

Preface to *Negative Space*¹

Robert Walsh

Forty years ago, prompted by the release of *Bitter Victory* (Nicholas Ray, 1957), Jean-Luc Godard famously declared: ‘There was theater (Griffith), poetry (Murnau), painting (Rossellini), dance (Eisenstein), music (Renoir). Henceforth there is cinema.’ You can still hear the dramatic pause ... ‘And the cinema is Nicholas Ray.’

Film criticism, of course, is Manny Farber.

From the beginning of his professional life, as a fledgling art and film critic at *The New Republic* in 1942, Manny Farber’s prose was unflaggingly humorous, swift, relentlessly declarative, and everywhere intricately constructed. He possessed an unerring eye and ear for identifying and exposing clichés, anything remotely corny, and the dead on arrival. What his mainstream colleagues held fast to—plot maneuvers, psychology with a capital P, character ‘development’—he virtually ignored, as though he considered these elements channel markers, not the anchors they had been taken for. Yet the briefest look at his work reveals an astute appreciator of actors, one who paid subtle attention to body language, physiognomy, and other presentations of self.

Farber had a coterie reputation, particularly in the postwar world of New York intellectuals, as a keen observer, a brilliant and original stylist, and an exacting but generous critic (as well as a pioneering painter). But until this selection of fugitive articles was culled from a

career then approaching three decades, it was necessary to unearth back issues of *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The New Leader*, *Commentary*, *Artforum*, and more marginal periodicals to study Farber’s reviews and extended essays. *Negative Space*, first published in 1971 and significantly expanded here, offered most readers their first chance to ascertain the full scope and evolution of his writing.

For many years, and much to his irritation, Farber has been typecast as the champion of B movies and ‘the male action film.’ He was certainly among the first to call attention to the achievements of directors as different as Howard Hawks, Raoul Walsh (no relation), William Wellman, Samuel Fuller, and Anthony Mann at a time when they were virtually ignored, and in the late 1950s and early 1960s his notoriety was enhanced—or, as it turned out, calcified—with influential summing-up pieces such as *Underground Films*, *Hard-Sell Cinema*, and *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*. But, as *Negative Space* shows, Farber covered a much more sprawling domain than he is usually given credit for, while displaying ever greater critical ambitions.

In contrast to his temperament, which inches along by layered reiteration, Farber’s pieces hooked and seduced readers from the opening phrase and drew them along, sometimes flagging a quick detour before sweeping them off again in other unexpected directions, though usually

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arriving at an energizing envoi. He could easily skate from a quick sociological overview to spatial analysis to a punning aside on a room's familiar bric-a-brac within the winding course of a single sentence. He probably became best known for his articulation and defense of 'termite art'—a phrase he applied to any unpretentious movie that burrowed with no object in mind but 'eating its own boundaries'—as opposed to self-conscious 'white elephant art,' artificially laden with symbolism and 'significance.' He would often praise 'the anonymous artist, who is seemingly afraid of the polishing, hypocrisy, bragging, fake educating that goes on in serious art,' singling out 'the least serious undergrounder, which attains most of its crisp, angular character from the modesty of a director working skillfully far within the earthworks of the story.'

In fact, Farber was so persuasive an advocate on behalf of films whose directors' names he employed as shorthand for complex webs of creative relationships that he has sometimes been mistaken for an auteurist fundamentalist who worshipped an unanointed few. *Negative Space* also leaves no doubt that this assessment of his sensibility and aesthetic was misleadingly narrow. For Farber was always, if increasingly, aware of films as collaborative and mongrelized in all their parts. In his essay *The Subverters*, he wrote: 'One day somebody is going to make a film that is the equivalent of a Pollock painting, a movie that can be truly pigeonholed for effect, certified a one-person operation. Until this miracle occurs, the massive attempt in 1960s criticism to bring some order and shape to film history—creating a Louvre of great films and detailing the one genius responsible for each film—is doomed to failure because of the subversive nature of the medium: the flash-bomb vitality that one scene, actor, or technician injects across the grain of a film. . . . One of the joys of moviegoing is worrying over the fact that what is referred to as Hawks might be Jules Furthman, that behind the Godard film is the looming shape of Raoul Coutard, and that, when people talk about Bogart's "peculiarly American" brand

of scarred, sophisticated cynicism they are really talking about what Ida Lupino, Ward Bond, or even Stepin Fetchit provided in unmistakable scene-stealing moments'.

