

## **Responsibility and Criticism**

**Conversation between  
Adrian Martin  
and  
Cinemascope – Independent Film Journal**

*Responsibility* is a big and scary word. The question 'what is a film magazine's responsibility?' has a threatening tone, as if there will only be one correct, politically progressive answer. One could just as easily argue, as a counter-provocation, that a film magazine needs to be *irresponsible*, to open up spaces of imagination beyond the straitjacket of any one ideology, whether of the right or left.

And yet, I take the question seriously. Once, when working on an Internet film journal before the advent of *Rouge*, I realised that everyone working on such a publication must be able to draw a line – *a line over which they will not cross*. An ethical line. In concrete terms, that means being able to say, absolutely, what kind of thing you are *not* willing to publish, under any circumstances. That instance – and hence the nature of the ethical line – could be anything: an article extolling the latest Spielberg blockbuster; or an indulgent article on pornography; or a tasteless exercise in proud 'political incorrectness' (there's a lot of that 'reversal' around in these *Borat* days). Feeling your way, case, by case, through what you *are* willing to publish is easy; the sky's the limit, and there is always so much more cinema to explore. But drawing the line is hard: it can feel like enforcing censorship rather than taking an ethical stand. Nonetheless, one must strive for an ethical standard in on-line publishing, and not let the moral *slippery slide* begin.

That slippery slide is usually inaugurated, in the film magazine business, by one thing: money. And most particularly: advertising. The moment you allow advertising onto a site, you have bought into compromise. Can you be truly critical, any longer, of those distributors, exhibitors or publishers who are helping to subsidise your site? It is better – and certainly ethically easier – to 'fudge' one's critical opinions, to keep powerful friends, to hold open the sources of precious revenue. Institutional support – such as might come from a government arts body, a university, a council, a cine-club association or a special public fund – can sometimes come with 'necessary conditions' (to promote a national or local cinema, for instance) which can be debated, deflected or subverted; advertising money, however, comes with the pulverising force of capital and its sole aim, which is to sell, to expand itself, and to win passive social consent.

A film magazine such as *Rouge* sets itself against such passivity – such *complicity*. This is one of the most socially and politically responsible things that a publication can do: resist complicity with the system, the industry, the establishment. It is easy to be idealistic about this, but idealism often corrodes quickly in a difficult material world. There is so much pressure, one way or another, to conform to the film industry: to cover only those latest films which the commercial industry wants you to see; to engage only in the kind of discourse (pro or con) that 'greases the wheels' of the mass

movie-going system; to overlook what the cinema of the past has been, or what truly 'alternative' cinema is today. This is the ethical responsibility of a film magazine: to *seek an alternative*, and then to communicate it, understand it, transmit it. To 'promote' this alternative, in a sense, but not in the empty way that the industry promotes its products: for a quick fix, for planned obsolescence, for immediate forgetting, for the sake of a 'serial' assembly-line consumption of absolutely alike items. Time without pity, and without memory.

As always, we return to the task that every severe, inspiring soul before us – Adorno, Benjamin, Debord, Daney, Brenez – has confronted and ceaselessly renewed: how to be truly *critical*, in a world that silences or castrates critique? How to get beyond those cinephilic procedures that are, at the right moments, fruitful and inspiring – like identifying a new auteur, or acclaiming some 'new wave' on the film festival circuit, or applying a new theoretical grid – but can so easily become endless distractions, hermeneutic spirals, self-sufficient parlour games, evasions of the real?

Of course, we all know that 'the real' is not something we can simply touch, shine a torch on, and gaze at steadily in an eternal Enlightenment; language, desire, strategy, poetic imagination will always be needed to pierce the veil or take one groping step further in the treacherous mist. We can never entirely know, in the slogans of an outmoded Communism, 'what is to be done', or what is to be said about cinema. If we could know these things in advance, there would be precisely no use in trying to say any of them in public – and this is the problem of relevance (or rather, irrelevance) of a certain Marxist film critique today. Culture – an alternative, critical, counter-culture – can never be known in advance. Its canons are unclear, to be reformulated from day to day. Doubt and mystery and poetry must be accepted as vital ingredients of any political practice (as the Surrealists and their kin knew). But once, again, an *ethical orientation* is possible: a direction, an intuition towards the future. Like the brave indigenous children in that fine Australian film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, progressive cinema magazines must find that fragile marker in the harsh, brutally colonised landscape that both guides and protects them, as they stumble tenaciously towards the unknown tomorrow.

