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Voices in the Dark: The Evolution of Activist Film Criticism in the 1960s

Brandon Schultz

“How do you make a good movie in this country without being jumped on?” asked influential film critic Pauline Kael in the opening of her genre-defining movie review of 1967’s shockingly violent and wildly popular *Bonnie and Clyde*.¹ Superficially, this tongue-in-cheek critique poked fun at the pearl-clutching reactionaries who warned that, due to its graphic depictions of sex and violence, *Bonnie and Clyde* would usher in a new era of immorality both on and off the screen. However, Kael’s comment also verbalized an unspoken and more radical connection, putting forward the idea that the best movies were the ones that elicited physical reactions. Throughout her lengthy career as a film critic, Kael insistently proclaimed her desire to experience more movies over which people argued and fought, but the movie reviewing field she entered in the early 1950s was unprepared for her fervent and vitriolic style. In the postwar era, most publications relegated articles about movies, if they existed, to the gossip columns or funny papers; the public viewed movie reviews as mere promotional opportunities for Hollywood. But, as the status-quo-defying movements of the 1960s ramped up, the field of film criticism also saw an uptick in activism, as reviewers sought to establish themselves as respectable professionals and attempted to more directly and meaningfully influence the production of films. Consequently, by asserting the artistic merit of both their own work and movies in general throughout the 1960s, film critics transformed their writing from glib, unofficial movie advertising to well-regarded documents of cultural thought and protest, opening American audiences to new cinematic experiences in the process.

¹ Pauline Kael, “‘Bonnie and Clyde’: Arthur Penn’s Iconic Gangster Film,” *The New Yorker*, 13 Oct. 1967.

Before the 1960s, largely due to the public's belief that movie reviews functioned more as advertising than scholarly appraisals, film criticism lacked the same professional esteem and serious consideration given to other fields of criticism. In his book-length analysis of the history of American film criticism, historian Jerry Roberts revealed that in the 1950s, "[c]overing the movies and caring about Hollywood was off the radar of regular newspaper coverage...[m]ost of the smaller and medium-sized U.S. papers used syndicated information from Hollywood in the form of 'gossip columns,'...usually ghettoized near the amusements page or 'funny papers.'"² Apparently, the vast majority of publications did not consider covering Hollywood or the movies part of their responsibilities, and if they did include information relating to these subjects, it typically came in the form of promotional material distributed by Hollywood itself. This lack of thoughtful writing, in addition to the unfortunate placement of this information in the least-serious pages of the papers, contributed to the relegation of film critics and their work. Eric Larrabee, the then-associate editor of *Harper's Magazine*, captured this dreary state of the field in postwar America, writing "[f]ilm criticism is at best a thankless task...there can be no question about the powerlessness of the movie critics. The correlation between their opinion of a film and the public's attendance at it is normally a flat negative, and their job has naturally come to be regarded with a certain good-natured contempt."³ Contrasting film critics with drama critics and book reviewers, Larrabee pointed to the lack of connection between audiences and movie reviewers as the most debilitating effect of the newspaper's poor treatment of film criticism. As a result of this widespread professional infantilization, film critics lacked a meaningful voice, and the career suffered since writers needed to work in multiple capacities in order to occasionally write about

² Jerry Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism* (Solana Beach, CA: Santa Monica Press, 2010), 94.

³ *Ibid.*, 106.

film. According to Larrabee, on newspapers, “the job of film critic is likely to be held by the restaurant-and-travel editor while he waits for the drama critic to retire.”⁴

That said, the superficial work of the most prominent American film critics during the 1950s did little to shift the public’s appreciation of film criticism. As Roberts suggests, “[t]he general opinion of film critics up until the 1960s was that they were, by and large, composers of plot précis with an opinion tacked on, and all with the depth of a loved-her, hated-him quip.”⁵ Extending the notion of film criticism as blatant advertising for Hollywood, Roberts detailed how the vast majority of reviews simply included a description of a movie’s plot and then a brief remark on its entertainment value, leaving little room for critics to explore and share their own artistic interests in the medium. Filmmakers especially found this perfunctory approach to reviews useless. Providing a Hollywood insider’s perspective, screenwriter and critic Theodore Strauss argued that, in most reviews, filmmakers saw “no depth of understanding of the craft problems involved to provide what any critic worth his salt should provide—an essay which is informative to his audience and is simultaneously a stimulating critique which the craftsman may read with profit.”⁶ For Strauss, one of the most significant issues with film criticism was the lack of industry knowledge on the part of the writers doing the reviewing, since these ignorant critics naturally lacked the insight to push filmmakers in new directions, in the process preventing their own field from achieving an artistic status.

