



Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings

Manny Farber, Robert Polito (Editor)

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Manny Farber (1917–2008) was a unique figure among American movie critics. Champion of what he called "termite art" (focused, often eccentric virtuosity as opposed to "white elephant" monumentality), master of a one-of-a-kind prose style whose jazz-like phrasing and incandescent twists and turns made every review an adventure, he has long been revered by his peers. Susan Sontag called him "the liveliest, smartest, most original film critic this country ever produced"; for Peter Bogdanovich, he was "razor-sharp in his perceptions" and "never less than brilliant as a writer."

Farber was an early discoverer of many filmmakers later acclaimed as American masters: Val Lewton, Preston Sturges, Samuel Fuller, Raoul Walsh, Anthony Mann. A prodigiously gifted painter himself, he brought to his writing an artist's eye for what was on the screen. Alert to any filmmaker, no matter how marginal or unsung, who was "doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it," he was uncompromising in his contempt for pretension and trendiness-for, as he put it, directors who "pin the viewer to the wall and slug him with wet towels of artiness and significance."

The excitement of his criticism, however, has less to do with his particular likes and dislikes than with the quality of attention he paid to each film as it unfolds, to the "chains of rapport and intimate knowledge" in its moment-to-moment reality. To transcribe that knowledge he created a prose that, in Robert Polito's words, allows for "oddities, muddles, crises, contradictions, dead ends, multiple alternatives, and divergent vistas." The result is critical essays that are themselves works of art.

Farber on Film contains this extraordinary body of work in its entirety for the first time, from his early and previously uncollected weekly reviews for *The New Republic* and *The Nation* to his brilliant later essays (some written in collaboration with his wife, Patricia Patterson) on Godard, Fassbinder, Herzog, Scorsese, Altman, and others. Featuring an introduction by editor Robert Polito that examines in detail the stages of Farber's career and his enduring significance as writer and thinker, *Farber on Film* is a landmark volume that will be a classic in American criticism.

Robert Polito, volume editor, is a poet, biographer, and critic whose books include *Doubles*, *Hollywood & God*, *A Reader's Guide to James Merrill's The Changing Light at Sandover*, and *Savage Art: A Biography of Jim Thompson*, for which he received the National Book Critics Circle Award. He directs the Graduate Writing Program at the New School in New York City.

See the contents for Farber on Film. (PDF, 142 KB)

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From Reader Review Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings for online ebook

Matt McCullough says

This is what criticism should be. Even if you disagree with Farber (which is hard to do), his passion and love of an art form is utterly inspiring.

Ted Burke says

It was a peculiar honor and pleasure to have taken classes by the late and revered film critic Manny Farber while an undergraduate at the University of California San Diego, where he taught. It was he, first among a host of serious film pundits, who convinced me that a critic was someone who's copy a smart editor left untouched. So long as the critic could write well, knew his or her stuff regarding the art and history of cinema, and who could meet deadlines without hassle, the editor was wise not to try to change or modify a critic's opinion, let alone tamper with the prose style. A readership distrusted reviewers who seemed to write great praises for every film a studio released, and were drawn more toward that critic they were sure they'd an honest and well argued opinion from. One also would look for that critic who'd managed to alert you to things in movie making that you hadn't been aware of, or only had a vague notion about. The blessing for lovers of movies and readers of quality film criticism was the 2009 publication of Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber from Library of America. Farber, a painter of note as well as a film critic, brought to the task of reviewing the artist's eye; he could take in the entire canvas and was able to discuss the visual styles of directors, photographers and lighting technicians who could create a distinct set of techniques to get across a broad and subtle range of emotions. The wonders of the collection is that one finds that while Farber broke with the pack and wrote about movies as a fully developed art in itself and not an adjunct or subsidiary form to another--film is no medium's poor cousin--he wasn't a strident formalist. The social uses of film concerned him as well, and through out this anthology one finds the juiciest of tidbits that clarify what's confused, puncture what's pretentious, highlight what his not discussed:

"The robust irrationality of the mouse comedies has been squelched by the syrup that has been gradually flowing over the Disney way."

"Good work usually arises when the creators... seem to have no ambitions towards gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or anything... It goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity."

"Masterpiece art, reminiscent of the enameled tobacco humidors and wooden lawn ponies bought at white elephant auctions decades ago, has come to dominate the overpopulated arts of TV and movies. Three sins of white elephant art are (1) frame the action with an all-over pattern, (2) install every event, character, situation in a frieze of continuities, and (3) treat every inch of the screen and film as a potential area for prize worthy creativity."

