

Other Roads, Other Tracks¹

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*Criticism is very important, and difficult.
I can't think of a better thing for a person to do.*

Manny Farber

'One of the most important facts about criticism is obvious,' Manny Farber once advanced in an interview. 'It's based on language and words. The desire is always to pursue: what does the word mean, or the sentence, or the paragraph, and where does it lead? As you follow language out, it becomes more and more webbed, complex. The desire is always to find the end. In any thought you put down, what you're seeking is truth: what is the most believable fact and where is the end?'

'It's the idea of writing about the film as commensurate with the way the filmmaker's mind is,' Farber continued. 'The work's qualities should influence the structure of the piece. [...] I don't think you can be mimetic enough.'

Farber's insistence on criticism as language—his insistence, too, that his critical language arise from the volatile particulars of the films he writes about—makes him the most adventurous and original stylist of the mid-century El Dorado of American film criticism that spans Otis Ferguson, Robert Warshow, James Agee, Andrew Sarris, and Pauline Kael. At the start of the 21st century Farber also proves the film writer with the deepest enduring influence among that distinguished

generation. Provocative traces of Farber's style can be registered in contemporary figures as various and persuasive as Greil Marcus, Luc Sante, Geoffrey O'Brien, J. Hoberman, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Paul Schrader, Jonathan Crary, Ronnie Scheib, A. O. Scott, Meredith Brody, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Kent Jones, and Howard Hampton. As far back as 1963 Susan Sontag, in her essay *Against Interpretation*, called for 'acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art. This seems even harder to do than formal analysis. Some of Manny Farber's film criticism [...] are among the rare examples of what I mean. These are essays which reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it.' Recently, novelist William Gibson speculated that 'if America were Japan, Farber would long since have been declared a National Treasure.' As Schrader concluded, 'In the beginning was Manny Farber.'

Farber on Film collects for the first time all Farber's film investigations, his coruscating forays as a featured, often weekly or monthly reviewer for *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Artforum*, *The New Leader*, *Cavalier*, and *City*, among other

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magazines, as well as the landmark pieces of his only book, *Negative Space* (1971, and reprinted in an expanded edition in 1998). He is legendary for fierce, serpentine essays that shun movie-criticism commonplaces like character psychology, story synopsis, and social lessons. *Negative Space* accents Farber's extended performances of the late 1950s and '60s, *The Gimp*, *Hard-Sell Cinema*, *Underground Films*, and *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*, reprinting only a dozen full or partial film columns from *The Nation* (where he started reviewing in 1947, and published over 65 film pieces) and just a single film column from *The New Republic* (where he started reviewing in 1942, and published almost 175 film pieces). The wonder of these early reviews is how impressively his *New Republic* and *Nation* columns deliver both as traditional criticism and innovative Farber prose, as he elegantly focuses acting, plot, even entertainment value, the very moves his monumental essays resist. The present volume returns those later essays to the movie occasions that prompted and sustained them, and one of its pleasures is tracking precarious notions like 'termite art' or 'the gimp' or the 'underground' across three decades. *Farber on Film* also sweeps up his important film pieces after *Negative Space*, including crucial looks at Scorsese and Altman.

Farber and *Negative Space*

The Farber equation is never simple. That sentence is a variation on a Samuel Beckett line I've wanted to adapt for an essay, review, biography, even poem, ever since I read the original in college. As the opening sentence to his first book Beckett wrote, 'The Proustian equation is never simple,' and from the outset I was comforted by the promise of persistent, accelerating, perhaps eternal difficulty and puzzle. But as over the years I repeated to myself the sentence, 'The Proustian equation is never simple,' at the blind start of any obstinate piece of writing, I found myself startled by Beckett's conflation of 'Proustian' and 'equation': his brisk juxtaposition of involuntary memory and the painstaking working through of quantities and variables.

I never found a space for the sentence because the bewilderment the arrival of Beckett's six words in my head customarily signaled turned out always to expose only a lack of preparation or confidence, a private anxiety that refused to intersect the subject at hand. But for Manny Farber's film criticism and paintings, the introductory oddities, muddles, crises, contradictions, dead ends, multiple alternatives, and divergent vistas spiral along 'chains of rapport and intimate knowledge' (to quote his essay on Don Siegel) into still more tangled and intractable mysteries; following Beckett on Proust, the Farber equation creates 'a sustained, powerful, and lifelike pattern of dissonance' (to quote his essay on Preston Sturges) that insists on insinuating the steeped-in-time personal and sensual alongside the abstractly intellectual, formal, and conceptual.

For much of his writing life Farber was branded an advocate merely of action films and B-movies—as though it might not be distinction enough to have been the first American critic to render serious appreciations of Howard Hawks, Samuel Fuller, William Wellman, Raoul Walsh, and Anthony Mann. Yet Farber resisted many noir films of the 1940s as inflated and mannerist—'over the past couple of years, one movie after another has been filled with low-key photography,' he complained in 1952, 'shallow perspectives, screwy pantomime, ominously timed action, hollow-sounding voices.' Farber also was among the first critics to write about Rainer Werner Fassbinder, an early champion of Werner Herzog, and an exponent of such experimental directors as Michael Snow, George Kuchar, Andy Warhol, and Chantal Akerman. *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman told me that upon discovering Farber in college, he was 'stunned by how eclectic Farber was, how wide-ranging his references were. I wasn't that interested in commercial films. I was interested in underground movies, the French New Wave, and such B-movies as existed. I would read Andrew Sarris, I would read Kael, but I felt they were operating from a different perspective—whereas Farber seemed to me to be

a much hipper intellect.' As Hoberman quipped in the introduction to his collection *Vulgar Modernism*, Farber played 'both ends off against the middlebrow.'

Still, Farber's notoriety as a film critic largely resides in his B-movie—steeped, careering slams of the 1950s and '60s—*The Gimp* (for *Commentary*, 1952), *Underground Films* (also for *Commentary*, 1957), *Hard-Sell Cinema* (for *Perspectives*, 1957), and particularly *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art* (for *Film Culture*, 1962). The termite/white elephant essay cashiered 'masterpiece art, reminiscent of the enameled tobacco humidors and wooden lawn ponies bought at white elephant auctions decades ago.' White elephant directors 'blow up every situation and character like an affable inner tube with recognizable details and smarmy compassion' or 'pin the viewer to the wall and slug him with wet towels of artiness and significance.' Farber instead tracked the termite artist: 'ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved, doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it.' Termite art (or 'termite-fungus-centipede art,' as he also bottled it) is 'an act both of observing and being in the world, a journeying in which the artist seems to be ingesting both material of his art and the outside world through horizontal coverage.' Against the white elephant 'pursuit of [...] continuity, harmony,' termite art mainly inheres in moments—a few spots of tingling, jarring excitement' in a Cézanne painting where the artist 'nibbles away at what he calls his "small sensation"'; John Wayne's 'hipster sense of how to sit in a chair leaned against a wall' in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Balance* (John Ford, 1962); and 'one unforgettably daring image' in *Les mistons* (François Truffaut, 1957), 'kids sniffing the bicycle seat just vacated by the girl in the typical fashion of voyeuristic pornographic art.'