This style of criticism appeared in the high-mindedness of *The New York Times*’s longtime film critic, Bosley Crowther. While undoubtedly knowledgeable on the filmmaking process, Crowther constantly demonstrated an unwillingness to engage with the evolutions of the medium. After viewing Michelangelo

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 95–6.

⁶ Theodore Strauss, “No Jacks, No Giant Killers,” *Screen Writer* 1, no. 1 (1945): 12.

Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, a film dedicated to recreating for its audiences the disillusioning experiences of its youthful characters, Crowther complained that "[j]ust when it seems to be beginning to make a dramatic point or to develop a line of continuity that will crystallize into some sense, it will jump into a random situation that appears as if it might be due perhaps three reels later and never explain what has been omitted."⁷ Crowther panned the movie on the basis of his dissatisfaction with it as an entertainment experience, ignoring the social significance and meaning of the film for the disaffected youth of the time.

Indeed, even at his most political, Crowther seemed incapable of transcending the pass-or-fail approach to movies that he shared with the other postwar critics. In 1967, while fighting against censorship, he still took aim at influential experimental movies like Istvan Szabo's *Age of Illusion* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat*, writing "[e]ven though most of these pictures are seriously questionable as salable entertainment or even worthwhile cinema...I would be the last one to dissuade any individual distributor or exhibitor from offering them to the public, if he wants to take that risk."⁸ In this instance, Crowther leveraged the considerable power of his position to advocate for distributors and exhibitors' rights to freedom of speech, but he, like other prominent postwar critics, failed to apply this same sense of activism to the content of the movies, belittling the concerns of the increasingly disillusioned public that appeared onscreen. By treating the burgeoning, social-minded movies of the 1960s as little more than trite, mass entertainment, the establishment film critics of the postwar period helped further the infantilization of American criticism fueled by its lack of meaningful attention in the majority of print media in the United States.

Due to the frustrating self-righteousness of prominent postwar movie reviewers like Crowther, the first major

⁷ Bosley Crowther, "Screen: 'L'Avventura': Film by Michelangelo Antonioni Opens," *The New York Times*, 5 Apr. 1961, 30.

⁸ Bosley Crowther, "Critic Hollers 'Help!'" *The New York Times*, 23 Apr. 1967, 97.

transformation in American film criticism developed in response to a critical renaissance in France. American film critic Ernest Callenbach summarized the crux of this transformation, relating that the French film critic François Truffaut, in a 1957 edition of the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema*, proposed a “‘politique des auteurs’ — a policy of focusing criticism primarily upon directors and specifically upon chosen directors whose individuality of style qualified them, in the eyes of the *Cahiers* team, as ‘auteurs’ — creators in the personal sense we accept for the other arts.’”⁹ This new, “auteur” approach to directors reinterpreted the collaborative filmmaking process with directors now occupying a position akin to that of a novel’s author. By attributing an entire movie to the efforts of a single individual, Truffaut and his fellow *Cahiers* critics hoped to elevate films to an artistic status on par with other, more highly regarded works of art, putting directors like Orson Welles alongside other singular artists like Ernest Hemingway or Frida Kahlo. In the process, these French critics also hoped to elevate the artistic merit of their own writing, positioning them alongside other better-regarded critics like those of books and drama. Additionally, many of these *Cahiers* critics, including Truffaut, soon became directors of the influential French New Wave film movement. And, according to film scholar Chris Weigand, through these critics’ double roles as filmmakers and film reviewers, “[t]hey essentially redesigned the role of the film critic, recognizing the young medium as on a par with the other arts, giving detailed analysis to the work of film-makers who had never before been treated with much respect.”¹⁰ Even though American film critics did not experience a similar, widespread movement from reviewing films to making them, they still benefited from the activist examples of the French critics. Not only did these *Cahiers* writers inspire American critics to assert the artistic merits of both the movie and movie review, they also

⁹ Andrew Sarris, “The Auteur Theory and the Perils of Pauline,” *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1963): 26.

