

Interviews: Ian Cameron, V.F. Perkins, Charles Barr, Alan Lovell

Article

Published Version

Open Access

Gibbs, J. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0876-1798>
(2019) Interviews: Ian Cameron, V.F. Perkins, Charles Barr,
Alan Lovell. *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism* (8). pp. 38-71.
ISSN 2047-1661 Available at
<https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/84433/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the
work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie>

Publisher: Universities of Warwick, Reading, and Oxford

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law,
including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other
copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in
the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

INTERVIEWS

Introduction

The four interviews which follow were conducted in the late 1990s when I was researching the critical history of *mise-en-scène*. They appeared as an appendix to my PhD and quotations from the interviews were published a number of subsequent publications, most notably *The Life of Mise-en-scène: visual style and British film criticism, 1946–78* (MUP, 2013).

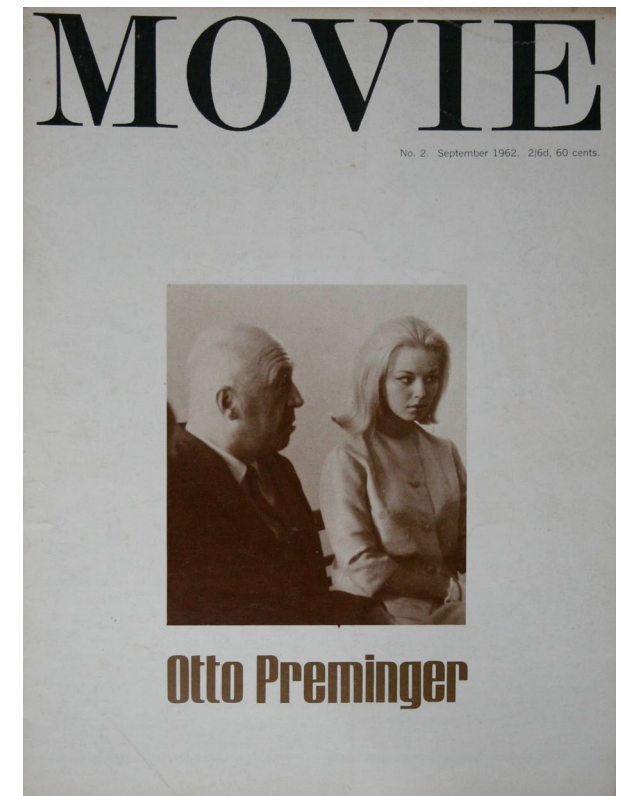
The interviewees were selected for their first-hand experience of the debates around the relative significance of film style which played out across a number of small film magazines and elements of the national press in the early 1960s; subsequently each became an influential figure in film publishing and education. Ian Cameron and V.F. Perkins were founder editors of *Movie*, building on their work on the film section of *Oxford Opinion*. Charles Barr was writing about film for another student magazine, *Granta*, when he encountered the startling claims about movies in *Oxford Opinion*; subsequently he published articles in *Motion*, *Movie* and *Film Quarterly*. Alan Lovell's politically engaged attitude to film positioned him on a different side in some of the debates of the early sixties; his writing at this period appearing in *Definition*, *Universities and Left Review*, and *Peace News*, among other publications.

There are a few points that may provide helpful contextualisation. The first is to note the significance of the order and timescale of the interviews (the first taking place in July 1996, near the end of the first year of my PhD and the last in April 1999 during its final stages). When I interviewed Ian Cameron I hadn't yet read *Oxford Opinion*, the issues of which I subsequently tracked down at the BFI and the various copyright libraries. This had a bearing, of course, on how informed my questions were, but also on my ability to respond to some of the replies. The recollection of each of the critics I spoke to is exceptionally good, but had I read *Oxford Opinion* prior to the first interview, I might have helped fix the chronology of Cameron's recollection of their encounter with *Cahiers du Cinéma* more accurately, for example. Furthermore, as the interviews progressed, I developed a

clearer sense of the argument of my thesis, and this informed the kinds of conversations I was able to have, and the debates I was able to engage with.

More generally, as you will see, each of the interviewees is extremely generous in their answers, sometimes asking suggestive questions or proposing other areas for enquiry. In all, they provided an elegant extra form of supervision, to complement the excellent guidance which I received on the project as a whole from my actual supervisor, Douglas Pye. Being able to conduct these interviews was enormously rewarding for me at the time, and it is my hope that reading them will prove interesting and informative today.

JOHN GIBBS, 2019



Ian Cameron

24 July 1996

[*Oxford Opinion*] ...was a general student magazine that happened to have delusions of grandeur at the time. The film section was perhaps six pages, and I was responsible for that with three others; Mark Shivas, Victor Perkins and someone called Gary Broughton who went into teaching and didn't stay in film criticism ... The important period would be summer term 1960 and autumn term 1960. I seem to remember it coinciding with finals ...

Q: *Not detrimentally I hope?*

No! And there were in all, probably half a dozen issues.

Q: *Had it been in existence as a magazine before you became involved?*

Yes it had. It existed as a magazine, I think, on a more or less once a term basis. Indeed, I did one long film piece for it (which was actually the first extended thing I had ever written on film) on, of all things, Roger Vadim. And then it changed. But both Mark and I, particularly Mark, had been writing for other student magazines at Oxford. Around that time we also started to write for *Film*, which was the Film Societies magazine.

Q: *What were you actually studying at Oxford?*

I was doing Zoology, Mark was doing Law, Victor was doing History.

Q: *What was the impulse behind your becoming interested in film, and doing the work at Oxford?*

Well in my particular case, and I think it was probably the same for Victor but not for Mark, it was National Service – I was in the Airforce, Victor in the Army – getting stuck in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do except go to the cinema five times a week. Which we did, and saw therefore, a very large number of films – mainly films of the 50s, nothing particularly early. The period we were in the services was 55 to 57 and at this point I started reading *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin*. I suppose the initial impulse was the purely practical one that we went to movies, saw things we really liked, thought were really good, and then read the review in *Sight and Sound*, the reviews in the papers and they said, 'just another over-long Hollywood movie'. It was as practical a thing as that. From there, I had no thought about getting involved in film criticism. I suppose the next stage was Victor and me becoming involved in running the Film Society in Oxford – and coming out of that was the invitation to write, first of all for *Cherwell* for which Mark was film editor and which was edited by Peter Preston, who eventually became editor of *The Guardian*. Obviously where we started was reviewing what came on at the local cinemas and, apart from the one long piece I'd written, it was not until we got to *Oxford Opinion* that we began writing at length.

What I wouldn't care to say (Victor might have some more formed ideas on this than I have) is at exactly what point we became conscious of what was happening in France. Certainly it was not where we started from, and I don't think that in the period of *Oxford Opinion* *Cahiers* featured very large, if at all, in our consciousness. You have to realise between *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* there was a fallow period of two years where we saw a whole lot more movies and read more. I think in general it is true to say that the impulse behind *Movie* was in no way a theoretical

one. It was reacting to films we liked, and trying to say what we liked about them, which led in due course to an interest in direction and, to some degree, towards a more text-based criticism than was current at the time.

Important in the genesis of *Movie* is what else was happening at the time. *Sight and Sound*, which was the dominant film journal in Britain, had been taken over in the early 50s by the people from *Sequence* – Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, Gavin Lambert and their side-kick Penelope Houston. Led by Anderson, they had moved towards a vaguely left wing 'committed' process, where the important operation is seen to be evaluation rather than analysis. At the point when *Movie* emerged – in fact it may even have been *Oxford Opinion* – others were trying to go further along in this direction, which seemed to us entirely sterile. If you look at some of the early issues of *Movie* you will find us tackling films which on an obvious content level we might have found ... I was going to say 'repugnant' but that's perhaps putting it a bit strong – things like Fleischer's *Barabbas* or, in an even more extreme way, Leo McCarey's *Satan Never Sleeps* which is stridently anti-communist and pro-catholic. I've always seen *Movie* as having moved from a practical concern towards any theoretical content or worked-out-attitude that might emerge later. I haven't read Victor's piece on British Cinema in the first *Movie* for a long time (because, although it was ostensibly the editorial board, it was actually predominantly Victor) but I think it was trying to nail the simplistic attitudes of what else was happening at the time. By the time of *Movie*, June 1962, the first films from the *Cahiers* group had appeared, and we were well aware of what *Cahiers* was doing. In fact, we printed the odd bit in English – the Chabrol piece, a Rivette piece on Hawks. The latter we edited because we felt it contained quite a bit of garbage.

Q: *Yes, the 'Big themes, Little themes' piece in Movie 1.*

Well it was an obvious thing to translate from *Cahiers* as a starter, as it did link in with Victor's piece on British Cinema.

Q: *The idea being that 'meaning' in a film isn't necessarily contained in the plot or in the dialogue, but elsewhere?*

There had been a tendency to look at films in an overall, rather than concentrated, way and to take from them basically what the plot synopsis told you was in there. One of the things we were interested in was trying to get to grips with the decisions that were being made, whether it was in terms of camera movement or camera position – which was what we were trying to do (and, I may say, attracted widespread derision for doing) in the Minnelli piece: 'Why does the camera go up now?', 'Because he's watching the sky.'; which I still feel was a valid attempt. And other things, like the order of presentation of information in a film which emerges, I think, in the pieces on Hitchcock. Definitely, we were interested in the detail in a way that people had not been.

This did not purely involve the American cinema. The biggest article I did at this point was one on Antonioni which didn't appear in *Movie* – it was a whole issue of *Film Quarterly*, and then we published it as a separate publication. (Eventually it became the first part of a *Movie* paperback for which the later films (after *L'Eclisse*), which I disliked, were covered by Robin Wood.) This was in 1962, or it might have been 1963. It took me a long time to write it because of the key difference between dealing with films then and dealing with films now – no video.

Q: *That was something I was going to ask you. The technology you had at your disposal for attempting close analysis – was it just public screenings or ...?*

Yes. Basically, it was all done in public screenings. Which meant in order to deal with *L'Avventura* I saw it eight times, at public screenings. And it meant that something which turned up once or twice at the NFT presented a considerable challenge! I got very good at writing notes in the dark. For the Antonioni book the only one I was able to view on a Prevost, or similar, was *Le Amiche* – and that was very interesting because I found one could actually do a whole lot more if one could sit down with the thing, run it backwards and forwards and play with it. But this

was just not available to us because at that point none of us were involved in film teaching, not that there was any. The first academic thing that happened in Britain was in 1960. Thorold Dickinson was made Lecturer in Film at the Slade (which is part of UCL) and the impact of that was that there were two research students per year. I think Ray Durgnat was one in the first year, and Charles Barr was one in the second year – and it was through Charles that I got access to the Prevost. But apart from that, it was all accomplished at public screenings.

Q: *Is that the case right the way through those first nineteen issues?*

Yes. Which meant that if you wanted to do something extended on a film that was not current, you tended to have to travel all over London to all sorts of cinemas.

Q: *Must have become quite expensive!*

The key cinemas like the *Tolmer*, which was a converted church of some sort by Warren Street tube station, cost, even in the sixties, only 1s.9d (which is less than ten pence). The *Rex* in Islington, which is now *The Screen on the Green*, was about the same. So it wasn't particularly expensive – if it had been we wouldn't have been able to do it.

Q: *In your introduction to the *Movie* Reader you talk about the 'prevalent woolliness' of the existing British criticism. Was the desire for empiricism very important?*

Yes. There were all sorts of clichés flying around and a general lack of empiricism. A reasonable example is the idea of the 'anti-war' movie. The number of war movies that could be counted as pro-war movies is really pretty limited, and in that most war movies tend to show war as a rather unpleasant experience they can all, or almost all, be taken as anti-war movies. Yet almost the main evaluative term about war movies at this point was whether or not they were 'anti-war'. Which in general, with a few exceptions of a heart-on-sleeve nature like Stanley Kubrick, meant *not American*. This is one area, another

is the fact that critics weren't bothering to *look*. If you read the reviews of *Rio Bravo* – which emerged in Britain, I think, in 1960 which was a rather crucial moment for *Oxford Opinion*, and us – you will find that they were almost all saying 'another John Wayne movie, *much* too long, an example of Hollywood current inflation, etc. etc. etc.' and not noticing that actually the thing was rather tautly constructed. So we did want to make everything more analytical, clearer. We wanted to do this, I suppose, to explain what was good in directors that were being ignored; for all sorts of reasons, many of them straightforward 'cultural gap' reasons. An obvious example is Frank Tashlin. He was just seen as irredeemably vulgar and this was at the point when he had just made his handful of really good movies, which had passed without note – like *The Girl Can't Help It* where the critics were totally unable to see beyond Jayne Mansfield and Rock 'n' Roll. It was something that I thought extremely good at the time, and there was no one else to say it. They were in fact saying it in France, which I certainly wasn't aware of when I first saw *The Girl Can't Help It*. Trying to clarify detailed responses to film was, I think, *Movie's* main feature. The fact that it happened to have a second characteristic which was a taste for the American cinema probably concealed this from at least part of *Movie's* public at first, and quite a lot of critics. Certainly the operations we chose to perform on the American cinema could be, and *were*, eventually, performed on the European cinema I suppose an image of the difference between the way people who wrote on *Movie* looked at cinema and the way others did can be seen in our reaction to the three dominant, early, New Wave directors from France. Virtually all critical opinion in Britain and America preferred Truffaut to everyone. And you can see exactly why they did, because *Les Quatre Cents Coups* is a very heart-on-sleeve movie. We, on the other hand, liked Chabrol which invited a very different response. *Les Bonnes Femmes*, which was widely hated at the time, is actually a movie which demands a much more complex and detailed response than early Truffaut.

Q: Were there any modes, or models of close analysis, within literary criticism that you might have been aware of, do you think?

Absolutely not. Indeed, I think one of the things about early *Movie* was the absence of English degrees around the place, the fact that we were coming to it without any background in literary criticism. Certainly in my case, as someone who was doing a science degree, I had not read any literary criticism. This changed a bit with the arrival of Charles and, particularly, Robin Wood whose background was much more in this area (although I think Charles' first degree was not English, Robin's most certainly was) and that did introduce another element. No, the literary models were just not taken account of, and indeed if anyone had suggested to us that that might be a way to go I think they would have met with some resistance. The idea that cinema could be treated as a more or less literary medium, rather than a more or less visual medium, would have made us not at all eager to look in that direction. As for myself, I was much more interested in the directions indicated in the Lawrence Alloway article, in *Movie* 7, which I suspect has been more anthologised than anything else *Movie* ever did. And rightly so.

Q: It certainly prefigures a lot of later approaches, doesn't it?

Yes, that and Alloway's book for the Museum of Modern Art, on thrillers and violence, which is also very good. In fact Alloway, who by the late 50s / early 60s had quite a big reputation as an art critic, was one of our more vociferous supporters. Although it never surfaced very much he, and I believe also the architectural critic Reyner Banham, had tastes in movies very similar to *Movie*'s tastes in movies before *Movie* came along. Somewhere (I've never been able to track it down, but I heard it from Alloway) Reyner Banham is in print as saying 'Written on the Wind is the movie that sorts out the men from the boys', which is not something that you would expect *Sight and Sound* to be saying at the time.

Q: So, in the period between Oxford Opinion and *Movie* you had encountered a fair amount of French criticism.

Yes. We were all, I think, limited by not being particularly confident readers in French. So while one collected *Cahiers du Cinéma* and leafed through it, I'm not sure how much in detail we took from it. Victor reckons that we mainly looked at the interviews, and I'm inclined to agree. We certainly took pointers in terms of what we should go and see from it – the idea of the importance of direction, mise-en-scène, I guess not. The works of André Bazin had not been collected in English at the time, and the important ones were quite early in *Cahiers*' existence. I think that it was a matter of us, in a parallel and I guess much less intellectual way, finding that we shared a lot of *Cahiers*' tastes and approaches. But I don't think there was anything more worked out than that.

Q: The term mise-en-scène itself ... I had imagined that's where it came from, is that the case?

I'm just wondering where the term mise-en-scène came from. There don't seem to be many other candidates around. It was certainly not current as a critical term. You wouldn't have got Dilys Powell or C.A. Lejeune talking about the mise-en-scène. So I guess it must have come from *Cahiers*. I'd be very interested. Undoubtedly if you are reading all this stuff you will discover what the first use of mise-en-scène in *Movie* is. I doubt you'll find it in *Oxford Opinion*.

Q: I think the first time is in the first issue in Mark Shivas' piece on Minnelli which precedes the interview, he slips it in on the second page.

Ah, does he? It is difficult now to think back and remember how self-consciously one was using the term mise-en-scène. Certainly we recognised direction as the key function

Q: I was going to ask how much attention to style and mise-en-scène come hand in hand with an interest in authorship?

I suppose the interest in authorship came partly out of seeing lots of movies, initially unselectively, and discovering that the common link between the ones you liked was not that they were all made by Columbia, or starred Alan Ladd, but that they were directed by people one hadn't been instructed by the critics to notice. There was always the view, which is of course not entirely without truth, that film is an art form involving groups of people rather than single people. This always seemed, oddly, applicable to Hollywood but not to similar operations in France. The formulation of the idea of a director as author might, I think, have been stimulated by *Cahiers*. The idea had been floating about in our minds before that. We were always clear, in a way that I think *Cahiers* were not, that there were other things in movies that could be crucial – whether a star or a script-writer or what have you – and this had undoubtedly occurred to us by the start of *Movie*. But amongst directors there were those who could almost be relied on to produce a remarkable product and there were, at the other end of the scale, those who could be relied on to screw it up. And in between there were a lot of other people who could produce staggeringly good movies if the stimuli were right and really appalling ones if they were not. Richard Fleischer is a particularly good example – The range between *Mandingo* and *The Spikes Gang* is very wide!

Q: It was the act of direction, and those sort of questions, that interested you rather than a polemic around who is an 'auteur' or not?

Ah, the whole 'auteur' thing comes from another source.

Q: Andrew Sarris?

Andrew Sarris. Those who were in the general area of *Movie* included the British contingent and also three Americans – Andrew Sarris, Eugene Archer (who was the second film critic on *The New York Times*) and then, and entirely separately, Peter Bogdanovich. There was also a Swede Stig Björkman and a Spaniard José Luis Guarner who shared a lot with us, and in fact Guarner

was responsible for the translation of some of the books into Spanish. Sarris, who unlike the rest of us had a regular critical niche (in *The Village Voice*), had – the word ‘soundbite’ comes to mind – had identified something which was lurking in *Movie* 1 in that histogram of directors. But he had identified this, more strongly than the rest of us, as something that was in effect marketable, and he then took it to absurd lengths – the ‘is he / is he not an auteur’ view. I would say that all directors are ‘auteurs’ but the likes of Fred Zinnemann are lousy ones. Whereas Andrew definitely saw auteurship as various levels of state of grace. That was, I think, actually going off in not merely a wrong direction but rather a dangerous one because it allowed everyone else to take a very simplistic attitude to what we were trying to do.

