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The Best
American
Movie
Writing
1999

EDITED BY
Peter Bogdanovich

JASON SHINDER, SERIES EDITOR

★ The ★
Best American
Movie Writing
★ 1999 ★

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Jason Shinder, Series Editor



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(continued on page 281)

To Daniel Talbot,

who edited the first important film-writing anthology (*On Film*, 1959, Simon & Schuster), and in whose revolutionary 1960s art house cinema, the New Yorker Theater (now gone), I saw so many wonderful pictures the right way, on the big screen with a sizable audience. Throughout the years, Dan Talbot has been, and continues to be (through New Yorker Films), unquestionably the most discriminating and conscientious of U.S. distributors as well as (with his Lincoln Plaza Cinemas in Manhattan) the exhibitor with the most integrity and the best taste. He also has been to me personally a great friend for nearly four decades, and this small tribute comes with my deepest thanks and love.

—P.B.

FOREWORD

Can a single annual volume enthusiastically reflect the richness, excellence, and diversity of the best American writing about film? Last year, the debut edition of *The Best American Movie Writing*, guest edited by George Plimpton, answered that question with a spirited yes. And this second edition, guest edited by Peter Bogdanovich, answers the same question with even greater optimism and enthusiasm. Mr. Bogdanovich, the passionate and distinguished director of the Academy Award-winning movie *The Last Picture Show* and such classic films as *Mask* and *St. Jack*, as well as the author of some of the most engaging and insightful books about cinema, had a very clear and passionate vision for this compilation of the year's best writing about film.

There are dozens of obvious topics available in a distinguished piece of writing about film; the approach of the director, the work of the actors, the plot, dialogue, lighting, music. Yet in the very best movie writing even the most familiar subjects can be deeply illuminated, resonating in ways they may have only been suggested to most viewers. The best movie writings quickly establish their authority as pieces that elucidate a movie's content and structure with passion, depth, and poignancy, while at the same time speak to larger issues of the self and society. It is not an easy task: Writers must understand and speak

through what Mr. Bogdanovich calls “the craft, technique, and construction, the basic grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of making films.” Yet each year the number of authors dedicating their full professional energies toward writing about film, or teaching writing about film, increases—along with the number of magazines dedicating all, or a majority of, their pages to writing about film with full or part-time movie writers on staff.

Tracking the movie writings published in the United States in the last year and a half between November 1, 1997, and October 31, 1998, was therefore a rigorous and instructive experience. Each and every issue of more than 350 general and special-interest magazines was surveyed—almost twice as many as for the previous volume. In addition to our survey, we solicited nominations from the editors of nearly one hundred of the magazines we surveyed. Many authors sent us copies of their published work, or the work of others they admired as well. Writing about film on the Web has certainly become a critical factor, and this year we expanded our survey to include on-line, as well as print, magazines. What we realized soon enough was that it’s a difficult task to keep up with what’s out there—there is so much of it, and so much of it is good: profiles, memoirs, historical pieces, meditations, academic studies, diaries, essays of all kinds.

With his insistence on excellence as the paramount criterion, and an inclination toward “retrospectively minded material,” Mr. Bogdanovich always provided a passionate and magnanimous spirit of response to the genuine article—observation, description, phrase, or word—wherever it was found among the many, many pieces reviewed. His final selections are in the following pages, accompanied by an even larger list of finalists in the “Notable American Movie Writings of 1998” section in the back of this volume. I hope readers will seek out, and read, these notable movie writings for their variety and excellence.

Only two of the authors whose work Mr. Bogdanovich selected for this volume, Martin Scorsese and Geoffrey O’Brien, appeared in the previous, inaugural issue. The inclusion of so many new writers points once again to the abundance of film writers and readers. Mr. Bogdanovich’s edition also includes several pioneers in the field of writing

about movies—figures without whom there would be no “field,” including Andrew Sarris, Robin Wood, Molly Haskell, Jonathan Rosenbaum, Rex Reed, and Roger Ebert. Like Mr. Bogdanovich, their lifelong devotion to the art of films is of the highest quality of intelligence and affection. I’m delighted that this edition recognizes them and, by association, the many others who have for decades tilled the soil of the field of movie writing. Although there is no substitute for the sort of movie writing produced by those committed entirely to the genre, there is always an essential and exciting place for movie writings by authors of other literary genres. E. L. Doctorow and Gore Vidal are among those writers in this edition, for example, who periodically turn their gaze from their usual field of fiction to that of cinema.