¹⁰ Chris Weigand, *French New Wave* (Harpenden, UK: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 8.

encouraged American critics to assume a more active role in the filmmaking process, though few critics sought the director's chair like their counterparts across the Atlantic.

Reflecting on his pioneering concept of "the French critic as protester," Truffaut wrote that, unlike American critics of the time, French critics considered themselves to be on "a mission to dispense justice; like God...[they wanted] to humble the powerful and exalt the weak...In addition, the foremost concern of the French critic to justify his function in his own eyes induces in him a strong desire to be useful."¹¹ This interpretation of the criticism of the 1950s highlighted the activist concerns of French critics to influence the filmmaking process and provide useful commentary in direct opposition to the uninvolved, reviews-as-advertising approach of the period's prominent American film critics. By reading these French critiques of movies, reviews, and American film reviewers, emerging American film critics developed an urge to transform their role in the media and culture in general. Inspired to action by these French writers, the next generation of American film critics arrived with a new, expanded understanding of the role of the movie reviewer in society.

To assert the artistic merit of their work for audiences in the United States, the new generation of American film critics followed the *Cahiers* writers by taking up the auteur debate in the pages of American print media. Critic Andrew Sarris started the trend in his influential article, "Notes on Auteur Theory in 1962," arguing the "ultimate premise of the auteur theory is concerned with interior meaning, the ultimate glory of the cinema as an art. Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material."¹² Focusing on the role of the director as the sole author of a film as a means of establishing the artistic significance of movies, Sarris appealed to notions of interiority, a hallmark of other, supposedly more-serious works of

¹¹ François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life* (Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 1994), 8–9.

¹² Pauline Kael, "Circles and Squares," *Film Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 12.

art that critical discussions largely ignored in relation to movies. During this same time, Pauline Kael emerged as a dominant voice in American criticism, and she publicly feuded with Sarris on the subject of the auteur, countering Sarris's appreciation of the formulaic nature of auteur theory by asserting "criticism is exciting just because there is no formula to apply, just because you must use everything you are and everything you know that is relevant, and that film criticism is particularly exciting just because of the multiplicity of elements in film art."¹³ In this response to Sarris, Kael advocated for a more liberated approach to film criticism, which, like other intellectual movements of the 1960s, emphasized the whole person and the role of lived experience in making meaning. While this public debate on the auteur theory led to a fracture in American film criticism, the most important outcome of this debate was that it occurred in the first place. Before, movie reviewers rarely engaged in prolonged debates about movies, and if they did, these quarrels were usually restricted to disagreements over language or the appraisal of a movie's entertainment. In their arguments, Sarris and Kael focused the film discourse on the theory of filmmaking, a process other fields engaged in with regularity. As a result, the auteur debate in the early 1960s helped to establish film criticism as a serious intellectual and artistic endeavor.

Aiding Sarris and Kael in the professionalization of American film criticism, the academic film journals necessary to publicize these theoretical debates also gained prominence in the early 1960s. In an advertisement for the relatively new *Film Quarterly*, Callenbach put forth the journal's mission statement:

Through such discourse we hope to stimulate controversy; we hope to clarify aesthetic and occasionally technical or industrial issues (for the cinema is a business); we hope to provide a forum for new ideas in a field that has been lacking

¹³ Ibid., 21.

them lately; and we hope to note important new developments in style, theme, or method and give them due attention.¹⁴

In addition to providing the emerging, activist-minded critics with a proper space to publish their writings, which had until recently been sequestered to the funny papers of most print media, the journal itself sought to cover film as seriously as a literary magazine or other scholarly journal. Focusing on aesthetics and, tellingly, “controversy,” Callenbach emphasized the desire on the part of emerging critics to, like their French counterparts, impact society, particularly through the films they reviewed. And, with the emergence of journals like *Film Quarterly*, film critics finally possessed professional tools to publish their more-serious works.