Q: *It gave director-centred criticism a bad name which, in a way, it is still trying to shake off today.*

Yes. Certainly we were much more about text-based criticism than about trying to sort out ‘the pantheon’, which is a foolish occupation because we all have our own. It’s not a matter of great significance that I like Joseph M. Newman movies and it’s not going to be significant unless I happen to be able to make a case for them, which I never did. No, the whole ‘auteur’ thing I see now as a slight red herring, though at the time I also saw it as an annoyance that Andrew was attracting a lot of publicity for what really didn’t seem to be helping the cause of what we were trying to talk about.

Q: *You mentioned André Bazin, earlier on, as someone whose earlier articles you certainly wouldn’t have seen, but people have suggested that *Movie* is in a line of descent, a tradition, from Bazin. Do you feel there is any validity in this view?*

Only in the most ill-defined way. If one takes Bazin as being the person who set out early in *Cahiers* a lot of the ideas that *Cahiers* espoused, *Movie* certainly espoused quite a lot of the same ideas. But I think they were probably differently articulated and if there was a direct link it was almost by osmosis – from reading things in

Cahiers which would have been somewhat informed by Bazin’s view. I think the people we were reading, as far as we read anything in *Cahiers*, were probably Chabrol and Rivette Certainly I would not for a moment accept any sort of placing of Bazin in the intellectual parentage of early *Movie*.

Q: *Do you feel that CinemaScope was a factor in encouraging you toward a style-based form of criticism?*

CinemaScope definitely was important. It was important partly because all the other fellows hated it, and certainly it encouraged us to look at what was happening on the screen. In a slightly different way if you, which I would not recommend, were to look at the thing I wrote on Vadim in 1959 quite a lot of it was on the details of composition and so on Hell, it was bigger!

Q: *Is it the case that another factor in British criticism at the time was the montage-derived theories of film, and might CinemaScope be seen as nurturing something of an opposition to that?*

There had been, I think, very little action on the theoretical front in cinema. There’s the early Eisenstein and Pudovkin, and then what? ‘What’ is Ernest Lindgren, Béla Balázs, people who actually started from the viewpoint that the theory of the cinema was established by Eisenstein and Pudovkin. It had certainly occurred to us that Eisenstein and Pudovkin were wrong! We were pretty immune to any taste for the Soviet cinema, but no one had really thought about the cinema in those terms when we were writing. I’m sure people had, but in terms of what was published and available it wasn’t around. I think the hostility to CinemaScope came from people whose feeling that montage was the basis of cinema was almost being undermined by CinemaScope, where you can put two heads on the screen at once in close up – gosh! – and, probably intuitively, we took to it. But the currency of montage theory? ... it was lurking somewhere, not much articulated, a sort of ‘fundamental truth’ – as indicated by Alfred Hitchcock, who was only too glad to refer to it.

Q: *There is a moment in the ‘Movie Differences’ discussion, in *Movie* 8, where you make the point very clearly that editing is not something a director has to use but can use, it being one of the options the director has at his or her disposal.*

It seemed to be self evidently true, and had in fact been noticed before in the work of Gregg Toland for Welles and Wyler. People had said, ‘gosh, here he is playing around with other things than editing’ and no one seemed ever to have taken it any further than that. It’s interesting to note what at that time we *hadn’t* seen, in this context. Before the start of *Movie* we hadn’t seen *Rope* – though we knew about, and were fascinated by, what it was said to do – and we certainly hadn’t seen *Under Capricorn*. Yes, montage was something we all assumed was a tool, not *the* means.

Q: *Do you think you were conscious, at the time, that under the ‘umbrella’ term of mise-en-scène, or in talking of style, there were a number of quite different ways in which the concept was being used? So, on the one hand you might compare Preminger’s style with Hitchcock’s in terms of where it positions the spectator, and on the other you might talk about mise-en-scène as expressive of character in, for example, the Barry Boys piece on The Courtship of Eddie’s Father. Were you aware there were a number of different, quite distinct, ways in which you were talking about mise-en-scène?*

I think we were happy to use mise-en-scène as a rather inclusive term, rather than actually analysing what we meant by it. So, no, I don’t think we went very far in that direction.

Q: *How much do you think of early *Movie* writing as an attempt to explain how films work, in relation to the spectator?*

Certainly. The larger articles in *Movie* very often had a dimension of trying to explain how the films we liked (because it will become apparent to you that, on the whole, we only wrote about the films we liked) worked. The article on *The Man Who Knew Too Much* was definitely an attempt in that direction. As was the other Hitchcock

piece I did and I think this is true of many of the better things in *Movie*. Certainly, that's what I was after in the Antonioni piece and I think you will find it was what Charles Barr was up to in the CinemaScope piece, which appeared in *Film Quarterly*. *Film Quarterly* was, incidentally, a journal even more reactionary than *Sight and Sound* at the time, but it was willing to try things. If I had offered them something on Howard Hawks at length, rather than something on Antonioni at length, I think I would have got a resounding negative. But one could get things in there – Charles' piece on CinemaScope.

Q: Did you attempt submitting articles to *Sight and Sound*?

No. We saw *Sight and Sound*, and the British Film Institute in general, as the enemy. If you look at the first issue of *Oxford Opinion*, there is a lengthy dissection (and when I say lengthy probably I mean 2000–3000 words because film criticism has definitely got longer) of a British Film Institute publication, which purported to identify the fifty best films ever made. The BFI was firmly identified as what we were against – I suppose, in fact, we gained some of our identity from that very thing. Also the tastes that we displayed and the views that we'd expressed were taken, quite wrongly, to mean that as we were not obviously left wing critics (in the sense that the people on *Definition*, the left wing film magazine of the time, were) therefore we had to be right wing critics. And liking the odd Leo McCarey movie was merely going to confirm this. No, *Sight and Sound* was not something we ever wanted to get in and write for. After *Oxford Opinion*, which got us noticed, what we wanted to do was start our own magazine – and having got noticed by the press, we thought that the people who ran magazine empires would only be too glad for us to do it. We were, of course, wrong.

Q: Do you feel, in retrospect, that many of the directors you were writing about – Ray, Minnelli, even Preminger – were directors that would, a decade later, be celebrated as melodrama directors and do you feel that there might be a generic specificity to 'mise-en-scène'.

We certainly liked films that were melodramas. We enjoyed, I suppose, excess. The flippant Reynier Banham quote about *Written on the Wind* actually is quite significant because liking *Written on the Wind* is automatically a statement against a certain good taste and dignity.

Q: Sirk, although I believe there is something on him in *Oxford Opinion*, is not a figure who is particularly noticeable in early *Movie*.

He was right at the end of his career, don't forget. One unfortunate feature of *Movie* is that *Movie* came out as the great days of the American cinema were drawing to an end. *Oxford Opinion* more or less coincided with *Rio Bravo* and *Psycho*, the beginning of *Movie* coincided more or less with *Advise and Consent*. Hollywood was definitively falling apart. There was a regrettable fact that a lot of the directors we espoused realised they were auteurs, moved to Europe and started making lousy movies. Anthony Mann, Tashlin, Nick Ray for that matter, had all made their best movies by the time *Movie* started. So, although we didn't know it, what we were looking at was an area of cinema that was actually in decline.

Q: That's a very good point. I had been wondering why, say, Preminger whose style is so effaced as to be almost invisible at times caught your enthusiasm and attention whereas someone like Sirk who is much more obviously working with elements of mise-en-scène didn't seem to be so much of a focus. But I suppose that's a very good reason – that Preminger was bringing out films the whole time through that period ...

Yes. That is, I think, very important. Preminger was actually more available. When we saw the Sirks, we loved them. But I think the only one we saw in the days of *Oxford Opinion* was *Tarnished Angels*, and we had to go to a flea-pit 15 miles out of Oxford to see that – and it was astonishing. But so too was, say, Losey's *Time Without Pity* which was a movie made in Britain which is, as I remember it, devoid of what were seen as the strengths of British cinema. I suppose the idea of melodrama was

not definitely articulated at this point, and had it been we would have undoubtedly said, 'Gosh, yes, melodrama – a lot of what we like is melodrama'. But then a lot of what we liked were westerns. The other thing that was absent, apart from video which has allowed one to study film in detail, was television as a source of almost limitless films to watch.

Q: And films from the past, I suppose?

Yes. The thing about obvious (not in the derogatory sense of the word) mise-en-scène as exemplified by Sirk as opposed to Preminger reminds me of another aspect. There was one other area of film criticism from France which was the MacMahonists. There was a cinema in Paris called *Le MacMahon*, and a group of people around it who produced a magazine that ran for a few issues, called *Présence du Cinéma*. They were into directors who maintained a totally naturalistic surface. What they liked was Preminger, Tourneur, Walsh, early Losey. There was a defining moment in *The Criminal* when the background light dims behind someone in a totally artificial manner, which was the moment at which these guys parted company from Losey. It took the rest of us a few films more. Again, it is very difficult to analyse now, but availability was a big part of what shaped our tastes – and what was conspicuously absent was the American cinema of the 40s, the movies that Andrew [Britton] loved. Bette Davis movies were just not around. There were two routes to the American cinema of the past. One was what you could catch at a flea-pit, which was shown with the reels not necessarily in the right order and usually substantially damaged, but that got you back to the early 50s. The other source was film societies and the NFT, but this was a very limited view which included Frank Capra, Frank Capra, and Frank Capra. *Bringing Up Baby* was allowed. The Capras included *Mr Smith* and *Mr Deeds*. And a rather random selection of other things, Cukor was three films, no four – *Pat and Mike* and *Adam's Rib* were accepted, *Born Yesterday* was accepted, not as a Cukor movie but as a Judy Holliday movie, and *The Philadelphia Story* which was nice and stage-play-based. Apart from that,

the period from 39 to 49 was represented by *Stagecoach*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Oxbow Incident* ... very little else. That was really all we had seen of the 40s ... Victor and I managed to get a few other things that were available for the Film Society in Oxford. There was quite a lot still floating around in 16mm.

Q: *Just returning, for a moment, to the MacMahonists. Where were you encountering their views?*

They came over. At some point, I cannot remember exactly when it was, they came over and hired themselves a small viewing theatre in Covent Garden and 16mm copies of everything they could lay their hands on. This is how I got to see things like the early 40s movies of Edward G. Ulmer, they had not merely *Detour* but things like *Club Havana* which were of no great import but at least one got to see them, and a lot of Raoul Walsh, like *Salty O'Rourke*.

Q: *Was it a commercial venture or was it artistic ...?*

Oh, their hiring of a viewing theatre was purely for their own delight and instruction. I suspect they were in a position to afford it. There were two of them, one was a man called Pierre Rissient who has turned up on the television – I think he became a PR person, particularly for American directors much in the way Tavernier did. I forget who the other person was ... but we saw quite a lot of films. Mainly, we got our film-going through a keen study of *What's on in London* and being ready to go to very strange places.

Q: *And the interest in 'invisibility' – do you in retrospect feel that to be important ...?*

Yes Of course, that led us towards directors who simply hadn't been noticed – invisibility in *mise-en-scène* was a sure recipe for invisibility in terms of critical reputation.

Q: *It strikes me that many of the articles in early *Movie* make the same points that one would wish to today, in the light of feminist theory and other debates that have had an impact*

on the study of film – which I feel is something of a testament to the method, and to the films themselves.

That is, of course, very cheering. In a way it is almost a natural product of trying to go into films without great preconceptions. Trying to see what they are saying or doing, rather than assessing them against a standard of what you would like them to say or do. What people would like films to be saying or doing is really rather too important in most mainstream criticism of the late 50s.

Q: *Finally, is there anything else in particular which you feel we haven't covered but that would be important to talk about?*

I'm sure the key to the early *Movie* is that it was very much something that was designed to work from the ground up, from analysis of detail, and that any theoretical overview emerged from that. If there is something we opposed more than anything else it was doing it the other way around

Q: *Do you think your scientific background helped in that respect?*

Oh, Certainly. I went to movies wanting to look. And I think one might have done that to a greater extent, more successfully, had the technology that is now available, been available then – and had we been situated in institutions of higher learning rather than variously scratching a living.

V.F. Perkins

22 May 1997

*The interview begins with a discussion of the interview the *Movie* editors conducted with Vincente Minnelli and published in the first issue (June 1962). The interview included questions about a sequence from *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1962), and provoked a fair amount of critical comment in the press, Ian Cameron responding in the second issue of *Movie* in the article 'Films, Directors and Critics' (republished [here](#)).*

I think in some ways that the interview with Minnelli in the first issue was quite important, not for anything it achieved but for what it was trying to do, for the aspirations that it represents. I don't think we prepared ourselves well enough for it, by which I mean I don't think we understood what being well prepared would consist of, and maybe Minnelli wasn't the person ... but I'm much less convinced of that. It represents a way of thinking about film, the sort of questions you might ask both of a film and of a film-maker. And not one informed by literary criticism!

Q: *Where did you get hold of the technology to conduct the interview?*

That's an interesting question. It took place in MGM's viewing room, with the fragment of film run a couple of times but with no stop and start, 'Let's look at this', the kind of opportunity that an editing table or a video would offer. That's one of the difficulties under which it was done. I think in film teaching there is a real problem with how you dispose the space, the ideal conditions for watching a movie are absolutely un-ideal for discussion. And in that situation, as I remember it, Ian and I were sitting in the row ahead of Minnelli and the MGM person who was with him – so spontaneity of contact was very limited.

Q: *That particular article raised a lot of ire, didn't it?*

People were looking for ways to counter-attack, and that was an opportunity. Retrospectively (I haven't seen it for many, many years) it seems to me unlikely that *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is really a major achievement! And you could understand that initiative, hostile-ly, as simply an expression of a rather juvenile film-mania. Since Minnelli didn't offer the kinds of penetrating account of what he was up to that an Orson Welles can offer, it was a good target. *Movie* had after all been very aggressive. What do you do in response to that? You either keep quiet and hope it will go away, or you find a way of hitting back.

Q: *You weren't able to have any more of those sort of encounters with directors?*

I think it's a pity that we didn't do it again, with the improved technology. Other directors could have engaged in that thing quite happily and, as I say, if we had been better prepared maybe Minnelli could have done too. I think there were opportunities in what he said that we weren't equipped to take up, at that point.

Q: *It seems strange that when the technology did become readily available, and when film studies began to become an academic activity, there isn't a corresponding increase in detailed criticism.*

No. The early history of film studies is so caught up with the passion of theorisation, which I understand precisely as an avoidance of text.

Q: *I suppose one of the really striking things about *Movie* is that you were responding to the films that were on down at the local Odeon rather than some films in an idealised past, or talking about what the films that were around should be.*

I'm not sure I understand that.

Q: *Well it strikes me that it is easier to talk about a group of films thirty years later than it is to talk about them as they are emerging.*

Well, I think one way of understanding it is that *Movie* was asking of journalism something that, on the one hand journalism is incapable of delivering, but on the other journalism claims to deliver. It was asking film reviewing to be film criticism, let's say. Part of the nature of *Movie*'s demand was that criticism should actually be based on more than one viewing of a film – and that's still not accepted. I was startled to learn that one of my colleagues had written an article for *Sight and Sound* on the basis of a single viewing of a film. It seems to me some kind of mad arrogance – accepting that some people's recall can be very much more detailed than mine. But the inaccuracy of most reviewing and of most aspiring criticism in the pre-film-studies era is very impressive. Part of my understanding of where the motivation for *Movie* came from was a desire to make statements about film that *were* accurate in relation to the text (though at that time the habit of talking about films as texts was not in place), where there was some basis in observation for the things one wanted to say about the film. And part of that involved the discipline of checking what you had in mind to write against a further viewing. In some ways the core of *Movie*'s problem, and some of the developments since we first got together, is that matter of the relationship between material observation and evaluation, assessment, interpretation – understanding in other senses. I understand that as relating to a desire (certainly on my part, I don't know how widely this understanding

would be shared) to escape from class-based notions of taste, where understanding is related to the person rather than to the process. Understanding as something which happened, rather than something which was achieved.

Q: *So one of the main motivational factors for getting to grips with the detail of text, the departure from what Ian Cameron calls the 'prevalent woolliness' of existing criticism, was the desire to talk about the objective features of the text rather than one's own response to the text?*

Well to relate the two, at any rate. I don't think we did, and I don't think we were aiming to, divorce response from the material content. What the material content of the text is, is actually a very difficult question. The status of off-screen sounds, say, and the images they evoke for us seem to me to be part of the material content of the text, but they're not visibly there the way that the wind ruffling the heroine's hair is visibly there. So there is a problem around what is materially present, but that's a problem of an order of sophistication ahead of whether it matters that the camera moves during a particular moment of the film, that a scene is shot indoors or outdoors, and if indoors what sort of environment, etc. etc. Another dimension, given that we were very partisan, is that I think it's important to have a certain kind of respect for the activity of filmmaking, for the intelligence and proficiency of filmmakers – based on the assumption that what they do actually makes some kind of sense that it would be interesting to articulate. And I don't think that's general. On the one hand there was this particular kind of partisanship that made one (then, but to which I would adhere to a large degree) very sceptical of the claims which were being made, and on the other a belief that film criticism conducted itself in much too lordly a fashion, in which it felt that it knew better than the filmmakers. As that Minnelli interview indicates part of our impulse – I think it was *our* impulse, it was certainly mine – was to regard what the filmmakers did as in advance of the critic. So it was the critic who needed educating rather than the filmmaker.

I think all those things become much more pointed when you start teaching. Unless you are happy to stand in

front of the class and issue forth rather vacuously, either on a grand historical level, or on a theoretical level, or on a level of taste – going on and on about how wonderful this is and how they've got to learn how to appreciate it – without specifying the points at which the meaningful complexity of the text can be evident ... I don't think I can quite finish that sentence. Yes I can – the alternative to all those things is precisely to treat the text in a way which makes it available to discussible analysis, where the precision of what you've said about it is open to challenge. The correctness, but also the relevance – is one treating this detail in a way which exaggerates its role in the total production, or that is consonant with the way that the film as a whole seems to be working? Treating detail in a way that opens things up to discussion rather than existing on authority. Claims on authority usually go back to claims about either innate good taste, which is class based, or intellectual supremacy – neither of which are worth having in a class room.

Q: *That's a very interesting perspective, but it wasn't until considerably later that you started teaching, was it?*

In a small way it happened quite quickly, but in a sustained way no.

Q: *What were these early experiences?*

Things like talking to groups of film society members, evening classes and so on. I did a certain amount whenever I got hold of a bit of film that I could take into school. Ian and I, I don't think anybody else, were earning a living once we had left university by supply teaching, in schools that were very far from being nests of privilege. I was teaching mainly English. In my first year of teaching I taught A-level Mechanics but that just reflects the desperate state of London as far as teaching was concerned, but thereafter I taught mainly English. I remember showing the Howard Hawks episode from *Full House* in my English classes in Bermondsey, but there were also various things, mainly documentaries and what you could get on free loan from County Hall. So I used film as much

as possible in teaching, while not seeing myself as truly a teacher – trying to do it decently, but thinking of it as how I was making the money to pursue my interest in film – and Ian was doing something similar in a different school. Then there was, biographically, a gradual progression to involvement with the Education Department of the BFI and in teaching further education at Hornsey College of Art (which was the first place that had a continuous film course). I gradually changed the number of hours I was teaching in schools so as to make more room for film teaching in various contexts. But I think the problems of teaching ten, eleven and twelve year old school kids whose attitude could easily become 'Why do I want to know this? What use is this to me?' was not irrelevant to some of my other activities.

