

**Pauline Kael**

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THE MOVIES**

The films of a decade, praised and deplored by

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PAULINE KAEEL



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# Introduction

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# Zeitgeist and Poltergeist; Or, Are Movies Going to Pieces?

## Reflections from the side of the pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel

“Bring your bathing suit,” said the movie producer, who was phoning me to confirm our date for lunch at his hotel, and before I could think of a way to explain that I didn’t have one with me, he added, “And remember, you’re meeting people for cocktails in my suite at six, so just bring your change of clothes.” Now I was completely out of my depth: I just said I would join him at 2:30 and hung up. Somehow I didn’t want to come right out and say that I didn’t have a change of clothes in the evening sense that he meant. Los Angeles dislocates my values, makes me ashamed of not being all the things I’m not and don’t ordinarily care to be. Each time I get on the jet to return to San Francisco it’s like turning the time-machine backward and being restored to an old civilization that I understand.

Los Angeles is only 400 miles away from where I live and so close by jet that I can breakfast at home, give a noon lecture at one of the universities in LA, and be back in time to prepare dinner. But it’s the city of the future, and I am more a stranger there than in a foreign country. In a foreign country people don’t expect you to be just like them, but in Los Angeles, which is infiltrating the world, they don’t consider that you might be different because they don’t recognize any values except their own. And soon there may not be any others.

Feeling rather seedy in the black and brown Italian suit which had seemed quite decent in San Francisco, I arrived at the pool of the Beverly Hills Hotel, sans bathing suit or change of clothes. As I walked past the recumbent forms to the producer, also recumbent, who was limply waving to me, I remembered Katharine Hepburn as poor Alice Adams in her simple organdy frock among the pushy and overdressed rich girls at the party. Only here it was I who was overdressed; they were expensive and undressed. They didn’t look young, and they didn’t act old, these people eating and drinking and sunning themselves around the pool. They seemed to be ageless like crocodiles; and although they weren’t fat, they were flabby.

Despite the narcissism of their attitudes, and the extraordinary amount of loving care that is lavished on their bodies, each giving way to the sun-blessed fantasy of himself, stretching this way and that to catch or avoid the rays, it was impossible to feel superior to them. They could afford to make this spectacle of themselves.

In San Francisco, vulgarity, “bad taste,” ostentation are regarded as a kind of alien blight, an invasion or encroachment from outside. In Los Angeles, there is so much money and power connected with ostentation that it is no longer ludicrous: it commands a kind of respect. For if the mighty behave like this, then quiet good taste means that you can’t *afford* the conspicuous expenditures, and you become a little ashamed of your modesty and propriety. *Big* money and its way of life is exciting; the vulgarity of the powerful is ugly, but not boring. This, you begin to feel, is how people behave when they’re strong enough to act out their fantasies of wealth. In this environment, if you’re not making it in a big way, you’re worse than nothing — you’re a failure. But if you can still pass for young, maybe there’s still time to make it; or, at least, you can delay the desperation and self-contempt that result from accepting these standards that so few can meet. It’s easy to reject all this when I’m back in San Francisco. But not here. You can’t really laugh at the Beverly Hills Hotel and people who pay \$63 a day for a suite that’s like a schoolboy’s notions of luxury. It’s too impressive. Laughter would stick in the throat — like sour grapes.

What “sensible” people have always regarded as the most preposterous, unreal and fantastic since



of life in California — the sun palace of Los Angeles and its movie-centered culture — is becoming embarrassingly, “fantastically” actual, not just here but almost anywhere. It embodies the most common, the most widespread dream — luxury in the sun, a state of permanent vacation. And as it is what millions of people want and will pay money for, the Hollywood fantasy is economical and practical. Across the country, homes become as simple, bare and convenient as simulated motels, and motels are frequently used as residences.

But pioneers suffer from stresses we don't know about, and the people I met in Los Angeles seem to have developed a terrible tic: they cannot stop talking about their “cultural explosion.” The producer went on and on about it, about their new museums, and their concerts, and their galleries, and their “legitimate” collegiate theater. It was like my first trip to New York, when I wanted to see skyscrapers and go to shows and hear jazz, and New Yorkers wanted me to admire the flowers blooming in Rockefeller Plaza. I wanted to talk about the Los Angeles that fascinated and disturbed me, and about movies and why there were fewer good movies in 1963 than in any year in my memory. He discussed the finer things in life, trying to convince me and maybe himself that Los Angeles, in its cultural boom, was making phenomenal strides toward becoming like other cities — only, of course, more so.

I dutifully wrote in my notebook but not about what he was saying. Perhaps, because the whole scene was so nightmarish, with all the people spending their ordinary just-like-any-other-day at the pool, conducting business by the telephones whose wires stretched around them like lifelines, and the earnest man in wet trunks ordering me double Bourbons on the rocks and talking culture while deepening his tan, I began to think about horror movies.

### **Zeitgeist and Poltergeist; Or, Are Movies Going to Pieces?**

The week before, at home, some academic friends had been over and as we talked and drank we looked at a television showing of Tod Browning's 1931 version of *Dracula*. Dwight Frye's appearance on the screen had us suddenly squealing and shrieking, and it was obvious that old vampire movies were part of our common experience. We talked about the famous ones, Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Dreyer's *Vampyr*, and we began to get fairly involved in the lore of the genre — the strategy of the bite, the special earth for the coffins, the stake through the heart versus the rays of the sun as disposal methods, the cross as vampire repellent, et al. We had begun to surprise each other by the affectionate nostalgic tone of our mock erudition when the youngest person present, an instructor in English, said in a clear, firm tone, “*The Beast with Five Fingers* is the greatest horror picture I've ever seen.” Stunned that so bright a young man could display such shocking taste, preferring a Warner Brothers forties mediocrity to the classics, I gasped, “But why?” And he answered, “Because it's completely irrational. It doesn't make any sense, and that's the true terror.”

Upset by his neat little declaration — existentialism in a nutshell — by the calm matter-of-factness of it, and by the way the others seemed to take it for granted, I wanted to pursue the subject. But O. Henry's remark “Conversation in Texas is seldom continuous” applies to California, too. *Dracula* had ended, and the conversation shifted to other, more “serious” subjects.

But his attitude, which had never occurred to me, helped to explain some of my recent moviegoing experiences. I don't mean that I agree that *The Beast with Five Fingers* is a great horror film, but that his enthusiasm for the horror that cannot be rationalized by the mythology and rules of the horror game related to audience reactions that had been puzzling me.

Last year I had gone to see a famous French film, Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face*, which had arrived in San Francisco in a dubbed version called *The Horror Chamber of Dr. Faustus* and was

playing on a double-horror bill in a huge Market Street theater. It was Saturday night and the theater, which holds 2646, was so crowded I had trouble finding a seat.