Adrian Martin 15 December 2006

**Conversation between  
Adrian Martin  
and  
MIRADAS DE CINE**

'Guys, Did You Get Past Page 80 of Volume 1 of *The Movement-Image?*':  
*Miradas de cine* interviews Adrian Martin  
by José David Cáceres and Alejandro Diaz

MDC: As a film critic, do you prefer theoretical investigation to reviewing recent films?

AM: There is a difference between what a critic ideally wants to do, and what he or she actually gets to do – or what he or she gets paid to do. The art of living involves trying to bend opportunity in the direction of desire as much as possible. If I could spend my whole life getting paid to write long, intellectual articles on Rossellini, Godard, Tsai, and teen movies, I probably would. But, in the reality of my own life and career, I have done various sorts of work in relation to cinema: periods of university teaching, of freelance writing and speaking, of being involved with film programming/curating, and of employment as a weekly film reviewer on a major Australian newspaper (Melbourne's *The Age*).

Each of these different jobs allow a different relation to cinema. In the university context, one can pursue a historical and theoretical approach to cinema, which I value highly. And yet, when I am in the university, I often think that the work lacks a sense of the 'now', of what is happening in the present tense of cinema (universities always seem five years behind the pulse) – and I value that sense of the now just as much. On the other hand, weekly film reviewing is, by its nature, so completely consumed by the now – by what blockbuster or commercial arthouse film is about to open this week or next week – that it almost inevitably loses all perspective on film history, its riches and possibilities. When newspaper reviewers start giving things like *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) nine out of ten stars (or whatever), I always wonder: but what about *Vertigo* (1958) or *Voyage in Italy* (195x) or *Vivre sa vie* (1962) – how many stars would you have given them?

MDC: Some film critics deal with new kinds of cinema and new forms of expression in film. Are we forgetting about older cinema (silent films, for instance)? Isn't it necessary to rediscover filmmakers from the past?

AM: To answer this, let me return to my idea of the now in cinema. There are two kinds of now. There is the now defined by what's happening, especially in the collective or popular mind: trends in popular culture, current problems and obsessions, what Thomas Elsaesser calls the *social imaginary*. So, to keep track of that now, you need to be seeing every kind of film, high and low: genre films, blockbusters, things coming out only on video or DVD or television, art films, etc.

Then there is a second kind of now which is really the *new*: the cutting edge, the innovative films, the avant-garde' wherever you find it (which is not just in art museums and galleries, or on computers). This is what you are referring to as 'new kinds of cinema and new ways of expression'. Yes, I admit I am very drawn to this 'new now', hence my interest in filmmakers including Raúl Ruiz, Peter Tscherkassky, Philippe Grandrieux, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Philippe Garrel, and many others. From where I am (Australia), these films really constitute a kind of underground art cinema, because such films are never commercially shown in arthouse cinemas here (the most adventurous that Australian art cinemas get is to show Haneke's *Caché* [2005] because it has big French stars, or a Zhang Yimou martial arts spectacular). So, it is like forbidden fruit, and therefore has great allure!

But to answer your question more directly: I completely agree with your proposition about 'old' films and 'past' filmmakers. In fact, I would go further: no film is truly old, or in the past! Every cinephile should have the experience of watching a silent film – I had this experience watching some Jean Epstein films recently – and suddenly feeling confronted with something that is still, today, newer and more modern than we ourselves are as spectators. There is a good, simple reason for this: the cinema is always a laboratory, a field of experimentation: experimentation with image, sound, performance, gesture, light, colour, music, rhythm, storytelling, etc. No experiment is ever exhausted, and no aesthetic or cultural problem is solved for all time. So, when we return to old films, we therefore see that they are completely contemporary to us and our concerns, if we are open to the traces of experimentation in them – there are always new ideas in old films. I do not regard the 'cinema of the past' as something neat, clean, classical, canonical. Cinema is always 'at the crossroads', at every moment of its existence, and so are we. That is why the art of programming is important: placing the present and past cinema always into a fruitful encounter – or an Eisensteinian dialectical clash. However, to get silent films onto DVD, into specialist film events, even into Film Festivals or some Cinematheques, is hard work and a big fight today: we all have to struggle hard to keep silent cinema present and alive before our eyes (and hopefully sometimes without the obligatory 'modern musical accompaniment').

MDC: Is it possible to establish any kind of objective knowledge about these crossroads where cinema always is at? Can we get further than just a discussion of personal tastes and preferences?

