

HOMAGE TO AN OLD MARQUEE

By Michael Ventura

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We take for granted now that we can rent or buy tapes and discs of virtually any movie, or borrow them from a library; that we may click our remotes through a hundred channels, at any hour; that we have legions of books about film, and can cruise the Internet for exhaustive filmographies. If we miss a movie in the theatre, we can catch it on cable or rent it before the year is out. In addition to Hollywood studios, there are smaller arty outfits who release almost as many films. Thousands of independent filmmakers attend dozens of festivals, while everywhere schools offer degrees in film. Today the culture of cinema, from its beginnings to the present, is as accessible as the culture of books. But perhaps something has been lost, or clouded, with all this accessibility. A sense of cherishing. A sense that a film is a precious, marvelous, unsettling experience, a way of dreaming still new to humanity -- a dream that changes our perception of ourselves. "Entertainment" is a misleading word, to say the least. To watch a film on a big screen in a dark room, is to experience an immersion -- to surrender to being immersed in the imagination of others. That is what cinema has in common with love. And in turn this surrender, usually unacknowledged, is the root of our love of cinema.

In the summer of 1961, the experience of cinema was very different from today. You took what Hollywood was dishing out in any given week. That was that. There wasn't anywhere else to look except TV, and TV was still primitive. New York City had more stations than anywhere else: seven! Most major cities had four. Many rural communities had just one or two. Most sets were black-and-white, and most stations shut down around midnight. The major networks didn't show many movies; those they aired were old and had whole sections chopped out ruthlessly for commercials. If you didn't see a movie when it came out, you didn't expect ever to see it. The silent films of people like Chaplin had been out of circulation for 30 years. You could read James Agee's stunning account of Chaplin's *City Lights* (Agee's was one of the few good movie books available), but it was virtually impossible to find a print to screen. Except for *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, and *The Village Voice*, there were few serious reviewers. Films now as famous as *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, and *Gone With the Wind* were rumors, absent from theatres since their release. *Gone With the Wind* hadn't been screened since 1939, and it wouldn't air on TV until the 1970s; *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane* occasionally showed up on TV, usually in choppy versions of bad prints. Only a handful of colleges offered film courses.

The significant film festivals were all in Europe. John Cassavetes had made *Shadows* (1959), Shirley Clarke had made *The Connection* (1960), and that was about it for independent filmmaking in America. Few even knew of these works, much less saw them. Federico Fellini, Ingmar Bergman, and Jean-Luc Godard were causing a sensation in Europe, but not many Americans were aware of that.

Cinema was a "popular art," yet it was fleeting. It was hyped in all the magazines and on billboards, yet once a movie was gone it was almost as though it had never been. The movies had caused enormous changes in our lives, we saw ourselves differently because of them, yet you couldn't lay a hand on them. They came from far away, they

were shown on big screens in the dark, then they disappeared. They changed you, yet they weren't really *your* culture. Perhaps that was part of their magic, but it was a one-sided magic, and had a way of leaving you very literally out of the picture.

In the summer of 1961, when I was still a few months short of my 16th birthday, none of this mattered to me. I was just a New York kid walking up Broadway, and somewhere around 90th Street, give or take a couple of blocks, I came across a theatre called the New Yorker and went in. These were still the days when you didn't go to a particular film, you just went to "the movies." It was almost always a double feature, you walked in at any time, didn't care if a movie was half over, nobody chased you out when a picture ended, you stayed 'til the scene you'd walked in on was playing again, then left. That's how our language got the phrase, "This is where I came in."

So it didn't matter that I'd never heard of the movies on the marquee. The New Yorker seemed a theatre like any other, I wanted to see a movie, I paid my 50cents and went in.

