

The Critical Mirror: Making Sense of Film Assessment

By Wm. Thomas Sherman, (1991)

I. GRUMBLINGS OF A FILM ENTHUSIAST

*A man must serve his time to every trade,
Save censure - critics all are ready made.*
~ Byron

Why is it that critics praise or condemn a film? By what method or means do they arrive at their conclusions? Very likely, this or a similar thought has occurred to us at one time or another, as when we glance in our local tv-movie guide to find that the film we adore is given one star, while a film we abhor is given four. What is it that makes a film “good,” “great,” “bad” or “terrible?” Worth watching? Worth saving? Worth overlooking? Worth forgetting? Who, and what, after all is a critic to be, before the public, passing judgment on someone else’s work, as if his opinions somehow mattered? Given the self-assured, sometimes zealous, sometimes arrogant, manner in which some critics praise or pan films, one would think the answers to these questions would somehow be glaringly obvious. No doubt some think they are, but I confess, I am not one of them.

Criticism is common to us all, yet only a certain few us are allowed, or else unfortunate enough, to be labeled critic. Practically any urban newspaper you pick up has its resident film pundit. We wouldn’t tolerate the same writer exclusively taking up an entire editorial page, yet how often in these newspapers do we ever find more than one reviewer evaluating the same film? Apparently, there is no need for any additional perspectives on that film.

Granted, since most of us believe that everyone is entitled to his own opinion, we customarily grant film critics and film historians a certain amount of leeway - just as we would anyone expressing a point of view. However, we are particularly indulgent if the opinion comes from persons with credentials ostensibly attesting to their cinematic acumen and aesthetic sophistication. True, most are sensible enough to receive what a critic says with some amount of skepticism. Yet, unconsciously or consciously, we are often, for better or worse, influenced by them - even when we think we know better. Custom, naivete, habit, indifference and simple laziness are perhaps some reasons to account for this passive credulity.

Can we properly assume a film to be “good” or “bad” simply because someone with eminent qualifications says it is? What criteria are used by a critic when evaluating a film, and why is one criterion preferred over another? Is it possible that his own background, and the conditions under which he watches it, affect a critic’s estimation of a film? Finally, is objectivity in film evaluation possible, and if so, to what extent?

It is to address all the above, and more, regarding the nature of film evaluation that this series of articles has been undertaken. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on how you view it, the answers to these questions are not all as clear cut and simple as might appear to be the case. Film aesthetics and critical theory deal with many abstruse philosophical, psychological and sociological issues, all of which deserve separate studies of their own. All that is attempted here is to provide an outline sketch and cursory examination of the theoretical and practical foundations of film criticism. If, therefore, I fail to provide all the right answers, I hope to pose the right questions - or at least most of them anyway.

What then is meant by “critic?”

The term critic, short for film critic, is someone who verbally, in writing, or otherwise presents to others their opinion of a film, the persons involved making it, or both. It refers, then, to just about any person whatsoever who engages in film evaluation, and communicates their assessments to another: a grouping that includes most of the human race. We are all critics, the author being certainly no exception. Some are more educated than others, some more eloquent, some more observant, some more witty, some more wise. Yet almost everyone think themselves experts on what is cinematically pleasing or repulsive, no matter how well others might confute their opinion or beliefs. I suppose this is to be expected, since who better than ourselves, is to say what we like or dislike.

This is not to make light of the obvious fact that there are many types of film critics. I would think this could be taken as given. Even so, let's profile some of these different critical "types" and, in the process, highlight a few of their attributes. I hardly need point out that reality is not nearly as clear cut and defined in reality as I would present it in theory. Still, these generalizations are useful in defining the perimeters of this discussion.

To begin then, there are four main classifications of film critics: amateur critics, media critics, film historians and film theorists.

"Amateur critics" are ordinary folk, who evaluate films for a hobby or casual pastime. These are the people making their comments upon leaving a theater showing or after watching a film on television. Though their views aren't published or broadcast, they are the most numerous kind of critic around.

"Media" critics refers to people who study and judge films as a vocation or livelihood. These professional critics range from well-established cinema savants, whose names are constantly quoted to blurb reviewers whose names are kept concealed. Unlike amateur critics, the views of media critics are either printed or broadcast. As with any profession, there are high-minded and conscientious individuals prompted by lofty ideals. And there are those less informed and motivated by petty and servile considerations with variety of other sorts spanning in between. Film reviewers are predominantly media critics.

"Film historians" are media or amateur critics, very often academics, whose focus is on films of a past, rather than the present, era. Unlike the amateur or media critics, they must know history, as well as films. I once heard a critic call a remake "the greatest screen version" of a particular novel ever made, without even acknowledging the existence of its predecessor which has been equally, and perhaps more rightly, praised for the very same reason. This critic, rest assured, was no historian. One notable difference between the typical media critic and the film historian that the one addresses himself to a contemporary audience, while the other speaks to posterity as well. Not surprisingly, many critics take on both roles. They serve as media critic judging films of the present day, and as a historian evaluating those of another time, some with greater credibility and success than others.

"Film theorists" are persons who examine and propound ways of looking at films, both as they impact and reflect individuals and society. They approach films, filmmakers and filmmaking methods in a far more in-depth way than the typical media critic or historian, again, some with greater success than others.