AM: Well, we *must* get further than just 'personal tastes and preferences'! I deeply believe that taste is a kind of prison for oneself – when a critic finds himself or herself always rigidly repeating the same opinions, the same positions, the same likes and dislikes (that is the kind of bad posture which Pauline Kael bequeathed to criticism). Critics should feel free to bring in their own emotional reactions to films – it is hard to keep them out of writing – but the phenomenon known as the 'gut feeling' or gut reaction can become a terrible end in itself: 'this film makes me angry or it makes me happy, so it's a rotten film or a great film, and I'm not going to discuss it any further.' The important thing is always argument, analysis, logic. I have an irrational side (critics need it), but my rational side believes in logical demonstration: if you can prove to me that what are saying about a film makes internal sense, if you can

marshal the evidence from the film itself to back up what you say, then I too can be persuaded to disregard my own first gut reaction and explore that film again in a new, more open way.

Your question mentions objective knowledge. I guess I am enough of a modern person to doubt the absolute value or reality of such so-called objectivity. I believe in the multiplicity of discourses, but I don't believe in total, free-for-all, postmodern relativity where any one opinion or analysis is as good as anyone else's. I believe that, through the constant dialectic of argument, through the richness of many personal views and systems, we can come, not to a consensus, but a sort of critical mass where each of us might be able to understand some of the key problems of our time, and the forces at work that shape our world. I believe that, somewhere amidst the veritable Babel of cinephilia, there is indeed some kind of new social community.

MDC: Is writing on current films the best way to explore current society?

AM: Writing on current films is only *one* way to explore current society. Society is like cinema: it always has its roots in the past, its traditions, its precedents, its 'archaeology of culture' (as I once called it in a text I wrote when I was 20 years old!). That's what history is, and I believe one must always try to be historical, to see the causes and seeds of things – as well as the possibilities for a better society that have been suppressed or forgotten – in what has gone before us. So, in that sense, looking at older films in order to understand the present society can give us the shock of a *defamiliarisation*: it can allow us to see a certain problem (of life, politics, culture, etc) differently, in a productive or unusual way. Let me give you a concrete example. I was once writing about the 'new relationship' films, the Generation X films of the 1980s and '90s, like Ben Stiller's *Reality Bites* (1993) and many popular films of that sort. Of course, every young generation thinks it has invented a totally new kind of love, a totally new form of intimate relationships, a totally new kind of sex! In the middle of researching and writing this piece (called "The Chaos Theory of Love"), by chance I saw George Cukor's *Sylvia Scarlett* from 1935. I was shocked and amazed (and also delighted), because everything I was writing about was already completely evident in that 'old' film! Everything about modern emotional alienation, about sex and gender experimentation, about sadness and liberation and confusion: Cukor captured it all in that 'crossroads' moment of 1935. We must all have salutary 'history lessons' like this, all the time.

On the other hand, it is *also* good to pay close attention to current films. A critic has to work 'at the coal face', he or she has to really immerse himself/herself in the messy contradictions of the present, all the issues and problems that are only dimly discernible, that are coming into shape around us. I like to watch for what I call new *sensibilities* in cinema: new, emerging shapes of thought and feeling, covering elements of content and of form. Watching present cinema without past cinema, or vice versa, makes no sense to me: we need both, in order to slowly build up an understanding of the way the world works, and how we work within it.

MDC: In what way has film criticism on the internet been positive (or negative)?

AM: This is a very big question! And I have mixed feelings about it, ambivalent feelings. On the positive side, let us take, as an example, this email interview/conversation we are engaged in right now: would you know anything of my work as a critic, or would I know anything of *Miradas de cine* and the Spanish cinephile scene, if the internet had never existed? Would *Miradas* be publishing in Spanish a critic from Australia, or would *Rouge* (which I co-edit at [www.rouge.com.au](http://www.rouge.com.au)) be publishing in English a number of critics from Spain, Brazil, Cuba? Perhaps it might have happened without the internet – but it would probably have taken many more years to spontaneously combust! So, in terms of the possibility and reality of international cultural exchanges, the internet has opened up, facilitated and hurried up many good things. Until quite recently, many cinephiles around the world (including myself) had a certain map of the film globe stuck in their heads, going back fifty or more years: the centres of that world were Paris, New York, London, and the major film magazines were *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Sight and Sound*, *Film Comment*. That is where the authority, the social-cultural legitimacy was; and if you were somewhere else, you had to resign yourself to being on the margins of the film globe, or you had to plan your escape to one of these romantic big cities, since only there (we imagined) could one 'see everything', and really make a mark as a critic. Now much of this map in our minds and in reality has been changed, redrawn – for the better. The centre is much more dispersed, and the important critical work can be done anywhere, if you have some access to the films, books, ideas, etc. However, it is still important to physically travel – at least to some excellent Film Festivals around the world.