Even dubbed, *Eyes Without a Face*, which Franju called a “poetic fantasy,” is austere and elegant; the exquisite photography is by the great Shuftan, the music by Maurice Jane, the superb gowns by Givenchy. It’s a symbolist attack on science and the ethics of medicine, and though I thought the attack as simpleminded in its way as the usual young poet’s denunciation of war or commerce, it is in some peculiar way a classic of horror.

Pierre Brasseur, as a doctor, experiments systematically, removing the faces of beautiful young kidnaped women, trying to graft them onto the ruined head of his daughter. He keeps failing, the girls are destroyed and yet he persists — in some terrible parody of the scientific method. In the end, the daughter — still only eyes without a face — liberates the dogs on which he also experiments and then tear off *his* head.

It’s both bizarrely sophisticated (with Alida Valli as his mistress doing the kidnaping in a black leather coat, recalling the death images from Cocteau’s *Orpheus*) and absurdly naive. Franju’s style is almost as purified as Robert Bresson’s, and although I dislike the mixture of austerity and mysticism with blood and gore, it produced its effect — a vague, floating, almost lyric sense of horror, an almost abstract atmosphere, impersonal and humorless. It has nothing like the fun of a good old horror satire like *The Bride of Frankenstein* with Elsa Lanchester’s hair curling electrically instead of just frizzing as usual, and Ernest Thesiger toying with mandrake roots and tiny ladies and gentlemen in glass jars. It’s a horror film that takes itself very seriously, and even though I thought its intellectual pretensions silly, I couldn’t shake off the exquisite, dread images.

But the audience seemed to be reacting to a different movie. They were so noisy the dialogue was inaudible; they talked until the screen gave promise of bloody ghastliness. Then the chatter subsided to rise again in noisy approval of the gory scenes. When a girl in the film seemed about to be mutilated, a young man behind me jumped up and down and shouted encouragement. “Somebody going to *get* it,” he sang out gleefully. The audience, which was, I’d judge, predominantly between fifteen and twenty-five, and at least a third feminine, was as pleased and excited by the most revolting obsessive images as that older, mostly male audience is when the nudes appear in *The Immoral Mr. Teas* or *Not Tonight, Henry*. They’d gotten what they came for: they hadn’t been cheated. But nobody seemed to care what the movie was about or be interested in the logic of the plot — the reasons for the gore.

And audiences have seemed indifferent to incomprehensible sections in big expensive pictures. For example, how is it that the immense audience for *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, after all those hours of watching a story unfold, didn’t express discomfort or outrage or even plain curiosity about what exactly happened at the end — which through bad direction or perhaps sloppy editing went by too fast to be sorted out and understood. Was it possible that audiences no longer cared if a film was so untidily put together that information crucial to the plot or characterizations was obscurely omitted altogether? *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was such a mess that *Time*, after calling it “the year’s scariest, funniest and most sophisticated thriller,” got the plot garbled.

In recent years, largely because of the uncertainty of producers about what will draw, films in production may shift from one script to another, or may be finally cut so that key sequences are omitted. And the oddity is that it doesn’t seem to matter to the audience. I couldn’t tell what was going on in parts of *55 Days at Peking*. I was flabbergasted when Cleopatra, with no hint of preparation, suddenly demonstrated clairvoyant powers, only to dispense with them as quickly as she had acquired them. The audience for *The Cardinal* can have little way of knowing whose baby the priest’s sister is having, or of understanding how she can be in labor for days, screaming in a rooming house, without anybody hearing her. They might also be puzzled about how the priest’s argument

against her marriage, which they have been told is the only Catholic position, can, after it leads to her downfall and death, be casually dismissed as an error.

It would be easy to conclude that people go to see a “show” and just don’t worry if it all hangs together so long as they’ve got something to look at. But I think it’s more complicated than that. Audiences used to have an almost rational passion for getting the story straight. They might prefer bad movies to good ones, and the *Variety* list of “all-time top grossers” (such as *The Greatest Show on Earth* and *Going My Way*) indicates that they did, but although the movies might be banal or vulgar they were rarely incoherent. A movie had to tell some kind of story that held together: a plot had to be parse. Some of the appreciation for the cleverness of, say, Hitchcock’s early thrillers was that they distracted you from the loopholes, so that, afterwards, you could enjoy thinking over how you’d been tricked and teased. Perhaps now “stories” have become too sane, too explicable, too commonplace for the large audiences who want sensations and regard the explanatory connections as mere “filler” — the kind of stuff you sit through or talk through between jolts.

It’s possible that television viewing, with all its breaks and cuts, and the inattention, except for action, and spinning the dial to find some action, is partly responsible for destruction of the narrative sense — that delight in following a story through its complications to its conclusion, which is perhaps a child’s first conscious artistic pleasure. The old staples of entertainment — inoffensive genres like the adventure story or the musical or the ghost story or the detective story — are no longer commercially safe for moviemakers, and it may be that audiences don’t have much more than a T-span of attention left: they want to be turned on and they spend most of their time turning off. Something similar and related may be happening in reading tastes and habits: teen-agers that I meet have often read Salinger and some Orwell and *Lord of the Flies* and some Joyce Cary and sometimes even Dostoyevsky, but they are not interested in the “classic” English novels of Scott or Dickens, and what is more to the point, they don’t read the Sherlock Holmes stories or even the modern detective fiction that in the thirties and forties was an accepted part of the shared experience of adolescents. Whatever the reasons — and they must be more than TV, they must have to do with modern life and the sense of urgency it produces — audiences can no longer be depended on to respond to conventional forms.

Perhaps they want much more from entertainment than the civilized, but limited rational pleasures of genre pieces. More likely, and the box-office returns support this, they want something different. Audiences that enjoy the shocks and falsifications, the brutal series of titillations of *Mondo Cane*, one thrill after another, don’t care any longer about the conventions of the past, and are too restless and apathetic to pay attention to motivations and complications, cause and effect. They want less effort, more sensations, more knobs to turn.

A decade ago, *The Haunting*, an efficient, professional and to all appearances “commercial” genre piece, might have made money. By the end of 1963, its grosses in the United States and Canada, according to *Variety*, were \$700,000. This may be compared with \$9,250,000 for *Irma La Douce*, \$4,600,000 for *The Birds*, \$3,900,000 for *55 Days at Peking* — all three, I think, much less enjoyable movies, or to be more exact, terrible movies, and in varying degrees pointless and incomprehensible. A detective genre piece, *The List of Adrian Messenger*, also incomparably better than the three films cited, and with a tricky “star” selling campaign, grossed only \$1,500,000. It’s easy to imagine that Robert Wise, after the energetic excesses of *West Side Story*, turned to *The Haunting* for a safe, sane respite, and that John Huston, after wrestling with *Freud*, turned to an intriguing detective story like *Adrian Messenger* for a lucrative, old-fashioned holiday. But what used to be safe seems now to be folly. How can audiences preoccupied with identity problems of their own worry about a case of

whodunit and why and how? Following clues may be too much of an effort for those who, in the current teen-age phrase, “couldn’t care less.” They want shock treatment, not diversion, and it takes more than ghosts to frighten them.