It was this feeling for impurities that made Farber an uncanny dowser when it came to spotting an individual's stamp on a film, wherever it could be discerned, and something of a seer about the relations between a film and its historical moment.

Farber has also been considered a 'curmudgeon,' but his alleged 'crankiness' is something more: an immediate responsiveness, a desire for precision, and an invitation to dialogue. Though he can seem 'opinionated,' 'intensely personal,' 'eccentric'—all the things he's blurbed to be—strictly speaking, the first person is virtually absent from his prose. Anything but private, his critical voice is suffused with personality and 'attitude,' but not exactly that of the man himself. As his sophisticated painter's eye began to take greater precedence over his gift for ridicule both caustic and sly, his work became more and more dense without, however, sacrificing its suppleness or speed—just one result of his inveterate habit of repeated viewings and reconsiderations of a given film, his attempt to go beyond his private reactions to accommodate plural perspectives, and the fact that he is admittedly 'unable to write anything at all without extraordinary amounts of rewriting.' These factors helped forge a criticism that took its author's initial responses to a film only as a launching pad; the published work was the result of rigorous self-criticism and endless mulling, a trial by fire.

Within this crucible Farber fashioned a style whose prodigious vocabulary, flexible syntax, and racing pulse were exquisitely at-tuned to the phenomenologies of artistic process (especially the momentary fluxes of filmmaking). No critic, not even Godard, has had a more developed understanding of a movie as mobile composition, a wheeling mandala of sounds and images in dialogue with one another and with their

viewers. Perhaps because of his relationships with contentious friends in the literary and art worlds—from James Agee to Jackson Pollock, Walker Evans to Clement Greenberg—as well as making his living for many years as a carpenter, he came to examine each movie as an open set of overlapping fields, which encouraged a style that reveled in Borgesian catalogues of telling detail and led him to give heightened prominence to the varieties of film space. By the 1970s he had come to see space as ‘the most dramatic stylistic entity—from Giotto to Noland, from *Intolerance* (David Wark Griffith, 1916) to *Weekend* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967).’

Always ‘process-mad’—his phrase—Farber seems to have trained himself to experience, as though microscopically and in slow motion, contradictions within a film overall, deficiencies in its script, friction in its performances, in a sequence, even in a single abbreviated shot, and grasped how entirely and precisely time-laden, imbued with its historical present, a movie, especially a good one, tends to be. This growing sense prompted him over the years to move further into what Donald Phelps called ‘extension’ and what Farber later designated as ‘continuation.’ (A prescient and all too brief article by Phelps, reprinted in his 1969 collection, *Covering Ground: Essays for Now*, remains the best introduction to Farber’s work as a writer and artist.) What ‘continuation’ means can really be understood only by watching Farber’s prose in action, appreciating the perspectives and voices collaged within the essays and unpacking the hints he gave to Richard Thompson in the superb interview that now closes the book.

Most of Farber’s work in his career of more than 55 years—including art and movie criticism, renowned film classes at the University of California at San Diego, and especially the paintings he began after his move to Southern California, shortly before *Negative Space* was published—has emphasized polyphony. He began blazing this trail quite early on and was always in dynamic if unspoken dialogue with other writers,

critics, and artists, testing his perceptions against theirs, interrogating and incorporating their languages and techniques, and using them to triangulate his positions. This may be one reason why, whatever his obsessions, he seems never to have become stuck on the films of one country, genre, or era but continued searching.