And, still on the positive side, the internet has also led to a thinking about new forms of film criticism. To put it briefly, many of us are starting to see how words can work differently with images, frame captures or freeze-frames from DVD, clips, graphic design, etc. Film criticism is becoming more multi-channel, at least potentially – and it is moving a little closer to its object, cinema, and sharing its language (of image and sound) a little more. People such as Godard were foreseeing and hoping for this revolution back in 1965! But only now do we have, not just the technology but, more profoundly (and philosophically), the *technique* – a new way of thinking about how to write about film, beyond the old-fashioned rationality of the written, descriptive word.

([www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html))

Take, for instance, a specific text which we translated into English and published in *Rouge*: Raymond Bellour's "The Film We Accompany", which is a textual analysis of Ritwik Ghatak's magnificent 1960 Indian melodrama *The Cloud-Capped Star*. ([www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/3/film.html)) When he first published it in *Trafic*, Raymond did not use any images (because that is the editorial policy of that magazine). In the *Rouge* version, which was constructed differently, we used literally hundreds of DVD frame-captures, running along beside the text. It makes the text more of an artwork in itself, creating new relations between image and word. Many of the greatest film critics of the past, such as Jairo Ferreira or Manny Farber, were always (maybe without knowing it!) the 'prophets' of this new style of criticism: the kind of writing they did was straining at the edges of mere 'literature' or journalism, trying to evoke this multi-channel, multi-sensorial experience. DVD, also, should move more in this direction (the 'audio commentary' by a critic over a film is only a small, modest,

highly constrained beginning) – that is, if the producers and business people allow it to happen!

Now to the negative side. There is tons of garbage published about cinema on the internet! Of course, there are some fantastic sites, magazines, blogs, sources of information, etc – but often it is hard for any of us to navigate this maze. The much-vaunted democratisation of the internet has its pitfalls. I said that, in the past, the problem was that authority was too narrowly circumscribed in a handful of cities, magazines, festivals, critics. Now, the problem is that authority is dispersed too far and too wide – anybody with an internet site is their own self-proclaimed authority on cinema. It is a positive, enchanting experience to realise that the real world of cinema and its culture is very large; but it can be a deflating, disenchanting experience to suddenly see that what a critic and his friends in a little town in Australia write about the latest film, is exactly the same as what critics and their friends are writing in every place all over the world. The internet, unfortunately, often favours a certain anti-intellectualism, a hyper-consumerist mentality – and the DVD market plays into that, too. It all becomes – much worse than in the Old World of printed newspapers, magazines, radio and TV – a matter of people asserting (often belligerently) simply 'I love this film' or 'I hate it', with little or no analysis, discussion, comparison between films, cultural investigation. For me cinephilia does not just mean seeing and rating thousands of films – and I don't care if that means films by Spielberg or Murnau or Béla Tarr or Jim Carrey. It means *having an idea* about cinema, forming a position, using it as a tool to decipher the world. Not a fixed idea, but a supple, mobile, multiple process of thought, description, exploration, analysis. When the internet gets us closer to that ideal, it will truly be a good thing.

MDC: Is it necessary for film critics to keep in touch with an audience that, in many cases, does not seem to be very keen on reading about the films they watch?

AM: Ah! I detect in your question an ancient anxiety that has always bedeviled the 'intellectual class' which contains film critics like ourselves: are we too distant, too disconnected, from 'ordinary people', average moviegoers? Often this makes itself felt in our lives in a very intimate way: are we growing away from our parents, our oldest friends, the people we went to school with or once worked with, by our immersion in our specialist interest? I am not sure whether scientists or lawyers share this anxiety with us, but if not, that is because the cinema brings with it a very special, very complex place in society: it is the 'art of the people', and yet it is also an art for intellectuals, specialists, connoisseurs ... and what is a cinephile if not a connoisseur? And yet, because cinema (at least, some cinema) is a popular art, none of us want to be labeled an elitist in the way we talk about it, write about it, love it. I once heard it said – it is a good dream – that the cinephile of today is someone who communes with the ghosts of bygone popular audiences in the lost theatres of yesteryear, appreciating Westerns, musicals, all kinds of genre films ... But I think we have to face up to the fact that any thoughtful immersion in a popular art, any attempt to articulate how it really works, is always going to separate us from 'the people' of today who (as you rightly point out) don't want to really read deep film analyses, if indeed they want to read anything! I have always liked Serge Daney's formulation: that film criticism is elitist, but it's a *popular elitism*, because it can work for anyone.