Despite their dissimilarities, these "types" share one common and essential feature. That is, they all place themselves in a position from which to judge films, or film related matters, at the behest or indulgence of others. It is this common characteristic which accounts for the free use here of this generalization, i.e. "critic." Film reviews are the most common form film criticism takes. They are, by reputation, a relatively shallow form of film criticism. Nevertheless, it is a legitimate brand of criticism all the same. Reviewing involves assessing films according to a regular schedule, and is usually done by amateur and media critics, though it certainly isn't unknown for respected film historians or theorists to frequently engage in the practice. Characteristically, a reviewer rarely has sufficient time in which to reflect on and savor a film. How can one not marvel at way reviewers sit through dozens and dozens of films on end, and presume to make sense of, let alone judge, any of them? For this reason, we might refer to reviewing as assembly line criticism.

"Real" critics, as opposed to "reviewers," are persons who take their evaluating more in earnest than reviewers, and display a high regard for films and what they have to offer. In this respect, they are generally more educated, sincere and experienced than "ordinary" reviewers. They often possess an imposing amount of knowledge about people, society, trends, technology and, of course, films (theoretically speaking anyway.) Understandably, we feel this is sufficient cause to place our trust in their judgments, and explains why we give what they say more credence compared with reviewers. Reviewers are not expected to, though they sometimes do, bring any such background to their evaluation. Instead, they need merely give a brief sketch of their reaction to a film, and perhaps include some anecdotal information about it.

The question of whether someone should more properly be considered primarily a reviewer or a "real" critic often depends on the content of that person's work and the character of the audience they are addressing. Many reviewers are thought of as "real" critics, and sometimes "real" critics serve in the capacity of reviewers. In addition, "real" critics frequently review, even if all reviewers are not "real" critics. The difference between the two then is very often a question of degree, not so much of kind.

Regardless of the appearance some might present, no critic is omniscient, and therefore infallible in his judgment. No matter how wise or knowledgeable they might otherwise be, “real” critics must often analyze on the basis of theoretical assumptions which they assess as peremptorily and fatuously as the most casual reviewer rates films. For clearly one could make any argument valid if their premises are assumed and go unchallenged. Since no historian or theorists can afford not to generalize now and then, they in effect engage in reviewing of sorts; not merely of films, but of ideas and facts. Otherwise it would take encyclopedias of evidence and discourse for a historian or theorist to justify the assumptions on which his opinions and beliefs are based. In this way, due to the ineluctable limitations of time and space, “real” critics are, often forced to sift through their own theoretical and practical aesthetic suppositions in a manner similar to the way reviewers must review films, which is to say quickly and inadequately.

It is probably a good idea to first find out something about the intelligence and integrity of critic before taking his evaluations to heart, either in a good or bad way. One can’t rate a critic by just one or a few reviews or studies. His qualities and merit, if any are best revealed in a compendium of reviews, or in a number of texts. Just as films can be misjudged, so too can critics. It is helpful in this regard to make note of the difference between what a critic thinks and what he says. For often times, critics say what they don’t mean or mean what they don’t say, while, not surprisingly, their audience misinterprets them. One especially good method for determining a critic’s integrity and objectivity is to compare films that they like with those they dislike, and visa versa. This is a good deal more enlightening than hearing only what they either like or dislike.

II. THE USES OF CINEMA

*Poetic Justice, with her lifted scale,
Where, in nice balance, truth with gold she weighs,
And solid pudding against empty praise.
~ Alexander Pope*

One of the principal concepts touched on in this theoretical survey of film criticism is the notion of “use.” Because of the unfamiliar and perhaps awkward manner in which it is used here, let’s take a look at what is meant by it.

A “use,” as defined for purposes of this examination, is a measure of a film’s value as perceived by the viewer. It refers to the criteria a critic uses when assessing a film’s worth. It refers to one of the many possible ways in which a critic could derive benefit from a viewing a film, and which in turn effect his evaluation of that film. For example, an action film, might be thought of as useful, and therefore good, insofar as it succeeds at generating excitement. The “use” of a film to the viewer in this instance is the excitement it engenders. It is contended here then that a critic, whether for themselves or others, deems a film “good” if it is useful. Or they judge a film to be “bad” if it is not useful: to greater or lesser degrees depending on how useful or useless to the viewer the film in question turns out to be.

A film might potentially be of use to a critic in quite a number and variety of ways. In this regard, “good” films could be spoken of as serving many uses to the critic watching and evaluating it. Oppositely, “bad” films serve few uses or none. With regard to the latter, not only could a film be deemed useless, but harmful as well. For instance, graphic violence shown to a sensitive or impressionable person could foment stress or nausea; or it might perhaps encourage in them a less than healthy disposition. Be this as it may, this is something for the adult viewer to decide for themselves - assuming they’re sane and in their right mind to be able to do so in the first place.

Utility has, through unthinking usage and arbitrary custom, been given a ignoble and materialistic connotation. If, however, we examine the way our emotions, intellect, and even the spirit, find certain objects, (e.g. art, films) or phenomena (e.g. events, ideas) beneficial, and therefore useful, we see that utility has a far wider range of meaning than what is normally associated with it. For beauty is useful, in point of fact, unseemly as that sounds. Just because the beauty of something makes it useful, does not make the object less beautiful for that. Indeed, it is precisely because an object or phenomenon is useful, emotionally or intellectually speaking, that we find it beautiful. Hence, beauty, broadly speaking, is itself a “use.”