As is typical of similar annual anthologies, the rules of selection are simple: A distinguished guest editor makes final selections based on a wide survey of writings published in the previous year. But the selection guidelines are also flexible enough to convey the changing yearly dynamics of the writers and subject being anthologized. This year, to better reveal the conditions and directions of writing about film in America, we’ve added a new section: a directory of film magazines, which offers a way of assisting readers through the growing maze of movie magazines while recognizing their critical and increasing influence. And, as with the previous volume, this edition of *Best American Movie Writing* permits the guest editor to select one or two pieces from a book or newspaper published within the last year.

Mr. Bogdanovich’s movies and writings have a way of setting our external and internal houses in order, of making difficult emotions possible to articulate. It’s one of the reasons we have come to depend upon him as a witness during moments of celebration and crisis. How many times do viewers and readers today turn to his award-winning films, highly acclaimed books, or his weekly columns in *The New York Observer*, when it is important to know in one scene, one gesture, one word, what we are going through? I was honored to have the opportunity to turn to him during the process of completing this wonderful edition of *Best American Movie Writing*. Several file cabinets in his New York City apartment are filled with hundreds and hundreds of index

cards, each with his hand-written notes about a particular movie: when and where he saw it, what he thought, when and where he saw it again, what he thought, etc. The movies clearly engage and enchant him in the most extraordinary and original way.

In addition to Mr. Bogdanovich, I want to thank his agent, Sheri Arden, for her support of the series and help in securing Mr. Bogdanovich's participation. Thanks also to Katie Adams, senior researcher for the series, whose contributions continue to be invaluable. And thanks once again to George Plimpton and his staff at the *Paris Review* for their continuing critical support, suggestions, and contributions. The series would not be possible without the editorial direction of Cal Morgan and Dana Albarella, editors at St. Martin's. And thanks to Sharon Friedman and Chris Shelling of the Ralph Vicinanza Literary Agency, who continue to work behind the scenes to ensure the success of the series. Finally, and perhaps most important, thanks to the writers and editors who granted permission to reprint pieces in this collection.

—Jason Shinder

P.S. Although unable to reprint Tag Gallagher's piece "White Melodrama" (*Film Comment*, November/December 1998) in this collection, it was selected by Mr. Bogdanovich as a Best American Movie Writing.

INTRODUCTION: RETRACING OLDER STEPS AND NEW

Writing about the movies can change movies. It did in France during the late Fifties and Sixties and it did in America, as a result of the French, in the late Sixties and Seventies. When critics like François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard wrote about the U.S. films they liked and the French films they didn't, essentially the entire course of picture history was altered. With their *politique des auteurs*—mis-translated here as “auteur theory”—they fostered a climate that would accept the pictures they eventually directed, superceding the *cinema de papa* with the Nouvelle Vague—that New Wave that swept across the channel and the ocean and affected all of us. Critics and film historians in England and America were inspired to a movement that gave movies back to the director, and so the New Hollywood was born, an eruption that produced a brief renaissance and a slew of young filmmakers who took movies into a new era.

Not everything about this has been entirely salutary. One of the things the French- and English-language critics frequently extolled were the glories of certain genre pictures that revealed a director's often subtly expressed personality. Finding a link between, say, *Baby Face Nelson* (1957) and *Madigan* (1968), and realizing this connection came

through the same director's vision, led to an understanding that picturemakers like Don Siegel were able to express themselves in complex subterranean ways that could be as valid and valuable as the more highly budgeted, more highly praised works of social import lauded by the establishment. But Siegel was, nevertheless, often working with material he didn't necessarily like or approve, and indeed, many times it was this particular tension between low-grade material and high-class temperament that resulted in a special noteworthy frisson.