Farber's attention to vivifying details and gestures rather than the encrusted masterwork reminds me of Robert Frost in his *Paris Review* interview. 'The whole thing is performance and prowess and feats of association,' Frost asserted of his poems. 'Why don't critics talk about those

things—what a feat it was to turn that that way, and what a feat it was to remember that, to be reminded of that by this?' Farber similarly personalized his termite/white elephant division for the introduction to *Negative Space*: 'The primary reason for the two categories is that all the directors I like [...] are in the termite range, and no one speaks about them for the qualities I like.' As termite artists he indicated a diversity of painters, writers, photographers, producers, and actors, which encompassed Laurel and Hardy, Otis Ferguson, Walker Evans, Val Lewton, Clarence Williams, J. R. Williams, Weldon Kees, Margie Israel, Isaac Rosenfeld, sometimes James Agee, and film directors Howard Hawks, Raoul Walsh, William Wellman, Samuel Fuller, Anthony Mann, and Preston Sturges.

Farber published his last film essay, *Beyond the New Wave: Kitchen Without Kitsch*, in *Film Comment*, in 1977, a few years after he moved from New York to San Diego with his wife, the artist Patricia Patterson, to paint and to teach film and painting at the University of California. Among his reasons for abandoning criticism, as he told me: 'I no longer wanted to be viewed as the film critic who also paints.' In New York Farber traveled among the late 1930s generation of New York writers and critics, many aligned with *Partisan Review*—Clement Greenberg, Agee, Saul Bellow, Jean Stafford, Mary McCarthy, Kees, and Ferguson, among others. For his reviews and essays for *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, *Time*, *Commentary*, *Commonweal*, *The New Leader*, *Cavalier*, *Artforum*, and *City*, Farber manifested overt and enduring affinities particularly with Ferguson, Agee, and Greenberg. Yet his approach to the actual writing could not be more divergent, incongruous, maverick, perverse. Where Greenberg aimed at what might be styled a fastidious lucidity, even as he traced the destruction of representation, and Ferguson and Agee offered distinctive variations on conversational lyricism—Ferguson tilting toward 1920s jazz, Agee canting into rhapsody—Farber is perhaps the only American critic of modernism to write as a modernist. He emerged

as the boldest and most literary of film and art critics of the 1940s and '50s by coursing along almost stridently anti-literary tangents. Farber advanced a topographical prose that aspired termite-fashion through fragmentation, parody, allusions, multiple focus, and clashing dictions to engage the formal spaces of the new films and paintings he admired.

Farber once described his prose style as 'a struggle to remain faithful to the transitory, multisuggestive complication of a movie image and/or negative space.' No other film critic has written so inventively or flexibly from inside the moment of a movie. His writing can appear to be composed exclusively of digressions from an absent center. One of his standard moves is a bold qualification of a qualification, in a sequence of vivid repositionings. His strategies mix self-suspicion, retreat, digression, and mulish persistence, so that Farber (once more Beckett-like) often proceeds as if giving up and pressing on simultaneously. There are rarely introductory overviews or concluding summaries; his late reviews in particular spurn plot summaries and might not even name the director of a film, and transitions seem interchangeable with non sequiturs. Puns, jokes, lists, snaky metaphors, and webs of allusions supplant arguments. Farber wrenches nouns into verbs (Hawks, he writes, 'landscapes action') and sustains strings of divergent, perhaps irreconcilable adjectives such that praise can look inseparable from censure. *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958), he writes, is 'basically the best movie of Welles's cruddy middle peak period.' He will cast prickly epigrams—'Huston is unable to countenance the possibility of every gentleman being a murderer at heart, preferring instead every murderer being a gentleman at heart.' His sentences will dazzle through layers of poise and charm:

'What is so lyrical about the ending [of Don Siegel's *The Lineup*, 1958], in San Francisco's Sutro Museum, is the Japanese-print compositions, the late afternoon lighting, the advantage taken of the long hallways, multilevel stairways, in a baroque,

elegant, glass-palace building with an exposed skating rink, nautical museum, and windows facing the sea with eye-catching boulders.'

But Farber *qua* Farber typically arrives at a kind of backdoor poetry: not "lyrical," or traditionally poetic, but original and startling. This is Farber on *How I Won the War* (Richard Lester, 1967): 'At its best, it has a crawling-along-the-earth cantankerousness and cruddiness, as though the war against fascism were being glimpsed by a cartooned earthworm from an outhouse on a fake hillbilly spread somewhere in the Carolinas.' Or here he invokes the "underground" theaters along 1950s Manhattan's 42nd Street:

'The hard-bitten 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, sound tracks infected with hiccups. The spectator watches two or three action films go by and leaves feeling as though he were a pirate discharged from a giant sponge.'

Many of these writerly aspects are on display in Farber's magnificent Hawks piece, originally published in *Artforum* in 1969. The essay manages neither a welcoming preface nor a resolving conclusion—the start and finish are all canny abruptness. The first four long paragraphs compose a docket, or roster—one Hawks film for each paragraph. Farber situates Hawks inside a vast allusive complex—Piero's religious paintings, cubist composing, Breughel, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Tolkien, Muybridge, Walker Evans, and Robert Frank; almost a kind of collage of allusive appropriation. Many phrases describe Farber's own writing practice and anticipate the complex, tangled surfaces of his future paintings: 'secret preoccupation with linking,' 'builds detail on detail into a forbidding whirlwind,' 'each one bumping the other in an endless interplay,' 'many plots are interwoven,' 'the idea of topping,

outmaneuvering,’ ‘intricately locked humor,’ ‘the ingenuity of its pragmatic engineering,’ and ‘the geography of gesture.’ And, rare for Farber’s prose, there is an explicit autobiographical reference—to the border town of his birthplace. The seaport in *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939) might be good, he writes, for a Douglas, Arizona, high school production.

You don’t necessarily think of Manny Farber as your *Baedeker* to the shadings and luridities of mainstay American movie acting, as a dab hand of the concise plot summary that uncoils into deft film critique, or associate him with audience recommendations and words like ‘marvelous’, ‘sensitive’, ‘poignant,’ and ‘sparkling.’ You particularly don’t think of Farber this way if your experience of his writing is confined to *Negative Space*. Yet consider three short illustrative moments from his many, sometimes-weekly film columns of the 1940s and ‘50s.

