

1-1-2001

Book Review: Artists in the Audience

James Morrison
Claremont McKenna College

Recommended Citation

Morrison, James. Artists in the Audience, by Greg Taylor. *Film Quarterly* 54.4 (Summer 2001): 43-45.

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a theory of interpretation in which contingency must play a critical role, a theory according to which there can be no ultimate interpretation of a given film.

This concept is prescient for the development of film theory. It is most clearly expressed in the first chapter of the book, "The Unattainable Text," in which Bellour describes the capacity of film to construct what we might call colloquially "a never-ending story," the meaning of which is never fully elucidated. If Bellour's treatment of film and psychoanalysis has proven influential in feminist film analysis, this notion of a text endlessly reinterpreted paved the way for what we now think of as spectator studies. In particular, Bellour's work opened the field to studies that depend upon historically and regionally defined interpretations that are meaningful not because they are "true," but because they are representative of the contingencies that define interpretive strategies.

This chapter was originally published in 1975, in the middle of the period during which these collected essays were written (1969-1980); it is indicative of the way in which Bellour's larger project is caught between structuralism and post-structuralism. The initial excitement that this work generated depended at least in part upon this ambiguity. (A colleague recently mentioned that in the 1970s he waited for the next Bellour article with the same anticipation that greeted the new season's opening episode of "Dallas" in the 1980s.) These analyses were extremely precise and detailed, and yet also "open" because they did not offer a definitive reading of a film. As a consequence, they generated discussion and debate across the field at a utopian moment in which the study of cinema history and theory were not as yet considered incompatible.

Bellour's own background as a scholar is wildly heterogeneous, and is meticulously described in Penley's introduction. His research topics range from the work of the nineteenth-century novelist Charlotte Brontë to that of the contemporary avant-garde video artist Bill Viola. Bellour has a curiosity that lingers over the odd yet ultimately revelatory detail. His style is marked by a poetic imagination that exhausts itself in aesthetic analysis and that is not always easily translated into the more rigid constructions favored by Anglo-American writers.

A pioneer, he trod lightly over the terrain that he surveyed, marking it as fertile ground for the generation of scholars that followed him. This is a book of historical value that still remains a rich source of ideas and information for the emerging scholar. The publication of this volume in the same year that celebrated the 100th anniversary of the publication of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* seems appropriate; it speaks to the way in which the problem of meaning and interpretation occupies a central position in twentieth-century thought. In the area of cinema studies, Raymond Bellour's work on film analysis constitutes a significant contribution to that project.

Hilary Radner is Associate Professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Theater at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.

Artists in the Audience

Cults, Camp and American Film Criticism

By Greg Taylor. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999. \$49.50 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

The "Best Films" of 1951, according to Manny Farber—and the quotation marks are his—were *Little Big Horn*, *Fixed Bayonets*, *The Thing*, *The Prowler*, *The People Against O'Hara*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The Man Who Cheated Himself*, and *Background to Danger*. So much for Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, Huston's *The African Queen*, Ray's *On Dangerous Ground*, or Wilder's *Ace in the Hole*—not to mention Capra's *Here Comes the Groom*, Mankiewicz's *People Will Talk*, Preminger's *The Thirteenth Letter*, King Vidor's *Lightning Strikes Twice* or Fred Zinneman's *Terese*. Sam Fuller and Howard Hawks, everyone's favorite tough-guy auteurs, are duly represented on Farber's list, but still, one cannot escape the impression that Farber's picks are, well, *idiosyncratic*. Yet the dyspeptic quirks are too bluff and four-square to seem eccentric, or even particularly willed. In Farber's relentlessly off-handed potshots, both Huston and Mankiewicz get it coming and going, and there's an earnest intensity underlying the hard-boiled aesthetics—even if one gets the feeling that the whole exercise is mounted as a mockery of conventional taste. Those quotation marks had to count for *something*.