A film is possibly useful to a critic for both aesthetic and practical reasons. There are then, for purposes of these articles, two main or primary “uses” of which a film is potentially capable, namely,

Aesthetic uses and Practical uses. These uses are sub-divided into “sub-uses”, which are employed as criteria by a critic to determine whether he will approve of a film or no, and to what extent. In spite of the less than favorable things said about some of them, none of the uses listed and presented here should be thought of as necessarily being in and of themselves indisputably bad or good per se. How admirable or despicable they are depends on the amount of credence a critic assigns them when evaluating a given film.

With some, the usefulness of a motion picture is straightforward and pronounced. With others it is vague and amorphous. Further, on an unconscious or subliminal level a film might be thoroughly trenchant and compelling. That is, a film could conceivably be of value to someone, even though they vehemently detested it. The apparent cause for this peculiar discrepancy is that the critic in question might be intractably closed minded, habitually obtuse or just plain ignorant. In such cases, the critic often grasps tightly to preconceptions that hinder them from realizing those beneficial uses which a film might potentially have to offer.

More can and will be said later on these particular questions. However, “uses,” “sub-uses,” and the role they play in film evaluation are better understood by examining each use separately than by trying further to explain the notion of “use” in the abstract. I will, for the moment then, refrain from doing so, and instead attempt an outline listing describing some of various kinds of uses. This glossary of viewer uses is not exhaustive, and often items described will unavoidably overlap or share similar or identical characteristics with another. Undoubtedly, the picture I present is not nearly as logical and clear cut in reality as I would propose it to be in theory. Yet given the daunting intricacy of human judgment and psychology and the relatively short length of this study, it could not have been otherwise. Nevertheless, it is hoped that readers will find this notion of “use,” and following glossary of “uses” helpful, if not wholly indispensable, as an objective means of understanding how critics operate and of assessing the merit of their opinions.

Note. For easier identification, all uses and their sub-uses mentioned are hereafter capitalized.

III. PRACTICAL USES

*Ethiopians make their gods black and snub nosed,
Thracians red-haired with blue eyes.*

~ Xenophanes

A critic might rate a film useful if practical advantages, for himself and others, can possibly be derived from that film. Below are some of the ways a film could conceivably be of use to a critic on a Practical level. It is based on such uses, or criteria, that a critic might purposely or unwittingly arrive at his conclusions about a film.

1. Propaganda:

Propaganda means the liking of a film because it promotes or celebrates an ideology, be it moral, political, religious, academic or cultural, which the critic admires or ascribes to. At the same time, should a film malign or denigrate the ideology that he espouses, the same critic will almost surely dislike that film. All film is, to varying degrees, propaganda insofar as it expresses anything resembling an opinion or point of view. That our judgments for and against a film are affected by Propaganda is perfectly understandable. That a critic feels outrage or elation about a film is often warranted, if not absolutely justified. Yet you could be invariably certain that a critic who never saw a Brobdignagdian film he didn't like is very probably a Brobdignagdian. If a critic feels offense or pride when a film touches on an ideology or code he staunchly adheres to, it is only fair that he make this plain - to himself if not others. It's probably a good idea then to have a dish of salt handy whenever listening to someone review a film which deals with Brobdignagdian issues. Should they provide this dish themselves, so much the better.

Although morality and ideology are interweaved with people's emotions, Propaganda is cataloged here as a Practical use because, it is a mechanically applied or else agenda oriented criteria. “True” emotions, on the other hand, deal with sentiments which a film viewer is made to feel spontaneously, without requiring adherence to any particular doctrine or creed. Emotions in this sense will be considered later.

2. Popularity:

Popularity becomes important to a practical minded critic who already knows a film is popular, or has reason to think that it will become so. A critic might like or show his approval for a film because he

thinks it will be popular with others. He might believe it is ipso facto “good” simply if a majority of others think and feel so - even though he himself might otherwise have thought little of it.

For some critics, the worst thing that could be said about a film is that it lost money, regardless of any merit it might otherwise have. No doubt the primary reason for this overt reliance on box-office receipts to ascertain a film’s intrinsic worth is that money is, to an often considerable extent, an indicator of a film’s popularity. Since Popularity, in this instance, being what makes a film good, money becomes the tell-all standard of what good filmmaking is.

The significance of Popularity itself aside, the amount of money a film takes in is hardly a reliable index of how many people like or will like a film. As is true with any business, market conditions change and vary over time. A film might earn a colossal amount of money, yet this might only be because wealthy fans or an enthusiastic interest group actively supported it. Simply because a film “sold” well during one period doesn’t necessarily mean that it will do so again at another time. Perhaps the films it had to compete against at the time of its marketing were pitifully weak. Conversely, just because a film was a financial disappointment, this does not mean that it could never be popular. Times and predilections change.

A widespread attitude among people is that it’s merely a matter of numbers or demographics as to who likes a film or not, otherwise what’s good or bad is completely relative. Though there is surely a good deal of truth in this point of view, to maintain it in practice is to deny that there can be such a thing as a good or bad film, thus reducing all aesthetical appraisals to haphazard popularity contests or mere accounting ledger estimates.