This is Farber on Frank Sinatra & Co. in *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) for *The Nation*, August 29, 1953:

‘The laurel wreaths should be handed out to an actor who isn’t even in the picture, Marlon Brando, and to an unknown person who first decided to use Frank Sinatra and Donna Reed in the unsweetened roles of Maggio, a tough little Italian American soldier, and Lorene, a prostitute at the “New Congress” who dreams of returning to respectability in the states. Sinatra plays the wild drunken Maggio in the manner of an energetic vaudevillian. In certain scenes—doing duty in the mess hall, reacting to some foul piano playing—he shows a marvelous capacity for phrasing plus a calm expression that is almost unique in Hollywood films. Miss Reed may mangle some lines (“you certainly are a funny one”) with her attempts at a flat Midwestern accent, but she is an interesting actress whenever Cameraman Burnett Guffey uses a hard light on her somewhat bitter features. Brando must have been the inspiration for Clift’s ability to make certain key lines (“I can soldier with any man,” or

“No more’n ordinary right cross”) stick out and seem the most authentic examples of American speech to be heard in films.’

Or here he is on Jerry Lewis in *That’s My Boy* (Hal Walker, 1951), two years earlier on September 1, 1951, also for *The Nation*:

‘The grimdest phenomenon since Dagmar has been the fabulous nationwide success of Jerry Lewis’s sub-adolescent, masochistic mugging. Lewis has parlayed his apish physiognomy, rickety body, frenzied lack of coordination, paralyzing brashness, and limitless capacity for self-degradation into a gold mine for himself and the mannered crooner named Dean Martin who, draped artistically from a mike, serves as his ultra-suave straight man. When Jerry fakes swallowing a distasteful pill, twiddles “timid” fingers, whines, or walks “like Frankenstein,” his sullen narcissistic insistence suggests that he would sandbag anyone who tried to keep him from the limelight. Lewis is a type I hoped to have left behind when I shortshteed my last cot at Camp Kennekreplach. But today’s bobby-soxers are rendered apoplectic by such Yahoo antics, a fact that can only be depressing for anyone reared on comedians like Valentino, Norma Shearer, Lewis Stone, Gregory Peck, Greer Garson, Elizabeth Taylor, or Vincent Impellitteri.’

Last, listen to the opening of his review of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) for *The New Republic*, December 2, 1946:

‘For an extremely sensitive and poignant study of life like your own, carrying constantly threatening overtones during this early stage of postwar readjustment, it would be worth your while to see *The Best Years of Our Lives*, even at the present inflated postwar prices.

The sparkling travelogue opening shows three jittery veterans flying home to up-and-at’em Boone City, a flourishing elm-covered metropolis patterned after Cincinnati. They are too uneasy about entering their homes as strangers to eat up the scenery. The chesty, down-to-earth sailor

(Harold Russell), whose lack of sophistication and affectation furnishes a striking contrast to his two chums, is hypersensitive about his artificial hands and is afraid his girl (Cathy O'Donnell) will marry him out of pity rather than love; the sergeant (Fredric March), whose superiority rests in his being old and experienced, a survivor of the infantry and before that a successful banker and father, feels he has changed too much for his old job and his family; the bombardier (Dana Andrews), who has about him that most-likely-to-succeed look of the Air Forces, got married on the run during training and hardly knows what to anticipate.'

Despite all the journalistic nimbleness and surprises inside these sentences, or the manifold tonal differences from the famous essays of *Negative Space*, you still witness emblematic Farber strokes in these brief early extracts from *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. Observe throughout the stubborn, graphic detailing ('the real hero,' he proposed in *Underground Films*, is 'the small detail') as he tabs various personality-revealing gestures: Sinatra, for instance, 'reacting to some foul piano playing,' or Dean Martin 'draped artistically from a mike.' Farber's later commemoration of the 'natural dialogue' and 'male truth' of action films is a recasting of his appreciation here of Montgomery Clift's 'authentic [...] American speech' in *From Here to Eternity*. Note too the distinctive seesaws of contrary adjectives and nouns—'grimmest', 'fabulous', 'success', 'masochistic mugging'—and the bouncy slang, 'up-and-at-'em', 'sandbag anyone', or 'short-sheeted my last cot.' Topical allusions (the blonde model-actress Dagmar graced the cover of *Life* the previous July) bump against deadpan, likely fictive citations ('Camp Kennekreplach'), much as that initial reference to Brando dangles, a tease, nearly a non sequitur, even after Farber ostensibly resolves it later in the paragraph. Observe especially that signature Farber list of 'comedians' that concludes the Jerry Lewis swipe. Valentino, Gregory Peck, Elizabeth Taylor . . . all comedians? The final name belongs to the then-mayor of New York City, Vincent

Impellitteri, aka "Impy," appended to the litany—I'm guessing—as much for his Tammany Hall affiliations and betrayals as for his public welcoming a few weeks earlier of Martin and Lewis to the Paramount Theater on Broadway.

By his *Underground Films* essay of 1957 Farber would flip over his fiesta for Sinatra and *From Here to Eternity*, the crooner-turned-actor by then evincing only «private scene-chewing,» and you will uncover in the *New Republic* and *Nation* columns analogous complications for his later appraisals of Preston Sturges, John Huston, and Gene Kelly. Farber initiated his career as an art and film critic at *The New Republic* early in 1942, and co-wrote his last essay with his wife, Patricia Patterson, in 1977; that's a 35-year arc. Of the original 281 pages of *Negative Space*, roughly 230 emanate from a 12-year stretch, 1957 through 1969, directly prior to the book. Farber titled a magnificent 1981 "auteur" painting, rooted in the films of William Wellman, *Roads and Tracks*. *Farber on Film* can advance alternate routes—other roads, other tracks—into, through, and around Farber's familiar trajectory as a critic and writer.

Occasionally in interviews he will present himself as a sort of natural critic, steeped in opinions and argumentative strategies. 'An important fact of my childhood was that I was surrounded by two brothers who were awfully smart, and very good at debating,' Farber once told me. 'We averaged three to four movies a week, sometimes with my uncle Jake. There was a good library, and in the seventh grade I started to go there and read movie criticism in magazines. I would analyze it and study it.' Then, at other moments, Farber suggests that ultimately only words matter to him. 'When I'm writing I'm usually trying for a language. I have tactics, and I know the sound I want, and it doesn't read like orthodox criticism. What I'm trying for was a language that holds you, that keeps a person reading and following me, following language rather than following criticism. I loved the construction involved in criticism.'

