

Film Criticism in the Era of Algorithms

B. Ruby Rich

Cinema, like everything, has its seasons. Spring is the hopeful moment of art-house breakthroughs and smart studio releases, summer the chill time of brainless blockbusters and lightweight “beach movies,” autumn the sacred season of film festivals (at least in North America) and smart talk over the airwaves and internet. Winter, the season of this particular issue, is—for better and worse—the season of awards. This editor has learned to resist (well, not entirely) the siren calls of list-making and award prognostication, but those rituals may well be on your minds, dear readers, as you peruse these pages in the “buzz” of blanket media coverage.

What do awards have to do with film criticism, scholarship, and *Film Quarterly* in particular? Possibly not much, though critics increasingly are expected to act like sportscasters and handicap the combatants. But one does wonder what the role of film criticism is today, however daunting to consider at a moment when numbers wield more influence than bylines, when the Rotten Tomatoes aggregator counts for more than *Sight & Sound* and *Film Comment* and *FQ* combined, and when the Netflix algorithm that reads film tastes like Tarot cards is a more trusted guide than even a Wesley with a Pulitzer. And, yes, it is true even when a *Film Quarterly* cover story (Amy Villarejo, “Seeing Through *Transparent*,” *FQ* 69:4) wins big at the Emmys.

This is not, of course, a problem only for film criticism. The easy availability of unregulated opinions, in an age recently dubbed the “post-factual,” has damaged journalism as gravely as Uber has damaged taxi service, Netflix (and now Amazon Prime) the movie-theater business, and Amazon, again, the retail world of local shops—with one rare exception: independent bookstores, now staging a comeback. In each case, profit has been concentrated in fewer hands and community has been subtracted from the equation.

In a time of easily defined and equally easily satisfied viewing desires, I persist in believing that film criticism is more necessary than ever before. There is an unmet need, although a worrisomely unfelt one, for the kind of expert opinion that

leads readers to turn to a restaurant critic after scanning Yelp, for instance. Film criticism can still provide an authority (hopefully a non-authoritarian one) grounded in expertise, history, and analysis, and an alternative to the regime of mere opinion. Nuance still counts in the open-mike-night universe of today in which “everyone” is a critic, as the movement of viewing online has aided and abetted an ominous slippage: into the home, out of the home, no outside standards required.

Film criticism has long been a discipline shaped by expertise and taste, by experience and aspiration, by study and history and museums and festival viewing, rather than just fan-boy cleverness and provocation (though they are always there, too). The web’s version of the airwaves is famously dominated by an unsavory brand of masculinity, largely white and heterosexual, immune to the importance of work produced by and for other sensibilities. The narrowing of criticism has serious implications for the health of cinema, digital media, and web creations, if other stories are not recognized, other voices not championed, other modes of narrative not valued. Without a criticism continuously fed by diversity of race, gender, class and sexuality, cinema screens themselves will languish in an increasingly narrow backwater of parochialism—or, even worse, left hostage entirely to commercial forces and advertising campaigns, only a viral meme away from total marketing domination.

Film Quarterly seeks to represent the field at its brightest and broadest, yet the task has barely begun. The search for new voices and wise elders, for those who can bring the full richness of the field alive in these pages, is ongoing. May it always be so. If film criticism is to fulfill its mandate to shape the field, not merely respond to it, there has to be more than a herd instinct at play. This editor was reminded of its importance at the very moment of typing these lines, when an email from a high-school senior interrupted its completion. Elizabeth Kim, co-founder of the new Gen Z Critics Club, was asking if I’d serve as a judge for its film-criticism competition for 16-to-24 year olds. “The film criticism community does not seem to be as connected with younger people as it could be,” she noted. Or as it used to be, I’d add, when film criticism was a young person’s game, aided and abetted by notable elders. Her note gave me hope and gave

me pause, making me wonder anew about the future. Consider this winter editorial, then, a shout-out to the profession, a tough-love letter that draws a line in the sand and proclaims: yes, this is essential, yes, this is important, yes, this vocation is necessary.

In This Issue

Alan O’Leary fastens a provocative lens onto *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) in its fiftieth-anniversary year, examining the use of street life and architecture to argue for its overlooked legacy as the very first (albeit unnoticed until now) *banlieue* film. Examining Pontecorvo’s origins, he also disputes its status within neorealism by pointing out the persistence of its end-of-empire aesthetics, then tracing their fascist origins.

Soraya Murray conducts an intriguing analysis of the dynamics of first-person-shooter games, examining one of the most popular to upend its progressive reputation. Her analysis of *Spec Ops: The Line* exposes the anti-Arab racism that fantasizes the apocalyptic ruins of Dubai as a fitting context for its gameplay and points to the influence of *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) and Joseph Conrad.

Manuel Betancourt turns his attention to the systems of distribution and exhibition that are responsible for delivering Latin American films to U.S. screens. He considers the way in which the region’s films get trapped between nationalist expectations and “world cinema” rubrics, stranded within contradictory categories of ethnicity. Examining both statistics and exhibition patterns, Betancourt questions how well U.S. audiences are served by the current infrastructure.

Jade D. Petermon, meanwhile, brings a native’s knowledge to bear on the version of Chicago offered up by Spike Lee in *Chi-Raq* (2015), one of his rare outings beyond the Brooklyn borough line. Arguing that his political compass fails him in the new location, she points to the disconnect between his perspective and recent events. At press time, however, news emerged of a new Spike Lee venture back home: spurred on by his producer-wife, Tonya Lewis Lee, *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986) is being reconfigured as a ten-part Netflix series. Perhaps Petermon will weigh in on the new Nola Darling Redux for *FQ* in the future.