Q: *Moving on to a rather different subject, to what degree do you feel that Cahiers du Cinéma was an influence?*

Ever so important. *Cahiers* was the first place I ever had anything published.

Q: *Really? I didn't know that!*

A letter about *Rio Bravo* was I think my first published effort at Film criticism.⁷ It was a response to Luc Moullet's article about *Rio Bravo* which I simply wrote him as a letter but which got published, and that thrilled me a great deal. My French was not good enough to read *Cahiers* with assiduity. It was odd, if your French wasn't terribly good – my French finished at O-level and the further development it has received is entirely from reading French film criticism and watching and listening to French movies – there were some writers that were easy to read. Bazin was ever so easy to read if you didn't have very advanced French, as were the interviews translated from English. I don't know what they would read like to a French eye, or ear. The two things that I think made most impact were: firstly, the degree of seriousness and passion with which a film like *Rio Bravo* was discussed, not the content of the discussion but the tone and fact of it; and secondly, the mode of conversation with filmmakers. I think the interviews were

more important than anything else. These are the *kinds* of questions it makes sense to ask a filmmaker. Partly it's manifest in the asking of them, but also in the way they're then treated by the filmmaker who responds to them as intelligible inquiries. And the reception of *Touch of Evil* was just so much more intelligent in France than it had been here. That was very affecting in a whole range of ways. *Touch of Evil* when it appeared was *such* a thrilling movie. I suppose there's a sort of pretentious adolescent dimension too – feeling that one was one of the few people to appreciate this wonderful, martyred movie. (I think it was important to the whole thing that we were very young.) But the level of discussion that the film received in France, particularly in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and the interviews around it, made an enormous impact.

Q: Was it something of a recognition that someone else was thinking the same things that you were beginning to think yourselves, or was it more 'Goodness, look what they are doing here!'?

It was partly at the level of taste and enthusiasm. I think I can better understand hating *Touch of Evil* than I can understand being indifferent to it. I think it is clearly a work of genius, and that doesn't mean it's a good film, necessarily. I was teaching a class on *The Magnificent Ambersons* only yesterday, when I was saying that I thought *Citizen Kane* was a work of genius but not a particularly good film. But there's a whole excitement about the kinds of eloquence a film can have in *Touch of Evil*. As I say, even if you think it's a disgusting work, which would not be a stupid way to react, that would need to be placed alongside the recognition that it was so intelligent, energetic, and achieved.

Q: Where were you getting access to magazines like Arts and Cahiers?

I think Ian brought back issues of *Cahiers* from Paris, and I subscribed as soon as I saw what it was. It had been mentioned in *Sight and Sound*, where one could perceive *Cahiers* in opposition to the posh end of British

film criticism. In fact they were all journalists together at the Cannes Film Festival and so on, and had a closer relationship than one realised. I found some *Cahiers*, I can't remember where, but I came across a great stash of back-numbers in England somewhere, an Oxford bookshop or something like that, which I bought. And there were the odd French film books available. The one I remember is Ado Kyrrou's *Amour-Erotisme et Cinéma* which clearly was imported because the French stood for 'cheeky'. I don't know if you know Kyrrou, he is someone in a different ideological camp to *Cahiers*, but some of his stuff did get published in *Cahiers*. Little bits of that book oddly enough, which I certainly didn't read cover to cover because it was a very thick book, were quite impressive – in terms of attitude and his hatred of *Brief Encounter*! (laughs) I remember it making quite an impression in suggesting different ways in which your values might come into play in relation to film. There was a version of PC in play at that time (well there always is) about, as it were, Official Positions – films ought to support the notion of brotherly love and so on – and that Official Position never accommodates the variety of human interests and appetites. There are various forms of liberation available, but one of them concerns the values you are allowed to bring to your appreciation of the arts.

Q: As well as the values, do you think an interest in mise-en-scène was stimulated by Cahiers?

Yes. But my understanding of an interest in mise-en-scène is that it is just an extension of the question, 'Well, what is interesting about movies?', of trying to find ways in which one's experience and one's enthusiasm can be articulated, and exchanged. It gets tiresome just to say 'Wow!' at one another, or 'Euch!'.

Q: What about the term itself? I notice that you use it in your Nicholas Ray article in Oxford Opinion. It was a term in the English language at this time, but do you think you picked it up from the French?

There was an article by Tony Richardson in *Sight and Sound* called 'The Metteur-en-scène' which I would have read, for sure. *Sight and Sound* and *Monthly Film Bulletin* had been very important to me as an adolescent movie fan reaching for culture. At one point I would have known that article pretty well. It's interesting to me that I made that usage, because I would have guessed it wouldn't have come till later.

Q: You say something like, 'Nicholas Ray subjects a frequently banal narrative to an idiosyncratic mise-en-scène'.

But don't you think that's partly because English lacks a word grand enough for direction? Because direction also means which way does traffic go, and has all those traffic cop implications. I don't know if you know the article that I did for *The Movie* on mise-en-scène?

Q: 'Moments of Choice'?

Yes – well there I tried to restore some force to the word direction, I was talking about a sense of direction. In some ways I deplore the pretentiousness of mise-en-scène as a term, but it occupies a gap in the English language where the word 'direction' isn't strong enough, isn't definite enough. So mise-en-scène stands for something like 'the work of the film stylist' rather than just the direction.

Q: I suppose also at that time (in English) the director wasn't the figure she or he would be for Movie?

Well, that depended who the director was. At the posh end the director was fully acknowledged – if it was Flaherty, or René Clair. It was in relation to a cinema regarded as routine that the director's work was routine as well. The questions of method and focus are also bound up with questions of taste. Is *Rio Bravo* a film it makes sense to be thrilled by?

Q: I suppose Ray was a figure who *Sight and Sound* weren't entirely hostile toward?

Sight and Sound, if you look back at it, is quite peculiar. It would be quite interesting to know the Penelope Houston version of that history. Certainly in terms of *They Live by Night* they were very supportive, very enthusiastic. But later on their interest became very patronising and I was affronted to my core by the way they received *The Savage Innocents*, which is still one of my favourite films, and which was given such a disgusting dismissal at the back of *Sight and Sound*. Compare the kind of camp indulgence that was extended to *Johnny Guitar* by *Sight and Sound* with the enthusiasm, perhaps in some ways over the top enthusiasm, with which it was received in France. I know which I would regard as preferable. Nicholas Ray was well received as long as he looked like an aberrant figure in Hollywood, but once he seemed to become a Hollywood filmmaker he was to some considerable degree sidelined. I remember at some point there emerged in the pages of *Sight and Sound* the ridiculous thought that perhaps the quality of *They Lived by Night* owed more to John Houseman than Nicholas Ray.

Q: *In the light of his later work?*

Well also in the light of Houseman's other work. But that just indicates the degree to which you haven't looked at *They Live by Night* to see where it's coming from, how it is being what it is being. The suggestion that somehow the producer could be responsible for the ways that things are lit, where the camera is, what the actors are doing is evidence of misunderstanding. I think it's probably based on the notion that the film is the script essentially, that all you need from a director is an *effective* realisation of the script.

Q: *What about the MacMahonists, were they an important influence?*

I don't think I can remember. Ian may have told you about a visit to London by a group of MacMahonists, including Pierre Rissient who is now a film producer. I think they were personally impressive. Again, in terms of the sort of liberation of attitudes that *could* be expressed or inhabited, I think there were some important things that came out of

some writing by Michel Mourlet, as well as Luc Moullet, both of whose writing / critical personae were fairly wild. The idea that you might take a committed interest in the violence of a violent movie, within the very staid conditions of English culture, was quite an incitement.

Q: *Michel Mourlet strikes me as the least 'English' of the French critics. I was thinking also of the way in which they liked Preminger and Losey, figures who were to become important to Movie. Was that an influence?*

I think it probably was. Once the initial connection had been made, I think I was inclined to take quite a lot of guidance from the French about what films to discover, or rediscover. I was trying to think when did Preminger ... oh well, for me it was with *Carmen Jones*, so that was the connection I would have made. *Carmen Jones* was a film that I had enjoyed enormously, and seen several times just out of enjoyment (in, I guess, my late teens). But I'm not sure how much else I'd seen until *Cahiers* gave the incentive to chase Preminger movies in Sunday screenings at the Astoria, Brixton and all that stuff. So I think we took quite a lot of guidance about who it would be worth considering, or re-considering – like Sirk! Losey was ever so important. I can't remember the chronology of it, but interviewing Losey and discovering the depth of detail to which the film could be designed and intended – this was specifically around *The Criminal* and *Blind Date* – was enormously important. And also his response – he was obviously tickled pink to find people taking the detail of the texture of his work seriously. But he personally, certainly for me, acted as an enormously strong validation of the idea that film makers knew what they were doing.

Q: *That interview appears in the joint issue of Oxford Opinion and Granta, but I think that takes place after you had actually left Oxford.*

Yes. It's funny, he was enormously important but I didn't actually like any Losey films much after that point.

Q: *What particular reason was there?*

Well I think he was someone for whom it was a misfortune not to be able and required to carry on within the popular forms. I think his move into Art cinema didn't do him any good, didn't do his *work* any good. That's not to say, obviously, that to continue working under the kind of conditions under which *The Damned* was made was somehow preferable.

Q: *I'm wondering whether this is related to ideas around discretion, or invisibility?*

I certainly don't give a damn about invisibility. Part of my own critical quest is precisely to make visible (laughs), and *Touch of Evil* is certainly not remarkable for the invisibility of the direction, or *Johnny Guitar* or any of Nick Ray's work. I think there's a question about *integration*, which can sometimes become a kind of seamlessness. But what is visible is so much related to what one is prepared to look for and at. I just think that if you go in for a flamboyant style the odds get longer. If you win it's fantastic, if you don't it's the more miserable. So there's something to do with the degree of emphasis needing to be consonant with the scale of feeling or of thought.

Q: *Is it also to do with a coherent strategy across the whole work?*

Not as a demand, because most of the films that one treasures are films with lots of good bits, rather than perfect, and many of the greatest movies are in various ways seriously flawed, I would say. But there's got to be enough of an armature there, as it were, to act as support for the key moments.

Q: *I mention it because it strikes me that by the time of Film as Film you are talking more about the way in which a film might be, I suppose, a 'systematised whole' as opposed to the Movie articles.*

Yes that's right, and I think that *Film as Film* slightly overdoes coherence really. It's odd in a way, because the general statements of that book strongly emphasise coherence and

yet it never talks about a single complete movie, it's always with bits.

Q: *I suppose the nearest you come is with Psycho.*

It is the nearest. I don't want to run away from the importance of integration it's just that in the rhetoric of the book, and in relation to the context to which I felt myself to be writing, I think that word is possibly overdone. But as I remember it, the book itself says that coherence is a fairly minimal claim. After coherence, what? I hope it says that.

Q: *A final question about French criticism – you mentioned how Bazin was easy to read, a lot of critics have attempted to place your work in relation to Bazin. Is that something you accept?*

Oh sure. I still think he's ever so insightful. And again the concern with the concrete – even though he is often inaccurate, as all detailed criticism of that time is – the concern with the concrete as the basis for any large understanding of what you advance, was important. It seems to me a waste of time to pick nits from Bazin because that's easy to do, as with any critical work of the past. I think what Bazin has to say about the connection between cinema and time and the war against time (he expresses it in terms of mummification at one point) is deeper than anyone has yet taken the subject. I think there's a strong connection between the cinema and the human fear of loss, or difficulties with loss, that Bazin points towards.

Q: *How does he fit in with ideas around the composition of the individual shot, as opposed to the montage-derived theories (Eisenstein / Pudovkin) that were prevalent at the time?*

There was a standard text of the time that was Ernest Lindgren's *The Art of the Film* and that itself made a kind of potpourri of ideas from Arnheim & Balázs and Eisenstein & Pudovkin, all of which one read in the quest for something that would enable one to notice and articulate more in one's enjoyment of film and which didn't seem to actually be very helpful. So, certainly in my case,

after a period of attempted submission to their authority one felt the need for something else, something that actually seemed to work. Eisenstein was more interesting than the others, again because of the degree to which he wanted to engage with particular moments, particular images and combinations of images. Without a knowledge of its cultural context, however, I think it's only semi-readable, so it only acts as an incentive rather than the detail of his ideas becoming available. Again, Bazin is so important for offering the sense that cinema isn't something that we understand. Whereas the tone of Arnheim, Balázs, Lindgren and so on, is that we *do* understand cinema and this is how we understand it. With Bazin you get the sense 'no we don't understand it, so let's start trying' which is much more enabling. Something that I quote to myself and students quite often without having the words exactly right – good God, I'm not even certain of the source, I think it's Schnabel who said of Beethoven's piano sonatas – 'This is music much better than it can ever be played'. I think of criticism very much in those terms, that criticism should aspire to be as good as the films that it's about, but it never will be. It should be based on the sense that our understanding is not yet adequate to the achievements of the great filmmakers, without being abject about it. In many respects I'm quite an arrogant person. Even introducing the question of my personality at this point represents a kind of arrogance – a manifestation of the fact that, that's a correct statement! Without a certain kind of confidence that you have, or will have, something worth saying you can hardly publish or go into the teaching business. But that arrogance, or confidence, needs keeping in check, balancing. Our understanding has to work to be worthy of the objects of understanding. I operate a lot of the time in opposition to the notion of authority, cultural authority essentially. Again, it presents some interesting quandaries as a teacher because I want to offer what I've got usefully to offer, but I don't want students to be overly impressed by my knowledge and understanding. In a way, I want them to pick and mix from what they think they can get out of me.

Q: *It's often suggested that Movie applied methods of literary criticism to film. Is there any validity in this view?*

Well, I expect there must be, and I don't see why it would be a particularly vicious accusation. The reason I say there must be – apart from Robin Wood who was at that time a very convinced admirer, one might say disciple, of Leavis – is that despite the fact that I regard my own literary training as minimal (much thinner than I would like it to be), I think what's in the air culturally is so pervasive. I didn't study literature but I certainly read the book reviews in *The Observer* and *The Sunday Times* and *Encounter* and so on. So the literary values represented in Kenneth Tynan's or Harold Hobson's theatre criticism (I don't know if these names mean anything to you, but they were important figures of the cultural journalism of my formative years) and the degree to which, for instance, the culture of *Sight and Sound* was a literary culture, would mean that one would have absorbed a lot of those values, those ways of thinking and expressing things. I suppose the relevance of the question is related to the fact that one of one's charges against criticism as practised at that time was that it was literary. In a sense, I think I could have done with the support of a much more sophisticated and developed literary background than I then (or now!) commanded.

Q: *Then there might have been the danger that you wouldn't have been looking at Hollywood films in the first place – you might have taken on values which were hostile to popular culture. Though it didn't slow down Robin Wood very much!*

That's right. There is something about the connection between modernism and snobbism that I think one was looking to avoid. The degree to which modernism as a crusade or a particular vehicle (I'm talking speculatively at this point), as a particular set of commitments – a commitment against the popular, against the comprehensible, against ease of enjoyment – isn't somehow motivated by a desire for exclusivity. That seems to me clearly the case in some expressions of modernism, how centrally it is the case with modernism as a whole I'm really too ignorant to say, but it is a suspicion that I carry.

Q: *One of the claims that is sometimes made is that your interest in close analysis was directly derived from knowledge of Richards and the American New Critics.*

Well it wasn't. It wasn't in the sense of having properly read any of their work. My question would be whether that wasn't so generally in the cultural air that necessarily one absorbed it – and if that's where the motivation to close inspection comes from then I'm very grateful to them!

Q: *The position I'm taking in relation to this material is to suggest that you weren't consciously saying 'Aha! So and so works like this, let's try this with film', but that some of these ideas would be readily available in the culture. For example it has been suggested that Movie's interest in coherence comes from Leavis, but you don't have to look very far to see that this isn't just true of Leavis, it's true of a whole tradition that stretches back at least as far as Aristotle.*

Yes, and I think the attack on coherence in the seventies was largely phoney anyway. It doesn't represent a commitment to some other set of values that could be articulated aesthetically.

Q: *You think that that argument rather lost its way?*

Yes ... but things hang on awfully long after they ought to have died. I think you would do much better to ask for some more precise specifications of what this word coherence is, of the work it's doing. But to deny that it represents an important consideration? Returning to the idea about literary criticism as an incentive to close analysis – I would think that its importance would come from coinciding with this other, differently motivated, desire to find ways of talking in *concrete* terms about, or finding the supports for, the judgements and interpretations that one wanted to offer. One thing that I remember impressed me in a negative way in puzzling through some of these problems (and I don't think one can sufficiently stress the stumbling way in which things move) was a piece that Penelope Houston wrote in *Sight and Sound* about Cukor which attempted close analysis. It actually had frame stills from a sequence, of *It Should Happen to You* I think, about

which she managed to say absolutely nothing of interest.² I'd approached this article ever so sympathetically (it was a good time before *Movie* got going, I think – I'm not sure about the date). I remember I thought 'Great, she's really going to do it!', and being very disappointed that from closely inspecting this sequence she had found nothing interesting to say. I think that stayed with me as representing something that ought to be possible, you ought to be able to do this.

I don't know what Penelope Houston studied at University, maybe her basis was literary? What did Lindsay Anderson do, and Gavin Lambert? What you rebel against is almost as important as what you embrace. That may be just an example of the complexity of where things come from, but I certainly remember that article in both strongly positive and strongly negative terms. A sense of 'yes this is what should be being done, but it hasn't been'. I think part of that progression for me also came out of my discontent with the things I had tried to write on the journalistic basis, on the having-seen-it-once-and-now-do-a-couple-of-paragraphs-for-*Isis* sort of basis, and not thinking the results were worth anybody's time.

Music criticism is interesting, I think, because since as long as I can remember (and my sense of it is that there's a long history) music criticism has always had this difficulty about the relationship between the grand generalisation about music, talking about it in terms of affective values and emotional values, and the technicalities of key changes and cross-rhythms. I could see *Movie's* efforts and what has followed them as much in relation to that problem, which it seems to me music criticism still is largely unable to cope with. I read as much music criticism as I did literary criticism. Gombrich was another quite key figure but of a somewhat later stage.

Q: *What sort of period?*

More or less in the period after leaving Oxford. I think Paul Mayersberg introduced me to Gombrich, and when I first started teaching at what was then Bulmershe I read quite a bit of Gombrich and thought that his method of discussion was more concrete and more available than

most of the art criticism I had previously encountered. Again, it achieved a better balance between the specific and the general than much criticism seemed to do.

Q: *So your first encounter with Gombrich would have been about the time when you started Movie?*

Probably about the start, yes. I couldn't say for sure.

Q: *Something I noticed about Movie writing: there is a lot of focus on the way in which effects work on the spectator almost below the level of consciousness. Whereas perhaps later mise-en-scène type criticism is more interested in the way in which the mise-en-scène 'presents' rather than 'represents' – I am thinking about the Brechtian approaches that were applied to melodrama.*

Well, Brecht came tremendously into the air didn't he? The first great Brecht champion that I was aware of was Kenneth Tynan, so there was an earlier period of Brechtianism before the *Screen* version hit us – and of course there was the Losey-Brecht connection to encourage one. But I was, and remain, pretty ignorant about Brecht. I guess my own absorption of the Brechtian dimensions of current cultural discourse in the sixties and seventies would be just that, rather than a truly informed and assessed position. But you were asking something about ...?