Where he wound up—light-years from where he began—no one could have predicted, though he had consistently zeroed in on mavericks and radicals. As far back as 1957 he had written that ‘the sharpest work of the last thirty years is to be found by studying the most unlikely, self-destructing, uncompromising, roundabout artists,’ so the 1960s and 1970s were an extremely fertile era for him, a period of film he was better prepared for than most of his peers. He rose to the challenges of Godard, Snow, Scorsese, and the New German Cinema (and whatever else he encountered at various film festivals and through the Pacific Film Archive) by redefining the goals and strategies of his criticism and defining ‘continuation’ in practice.

In 1966 Patricia Patterson, an artist and teacher in her own right whom Farber married ten years later, began collaborating informally with him. Though uncredited at first, she had an ever stronger hand in his *Artforum* articles of the late 1960s and then in the essays published in Francis Ford Coppola’s short-lived *City* magazine and in *Film Comment*. In addition to a comprehensive index, this expanded version of *Negative Space* appends eight pieces published after the original edition, nearly all explicitly cosigned by her. In their interview with Thompson, Farber specified a bit of what Patterson brought to their criticism: ‘Patricia’s got a photographic ear; she remembers conversation from a movie. She is a fierce anti-solutions person, against identifying a movie as one single thing, period. She is also an antagonist of value judgments. What does she replace it with? Relating a movie to other sources, getting the plot, the idea behind a movie—getting the abstract idea out of it. She brings that into the writing and takes the assertiveness out’.

After Patterson conceded that she was ‘a little more scrupulous’ and ‘less willing to let the statement be made... always saying, that’s not exactly true, or that’s not fair, or look at this other side’, Farber explained: ‘She cannot be unscrupulous. We have ferocious arguments over every single sentence that’s written.’ Those battles, however essential to the production of their essays, leave few traces here, except in the unusual variety of texture and the inescapable impression that the stakes have been raised and there is so much left to be said. Again there is a personal critical voice, yet it is neither Farber’s nor Patterson’s, but an unprecedented blend.

‘I can’t imagine a more perfect art form, a more perfect career than criticism,’ Farber told Thompson at the end of their conversation in 1977. ‘I can’t imagine anything more valuable to do, and I’ve always felt that way.’ Yet just a few months later the tag team published what would be their final work of criticism, *Kitchen Without Kitsch*, an essay on Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman*. Farber taught film courses at UCSD for another decade or so, and both he and Patterson have been even more fiercely committed to painting (and, in Patterson’s case, to installations and site-specific work) that has often incorporated texts of various kinds. Their surpassing art of the last twenty years is perhaps

the most vivid yet neglected work in the world—a consolation of sorts for their decampment from the critical arena. But their shift of attention away from movies has been an incomparable loss to film studies, to criticism of any kind, and even to American prose, for Farber had long been one of the great writers of his generation, and Patterson’s enlarging contribution to their collaboration was deep, wide-ranging, and liberating. We may no longer have the chance to hear from Farber and Patterson on the films he taught with enormous passion and care (an unprecedented stretch, from Hollywood and the international independents to what used to be called the avant-garde: Griffith to Renoir, Mizoguchi to Melville, Sternberg to Duras, and even Leonard Kastle’s *The Honeymoon Killers* (1969) or on films of the 1990s (Pialat’s *Van Gogh* (1990), for example—one of their favorite films in recent years—or the latest Hou Hsiao-Hsiens, Sokurovs, and Markers), but readers can now relish their finest pieces in this new edition of *Negative Space*. The volume as a whole is an invaluable compilation by, as Susan Sontag puts it, ‘the liveliest, smartest, most original film critic this country ever produced.’ Farber and Patterson’s last essays and joint interview are the most indispensable, suggestive, and with luck, *future-seeding* writing about film we have—a rich and untapped vein. •

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For Richard Roud, 1929-1989