are underground for more reasons than the fact that the director hides out in subsurface reaches of his work,' wrote Farber appreciatively. 'The hardbitten action film finds its natural home in caves: the murky congested theaters, looking like glorified tattoo parlors on the outside and located near bus terminals in big cities. These theaters roll action films in what, at first, seems like a nightmarish atmosphere of shabby transience, prints that seem overgrown with jungle moss, soundtracks infected with hiccups. The spectator watches two or three action films go by and leaves feeling as though he were a pirate discharged by a giant sponge.' It was startling to discover that Farber was knocking out copy like this every month for the back page of *Artforum*.

Rereading Farber's essays before the interview, what struck me was how reflexive they are, how much they describe his own modus operandi. When he writes that 'a peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and likely as not leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity,' he could be predicting his own development, the successive occupation of disparate realms (the B movie, the structural film, European modernism) without settling into any of them. When he cites the 'important trait of termite-fungus-centipede art' as 'an ambulatory creation which is an act both of observing and being in the world, a journeying in which the artist seems to be ingesting both the material of his art and the outside world through a horizontal coverage,' he's acknowledging the painter's traits that inform his criticism – the sense of space as a malleable substance, the capacity for collaging raw perceptual data, the knack for looking at movies from the inside out.

A congenital maverick, Farber was born in an Arizona copper town one mile from the Mexican border. His parents owned a dry-goods store. As a student he was interested in both painting

and journalism, but became a carpenter as an alternative to working for the WPA. Arriving in New York in the late '30s, he intersected two key intellectual scenes: the *Partisan Review* crowd and the future Abstract Expressionists. In 1942 he succeeded Otis Ferguson as the movie critic for *The New Republic*, writing for it, and its cousin *The Nation*, off and on for the next 11 years. (At times, Farber's beat included art criticism as well: Matisse's 'line is as much a thing of genius as Cary Grant's dark, nonchalant glitter. With one swift, sure, unbroken flip of the wrist he can do more for the female navel, abdomen, breast, and nipple than anyone since Mr. Maidenform.') Despite his remarkably prescient appreciations of Tex Avery, Val Lewton, Sam Fuller, and *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby, 1951), Farber was consistently overshadowed by his more famous crony, James Agee.

Like a veteran relief pitcher, Farber was 'traded' to the *New Leader*. Then, after dropping out of regular criticism to write his position papers – *Underground Films*, the acid *Hard Sell Cinema*, *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art* – he signed on as the movie reviewer for a second-string strokebook, *Cavalier*. (According to Greg Ford, who helped Farber assemble his one anthology, *Negative Space*, Farber never bothered to save these pieces, which then had to be excavated from Times Square backdate magazine stores.) When Farber abruptly decamped for *Artforum* in late 1966, the shift in perspective was more complex than just a move from the psychic environs of 42nd to those of 57th street.

Arguably, Farber did his best writing in his three years at *Artforum*: a canny mixture of career appreciations (Hawks, Fuller, Siegel), straight reviews, and pithy reports on various New York film festivals. Moreover, he pushed his termite aesthetic into new territory, revealing an enthusiasm not only for Jean-Luc Godard but for the structural films of Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, and Ken Jacobs. His affinity for the latter group may well be a factor of Farber's painterly eye, but he credits his wife and collaborator,

the painter Patricia Patterson, with leading the expedition into the avant-garde. Farber's last stint as a regular critic was in 1975 after he and Patterson got teaching positions at the University of California at San Diego, where they still live. For seven issues, the Farbers worked for Francis Ford Coppola's *City* magazine, filing exhortatory reviews of the European modernists (Fassbinder, Herzog, Duras, the Straubs, Rivette, Akerman) that he was then teaching. 'Duras should direct a Continental Op story,' he says. 'Two grudging, monosyllabic writers.'

Farber isn't grudging in conversation, just understated. He measures his words, spends a lot of time listening, and asks as many questions as I ask him. What was Michael Snow's new film like? What do I think of Herzog? Where did I go to college? The interview turns quickly into a discussion. Among the topics is Fassbinder's decline from an arch-termite to a total white elephant ('The low budget helped a lot – he's over-produced now.') Farber and Patterson were among the first American critics to discover Fassbinder. They caught *The Merchant of the Four Seasons* (*Händler der vier Jahreszeiten*, 1971) at the 1972 Venice Film Festival, writing in *Artforum* that it was 'the single antidote to thoughts of suicide in the Grand Canal.' Hollywood, Farber thinks, 'is being castrated because it doesn't get any help from the inventions of people like Snow, Rocha, Gehr. Somehow, it's cut off from all pictorial contributions by outsiders.' He found *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) 'a terrific movie technically, but much too narcissistic and aggressively ambitious.' *Excalibur* (John Boorman, 1981)? 'Horrible. I always thought Boorman had a better eye.'

Right now, Farber tends to downplay his writing. He calls it 'excruciating' work. (Farber's difficulty with deadlines is legendary. *Film Comment* is still waiting for his piece on Syberberg's Hitler film.) He'd rather talk about his paintings – the aerial views of Milk Duds boxes and lollipops scattered in stringent, centerless patterns across a desk-blotter surface, or the works of the

Auteur Series, which employ the same overhead perspective and overall compositions as well as a host of miniaturized objects in suggestive, rebus-like formations. ('I like work... termitically.') The elements in *Howard Hawks "A Dandy's Gesture"* include railroad tracks and a model train, a speedboat, an airplane, an elephant, and what look like bits of a Hershey bar. They're all roughly the same size. Slanting off the canvas at the lower edge is a somewhat larger reporter's tablet filled with scrawled notes on *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932) and *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940).

The Auteur Series includes paintings on Preston Sturges, Anthony Mann, and Marguerite Duras. Farber tells me he's currently working on William Wellman and Luis Bunuel. The canvases take a long time to finish. 'I don't go to movies that much any more,' he says. "I think about them while I'm painting.' •