While measuring a film’s value on the basis of its popularity is arguably an objective approach, it also can be an deceptively fair and misleading standard for measuring a film’s worth. A film, for example, might for years be deemed a monumental classic, and then in a course of a few generations be relegated to utter obscurity. Or it might start out as a sleeper, and then be resurrected to cult, or even classic, status. Yesterday’s bomb becomes today’s triumph, and today’s smash-hit becomes tomorrow’s faded memory. Though one generation calls a particular movie the greatest film of all time, this does not mean that same claim is necessarily true for another generation. Indeed, generations - young, old alike and older alike - will sometimes go so far as to bash, censor, and deprecate each other’s values and beliefs using film criticism as the medium in which to do so. When you consider the millions of people contained in a movie-viewing generation, one can see the formidable impact these generational differences might have on different people’s conception of a film. It is of interest to note in this regard that, mathematically speaking, each succeeding generation will contain more people than the ones preceding it. It follows then that some films are known better than others simply because they came out at a later date, i.e. when the population was greater. This also means that the older a film is the fewer people there will be to know about it. So with the possible exception of “timeless” or monumental classics, the older a film is the less likely it will be known, let alone popular.

So much for the fairness of popularity!

Indubitably, popularity will, over the course of years, eventually determine to no small extent whether a film, rightly or wrongly, is appreciated or ignored. Yet popularity, even in the long-term, can hardly be accepted as the sole and final test of a film’s worth, for often times entire generations of audiences and critics can be mistaken in their assessments. The works of Aristophanes, El Greco, Mozart, John Keats, Baudelaire, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, were at one time casually declaimed or inanely taken for granted, yet who today familiar with these would deny their consummate genius? It is, perhaps, precisely because their genius was so powerful that it took more than a few generations to comprehend and, as a result, recognize this fact. If we take the relatively brief time span that motion pictures have been in existence (i.e. when compared with literature and art), how much more likely then are critics to be deceived by misguided convention into carelessly crowning ephemeral and meretricious films, while refusing attention to truly lasting and durable ones?

3. Fashion:

Fashion means the liking of a film as a way of falling in line, and therefore staying in good graces, with the established aesthetic, academic, or cultural order. A film then is labeled “good” or “bad” according to the kind of appeal it will have for the type of society the critic seeks to associate himself with or profit from. To the extent Fashion involves the promotion of the kind of society to which one belongs or aspires to, it is something of a cross between Popularity and Propaganda. Like Popularity it relies on polls and movie receipts. Yet unlike Popularity, and like Propaganda, Fashion is genre specific, and

specifically suited to the tastes the critic considers himself an advocate of. Perhaps the greatest difference between Fashion and Propaganda is that the former is frivolous and superficial by nature, while the latter more serious and heartfelt.

Though it's true many miserable films have been lavished praised merely because they're fashionable, this does not mean that just because a film is fashionable that it cannot be any good. There are critics who think themselves astonishingly clever if they constantly buck fashion for bucking fashion's sake. Yet an implacable skepticism toward all that is fashionable is usually about as valid as the very approach it seeks to rebuff, being equally narrow minded and arbitrary.

4. Egotism:

The difference between Propaganda and Egotism is that while Propaganda deals with a critic's beliefs and dogmas, Egotism deals with day-to-day lifestyle, personality traits, and even physical attributes. Yet like Propaganda, the influence of Egotism is often understandable, if not entirely inevitable.

I once saw an especially funny little 1930's cartoon¹ that provides an ideal caricature of this notion of Egotism. Though the title of the short at the writing of this escapes me, I'll try to describe the comical sequence it contained which incisively illustrates the nature of this Practical use.

The setting is a talent show of animals and silly cartoon characters. The first group of acts, after being permitted to give a brief performance, are roundly booed off stage by an unseen cartoon audience. Then the third and last act appears. It is a tiny little, big-nosed man. He stands on the stage and does nothing, yet now the talent show audience, beside themselves with euphoria, roars with applause. The reason for their approbation becomes ironically evident when we suddenly are made to realize that every single one of them is identical in person and appearance to the ridiculous little man on stage. The sad or funny thing about this, depending upon how you look at it, is that it is all so true! How typical it is us to sometime praise a film whose star performer is similar, if not the spitting image, in character, disposition and physical attributes to ourselves! With critics it is no different at all.

Inasmuch as Egotism includes with it the role of personality in films, it is not something to be categorically dismissed out of hand - as might initially seem to be the case. A performer's personality might coincidentally mirror our own. Yet it might also happen to be utterly appropriate for what the director or screenplay calls for. The presence of a personality in a film with whom we can readily empathize and identify with can be of extraordinary value in furthering our enjoyment of a film. It can express some of our deepest feelings, and cause the action taking place in a story to come vividly to life.

Unfortunately, the advantage of a particular personality is not always something that others can appreciate or relate to in the same measure as we ourselves might. At least a critic can't reasonably assume this to be so. While it is possible for a performer's personality to make a film "good" despite that picture's flaws, it is also possible for a critic to see incredible achievement in films which indirectly, or as a matter of chance, merely extol his own personality, appearance or way of life. In either case, it is not always clear whether a character is remarkable in an other worldly way, or merely a cinematic representation of certain people's conceit.