Maori Karmael Holmes interviews Julie Dash, shedding light on the anniversary restoration and re-release of her landmark film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), and exploring the influences upon/from its creation. She also takes the opportunity to discuss Dash’s newest work, *Standing at the Scratch Line* (2016), the short lyrical film that is part of Louis Massiah’s Great Migration series, and catches the reader up on all the films that Dash has made in the interim.

Longtime *FQ* columnist Paul Julian Smith turns his attention to Spain, explaining why Pedro Almodóvar’s *Julieta* (2016) didn’t do better there and analyzing the upstarts that outperformed his work at the box office. Digging into the recent history of Spanish cinema, Smith points to the apparent disjunction between domestic response and international appeal and wonders whether Almodóvar has sacrificed local audiences in favor of cosmopolitan appeal.

Caetlin Benson-Allott brings her long study of the horror genre to bear on the newest event to claim that title: the July 6, 2016 Facebook Live streaming video by Diamond “Lavish” Reynolds, recorded at the time of her boyfriend Philando Castile’s murder by police. This meditation on platforms and meanings marks Benson-Allott’s welcome return as a *FQ* columnist, fittingly intervening in the enigmatic process of how categories and genres are defined.

Racquel Gates surveys a different category altogether: that of early black cinema that has been either unavailable or seen only in a degraded state for too many decades. Considering the box set *Pioneers of African-American Cinema* that was executive produced by Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky, and painstakingly curated by professors Charles Musser (Yale) and Jacqueline Stewart (University of Chicago), she comments on the sense of wonderment: that these restorations truly remake the works and how they will be considered. Through her conversation with Miller, Gates traces the project’s ambitions.

Film festival coverage in this issue continues *FQ*’s mission to highlight the important work that is headed to audiences, catching the moments of first debut or first revival. Jean Ma considers the importance of Cinema Ritrovato and the allure of its Bologna location, Jerry White reports on the climate in Locarno in the context of its earlier history, and this editor reports from her thirtieth pilgrimage to Toronto.

FQ’s chief book critic Carrie Rickey parses the arguments about the development of the musical found in Ethan Mordden’s *When Broadway Went to Hollywood* and deems the form very much alive and well. Associate Editor Regina Longo interviews Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover about the research and conceptualization of their book, *Queer Cinema in the World* (you can download a chapter online). And a range of writers, including contributing editor Joanna Rapf and former chief book critic Dana Polan, weigh in on new volumes of writing by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, a new edition of Sergei Eisenstein’s criticism, two new volumes on Orson Welles, and new books from A. O. Scott, Ruby Cheung, and Scott Higgins.



Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor died at the age of 79 on September 3, 2016; she is the subject of Julie Dash's work in progress.

R.I.P.

As usual, alas, there are passings that need to be sadly noted and lives celebrated.

Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's death on July 4, 2016, hit people very hard, not only because his films were so beloved but because his illness had reportedly been misdiagnosed and/or improperly treated at home in Iran. He had traveled to Paris for treatment for cancer, too late, and died there. With much still shrouded in rumors, his death at 76 was a blow to cinephiles everywhere. Through his "Koker trilogy" of films, centered on that village—*Where Is the Friend's Home?* (1987), *Life, and Nothing More . . .* (1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994)—and the films that followed, he made an indelible impression. Their transcendent synthesis of narrative poignancy and documentary exactitude conveyed a sense of Iranian life unlike any other. But Kiarostami was not only Iranian: he

belonged to the whole world, and now that entire world has lost him.

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor cited in Maori Karmael Holmes's conversation with Julie Dash as inspiration and influence on *Daughters of the Dust*, died at the age of 79 on September 3, 2016. She was a "culinary anthropologist" who singlehandedly brought Gullah cuisine and its history to notice; described also as a griot, she exercised an influence that can't be overstated through her books, cookbooks, television shows, and public radio broadcasts. She was a force to be reckoned with, as Dash relates in connection to the documentary she's been making on Smart-Grosvenor's life; now, she's with the ancestors.

On September 20, writer-director Curtis Hanson died at 71 of complications from frontotemporal degeneration (FTD). Capping a long career, his *L.A. Confidential* (1997) and *8 Mile*

(2002) captured the zeitgeist of their times. Hanson came of age at a time when the industry was changing and he helped it to change in the right direction. Notably, like so many of the French New Wave filmmakers, he'd started out as a critic. At the age of 19 he joined the journal *Cinema*, owned by his legendary uncle Jack Hanson, working variously as editor, writer, and photographer.¹ It was his film school and he made good use of it. Hanson—and all those films that now he will never get to make—will be missed.

Note

1. For a lovely appreciation of Hanson with details of his early life, see Manohla Dargis, "Curtis Hanson: A Filmmaker of Sunshine and Noir," *New York Times*, September 21, 2016, at www.nytimes.com/2016/09/23/movies/curtis-hanson-a-filmmaker-of-sunshine-and-noir.html?_r=0

This marks the last issue of *Film Quarterly* to be published during the Obama presidency. As the United States enters a new and unprecedented era, I want to invite *FQ* contributors, editors, readers, and subscribers to imagine new ways of thinking. Throughout my lifetime, cinema and television and, more recently, web media have been the mediums through which society has been reflected, tested, challenged, and changed—a weighty birthright indeed. In the best of times, this field has been a force for change, such as Emile DeAntonio's *Point of Order* (1964); in the worst of times, it has also aided the dark side rather spectacularly, most notably in the case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*, 1935). Today may well mark the end of postwar America but it also ushers in, I hope, a new era of image-making that will arise to counteract the cable, film, and web landscape that has dominated thinking and viewing for too long. In times of disaster, there always lurk openings. I hope that 2017 is no exception. Please join me in charting a new path forward.

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