If Greg Taylor's *Artists in the Audience* performed no other service than to restore interest in Farber and his fellow-camper Parker Tyler as important figures in film criticism, it would remain a valuable project. But in fact the book does more. It bids to return our attention to film criticism itself as an institution—the *only* one, it sometimes seems, to which current film study has failed to direct its penetrating gaze—an institution with a fraught context and a vexed history. After sketching the clash of jerry-built American modernism with emerging middlebrow taste, Taylor examines the work of Farber and Tyler in the 1940s as representative of, respectively, "cult" and "camp" positions of "vanguard" criticism. He goes on to investigate the mainstreaming of cult and camp taste, transmitted in particular through the work of Andrew Sarris; the subsequent retrenchments of Farber and Tyler in the face of countercultural assimilation of the oppositional energies they promoted; and the ultimate "retreat into theory" of film criticism, especially embodied in the work of Annette Michelson and in academic film study during the 1970s. Along the way, Taylor presents a wealth of useful research, especially in his lucid expositions of the contributions to cinematic tastemaking of such avowedly avant-garde journals as *View*, *Artforum*, and *October*, such irresistibly middlebrow periodicals as *The New Republic* and *The Nation*, and such split-the-difference curiosities as *Film Culture* in its early days.

If Taylor's treatment of the work of Farber and Tyler is somewhat limited by his attribution of self-interest or self-promotion as that work's primary motivation, it is better able thereby to deal with the "grandstanding" rhetoric, as Taylor sees it, of their writing: "As with Farber, Tyler's approach

was fueled by the vanguard desire to lead but not be followed: this may have been an example of creative, resistant spectatorship, but ultimately it was one whose purity, in practice, could be maintained only by an elite" (58). In Taylor's view, the distinctive aesthetic positions of these two critics arise as flamboyantly self-empowering gestures of defense against a new philistinism that threatens cultural boundaries. As he states in the conclusion, "Cultism and camp are fundamentally aesthetic procedures steeped in highbrow taste, and directed toward the assertion of highbrow distinction" (154). Though cult and camp are allied in their definitive double-focusing, multiplying textual levels to enable the vanguard revisionism that will remake a tawdry B-movie as a primitivist torpedo, or a slick melodrama as a mythopoetic vessel, these critical strategies remain committed, according to Taylor, to key aspects of the traditional cultural hierarchies they appear to compromise. He notes the suitability of Tyler's aesthetic to the critic's "desire to support, and explore, interesting work" (57), and this point lays the groundwork for Taylor's claim that Tyler's later work, after his first two books, marks a dramatic turn from camp appreciation to the stricter discernment of traditional standards. Less convinced of a level of fundamental seriousness beneath the cultist's ardor of Farber's work, Tyler is less inclined, in the end, to cut Farber much slack: Farber's "integration of artist and critic functions has allowed him to create within aesthetic norms but also within a vacuum of judgment, while using cinema (or any mass cultural product) in order to reassert his own artistic autonomy as an end in itself" (154).

"Undertheorized" is a word one is starting to hear these days at professional conferences in the humanities, and one might not be especially surprised, in that heady milieu, to hear the word applied to Taylor's book. The clarity of presentation here at times seems bought at the expense of complexity, and the lucidity of the writing sometimes suggests journalese (a film is said not to be Tyler's "cup of java"; elsewhere, the critic is said to be "miffed" about something or other). Like many recent works in academic film study, this book eschews High Theory in favor of a putatively more "public" mode of address. It would be a pity if theoretical advances of the past decades were put aside in the wake of this general trend, but this eschewal has particular implications for Taylor's study. Though Taylor cites theoretical work on the sociology of culture, in particular that of Pierre Bourdieu, he continues to conceptualize culture as a relatively closed field, relatively impervious to determinations of class, gender, or race. Thus, he treats the concepts of "highbrow" and "middlebrow" primarily as cultural categories, without significant implication in the terms of contemporary "identity-politics," historicism, or class issues. This enables, in turn, a model of twentieth-century taste as split between an "Arnoldean" defense of traditional value and "Wildean" assertions (after "The Critic as Artist" [1891]) of the critical empowerment of campy pleasure-seeking. It is the rise of consumerism as such, in Taylor's view—and not, to name one alternative possibility, the claim for cultural recognition of previously excluded identities—that brings about cult and

camp as vanguard positions aimed against forms of commodification. To call Parker Tyler's late style "Arnoldean" is a terrible stretch on the face of it; the fact that Taylor does so emphatically points up some of the limitations of his approach.