Unlike the foreign-born influences of the *Cahiers* writers, the next major development in American film criticism came as a result of the domestic unrest of the 1960s. According to cultural and contemporary art scholar Eliane Elmaleh, “[i]n the United States...[a]s the 1960s progressed, with their series of political assassinations, the escalation of the Vietnam War, the confrontation with Cuba and the Civil Rights Movement, American artists, like many intellectuals, felt the need to take sides.”¹⁵ Evidently, the social, economic, and political turmoil in American society throughout the 1960s led artists to develop a political consciousness, and, as the tenor of this disorder increased throughout the decade, these artists felt obligated to affect change in their society through popular art forms. For American film critics, Kael was at the forefront of this political transformation. Speaking to the political aspirations of Kael in her reviews, Roberts claimed “Kael preferred the earthiness in films, was at the forefront of espousing liberal sexuality on the American screen,

¹⁴ Ernest Callenbach, “The Public Arts: Toward a Serious Tradition of Film Criticism,” *The English Journal* 48, no. 3 (1959): 162.

¹⁵ Eliane Elmaleh, “American Pop Art and Political Engagement in the 1960s,” *European Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 3 (2003): 182.

and wanted to release moviegoers from following traditional Hollywood mores.”¹⁶ A former University of California, Berkeley student¹⁷ and an outspoken feminist voice, Kael broke away from the tradition of male critics by developing her own artistic sensibility that favored the inclusion of lively and radical activism in the pop-art packaging of Hollywood spectacle. As a result, she championed more liberal and realistic depictions of life that starkly contrasted with the fantasies of Old Hollywood. However, despite her criticisms of the phoniness of Old Hollywood morality, Kael, like other artists of the 1960s, remained committed to the political power of pop art. Responding to the works of Jean-Luc Godard (which rankled the tastes of establishment critic Crowther), Kael championed their ““volatile mixture of fictional narrative, reporting, essay, and absurdist interludes’ whose frenzied, pop-art spirit was an ideal reflection of the chaotic times.”¹⁸ Exemplifying this new generation of activist film critics, Kael used her widely circulated reviews, themselves an example of pop art, to take a stand in American culture in favor of cinematic art that reflected the turmoil and uncertainty of the 1960s. By supporting films like Godard’s *Band of Outsiders*, Kael hoped to convince the movie-going public to reject the falsity of Old Hollywood, encouraging the production of more realistic movies that better reflected the struggles and tastes of the times.

Still, the calcified morality of Old Hollywood and its stringent production codes marked a major obstacle to the transformation of American filmmaking envisioned by Kael and her contemporaries. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) still censored all films in accordance with the far-reaching and restrictive regulations of the 1930 Production Code, which, as a particularly bizarre example of its power, forced filmmakers in 1964 to change the title of their movie from the

¹⁶ Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, 160.

¹⁷ Brian Kellow, *Pauline Kael: A Life in the Dark* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2012), 17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

“unseemly” *How to Murder Your Mistress* to the more acceptable *How to Murder Your Wife*.¹⁹ This code restricted American movies from depicting the sex, violence, language, and immoral behaviors that the public confronted on a daily basis in their regular lives. The older, establishment critics embraced these regulations from the MPAA and the collaborating National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures and the Episcopal Committee for Motion Pictures. According to Roberts, these critics, like Crowther “and others at major papers, espoused an even keel, a stern moral compass, common sense, and Middle-American values...even as the permissiveness, sexuality, and ambiguous morality in foreign films began to influence studio filmmakers in the late 1950s and early 1960s.”²⁰ Increasingly at odds with the emerging, disaffected culture of the 1960s and, eventually, the 1970s, these establishment critics frustrated newer voices like Kael, who still lacked prestigious positions like Crowther at *The New York Times*. However, this lack of seniority did not stop these critics from asserting their political voice. In an article titled “A Question of Standard,” critic John A. Barsness contrasted two different representations of the West in film: the American myth-affirmation of *High Noon* and the later, moral interrogation of *The Misfits*. Perhaps unintentionally, this critique also served to capture the need for a post-Production Code Hollywood, for Barsness argued that the power of *The Misfits* stemmed from “its exposure of a society...that...depends for its existence on its belief in [a] myth—an image of itself that is as unreal in its historical beginnings as it is now.”²¹ For newer critics, the Production Code maintained a false, and to their political tastes, unpalatable image of American society. To change the country, Hollywood needed to reflect reality.