Indeed, many cinephiles and critics are not necessarily certified university academics; many are autodidacts, self-taught and obsessive (my life has straddled both conditions; I dropped out of university at the age of 18, but at last I am returning to it as a Doctor of Philosophy, after a lifetime of obsessive cinephilia). But there will always be that tension inherent in being an 'intellectual of popular art'. Elsaesser wrote a terrific essay about this back in the mid '70s, which has just been reprinted in his collection *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

To come back more directly to your question: how can we 'keep in touch' with the regular audience? Well, every film fan has at least a *little* piece of that innocent, spontaneous, unreflective moviegoer left inside him or her! And, of course, in daily social life, we are constantly in touch with people who have a normal (distracted or indifferent) relation to cinema, not the intensive (and intense) relationship that we have. And then there are more sociological ways of taking the pulse of the popular audience: questionnaires, surveys, watching television, reading essays in political science ... Finally, however, I recall a story from when I was about 20 years old: I went to a screening of Howard Hawks' classic Western *Rio Bravo* (1959) on 35 millimetre in a beautiful old-style movie theatre in the suburbs of Melbourne; it was probably the final time this movie was ever physically projected in Australia (before the eras of VHS and DVD). And you know what this screening was? It was a midday Saturday session for little children! Well, there were five people present: myself, and four very young kids. Three of these kids jumped out of their seats within the first two minutes of the film, instantly bored with it, and ran around the cinema, playing and screaming; at intermission (it is a very long film!), they found their parents and left. The one little boy who was left, all alone, came shyly up to me and asked: "Mister, do you like this movie?" I said to him, "Yes!", and tried to explain why. Then, for the second half, this little boy and me sat, like father and son, watching *Rio Bravo*! And at the end he walked away, out into the street, and we never saw each other again: it was a like a poignant scene from a Víctor Erice film. And that, to me, is an allegory, of how a critic truly relates to 'the average moviegoer' – like two ghosts who might meet in the cinema foyer of Tsai's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003).

MDC: You say that writing on films could be a way of 'understanding the way the world works and how we work within it'. Do you think critics should include their own political ideas when writing on films?

AM: The first way I can answer your question is to declare this: that, no matter what critics *think* they are saying or not saying in their writing, they are betraying themselves, giving away their deepest selves, their full system of beliefs and values, at every single moment. It is important for every critic to come to a realisation of this truth. What you think about music and art, what you think about sex, what you think about family and friendship, what you think about politics and history: it's all there, plainly there, for everyone to read in what you write, in your slightest expression, your smallest turn of phrase. Any critic's *biases* are always going to become apparent – so it is better to master those biases, use them, include them, be up front about them. Or else, those biases will rule you, like nasty unconscious impulses, and you will end up looking like someone who has a sinister agenda, an axe to grind.

Having declared that, I would also like to say that it is important to try to stay politically and socially open-minded in your head, and in how and what you write: the worst kind of political criticism is when every movie is praised or damned in terms of how far it illustrates the critic's favourite political theory (left-wing or right-wing, it doesn't matter on this level) of how the world works (or how it *should* work). For me, the truly political goal in film criticism is always to question received opinions, whether these opinions are conservative or progressive. For every cliché statement that comes easily to one's mouth or one's pen – for instance, if we say that films with an *authoritarian* style are bad, while films with a Bazinian, democratic style (like Kiarostami's) are good; or that classical narrative is bad whilst fractured modernism is good – we need to stop and try to *think the exact opposite position*: aren't there some good authoritarian films (Haneke's for example), aren't there some good classical narrative films (maybe several thousand)? It is only through constant dialectics, back and forth, that we can finally think freely and clearly. We have to constantly question the reflex distinctions we make between forms, styles, eras, tendencies – partly because, as I said, before, *all* cinema is in the present. I like what Michel Foucault said about thinking: he said what 'what I say is not necessarily *what I think*, but rather *what might be thought*' in any given situation, conjuncture, crossroads. Every critic should find and develop their own personal voice – but they should also avoid building an altar to their own ego!

MDC: If young moviegoers don't seem to be very interested in reading about films, maybe they'll be less interested in reading about cinema from the past, about the black & white films ... Do you think there's some kind of miseducation/alienation which is negative for young cinephiles?