Q: *The interest in trying to pin down the ways in which a spectator may respond without being conscious of it.*

With hindsight, I would say that has a lot to do with the problem of the relationship between what multiple and detailed viewings can reveal to one and what one understands to be available to the ordinary viewer. But in saying that, I would want to emphasise ever so strongly that the ordinary viewer isn't somebody else, the ordinary viewer is me the first time I see the film, or when I see it in a relaxed frame of mind, or when I see it without some of the information that I subsequently acquire. So I'm not wishing to estrange myself from some inexpert figure. I'm saying that gathered information puts one in a different position, and then there is precisely the question about the

relationship between one's developed view of something and the occasion on which the film now articulated in this way was, or was not, available. Is one relating to some kind of ideally positioned viewing of the film? What is the status of these detailed observations, their relevance to the experience of someone, initially oneself but then others, whose enjoyment and appreciation of the work one is hoping to assist? It would certainly be a radical disadvantage to an observation or an interpretation one advanced if one had to concede that this was not a view that could possibly have been reached by someone in the course of seeing and responding to the film. But on the other hand one is trying to improve oneself as a spectator, to make oneself a better receiver of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* or *Bringing up Baby*.

Q: *I was thinking of that example from The Man who Knew too Much, which compares the two versions of the film. In the example the second version was preferable because it works without the spectator having to 'translate' the mother holding the son's button.*

Again, I have not read it for a long time, but I think I would now be very unhappy with most of the attempts at, so to speak, spectator psychology in *Film as Film* – and I've got less and less interested in the whole area of attempting to establish the pattern of thought and feeling of the movie spectator. I think it almost inevitably gets you into a very mechanical understanding of our imaginative engagements with film or any other kind of fiction. I don't deride other people's attempts to make sensible articulations in this area, though I think a lot that isn't sensible goes on. It's not something I have remained interested in, or feel an aptitude for exploring. On the other hand one of the unacknowledged, or insufficiently acknowledged, dimensions of popular movie making is that one of the controlling objectives of the movie is to hold the spectator's emotional attachment to particular characters and their goals. I think that is crucial to the form of most Hollywood movies. So understanding the form means at least understanding the movie's conception of how the audience can

respond. I remember with some embarrassment certain bits of *Film as Film* which seem to me to involve a rather mechanistic psychology of the audience.

Q: *In retrospect, do you feel you were witnessing the death of mise-en-scène in 1975?*

(laughs) I certainly think something changed. I think that the students I teach are correct when they perceive that there is a difference between what they think of as old movies, and what they think of as current movies, which can go back as far as *Bonnie and Clyde*. *Bonnie and Clyde* was made before they were born, but there is a sense in which *Bonnie and Clyde* and other films immediately adjacent to it represent markers for the movement from old movies to new movies. A whole host of things changed, of course. I think every answer I give you is going to be a convoluted version of 'I don't know'.

I think that Golden Ageism has a foundation, that is I think that the best movies of the twenties, thirties, forties, fifties were better than the best movies that we're getting now. There were always, and always are likely to be, oceans of crap, and a greater number of misfires than successes. Even among people who are working dedicatedly and ambitiously, you're more likely to get it wrong than to get it right.

My sense of things is that, in an odd kind of way, the British cinema has conquered the world. Exactly what I then objected to about British cinema actually became the way movies were made internationally, with no middle ground between pretension and triviality. So I find it almost impossible to choose between latter-day Martin Scorsese and *Twister*. They seem to me to be equally impoverished. But maybe I'm missing the rich ones. I'm ever so mistrustful of my view of something having seen it once. On the other hand, when you see it once you do or don't derive from that viewing the motivation to go back and see it more than once. It seems to me that there's an awful lot of meretricious crap of *The Piano* kind that gets acclaimed, that sits in the *Lawrence of Arabia* position. I'm absolutely unrepentant about it, I went back to *Lawrence*

of *Arabia* in an attempt to see the neglected masterpiece, or the unseen masterpiece, and still regard it as a turgid, self-deluded piece of work. And I went with every effort to respond, given that I'm very impressed by the fact that, for instance, Nick Ray admired it a lot.

So I think there is a question about whether movies have been in a trough, from which they may or may not emerge. Whether the difference between my quite distanced feeling about current movies, even though I actually enjoy a fair number of them, and the zeal that some of the students can feel for them is simply an age gap and my view of things is very middle, or post-middle, aged? – I'm quite open to that possibility, not that there's anything that I would be able to do about it. My sense, however, is that movies have gone into a trough. The whole concept of the Hollywood Classical Cinema, for instance, depends on an unacknowledged dimension which is that you call something classical on grounds of quality as well as on other grounds. The concept of calling it *classical* cinema is absolutely incoherent unless you import into it the notion of significant achievement.

I watch *ER* and *Homicide* with more enthusiasm than I go to the movies. Of course, I'm tempted by the thought that television is the place where one should now look for significant achievements. On the other hand, the claims I want to make for *ER* or *Homicide* at their best, although genuine, do not have the depth of the claims I would wish to make for *Notorious*. I don't know how much of any of that constitutes elements of an answer to your question. One thing about *mise-en-scène*, is that evidently carefully thought strategies of presentation exist as much now as then. Whatever else you say about *The Piano* it's very calculated in its *mise-en-scène*.

Q: *Does The Piano have the same sort of delicate shifts in point of view as, say, the opening of Caught?*

Well it's conceivable that it does, but that's not my impression. But I think there is a dangerous stupidity about opining too freely on stuff that I have seen precisely as an ordinary cinema-goer. I know that I know more than

average cinema-goers, but if you see it once, in a particular mood, in a particular state of liveliness or exhaustion, what value should be attached to anything you have to say? It has the value of any interest that people find in it, but one shouldn't get very convinced about it for one's own sake.

Q: *One purely technical question, is it possible to remember what the term melodrama meant to you in 1960?*

I don't think I would have thought of *Written on the Wind*, for instance, as a melodrama. But memory may be a problem here. My impression is that I would mainly have used melodrama as a term of abuse. I think nowadays we've lost sight of the fact that it can legitimately be a term of abuse, can refer to outrageous and artistically unproductive contrivance, exaggeration of effects without any decent dramatic basis. That's a different hobbyhorse.

Very interestingly, Orson Welles said that Shakespeare wrote melodrama, and that made a big impression on me – in precisely one of the interviews around about the time of *Touch of Evil*.⁴ So that reappraisal of the word was already around, but you see I think I'd have made a distinction, I wouldn't have thought of *Touch of Evil* ... *Touch of Evil* is a much more complicated case ... I wouldn't have thought of *Written on the Wind* as a melodrama, I'd have said it was a drama. And I would have thought you could legitimately discuss whether, say, *Rebel Without a Cause* was flawed by its melodramatic elements. But Welles certainly had this very interesting thing about melodrama in one of his interviews where against the grain he was saying 'Well, *Othello*'s a melodrama, fantastic melodrama, and Shakespeare never wrote tragedy, what he wrote was melodrama'. So that was a change in the cultural currency of melodrama. I don't think I had any problems about whether *Psycho* and *Touch of Evil* were great movies, but I wasn't really, at that point, concerned to position them in relation to a notion of melodrama. Asked about it I would have said that melodrama was something more like Saturday morning serials, cliff hangers.

Q: *More in the way the industry was using the term – as Steven Neale detailed in his paper for the Melodrama Conference – where Hitchcock is melodrama, adventure is melodrama?*

Yes, the orientation to suspense – and I would have thought a villain was crucial to melodrama. My understanding of melodrama in the fifties would have been related to the whole notion of the Gaslight melodrama, to Todd Slaughter. That whole tradition which existed almost only in parody, rather than in its authentic forms. There was a serial on the radio called *Dick Barton* – it was like *The Archers* except that it was cops & robbers and spies and it always ended with the hero in jeopardy – which would have satisfied my notion then of what melodrama was.

Extra information from correspondence, 19.12.97:

Mourlet was never one of the writers that I found it easy to understand through the language barrier. Perhaps it was more necessary with him than with some others to have a familiarity with the French / Parisian cultural context in relation to which he was operating. So epithets like 'Charlton Heston is an axiom' could have a value as provocation and defiance that was largely independent of the wider context of the argument / polemic.

I was inclined to accept any claim for Hollywood directors as significant artists; so, for instance, I thought worthwhile to investigate Joseph L Mankiewicz's oeuvre with the assumption that there was excellence to be discovered. He now appears to me to have been remarkably heavy handed, often – as in *Guys and Dolls* – dismayingly so. However I think it was and is advantageous to approach as many films as possible with the supposition that they have depth and excellence which one is charged to discover.

I do not think that Losey's direction was ever remarkable for its reticence, perhaps it is the importance he gave to achieving precision and eloquence in the performances – alongside the rhetorics of the image and montage – that distinguished him in the British context in which we 'discovered' him.

I remember being rather impressed by the Rissient party's emphatic preference for *The Big Sky* over *River of No Return*. Although I have never shared that preference, the notion that Hawks' style showed up an excess of ornamentation and elaboration in Preminger's gave me a lot to think over.

Your question about the technology for the Minnelli interview combined with your letter's enquiry about the date of my involvement in film education to remind me of something that might illuminate a little corner of the history. When I went to work in the BFI Education Department I discovered a Prevost editing table on the premises and it became enormously important to me as an aid to film study. It was very important in my preparation of a series of Schools TV programmes on film, and I remember using it to prepare a lecture for the BFI's summer school on the western – on the mise-en-scène of the first ten minutes of *The Left Handed Gun*. This was in the period when I was working, on and off, on *Film as Film*. It sounds mad but I believe it's true that I was the one person around the BFI who used the Prevost to facilitate analysis rather than simply as an alternative way to run a movie when the viewing theatre was unavailable. This experience established with me the notion that technologies to assist textual work were essential to the proper development of film as an academic and critical pursuit, so I started campaigning for the purchase of a Prevost machine as soon as I found myself in charge of Film Studies at Bulmershe.

¹ (1959) 'Hawksienne Albion', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 100 (October), 38.

² (1955) 'Cukor and the Kanins', *Sight and Sound*, 24. 4, (Spring), 186–191, 220. The sequence in question is actually from *The Marrying Kind*.

³ (1958) 'Entretien avec Orson Welles (II)', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 87 (September), 2–26. (p. 7)

Charles Barr

19 June 1997

The interview began with a discussion of the people writing for Granta at the time of Barr's involvement (1960-61).

Certainly David Frost wrote things on films and other topics, and Peter Graham, though he's not really a film person now, was quite influential and edited the compilation on the New Wave which was, I guess, more effective than anything in England in putting André Bazin's actual text in circulation. He wrote a lot about films in Cambridge at that time – and became Paris correspondent of *Films and Filming* for a few years in the early 60s.

Q: *Am I right in thinking he took over your editorial role on Granta?*

I forget whether it was directly afterwards, but yes he certainly did. And there's no problem if you want to get in touch with Peter Graham, that could be arranged. In fact he's always rather pleased when people contact him. He made a film called *A Shilling Life* – which maybe you ought to look at, I've got a copy of it here – a year or two after I'd left Cambridge, funded by the Cambridge Film Society. It's a 20 to 25 minute film set in Cambridge and it very much reflects the influence of the New Wave and

Antonioni; I'm sure he wouldn't mind me saying that it's a very pretentious kind of film. It has a number of people in it who became quite well known: Laurence Gordon Clark, who is a television director; Richard Boston, of *The Guardian* etc.; and Stephen Frears. It is very typical of the film culture of the time and the interesting thing is that it takes no influence from the American cinema at all, whereas now, intelligent, ambitious flimbuuffs would be likely to make something that was a recreation of Film Noir perhaps, or influenced by Tarantino, or Hartley maybe ... but the influence would tend to be American. That's always the thing to remember about that period (I can't remember quite what aspects of it you're investigating) that the dominant influence came from European cinema, and partly perhaps from the American cinema filtered through the New Wave, more than from, say, Nicholas Ray and Hitchcock. In a sense there were two currents; if the *Movie* people themselves, if Ian Cameron, Victor Perkins and company, had made student films – and I have a feeling that Ian Cameron did make a film while at Oxford – they might have been modelled on Ray and Fuller. But generally I think that people at the leading edge of university film culture still took Bergman, Antonioni and the New Wave more seriously than anybody else.

Q: *What must have been so exciting was to have not only to have these exciting things going on in Europe, but also you were getting the late films of Preminger and Hitchcock ...*

Yes. You've probably talked to Jim Hillier about this, but when I was at Reading [in March] he gave me a handout which was a proposal for a book about precisely the films of around 1960, with a strong emphasis on that idea that the great generation of American auteurs, many of them with their roots in the silent period, were making their last mature films at that time – Ford and Hitchcock and Hawks, and then the postsound directors like Minnelli as well. But there was a conflict between the champions of European cinema and the champions of American cinema, putting it very crudely, and of course *Movie* unites the two (as *Cahiers du Cinéma* does) – there's almost an

equal enthusiasm for both, and it's the coming together of both which is the key. There was quite a strong sense, perhaps wider than we are led to believe now, of regarding the celebration of American cinema as pretentious, not serious. You find it in the *Sight and Sound* articles of the early sixties. Who are these young flippant people who haven't grown up yet and don't realise that European cinema is inherently more serious than American popular cinema? And they take seriously the films of such commercial filmmakers as Ray and Fuller! I'm sure that was quite strong at Oxford, as well as Cambridge and the wider world. So many films around that time were the site of struggle about critical value – *Psycho* and *The Birds* and Minnelli's films ... and Ray as well.

Q: *At an earlier stage the Sight and Sound generation, as it were, had been quite keen on Ray but their ardour had cooled by the end of the fifties.*

Yes. Although it is so interesting that Gavin Lambert went off to work with Ray. Have you read the thing Gavin Lambert wrote in *Film Quarterly*, 'Goodbye to some of all that'? I think it's in *Film Quarterly*, where he's saying goodbye to England really, and is keen to go to America, and there's a certain amount about Nicholas Ray in it. But it is interesting that the *Sequence* people sort of discovered Ray and seem to have been responsible for getting his first film *They Live by Night* shown quite widely and written about by other critics. And then *Sight and Sound* review some of his films in quite a friendly way, don't they, but they feel that after *Rebel Without a Cause* he goes down hill. I don't know if Lindsay Anderson was ever very interested in Ray, I can't remember if he writes about him, but Lambert certainly was. Lambert was interested enough in him to go and work for him on *Bitter Victory* and *Bigger than Life*, which were exactly the sort of films which according to *Sight and Sound* (which Lambert had just left) showed how Ray had been beaten by the system, or alternatively had become in thrall to hollow, formalistic, nonhumanist values.

Q: Party Girl.

Yes, exactly. *Party Girl* was a great site of dispute. But getting back to what you said, it certainly does seem a very rich period, in retrospect, partly because now it's become such a commonplace to use 1960 as the date for the definitive crumbling of the old studio system. Directors were having to adjust to those changes, and I don't know quite what effect that has in itself, but perhaps they suddenly found they had more freedom? You have to find some way of gathering together the range of American films that were made. What do you think of those films? Do you see that as a very rich period?

Q: *I do. One of the questions I was going to ask you later on was whether you were a subscriber to the hypothesis of 'the death of mise-en-scène'?*

I don't quite know what's meant by 'the death of mise-en-scène'. Remind me what it is.

Q: *Well, Victor Perkins says that nowadays – this is 1975 – films, in terms of their style, are divided between 'arbitrariness and pointmaking' in the decisions they make about camera placement, those sort of decisions.*

There isn't a kind of 'organic' structure? ... the values of *Film as Film*.

Q: *Yes. I suppose Altman must be a key figure in that discussion – and perhaps one can contrast the camera movement, or the lens movement, in *The Long Goodbye* which seems to be mainly there to draw your attention toward the director and the fact that this is an Altman film, as opposed to, say, *Caught with those subtle shifts of point of view that the opening of that film provides*.*

Well, Robin Wood uses that thing in *The Long Goodbye* to say that mise-en-scène isn't dead, doesn't he?

Q: *He does.*

I don't really subscribe to that, I don't think, partly because there are some very strong distinctive filmmakers adjusting to the changing scene, but making films which

are extremely expressive in visual structural terms – like Peckinpah. You can't fit Peckinpah, for instance, into that sort of schema. I'm not sure whether Victor Perkins would do so, or whether he'd take him as an exception. Peckinpah is 'making points' strongly, but then so was Fuller. I'm not sure quite how you would place people like Scorsese or Ken Loach, not that he's a Hollywood filmmaker, but these are all people who seem to have a style which is intricately, intimately related to the subject matter. Whether it's as good or not? – I don't really see that as a particularly strong issue. And I think Victor Perkins was probably being provocative. Well, he was being provocative when he said it, but that doesn't mean he doesn't believe it. There's also the complication of the fluidity around the term mise-en-scène. Does mise-en-scène come in your title?

Q: *Yes.*

I think we talked about this earlier, but Robin Wood has that early definition of mise-en-scène (in *Definition*) where he includes editing in mise-en-scène. Whereas I find the useful sense of mise-en-scène is related to its meaning in stage terms, the staging – to do with the profilmic event. I think Victor Perkins' notion of the death of mise-en-scène includes the *découpage*. That sort of muddles the issues, so I would find it quite difficult to reconcile this with the dictionary meanings of mise-en-scène, and with the Bordwell and Thompson meaning which has become so dominant – Bordwell and Thompson say this is what mise-en-scène is and everybody uses the book, and it is a very workable and very useful definition which I think is actually better than the *Movie* definition, not that it was really a definition, it was a sort of evocation meaning, in a sense, film style.

Q: *Don't you think it's important to include the frame in a definition of mise-en-scène?*

Do Bordwell and Thompson include the frame, I can't remember?

Q: *I don't think they do, actually, because they have that separate chapter on cinematography. I suppose I'm going to have to decide at some point exactly what definition I'm going to work with.*

Well I think you've got to at least have a discussion of it, and maybe part of your project (it's not for me to say) would be to trace the development of conflicting notions of the term mise-en-scène and what is at stake in each separate definition. Or what is perhaps masked and obscured by the fact that the definition does slide through the years.

Q: *I'd certainly like to include the frame and I'd like to also include camera movement, camera positioning – and that would fit in with the polemical sense of mise-en-scène where it is what the director does, in that worse case scenario when ...*

Yes, true, the director's contribution. But then isn't there a further complication to wrestle with: the conventional distinction between auteur and metteur-en-scène, which is *Cahiers du Cinéma's* distinction, and then *Movie* in a sense picks that up (Indeed, doesn't Tony Richardson use the same terms to make a distinction, in a *Sight and Sound* article in the 1950s?)

Q: *Well, I'd always felt it wasn't so important to *Movie* – as it might be to Andrew Sarris, say. My impression is that you don't find 'auteur' referred to an enormous amount in *Movie* or that evaluative sense of auteur theory. When I interviewed Ian Cameron he said 'I think all directors are auteurs but some of them, like Fred Zinnemann, are lousy ones'.*

Ah. Is that the argument in the article 'Films, Directors, and Critics' which Ian Cameron wrote in an early issue of *Movie*? I remember the bit where he says the dominant personality in the movie can be all sorts of people, but it is more often the director, and certainly so in the best films That implies that he doesn't always think the director is the auteur.