*The Haunting* is set in that pleasantly familiar “old dark house” that is itself an evil presence, and is usually inhabited by ghosts or evil people. In our childhood imaginings, the unknowable things that have happened in old houses, and the whispers that someone may have died in them, make them mysterious, “dirty”; only the new house that has known no life or death is safe and clean. But so many stories have used the sinister dark house from-which-no-one-can-escape and its murky gardens for a ritual entertainment that we learn to experience the terrors as pleasurable excitations and reassuring reminders of how frightened we used to be before we learned our way around. In film, as in story, the ambiance is fear; the film specialty is gathering a group who are trapped and helpless. (Although the women are more easily frightened, the men are also powerless. Their superior strength doesn’t count for much against unseen menaces: this may explain why the genre was often used for a male comedy — like Bob Hope in *The Ghost Breakers*. Russ Tamblyn serves a similar but feeble cowardly-comedy function in *The Haunting*.) The action is confined to the house and grounds (the maze); the town is usually far away, just far enough away so that “nobody will hear you if you scream.”

In recent years film festivals and art houses have featured a peculiar variant of the trapped-in-the-old-dark-house genre (Buñuel’s *The Exterminating Angel* is the classic new example), but the characters, or rather figures, are the undead or zombies of the vampire movies. “We live as in coffin frozen side by side in a garden” — *Last Year at Marienbad*. “I’m dead” — the heroine of *Il Marchese della Smeralda*. “They’re all dead in there” — the hostess describing the party of *La Notte*. Their vital juices have been sucked away, but they don’t have the revealing marks on the throat. We get the message: alienation drains the soul without leaving any marks. Or, as Bergman says of his trilogy, “Most of the people in these three films are dead, completely dead. They don’t know how to love or to feel any emotion. They are lost because they can’t reach anyone outside of themselves.” This “art” variant is a message movie about failure of communication and lack of love and spiritual emptiness and all the rest of that. It’s the closest thing we’ve got to a new genre but it has some peculiarities. The old dark house was simply *there*, but these symbolic decadent or sterile surroundings are supposed to reflect the walking death of those within the maze. The characters in the old dark house tried to solve the riddle of their imprisonment and tried to escape; even in *No Exit* the drama was in *why* the characters were there, but in the new hotel-in-hell movies the characters don’t even want to get out of the maze — nor do the surmises do the directors, despite their moralizing. And audiences apparently respond to these films as modern and relevant just because of this paralysis and inaction and minimal story line. If in the ground at the older dark house, someone was not who we thought he was, in the new dull party gatherings, it doesn’t matter who anybody is (which is a new horror).

Although *The Haunting* is moderately elegant and literate and expensive, and the director gussies things up with a Marienbadish piece of statuary that may or may not be the key to something or other, it’s basically a traditional ghost story. There is the dedicated scientist who wants to contribute to science in some socially unacceptable or scientifically reproachable area — in this case to prove the supernatural powers of the house. (The scientist is, somewhat inexplicably, an anthropologist; perhaps Margaret Mead has set the precedent for anthropologists to dabble in and babble on anything — so that the modern concept of the anthropologist is like the old concept of the philosopher or, for that matter, the scientist.) And, in the expository style traditional for the genre, he explains the lore and jargon of psychic research, meticulously separating out ghost from poltergeist and so on. And of course the scientist, in the great tradition of *Frankenstein*, must have the abnormal or mad assistant; the role that would once have belonged to Dwight Frye is here modernized and becomes the Greenwich Village lesbian, Claire Bloom. And there is the scientist’s distraught wife who fears the

her husband's brilliant career will be ruined, and so on. The chaste heroine, Julie Harris (like an updated Helen Chandler, Dracula's anemic victim), is the movies' post-Freudian concept of the virgin: repressed, hysterical, insane — the source of evil.

It wasn't a great movie but I certainly wouldn't have thought that it could offend anyone. Yet part of the audience at *The Haunting* wasn't merely bored, it was hostile — as if the movie, by assuming interests they didn't have, made them feel resentful or inferior. I've never felt this kind of audience hostility toward crude, bad movies. People are relaxed and tolerant about ghoulish quickies, grotesque shockers dubbed from Japan, and chopped-up Italian spectacles that scramble mythologies and pile on actions, one stupidity after another. Perhaps they prefer incoherent, meaningless movies because they are not required to remember or connect. They can feel superior, contemptuous — as they do toward television advertising. Even when it's a virtuoso triumph, the audience is contemptuous toward advertising, because, after all, they see through it — they know somebody is trying to sell something. And because, like a cheap movie obviously made to pry money out of them, that is all advertising means, it's OK. But the few, scattered people at *The Haunting* were restless and talkative, the couple sitting near me arguing — the man threatening to leave, the woman assuring him that something would happen. In their terms, they were cheated: nothing happened. And, of course, they missed what was happening all along, perhaps because of nervous impatience or a primitive notion that the real things are physical, perhaps because people take from art and from popular entertainment only what they want; and if they are indifferent to story and motive and blank out on the connections, then a movie without physical action or crass jokes or built-in sentimental responses has nothing for them. I am afraid that the young instructor in English spoke for his times, that there is no terror for modern audiences if a story is carefully worked out and follows a tradition, even though the tradition was developed and perfected precisely to frighten entertainingly.

No wonder that studios and producers are unsure what to do next, scan best-seller lists for trends, consult audience-testing polls, anxiously chop out what a preview audience doesn't like. *The New York Times* chides the representatives of some seven companies who didn't want to invest in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* but how could businessmen, brought up to respect logic and a good commercial script, possibly guess that this confused mixture of low camp and Grand Guignol would delight the public?

And if I may return for a moment to that producer whom I left sunning himself at the side of the pool — “Did you know that *Irma La Douce* is already the highest-grossing comedy in film history?” he asked me at one point, not in the droning voice of the civic-minded man discussing the cultural development of the community, but in the voice of someone who's really involved in what he's saying. “Yes,” I said, “but is it even a comedy? It's a monstrous mutation.” The producer shrugged his dark round shoulders helplessly: “Who knows what's a comedy any more?”

It is not just general audiences out for an evening's entertainment who seem to have lost their narrative sense, or become indifferent to narrative. What I think are processes of structural disintegration are at work in all types of movies, and though it's obvious that many of the old forms were dead and had to be broken through, it's rather scary to see what's happening — and not just in the big picture-palaces. Art-house films are even more confusing. Why, at the end of Godard's *Mais la Vie*, is the heroine shot, rather than the pimp that the rival gang is presumably gunning for? Is she just a victim of bad marksmanship? If we express perplexity, we are likely to be told that we are missing the existentialist point: it's simply fate, she had to die. But a cross-eyed fate? And why there so little questioning of the organization of *My Name Is Ivan* with its lyric interludes and patriotic sections so ill assembled that one might think the projectionist had scrambled the reels? (They often

do at art houses, and it would seem that the more sophisticated the audience, the less likely that the error will be discovered. When I pointed out to a theater manager that the women in *Brink of Life* were waiting for their babies after they had miscarried, he told me that he had been playing the film for two weeks and I was his first patron who wasn't familiar with Bergman's methods.)