AM: Well, I think there's a big difference between film *fans* (or film *nerds*) and cinephiles. This difference has always existed, it's nothing new, but it often causes friction and troubles. In my view, a cinephile is someone who likes to read, who likes to bring in ideas to think about and discuss movies. The fan/nerd doesn't much like to read or analyse – and, if they do, it is a very particular kind of material: lists of films (best, worst, genre lists, 'what I have seen this month') – and a very particular kind of analysis: 'in' jokes for aficionados ('John Landis appears in the background in a werewolf costume!'), very broad symbolic-political meanings ('Romero's supermarket zombies stand for mindless consumers!'). Nerds don't like to read, but they sure love to write – the Internet is now full of this kind of stuff. The stance of the nerd is fiercely anti-intellectual, anti-authoritarian, and it comes with a particularly vicious variant of populism: 'My opinion is as good as anybody's, and therefore I deserve as much of the critical space as I can grab, so fuck you!' It's the 'democratic' attitude gone mad, and I really think it is the enemy of cinephilia – not least because the film culture of the nerd fixates on a very narrow, almost completely narrative, commercial or semi-commercial band of filmic production: horror movies, action films, sex films, trash comedies, the cult of Tarantino, etc. I love these kinds of films, too – but the cinephile is the person who can link the greatness of George A. Romero with the greatness of Hou Hsiao-hsien or Peter Tscherkassky, not just Kim Ki-Duk or Dario Argento! Yes, the nerd is miseducated and alienated – and, what's worse, they choose to cultivate

their alienation, to imprison themselves in their anti-intellectualism, to wear it as a badge of pride. It is an ugly posture, the opposite of an open, generous cinephilia.

MDC: There's a way of writing on films which we find so cryptic, so far from the 'real world', so abstract that it ends up being too academic. We don't like Gilles Deleuze's interpretations of films very much, but we are happy when we read James Agee's reviews in *The Nation* or André Bazin's theoretical essays ... We don't think Deleuze's writings are uninteresting or irrelevant; it's a matter of the way he writes, a matter of methods. Shouldn't a film critic or reviewer be clear in his articles, above all else? Does teaching in a university isolate people from the rest of the world?

AM: Guys, did you get past page 80 of Volume 1 of *The Movement-Image*? That first part of the book is the hardest, the heaviest, the most philosophical in the traditional sense, with its commentary on Bergson's theory of intervals, etc. To everyone I meet who is about to tackle this book for the first time, I advise: just keep going past page 80! Because it's Deleuze we're talking about here, and Deleuze is the guy who, about one hundred pages later, can write this most beautiful description of the films of Mizoguchi: that his films trace lines and vectors of life, connections and disconnections between people and places, and when these lines finally break completely, all the misery of the world pours out. Have you read a better account of Mizoguchi than that? I haven't. It brings together the human and emotional aspect, the formal aspect, the spatial aspect of his films, and ties them into a superb, moving logic. What more could you ask for?

Here, I must explain something to you. I have never considered Deleuze an esoteric, cold, abstract or ultra-academic writer. When I was 17, one of the first 'intellectual' books I bought was a collection of essays (many translated from French and Italian) edited by several renegade Australians, called *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*. Could any 17 year old, precocious intellectual resist a book with a title like that? One of the editors, Meaghan Morris, went on to become one of the best and most inspiring film critics in my country, and she was literally 'schooled in France', in the textual techniques of Barthes and Genette, the 'urbanism' of De Certeau, the feminism of Le Dœuff, and the political analyses of Foucault. She brought all of this, and more – Deleuze included – into her work as a columnist for a newspaper that was mainly devoted to financial speculation! She was (and remains) an absolute model for me (you can read some of her great texts in *Rouge*). So Deleuze was never, for me, inaccessible: he was the great 'tool box' as he called himself, he encouraged his readers to take his ideas in any direction they wished. He proposed abstract ideas – all ideas are abstractions, after all! – which were designed to inspire concrete applications, experiments in every kind of domain (including film criticism). So, as a young guy, I connected immediately to his powerful ideas about desire, assemblages, the rhizome, multiplicity, etc, well before the project of his cinema books began in the '80s. I would have to say that, even at his most dense, Deleuze is always clear, in fact he's the standard for limpid, logical, step-by-step reasoning that takes you from the everyday to the stars – read the transcripts of his class lectures on the Internet, what a great teacher he was! I have always thought: if you are a young person and you read Deleuze mocking and expanding the writings of classic psychoanalysts, as he does in the great text "Interpretation of Children's Utterances", or you read Guattari

describing what it is to face the line of police with shields and batons charging you to bash your skull in (see Garrel's magnificent *Les Amants réguliers*) – then you can never be the same again! (There are certain artists and thinkers that are especially important and fateful for the young to encounter: Deleuze, Godard, Hawks, Cioran, De Palma.) Reading Deleuze truly changed my life – so I will not stand to hear him denigrated as cryptic or academic or cut off from the real world!