Movies were the issue at hand, and discussing them Farber was able to slice through the distinctions that kept low, middle and high culture segregated and their respective audiences apart. Movies were a vehicle anyone

who'd seen them could have an opinion of--all of us had seen the same film, all of us had seen and understood, the same plot and motivations, and all of us, with no specialized training nor advanced degrees, could bring our interpretations to the discussion; anyone who cared to participate could have a say. As often as not, the long range conversations and disagreements over movies and their meanings, directors and their directions, was itself criticism, much of it sparked by the concise, pithy, perceptually brilliant musings of Manny Farber.

I realize, though, that this great period of American film criticism is largely behind us, giving way to a consumer guide ratings that are pithy, if not artful. A large part of the problem might well be that critics, so called, are bored with a preponderance of movies that bleed into one another--how other movies does this stinker remind me of?-- but there are those who fight the good fight none the less. I am thinking of Duncan Shepard of the San Diego Reader, a Farber protege, who seems not to care for the majority of releases he's tasked with evaluating and yet who is among the top movie essayists in the country: his writings on the Coen Brothers and Clint Eastwood are the finest and subtlest I've come across. Still, the trend is not good. There was a funny 2005 piece by former Slate film critic David Edelstein about those film reviewers who seemingly are willing to whore their good names in order to be quoted in big movie ads. Edelstein gets to heart of the matter that film criticism has become a game of dodge ball rather than a reasonable case for why a movie is good, bad, or stalls somewhere in between. Critics will flee or produce more colored smoke if someone presses them to back up the original opinion; Peter Travers, Rolling Stone's shrill shill for mediocre work, would evaporate like slight rain in Death Valley if he were grilled. Film criticism used to mean, not all that long ago, an exercise in establishing movies as a rich and unique narrative art form, with a critical vocabulary and working theories used to establish criteria for good, bad and indifferent work.

Impressionable as a twentyish critic, I applied the thinking to what reviews I did for some local publications and, truth be told, I was a bag of wind much of the time, grandiose and prolix, but the readers got an honest and considered opinion. Yes, I know that I was read; I still have both my hate and fan mail. All this worked as long as there was a constant stream of good films to parse, but as film production became the province of corporate interests, and as more independent publications became property of overgrown media combines, criticism became cheer leading for company projects, good, bad or worse.

Time magazine, for example, is in charge of reviewing the product of Warner Brothers Studios. However loud the chant goes that there is no undue influence put upon Time's assigned scribe, it remains a rotten situation. You wonder just how badly Richard Schickel could maul a particularly odious WB release without the worry of getting pink slipped. The consequence of this is that nearly every mainstream reviewer reads like Peter Travers, manically upbeat, cheery, positive, and utterly, completely unreliable. Critics, as such, are little more than musicians who can play only one song. Their answer to that charge would be, naturally, a variation of witlessly up sided spin: "Well yes, and what's more, we can play "Happy Birthday" in every key!" It would be a nice party trick, but it doesn't cut for discussion when you most desire one.

Richard Anderson says

Many great apercus, but occasionally hard to parse out a meaning.

Bill Kerwin says

This comprehensive, 800 page collection of the film criticism of Manny Farber should be required reading--or at least required skimming--for everyone who cares about film and its styles, its significance, and the special techniques that endow individual movies with their uniqueness and particularity.

Farber is most famous for a few of the terms in his eccentric lexicon of film--elephant art, termite art, negative space, the gimp--but I find that he is most instructive when he shares his painter's eye view of a particular movie, revealing the moments in it that shine with idiosyncratic liveliness and power.. The Jesuit Gerald Manley Hopkins would have called this "inscape"--the dynamic, individual "thingness" of a thing, the design that gives it particular identity--and for Farber, it is this quality that makes movie-going worthwhile. If you read only a few of Farber's pieces, you might be tempted to identify this "inscape" quality with a documentary-like realistic atmosphere, an ironic performance in the midst of sentimentality, or an eccentricity of style, but as you explore what he has to say, you realize that what he loves is something deeper and richer, albeit hard to define.

What Farber hates is easier to talk about: he hates bullshit: inflated acting, the unthinking application of a glossy Hollywood style, portentously "arty" shadows and camera angles, bogus Freudian symbolism as substitute for character revelation, minimalist TV techniques designed to telegraph an easy message, etc. He may ridicule an acknowledged classic for its phoniness, and then immediately turn around and praise an obscure little picture for the natural way its people eat at the dinner table. But whatever he trashes or champions, he does so in the service of what makes movies unique and admirable.