The art-house audience accepts lack of clarity as complexity, accepts clumsiness and confusion as "ambiguity" and as style. Perhaps even without the support of critics, they would accept incoherence just as the larger audience does: they may feel that movies as incomprehensible as *Viridiana* are more relevant to their experience, more true to their own feelings about life, and more satisfying and complex than works they can understand.

I trust I won't be mistaken for the sort of boob who attacks ambiguity or complexity. I am interested in the change from the period when the meaning of art and form in art was in making a complex experience simple and lucid, as is still the case in *Knife in the Water* or *Bandits of Orgosolo* to the current acceptance of art as technique, the technique which in a movie like *This Sporting Life* makes a simple, though psychologically confused, story look complex, and modern because inexplicable.

It has become easy — especially for those who consider "time" a problem and a great theme — to believe that fast editing, out of normal sequence, which makes it difficult, or impossible, for the audience to know if any action is taking place, is somehow more "cinematic" than a consecutively told story. For a half century movies have, when necessary, shifted action in time and place and the directors generally didn't think it necessary to slap us in the face with each cut or to call out, "Look what I can do!" Yet people who should know better will tell you how "cinematic" *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* or *This Sporting Life* is — as if fiddling with the time sequence was good in itself, proof that the "medium" is really being used. Perhaps, after a few decades of indoctrination in high art, they are convinced that a movie is cinematic when they don't understand what's going on. *This Sporting Life*, which Derek Hill, among others, has called the best feature ever made in England, isn't gracefully fragmented, it's smashed. The chunks are so heavy and humorless and, in an odd way, disturbing, that we can tell the film is meant to be bold, powerful, tragic.

There's a woman writer I'd be tempted to call a three-time loser: she's Catholic, Communist, and lesbian; but she comes on more like a triple threat. She's in with so many groups that her books are rarely panned. I thought of her when I read the reviews of *This Sporting Life*: this film has it made so many ways, it carries an identity card with all the outsiders. The hero is "bewildered," the heroine "bruised" and "afraid of life," the brutal rugby games are possibly a "microcosm of a corrupt society" and the film murkily suggests all sorts of passion and protest, like a group of demonstrators singing "We Shall Overcome" and leaving it to you to fill in your own set of injustices. For *Show* magazine: "The football scenes bear the aspect of a savage rite, with the spectators as participants hungry for sacrifice. The love story . . . is simply another kind of scrimmage, a battle between two people who cannot communicate . . ." For the *New York Times*, the film "translates the confusions and unrequited longings of the angry young men and women of our time into memorable universal truths." (I wish the reviewer would spell out one or two of them for us.) The *Times* has an unusual interpretation of the love story: "The woman . . . only succumbs to him physically and the real roots he seeks are unattainable." This reminds me of my confusion as a schoolgirl when a jazz musician who had been introduced to me during the break called out "Dig you later" as he went back to the stand.

In the *Observer*, Penelope Gilliatt offers extraordinary praise: "*This Sporting Life* is a stupendous film. It has a blow like a fist. I've never seen an English picture that gave such expression to the violence and the capacity for pain that there is in the English character. It is there in Shakespeare, in Marlowe, in Lawrence and Orwell and Hogarth, but not in our cinema like this before. *This Sporting Life* is hard to write about because everything important about it is really subverbal." But then so a

trees and animals and cities. Isn't it precisely the artist's task to give form to his experience and the critic's task to verbalize on how this has been accomplished? She goes on to write of the hero, "The events almost seem to be happening to him in the dark. Half of them are told while he is under the dentist's gas, in flashback, which is a clumsy device if one is telling a story but the natural method if one is searching around a character." English dental hygiene is notorious; still, isn't telling a story with or without gas and flashbacks, a pretty good "natural" method of searching around a character? But something *more* seems to be involved: "The black subjective spirit of the film is overpowering. It floods the sound track, which often has a peculiar resonance as though it were happening inside one's own head." Sort of a sunken cathedral effect? The bells are clanging in the reviewers' heads, but what's happening on the screen?

In one way or another, almost all the enthusiasts for a film like this one will tell you that it doesn't matter, that however you interpret the film, you will be right (though this does not prevent some of them from working out elaborate interpretations of *Marienbad* or *The Eclipse* or *Viridiana*). Walter Lassally says that "Antonioni's oblique atmospheric statements and Buñuel's symbolism, for example, cannot be analyzed in terms of good or bad . . . for they contain, in addition to any obvious meanings, everything that the viewer may read into them." Surely he can read the most onto a blank screen?

There's not much to be said for this theory except that it's mighty democratic. Rather pathetically, those who accept this Rorschach-blot approach to movies are hesitant and uneasy about offering reactions. They should be reassured by the belief that whatever they say is right, but as they refers not to the film but to them (turning criticism into autobiography) they are afraid of self-exposure. I don't think they really believe the theory — it's a sort of temporary public convenience station. More and more people come out of a movie and can't tell you what they've seen, or even whether they liked it.

An author like David Storey may stun them with information like "[*This Sporting Life*] works purely in terms of feeling. Only frivolous judgments can be made about it in conventional terms of style." Has he discovered a new method of conveying feeling without style? Or has he simply found the arrogance to frustrate normal responses? No one wants to have his capacity for feeling questioned and if a viewer tries to play it cool, and discuss *This Sporting Life* in terms of corrupt professional football, he still won't score on that muddy field: there are no goal-posts. Lindsay Anderson, who directed, says, "*This Sporting Life* is not a film about sport. In fact, I wouldn't really call it a sports picture at all. . . . We have tried to make a tragedy . . . we were making a film about something unique." A tragedy without a story is unique all right: a disaster.

In movies, as in other art forms, if you are interested only in technique or if you reject technique the result is just about the same: if you have nothing to express it is very much like thinking you have so much to express that you don't know how to say it. Something related to absorption in technique is involved in the enthusiasm of young people for what is called "the New American Cinema," though these films are often made by those who reject craftsmanship as well as meaning. They tend to equate technique with science and those who produced the Bomb. This approach, which is a little like the attack on scientific method in *Eyes Without a Face*, is used to explain why they must make movies without taking time to learn how. They're in a hurry, and anyway, technique might corrupt them.