To make a general point of this: what did I really find in Deleuze, beyond the substance of certain ideas, certain models? This goes to the very heart of the investigation into criticism that you are making at *Miradas*. There is something in criticism I value perhaps above everything else: it is what I can call the 'personal voice'. I do not mean the autobiographical or confessional content of writing, which often bores and irritates me – and, in fact, most writers 'in person' are absolutely nothing like what you imagine them to be from their writing! No, I mean the way in which an individual writer can communicate and draw you into his or her own 'system', their way of seeing, feeling and processing films, as well as the world. In this sense, no critic is either right or wrong in their judgements; they can only succeed (or fail) to be convincing or persuasive, to let you experience a new or specific way of looking and thinking. Writing is rhetorical, in this sense, but it is also creative, imaginative, poetic: this is the point where criticism approaches art (although it never supplants art!), and all the best critics (like Jonathan Rosenbaum, Nicole Brenez, Judith Williamson or Roger Tailleur) reach it. The Surrealists (who have been a big influence on me) always upheld this principle of the 'personal voice' above all else, and I find a more recent statement of this principle from Jean Baudrillard in *The Perfect Crime* (1995): "As for ideas, everyone has them. What counts is the poetic singularity of the analysis. That alone can justify writing, not the wretched critical objectivity of ideas. There will never be any resolving the contradictoriness of ideas, except in the energy and felicity of language."

MDC: You talked about the difference between a text by Raymond Bellour on an Indian film of the sixties published without photos by *Trafic*, and then published again by *Rouge* with pictures extracted from a DVD. Is it really necessary to read about a film with images attached to the text? Wouldn't it be better if the text is considered apart from the film, and then compared to the film itself?

AM: Godard was the first person, to my knowledge, who called for the use of photograms (still frames) from a film to accompany critical texts. Years later, in his famous debate with Pauline Kael, he uttered what I believe is one of the great mottos of criticism: "Bring in the evidence!" He meant, in that context, bring in the film to show as you speak about it, use image and sound to analyse image and sound – which is, of course, the project of the *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. This is what I spoke of earlier: bringing the language of written criticism closer to the language of its object, cinema. That was the reasoning behind the *Rouge* presentation of Bellour's text. But there is not just one way to bring criticism closer to its object; there are many ways, and all should be experimented with. Let us remember: the 'printed word' is never a pure *logos*; some of the most powerful and influential moments in the publishing of film criticism – I am thinking of magazines such as *Movie* (UK) and *Bright Lights* (USA) and *Admiranda* (France), as well as *Cahiers* and *Positif* in their early periods –

have a lot to do with the impact of layout, of the graphic design (or *mise en page*) that, beyond the 'content' of written ideas, juxtaposed the associations of typeface, placement of still images, white spaces and borders ... such graphic design is already a kind of cinema, a gesturing towards it. Think, for example, of the importance of covers of film magazines, how striking they can be as a statement: an immortal example for me was the British publication *Monogram* in the early '70s, which brazenly presented on its cover a glossy image of Gloria Grahame reclining provocatively on a sofa, with the interrogative headline underneath: "Why Hollywood?" You had to open it up and read it straight away, there was no room for indifference!

Of course, in our image-saturated culture, sometimes it becomes a forceful gesture to subtract the image from the design – like Godard himself did when he edited a special issue of *Cahiers* and, instead of using the same old 'production stills' you see everywhere, he simply drew a blank box with the caption: 'Space for usual photograph'. *Trafic*, and also *Rouge* in its general layout approach, goes for this effect: to evoke the cinema in a *virtual* way, an experiment with the sole power of writing and language. But I agree with Bernard Eisenschitz (editor of *Cinéma*), who recently surveyed the different approaches and their history in publishing – text and photograms; whole sequences or clips on Internet sites; text with supplementary documents; text alone; combining a DVD with the book or journal – and concluded: "I defend them all." Every way has its best use at a particular place and time; we must all search, in our own cultural contexts, not for the 'right' or 'correct' way, but the way that will have the most impact, that will open up ideas, perceptions, sensations.

MDC: It seems obvious that, nowadays, there's a different way of watching films and writing on them. Is *Movie Mutations* a first step towards regenerating the methods of film criticism? What way should those who write about film go? Is it necessary to have just a single purpose, or more than one?