Q: *That's true, of course, but other than that 'histogram' of directors at the beginning, my impression is that you don't get*

a strong sense that this person is an auteur and this person is a *metteur-en-scène*. I'm not even sure that the term 'metteur-en-scène' crops up in *Movie*.

No, it may not do. But it is still quite an influential division, isn't it, the auteur or the *metteur-en-scène*. It certainly still gets referred to, and that rather labels *mise-en-scène* as the thing which is mainly looked after by people other than the director, the profilmic event. And then the real author puts his signature on it by the way which the camera moves, the framing, the 'layout of shots' as Victor once put it, which I think is just a translation of *découpage*.

Q: Do you remember where he uses that?

No. I'm sure it's somewhere in *Movie*. I think it might be in the *Movie* discussion in number 8, where he uses it as a criterion: a good director does a layout of shots that is expressive and makes sense, that is not distorted or arbitrary.

Q: When I interviewed Victor he did say that he felt that modernday films like *The Piano*, say, are very calculated in the way that they position the spectator, but I wonder whether you think those later films have, in other senses of the term *mise-en-scène* (I suppose I'm thinking of the way in which *décor* might be expressive of character or those other sorts of things), whether you think post65 films display the same kinds of strategies?

I find that a rather difficult question to answer. Partly because there aren't that number of modern films that I feel a strong allegiance to, say, after Peckinpah. There's not that many very modern films that I use in teaching, or have written about. *Heaven's Gate* seems pretty much in the classical tradition. What was the question again?

Q: Do you get that detailed construction, in the sense of those evocative examples in *Film as Film*? Or I imagine the sort of work you can do with a pre-1965 film in class, in terms of

detailed discussion – do you find you can perform that sort of operation with a post-65 film?

Well, I don't do it very much. I tend to work with earlier films. I don't do much teaching of modern cinema, as opposed to modern television (though that's another story).

Q: Is there a reason for that?

Partly laziness. Partly, like Victor, being attached to certain periods and partly having focused almost all my research on film history, including early cinema. I don't know how this affects your project, but it seems to me that the major thing that has happened since the moment of *Movie*, since the 1960's, is a scholarly rethinking of the silent period and the very beginning of cinema, and the relationship of this early cinema to other media etc., which opens up areas that *Movie* was never interested in – not that many other people were in those days. A really dynamic rethinking of the scope of film studies.

But returning to the question of more recent films ... I think that Peckinpah, and for that matter Arthur Penn, are very interesting cases, and Scorsese and Cimino ... and Ridley Scott for that matter. All sorts of things come back to me that I do quite like working with. You're saying, basically, is the sort of closetothetext analysis of *Film as Film* still performable? Well, I'm not sure how much I ever wanted to do the sort of thing that Victor was doing with *Film as Film*, it's very idiosyncratic. I remember the scene that Victor writes about from *The Cardinal*, where Tom Tryon is cycling and the camera picks up the movement in a particular way and pans around. I did see that again quite recently, on the big screen as well, and I thought 'Great, this brilliant moment is coming up' and it was good, but still somehow a bit of a let-down ... nowadays I would just see that as a building block in the film, not that Victor would say otherwise, and as representing a relatively small part of the influence and importance and pleasure of that sort of film. I find somebody like Ken Loach very interesting in close formal terms – different from classical Hollywood, indeed rather hostile to

classical Hollywood, but in terms of *mise-en-scène* and framing and texture and everything (and in an almost consciously oppositional way to the way that Preminger or Hitchcock would do it) I would say that Loach is using the film medium in the same sort of organic and integral way. Victor would probably be shocked to hear that, I don't know what he thinks about Loach. Loach, of course, is not a Hollywood filmmaker, but he's somebody working in the age of television, in the age of video, of euro coproduction, who moves with the times, much in the way Hitchcock moved with the times. Directors can sustain a long career by adjusting intelligently, just as Hitchcock adjusted to sound, to colour, to the television era, to industry change etc. Then there's Michael Mann. *The Last of the Mohicans* is a really handsome Scope film. Do you know *The Last of the Mohicans*?

Q: I'm afraid I've never seen it. I remember Andrew Britton making some very dismissive remarks about the casting of Daniel Day-Lewis, but I don't think he'd seen it either.

Well, I've seen it once in the cinema and some of it again on television and I thought that there's a film like certain Ford westerns, like *Revolution* – which is almost my favourite 80s film. Have you ever seen *Revolution*? Now there's a *mise-en-scène* film, in the old sense, though again I suspect this claim might shock Victor. The British *Heaven's Gate*, really, and a much maligned film, but squarely in the great tradition of Hollywood cinema, in terms of the relation of the individual story to history and a very bold concept of a certain kind of *mise-en-scène*. I don't really go for films like *The Piano* very much, and I can see exactly what Victor means by 'calculation'.

Q: What about the sort of activity you perform in your article on Dodge City in *The Movie Book of the Western*? You manage to point to an enormous amount of suggestive material in that opening sequence, though I suspect your point is almost that in the western you can do this because the genre is so rich ...

Yes. I suppose in a way that's a subversion of *Movie's* detailed criticism, because it's detailed criticism saying it's nothing specially personal, and it's 'only' Michael Curtiz. I'm not quite certain whether that points in the direction of decentring the auteur in favour of the genre and the studio and the historical moment, or if it's saying Curtiz is an underestimated auteur. I think it's both. *Movie* clearly, in retrospect, was much too prescriptive about who were the great directors and who weren't. I find when I'm running survey courses on film history, which is one of the things we do at East Anglia, that I'm getting very interested in the concept of the journeyman director – like Curtiz and Mervyn LeRoy, both of whom are sort of chameleon directors who will take any sort of material and treat it in a professional and insightful way, certainly in their best decades. Maybe you take the Cameron line and say that all directors are auteurs but some of them are not very good ones, and some of them are worth a lot more attention, like Curtiz and LeRoy. But the whole *Movie* project was such an innocent one, and in a way predated such a lot of research and knowledge about film history. My article on CinemaScope was a terribly innocent article in historical terms.

Q: *Although, interestingly, it's more scholarly than most of the writing in Movie at that time, in the sense that despite not knowing much about the history of film you certainly make an attempt to examine in some detail earlier theories that had been advanced about film ...*

Yes

Q: *And you employ points of reference in ways that early Movie articles don't. Is that a reflection of the fact that it was produced as part of your research?*

I suppose so, yes. I don't know when people like Victor read Paul Rotha, Eisenstein and Roger Manvell and company. And maybe they had done so but just didn't feel that it was worth spending time on. I was doing a year's funded research, part of which was spent in reading a lot of books. Since I knew I was wanting to challenge critical

orthodoxies in ways other than writing about a particular director or a particular film, it was important to get a handle on those critical orthodoxies. But the whole field of early cinema had simply not been explored, so there are some references to Griffith which have no understanding of what Griffith stood for. That wasn't satisfactorily confronted until the seventies I think, understanding what Griffith stood for and what he did, and how he related to the economic development of the industry.

Q: *I suppose also, it's a theoretical article whereas the articles in Movie are for the most part reviews of films.*

Yes. What's the title of your thesis?

Q: *Well at the moment it's called 'Critical Approaches to mise-en-scène'.*

Oh well if it's 'Critical Approaches to mise-en-scène' then I think there is a potentially very productive sorting out to be done of that tangle of what I would say is really three definitions. (It's not for me to tell you how to do the thesis! But partly I'm wondering what your research gathering and your questions, are actually aiming towards.) The *Cahiers du Cinéma* definition of auteur vs. metteur-en-scène, the Robin Wood / *Movie* one of mise-en-scène as everything to do with directorial style, and Bordwell and Thompson's much more formalist one, which is more satisfactory in terms of clearly delimiting what mise-en-scène consists of. Some of the words that Raymond Williams deals with in his book *Keywords*, like 'realism', 'personal' or 'national' are similarly a site of struggle between certain kinds of values or critical contexts. It would be very interesting to untangle mise-en-scène in the same way.

Sometimes the influence of *Movie* is referred to in terms of close textual analysis. Are you engaging at all with Leavis, the precedent of Leavis?

Q: *I have been trying to assess the claims, often advanced, which suggest that Movie is applying models of close analysis derived from Leavis and other parts of literary criticism. Is that a view you have any sympathy with?*

Well, there's no doubt that Robin Wood was influenced by Leavis, but as far as I know the only other people this applies to were both marginal to *Movie*. That is James Leahy, who wrote a couple of things in *Movie* and later took over from Thorold Dickinson in running the film research unit at the Slade School, and me. We were both at Cambridge and were both influenced, though not nearly as directly as Robin Wood who was actually a pupil of Leavis. I certainly read I.A. Richards and read Leavis' books, and went to some of his lectures. But, as I said, both James Leahy and I were very marginal to that first impact of *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie*. Ian Cameron, Victor Perkins, Paul Mayersberg and Mark Shivas certainly weren't Leavisite, and in so far as they knew about Leavis they were rather scornful. Robin Wood came from somewhere very different from the others, and I think had a big influence because with Robin Wood it became impossible to accuse *Movie* of being flippant, which was one of the initial reactions – 'Here is a glossy magazine which celebrates empty Hollywood movies'. The underlying seriousness, of particularly Victor I suppose, wasn't as apparent as Robin Wood's, because Robin was deploying a certain amount of Leavis terminology and actually citing Leavis. Ironically, the opposition which initially appeared to many people – *Sight and Sound* versus *Movie*, serious versus flippant – was shown to be the other way round. It was *Sight and Sound* which was shallow, relatively speaking, and *Movie* which had a more earnest moral weight behind it.

Q: *When do you think that Robin Wood would have made this impact?*

I'm not sure when he first met the *Movie* people, but he wrote for the second issue, the Preminger one – so it must have been before that. To work out the dynamics of it fully, you'd have to talk to them – have you asked Victor when he first met Robin?

Q: *I didn't think to. When did you first come across them?*

It must have been 1960. I was one of a lot of people who got very interested in films at university, and obviously there

was no sort of structure within the university system for absorbing that, it was all unofficial culture. There were all these contexts for seeing films, talking about films, and writing about films – there were a lot of journalistic outlets, however primitive. It was a case of finding out your values and standards as you went along, at (certainly in my case) a very callow, adolescent time. I remember going to a bookshop in Cambridge, probably in my second year, and picking up this magazine *Oxford Opinion* and glancing through it and thinking, ‘Oh it’s got some writing about films, I’d better buy this’. And then reading the first issue of *Oxford Opinion* with the writing on film, and being rather outraged by it, rather shocked. It was obviously powerful writing but it seemed so wrong, it was challenging everything that one had just started to read about correct and responsible approaches to film Here were a lot of films being celebrated that I either hadn’t heard of or just assumed were very minor, like a Randolph Scott B-western. It was exciting but unsettling. And then there was another issue and I remember writing a letter to Ian Cameron (I do hope he hasn’t still got it, I certainly haven’t) saying that I was interested to see this but I thought they were very wrong about everything – I remember quoting De Sica, referring to humanism, European cinema etc. And referring to *Sequence* as well, because there’s a reference in that first issue, more or less the first thing. Ian Cameron says ‘Film criticism in Britain is dead. Perhaps in the good old days of *Sequence*’, something like that, and in my letter to him I said ‘You invoke *Sequence*, but surely *Sequence* stood for this and that’ and quoted Lindsay Anderson. Ian Cameron wrote back, a very courteous and considered reply, sticking up for the *Oxford Opinion* position, and saying ‘As a matter of fact I’ve never read *Sequence*, I just put that in because it’s the sort of thing people say, it’s caricaturing what people say about the good old days of *Sequence* – and we don’t need to read *Sequence*, we’re making a fresh start’. Anyway, I went on reading *Oxford Opinion* with great interest and made sure I went to see the films, and thought ‘maybe there is something in this’. Other people, Peter Graham for instance, thought it was pretentious rubbish.

There was a certain kind of division at Cambridge, as there must have been at Oxford, between people who were actually rather impressed, and struck, and influenced in spite of themselves, and other people who resisted and thought Bergman, Orson Welles, Antonioni and the New Wave were incomparably more important than all these Hollywood filmmakers they were writing about. It was such a complete break with everything. It didn’t seem to have any connections with Leavis, for instance, I don’t think I made a connection at all. And then came the film issue of *Granta*, and after that I was surprised to get a letter from Ian Cameron saying, ‘We rather liked the film issue of *Granta*, we don’t like *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, but we did like your article on criticism (or whatever it was) and would you like to write something for *Oxford Opinion* or for another magazine that we’re putting together’. So there was a sort of *rapprochement*. Then somehow I met them (it was probably in London) and there was this joint issue between *Oxford Opinion* and *Granta* where I got them to give me an interview with Losey which they hadn’t been able to publish.

And then I went to do the year of research in London Did I tell you that they all applied for that studentship? I’m not sure they all did, but certainly Ian Cameron did, and I have a feeling that Victor might have as well. Ian told me that he had gone in for the interview and they’d asked him what he meant about his project of revising the orthodoxies of film criticism, and he said ‘Well there’s one particular book *The Art of the Film* which represents everything I distrust most about traditional film criticism. Ernest Lindgren isn’t here by any chance, is he?’ – and somebody put his hand up, Ernest Lindgren was indeed there. I remember that he was there on my own interview panel but I must have been more tactful. Anyway, I got the studentship, and by then I’d met them occasionally at the National Film Theatre. In those prevideo days, the wonderful facilities we had at the Slade school were very useful. The great thing was that you could see any film you wanted to, you just asked them to book certain films and they were booked. So Gavin Millar and I watched masses of films, some projected in 35mm on the big screen, and

some we just ran on 16mm. For the Preminger issue of *Movie* I think Ian Cameron or somebody had arranged to borrow 6 or 8 of his films on 16mm, and they came in and saw them all at the Slade School, at different times of the day and night. Likewise, Ian Cameron watched quite a few films there with me on the Slade’s Steenbeck for his book on Antonioni. So I got to know them a bit then, and so did James Leahy who was in London at the time. I wasn’t confident enough to write anything for *Movie* at the very start, nor was I particularly pressed to I don’t think, but I was working on my dissertation and I guess it was early 1963 when I finished it. Then I met Robin Wood, I’d just been introduced to him at the National Film Theatre by the *Movie* people, so they obviously had met him, he must have written to them after *Oxford Opinion* or after the first issue of *Movie*, and been coopted by them. When I finished my dissertation and sent it off to *Film Quarterly*, I remember sending a copy of it to Robin because I had been shown something that he had written for the British Film Institute Education Department on *Ugetsu Monogatari*. I don’t think it has ever been published, though he has written elsewhere about Mizoguchi. I think there was going to be a series of essays on great films, and he’d done one on *Ugetsu Monogatari* which was a very good example of early Robin Wood criticism: very close to the text, very serious, and arguing that here was the film of a serious moralist. It had some very nice stuff about deep focus photography and long takes, and I wrote to him and said I’d seen this article and really liked it and felt it was in tune with some of the things I had been working on, and here was a copy of a thing that was going to be in *Film Quarterly*. He wrote back and said he could see the connections, and we arranged to meet and got on well. And James Leahy and Robin and I became friends, I think better friends than Robin was with any of the *Movie* people, or than either James Leahy and I were at that time with any of them.

James Leahy would be worth talking to, particularly if you were reconstructing critical lines of force that followed *Movie*. James was probably slightly more on the fringes of *Movie* even than I am (because, after all, I am a

member of the editorial board still!). He very impressively got a film lectureship in Chicago, and then was appointed to succeed Thorold Dickinson, which was slightly surprising because he sort of came from nowhere, in comparison with Thorold, and hadn't written very much – but then in those days nobody had written very much, and there were no academics ready to take over from Thorold Dickinson, indeed there were no film academics in this country. His job could have been taken over, at that time in the early seventies, by someone like Karel Reisz, I suppose, someone who like Thorold Dickinson had, had a career in the industry which had then slowed down, or by someone, say, from the documentary movement. But James, as an English academic with a post in America and some publications, got the job. He updated the Slade in terms of opening it up. I don't mean just to *Movie*; it was already quite open to *Movie*'s kind of approach, because the attractive thing about Thorold Dickinson was how sympathetic he was to the work being done under him, by Raymond Durnat primarily, who was perhaps the most important of the Slade students because so much writing came out of the period that he spent there, and then by Gavin Millar and myself. We got in some Budd Boetticher westerns, and Thorold Dickinson was enthralled by them, he said, 'This is really opening my eyes, CinemaScope – wonderful thing! Look at that composition etc'. (You can see the results of this in his book *A Discovery of Cinema*.) But James not only consolidated the connection of the Slade with close textual reading, which Thorold Dickinson was sympathetic to, he also took on board various developments in scholarship as they were happening – he had Noël Burch and Barry Salt working with him before they had published much – and that was an important growth point. A lot of people like Pam Cook were students at the Slade, and James was very influential, at the same time as being rather disorganised in some ways and, I think, a poor politician. He never made it into an MA Course, it was always just a diploma course, and the end result, the writing done by the students, was often disappointing, without the spur of the degree qualification. So you had this wonderful spread of films being shown by, for

instance, Barry Salt and Noël Burch, who were developing what later became their major works, but it wasn't so productive at the student end, at least not in the short term, and it left the Slade very vulnerable, so that when there was a demand for cutbacks at London University the film department was just snuffed out completely, and James was left rather in limbo.

But getting back to where I was, in the early sixties, this was Robin Wood's first period of very productive criticism. It was when he was very family oriented and before he had 'come out'. He had a wide circle, including the *Movie* people and some postCambridge Leavisite connections; he kept in touch with a number of former English Literature colleagues. That was the time when Robin was writing for the early issues of *Movie* and developing the Hitchcock book. And then *Movie* had an interruption, it had several interruptions, and then the *Movie* paperbacks started to appear.

That was certainly a key time for me in the early 60s, I suppose I was ready for it. As soon as you take on board the significance of *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie*, you see the traditional criticism in a new light. You no longer read Lindgren and Manvell with that reverence, the feeling that 'here are the key texts for understanding film'. My CinemaScope article certainly came out of that reorientation. It was when I had learned not to resist what *Oxford Opinion* was doing, had seen enough films, and had seen *Psycho*, which seemed so absolutely decisive in validating what *Oxford Opinion* was doing. On the one hand, there was Penelope Houston saying that you have to understand this is Hitchcock's joke, and on that basis you can enjoy and respect it, within its limits. On the other hand, *Oxford Opinion* took it as 'the work of a great tragedian' or however Victor phrased it. And then Robin Wood wrote about it in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and I was taking the magazine, because I read French, though not as well as Peter Graham, who is very francophile (and lives in France now, and has done since the 60's). So *Cahiers du Cinéma* was to hand, and suddenly there was this article on *Psycho* by Robin Wood. I read it before I knew who Robin was, wondering 'Why has this Frenchman got an English name?', and

then suddenly he turned up, he was in England. He says somewhere that when he wrote his article on *Psycho* he sent it to Penelope Houston, and she returned it and said 'Interesting, we'd like to hear more from you, but we don't think we can publish it because the thing to understand about *Psycho* is that it's a joke'. So he sent it to *Cahiers du Cinéma* and weeks passed, he never heard anything, and then he picked up a copy of the magazine and it was the lead article.