Some illuminating and infuriating excerpts, chosen almost at random from the first 150 pages:

On Disney's "Bambi":

"The worst effect of all this artiness is the preference now for cheap painting . . . in place of the movement which was the main thing before. No longer do the trees and flowers carry on like mad: they are there for pretty, and as the camera moves slowly over them and you drink up all this tinselized loveliness, there is the lone deer on the distant hilltop, a gold aura around him. Mickey wouldn't be caught dead in this.

On Welles' "The Magnificent Ambersons":

In keeping with this eclecticism are photographic tricks from everywhere, so unintegrated you can't miss them. These aren't as objectionable as the general theatrical use of the camera, which subscribes to the theory that six shadows are six times as dramatic as one and the blacker the better. This eighty-eight-minute dim-out negates nearly everything a camera can do.

On Hitchcock's "The Shadow of a Doubt":

Hitchcock shows here that sensationalism is not necessary to every part of a movie if the details of ordinary activity are examined for their fullest suggestiveness. His most expressive moments are the sudden switches in emotion in midstride of an activity: the abrupt change in the pace of a walk or the tone of a voice, the sudden hurrying of people into position. As a result he is producing movies of high quality. As for his famous horror and suspense, they are here . . .

On Preston Sturges' "The Miracle at Morgan's Creek":

Sturges has realized his trademark in this movie better than in any of his other films--that is, to keep a picture exploding from scene to scene with a great frenzy, excitement and energy, by gagging anything either for a laugh or to keep the pace and nature of the movie close to a rout. . . Sturges' films come very close to the energetic sadism of primitive comic strips like "The Katzenjammer Kids," and they are a fine pleasure.

Jon Zelazny says

My impression of every review Farber ever wrote:

"The Emperor of Wyoming" (Universal-International), Anthony Mann's latest swing 'n miss at self-mythologizing sleight-of-hand, squanders it's scant narrative integrity, though a chiaroscuro close-up of a buffalo's nostril instantly brings to mind the best footnotes of Frederick Jackson Turner. Ernest Haller's photography is a chilly downpour of compromised hues as John Wayne ambles in full Earp-via-Jung "See here, young lady" loquaciousness. Thespians high and low offer self-conscious leaks and gambler's tells straight from the days of Mabel Normand, save for veteran character actor Jay C. Flippen, who consistently spits his chaw like a Burmese harpsichord. A monumental waste of time (even the popcorn at the Rialto tasted rheumy) and solid contender for Best Picture of 1955.

Tom Stamper says

Like Andrew Sarris, Farber appreciates neglected genre films more so than prestige pictures. For me, Farber isn't as accessible as Sarris because he cites many more obscure and even forgotten films. Still, much of his insight is brilliant and I agree with the big picture of his arguments.

Tony says

Polito, Robert (ed.) FARBER ON FILM. The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber. (2009). *****. This is a special publication from The Library of America that should be on every movie-lovers shelf, both as a reference and as a superb source of casual dipping. I stayed up very late two nights in a row and managed to finish, sadly, all 775 pages of this encyclopedic tome. I couldn't get enough of Farber's wit, insight, and discerning eyes and ears as they watched films from all over the world and told us what was good about them, and, equally, what was bad. I have this urge to quote huge sections of the various essays on specific films, genres, and/or directors and actors, but I'll stifle it as much as I can.. Most of these essays were published in The New Republic, and The Nation, with the longer, later works published in Commentary. There are hundreds of films reviewed, from 1941 through 1976, the longer pieces co-written with his wife. Farber was also a successful artist and wrote also about the current art scene. He accumulated the reputation of only liking "B" movies, though that was certainly not the case. He did aver that many B movies were able to avoid the pompous influences of the large studios and were able to tell their story on low budgets that required imagination. Some of the films he (mostly) liked included: Union Station, Crisis, Little Big Horn, The Thing, Five Fingers, The Captive City, Los Olvidados, He Walked by Night, Red River, The Turning Point, Limelight, Band of Outsiders, etc., etc. Some of the films he believed had major flaws included: Casablanca, Pride of the Yankees, Bambi, Song of the South, It's a Wonderful Life, the later films of Alfred

Hitchcock, the later films of Orsen Welles, etc., etc. You will find these critiques to be fascinating reads. Whether you agree with his views or not, you will find yourself watching movies in a different way after you read him. Highly recommended.