¹⁹ Peter Bart, “Label Babel: Ad Men Spur Industry in a Hot Race For Lengthy, Exotic Film Titles,” *New York Times*, 6 Dec. 1964, X13.

²⁰ Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, 113–4.

²¹ John A. Barsness, “A Question of Standard,” *Film Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1967): 33.

These critics were aided in their attacks against the phoniness of Old Hollywood by financial incentives and cunning American filmmakers. As film scholar Mark Harris noted, “[t]he influx of European films, some with nudity, that weren’t produced by studios and didn’t require a Code seal had created a double standard; local theaters, meeting the demands of their audiences, were increasingly willing to show movies without Code approval.”²² Evidently, with the propagation of less regulated European movies, the Code’s nescient restrictiveness stymied American movies’ profitability as 1960s audiences flocked to foreign films. In addition to these financial struggles, American filmmakers inspired, like their critical counterparts, by the freer work of foreign artists, also sought to dismantle the Code. Relying on inventive tactics, Mike Nichols, the director of the at-the-time vulgar *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, had his friend and former first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, attend “a small screening” of the film where “she made sure to say, within earshot of a key member of the Catholic film board, ‘Jack would have loved this movie.’”²³ As a result of this clever ploy, the film received a less restrictive rating while also exposing the arbitrariness of the Code’s ratings system. Indeed, after becoming the president of the MPAA in 1966 after a stint as special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Jack Valenti “ordered a complete overhaul of the Production Code” citing “serious questions about ‘the entire philosophy of self-censorship,’” effectively ending the Code’s censorship of the content activist American critics longed to see onscreen.²⁴

The effects of dismantling the Production Code were on full display at the 1967 Academy Awards. According to Harris, for Hollywood, the five films nominated for Best Picture, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Doctor Dolittle*, *The Graduate*, *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, and *In the Heat of the Night*, made it “increasingly clear

²² Mark Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2009), 182.

²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

that something was dying and something was being created...[a] fight that began as a contest for a few small patches of Hollywood turf ended as the first shots in a revolution.”²⁵ With radical works of art like *Bonnie and Clyde* competing against more traditional Hollywood fare like *Doctor Dolittle*, the 1967 Academy Awards reflected the influence of the 1960s film critics, who had long sought to topple the hegemony of Old Hollywood morality with movies that reflected the moral ambiguity and roughness of the disruptive American culture of the 1960s. Moreover, Harris argued that this Best Picture lineup also reflected the changing tastes of American audiences (which were in turn influenced by the more vocal, activist critics), since he attributed the inclusion of radical films like *The Graduate* to “the demands of an audience that had, in 1967, made its wishes for a new world of American movies so clear that the studios had no choice but to submit to them. The outsiders were about to take flight and to discover that the motion picture universe was now theirs to re-create, to ruin, or to rule.”²⁶

Emerging on the critical scene the same year as these Best Picture nominees, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Roger Ebert cemented the activist nature of the American film critics of the 1960s. The campus newspaper for his alma mater, the University of Illinois, reported on a series of forums Ebert led as a student in 1965, in which he expressed “[w]e have a rotten society... ‘most of the things we talk about that make it great are not in operation in society.’ There is nothing to be ashamed about Utopian ideals...we should ‘stand up and say we want a perfect society.’”²⁷ Displaying Ebert’s activist bona fides, this sentiment matched the disillusioned but optimistic rhetoric of the Free Speech Movement occurring concurrently at Berkeley. ““This is the winter of our discontent...and although we have been quiet in the past, now we are beginning to stir. For we are angry, and there is a point beyond

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Ibid., 417.

²⁷ Vicki Packer, “Ebert Talks at Two Forums,” *The Daily Illini*, 13 Feb. 1965.

we will not be pushed,”²⁸ Ebert passionately proclaimed in his student newspaper, the *Daily Illini*. Undeniably, Ebert possessed a powerful conviction for social justice, and when he fell into film criticism by the end of the decade, he brought this sense of activism with him. In a four-star review, he declared *The Graduate* “the funniest American comedy of the year...not because of sight gags and punch lines and other tired rubbish, but because it has a point of view. That is to say, it is against something.”²⁹ In this review, Ebert embodied the new role of the American film critic as both taste appraiser and tastemaker, championing *The Graduate* for its artistic merit and also pointing to it as a new standard for audiences to use to evaluate other movies. Most notably, the crux of this review involved its celebration of *The Graduate*’s attitude in opposition to the status quo, epitomizing Ebert and his contemporaries’ commitment to realizing the activist potential of movies through their own rebellious writing.