I'm sure that this sort of enlightenment happened to lots of other people, but because I was in a privileged place, Cambridge, there was the opportunity just at that moment to apply for a scholarship to study film properly. 'CinemaScope: Before and After' became one of a number of articles in different places that challenged orthodoxies and did have some influence. But I think talking to James Leahy might be a good idea, if you're reconstructing the film culture of the period and not simply writing about textual analysis and the concept of mise-en-scène.

Q: *I'm not sure I have seen the film issue of Granta, is this an issue with a whole range of articles?*

Yes. I might have suggested it, or David Frost might have suggested it, but it seemed a good idea to have a film issue, because film was such a coming, trendy thing. It's got Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* on the cover. I wrote two things in it, one is about *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and the other is a general article about criticism, I can't remember what it is called, but it was essentially reproducing and endorsing a sort of *Oxford Opinion* aesthetic. I'd be quite curious to see it again, because I haven't read it for twenty years. Then the magazine has a report on the London Film Festival where masses of important, influential new films came out – *Rocco and his Brothers*, *Shoot the Pianist*, some Antonioni, there were lots of reviews by people like Nicholas Garnham and Peter Cowie who have become well known in their different fields.

The key stages, if you were constructing a single narrative history, would be *Oxford Opinion*, then their move to London to set up *Movie*, then the *Movie* Paperbacks, and then people going into educational institutions as

several of us did, though not really until well into the 70s. That would be the simple linear history, but there's not only Oxford to London, there's Cambridge in a minor way, and then there's the Slade School. Gavin Millar and I were there in the second year of the department's operation; before that there had been Don Levy, the experimental Australian film-maker, and Raymond Durnat. Durnat is an important figure because he was so productive, and he was so anti*Sight and Sound*. He had a sort of rapprochement with *Movie* doing his article on Michael Powell, though that wasn't till 1966. Then there is the British Film Institute Education Department, and the network of contacts it had with schools and adult education. I can't reconstruct exactly who was in the Education Department at what time, but a key figure was certainly Paddy Whannel. He died when, the 70s? I remember him quite vividly, because he was a friend to a lot of people. He was a very friendly, dynamic sort of person and he went to Chicago as well – he may in fact have replaced James Leahy there. He wrote a book on popular culture with Stuart Hall, and made some television programmes about cinema, including one on John Ford that was directed by Mike Dibb (who writes in *The Movie Book of the Western*, on Budd Boetticher). Paddy was certainly in the Education department by the time that the whole shift that we are talking about took place, and he embodies that significant position of being someone who really came from the old humanist tradition but was very struck by and receptive to the new influences. In a way like me, only in a much more important role, at the BFI. And the Education Department was also the base for people like Jim Kitses, Victor Perkins, Alan Lovell, and Peter Wollen.

Another quite important place is *Motion* magazine – like *Movie* a small independent magazine, that just didn't cohere in the same way. Raymond Durnat was important to it, I wrote something in one, and Ian Johnson wrote an article on *Peeping Tom* which was way ahead of its time, the first serious article on *Peeping Tom* in the English language. And *Definition*, which was sort of anti*Movie*, and yet Robin Wood wrote for it, didn't he, before he wrote for

Movie? That's where his writing on the concept of mise-en-scène appears.

Q: And Alan Lovell wrote for *Definition*.

Yes, I'm sure he did. And Paddy Whannel wrote at least one important article in *Universities and Left Review*, which later became *New Left Review* – that was another place for debate about film. Retrospectively, it seems that *Movie* was the big thing that was happening, and maybe it was the most influential, the one with the most enduring influence, because it was making the most telling, the most important shift from the orthodoxies that preceded it. But there were such a lot of other currents that were partly competing, and partly coalescing. The kind of person I am thinking of here is Dai Vaughan, who also wrote for *Definition*, and has remained a professional film editor, while continuing to write very intelligently about films from time to time; he has never been aligned with *Movie*, but he also seems to me very much a part of that 1960s rethinking.

Q: Just returning to literary criticism, what was the nature of that influence? Did you consciously say, 'This is what Leavis and Richards are doing with poems, let's try it with film'?

I can't remember it being conscious, but I certainly read Richards' *Practical Criticism* several times when I was at Cambridge. I can't really remember the early things I wrote about films, to what degree they contained close textual analysis.

Q: My impression (given that I am yet to see the special film issue) is that your writing varies even during the period you write for *Granta*. The earliest article I've seen is 'Anatomy of a Film' which is on *The Angry Silence*, which seems to be very much part of the humanistic tradition

Yes, that was in an earlier issue, and it would be a very good example of the humanistic tradition.

Q: And then a bit later on there's the one on *Spartacus* and one on *The Entertainer* in particular which seems both in its methods and its attitudes much more in line with Oxford Opinion.

Yes, I'd forgotten the one about *The Entertainer*. As a matter of fact I think I have to revise things, it was after that article that Ian Cameron wrote to me, and then he wrote again after the film issue of *Granta*. They'd obviously rather enjoyed picking up *Granta* and reading a strong attack on Tony Richardson. And of course that was before *Movie* had come out, so I suppose I was the first person to be in print with a strong attack on Tony Richardson. I remember Ian wrote and said 'We like your attack on *The Entertainer*, although we don't like *Room at the Top*', because I'd had some remark like, 'Unlike *Room at the Top*, *The Entertainer* doesn't successfully integrate its characters with their backgrounds' ...

I'm sure I was influenced by *Practical Criticism*, and also by Leavis' style of attack – Leavis could knock down respected works, and one could imitate that by attacking *The Entertainer* with a few well chosen details. Although that doesn't mean I feel I was being insincere. The *Spartacus* piece, as I remember it, contained the germ of my writing about CinemaScope. I was in the situation around that time of thinking 'This new studentship would be a nice thing to apply for', and you had to say what you were going to write about, and there suddenly seemed to be a great gap; and *Spartacus* had just come out, to add to all the handsome Scope films by Ray and others that I'd seen and liked previously. It was an area that seemed wide open, ready to be written about, and that is how it turned out.

Q: Do you think CinemaScope as a process acted as a spur toward developing a mise-en-scène criticism?

Yes. As I think I probably say in that article, once you had that really big screen it was no longer possible to write about a film sequence as if it was a translation of a literary sequence. It was certainly a catalyst for changing the ways of writing about film, and Mark Shivas had already

said something about that in an article in the first film section of *Oxford Opinion*; the title was something like 'Commercial Cinema: a few basic principles'. I can remember being very influenced by the way he evoked and then answered the common objections to CinemaScope, on the lines that this sort of criticism is blind to the visual richness that CinemaScope provides 'in any circumstances'. I think he did say 'in any circumstances', claiming that the wide screen was automatically a factor for greater visual richness and density.

Q: *Thinking back, it seems clear to me from the article that the argument about the spectator being required to do the work has everything to do with a view of cinema that dramatises themes rather than conveys messages. Do you think that's an important point?*

I suppose so, yes.

Q: *You talk very eloquently about the Pudovkin / Eisenstein model where the spectator has to follow a proscribed route to make meaning, and you're firmly against the idea that cinema exists to convey messages.*

Yes. Well that's certainly a lot of the thrust of it. I'm sure it's a rather facile opposition. I actually now really like Pudovkin's films, in some ways I prefer them to Eisenstein's films, and I think that, now that a psychoanalytical approach to movies is available, Pudovkin's films don't seem like message films, but more like very intense family melodramas – but that's another story. Nobody was writing about psychoanalysis and cinema then.

Q: *I think it's less an argument about the films than about criticism. 'A poem should not mean but be', as opposed to the more propagandist view of art which Definition was seeking to put across.¹*

Maybe there's an unconscious reaction there against the whole schoolmasterly tradition of British criticism, and indeed British culture. We all in a sense came out of the war period and its aftermath, and there's that very strong tradition of documentary and propaganda, and of realism

being good for you, teaching lessons. So it was quite intoxicating to find a kind of cinema that was morally engaged, and was telling meaningful stories, but through giving the spectator experience rather than a lesson.

Q: *How far do you see your work at that time as an attempt to relate the material features of the text to meaning in other senses?*

I don't know. It's very difficult to think back into that time, there certainly wasn't a conscious agenda to do that. I think everyone had a project of doing justice to the pleasures and the experience of cinema, and so much of the pleasure was, and is, the sensuous richness and complexity of it all. Like, as you say, the complexity of poetic language, and it just seemed to be so brutally reduced in the standard writing about film – Roger Manvell being typical of that. The summit of cinema was reduced to certain kinds of patterning of shots at the beginning of *Great Expectations*. Certain things were held up as typical of expressive filmmaking – Ernest Lindgren has all these examples of the highangle shot and the lowangle shot. Meaning and experience seem to be defined in such a reductive way, with no real scope for complexity of texture and complexity of response and ambiguity.

I've realised one key name has been left out, I'm not sure how I managed not to mention him before, which is André Bazin. Undoubtedly for me the most important influence, on a reading level, was Bazin. More so than Leavis, and more so than I.A. Richards because Bazin was writing about film and was writing in a Leavis / Richards kind of way. Bazin's work became known at that time, partly because he'd just died and there were articles celebrating him. I think I commissioned Peter Graham, who was always going to Paris, to bring back André Bazin's collected essays which had just come out (in French, I've still got them). His essays on Wyler were particularly memorable, which was strange, because no-one especially liked Wyler. Wyler's reputation had gone down, but here were these great Bazin essays which used his work, and also of course Welles', as a key example of visual density and complexity. Do you know his essays? 'Montage

Interdit' was another important one, and very relevant to the line I was developing on CinemaScope. So Bazin was as important as any of the people I have mentioned. I think everyone knew about *Cahiers du Cinéma* and its hard line about certain things, and Bazin was part of that, and somehow transcended it all because he was known to have resisted what were seen as their wilder excesses.

I now see Bazin as having quite a lot in common with Leavis. They're both writing from before, and to some extent against, the spread of critical jargon. 'The real' is an absolute key term for both, although Leavis uses 'life' just as much – they both have this almost mystical attitude to life and reality which of course can seem terribly naive, and which helps to make Leavis easy to deconstruct and criticise. They both have this way of writing very vividly about particular texts, about particular lines of poetry in Leavis' case, from Shakespeare or Hopkins or whoever, and, in Bazin's, particular sequences of Welles or Wyler, Rossellini or De Sica. And making it part of a moral vision, a vision of life, which in Bazin's case is a sort of Catholic acceptance of the world, and in Leavis' a struggle for integrity and certain puritan values. They had a comparable earnestness which they mobilised in attacking – more explicitly on the part of Leavis – a shallower, less serious tradition of criticism. In terms of the relation of close textual analysis to moral issues, Bazin was a major inspiration. His death meant that he couldn't be writing about current cinema, and Leavis wasn't interested in the cinema, so Robin Wood and everybody else who was influenced by them were freed from actually following in their footsteps. Robin could write completely freshly about Hitchcock because nobody had really written from that perspective. Bazin had never written much on Hitchcock, and the approach of Chabrol and Rohmer and the other *Cahiers* writers was, though intriguing, somehow so distinctively French that there was no sense that he was following them. And for me, writing about CinemaScope in the context of American mainstream cinema, it seemed virgin territory.

Q: You mentioned the difference between French criticism and English criticism, what is the crux of that?

I think there was a significant difference in tone and context in French writing. Partly the language question, the French have this distance on American culture which enables them to see past certain distractions, but I don't think the Chabrol and Rohmer book could have been written by English people – I don't quite know what I mean by that. I think Bazin's work is perhaps closer to certain traditions of humanistic text-centred English criticism than it is to the much more impressionistic writings of Godard and Truffaut or, to some extent, Chabrol and Rohmer in their book. Bazin was quite anglophile, he liked a lot of English films. But I wouldn't attach much weight to my opinions on the difference between French and English criticism.

Q: What about the MacMahonists? You told me you were a subscriber to *Présence du Cinéma*.

Yes. I don't know how much influence the MacMahonists had, and I don't know how MacMahonist *Présence du Cinéma* really is because a lot of it is interviews and filmographies. I can't remember being influenced by anything I read in *Présence du Cinéma*. But it was a MacMahonist, Michel Mourlet, who wrote that 'Lang, Losey, Preminger and Cottafavi – these are the greatest of the great' – that was very striking, along with the notion of things being stripped down, bare and austere, that was characteristic of the early Losey. In the first thing I wrote for *Movie* I quoted the word *dépouillement*, meaning a sort of stripping down. I'd read this thing about Cottafavi; a Cottafavi film came out, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*; I rushed out to see it a few times, and wrote about it for *Movie*. So there, in a way, you can see the influence of *Présence du Cinéma*, through Cottafavi, and I latched onto this idea of 'stripping down'. I think that was part of the attraction of the French view of films, they caught something very important about American cinema (and others in the case of Losey's early British films, and Cottafavi) which opened up popular genre cinema and nonrespectableseeming

films to attention. *Hercules Conquers Atlantis* must be the least 'serious' film that *Movie* addressed.

Q: Other than your appreciation of Bazin, do you feel that the most important thing about the influence of Cahiers, and perhaps *Présence du Cinéma*, would be in terms of what sort of films would be worth looking at?

Yes, I think it was mostly the question of what and who was important to look at. As far as I'm concerned, and it probably applies to other people, André Bazin was the important critic, on the whole via work which hadn't appeared in *Cahiers du Cinéma* but had been written earlier. We read *Cahiers* and liked the rating system; seeing which films got high ratings and which didn't was always interesting. They named a range of directors whose work was interesting, and people did then at least check them out. I don't know if Ian Cameron wrote about *Comanche Station* in the first issue of *Oxford Opinion* because André Bazin had written about Budd Boetticher and signalled him as an important filmmaker, or if Ian just happened to see the film and thought 'this is interesting, I'll write about it'. Did he say anything about that? Certainly I picked up on Cottafavi because he was mentioned in *Présence du Cinéma*, or maybe in an article quoted in *Cahiers*. Many of the directors that *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* wrote about were the Cahiers ones. Paul Wendkos had been mentioned in *Cahiers*, so I noticed a Paul Wendkos film was on in a double bill in an obscure cinema, and saw it, and then wrote about it in *Motion*. I would never have gone to see it, or if I had seen it I might not (who knows?) have thought much about it, if Wendkos hadn't been picked up as an interesting young director. Of course, we knew Hitchcock and Hawks were the two top people because there were these Cahiers people called *les hitchcockohawksiens*, and then duly in the first issue of *Movie* Hitchcock and Hawks were ranked top, and there was a lot of writing about Hitchcock and, soon, a special issue on Hawks. Some people said that it was all copied from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, but Hitchcock and Hawks were very established figures in the American cinema. I can't say that I went to see Hitchcock and Hawks films because they were mentioned in *Cahiers*

du Cinéma, they were famous anyway – this only applied, for me, in the case of minor figures like Wendkos and Cottafavi, people whom *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* hadn't picked up – so this was my chance to investigate two new people, and make a contribution to this whole scholarly project. Mind you, nothing much happened subsequently with either of them. Cottafavi made hardly any more films, though I think Wendkos may still be working. I used to go and see his films fairly religiously, but I haven't kept it up.

Q: What about method, an interest in close textual analysis, *mise-en-scène*? Is there any link there?

You mean with *Cahiers du Cinéma*? No, I think it's a combination of Bazin and the Cambridge English tradition. Not that I was doing English, but I.A. Richards and Leavis transcended the boundaries of the English courses. I was reading classics, and I wasn't stimulated to spend all my time doing classics, so I spent a lot more time reading English critical works and novels and so on. So for me I don't think close reading came from *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and I don't know if it did for anybody. I think it's much more an English thing. I don't know where it came from for Victor. I think it just came from him! He doesn't have to be influenced by anyone. And from some intelligent and lively people getting together in Oxford and stimulating each other and talking about why they liked certain films.

Q: And for you, presumably having access to that technology at *The Slade* would have been an important factor.

Yes. And Antonioni was very important, particularly, for me and also Ian Cameron, *Le Amiche* – have you seen that?

Q: I haven't. He mentioned in his interview that you got him on to an editing table to see that.

Yes. We ran it backwards and forwards a lot of times, looking especially at the dazzling instances of the *plan séquence*, handling whole group scenes in a stunning long-take way. Without a Steenbeck, you used to have to

go into a cinema and see a film two or three times, and write a lot of notes and then try to recapture it on paper, since of course there were no videos to refer to.

Q: *You said that you knew Sequence as well when you were at Cambridge.*

Yes. I came across a second-hand set of it in a Charing Cross Road bookshop, and read it and was impressed by it, because it's very well written. It didn't really rub off on what I was writing, except possibly to some extent in style. Ford is an interesting case. *Movie* was initially very anti-Ford, as you may have picked up. When did the first Ford thing appear in *Movie*, was it Victor?

Q: Cheyenne Autumn?

Yes, which is very late.

Q: *Yes, about number 12.*

Yes, and the first film issue of *Oxford Opinion* has a very scathing reference to Ford, by Mark Shivas, and that set the tone. *Sight and Sound* liked Ford, *Sequence* liked Ford; not that they'd read *Sequence*, but anyway *Sight and Sound* and Lindsay Anderson were very enthusiastic, seeing Ford as the justification of the Hollywood system. So that was a clear was of distancing themselves from the English orthodoxy. And *Cahiers du Cinéma* hadn't yet become very keen on Ford. I think it was Bazin – or was it Roger Leenhardt? – who wrote 'A bas Ford, vive Wyler', 'Down with Ford, Long Live Wyler'. Ford was what the oldguard liked. So through the first part of the 60s Ford was almost a nonperson. I remember going with Gavin Millar, during our year at the Slade, to watch *Two Rode Together* at a cinema in Islington. And we came out and said, 'What an awful film, what a terrible film' and we slagged it off for quite a long time. And now I think it's a wonderful film. I'm sure that first reaction was influenced by the fact that Ford was not fashionable, and you'd have had to be quite bold to argue for Ford. It was rather like *Peeping Tom*. I was interested in horror films, which on the whole other people around me weren't, and I wanted to see *Peeping*

Tom, it sounded a rather scandalous film, and I went to see it in its first week and was bowled over by it and went back to see it the next day ... but nobody I knew had any time for Powell then, and I remember Victor saying very scathingly that '*Peeping Tom* could have been a good film if it had been made by a decent director', or something like that – writing it off completely, as indeed did *Cahiers*. So although the project was to overturn critical orthodoxies, it operated with its own sort of peer group culture – Tony Richardson was bad, Ford was old hat, Hitchcock was great, etc. And Powell and Pressburger were liked by nobody, *Sequence* included. And *Peeping Tom* we can now recognise as being way ahead of its time – the modern version of *Movie* has duly celebrated it.

And I think the case of Ford was rather similar. My own turning point was going to see *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* long after its first release, at a remote Irish cinema, and thinking it was terrific. But by then people were starting to come round. James Leahy always rated Ford, in fact it was he who convinced me that he was an important director. But it was a long time before anything affirmative appeared in *Movie*. Who was the first *Movie* person who wrote at any length about Ford? I suppose Doug Pye, and Robin Wood.