Just as a critic might call a film "good" if its central performers have personal traits similar to his own, so it is possible for a critic to dislike a film because it's performers are just "too" good to endure. That is, a critic dislikes a film because he envies or resents how talented, attractive, or free of visible defect, the performers in the film might happen to be. This is not so strange. I once heard a young woman say she just "hated" another because this other was so pretty. In the same vein, some people will despise an actress if she is both too beautiful and too talented. Or they'll snub an actor if he's too handsome and too smart, though usually it's the gal that gets the worst of it. It's the same reaction that is occasionally at work in film criticism. Ostensibly, the critic is nowhere near as appealing, graceful, skilled or inspired as the film's performer. Since any display of such genius makes them by contrast look bad, they'd rather that others not see the film. The very merit of a performer might indirectly make the critic himself seem unworthy or less than pleasing in his own and possibly other's eyes. As a result, they attack or reviles those films in which the performer's beauty or prowess is, to them, most fulsomely apparent. Some critics are humble, some candid about their envy. Others respond only with venom and gall when viewing their betters.

Later note. "Hamateur Hour" (1938), a Warner Bros. "Merry Melodie," supervised by Fred "Tex" Avery very much resembles the cartoon in question.

Films which produce envy might be denoted as being so “good” that they’re “bad”, at least as far the ego-prompted critic is concerned.

IV. THE AESTHETIC USES

“The heart and mind! What an enigma!”
- Calvero, *Limelight*

The Aesthetic “use” of a film can be divided into two aspects, Emotional and Intellectual. In looking at it then, we will look at these and their relationship to each other. Admittedly, it’s not merely misguided, but wrong to attribute all emotions to the heart, or all intellectual experiences to the mind. Some experiences we perceive as simply emotional are equally intellectual, and often it is all but impossible to separate the two. For centuries, metaphysicians, epistemologists, neurologists, psychologists and a few others have been wrestling with the questions of thought and feeling. These are questions too complex and involved to be directly taken up in an article of this length. I will, therefore, forbear from doing so here.

This said, common sense and tradition have told us that the heart and the mind, are the receptacles, symbolically speaking, of our emotions and thoughts. They are adequate, if not strictly accurate, reflections of what, for most of us, is the very real dichotomy between emotion and intellect. As a result, I’ll permit myself use of these two germane generalizations.

A. EMOTIONAL USES OF CINEMA

*If one has to imagine someone else’s pain on the model of one’s own, this is none too easy a thing to do:
for I have to imagine pain which I do not feel on the model of the pain I do feel.*

~ Ludwig Wittgenstein

Art and entertainment films ultimately rely on emotion to succeed. Is this surprising? Films are usually about stories about life. And, unless you are watching a film from the perspective of a technician or scientist, these stories of life are held together by feelings, as much, if not more so, than intellect. Without doubt, there is much more to criticism than ascertaining a film’s emotional impact. Nor is it to be denied that thought does interplay with and enhance emotions. Nevertheless, a film is only aesthetically effective as it’s ability to educe emotions from its audience.

Take something like music, for example. What evokes emotion better than it? Piano accompaniment, orchestras, music tracks, movie melodies and theme songs have always played a preeminent part in films. Indeed, often times a film’s score will decisively determine whether a person approves of that film or not. If one doesn’t particularly care for Wagner, Big band music, hootenanny hoots, or any other specialized style of music, it’s very likely that they won’t be able to enjoy a film that incorporates these - no matter how well the film might otherwise be made. This, of course, depends on the contextual appropriateness of the music to the film in question. Yet so ardent and ingrained can be one’s passion be, both pro and con, about certain kinds of music that it is rarely something that a critic can avoid being influenced by when assessing a film.

Due simply to the character of our physical natures, our emotions are subjective. You like what you like; I like what I like. What makes one laugh makes another cry. What makes one sigh makes another wince. What is tedious to one is thrilling to someone else. We’re all acquainted with this phenomenon, yet who can explain it? We can’t be objective about feelings in the same way we can be about a string of logic or set of empirical data, since only the person possessed of an emotion is in a position to identify what it is he feels. While we can attempt to describe or relate to what it is another feels, this is far different from saying that we “know” or experience ourselves just what it is that person feels or is feeling. If we are to have any inkling at all, we can merely imagine, based on what we’ve felt to ourselves, what it is another feels. True, our emotions react to and can be influenced and changed by the emotions of others. Yet when all is said and done, all the emotions a person ever knows are ultimately their’s, and their’s alone.

Assuming, then, the fundamental and invaluable role emotions play in the partaking of a cinematic experience, and the subjectivity of emotion does it make sense to speak of a critic being an emotional scholar; deciding which feelings are and are not to be preferred? If so, whose emotions then are the correct or the better ones? The critic's? The viewer's? Is it even possible for critics to speak about emotions in a way that can be understood by others? Or is this merely an illusion?

It is only to be expected that, given their different emotional dispositions and cultural backgrounds, critics will expound the meaning of objects differently. What is loved as "childlike" by one, is frowned on as "childish" by another. What is "tragic" to one is "maudlin" to another, etc. In this way, critics are able to minimize or overlook the defects of a film they admire, or exaggerate the weaknesses of those films they loathe. And with the slightest ease, defects are transformed into virtues, and strengths are made into weaknesses with the slightest ease.

Due in part to this problem of emotions and subjectivity, critics will frequently focus on a film's intellectual merits as the basis on which to support their opinions, since the intellect is, by comparison, the easier of aspect of film to speak objectively on. For while it is not possible to objectively evaluate a film on an emotional basis, it is, by comparison, possible to do so on an intellectual one. Many critics then endeavor to be known and recognized for what they think rather than how they feel, since emotions are, by their nature, so problematical to discuss in a way that can be equally embraced and respected by all.