In its treatment of the critic's aesthetic as a reflection of shifting cultural terms in postwar America and, especially, as a product of the general energies in the art world of the time, Taylor's work on Farber is excellent. But Taylor's representation of Farber as a pioneer of vanguard criticism slights the particular contexts of film criticism. Taylor cites Robert Sherwood, Meyer Levin, and especially Otis Ferguson as precursors to Farber's work of the 1940s (though he does not mention such an important figure as Harry Alan Potamkin), but he gives little sense of what was happening more generally in film criticism at the time Farber was writing. He mentions James Agee and Robert Warshaw, but says nothing of others—Barbara Deming, say, and Paul Goodman and Vernon Young—whose work might have usefully counterpointed Farber's. A fuller sense of these contexts would have shown that Farber was not alone in opposing middlebrow taste by celebrating marginal films or seemingly peripheral, occulted aspects of films. Indeed, Deming, Goodman, and Young—not to mention Warshaw and Agee—all practiced styles of criticism that could easily be deemed "cult" writing by Taylor's definition. But in the context of Taylor's work, Farber needs to be seen as a lone pathfinder in order to be construed as a pervasive influence on later criticism.

Perhaps for the same reason, Taylor overstates Farber's modernist-formalism. He rightly draws attention to Farber's penchant for fastening on the nonnarrative elements of Hollywood films, such as actors' physiognomies, random details of composition, or visual textures. Though Taylor presents an intricate analysis of Farber's basic quasi-Bazinian "realism," he has little to say about Farber's attitude towards the role of *content* in film. Taylor suggests that Farber's contempt for Hollywood's middlebrow tradition-of-quality emerged most clearly in his rejection of the social-problem film, but he never shows how this distinguishes Farber from the middlebrow apologists he chastises. In Farber's review of *Home of the Brave*, he claims that the film "is not clever or ingenious enough to conceal its profit-minded, inept treatment of important issues." Late in his career, Farber chided Richard Lester as exemplifying "a kind of thickness of texture which he gets purely with technique." These are hardly the words of a proponent of pure cinema. For many readers, Farber's abstractionist concentration on texture in narrative films on the one hand, and on narrative in avant-garde films on the other, is easy to see as evidence of a gruff streak of perversity. In any case, given that Taylor's presentation of Farber as cultist depends in large part on the critic's circumvention of content in his work on film, more commentary on Farber's attitudes toward the *content* of movies seems warranted.

Tyler, meanwhile—and much more problematically—is represented as the trailblazing doyen of camp who reverts to "Arnoldean" reactionism once he realizes the decadent

horrors that the influence of his own early excesses has wrought. The only way that such a treatment of Tyler can be sustained, unfortunately, is by erasing Tyler's homosexuality as a crucial determinant on his work. In his evident commitment to neutrality on issues of identity-politics, Taylor considerably minimizes that very factor. Discussion of the gay ramifications of camp is confined to a footnote that ends by declaring that the deemphasis on these issues is intended "to retrieve camp as a term to describe a larger *aesthetic* phenomenon" (167). In the text, Taylor states that Tyler ultimately repudiated camp or mythopoetic criticism in favor of Arnoldean discrimination; in a footnote, Taylor qualifies this claim: "Tyler continued to practice such criticism—albeit sporadically—throughout his career" (171). Here Taylor mentions in passing the most important book of Tyler's late career, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1972). A glance at this book shows Tyler's camp energies to be in full force; an actual reading of it shows that Tyler, at the end of his career, rejects Arnoldean standards of value as flamboyantly as he had in the 1940s, trouncing supposed art films like *Fellini Satyricon* with the same joyous contempt with which he disparages middlebrow items like *Staircase*, subjecting *Ivan the Terrible* to much the same kind of mythopoetic thrashing he gives *The Great Escape*. Taylor's version of Tyler's career would seem, then, to require something more than parenthetical qualification. It is, no doubt, in the name of that "larger *aesthetic* phenomenon" that Taylor more or less absents *Screening the Sexes* from Tyler's bibliography, but to talk about Tyler as a practitioner of camp without discussing this book is comparable to talking about Eisenstein's North American stint without discussing *Que Viva Mexico!*