The spokesmen for this cinema attack rationality as if it were the enemy of art ("as/ the heavy Boots of Soldiers and Intellect/ march across the/ flowerfields of subconscious" and so forth by Jon Melcas). They have composed a rather strange amalgam in which reason = lack of feeling and imagination = hostility to art = science = the enemy = Nazis and police = the Bomb. Somewhere along the line, criticism is also turned into an enemy of art. The group produces a kind of euphoric publicity which is published in place of criticism, but soon it may have semi-intellectually respectable critics

In the *Nation* of April 13, 1964, Susan Sontag published an extraordinary essay on Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* called "A Feast for Open Eyes" in which she enunciates a new critical principle: "Thus Smith's crude technique serves, beautifully, the sensibility embodied in *Flaming Creatures* — sensibility based on indiscriminateness, without ideas, beyond negation." I think in treating indiscriminateness as a *value*, she has become a real swinger. Of course we can reply that if anything goes, nothing happens, nothing works. But this is becoming irrelevant. In Los Angeles, among the independent film makers at their midnight screenings I was told that I belonged to the old generation, that Agee-alcohol generation they called it, who could not respond to the new film because I didn't take pot or LSD and so couldn't learn just to *accept* everything. This narcotic approach of torpid acceptance, which is much like the lethargy of the undead in those failure-of-communication movies, may explain why those films have seemed so "true" to some people (and why the directors' moralistic messages sound so false). This attitude of rejecting critical standards has the dubious advantage of accepting everyone who says he is an artist as an artist and conferring on all his "noncommercial" productions the status of art. Miss Sontag is on to something and if she stays on and rides it like Slim Pickens, it's the end of criticism — at the very least.

It's ten years since Dylan Thomas answered Maya Deren's call for a new poetry of film with "I'm not at all sure that I want such a thing, myself, as a poetic film. I think films fine as they are, only they were better! . . . I like stories, you know — I like to see something going on." Movies have changed in these ten years, disastrously in the last few years; they have become "cinema."

At the art-house level, critics and audiences haven't yet discovered the beauty of indiscriminateness, but there's a lot of talk about "purely visual content" — which might be called the principle of ineffability. *Time* calls Resnais's *Muriel* "another absorbing exercise in style." Dwight Macdonald calls *Marienbad* " 'pure' cinema, a succession of images enjoyable in themselves." Arthur Richman, who was responsible (and thus guilty) for the film selection at the New York Film Festival, goes all the way: films like *La Notte*, he says, provide an "experience in pure form."

Once matters reach this plane, it begins to seem almost unclean to raise issues about meaning and content and character, or to question the relevance of a sequence, the quality of a performance. Someone is sure to sneer, "Are you looking for a paraphrasable content? A film, like a poem, *is*." One can smile pityingly and remind you that Patroni Griffi had originally intended to call *Il Mare* "Landscape with Figures"; doesn't that tell you how you should look at it? It does indeed, and it's not my idea of a good time. After a few dismal experiences we discover that when we are told to admire a film for its pure form or its structure, it is going to exhibit irritating, confusing, and ostentatious technique, which will, infuriatingly, be all we can discover in it. And if we should mention that we *enjoy* the dramatic and narrative elements in movies, we are almost certain to be subjected to the contemptuous remark "Why does cinema have to *mean* something? Do you expect a work by Bach to *mean* something?"

The only way to answer this is by some embarrassingly basic analysis, pointing out that words and unlike tones, refer to something and that movie images are rarely abstract or geometric designs, and that when they include people and places and actions, they have implications, associations. Robb Grillet, the scenarist of *Marienbad*, may say that the film is a pure construction, an object without reference to anything outside itself, and that the existence of the two characters begins when the film begins and ends ninety-three minutes later, but, of course, we are not born when we go in to see a movie — though we may want to die by the time we leave. And we can't even leave *Marienbad* behind because, although it isn't particularly memorable (it isn't even particularly offensive), a kind of creeping Marienbadism is the new aesthetics of "poetic" cinema. This can only sound like pedantry to those interested in "pure" art who tend to consider analysis as an enemy, anyway (though many of them are in it). The very same people who say that a movie shouldn't mean anything, that art is beyond meaning, also say that it must be seen over and over again because it reveals more meaning



with subsequent viewings. And although the structure of many of the new films is somehow supposed to be the art, we are frowned upon if we question the organization of the material. There is nothing, finally, that we are allowed to question or criticize. We are supposed only to interpret — and that as we wish.

The leaders of this new left-wing formalism are Resnais, who gives us his vision of a bomb-shattered, fragmented universe, and Antonioni, the master practitioner of the fallacy of expressive form, who sets out to demonstrate that boredom (and its accompanying eroticism) is the sickness of our time (but doesn't explain how it helps to add to it). If their characters have a curious way of using their sophisticated vacuity as a come-on, are they not in their creators' image? They make assignments (as in *The Eclipse*), but nobody comes.

The movie houses may soon look as desolate as *Il Mare* — set in Capri in winter. I've never seen so many people sleeping through movies as at Lincoln Center: no wonder there is talk of "cinema" achieving the social status of opera. A few more seasons of such art and it will be evidence of your interest in culture and your sense of civic responsibility if you go to the movies.

The "techniques" of such films are so apparent, so obtrusive, that they may easily be assumed to be "advanced," "modern," "new." It's perfectly true you don't come out of an older movie like Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, or Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, or Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* saying, "What technique!" Nor do you come out of a concert by Serkin exclaiming about his technique — you're thinking of the music. But those who adore José Iturbi always say, "What technique!"; who else is there to respond to? And the comment — which means how fast he can play or how ostentatiously — is not so very far from the admiration for Antonioni or Torre Nilsson or Bresson in *Trial of Joan of Arc* (though they are generally admired for how slow they can play).

My attitude to what is happening to movies is more than a little ambivalent. I don't think that my own preferences or the preferences of others for coherence and wit and feeling are going to make much difference. Movies are going to pieces; they're disintegrating, and the something called cinema is not movies raised to an art but rather movies diminished, movies that look "artistic." Movies are being stripped of all the "nonessentials" — that is to say, faces, actions, details, stories, places — everything that makes them entertaining and joyful. They are even being stripped of the essentials — light (*The Eclipse*), sound (*The Silence*), and movement in some of the New American Cinema films (there is sure to be one called *Stasis*). It's obvious that the most talented film artists and the ones most responsive to our time and the attitudes of Camus and Sartre are the ones moving in this direction. The others, those trying to observe the older conventions, are usually (though not always) banal, trivial, ludicrously commercial, and out of touch, somehow. It is the highest talents, the most dedicated, who are driven to the dead end of "pure" cinema — just as our painters are driven to obliterate the image and a dramatist like Beckett to reduce words to sounds.

Cinema, I suspect, is going to become so rarefied, so private in meaning, and so lacking in audience appeal that in a few years the foundations will be desperately and hopelessly trying to bring it back to life, as they are now doing with theater. The parallel course is, already, depressing and apparent. Clancy Sigal's (admiring) account of Beckett's *Endgame* might have been written about Bergman's *The Silence*:

*Endgame's* two main characters . . . occupy a claustrophobic space and a deeply ambiguous relationship. . . . Outside, the world is dead of some great catastrophe. . . . The action of the play mainly comprises anxious bickering between the principal characters. Eventually, Cloy dresses for the road to leave Hamm, and Hamm prepares for death, though we do not see the moment of parting . . . none of the actors is quite sure what the play is about, Beckett affects complete ignorance of the larger implications. "I only know what's on the page," he says with a friendly gesture.