John Hood says

Bound Miami SunPost December 10, 2009

<http://miamisunpost.com/themorgue/200...>

Critic with a Fist

Manny Farber Kicked Film Ass

John Hood

How the fuck did I not know about the film criticism of Manny Farber? Granted the bulk of his beautifully brutal work occurred before I made my way into the cold cruel world. But a lot of things went down before there was a Hoodlum mouthing around, and I'm in on their particulars. Like film noir, for instance, the genre that some claim I actually seem to be re-living out, in living color. Or pulp fiction, the form that appears to fit me like one of Brando's well-torn tees. Then there's the raked lid, the zooted suit, the guys and the dolls and the gun molls, each of which gets me giddy with go-cat-go. All of those great good things existed prior to my time on this wicked earth, and I'm obsessively intimate with every single solitary one of 'em.

So then why in the world was I not hip to a cat that covered the flickers like some pulp fiction pugilist who stepped straight outta gangland? No reason. There's no excuse either. I missed out on a heavyweight champion of word and wisdom. And I'll be kicking myself in the ass until I can't lift my two-tone shoes off the blood-spilled pavement.

Or at least until I completely read and then re-read Robert Polito's comprehensively edited Farber on Film (The Library of America \$40). And since the 800+ page book reportedly contains everything the master ever crafted about the pictures, and since everything he ever crafted about the pictures begins at brilliant, ends at astounding, and merits memorization, I'll be at this task for quite some time.

And you know what? I'll enjoy every mad minute of it, even if it takes to the last of my hard living days. Why? Because every time I crack the spine of this ass-kicking collection, I learn something, that's why. And not just something about film either. (Though there is that.) No, when I crack the spine of Farber, I learn something about sight and sound and thought and action and how to angle it all into word. Mostly though, reading Farber I learn something about my own bad self. And that, my good friend, is no easy feat.

Take "Underground Films," the piece which hits on the heels of "Hard Sell Cinema" and kicks off the years 1957-77. Basically a diatribe about how bad boy "soldier-cowboy-gangster directors" like Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks, William Wellman, William Keighley and Anthony Mann had "turned out a huge amount of unprized, second-gear celluloid," Farber is as mad at the men who made the movies as he is at the audience who watches them. In this case it's the "tide" that was "in the process of burying a group that kept an endless flow of interesting roughneck film passing through the theaters." To Farber, "Americans seem to have a special aptitude for allowing History to bury the toughest, most authentic native talents." And he's not about

to let 'em get away with it without at least a fat black eye.

Of the action directors, Farber dug Hawks the most, "because he shows a maximum speed, inner life, and view, with the least amount of flat foot." "His best films" (from Scarface to The Big Sleep) "have the swallowed-up intricacy of a good soft-shoe dance." Walsh's films (They Drive By Night, White Heat) "are melancholy masterpieces." Wellman is "at his best in stiff, vulgar, low-pulp material." And "Mann's inhumanity to man can be studied best in The Tall Target, Border Incident, etc." This is a mind that's mulled over mayhem, and he it rest until the best of it gets recognized.

But Farber's no mere cheerleader. Far from it. In fact he bitchslaps more than he applauds. I couldn't even begin to list the names of films and directors and actors and writers who get dressed down and shown they've no clothes, but I will tell you that in addition to the above-mentioned, there are damn few who don't.

Still, Farber's is not a gratuitous ass-kicking. He's not some cranky curmudgeon lamenting the loss of his or his movie's youth. No, his is a studied attack, keen, knowing and carefully calculated to ring in the ears of both victim and reader until the cows jump over the moon. I've neither the time nor the space to truly do this work justice. I doubt seriously if I've got the talent either. But what I do have is an assurance that if you read even one of these essays, you will be awakened. Yes, more often than not it'll be akin to being awakened with a fist to the face. But it's awakened nonetheless. And anyway, the more black-and-blue the bruising, the least likely you are to ever forget it.

Read Farber. You'll never see another movie the same way again.

Will says

This was my 1,000 page introduction to Manny Farber, and worth it if only for this great comment on "great acting ladies" who have:

"the body of the bathing beauty, the face and wholesomeness of the girl who plays Sister in family movies, and the free-swinging, sexual lustiness of the vampire women. But they also have the added jigger of sensitivity. For that jigger they are indebted to [Ingrid] Bergman; also they use her worst cuteness, and that eager kind of acting intelligence which in some of the actresses makes you feel that they read and understood the script and then hid the hero's before he could read his."

There's so much more, but (my only complaint) at a thousand pages of three page reviews, it takes forever to get a sense of Farber's genius since you only get a teeny bit at a time.

Jesse says

omg, omg, OMG! FINALLY.