While we can't, therefore, demarcate and distinguish emotions with definitive precision, there's nothing wrong in attempting to do so - just so long as we, in some manner, acknowledge the analytical predicament we face in doing so.

The following then is a list of emotions, which, insofar as they can be realized and expressed in a film, are aesthetically useful to a critic in enhancing, or filling gaps in, their emotional life. I have enumerated the most significant of these, and coupled each with its "opposite." The general nature of these emotions appeared reasonably self-evident. In view of this, it seemed a waste of time to describe what should, in most cases, be fairly obvious. Their "meaning", if such is possible, is best comprehended by experiencing and then reflecting on them. That can be accomplished elsewhere more profitably than in an analysis of this sort. After all, that's what life and art are for. Consequently, I have focused on certain pairs of emotion, but said nothing hoping, instead, that readers themselves would find these terms intuitively comprehensible. Here again, so as not to cause any misapprehension, it should be pointed the list is not exhaustive, nor should my characterizing of one emotion as the opposite of another be thought as not leaving any room for question. "Why not have anger the opposite of sorrow, rather than laughter," it could fairly be asked? Other feelings might easily have been chosen as the "opposite" emotion of another than the ones that I have selected. In that case, if what's alluded to below doesn't suffice, the reader is by all means free to configure their arrangement or outline of human emotions as they sees fit.

1. Joy and Sorrow
2. Hope and Fear
3. Elation and Despair
4. Surprise and Shock
5. Laughter and Anger
6. Serenity and Anxiety
7. Admiration and Disgust
8. Pride and Shame
9. Wonder and Horror
10. Relief and Suspense
11. Confidence and Confusion
12. Sympathy and Contempt
13. Comfort and Tension
14. Tenderness and Excitement
15. Yearning and Resignation
16. Sentimentality and Cynicism

B. INTELLECTUAL USES OF CINEMA

Everyone likes the picture, but I don't. It's just too technical. All that technique and not one real thought in it.
~ Akira Kurosawa, (speaking about one of his films)

An Intellectual "use" refers to the criteria a critic might apply in assessing a film's value on intellectual grounds. A film can be deemed useful, i.e. "good", to a critic inasmuch as it promotes the mind, or at least seems to do so.

Intellectual uses naturally interconnect with and are often indivisible from Emotional uses. To pretend otherwise would be overly simplistic, not to mention absurd. Intellect can enrich emotion, just as the heart can inspire the mind. They work mystically in tandem. Even so, not a few critics seem to view the intellect as being, in almost all cases, somehow superior to emotion. Some critics go so far as to treat emotion as a lesser adjunct of the intellect, in spite of it's equal prominence in aesthetics. But this is not unusual, given the difficulty of openly addressing so subjective, and easily misunderstood a topic as one's

own emotions. It is far easier thing to say that you feel such-and-such, than it is to say, with objective accuracy, why it is you feel so.

Yet this epistemological dilemma aside, it is often the primary business of a critic to seem as objective and intellectually forceful as possible. In consequence, it sometimes becomes necessary for them not to appear to be unduly swayed in their evaluation of a film by anything so subjective and unacademic as “feelings” - even though actual facts might suggest quite the opposite. Intellectual critics understandably prefer to be seen as objective. It’s easier for them to focus on factors that lend themselves to objective assessment. Given, therefore, how much easier it is to objectively judge a film on an intellectual basis, questions raised about a film’s emotional strength become of secondary importance. This is by no means to minimize the significance of the intellect in aesthetics. Far from it. Rather, it is to make note of critics who use these to conveniently conceal the part their emotions play in their film evaluations; or to cover the practical motivations behind their critical opinions. If a film provokes an emotion the critic finds disagreeable, they should say so candidly, rather than dissemble with a technical argument, and attack the film on some perhaps relevant, yet really tangential, grounds.

1. Philosophy:

With Philosophy, as delineated here and using the term very loosely, a critic appreciates a film according to how thoughtful, informed and sincere it is in depicting different values and perspectives pertaining to sociological, moral and psychological questions which the film might raise. In other words, the critic likes a film because it deals with significant subject matter and or weighty themes; but more importantly, because it does so in an intelligent and conscientious manner. Due to its association with crucial issues, and therefore ideologies, Philosophy must often be considered in conjunction with Propaganda. Unlike Propaganda, however, Philosophy, by means of a film’s plot and characters, involves well considered, unbiased analysis - as opposed to knee-jerk reaction or premeditated dogma. For this reason, it is categorized here as an Intellectual use.

A film can be valued for its Philosophical worth only if the critic himself is perspicacious and possesses a more than customary amount of knowledge about people, culture and the world in general. The critic need not be as informed or familiar with the topics considered by a film maker. Yet the more he is so, the better he is in a position to value and benefit from what that filmmaker has to offer. As far as film criticism is concerned, a film is only as brilliant, or Philosophically useful, as the critic watching it. Of course, it is frequently the mark of an unusually cunning filmmaker to address unfamiliar themes and situations in a way that is comprehensible and engaging to the uninitiated. Some films are immeasurably enhanced by familiarity with their subject matter, and not infrequently misunderstood for lack of such. Nevertheless, for a critic to rely continually on this kind of consideration on the filmmaker’s part, is often little more than a poor excuse for ignorance or dullness.