AM: I am happy if the example of *Movie Mutations* has inspired anybody anywhere in the world, but it's important to say that what we all did in that book does not constitute a Movement, a Church, or a New Way – it was just one experiment among many happening around the globe. It was never meant to be exhaustive in its scope, and it wasn't the first step in some Master Plan. It was, purely and simply, the example of a certain kind of 'connective energy', bringing together people and films, ideas and writing styles, that might initially seem very far away from each other. But, just as we said earlier that no old film is really locked away in the past, I believe the same is true for film criticism. I am constantly surprised and inspired by the written work of the past – often by people, and from times and places, I have never really encountered before. I love the saying of the French-Arabic writer who has collaborated with Raúl Ruiz, Abdelwahab Meddeb: "Each person should choose the ancients who suit him or her, so that in the adventure of the new, the living can catch hold of the dead."

The adventure of the new, that's finally what it's all about: launching experiments that will liberate some creative and social energy in the collective act and art of film criticism. So I don't think any of us needs to define a singular, revolutionary 'way to go' to regenerate criticism. The revolution starts wherever you are, with whatever

tools you have to hand – Deleuze can teach you that! Likewise, I do not think we should try to collectively fix on a 'single purpose' for criticism. Criticism always has many purposes, and many potentialities at once; it's not a 'field' you can cohere and strategically organise across the board, like a business plan, a military operation, an academic conference or a political party. What a grotesque delusion that would be, in any event! When I speak of purposes and potentialities, I mean everything from the most humble aim – to simply give a lucid, respectful account of a film – to the most elevated and crazy: to think of film writing as a means of political intervention, or as a form of concrete poetry. Obviously, criticism can take an infinite number of forms: it can be soliloquy, meditation, dialogue, polemical rant, patient description, a work of fiction, a text running 'parallel' to a film, a sociological or philosophical commentary, a cryptic piece of symbolist literature, or a political treatise. All forms should be encouraged – I defend them all! And they should be constantly intermixed into every kind of hybrid mode. It is when we narrow down to only a few modes of singular discourse that stagnation and repetition set in, and creativity withers. The challenge is always to keep your own impulse, your own excitement – or the excitement of the group you are part of – alive and productive for as long you can, and to keep switching tracks so that your idealism can be constantly reborn in new ways.

MDC: In his film *Demonlover* (2002), Olivier Assayas shows us how the way in which the audience perceives moving images is changing and mutating in a really fast way as time goes by. Is it possible for film critics to write anything not only on movie mutations but also audience mutations?

AM: To use a sports metaphor, you've got to keep your eye not only on the ball, but on the crowd, too! I think it is a mistake to think you are ever, as a film critic, only looking 'at the object' in pristine isolation, like some experiment in chemical separation. Remember, the critic, no matter what he or she might think, is always already some reflection, some symptom, of a larger audience. As I mentioned before, writing about film is always about capturing fugitive *sensibilities* as they form and die, at a very rapid rate, within the cultural sphere. A sensibility is a 'mood' or obsession that suddenly coalesces before your eyes, bringing together and charging up very banal, everyday things with very lofty, mythic ones. And all these things, banal or lofty, are naturally funneled through the structures and media of our daily lives, everything from the shape of architecture around us to the technological tools we learn to use and then eventually discard. The books of the great theorist Vilém Flusser, on the histories of design or photography or simply the ways of modern life, are tremendous tools to begin understanding all this: he can intuit, in the way a wall is decorated, a sheet is folded or a letter is sent, the whole mentality of an era and a culture. So, of course, the 'mutating audience', how we receive things and communicate our experiences to each other, is totally a part of this picture.

I'll give you a concrete example, which really astonished me when I saw it recently: Abel Ferrara's *Mary* (like also Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*) happens to be a remarkable essay about telephones in modern life – mobile phones, in particular. All the actions, the character interrelations, the montage dynamics, the junctions and disjunctions of image and sound, are caught and dramatised in the multiple phone calls that occur in the movie, bridging different countries, different experiences, different media. Ferrara

deliberately restricts his frame of reference: none of his characters use computers or send emails, for instance. Maybe that will be the subject or substance of his next film! But by 'unrealistically' isolating this one element of modern experience in *Mary*, he really makes us see, experience and understand it. And he connects it to very large issues: faith, love, revolt. This working from the particular detail to the general theme is part of what the influential critic Manny Farber meant by his concept of 'termite art'. Films are involved in making termite art in this way – and so are film critics.

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