Is Beckett leading the way or is it all in the air? His direction that the words of *Play* should be spoken so fast that they can't be understood is paralleled by Resnais's editing of *Muriel* so fast that you can't keep track of what's going on. Penelope Gilliatt writes, "You may have to go to the film at least twice, as I did, before the warmth of it seeps through . . ."; Beckett has already anticipated the

problem and provided the answer with the stage direction, "Repeat play exactly."

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When movies, the only art which everyone felt free to enjoy and have opinions about, lose the connection with song and dance, drama, and the novel, when they become cinema, which people feel free to criticize just as they fear to say what they think of a new piece of music or a new poem or painting, they will become another object of academic study and "appreciation," and will soon be an object of excitement only to practitioners of the "art." Although *L'Avventura* is a great film, had I been present at Cannes in 1960, where Antonioni distributed his explanatory statement, beginning, "There exists in the world today a very serious break between science on the one hand . . .," I might easily have joined in the hisses, which he didn't really deserve until the following year, when *La Notte* revealed that he had begun to believe his own explanations — thus making liars of us all.

When we see Dwight Macdonald's cultural solution applied to film, when we see the prospect that movies will become a product for "Masscult" consumption, while the "few who care" will have their High Culture cinema, who wants to take the high road? There is more energy, more originality, more excitement, more *art* in American kitsch like *Gunga Din*, *Easy Living*, the Rogers and Astaire pictures like *Swingtime* and *Top Hat*, in *Strangers on a Train*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Crimson Pirate*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Lady Eve*, *To Have and Have Not*, *The African Queen*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Sweet Smell of Success*, or more recently, *The Hustler*, *Lolita*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Hud*, *Charade*, than in the presumed "High Culture" of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Marienbad*, *La Notte*, *The Eclipse*, and the Torre Nilsson pictures. As Nabokov remarked, "Nothing is more exhilarating than Philistine vulgarity."

Regrettably, one of the surest signs of the Philistine is his reverence for the superior tastes of those who put him down. Macdonald believes that "a work of High Culture, however inept, is an expression of feelings, ideas, tastes, visions that are idiosyncratic and the audience similarly responsive to them as individuals." No. The "pure" cinema enthusiast who doesn't react to a film but feels he should, and so goes back to it over and over, is not responding as an individual but as a compulsive good pupil determined to appreciate what his cultural superiors say is "art." Movies are on their way into academia when they're turned into a matter of duty: a mistake in judgment isn't fatal, but too much anxiety about judgment is. In this country, respect for High Culture is becoming a ritual.

If debased art is kitsch, perhaps kitsch may be redeemed by honest vulgarity, may become art. Our best work transforms kitsch, makes art out of it; that is the peculiar greatness and strength of American movies, as Godard in *Breathless* and Truffaut in *Shoot the Piano Player* recognize. Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* is a classic example. Our first and greatest film artist D. W. Griffith was a master of kitsch: the sentiment and melodrama in his films are much more integral to their greatness than the critics who lament Griffith's lack of mind (!) perceive.

The movies are still where it happens, not for much longer perhaps, but the movies are still the art form that uses the material of our lives and the art form that we use. I am not suggesting that we want to see new and bigger remakes of the tired old standbys of the film repertory: who wants to see the new *Cimarron*, another *Quo Vadis*? And meanings don't have to be spread out for us like a free lunch counter. There are movies that are great experiences like *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and just a few years back there were movies which told good stories — movies like *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *From Here to Eternity*, *The Nun's Story*.

People go to the movies for the various ways they express the experiences of our lives, and as a means of avoiding and postponing the pressures we feel. This latter function of art — generally referred to disparagingly as escapism — may also be considered as refreshment, and in terms of modern big city life and small town boredom, it may be a major factor in keeping us sane.

In the last few years there has appeared a new kind of filmgoer: he isn't interested in movies but in cinema. A great many of the film makers are in this group: they've never gone to movies much and they don't care about them. They're interested in what they can do in the medium, not in what has been done. This is, of course, their privilege, though I would suggest that it may explain why they have such limited approaches to film. I'm more puzzled by the large numbers of those who are looking for *importance* in cinema. For example, a doctor friend called me after he'd seen *The Pink Panther* to tell me I needn't "bother" with that one, it was just slapstick. When I told him I'd already seen it and had a good time at it, he was irritated; he informed me that a movie should be more than a waste of time, it should be an exercise of taste that will enrich your life. Those looking for importance are too often contemptuous of the crude vitality of American films, though this crudity is not always offensive, and may represent the only way that energy and talent and inventiveness can find an outlet. It can break through the planned standardization of mass entertainment. It has become a mark of culture to revere the old slapstick (the Mack Sennett two-reelers and early Chaplins that aren't really as great as all that) and put down the new. But in a movie as shopworn as *Who's Been Sleeping in My Bedroom* there is, near the end, an almost inspired satirical striptease by Carol Burnett. *The Nutty Professor* is too long and repetitive, but Jerry Lewis has some scenes that hold their own with the silent classics. I enjoyed *The Prize*, which opens badly but then becomes a lively, blatant entertainment; but there's no point in recommending it to someone who wants his life enriched. I couldn't persuade friends to go and see *Charade*, which although no more than a charming confectionery trifle was, I think, probably the best American film of last year — as artificial and enjoyable in its way as *The Big Sleep*. The world had got around that it isn't *important*, that it isn't *serious*, that it doesn't do anything for you.

Our academic bureaucracy needs something alive to nourish it and movies still have a little blood which the academics can drain away. In the West several of the academic people I know who have at least understanding of movies were suddenly interested by Laurence Alloway's piece called "Critical in the Dark" in *Encounter*. By suggesting that movie criticism had never gotten into the right hands — i.e., theirs, and by indicating *projects*, and by publishing in the prestigious *Encounter*, Alloway indicated large vistas of respectability for future film critics. Perhaps also they were drawn to his condescending approach to movies as a pop art. Many academics have always been puzzled that Agee could *care* so much about movies. Alloway, by taking the position that Agee's caring was maladjustment, re-established their safe, serene worlds in which if a man gets excited about an idea or an issue, they know there's something the matter with him. It's not much consolation, but I think that in the cinema the academics will be working over will be the cinema they deserve.