Manny Farber was born on February 20, 1917, in Douglas, Arizona, his house at 1101 Eighth Street just five blocks from the Mexican border. His parents ran a clothing store, La California Dry Goods, on G Street, Main Street in Douglas, across from the Lyric Theatre and also near the Grand Theatre. He followed his older brothers Leslie and David to Douglas High School, where he played football and tennis, wrote about sports, and contributed drawings of Mickey Mouse to the school yearbook, *The Copper Kettle*. After his family moved to Vallejo, California, and then to Berkeley, Farber enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley, for his freshman year, before transferring to Stanford. At Berkeley, Farber covered sports for *The Daily Californian*, his earliest signed article, a spirited forecast of the upcoming track and field season, appearing on January 25, 1935, under the headline BEAR WEIGHT MEN RATED AS STRONG GROUP. As he concluded his journalistic debut:

'Further joy was added to the track outlook with the announcement that big Glen Randall, Little Meet record holder, will again heave the discus this spring. Seriously hurt in an automobile accident last October, Randall is again ready to hurl the platter out to the 150 foot line. Aiding him in this event is Warren Wood, a potential first place winner but an erratic performer.'

Farber often claimed sportswriters as an influence on his criticism, and routinely injected sports metaphors into his columns, surprisingly for art as much as film. Richard Pousette-Dart, he suggested in *The Nation* (October 13, 1951), 'is something close to the Bobby Thomson of the spontaneity boys,' while Ferdinand Léger, he contended in *The Magazine of Art* (November 1942), 'reminds me of a pitcher who can throw nothing but fast balls, and his fast balls so fast you can't see them.' Reviewing sports-film features, he stressed that the games be represented as convincingly as any other profession. On Gary Cooper as Lou Gehrig in *Pride of the Yankees* (1942):

'No matter that Gary doesn't like baseball, is right-handed, lazy and tall-skinny, whereas Gehrig was left-handed, hard-working to the point of compulsion, and his one leg was the size of two of Gary's. So they taught him to throw left-handed, but they could never teach him to throw with any muscles but the ones in his arms, like a woman, nor could they make his long legs run differently from those of someone trying to run with a plate between his knees, nor could they move his body with his bat swing.'

All of which meant cutting the baseball action to a minimum—montage shots mostly from long distance up in the press box, and the picture was shot to hell right there.' (*New Republic*, July 27, 1942)

After taking drawing classes at Stanford, Farber enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts, and then at the Rudolph Schaefer School of Design. Around San Francisco, he supported himself as a carpenter, until he joined his brother Leslie in Washington, in 1939, and then in New York, in 1942. Both Leslie and David Farber found callings as psychiatrists; Leslie, notably, was the author of *The Ways of the Will: Essays Toward a Psychology and Psychopathology of Will* (1966), and *Lying, Despair, Jealousy, Envy, Sex, Suicide, and the Good Life* (1976). Leslie Farber's psychoanalytic essays track curious affinities with his brother's film writings—Leslie's 'distrust' for 'any psychological doctrine [...] [which] requires the repeated fancying-up of some item of experience—memory, dream, feeling, what have you—to give it an epistemological razzle-dazzle it couldn't manage on its own' inevitably recalls the 'wet towels of artiness and significance' of white elephant art. Overall his brothers' immersion in the human inner life appears to have prompted Manny's contempt for psychology, whether on screen or in his own writing. 'I moved as far away as I could from what Les and David were doing,' Farber told me. 'My whole life, the writing, was always in opposition to Leslie's domain, his involvement with psychology, brain power, etc. But there

was never any quarreling between brothers. It was just competing, that's all.' Under the title *Paranoia Unlimited*, (*New Republic*, November 25, 1946), Farber joked:

'In answer to the demand for movies that make you suspect psychopathological goings-on in everyone from friend to family dog (yesterday's heroes killed Indians, today's are associated one way or another with psychiatry), MGM has reissued a pokey oldie called *Rage in Heaven* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1941). This relic starts at a lonely asylum with a comic-opera escape by an unidentified inmate (Robert Montgomery) who is known to be paranoid only by the asylum doctor (Oscar Homolka, who gives an embarrassing rendition of a Katzenjammer psychiatrist).'

Still, as with football or baseball, he would notice the 'fairly accurate' rendition of an analyst's questions in Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), even as he dismissed the Dali dream as 'a pallid business of papier-mâché and modern show-window designing' (*New Republic*, December 3, 1945).

With a characteristic mix of the flip and the canny, Farber bamboozled his way into *The New Republic* with a 'smart-aleck' letter to editor Bruce Bliven, indicating that 'I could do the job better than anyone else who was doing it.' His earliest art column appeared on February 2, 1942, a review of the MOMA show, 'Americans 1942— Eighteen Artists from Nine States', that featured a postage stamp-sized sketch by Farber of artist John Marin. His next art column two weeks later delineated the face of Max Weber, then in a Whitney Museum watercolor exhibition. 'I planned to do a drawing to go along with every article,' Farber told me, 'but I just couldn't keep up.' After Otis Ferguson enlisted in the Merchant Marine as a seaman, Farber took over the film column, publishing on March 23 a round-up review of three war films, including *To Be or Not to Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942). As an art critic, Farber sounded like Farber from his premiere column, accenting 'action' and 'flexibility,' denouncing 'stylization'

and 'dogma.' With movies, he took longer— perhaps also piling on at first too many films at once for a short review; not until May would he learn to fixate on a single film and wrap up the others in a codicillary paragraph.

As I suggested at the outset, *Farber on Film* can be read for both continuities and departures, especially toward or away from the key essays of *Negative Space*. Looking back from the vistas of *The Gimp*, *Underground Films*, and especially *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*, Farber can be viewed as implacably progressing into his galvanizing notions. In *The Gimp*, for instance, published in *Commentary* in 1952, he imagined a 'gimmick,' a device with a string that a director might jerk any time he wished to insert some 'art' into a film. As far back as 1945 he was propounding a sort of protean mask for the same purposes:

'A device will soon be invented in Hollywood that will fulfill completely the producers' desire to please every person in the movie-going public. The device will be shaped like a silo and worn over the face, and be designed for those people who sit in movies expecting to witness art. It will automatically remove from any movie photographic gloss, excess shadows, and smoothness, makeup from actors' faces, the sound track and every third and fifth frame from the film in the interest of giving the movie cutting rhythm. It will jiggle the movie to give it more movement (also giving the acting a dance-like quality). To please those people who want complete fidelity to life it will put perspiration and flies on actors' faces, dirt under their fingernails, wet the armpits of men's shirts and scratch, flake and wear down the decor. It comes complete with the final amazing chase sequence from *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916) and the scene from *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) in which the Little Sister decorates her ragged dress with wads of cotton, which it inserts whenever somebody is about to conduct an all-girl symphony. The gadget also does away with all audience noise.' (*New Republic*, August 20, 1945)

Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s Farber memorialized the 42nd Street itch-house hippodromes he would tag ‘caves’ in his 1957 essay *Underground Films*. This, from 1943:

‘Who builds movie theatres? If you seek the men’s room you vanish practically away from this world, always in a downward direction. It is conceivable that the men’s room is on its way out. At the theatre called the Rialto in New York the men’s room is so far down it somehow connects with the subway: I heard a little boy, who came dashing up to his father, say, “Daddy! I saw the subway!” The father went down to see for himself. Another place that lets patrons slip through its fingers is the theatre in Greenwich Village where the men’s room is outside altogether.’ (*New Republic*, June 7, 1943)

That same year he observed of the action films he would eventually ticket as underground: ‘It is an interesting Hollywood phenomenon that the tough movie is about the only kind to examine the character’s actions straight and without glamour’ (*New Republic*, January 11, 1943).

The dynamics of white elephant art were fully in place at least nine years, maybe even more than a decade before Farber’s 1962 essay *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*. He attached the word ‘elephantine’ to the concept for an October 17, 1953, *Nation* column, and defined it recognizably in his recapitulation the previous January of his ten best films. ‘The only way to pull the vast sprawl of 1952 films together is to throw most of them in a pile bearing the label “movies that failed through exploiting middle-brow attitudes about what makes a good movie.” [...] It is difficult to say whether I liked or disliked a number of films that will appear on most other lists, since it was usually a case of being impressed with classy craftsmanship and bored by watching it pander to some popular notion about what makes an artistic wow’ (*Nation*, January 17, 1953). But white elephant art loops back through the years, accruing linkages and implications. A

1952 review of *Carrie* (William Wyler, 1952) positions underground films against white elephants without naming either:

‘Hollywood films were once in the hands of non-intellectuals who achieved, at best, the truth of American life and the excitement of American movement in simple-minded action stories. Around 1940 a swarm of bright locusts from the Broadway theaters and radio stations descended on the studios and won Hollywood away from the innocent, rough-and-ready directors of action films. The big thing that happened was that a sort of intellectual whose eyes had been trained on the crowded, bound-in terrain of Times Square and whose brain had been sharpened on left-wing letters of the thirties, swerved Hollywood story-telling toward fragmented, symbol-charged drama, closely viewed, erratically acted, and deviously given to sniping at their own society. What Welles, Kanin, Sturges, and Huston did to the American film is evident in the screen version of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, which is less important for its story than for the grim social comment underscoring every shot.’ (*Nation*, May 17, 1952)

Such fledgling evocations of white elephant art render explicit, as his 1962 essay never would, the intimation that Farber, who as a carpenter in San Francisco tried to join the Communist Party, was specifically dethroning the vulgarities and hypocrisy of liberal New Deal Hollywood as much as any other inadvertently comic bourgeois correctness. As he wrote of *Come Back, Little Sheba* (Daniel Mann, 1952), ‘You will half-enjoy the film, but its realism is more effective than convincing, and it tends to reiterate the twisted sentimentality of left-wing writing that tries to be very sympathetic toward little people while breaking its back to show them as hopelessly vulgar, shallow, and unhappy’ (*Nation*, November 8, 1952). Other reviews connect elephantitis with films that would be dubbed noir (*Murder, My Sweet* [Edward dmytryk, 1944]; *Laura* [Otto Preminger, 1944]; and *Double Indemnity* [Billy Wilder, 1944]), with European films (*Miracle in Milan* [*Miracolo a Milano*, Vittorio

de Sica, 1951]), Japanese films (*Rashomon* [Akira Kurosawa, 1950]), Oscar aspirants (*Mrs. Miniver* [William Wyler, 1942]), and Disney cartoons (*Bambi* [David Hand et. al., 1942]). As a category, if not a punchline, white elephant art was vital to Farber's thinking about movies and paintings from his first months at *The New Republic*.

Termite art of course is *everywhere* in his *New Republic* and *Nation* columns, though fascinatingly never via the urgent termite metaphors ('tunneling', 'burrowed into', 'excavations,' 'veining,' 'nibbles away,') that stitch together both *Underground Films* and *White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art*. You twig termite art in Farber's 1940s valentines to B-movies and B-directors, his early assertion that 'there is not a good story film without what is called the documentary technique,' (*New Republic*, July 12, 1943), his recurrent application of the adjectives 'honest' and 'accurate' for his highest praise, his emphasis on scrupulous history in allegedly historical movies, and in phrases like 'the details of ordinary activity' (*New Republic*, February 8, 1943), and 'actual life in actual settings' (*New Republic*, March 13, 1944). His dazzling invocation of late-night New York radio talk-jocks for *The American Mercury*, *Seers for the Sleepless*, similarly would italicize their fidelity to the 'sounds of real life.'

These columns also comprise a sort of anthology of the infinite ways of scaffolding a mixed review. Early and late, in his writing and for his paintings, Farber would demand multiple perspectives. As he ultimately lamented about popular arts criticism, 'Every review tends to become a monolithic putdown or rave' (*Cavalier*, June 1966). Here he leads off a 1942 *New Republic* art column being wisecracking and caustic toward Thomas Hart Benton:

'A bush-league ball player never gets beyond the Three Eye League, but a bush-league painter can be known coast to coast, especially if he has the marvelous flair for publicity that is Benton's. When Mr. B paints a picture, almost like magic

the presses start rolling, cameras clicking, and before you know it everyone in East Orange is talking about Tom's latest painting.'

Yet, by the next paragraph he is already backpedaling—he admits that «Benton has painted war as it actually is» and concludes, «Mr. Benton may be strictly a lightweight as a painter, but he is nevertheless honest and wise enough to paint the war as war, and not as pattycake pattycake» (April 20, 1942). By 1945, reviewing *The Clock* (Vincenzo Minnelli, 1945), Farber could insinuate all his contrary responses into just one paragraph:

'The movie is dominated by the desire to be neatly pleasant and pretty, and truthful only so far as will not basically disturb the neatness, pleasantness and prettiness. The furlough without an empty, disappointing, lonely, distasteful or fearful moment is as hard to believe as is the portrait of New Yorkers as relaxed, daisy-faced, accommodating people who send champagne to soldiers in restaurants. Most of the story is the sensation-filled, laugh-hungry, coincidence-ridden affair a gag writer would invent, and probably the hardest fact to swallow is the film's inability to show anything in its lovers that might indicate that their marriage would ever turn out to be any less blissful than their two-day courtship. Mainly because of the direction of Vincenzo Minnelli, *The Clock*, though, is riddled as few movies are with carefully, skillfully used intelligence and love for people and for movie making, and is made with a more flexible and original use of the medium than any other recent film.' (*New Republic*, May 21, 1945)

By 1953 Farber would require just a single mixed sentence. '*Stalag 17* (Billy Wilder, 1953) is a crude, cliché-ridden glimpse of a Nazi prison camp that I hated to see end' (*Nation*, July 25).