Undoubtedly, a filmmaker can rarely afford not to take into serious consideration those who are unacquainted with or wouldn’t recognize the importance of the topics he addresses. Yet it is nauseatingly self-indulgent for a critic to assume that every film be served up according to their limited level of knowledge and understanding. Some ideas and issues are, by their nature, far too intricate or deep to be reduced to something that is intellectually digestible to everyone. Suspension of critical judgment then is warranted in cases where others, better educated on a particular subject, might find considerable use in a filmmaker’s work even though others wouldn’t do so. For example, a futuristic, or if you prefer, ancient psychological drama might be an exceptionally engaging cinematic experience if it assumed the audience was already knowledgeable on certain points, rather than spend a lot of story time disclosing the background and significance of every reference made. The film perhaps wouldn’t appeal to all, or even most. But to those it did appeal to, it might be the most absolutely outstanding film they ever viewed.

2. Technology:

As far as this “use” is concerned, a critic likes a film for the technical genius or skill displayed by its makers. The film is “good” because advanced technology or state-of-the-art methodology were used to make it. Some common examples of ways in which Technology might be manifested in a film, include special effects, sound, cinematography, story construction, anything that might involve a technology or craft. This is about as objective an aesthetic criteria as you’ll find, which is why critics use it occasionally to speciously justify or hide the “real” reasons, i.e. emotional and practical, why they approve or disapprove of a film.

3. Artistry:

Artistry refers to the liking or disliking of a film based on the artfulness of its conception and construction. It contemplates the imaginative way in which a filmmaker might apply his cinematic expertise. A film's aesthetic merit based on this "sub-use" is ascertained according to how well such talents do justice to the film maker's particular perspective or insight. Artistry and Technology are often linked and easily confused, since they are so very similar. Still, they are not quite the same. How well mechanically a film realizes a vision, is more akin to Technology. How imaginatively a film's vision is conceived and organized, that is Artistry. Artistry, generally speaking, is concerned more with evaluating the emotion and spirituality of a filmmaker's work than Technology. It is not necessary on the other hand that the latter bother with these. Artistry is not listed as an Emotional use, however, because it is not concerned with the value of emotions in and of themselves, only how well a film imparts them.

Artistry is particularly unique in that it is perhaps the single aesthetic "use" to embody all others. There are a myriad of theories and standards regarding what properly qualifies as artistic. And while it is possible to talk about standards of artfulness, i.e. theories of harmony, unity of themes and blending of elements, space does not permit doing so here other than to make note of these.

4. Originality:

There is something especially virtuous or pleasing in that which is new. And creativity is a natural criterion that a critic might use in grading a film. In its least useful form, Originality comes up as transitory gimmicks or ephemeral novelty. At other times it is the very fount of genius and cinematic vision. Usually it is only an experienced film historian who is able to tell whether something is truly original or a repeat. Anyone with more than a cursory interest in movie "history" knows that often times so called "firsts" turn out not to be firsts after all.

5. Believability:

Though it is normally the case to determine intellectually what is and is not believable in a film, this is not true in all instances. Emotional intuition can be equally important depending on what facet of a film is being judge believable or not.

Characters, plot and setting, not surprisingly, have greater impact when they seem sincere and realistic as opposed to pretend and artificial. One can more readily empathize with and be taken in by a film whose characters, story and locale come across as believable. This does not mean that a film be convincing in all respects, only in the most individually pertinent ones, depending on the film. A film can be believable in several different ways. Most of us prefer it when the emotions a star performer recreates are credible enough to make a viewer feel those emotions themselves. Their resourceful or animated acting make the character in a story come to life. If, by contrast, the emotions expressed by an actor's ring false, it's not likely that the film will succeed, aesthetically speaking - unless perhaps for reasons which the actor or filmmaker did not intend.

The effect of Believability is seen also in some historical films which attempt to faithfully recreate another era. What a difference say between films made on authentic locations and where meticulous attention is given to period details, when compared with a disconcertingly pristine costume-drama, photographed on some wretched backdrop or break-apart studio set. Even when films are set in imaginary settings, one can't easily excuse phony performances, careless staging, or preposterous story-telling simply because the subject of the film is a fantasy. On the other hand, some critics rightly allow certain films with fantastical settings some slack on this point. Surrealistic, experimental and madcap comedy films are some plausible exceptions that come to mind. Then also there are those films which are valued for the very reason that they are flagrantly unrealistic or astoundingly inept. These are sometimes referred to as being so "bad" that they're "good." As is evinced by such pictures, lack of believability and production defects (i.e. rickety sound tracks, poor editing, tawdry special effects, etc.) can turn out of date shelf-sitters into perennial movie favorites.

V. THE SYNTHESIS OF USES

If I call bad what is bad, the gain is not great. But if I call bad what is good, then great harm has been done. Who wants things right must never scold; he must not be concerned with what is wrong; but rather do at all times what is good. For the important thing is not that something be torn down, but that something be built up that will be a pure joy to mankind.

~ Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*

If you should happen to have followed this series up unto this point, you will have seen that a film can serve a variety of needs, and in quite an assortment of different ways. Needless to add, the number of possible combinations of these “uses” is positively mind boggling. It seems reasonable to infer from all of this that the more ways a film is of use to an individual critic, the better a film it is. For instance, when we think of the “greatest” movies, they are usually films which are useful to a critic in numerous ways. While the quantity of a film’s “uses” might very well be pivotal in confirming a film’s worth, we would do well to keep the following caveats in mind.

* Some critics average the value of a film’s uses, and arrive at their assessment by judging the film as a whole. Others appreciate a film based on a few particular strengths, despite any overt imperfections.