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# I

## Broadsides

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# Fantasies of the Art-House Audience

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For several decades now educated people have been condescending toward the children, the shopgirls, all those with “humdrum” or “impoverished” lives — the mass audience — who turned to movies for “ready-made” dreams. The educated might admit that they sometimes went to the movies designed for the infantile mass audience — the number of famous people who relax with detective fiction makes this admission easy — but presumably they were not “taken in”; they went to get away from the tensions of their complex lives and work. But of course when they really want to enjoy movies as an art, they go to foreign films, or “adult” or unusual or experimental American films.

I would like to suggest that the educated audience often uses “art” films in much the same self-indulgent way as the mass audience uses the Hollywood “product,” finding wish fulfillment in the form of cheap and easy congratulation on their sensitivities and their liberalism. (Obviously any of my generalizations are subject to numerous exceptions and infinite qualifications; let’s assume that you know this, and that I use large generalizations in order to be suggestive rather than definitive.)

By the time Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima Mon Amour* reached American art houses, expectations were extraordinarily high. Dwight Macdonald in *Esquire* had said: “It is the most original, moving, exciting and important movie I’ve seen in years, somehow managing to combine a love story with propaganda against war and the atomic bomb without either losing its full force.” The rest of the press seemed to concur. The *Saturday Review* considered it “a masterpiece.” The New York *Herald Tribune* decided that “it establishes beyond any man’s cavilling the potentialities of the film as an art” — something one might have thought already established. *Time* decided that the theme was that “Hiroshima, like God, is love. It is the Calvary of the atomic age. It died for man’s sins . . .” I met a couple who had seen the film five nights in a row; a University of California professor informed me that if I didn’t like *this* one, he would never speak to me again. Dwight Macdonald wrote more and went further:

It is as stylised as *Potemkin* or *Ten Days that Shook the World*, as pure and powerful as cinema . . . It is also a novelistic exploration of memory, a *recherche du temps perdu* comparable to Proust. . . . For the first time since Eisenstein — have a cinematic intelligence so quick, so subtle, so original, so at once passionate and sophisticated that it can be compared with Joyce, with Picasso, with Berg and Bartok and Stravinsky. The audience was extraordinarily quiet — coughing, whispering, rustling of paper; a hypnotic trance. . . . It was oddly like a religious service, and if someone had made a wisecrack, it would have seemed not an irritation but a blasphemy.

Surely movies — even the greatest movies — are rarely received in such an atmosphere of incense burning. *Breathless* and *L’Avventura* were to be either admired or disliked or ignored, but *Hiroshima Mon Amour* was described in hushed tones; it was some sort of ineffable deep experience. Why?

The picture opened with those intertwined nude bodies — this could be symbolic of a true intermingling, but it irresistibly set off some lewd speculations about just *what* was going on. And what was that stuff they were covered with? Beach sand? Gold dust? Ashes? Finally, I accepted it as symbolic bomb ash, but I wasn’t happy with it. (Later I discovered that it was supposed to be “sweet ashes and dew.”) Then the French girl said she had seen everything in Hiroshima, and the Japanese man told her she had seen nothing in Hiroshima. Then they said the same things over again, and again, and perhaps again. And I lost patience. I have never understood why writers assume that repetition creates a lyric mood or underlines meaning with profundity. My reaction is simply, “OK, I got it the first time, let’s get on with it.” Now, this is obviously not how we are supposed to react to Marguerite Duras’s dialogue, which is clearly intended to be musical and contrapuntal, and I was going to try to get in the right, passive, receptive mood for a ritual experience, when some outright fraud made me stop and pay attention. The action — or inaction — in bed was intercut with what purported to be

documentary shots of the effect of the bomb on Hiroshima. Only I had seen some of the footage before in a Japanese atrocity movie that was about as documentary as *Peyton Place*. This clumsily staged imposture made me suspect that the Japanese man didn't know Hiroshima either, and I began to look askance at the truth he was supposed to represent. Where did he get this metaphysical identity with Hiroshima? As the film went on, and the heroine recounted her first love for a German soldier, how he had been killed on the last day of fighting, how she had been dragged away and her head shaved, how she had gone mad and been hidden away in the cellar by her shamed parents, I began to think less and less of the movie and more about why so many people were bowled over by it.

Was it possibly an elaborate, masochistic fantasy for intellectuals? Surely both sexes could identify with the girl's sexual desperation, her sensitivity and confusion — and had anyone dreamed up worse punishments for sexuality? Only a few years ago it had looked as if James Dean in *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* had gone just about as far as anybody could in being misunderstood. But this heroine not only had her head shaved by people who didn't understand her love and need for the German, but she went *crazy* and was locked in a cellar. You can't go much further in being misunderstood. And, at the risk of giving offense, is this not what sends so many people to analysts — the fear that they'll go crazy if they don't get love?

The Japanese, it may be noted, is rather dull and uninteresting: he says no more than an analyst might; he is simply a sounding board. And if, being Japanese, he is supposed to represent the world conscience, he brings an unsuitably bland, professionally sympathetic and upper-class manner to the function. But everybody who has suffered sexual deprivation — and who hasn't? — can identify with her and perhaps fantasize brutal parents and cellars. Even her insanity can be equated with those rough nights when a love affair fell apart or that nervous exhaustion at the end of the academic year that sends so many to the hospital or the psychiatric clinic.

It seemed to be a woman's picture — in the most derogatory sense of the term. And still she went on talking: her feelings, her doubts, her memories, kept pouring out. It began to seem like Truman's Confession at the higher levels of spiritual and sexual communion; and I decided the great lesson for us all was to shut up. This woman (beautifully as Emmanuelle Riva interpreted her) was exposing one of the worst faults of intelligent modern women: she was talking all her emotions out — as if bedrooms were the place to demonstrate sensibility. It's unfortunate that what people believe to be the most important things about themselves, their innermost truths and secrets — the real you or me — that we blurt up when somebody looks sympathetic, is very likely to be the driveling nonsense that we generally have enough brains to forget about. The real you or me that we conceal because we think people won't accept it is slop — and why *should* anybody want it?

But here was the audience soaking it up — audiences of social workers, scientists, doctors, architects, professors — living and loving and suffering just like the stenographer watching Susan Hayward. Are the experiences involved really so different? Few of us have seen our lovers killed by partisan bullets, but something kills love anyway — something always does — and it's probably highly gratifying for many people to identify with a heroine who isn't responsible: it is the insane world that has punished her for her sexual expression. Emmanuelle Riva's sexual expression is far more forthright than a Hollywood heroine's, which makes it more appealing to an educated audience and, of course, her character and her manner of indicating her emotional problems have a high "tone." (It may be relevant to note that the educated audience, which generally ignores Miss Hayward, did turn out for *I Want to Live*, in which the character of Barbara Graham was turned into a sort of modern Tess of the d'Urbervilles — not only innocent of crime but horribly sinned against and *noble* than anybody else.)