By the end of the 1960s, American film criticism enjoyed its widest audiences to date and a peak in cultural significance, a decided transformation from its infantilized and scorned past. Describing the nature of this change, Ebert wrote that after Twentieth Century-Fox banned critic Judith Crist from its screenings due to her negative review of *Cleopatra*, the “development so tickled the public fancy that it became necessary for the trendier papers to import or create their own hard-to-please reviewers...by the middle years of the decade, any self-respecting paper had its own local critic, and everyone [sic] of them had studied Kael’s *I Lost It at the Movies*.”³⁰ As the film critic became an established, reputable, and practically required position at most publications, American film criticism reached more readers, helping to set expectations for American audiences and spurring

²⁸ Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 87.

²⁹ Roger Ebert, “The Graduate,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 Dec. 1967.

³⁰ Roger Ebert, “All Stars: Or, Is There a Cure for Criticism of Film Criticism? Pt. 2,” *Film Comment* (March/April 1990).

the public to develop a more sophisticated understanding of movies beyond the old, pass-or-fail entertainment model. In 1968, Kael, one of the pioneers of this activist generation of critics, finally settled into her powerful position at *The New Yorker*, affording her criticisms more weight and influence. Now on equal footing with the older, establishment critics of the postwar era, Kael focused her attention on Crowther, whose “ideas seemed not only arcane and didactic to her, but...also expressly misplaced the public’s trust in him by misrepresenting the films and characters in them through his own moral compass.”³¹ Kael viewed Crowther’s moral heavy-handedness as particularly egregious, especially since he distorted films through the lens of his phony, Old Hollywood sensibilities. The unofficial leader of a movement against Crowther’s smug pretentiousness, Kael’s critiques led a majority of other critics to view Crowther’s work as irrelevant, and *The New York Times* eventually ousted him after a noticeably out of touch review of *Bonnie and Clyde*.³² Despite Kael’s achievement of unprecedented critical success, this episode illustrated Kael’s activist-like dedication to rooting out what she viewed as the falseness of American film culture. Her brand of passionate and audience-centered criticism became the critical standard.

In contrast to Crowther’s ill-fated critique, Kael’s own review of *Bonnie and Clyde* demonstrated her genre-defining knack for speaking to and setting political tastes in American movie culture. Summarizing the general complaints detractors lodged against both *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Graduate*, Mark Harris noted that both “were morally contemptible, smirky, and ripe for dismissal in the same language that critics on the right used when they wanted to write off hippies, political militants, campus organizers, and war protesters as nothing more than exemplifications of youthful laxity and bad manners.”³³ Rather than addressing these political critiques (themselves evidence of

³¹ Roberts, *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, 176.

³² *Ibid.*, 179.

³³ Harris, *Pictures at a Revolution*, 392.

the transformation of American film criticism from entertainment puff pieces to intellectual works preoccupied with the political implications of movie-going) from the perspective of a pundit from the opposing political viewpoint, Kael framed her responses in terms of American culture in general. In her breakout review of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Kael supported the film's noteworthy and heavily criticized violence, writing "[t]asteful suggestions of violence would at this point be a more grotesque form of comedy than 'Bonnie and Clyde' attempts. 'Bonnie and Clyde' needs violence; violence is its meaning...conveying...how...the irrelevant 'innocent' bystander, can get it full in the face."³⁴ In this review, Kael attempted to convince moviegoers of the artistic value of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s violence in helping to understand the turmoil of the decade. Kael's unique brand of activism, evident in this piece, transcended the political debates of the time (though she certainly participated in those too, from a left-leaning perspective) because her preoccupations involved cinematic aesthetics, though she understood how these aesthetics in turn shaped the culture. As a result, her brand of activism predominantly focused on influencing movies and their audiences. Throughout the 1960s, Kael, like her like-minded contemporaries, leveraged her film criticism to expand the public's movie-going sensibilities, acting as a watchdog to warn us whenever, as she wrote in her review of *Bonnie and Clyde*, "we've become the butt of the joke."³⁵

The start of the 1970s ushered in a new era of American cinema, an era long heralded by the movie-mad critics who fought for and assumed a considerable degree of cultural power by the end of the 1960s. By explaining filmmaking trends and theories and bashing the false morality of Old Hollywood, the critics of the 1960s prepared audiences for, and taught them to demand, rougher and more complicated movies like *Easy Rider* or *The Godfather*. Amid the influx of the realistic, complicated, and moving films of

³⁴ Kael, "'Bonnie and Clyde.'"