What this eventually deteriorated to, however, was the enthroning of genre for its own sake, forgetting it was usually the director's handling of trash—his subversion of it, transcendence from it—not the trash itself, that was compelling. The unfortunate result today is an endless stream of expensive junk movies with lots of slick special effects and virtually no discernable personality at all. The formally despised, usually suspect genres of science fiction, cliffhanger serials, and crime melodramas are now generally given more attention than the ever-diminishing pictures about people and contemporary society.

Over the last two decades, there also has been, in America at least, a sharp and glaring drop in the level of real film culture. Most of the younger generations seem to think that movies of any interest began sometime either in the early Seventies or perhaps even in the early Eighties. Many new filmmakers, as evidenced in their work, appear to have seen no pictures made more than twenty years ago and so reveal an amazing lack of technical sophistication by their own ignorance, clumsily inventing the wheel each time, unaware of all the wheels already invented. This primitivism is especially disheartening considering the vast treasure trove that (since the videocassette age) lies at their very fingertips. I am speaking of craft here, of construction and technique, of the very grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of making films. The solid silent cinema (circa 1912 through 1928) and the classic sound era (1929 to 1962) did it all, the foundation having been laid ten times over; why are so few learning from it?

The overall purpose of this yearly anthology, as well envisioned by series editor Jason Shinder, implemented and expanded by George Plimpton and his staff at *The Paris Review*, has been to gather together

the year's best writing on the movies, and therefore not simply on current pictures. Some of the pieces—like Martin Scorsese's or Steven Spielberg's—are here to show again that a director's personal life does make a difference in what they choose to make. But if anything, in my suggestions, I have pushed to bring in as much retrospectively minded material as possible, because of my concern about the general lack of attention paid to what has preceded us. This accounts for quite a few of the pieces chosen. In a historical context, Robert Graves once wrote, "We must retrace our steps or perish." I feel the same way about this youngest of all art forms, which seems already deeply threatened with decadence. Exposing children to the greatest pictures of the past, as we do to the past of other arts, is a crucially important step. Making that past exciting and tantalizing is part of our job here, as well as encouraging and interpreting quality in the present (which accounts for the rest of the articles).

Perhaps the second biggest danger in films currently is the substitution of money for talent. With the many filmmakers I've spoken to over the years, and among the eighteen masters taped for publication—from John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Alfred Hitchcock to Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, and Otto Preminger—the one attitude common to them all was their pride in doing things economically, of not requiring millions to achieve their goals. Pioneer Allan Dwan said that whoever thought of spending so much money on pictures had taken them into a bad downward spiral. Art is usually born of limitation. Today's emphasis on what pictures cost and what they gross the first weekend is a disastrous atmosphere for true and lasting achievements. Perhaps some of the writing here may act as antidote.

—Peter Bogdanovich

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A Box Filled with Magic

by Martin Scorsese

FROM *NEWSWEEK*

I've always linked my moviegoing experiences to my family. My parents weren't educated. There were no books in our house. I was constantly ill with asthma, and the only activity we could share was going to the movies. We lived in Little Italy in downtown Manhattan, and I remember the neighborhood movie theaters well, with their tantalizing posters promising dreams, and a rich array of second- and third-run movies. Admission was thirteen cents for children. The first film I remember seeing by title was *Duel in the Sun*. I was four years old. My mother said she took me to see it because I liked Westerns, but actually it had been condemned by the church, and I suspect that's the real reason she took me. The movie was overpowering with its hallucinatory color imagery, violent music, hysterical melodrama, and intense sexuality. I wasn't ever the same after that.

When I was a boy, there wasn't much direct communication between my father and me. But at the movie theater, the two of us shared the remarkable images and strong emotions that emanated from the giant screen, emotions we couldn't otherwise articulate to each other. Together we saw such pictures as *The Red Shoes*, *I Shot Jesse James*,