But what does her sad story have to do with Hiroshima and the bomb? Would not some other psychosexual story of deprivation (say, *Camille* or *Stella Dallas*) be just as relevant to the horrors

war if it were set in Hiroshima? It would seem so. However, the setting itself explains another aspect of the film's strong appeal, particularly to liberal intellectuals. There is a crucial bit of dialogue: "They make movies to sell soap, why not a movie to sell peace?" I don't know how many movies you have gone to lately that were made to sell soap, but American movies *are* like advertisements, and you can certainly assume that indirectly they sell a way of life that includes soap as well as an infinity of other products. But what makes the dialogue crucial is that the audience for *Hiroshima Mon Amour* feels virtuous because they want to buy peace. And the question I want to ask is: who's selling it?

Recently, at a cocktail party of artists and professors, I noticed displayed on a table right next to the pickled Jerusalem artichokes, two French publications — Lo Duca's new volume on *Eroticism in the Cinema* and Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon*. Both books are like more elegantly laid-out issues of *Confidential* and all those semi-nameless magazines which feature hideously oversized mammary glands, only these books are supposed to be chic — the latest intellectual camp. The Lo Duca book features stills from a Kenneth Anger movie in which nude ladies are wrapped in chains. Kenneth Anger, you may recall, made his reputation with a film called *Fireworks*, in which a roman candle explodes inside a sailor's fly. His own book has a dust jacket photograph of Jayne Mansfield — an aerial view down her dress that makes her breasts look like long strips of cooked tripe. The book itself is a recounting of the legends (that is to say the dirty stories, scandals, and gossip) that Anger heard while growing up in southern California.

What struck me about these books, which function as entertainment to what might be called highbrows, was that their chic seemed to consist largely in a degradation of the female image. The stars and starlets are displayed at their most grotesque, just as they are in the cheapest American publications (in fact the photos are probably derived from those sources). This female image is a parody of woman — lascivious face, wet open mouth, gigantic drooping breasts. She has no character, no individuality: she's blonde or brunette or redhead, as one might consume a martini, an old-fashioned, or a gin and tonic.

Now I am told that even the junior-high-school boys of America use photographs like these as pinups, and that this is their idea of the desirable female. I don't believe it. I would guess that they pretend to this ideal because they're afraid they won't be considered manly and sexy if they admit they find this image disgusting. I don't believe that these photographs are erotic in any ordinary sense. I think that the grotesqueness of this female image is what people enjoy. Here are some possible reasons. First, these spongy, subhuman sex images reduce women to the lowest animal level. And in the modern world, where women are competent, independent, and free and equal, the men have a solid, competitive hostility — they want to see women degraded even lower than they were in the Victorian era. Here is woman reduced to nothing but a blob that will gratify any male impulse. And, of course, a woman who has no interest in life but love presents no challenge to the male ego. Second, there's the old split between sacred and profane love — and many men feel that the more degraded the female, the more potent they would become. Third, there's the vast homosexual audience which enjoys derision of the female. I would guess, and here's a big generalization, that more homosexuals than heterosexuals love to chortle over the nude photos of Anita Ekberg. She's so preposterous — a living satire of the female. It's my guess that the audience for nudie-cutie magazines uses them in much the same way the wealthy and educated use expensive French publications on the same theme: they want to laugh at the subjects and/or feel superior to them.

When the parodied female becomes known, becomes a "personality," derision gives way to admiration and sympathy and "understanding." In publications like the British *Sunday Times* you will find discussions with passages like "Marilyn Monroe grew up without affection and at times she was

near suicide. When she talks about herself the awareness of her bitter past is never quite absent." *Time* and *Life* present her psychoanalytical comments on herself. And Dwight Macdonald in *Esquire* explains that "the expensive difficulties she makes for her employers are not so much prima donna assertiveness as symptoms of resentment and boredom." Sociologists read Zolotow's book on her character changes, and Cecil Beaton rhapsodizes that "she was born the postwar day we had need of her. Certainly she has no knowledge of the past. Like Giraudoux's Ondine, she is only fifteen years old; and she will never die." He's right, at least, about her not having knowledge of the past: she seems to have swallowed all the psychoanalytical clichés about maltreated children, and when she talks about her past she simply spews them up. And the educated public loves these burbling bits of Freudian "insight" when they come out of the mouths of "babes." In *The Misfits*, our heroine, with the sure instincts of the faithful dog, and the uncorrupted clarity of the good clean peasant, looks at each character in the film and knows him for what he is. The innocent eye can see the inner man — she is the female of the species of the strong, silent hero, but she's also the traditional whore with the heart of gold. Her performance in *The Misfits* appears uncontrollably nervous, but it's almost as if her confused state were the final proof of her sincerity. The public loves her the more because life seems too much for her.

*La Vérité* is a tired and trite and mechanical piece of slick moviemaking. Conceptually, it's rather like *Of Human Bondage* — seen from Mildred's point of view. Although the title and the film's structure suggest that we are going to see the relativity of truth, the movie seems designed to show us the truth about Brigitte Bardot, just as *The Misfits* was written around Monroe. (These ladies are the ones congratulated for their histrionic achievements in playing themselves; certainly they are perfect in their roles — no one else could play them so well — but then, could they play anyone else?) This confusion of art and life which takes the form of sensationalism is becoming very popular in this Freudianized period. (Clouzot coyly plays with this confusion by having Bardot, the subject of a book by Simone de Beauvoir, accused in the courtroom of *La Vérité* of having read a book by de Beauvoir.)

It is supposed to be daring and modern to make these messed-up accounts of messed-up lives — though they may seem very much like the old Sunday supplements with their daring exposés. In their new form, however, the appeal is not only to the mass audience but also to the more literate, who are led to believe that they are getting some inside psychological dope.

Apparently these screen incarnations of male fantasies, Monroe (once a calendar girl come to comic strip life, an implausible but delicious affront to respectability) and Bardot (the distillation of all those irresponsible, petulant teen-agers who may never know that human experience has depth and expressiveness and potentialities beyond their immediate range of impulses) are objects of enthusiasm not so much for their (former or present) polymorphous-perverse physical charms and their (former or present) comedy talents, as for their messy, confused public-private lives — the nervous breakdowns, miscarriages, overweight problems, husband troubles, and all those mental and physical ills which now comprise the image of a great star. The new heroine of our films is becoming the wretched star herself. In the pre-Freudian age, the exploitation of personal ailments in films like *The Misfits* and *La Vérité* would have been regarded as disgusting. It is disgusting, and the condescending type of sympathetic "understanding" which is now widely purveyed is an insult to Freud and man. In the frivolous, absurd old days, stars were photographed in their bubble baths: now they bathe in tears of self-pity — while intellectual critics tap their understanding typewriters.

The "mass" audience looks up at the "stars"; the educated audience looks down sympathetically as if reading a case history. They all stew in their own narcissism. The mass audience is beginning to catch up. On a recent television program Ed Sullivan clucked sympathetically at Brigitte Bardot and told her how much he sympathized with the hard life of glamour girls like her and Monroe and Taylor, and, final irony, told her how much he admired the way she had "handled herself."



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