These issues by no means undermine the essential seriousness of the work, but they gather real force as problems by the last chapter and the conclusion. There, it suddenly becomes disturbingly obvious that the agenda, thankfully quite well hidden until then, has been to retrieve Arnoldean discernment from the clutches of Wildean jest. After a suggestive reading of Richard Kwietniowski's *Love and Death on Long Island* (1996), where the refusal to engage the gay thematics of the text is doubtless once again meant to be seen as evidence of equanimity, Taylor argues for a return to the methods of traditional valuation "to help build and maintain a constituency for film art" (157). At times in the course of the book, with his heavy reliance on highbrow and middlebrow as apparently stable definitions, it had seemed as if Taylor simply could not see that Tyler, Farber, and others were trying to *break down* these categories, not operate within them. In the end, it is clear that he *could* see it: "Challenging the notion that aesthetic value is fixed and inherent, [Farber and Tyler] suggested quite the opposite—that it is variable, contextual, even spectator-centered" (153). But he thinks they were *wrong* to try: "In privileging the marginal or derided, in claiming formal or symbolic intricacy where none exists, we prove again and again that we are more inventive and more profound than the guardians of the culture industry. . . . But we do so at the expense of engaging the larger possibilities of movie art" (157). Even in their own

renegade postures, according to Taylor, these critics themselves retained residual aspects of the traditional cultural value they affronted: "The admirable 'artistry' of Farber and Tyler's cultist/camp criticism betrays an underlying commitment to [traditional aesthetic] norms, and to related ideologies" (153).

I find the implications of these claims troubling, especially considering Taylor's own *devaluation* of the "marginal," in the light of his diminishment of the specifically gay valences of camp. It is perhaps a tribute to the meticulousness of Taylor's scholarship, however, that such issues, even as they become more pressing by the book's end, do not become debilitating. This book remains an important contribution to the study of film criticism.

James Morrison's book *Passport to Hollywood* (SUNY, 1998) was selected as a *Choice Outstanding Academic Book in Film* for 1999. His next book, *Broken Fever*, a memoir, will be published by St. Martin's Press.

British Cinema in the Eighties

By John Hill. N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1999. \$49.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

British cinema has always presented problems, at least for Americans. What is it about? Is it worth discussing? What on earth has it contributed to world cinema besides some documentary films and kitchen-sink realism? Who are its geniuses? Where are its genres? In short, it is difficult to get British cinema in focus. Whereas attention has always been paid, and rightly so, to Russian, German, and French cinema—to montage, to expressionism, to the New Wave, to neorealism—English cinema has usually been dismissed out of hand and, like a neglected maiden aunt at a family wedding, has skulked in a corner far from the limelight of critical attention.

Here and there a few books have tried to correct that state of affairs, and have tried to show how and why British cinema merits attention. Some years ago, for example, Alexander Walker did a beautiful job on the 60s in his classic study *Hollywood—England* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974). Later he repeated the trick with *National Heroes* (London: Harrap, 1985), a very well-researched work on the 70s. In *British Cinema in the Eighties*, John Hill takes up the baton, and in doing so provides us with one of the most intelligent, serious, and well-written cinematic studies of recent years.

Hill addresses two main questions: What was the changing role of British cinema in the 80s, and how did it deal with identity, including all its national, social-political, and gender strands? These are questions of fundamental importance and are placed against the background of a world film industry increasingly dominated by Hollywood. Because of the depth and the seriousness of the questions, Hill's book of necessity becomes a study in cultural politics, and the ways in which 1980s British filmmaking responded to the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of the period.