But the New Yorker had an atmosphere I hadn't experienced before. Both the people working there, and its smattering of patrons, were an earnest-looking lot. Something *serious* was going on here. I didn't know what an "intellectual" was, but whatever they were this seemed to me where they hung out. The word will always conjure for me the atmosphere of that theatre as I discovered it, and as I returned to it over and over: private-seeming, intense, vaguely conspiratorial people, polite but distant, who quietly concentrated on something arcane in a dark place that was neither well air-conditioned nor well-heated. A place that smelled of popcorn and cigarettes (you could still smoke while you watched a movie). A grown-up place (I was often the youngest there). A place that, though it was certainly public, seemed somehow hidden, somehow furtive, and a little sad.

The films were old, but the prints were pretty good. They had a glow and a style that the films of 1961 had already lost. It was one thing to see the young Bette Davis on TV, with the slightly snowy reception we had, and cut with many commercials; it was a revelation to see her shine in all her young intensity, with no commercials. And the young James Cagney. And Greta Garbo. To see *Casablanca* for the first time, when you'd never heard of it, and had no idea what the ending would be. To be stunned by Marlene Dietrich in *Morocco*. One seemed to have known the image of Charlie Chaplin since childhood, but to see the lyricism of *The Gold Rush* for the first time, without being prepared for it in any way, this mysterious evocative imp, so vulnerable and so volatile. It was as though another order of existence was calling out to you from the screen. And to answer that call was to expect and demand more from life.

Unlike any movie house I'd ever been in, at the New Yorker *the theatre itself* seemed to respect the films. In fact, the groundnote of the place was a blend of respect and hunger: respect for the movie itself, and a hunger to take something crucial from the screen. We were there because these movies had something to offer that we could get nowhere else. Later I would realize that the almost church-like atmosphere of the place -- a dilapidated, out-of-the-way church -- had to do with its quietly palpable sense of devotion. A devotion so taken for granted that the word would have seemed pretentious and out of place.

There was a ledger-like book on a small table in the lobby. Patrons were invited to write what movies they most wanted to see. It was difficult to find those movies, but the theatre made the attempt. I didn't know it at the time but one of the young ushers was Peter Bogdanovich, who would direct *The Last Picture Show* and *Saint Jack*, to name

only two. He later wrote of a day when Montgomery Clift came to see a movie. Clift was in his early forties but looked much older, was ill, broken in spirit, would soon die. A decade before he had been one of America's biggest stars, but now he worked rarely. Bogdanovich tells of showing Clift the ledger, on which someone had scrawled across a whole page, "More Montgomery Clift!" The dying actor was shaken, grateful, thanked the young usher, and left.

I would find other such theatres. The Bleeker Street in Greenwich Village. The Orson Welles in Cambridge. I drifted through a lot of cities when I was young, and most of the larger ones had a theatre something like the New Yorker, with the same kind of program and atmosphere. Before it was possible to get a degree in film; before Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael published their books; before the plethora of festivals; before thousands of waitresses and valet parkers described themselves as independent filmmakers; before videos, HBO, AMC, IFC, Bravo, and Turner Classics; before Miramax and its ilk -- cinema *as culture*, as art, as something not merely about stardom but about a means of experiencing the core and the quick of life, lived in these threadbare, struggling, poorly air-conditioned and inadequately heated places. In these theatres, operated and attended by passionate people whose names will not be remembered, the spark of cinema as culture was kept alive.

History rarely says "Thank you" to anyone. But we who love film owe thanks to these places, these people. The very fire they helped start put most of them out of business. That is the way of history, even the history of art. Now we rent and buy videos instead of attending those drafty joints. But in a time when almost nobody cared, they cared. This may sound sappy in our era when to care is often seen as a weakness, and when snideness passes shamelessly as intelligence. It's true nevertheless: The forgotten ones who care when caring isn't fashionable are the ones who start the fires. It is a matter of cherishing. A matter of taking what we love seriously. These qualities were palpable in theatres like the New Yorker. Their tale won't be told because there isn't much to tell. Just people running a theatre and sitting raptly in the dark. People being passionate about something, without any prospect of reward. Which, even in this era of hype, is still the foundation that culture rests upon.

A version of this piece appears in this year's *Sundance Film Festival* program book.

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