Q: *Robin Wood talks somewhere about the experience of going to an Education Department session on Ford run by Alan Lovell.*

And possibly Paddy Whannel also.

Q: *Well the two of them I think, and being won over during the course of the workshop as to Ford's qualities.*

Oh yes, well that is the BFI Education influence. Have you read *Sequence* yet? I still like the *Sequence* stuff on Ford. To have all that lyrical writing about *My Darling Clementine* at the time that it first came out, coupled with the fact that *My Darling Clementine* is such a great film ... that's an area where *Sequence* really has been vindicated, in the way that *Movie* was in relation to Hawks and Hitchcock.

Q: *And Preminger.*

I don't know about Preminger, Preminger is a person who's almost forgotten now.

Q: *Well that's interesting. At Reading, Doug and I and some other research students sat down and did some work on Bonjour Tristesse to see if it really was good, and we thought it was wonderful. We were really very impressed. You're absolutely right that he's a forgotten figure, but I think that Movie was absolutely right about his qualities.*

Well it certainly seemed to be at the time, and *Exodus* was a very important film. I never really that much liked *The Cardinal*, but I'd love to see *Exodus* again on a really big screen. I can remember seeing that in Dublin two days running, with Mike Dibb, whom I mentioned earlier – he represents the Dublin fringe (he was at University there) of this movement. He was a great friend of Paddy Whannel's, he directed the television programme I mentioned with Paddy about Ford (I wonder if he's still got it?) – that must have been about 1965.

Q: *Is there anything else that you particularly want to say?*

Talking about it all has reminded me of a lot of things, and I think the main thing is that complexity and multiplicity. If you're engaging with this period it is very important not to have a simple linear view: that there was this and then *Movie* came in and gradually undermined it. It is a conjunction of such a lot of different things and influences: *Definition*, *Motion*, the Slade School, the Education Department of the British Film Institute, certain people working in adult education, even things like *New Left Review* and *Universities and Left Review*. And the complexity of the French influence. And, certainly as far as I'm concerned, André Bazin was very important.

Q: *Victor was very keen to pay tribute to André Bazin.*

Ah, good. Part of the complexity thing is the balance of attention to American and non-American cinema in *Movie*.

Q: *The fact that there was such a balance does tend to be overlooked.*

Yes. And also in *Sequence*, *Sequence* was fairly evenly divided between American cinema and European cinema.

Q: *I remember you saying that you saw a number of affinities between the *Sequence* project and *Movie*.*

Absolutely. They both come out of Oxford for one thing, and they're both consciously reacting against an established orthodoxy, represented by people like Roger Manvell and Paul Rotha. But *Sequence* was opposing itself particularly to the dominance of the documentary people, of Griersonian Puritanism – and to all the euphoria about British cinema and its revival during and at the end of World War II. I think the defining moment in early *Sequence* is Lindsay Anderson writing on Ford (it's reprinted in the Preface to his book *About John Ford*). He says that when he got back from war service to London, he had a choice of seeing *Great Expectations* or *A Matter of Life and Death*, which were the great hyped-up films of the British renaissance, or *My Darling Clementine*, which nobody was very interested in. He perversely chose *My Darling Clementine* and was bowled over by this wonderful poetic film.³ And then he celebrates *My Darling Clementine* very eloquently, and goes on to write about other Ford films equally strongly. And the *Movie* project, likewise, is defined at the time of a period of hype of the new British cinema, in this case *Room at the Top* and *Look Back in Anger* and all the other Tony Richardson films. *Movie* is saying the same thing as Lindsay Anderson who writes, at the beginning of his article on Hitchcock in *Sequence*, to the effect that 'British Cinema has always been uneasily caught between Hollywood and Europe' – not having the bold commercial confidence and generic rootedness of one cinema, and not having the seriousness and personal vision of the other. *Oxford Opinion* and *Movie* were more or less doing the same thing, saying that both British Cinema and British criticism are fatally flawed, wrapped up in tepidity, failing to appreciate the real potential of film. It's interesting that one of the contextual similarities is this hype about British

cinema which both are strongly opposing. There's almost exactly the same position occupied by Tony Richardson for *Movie* and Powell and Pressburger for *Sequence*, who represent vulgarity and bad taste.

Then there's the similar balance between the American and European. The new Italian cinema is taken seriously in *Movie* – Antonioni, late Rossellini – and in *Sequence* it's the neorealists. They both admire different periods of French cinema, and they both like Renoir. And interestingly, in American cinema Nicholas Ray and Minnelli are very important for *Sequence*, as they will be for *Movie*, which has forgotten, or didn't know, that Ray and Minnelli were important for *Sequence*. Also, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a key film for both of them. So actually there's a lot more in common than Ian Cameron would have liked to admit, and maybe nowadays as a mild middle-aged person he would actually rather like *Sequence*, I don't know. But Gavin Lambert, have you traced what happened to Gavin Lambert?

Q: *I was reading that interview with him that's in the same issue of *Screen* as your *Straw Dogs* piece just yesterday.*

Gavin Lambert is a very positive figure, I think. He wrote a very sympathetic book on Cukor, and he had gone originally to Hollywood with Nicholas Ray; and he wrote an essay on Hitchcock in the early 70s which is certainly not in any way following the Lindsay Anderson disapproval of Hitchcock's work in Hollywood. I met Lambert two or three years ago in Hollywood when we were making the *Hundred Years of British Cinema* programme; he and Alexander Mackendrick are the two people who talk together in Hollywood with Stephen Frears, under the direction, again, of Mike Dibb. Unfortunately the interview gets chopped up, but there are still good things left. Yes, I definitely think the *Sequence* / *Movie* parallel is very interesting. As I said, *Sequence* started as the magazine of the Oxford University Film society and then moved to London, rather like *Movie* growing out of *Oxford Opinion*.

Q: *I think you even suggested a link between 'poetry' and *mise-en-scène*. [As I now recall, the parallel that had been*

made in an earlier conversation was between 'poetry' and 'beauty'.]

Yes, Anderson does talk a lot about 'poetry', and he means the texture of the image, the sort of thing which is very difficult to pin down on paper. And he does sometimes have some quite detailed shot-by-shot analyses, obviously not done in quite the same way as *Movie*. But the notion of 'poetry' is also I think, like the Leavis notion of 'life', that there's an indefinable something, that all the critic can do is point to the details, the sensitivity and precision with which something is realised, and stand back and say 'there you are', there is 'reality', there is 'life', there is 'poetry', there is 'beauty'.

Q: *Thank you very much.*

Some further thoughts:

I tend not to look very intensely or closely at modern films, partly through being more of a film historian, and partly from a sense that films just don't now have that same cultural centrality.

I don't care enough about current films now, in the way I used to do. When *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* came out, that was the most important thing that was happening in the world at that time and it was terribly important to keep seeing it and to celebrate it. I think it is partly to do with the postmodern culture, if you use that word, that makes everything continuously accessible. If a film comes out now there's no special reason to catch it at the cinema because it will be on rental video, it will be on sell-through video, it will be on television again, it will always be available.

Q: *It's almost like the sense that the Wednesday Play or Play for Today had an audience, when you only had a couple of television channels, and almost the whole population would have watched it.*

Yes, and you had to see it now. You had to see *Cathy Come Home* then because it was never going to be repeated. It was like you had to go to the theatre to see something because when the production stopped that was it. And

Cathy Come Home was exceptional in being repeated, and then it took ages before it was available. Something like *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* wouldn't automatically stay around and form part of a repertory.

A very strong admiration for Peckinpah is something I have in common with Doug, not just *Straw Dogs* (I'm not sure how I rate that compared with the others) but I feel something like *Junior Bonner* works on a level of intensity, eloquence and complexity level with any Western by anyone. But that's early 70s, isn't it? I'm just not sure if something like *The Last of the Mohicans* could repay the same close attention. I know very well that a film like that has the same level of detailed serious input, that it is worked out over a very long period, and is put together with immense care and commitment. Maybe I should set myself to really look at a film like that. And then Loach and Scorsese. Perhaps. But I suppose I just don't feel the urge to settle down and do such close analysis. What am I doing now? I'm working on *Vertigo*, and Hitchcock's British films, and British World War II films – those are the three things I've got to do before I can do my book about Wicket Keeping. And 1958 is precisely the moment before I started to get interested in films, and before the *Movie / Oxford Opinion* generation started to come through. So *Vertigo* in a way marks off that period, at the end of the classical era.

¹ Wimsatt, William Kurtz (1954) *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 81.

² Barr's recollection of critical material is generally extraordinarily accurate. However, I think Anderson's recollection of seeing *My Darling Clementine* only appears in *About John Ford* – although he, Ericsson and Lambert did indeed celebrate the film and its director.

Alan Lovell

13 April 1999

Q: Perhaps I can begin by asking you how you came to be writing about film in the first place? What was your entry point?

I guess my entry point, on a strictly personal level, was not doing any work at university at all, and going to see films. But the serious entry point was an involvement at Oxford with what was then the *Universities and Left Review*, and a general interest in trying to bring culture into political discussion.

Q: What period were you at Oxford?

1955-58

Q: So you were the generation before the *Oxford Opinion* contributors – the relevant issues of *Oxford Opinion* appeared in 1960?

I am confused now, because Victor was my contemporary, almost exactly I think. And indeed, one of the first memories I have of serious discussion of film was going to some kind of film group and meeting Victor.

Q: And there was already a strong political motivation for your thinking about film?

Yes, it was very much in a political context at that point. Given that there was an awful lot of energy developing in Oxford at that time – which led to *Universities and Left Review* – it was inevitably very politically coloured.

Q: What do you think the personal root of that political interest was?

It was to do with my own social background. Coming from a working-class background, and particularly going to Oxford, it's hard not to have views of politics and class.

Q: I remember your article in one of the issues of *Universities and Left Review* called 'The Scholarship Boy', which is about Hoggart and what you would wish to add to his argument.¹ It strikes me that the scholarship boy is a very interesting figure: Raymond Williams, Hoggart of course, you, Victor fits that description as well doesn't he?

Yes he does.

Q: ... Dennis Potter. It's a social phenomenon with considerable consequence for the movement we're discussing.

In fact, if you want to trace a real connection for me, I can remember going into Blackwell's in Oxford and discovering *The Uses of Literacy* – about which I knew nothing at that point, it hadn't been reviewed or anything – and being absolutely overwhelmed by the book: 'My God, it's the book I've been wanting to read all my life!'

Q: So you were very much involved in discussions from the *Universities and Left Review* perspective. What were your feelings when you encountered *Oxford Opinion*, and Victor and perhaps some of the other people?

My first impression of Victor and the others was that these were perfectly eager people who were also interested in film, and I had no strong sense of difference at all at that point. When *Oxford Opinion* started to first appear, and

then *Movie*, I felt strongly hostile to their choice of directors. It was hard for me, given the political background, to suddenly like all these American Hollywood directors, or to take them seriously at all. And I also felt there was no political dimension to their discussion, they weren't interested in politics.

Q: It seems to be one of the features of the New Left movement, in its first expression, is this strong distrust of certain aspects of popular culture, particularly American popular culture.

Yeah.

Q: That's very clear in *Uses of Literacy* where Hoggart is very keen to praise traditional popular art, but that's opposed with 'mass art'. But by the time of Hall and Whannel's *The Popular Arts*, and I suppose Peter Wollen's articles in the *New Left Review*, there's been a change hasn't there?

There has. I would roughly characterise it in the way you have, though I have a slightly complicated view of where Peter Wollen stood in relation to popular culture. One person I ought to mention as having a huge impact in terms of film and politics is Lindsay Anderson. Lindsay came to Oxford, and he talked to some kind of political group – I can't remember what it was – but I remember him talking about Vigo, and being very excited, and talking to him afterwards. As a consequence of that I developed a kind of relationship with him. And then being hugely impressed by his writing, particularly the article on *On The Waterfront*.

Q: That's interesting. Were you going back to discover the *On The Waterfront* piece.

Yes.

Q: And was that when you went back to discover *Sequence* as well? By the time of *Definition* it appears you're quite familiar with *Sequence*.

Yes, it probably was. It also was the time when Lindsay was writing things like 'Stand Up!, Stand Up!', about the need for commitment, which he published in *Sight and Sound* and which we reprinted in *Universities and Left Review*.

Q: *That is very interesting because that forms a direct link between Sequence, Anderson's expressions of commitment in Sight and Sound certainly, and your interest (as being that younger generation of around 1960), which isn't there at all in Oxford Opinion. In The Popular Arts there also seems to be a Sequence impulse in that Ford is the director whom they write about, and celebrate as valuable popular culture.*

Yes. In making that connection with popular culture Ford was invaluable – finding a popular artist you could really support.

Q: *How did you come to be involved in Definition?*

I can't exactly remember now. I met Dai Vaughan and Boleslaw Sulik ... it must have been when I first went to London, there was the New Left Review Club, I may have met them there. But it was the meeting with them. I guess they were the first people I had met who had similar political interest and wanted to connect film and politics.

Q: *That's interesting, the idea that it might have been the New Left Club where you met.*

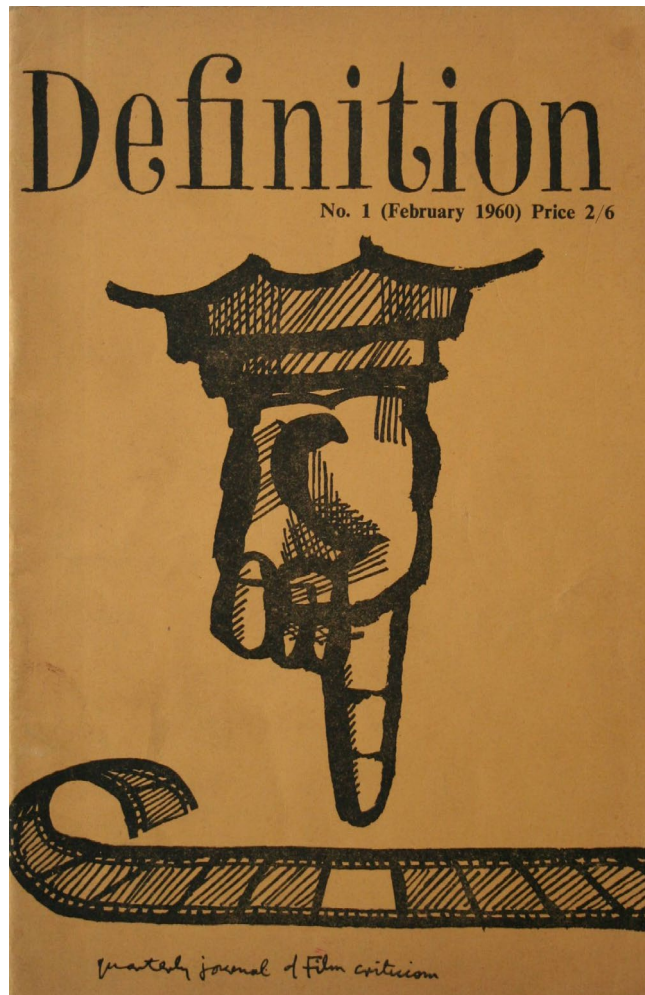
I can't think of any other context.

Q: *Perhaps you can clarify a point for me: Dai Vaughan is not the same person as the David Vaughan who wrote for Sequence and Sight and Sound?*

No, he's not, he isn't the guy who wrote about musicals for *Sequence*. David Vaughan was a dancer, or involved in dance? While Dai was an editor in the industry.

Q: *Did Dai Vaughan and Boleslaw Sulik have a background in the London School of Film Technique?*

They did, and that was very important too. Perhaps the connection came in that way? I'm not sure. I did do some



lecturing at the London School of Film Technique, but I think that was after I had met Dai and Boleslaw.

Q: *What sort of basis was Definition published on?*

Do you mean economically?

Q: *I do, really.*

Well that was entirely on the hope that we could sell enough copies, and that's why it was never viable. We used to operate with some very cheap Polish printers which Boleslaw knew. He was part of the whole Polish exile group in London and he had some connection with the printers who did it very cheaply for us, but even then there was no hope of meeting our costs.

Q: *Does he form a link with the interest in Wajda and that kind of cinema which was obviously important to Definition?*

Yes, but there's the other connection with Lindsay Anderson, because Anderson was the great champion of Wajda and the Polish cinema. Again this relates to the question of a popular cinema. We might now question whether Wajda and the Poles could be regarded as a popular cinema, but at that time it certainly seemed that they were people making popular cinema.

Q: *How did Anderson champion that, was it through writing?*

Yes, through writing. He was the film critic of *The New Statesman* for a time – in fact I think writing about the Poles got him sacked. He wrote about *Kanal* which came out in the same week as *Bridge on the River Kwai*, and he reduced *Kwai* to the last thing he dealt with, and *The New Statesman* thought this was the wrong order of priorities, and it was a parting of the ways.

Q: *What were you doing as a job at this point in time?*

I worked as a journalist for a pacifist newspaper called *Peace News*.

Q: *Can you tell me any more about Peace News?*

The history of *Peace News* is very interesting, it goes back to the 1930's and the development of pacifism. One of the editors was John Middleton Murray, who was a key literary critic of the 1930s, who championed D.H. Lawrence and was the husband of Katherine Mansfield. He was part of that kind of literary culture and he edited *Peace News* as well. There was a connection between *Peace News* and a lot

of people like Michael Tippet and Benjamin Britten who were conscientious objectors – so there was an historical connection with arts and culture. By the time I got there that had largely been lost, it was a narrow pacifist magazine, but then it got caught up in the whole Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament / New Left movement, and created space for people like me to write about film. And we had a theatre critic, a guy called Albert Hunt.

Q: So you were heavily journalistically involved at this time?

I was a journalist. *Peace News* didn't pay well, but I was employed as a journalist.

Q: Let us think for a moment about the battle over form and content and their relative value. In the editorials of *Definition* there is an appeal for a detailed criticism, it even appears in 'Stand Up! Stand Up!' which is the banner of committed criticism. But, and this may relate to only surviving for three issues, the reviews in *Definition* don't seem to be doing the kind of things reviews in *Oxford Opinion* are trying to do. Would that be your suspicion?

I think that's fair. The key thing, I think, in questions about style is that nearly everybody shares a root in something like Leavisite criticism. Obviously with Leavis the notion of close, detailed criticism – taking account of style – is very important. We were part of that, but that is in a sense compromised for us by politics, which leads in the direction of content. You're probably right that we didn't resolve that.

Q: So Leavis had, in a sense, been quite an influence on your methodology?

Oh, absolutely. At school in the sixth form we read Leavis, and when I was at Oxford I knew Stuart Hall, and Stuart was very much from Leavis – he was doing a PhD on Henry James. So we were absolutely steeped in a Leavisite approach.

Q: How interesting. Robin Wood was clearly influenced by Leavis, but one of the things I've been investigating is how

much of a literary basis there is for the work of the Oxford Opinion writers, none of whom were actually studying English. I think that relationship is often overstated in their case.

That's probably right. Robin seemed to be different from the others at that particular point because of that very deep involvement with Leavis – which kind of gives him a militant and, although it was not specifically political at that point, moral drive which is close to a political drive. Now that seemed missing from *Oxford Opinion*.

Q: Looking back from today's vantage point, how do you consider the relative ambitions of *Definition* and *Oxford Opinion*?