Ultimately, though, for all its intersections with *Negative Space*, *Farber on Film* inscribes alternatives rather than correlatives. For the first time it's possible to shadow Farber as a professional chronicler of new films, and he emerges as

thoughtful and skillful precisely where his reputation predicts he might be careless—actors, plots, judgments, even annual best lists. Alongside his reviews, he also wrote an alluring motley of “think pieces” on such topics as *The Hero*, *Movies in Wartime*, *Theatrical Movies*, independent film trends, screwball comedies, documentaries, newsreels, hidden cameras, censorship, 3-D, and television comics. Farber moonlighted away from both his beats—smart, resonant essays on Russel Wright dinnerware, Knoll furniture, jazz, and Pigmeat Markham. Part memoir, part prescient anatomy of the exaltation of talk radio in American experience over the coming decades, part midnight hallucination of ‘disembodied voices’, *Seers for the Sleepless* approaches the everyday visionary art of his Greenwich Village friends Weldon Kees and Isaac Rosenfeld. His early pieces during World War II routinely entail vivid social history, and Farber always proved alert to racial affronts and offenses in Hollywood films. From 1942: ‘Behind the romantic distortion of Negro life in *Tales of Manhattan* (Julien Duvivier, 1942) is a discrimination as old as Hollywood’ (*New Republic*, October 12). Or 1949: «The benevolent writers—working in studios where as far as I know there are no colored directors, writers, or cameramen—so far have placed their Negroes in almost unprejudiced situations, presented only one type of pleasant, well-adjusted individual, and given him a superior job in a white society» (*Nation*, July 30).

As a regular reviewer, Farber also turns out to be *funnier* than you’d calculate, not just caustic or cranky, but witty. Early on he complained about overcrowded museum exhibitions of two, maybe three hundred paintings. ‘Something like it would be reading *War and Peace*, two short stories and a scientific journal in one sitting’ (*New Republic*, February 16, 1942). ‘All kinds of hardships have to be endured in wartime,’ Farber confessed. ‘Some of them could be avoided. One of these is the war poster that plays hide-and-seek with art and our times. I don’t think the lack of aesthetics is anything to carp about at this stage, but I do think they ought to mention the war

above a whisper’ (*New Republic*, March 16, 1942). Reviewing a three-and-a-half-million-dollar film about Woodrow Wilson called *Darryl F. Zanuck’s Wilson in Technicolor* (1944), he observed, ‘For several reasons, one being that Wilson had a “nice” tenor voice, there are 87 songs blared or sung in the picture from 1 to 12 times and as though the audience left its ears in the cloak room: come in at any time and you will think “Zanuck’s Sousa” is being shown’ (*New Republic*, August 14, 1944). Still, Farber could also sound caustic and cranky—‘The closest movie equivalents to having a knife slowly turned in a wound for two hours are *Tender Comrade* (Edward Dmytryk, 1943) and *The Story of Dr. Wassell* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1944’ (*New Republic*, June 26, 1944).

Once Farber quit New York and moved to San Diego with Patricia in the fall of 1970, he abandoned criticism for painting and teaching. Although he wouldn’t entirely stop writing until 1977, Farber ended—at least he set in motion the steps that would lead him to end—his three-and-a-half decade stint as a critic as whimsically (or craftily) as he had started it with that wise-guy letter to *The New Republic*. During a drunken dinner—and Manny rarely drank—after a 1969 show of his monumental abstract paintings on collaged paper sponsored by the O.K. Harris Gallery, he found himself talking to another artist, Don Lewallen, a UC San Diego professor in painting, on leave in Manhattan and wishing to stay. Somehow, by the end of the night, Farber had traded his loft on Warren Street for the professor’s job at UCSD.

He joined the Visual Arts faculty, teaching small painting classes and large film lecture courses. ‘It was hell from the first moment to the last,’ Farber recounted in an interview. ‘We came for me to teach painting, which was fine. I’d been doing that once a week in New York. I was very comfortable, and it was a nice thing to do. But someone had the idea that I teach film appreciation, since I’d been writing criticism. And it seemed OK. We didn’t realize it would become such an overwhelming job. The classes

in film would have 300 students, instead of the 15 you'd have in a painting and drawing class. I was swamped.' The UCSD faculty mixed artists, poets, critics, and art historians, and included David Antin, Jehanne Teihet, Michael Todd, Ellen van Fleet, Newton Harrison, Gary Hudson, Allan Kaprow, and eventually J. P. Gorin.

Farber taught a *History of Film* class—one opening week he screened *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (D.W. Griffith, 1912), *Fantômas* (Louis Feuillade, 1913), *A Romance of Happy Valley* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), and *True Heart Susie* (D.W. Griffith, 1919), while his week three spanned *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927), *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927), *Scarface* (Howard Hawks and Richard Rosson, 1932), and *Spanky* (Robert F. McGowan, 1932). He also taught *Third World Films* and *Films in Social Context* and created a class in 'Radical Form' called *Hard Look at the Movies* that moved from Godard-Gorin and Andy Warhol through Fassbinder, Marguerite Duras, Michael Snow, Jean-Marie Straub, Alain Resnais, and . 'Manny's film classes,' as Duncan Shepherd, later film critic for the *San Diego Reader*, recalled, 'were the stuff of legend, and it seems feeble and formulaic to call him a brilliant, an illuminating, a stimulating, an inspiring teacher. It wasn't necessarily what he had to say (he was prone to shrug off his most searching analysis as "gobbledegook") so much as it was the whole way he went about things, famously showing films in pieces, switching back and forth from one film to another, ranging from Griffith to Godard, Bugs Bunny to Yasujiro Ozu, talking over them with or without sound, running them backward through the projector, mixing in slides of paintings, sketching out compositions on the blackboard, the better to assist students in seeing what was in front of their faces, to wean them from Plot, Story, What Happens Next, and to disabuse them of the absurd notion that a film is all of a piece, all on a level, quantifiable, rankable, fileable. He could seldom be bothered with movie trivia, inside information, behind-the-scenes piffle, technical shoptalk, was often offhand about the basic facts of names and dates,

was unconcerned with Classics, Masterpieces, Seminal Works, Historical Landmarks. It was always about looking and seeing.'