³⁵ Ibid.

this New Hollywood, Kael commented positively on what she viewed as ““a new open-minded interest in examining American experience”” which did not need to supply ““reassuring smiles or self-righteous messages.””³⁶ Analyzing the state of film discourse during this time, political scientist Jonathan Kirshner noted:

These were movies to talk about, and fight about, and accordingly it was also the decade when the critics mattered. An ambitious cohort of film critics, shaped by new sensibilities, expectations, and experiences, led a tumultuous public debate about the movies, their meaning, and their relationship with society.³⁷

After spending much of the 1960s working to earn their seat at the critics’ table, the activist film critics spent the 1970s enjoying the product of their decades-long effort to transform the public’s relationship with the movies. Americans now interpreted films as art, and the associated reviews received similar attention and public discussion. Still, the activist critics refused to rest on their laurels. Kael, especially, spent the 1970s cultivating the next generation of critics, dubbed the “Paulettes,” whose careers she intensely micromanaged. Commemorating the centennial of Kael’s birthday, filmmaker (and short-lived Paulette) Paul Schrader recalled how the influential critic, ever the activist, would marshal her disciples in order to coordinate a nationwide defense of a movie she favored: “The phone would ring. Pauline, in that passionate, bullying voice, would explain that such-and-such a film (La Chinoise, for example) needed our support, and to the barricades we’d run.”³⁸

³⁶ Johnathan Kirshner, *Hollywood’s Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 88.

³⁷ Jonathan Kirshner, “When Critics Mattered: Kael, Ebert, and ’70s Film,” *Boston Review*, 1 March 2012.

³⁸ Paul Schrader, “Paul Schrader Remembers Pauline Kael: ‘She Was My Second Mother,’” *The Guardian*, 13 June 2019.

Ultimately, America's relationship with the movies shifted throughout the 1960s, and this cultural transformation stemmed from the activist efforts of film critics seeking to assert the legitimacy of their craft and an influence on film culture. In the postwar era, newspaper editors relegated any writing about film to the gossip columns and funny pages of their publications. Even then, this writing often came fresh from Hollywood's advertising presses. As a result, the public lacked respect for film criticism, and writers who did participate in the field rarely fought to overcome this stigma, preferring to meet Hollywood's demands for promotional plot descriptions and a brief note on the movie's quality. However, in France in the late 1950s, a group of critics writing for the *Cahiers du Cinema* film journal attempted to assert movies as a legitimate art medium on par with other forms like writing or painting. Compelled to protest the infantilization of their work, the *Cahiers* critics proposed the auteur theory, which elevated the director as the sole author of a film and as a result elevated the status of their criticism through their firsthand experience in the making and theory of the movies. In the United States, the emerging generation of film critics, led by writers like Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael, took up the auteur debate in new academic journals like *Film Quarterly*, establishing film criticism as a genuine intellectual field. Along with the other pop artists of their time, film critics responded to the increasing turmoil and unrest of the 1960s by directly addressing and attempting to influence the political power of the movies, becoming activists against what they deemed the falsity of Old Hollywood fantasies that felt phony given the disillusioned realities of events like counterculture protests, Vietnam, and a spat of high-profile assassinations. Working with filmmakers and other activists, film critics helped to dismantle the stifling Production Code, ushering in a new era of American cinema. The resulting movies, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, and the new critics of the time, like Roger Ebert, worked to make the public more active in film culture, eventually leading to the revolutionary New Hollywood of the

1970s, which tackled the realities of America in nuanced terms. Regardless of the current state of movie reviewing, the self-actualizing work of activist film critics asserting their cultural voice in the 1960s fundamentally altered the public's expectations and hopes for its movies, transforming Americans into more mature and active audiences.

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