Definition now seems very limited. Almost accidentally it happened that three people – all of whom were kind of odd, particularly Boleslaw who was a Polish exile, but Dai was a filmmaker and I was a journalist and so on ... I'm not sure we represented anything much, outside of ourselves. Obviously we echoed that interest in politics, but in terms of film I don't think we had much. Whereas I think *Oxford Opinion* – and that's where Peter Wollen comes in – represent something in English culture which gives them more substance.

Q: So that's true of both *Oxford Opinion* and Wollen's association with *New Left Review*?

I think there are very interesting connections between *Movie* and the *New Left Review* – and disjunctions as well.

Q: What do you mean by 'something in English Culture'?

I think there's something – Anderson's very much part of that too ... Jennings ... – an interest in art and sophistication, taste, *mise-en-scène* and so on, as opposed to the vulgarities of content. And that interest being associated with a critique of England, and looking elsewhere to find your sophistication and taste. The other thing which differentiated me from them, in which I guess I'm influenced by George Orwell, was *Movie*'s distaste for British cinema.

It seemed part of a long English tradition – Orwell comments upon it – English intellectuals don't like England, and are endlessly going on about how narrow and provincial it is. This is where *New Left Review* and *Movie* connect up: the interesting place is France. They go to different things, *Movie* obviously to *Cahiers* and *New Left Review* to Althusser, but French culture is very important for them.

Q: That's an interesting perspective, certainly. I'm not disputing your general point, but part of what is really remarkable about *Movie* and *Oxford Opinion* is the challenge to the established notions of 'taste': writing about Tashlin, or Fuller. It may well be about sophistication, but it's a very different kind of sophistication to that which is currently in place.

It would be really interesting to go back and look at how they wrote about Tashlin, but the discussion about Hitchcock, for example, particularly when it comes filtered through *Cahiers* or Chabrol, brings you into a world of great sophistication in art.

Q: It does, but it still seems an affront in 1960 to be advancing these ideas.

Yes, but the affront is much more 'this is Hollywood'.

Q: That's the stumbling block, not questions of taste *per se*.

That's where taste comes into it, that Hollywood is not part of acceptable taste, as it were.

Q: It seems there is something of a rapprochement between the *Movie* ideas about film and the new left emphasis, I suspect (correct me if I'm wrong) in the shape of the BFI education department and related activities. Would that be your impression?

The real rapprochement, in a way, comes from me because I was the person who got Peter Wollen the job at the BFI. It's almost as crude as that. I knew the *New Left Review* people, I read Peter's stuff and I thought it was really interesting, and I thought that the intellectual seriousness of

the *New Left Review* ought to come into film criticism. So I was very keen to get Peter in, and in fact the two candidates for the job were Peter and Victor.

Q: Really?

My candidate was Peter, but we all agreed that Victor was so good that we actually created another job for him.

Q: At what stage had you come to work for BFI education?

I had started to do freelance lecturing for them when I was still a journalist, and then I effectively became a freelance journalist and supported myself by doing a lot of lecturing. At that time the BFI had a lecture agency which organised lectures everywhere in the country. I already knew Paddy Whannel through *Universities and Left Review*. We used to come up to London from Oxford, and go to the National Film Theatre, and met Paddy who had just become the education officer.

Q: He seems a very important figure.

Yes, he was.

Q: Returning to the earlier point, I'd suggest Peter Wollen is very different from the Movie tradition. He's very keen to take American films seriously, so they have that in common, but he's always less interested in style. When he goes on to discuss authorship style clearly isn't his main point of interest, it's recurrent features. Whereas with Victor, style is the most important aspect.

My own view is very different now from what it was then, and this partly came out of a dialogue between my teaching at Warwick and what Victor teaches. I think in the end, Victor is not that interested in style. The emphasis is on the themes and ideas which you apprehend through style. The whole of the teaching at Warwick is organised on detailed criticism, that is for every course that you do you see a film twice, and it's assumed that's your basic method. But given that, the students know almost nothing about camera work. And I remember doing an introductory

course in which we simply talked about camera work. It always seems to me that Victor starts with mise-en-scène, but is very quick to get on to the meanings.

Q: When I talk about style, I'm really talking about the way style relates to meaning. But I'm quite surprised by your suggestion that Victor gets through the style half of that equation quickly.

There's not a huge awareness of style and lighting and sound, rhythm, pace.

Q: But thinking about the Letter from an Unknown Woman piece? That's probably the most detailed piece of his that I've read.

I don't remember it too well.

Q: He writes just about the Linz sequence. The other moment I tend to think about is those tiny fragments from Caught which he discusses in 'Must we say what they mean?', in the most recently published issue of Movie (34/35. Winter 1990).

My memory of the substance of the articles isn't very good. I think Noël Carroll gives a very good account of Victor's criticism in *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, when he talks about Victor's attention to detail and always finding a surplus of meaning in the work. It seems to me that's what's the real interest, it's the meanings, the extra meanings. Clearly, the way to find it is starting off with stylistic details, but I'm not sure that they detain him very long.

Q: Ok, but given that (I'm sure you're important in this, I'm sure Paddy Whannel is important in this, I'm sure that Victor's important in this) but some of what Oxford Opinion and Movie establishes is brought to bear in that BFI Education set up, isn't it? Be it taking things in detail or the amount of attention you're prepared to expend upon a film, or in particular a popular American film.

Leavis is the key thing there, because in a sense Victor is knocking on an open door with people like me or Paddy

who were influenced by Leavis. Immediately we will respond, 'yes, of course, you should look carefully at the stylistic qualities'. One of the debates we had at that time was with sociologists, who we felt always said 'oh well it means this, and it means that' and simply talked about the obvious features of the plot.

Q: So you were really taking a position saying, 'well, you haven't really understood how these things are qualified by ...'?

Yes, that you really have to look carefully and so on. Actually I would say that the *New Left Review* impulse from Peter Wollen was not influenced by Leavis in that way, in fact the *New Left Review* was quite hostile to Leavis for political / cultural reasons, and I think you're quite right that Peter doesn't take over that kind of interest in stylistic matters.

Q: Are there any other things that are worth recording about the activities of the BFI education department, that would be of interest to a history such as the one I am writing?

It's a question of things you take for granted. Clearly the thing which had the biggest impact was the seminars. I can remember Peter doing the first paper on semiology and nobody had a clue what semiology meant, desperately looking in dictionaries! Those seminars were pretty open, and a number of people from *New Left Review* came, like Tom Nairn and Jon Halliday. All the ideas of semiology, psychoanalysis, Marxism came out of those seminars, that's my really vivid impulse. Against that you have to put the lecturing we were doing all over the place, in which we were doing a lot of (in a sense) mise-en-scène work. The classic method was that we had an extracts library, and we would go and show and analyse the extracts. The famous scene from *My Darling Clementine* – going to church – was endlessly shown and analysed. And so I think that did influence a lot of people towards a mise-en-scène type of approach.

Q: *That must be a very important stage in the dissemination of those ideas. An exciting initiative, and not the sort of thing you can imagine the BFI organising today.*

No.

Q: *So Movie's hostility to British Cinema has always been a point where you diverge from them?*

Yes. And that connects with the *New Left Review*, because the *New Left Review* had a similar hostility to British Culture, regarding it as a philistine, narrow culture. That's what provoked me to do my paper about British Cinema, 'The Unknown Cinema'³ – nobody seems interested in British Cinema, they all just dismiss it.

Q: *Jacob Leigh was telling me about your more recent essay, 'The Known Cinema' in which, as I understand it, you discuss students' response to Saturday Night and Sunday Morning on the one hand and Rebel without a Cause on the other.³*

In a way it's a separate point to do with popular culture. Christine Gledhill was doing a course which I would describe as straight down the *Movie* line. She wanted to show the students *mise-en-scène* and so she showed them *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Breathless* and *Rebel without a Cause*. What I was really struck by was the students' response to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which was very direct. They really enjoyed it, it was very clear, and these were students who were untouched by all those debates, it was just the simplicity and directness and humour of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. In that context *Breathless* is a real smart-arse film. How is that going to relate to those students? So it was the sense of popular culture, the film, making a connection in a very direct way.

Q: *It doesn't have the ambiguity you might find in Rebel, but has that immediacy?*

Yes, and I came to think, which in a way I have always thought, that *Rebel* is very overwrought.

Q: *It obviously had a big impact at the time of its release. But perhaps that's as much to do with James Dean himself as with the film?*

I think it was James Dean. Stuart Hall and I actually hitch-hiked to London to see the premiere of *Giant*, because James Dean was in it! [laughter] There was no doubt about it, that's what we were going for.

Q: *An interesting element to the story! What are your feelings about mise-en-scène in criticism and theory today?*

I actually now think *mise-en-scène* is not a helpful notion at all.

Q: *Really? Why is that?*

First of all it's not very precise. I had an argument recently about whether the camera counted in *mise-en-scène*, and I then went to check up on this, and there's clearly some confusion. Some people talk simply about what's in front of the camera

Q: *That's partly the Bordwell and Thompson line. In Film Art they separate the mise-en-scène chapter from the cinematography chapter, which I think is a big mistake. One of the interests of research like mine is that it involves thinking about the different ways of conceptualising mise-en-scène. In Movie the emphasis is very much on directorial realisation and camera movement and framing are crucial, whereas they wouldn't be at all for Bordwell and Thompson. There's also that interesting Robin Wood definition of mise-en-scène in Definition, which includes editing and sound.*

But then it becomes style.

Q: *It does.*

And that's the other ambiguity, it seems to me. You're talking about style, about being in charge of the whole film – I wonder where 'direction' is considered in all this, it seems to be a hidden word?

Q: *It's interesting that Victor almost never writes about mise-en-scène. He almost always talks about direction.*

That's interesting, I didn't realise that. In some respects, it sounds right, when I think about it.

Q: *He uses it in Oxford Opinion, but barely since. Perhaps we can rephrase the question. How important do you think a detailed consideration of style is to criticism and theory into the next millennium?*

Well, what a question!

Q: *My impression is that with the advent of theory, it gets displaced to a significant degree. Perhaps it's in the nature of theory to talk in general rather than in particular terms, but it seems to me that detailed criticism tends to be pushed to one side.*

I think that's probably right. In a sense what theory has produced is ideological criticism. I don't actually think it's very different from a lot of the sociology we were objecting to at the BFI. People endlessly interpret films in terms of feminism or ethnicity, in terms of ideological meanings, without that stylistic sophistication, when it comes down to it, because that's the real preoccupation of those social, political kinds of readings rather than style.

Q: *It strikes me that the anchoring of those things together is potentially very fruitful, but that doesn't often happen.*

It doesn't often happen, but I think there is a real problem which goes back to reading. If you say that style is very important, and you're really curious about political and social meanings, you have to ask yourself what kind of readings are made by audiences who see it once, like the people who go to the multiplexes. Now a lot more would need to be discovered, but I would guess most people do not make careful readings of camera movements and compositions.

Q: *I quite agree this is a continually vexed question. Camera movements and compositions might be shading their*

experience of what it is that's on the screen, shaping one's response even if one isn't always aware of it.

One would have to have an account of that shaping of consciousness by style. That seems to me to be missing. In a way, it seems in part what they're trying to do in Wisconsin now.

Q: *Except, that Bordwell himself has this ambition to divorce interpretation from his discussion of style. He's trying to talk about the way in which we understand style, but he's very resistant to interpretation. And there's also a danger of the Wisconsin work becoming rather mechanistic in that kind of discussion.*

I think that's a big problem with their position. As far as I understand that position, it depends on a notion of the mind in mechanistic terms: rather like a computer, seeking cues, a very rational kind of process.

Q: *That strikes me as one of the most difficult things to do – to write about the balance of different feelings that a really complex piece of film can engender. I'm sure it's very difficult to build that into your film, but it's also very difficult to write about.*

I think there's a question whether what you're looking for all the time are meanings. That seems to me a very powerful notion. And it might well be that the influence of camera movements and sound (the other thing that mise-en-scène forgets about) is not to be talked of in terms of meanings but in terms of some kind of emotional affect or quality

Q: *I'm certainly very resistant to the idea, and I think Movie were too, that film is about a simplistic conveying of messages. I want to be able to talk about camera movement and sound shaping and qualifying, and about dramatised themes*

But at the end it's themes or meanings, something like that? However sophisticated it is, at the end you are trying to discern themes or meanings.

Q: *It's true.*

What's at stake, I think, is an understanding of what art is. There's a strong feeling that what makes art is themes and meanings, they give it weight and importance.

Q: *We're returning to the debate circa 1960 by a round about way! But what's your perspective on this question?*

I think you have to think not in terms of meaning, but a different sense of affect, emotion, excitement, why people are moved to tears. All the things a mechanistic account of mind can't deal with at all.

Q: *What's really interesting in those terms is when you have those conflicting, changing impulses. Andrew Klevan gave a very stimulating paper at Reading on Tin Cup, and it included a very useful elucidation of the scene at the end where he keeps trying to hit the golf ball over the lake, the whole complex of emotions which are in play and shifting delicately over the sequence. That's one of the examples I can think of where someone has managed to write successfully about that kind of complex experience.*

But words like 'complex' have such a long history, they're Leavis words actually. I think you always have to ask yourself whether an audience who sees *Tin Cup* is actually involved in this complex experience.

Q: *My feeling is that they are.*

Well then I think you need to be able to demonstrate that. In talking about this I'm reacting to Victor. Listening to Victor talking about *Strangers on a Train* which he has seen about 30 times, and the detail which he goes into – you can't possibly expect anybody to make that kind of detailed reading.

Q: *I suppose Leavis would say that criticism is about helping you toward that kind of reading.*

Yes, but that again raises big questions about what we are trying to do on a film course. Are we trying to create specialised readers, more attentive readers?

Q: *So what do you feel your chief ambitions for teaching film at the present are?*

I would say to increase enjoyment. The simplest thing I do is expose students to a range of movies, encourage them to appreciate that there's a variety of enjoyments. The old political impulse is still there in that I want students to be curious about audiences. (Despite a certain amount of discussion of audiences, there's a general lack of curiosity.) I do certain things like send the students to the cinema and tell them to write about the audience – what kind of people they are, and how they respond to the movies. I want that kind of curiosity about audiences, and the realisation that they as film students are different from people at multiplexes. Another major emphasis in my teaching, which is different from your concerns I guess, is an understanding of the nature of the film industry. Films cost money, and there are consequences as a result.

Q: *One further question about style, something I've asked the other people I've interviewed and which would be interesting to ask you. It's about the death of mise-en-scène, or that sense that post-classical films are not as rich. Can you say the kinds of things you might say about Hitchcock of today's Hollywood films, and if not, why not?*

That's a question I asked Victor. Why is it there is no film made after about 1960 which you think is any good? Is there a structural reason for this? This was a rather casual conversation we had in the staff room at Warwick a few years ago, and we never concluded the discussion. In terms of a straightforward response, I see no great difference now from 20 years or so ago. I don't think there's a decline in Hollywood at all.

Q: *What if you were to take an extract around the country with you? If you took Clementine and you took something else?*

Yes, what would I take? That's an interesting question I'm not sure I can answer it directly. To come at it a slightly different way, when I was teaching at Warwick a few years ago I saw *Frankie and Johnny*. I said to the students

– we were discussing the dominance of American cinema squeezing out British cinema – ‘in the end I had a really good time seeing *Frankie and Johnny*, not the greatest film I ever saw but I had a really good time, and in the end I don’t mind if there was no British cinema’. So if you were going to take a popular entertainment, the equivalent of *My Darling Clementine*, that’s an example. But with *Clementine* there was much more of a sense of ‘this is art’, which I wouldn’t want to say about *Frankie and Johnny*, I wouldn’t want to make the same kind of claim.

If you were to say to me ‘are there as good directors in Hollywood now?’ ... I don’t have so much of a pantheon. A name that comes to my mind is Jonathan Demme, I guess. I think he’s rather got caught up in big projects with cultural responsibilities recently, but the stuff he did before that we could argue in the same kinds of ways if you wanted to. But it is very hard.

One of the things that influenced me about *mise-en-scène* is sound. You have to talk about uses of sound now, I think, it’s really important. One of my colleagues, who is actually an ex-Warwick undergraduate, is doing a PhD on sound. In fact, he did an essay for me on sound when he was an undergraduate, which really woke me up to it. He recently went out to Hollywood and met a lot of big sound designers, fantastically interesting guys in their ability to talk intelligently about what they think they are achieving with sound, and shifting between artistic considerations and technical considerations.

Q: *That sounds very interesting.*

It’s very hard to fit that into *mise-en-scène*, and Hitchcock’s camera movements. The other way I’m disconcerted, is that I now believe precisely the opposite of the *mise-en-scène* attitude to the script. Nobody talks about the style of the script, because the thrust of *mise-en-scène* is that cinema is a visual medium and you must be able to deal with it as a visual medium – and then you just ignore scripts, which are taken as givens, they’re somehow literary and so on. But scripts are organised in certain kinds of ways.

Q: *It’s certainly the case that interesting things can be said about narrative structure. Of course, there’s a polemical history which explains why mise-en-scène doesn’t talk about the script, it’s everything to do with a commissioned cinema, or one’s impression of what a commissioned cinema might be.*

The auteur theory seems to be a total mess. I know I like particular directors, but there seems to be no proper account of authorship. Once you start to raise questions sound and script and so on, you start to lose the sense of the director in terms of somebody doing *mise-en-scène*.

Q: *I’m quite happy about some of the arguments about directors advanced on grounds of style ... but we’re not interviewing me!*

It would be interesting to hear what you think.

Q: *Well, I like that piece by Victor – ‘Authorship: The Premature Burial’.*⁴

Yes that’s very good, because it raises the key question that what you’re talking about is quality and not just personal expression. Just to see personal expression doesn’t necessarily tell you anything about whether it’s a good film or not.

Q: *No indeed. Just because a film is distinctive, doesn’t mean it’s distinguished.*

Exactly. ... I think the question of value is often ignored because of the old opinion of mass culture. The basic assumption is that we live in a mass anonymous society where anything personal is to be valued. That seems to me almost part of the intellectual framework that everybody inhabits: people talk about shops in towns, we don’t want all these anonymous Marks and Spencers everywhere, we want small distinctive shops. And then you get a criterion of value that personal expression is valuable.

Extra information from correspondence:

Arnold Wesker didn’t have much of an impact on *Definition*. He was a friend of Dai Vaughan’s and I think

attended what was then the London School of Film Technique. I only got to know him later when he created Centre 42. He was part of the web which connected *Definition* with the Royal Court Theatre and Free Cinema.

¹ (1957) ‘The Scholarship Boy’, *Universities and Left Review*, 1. 2, 33–4.

² ‘The British Cinema: The Unknown Cinema’, paper presented to the British Film Institute Education Department Seminar, 13 March 1969. A revised version of this paper was published as (1972) ‘The Unknown Cinema of Britain’, *Cinema Journal*, 11. 2, 1–9.

³ (1997) ‘The British Cinema: The Known Cinema?’, in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*. London: BFI, 235–243. (p. 242)

⁴ Perkins, V.F. (1990) ‘Film Authorship: The Premature Burial’, *CineAction!*, 21/22, (Summer / Fall), 57–64.