Farber's exams and quizzes demanded his students see all the films, and then remember everything they saw and heard—'Describe the framing (composition) and use of people in the following: a. *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; b. *Walkabout*; c. *Fear Eats the Soul*; d. *Mean Streets*'; 'Identify the movie in which this unforgettable scriptwriting appears [...]' He directed pitiless essay questions—'MOUCHETTE emphasizes the existence of contradictory impulses succeeding one another (more rapidly than is admitted in our culture). Describe this transiency in either the stream edge fight between poacher and warden or the rape scene between Arsene and Mouchette (camera, framing, etc.). BROKEN BLOSSOMS is gravely different; using any of the scenes between Lucy and Battling, show how these two characters are locked into a single emotion in relation to each other.' (This was one question.) Sometimes he asked for storyboards:

'Draw one frame from each of the following scenes:

- a. The dancehall scene in *Musketeers* when Lillian Gish is first introduced to the gangsters.
- b. The subway scene in *Fantômas* with the detective and the woman he is shadowing in an otherwise empty car.
- c. The scarecrow scene with Lillian Gish in *A Romance of Happy Valley*.

Indicate in words alongside each frame how close the actors are to the screen surface, the depth of space between figures and background, the flow of action if there is any.'

Farber retired from teaching in 1987.

Farber after Negative Space

Farber's 1969 Howard Hawks essay—as hinted earlier—lodges a wry double self-portrait: as he summons his own birthplace for a joke

about small-town provincialism, his praise of the filmmaker's mobility and speed conjures his own termite activities as a writer and painter. His film criticism is personal, even autobiographical, though of a deflected sort that edges into allegory and fever-dream.

In *A Dandy's Gesture* (1977), one of Farber's two "auteur" paintings focused on Hawks, he glances at—often through toys and miniatures—images from the director's films: a plane crashed into a chocolate candy mountain, from *Only Angels Have Wings*; a tiger, from *Bringing Up Baby* (1938); an elephant, from *Hatari* (1962); a boat, from *To Have and Have Not* (1944); and newspaper layout pages, from *His Girl Friday* (1940), with gangster Johnny Lovo (from *Scarface*) in the headline. But following the train careering down the track on the left of the painting to a notebook, we discover Farber slyly inserting himself into the painting. A little reporter's pad quotes his own notes for his film class on Hawks at UC San Diego. What might be the lines connecting a director at work in the Hollywood studio system and a painter at work in a university—here, cramming for a lecture; or, perhaps, not cramming, but painting *A Dandy's Gesture* instead? Who is the gestural dandy of the title? Howard Hawks? Or Farber himself?

His friend the late Pauline Kael condescended slightly to Farber during a *Cineaste* interview, remarking, 'It's his analysis of the film frame as if it were a painter's canvas that's a real contribution.' Farber could direct painterly thoughtfulness to issues such as color in Disney cartoons or slackness of camera in Hollywood features as far back as his first *New Republic* reviews, and always in his criticism references from film and art crisscross and trespass. Still, the correspondences in Farber's film criticism and his paintings are more radical and strategic. During nearly all the years he actively wrote criticism Farber worked as an abstract artist—as a painter, sculptor, and the creator of gallery installations and monumental oils on collaged paper. But after he moved to San Diego, Farber shifted to representational paintings—a profusion

of candy bars, stationery, film titles, film directors, and domestic still lives—and soon discontinued his film writing. Characteristically these new paintings are multi-focused and decentered. Intense detailing arrests the eye amid spiraling chains of association: visual, cultural, or personal. They sometimes imply narratives, but without positing the entrances, exits, and arcs of any particular pre-existent story lines. Despite their subjects, these works can hardly be mistaken for Pop—yet for all their conceptual focus on the medium, or on art history, they aren't abstract either.

Farber's paintings import film dynamics, but paradoxically. The controlling intelligence of an auteur director atomizes into a profusion of stories and routes; much as with an interactive e-book, a viewer can enter a painting only by realigning the givens. But in Farber's film criticism, I want to suggest, is a prediction of the painter he would become. Certain reverenced film directors—Hawks, Wellman, Sturges, Lewton, Don Siegel, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Bresson, Warhol, Fassbinder—arise from the essays almost as self-portraits of that future painter. The painter Farber will be is forecast in his observations and descriptions of his favorite directors, actors, and film moments, but also (and vividly) in his writing style.

Hawks is only the most courtly of these projections of Farber's future paintings. From his inaugural review for *The New Republic* on February 2, 1942, Farber insisted on a multiplicity of expression and form, criticizing a Museum of Modern Art exhibition where each artist 'has his one particular response to experience, and no matter what the situation, he has one means of conceiving it on canvas. [...] Which is all in the way of making a plea for more flexibility in painting and less dogma.' Long before he started to collaborate with Patricia Patterson on his film writing, Farber managed to insinuate a sense of multiple perspectives, even multiple voices into his critical prose—his *New Republic* and *Nation* columns often found him so insistently mixed as to suggest (at least) a

pair of contrary authors; subsequent pieces review disparate films, and discuss them all at once. Among Farber's last solo pieces was his anti-auteurist *The Subverters* for *Cavalier*, in July 1966, the summer photographer Helen Levitt introduced him to Patricia:

'One of the joys in 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.'

His Preston Sturges essay (*City Lights*, 1954, co-written with W. S. Poster) etches a variant on Farber's nostalgia-for-the-future self-portraits. Remarking 'the almost aboriginal Americanism' of the character actors in Sturges's comedies, he celebrates the director for his 'multiple focus,' 'fragmented action,' 'high-muzzle velocity,' 'easy handling of multiple cinematic meanings,' and 'this modern cinematic perspective of mobility seen by a mobile observer.' Echoing his first *New Republic* article, he surmises, 'It is also probable that [Sturges] found the consistency of serious art, its demand that everything be resolved in terms of a logic of a single mood, repugnant to his temperament and false to life.' Still more closely intuiting his own distant paintings, Farber wrote: 'Basically, a Sturges film is executed to give one the delighted sensation of a person moving on a smoothly traveling vehicle going at high speed through fields, towns, homes, even through other vehicles. The vehicle in which the spectator is traveling never stops but seems to be moving in a circle, making its journey again and again in an ascending, narrowing spiral until it diminishes into nothingness.' Farber would eventually quote fragments of his Sturges essay on a note pad he sketched into his "auteur" painting *The Lady Eve* (1976-77).