* A film might serve many functions to a critic, yet serve these functions in mediocre or less than felicitous ways. Conversely, a film might be useful in only one or a few ways, yet be useful in such extraordinary ways that the critic might intensely favor such a film over others with more uses.

* The different criteria which make a film useful or not to a critic frequently complement or cancel each other, with varying results. For example, a practical consideration might make one critic ignore a film’s intellectual strength. Or it might make possible wider respect for the film’s intellectual merit. Occasionally one “use” could end up rendering another all but ineffective, as can happen with Emotional uses. With serenity and shock, for instance, it’s easy to see how an unbridled amount of gratuitous violence in a film could negate any attempt to create a pastoral ambience. Without a doubt, it is characteristic of genius to defy our expectations by artfully combining or reconciling two or more seemingly contradictory uses. Yet genius is, of course, the exception not the rule.

* A film could be useful to a viewer without their realizing it. The truth of this is demonstrated in the case of films which at first we don’t think much of, but which when viewed later, under different circumstances, affect and impress us immensely.

* Critics will sometimes casually dismiss a film because it fails one criterion (is technically flawed or grossly unpopular) without taking any account whatsoever of persons who, given their character, and the current disposition of their lives, might conceivably find salutary pleasure and singularly smashing merit in it. For instance, a film might be too “outrageous” for most critic’s tastes, yet perhaps there is someone who, under certain conditions and time in their life, might obtain great benefit from this same outrageousness. A person’s life might be so conventional and mundane that a film’s outrageousness might be a welcome change for them, even though most others might find the presence of this same element in a film annoying or distasteful. Perhaps this someone needs merely to see the kind of film in question once and once only in order to take full advantage of the much it has to offer them. Nevertheless, that film might indeed be the best they had ever seen. One can liken such a picture to a pitcher of cold water found by someone lost in a arid desert. Under the circumstances, it might taste better than any nectar sent from above.

Some critic’s are unmoveably dignified and put on scholarly miens. Yet for all their solemnity and pretense, they are, consciously or unwarily, guided in their assessment by the most crass or craven motivations. Others, more honest, are unabashedly venal, fashion minded, or partisan in their evaluations. I think most would agree that such critics are inherently wanting. Yet presuming a film’s aesthetic uses to be of greater value and significance than it’s practical uses is something that cannot be readily proven out of hand. At times, it is not only pardonable, but desirable to take practical considerations seriously, given the nature of the film being reviewed and the kind of audience a critic is addressing.

So while we can’t unequivocally claim that practical uses are necessarily subordinate to aesthetic uses, we can, however, point to the way practical minded critics do act. That is, they usually try to prevent giving the impression of seeming to be influenced by practical considerations, and will attempt to frame their assessment in such a way as to make themselves appear +intellectually adroit and emotionally profound. The critic might be as pandering or partial as they come. Yet rather than be exposed in his conventional subserviency or personal leanings, he is at great pains to keep up this false persona. Whatever this says about the critic is one thing, yet it does show that even a critic whose values are primarily Practical in nature respects the intrinsic importance of emotional and intellectual uses. Though the critic, paradoxically, uses aesthetics for practical purposes, he still finds that in doing so he is at least forced to acknowledge the primacy of aesthetics in film evaluation. That a film took in big box-office or champions our cause is perhaps to its credit. But if it doesn’t otherwise touch our hearts, minds or both, it

isn't likely to get very far for very long, either with professional critics, ourselves or anyone for that matter.

Greatest films of all time? Perhaps. Greatest film of all time? Never. Aesthetically speaking, such a thing is impossible. The reason there can be no such thing as a perfectly ideal film is that, outside of Heaven, there is no such thing as a perfectly ideal viewer, with ideal emotions and ideal intelligence. There is no film so great that we can't find some flaw with it. Nor is any film so bad that we can't identify some advantage in, which would redeem any shortcomings marring it. The critic's perspective depends on what they are looking for, who they are, their age, and perhaps what they currently need or could use in their life. In this way, films are as different and varied in their advantages and frailty as people, taking the situation and conditions in which either are experienced. This does not mean a critic can never be correct in his assessment of films, only that he can never objectively verify that he is so. The most his readers or audience can do is to assume that the critic "feels" about a film the same way they themselves would. Otherwise, they'll need to guess, or watch the film themselves in order to adequately assess it.

Objectivity in film criticism is possible, but only to the extent to which the critic takes into account the following: 1) the role of his own emotions when viewing a film 2) the circumstances, mental and physical, under which he watches it 3) their possible affect of his practical prejudices 4) the possible variety of ways in which a film might be found worthwhile to different viewers 5) the value of a film when viewed from disparate perspectives 6) the kinds of persons who might conceivably enjoy a particular film, though a tiny minority they may be.

Although it is part of the nature of film criticism for a critic to make quick, general assessments, a reviewer ought, in the interest of fairness and candor, to qualify their judgments when there is any reasonable room for doubt. When they don't like a film, it would be better if they indicated that it was perhaps a good "this" sort of film, but otherwise not very good overall - as opposed to some blanket statement about the film's worth. This doesn't mean that they can never be negative. Nor does it mean they must smile at every film they're shown. What it does mean is that, at the very least, they should use caution and care when they take it upon themselves to pass judgment, in public, on the works of others. It is, in part, to help facilitate this effort that this inquiry has been written.

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