Raoul Walsh materializes as another stand-in for the painter—'Walsh's style is based on traveling over routes—as do other such "underground" filmmakers as Wellman and Mann, who open up a scene 'by road-mapped strategies that play movement against space in a cunning way, building the environment and event before your eyes.' By the early 1970s and his joint productions with Patricia Patterson, Farber's surrogates are not limited to action directors, nor are the directors only American. On Godard: 'His is basically an art of equal emphasis. [...] Dissociation. Or magnification of the molehill against the mountain, or vice versa [...] The words becoming like little trolley-car pictures passing back and forth.' On Herzog: 'The awkward framing, unpredictable camera positions [...] the droll, zestful, looming work of a filmmaker still on the prowl, making an exploratory work each time out.' On Fassbinder: 'A kind of lurching serpentine [...].' Buñuel conjures Farber's future paintings, but acidly, from inside a dark mirror:

'Each movie is a long march through small connected events (dragged out distressingly to the last moment: just getting the movie down the wall from a candle to a crucifix takes more time than an old silent comedy), but it is the sinister fact of a Buñuel movie that no one is going anywhere and there is never any release at the end of the film. It's one snare after another, so that the people get wrapped around themselves in claustrophobic whirlpool patterns.'

Many of these directors, along with Sam Peckinpah, Wim Wenders, Jean-Marie Straub, Marguerite Duras, and Eric Rohmer, would prompt "auteur" paintings from Farber during the late 1970s and early '80s. The witty, devastating *Roads and Tracks* (1981) that issues from films of William Wellman shadows inversions and reversals. At the top of the canvas, the staid women falling (or jumping?) from airplanes, for instance, are from *Wings* (1927); they immediately transform into angels, probably in a punning reference to Hawk's *Only Angels Have Wings*. In a counter-image to the angels, near the

bottom center of the painting, a modern pop-tart woman in a bathing suit pops up from a glass. The cowboy stomping the man on the tracks at the lower right is from *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), while the tracks themselves arrive courtesy of a favorite Wellman film of Farber's, *Other Men's Women* (1931), a love triangle among railroad roustabouts, with many scenes set in a kitchen (hence the butter, the corncob, the lettuce, and bottles). The appearance of James Cagney with a grapefruit on his face is a twist on the famous scene in *Public Enemy* (1931).

Throughout, crisscrossing tracks and roads frame—and force—an impression of stuttering immobility; for all the alleged motion, they don't go anywhere. They're blocked, and destructive. Besides figures from action and war films, the painting is full of cliché, often toy reproductions of '30s small-town, working-class life—a milkman, old advertisements, the houses, cars—and also teasing intimations of a world outside that life: most notably, the art book open to the Indian tantric sex painting at the lower left.

Along and inside the tracks Farber races trains of associations, historical, cultural and private. *Roads and Tracks*, like all of his "auteur" paintings, refutes the notion of any single authorial consciousness—the multi-perspectives of the winding allusions, their various knowledges, visual textures, and experiences, are at once too public and personal for that.

Farber's "auteur" series flaunts conspicuous links to his film criticism which other paintings will probe ingeniously and boldly. An explosion of the notion of a still life, *Domestic Movies* (1985) likely derives its smart title from the suggestion of time and motion through a tilted perspective and the film leaders that take the viewer up and down the painting. Farber got rid of the object in the center, and the perspective is almost vertiginously multiple—the overhead view of the bowls of lemons, for instance, is distorted by the upward push of the various potted flowers. The flow along the film leaders

and up the stalks is checked by other forms of verticality—the donuts, for example, or subtly raised objects, such as the dead bird on what looks like a book, or the plant on a rectangle of blue cardboard on the left. Movement also is checked by the intensive detailing of the lemons and the half-eaten bowl of oatmeal. The film leaders contain titles of films Farber was teaching at the time, such as Yasujiro Ozu's 1962 *An Autumn Afternoon* (*Sanma no aji*), and there are scattered written notes, one a snatch of movie dialogue: 'I want this room filled with flowers.'

Over and over Farber's film writing prizes the detail—'the real hero is the small detail,' he observes in *Underground Films*, and termite art radiates 'walls of particularization,' 'focusing only on a tiny present area,' and 'buglike immersion in a small area without point or aim, and, over all, concentration on nailing down one moment without glamorizing it.' Decorous, overwrought white elephant art, 'tied to the realm of celebrity and affluence,' accents (as noted above) 'the continuity, harmony, involved in constructing a masterpiece.' Yet Farber also will argue for the subservience of all parts to a flowing totality—'Everything in a good movie is of a piece,' he affirms in the introduction to *Negative Space*. Other essays criticize directors and actors who indulge electric, illuminating 'bits' instead of a 'panoramic unfolding,' a 'continuously developing, forming personality,' or 'an inevitable train of events.' Farber's paintings, no less than his film criticism, operate along a stress, maybe a contradiction, that sometimes honors a grace note over the whole, and at other times exalts organic form over the niceties of any incandescent moment.

Hacks (1975), from the *American Candy* series, is one of Farber's earliest representational paintings, and my favorite of his oils on paper. Against overlapping gray-silver planes, Farber arrays networks of circles and lines. The circles: a lollipop at the bottom, a candy tin at the top left, the corks. The lines: various candy bars—Tootsie Rolls, Black Crows, and the wondrous

Hacks. All these candies would have been familiar to Farber from the movie concession stands of his childhood, much as the ground colors cue the silver screen, and it's tempting to stroke some of the associations. The childhood movie candy vies with icons of adult life—the chocolate cigar at the right, the corks by the Tootsie Rolls. There is the sense of "hack" as in cut or bludgeon—a number of candy items are chopped off by the frame, or already half-eaten. During 1975 Farber also was writing movie reviews for Francis Ford Coppola's *City* magazine, and he was roughly 18 months away from his last article. Inevitably, given all the film hints, might the notion of the "critical hack" surge as well from the wily web of resonance? Farber hardly can expect a viewer to complete more than a few of the circuits he has coiled into his paintings like springs inside a jack-in-the-box. But as in Beckett's confounding

of 'Proustian' and 'equation,' it's the snarl of mechanism and memory that Farber is chasing here, the way the formal dynamics of multi-perspective slide against the instinctive disclosures of a life.

Manny Farber died at home in Leucadia, California, on August 18, 2008, at the age of 91, just months after his final solo art exhibition, *Drawing Across Rime* —no longer able to paint, he had created at a table in Patricia's garden some mixed media on paper drawings: a reinvigorated proliferation of last looks, obsessive, commemorative, sensuous, vertiginous, his variations on a wall, window, path, flowers, bushes, trees, hypothetically at least, inexhaustible, infinite.

The Farber equation, as I said, is never simple. •