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## THREE PHILOSOPHICAL FILMMAKERS

A review of Irving Singer, *Three Philosophical Filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, Renoir*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004. x + 279 pp., index. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN: 0262693283.

IRVING SINGER, one of the most readable theorists of film currently writing, develops his thesis about the creation of meaning through film technique in *Three Philosophical Filmmakers*. In essence, the book is an extended application of the ideas he developed in *Reality Transformed: Film as Meaning and Technique* (MIT Press, 1998). In that work, Singer criticized both ends of the realism-formalism continuum that many film theorists have long used to identify the technical approach taken by filmmakers as well as the mechanism by which a film's style or method issues into meaningful communication. He holds that the interdependence of the many channels through which film affects the viewer and can be manipulated by the filmmaker calls for a new, holistic aesthetic of film. In the present work, the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, and Jean Renoir are analyzed as examples of different effects -- different visions of reality created onscreen -- through the interplay of photography, montage, music, character, and plot. While the aggressive hand of a director in shaping the work may still be usefully categorized as formalist, and the more retiring, presentational approach is still meaningfully termed realistic, Singer seeks a new language for disclosing the filmmakers' underlying beliefs about the interaction of cinema, audience, and ideas.

The author's tools in this quest are not only close readings of the filmmakers' entire bodies of work, but also their extensive published interviews, essays and magazine articles written by them, the novels and short stories they adapted, and even comparative examinations of their films with remakes or contrasting approaches. The variety of sources creates a felicitous roundness to Singer's analysis. He avoids depending on any imagined Rosetta Stone of interpretation, and in the process steers clear of reductive systems. This approach, combined with his clear, accessible prose, results in a compelling presentation that illuminates his subjects even for readers unconcerned with the finer points of the

philosophy of film.

Singer begins with Hitchcock, contrasting the famously ludic director's public protestations that he is a mere entertainer with evidence from his films that a complete, if unarticulated, vision of reality lies therein. It has long been known and widely reported that Hitchcock called actors "cattle" and regarded the writing and storyboarding of a film to be the only real creative work, relegating the filming and editing to decidedly secondary status. Singer weaves that attitude toward his actors with Hitchcock's statements about how he directed them, planning his edits to achieve the desired emotional effect in his audience. For instance, with regard to the dinner scene in *Sabotage*, the director described in great detail the series of cuts from Sylvia's face, to her hand near the carving knife on the table, to her husband, and back around again, contrasting the process with how it would have been done in silent film days, where the audience would be asked to read Sylvia's inner state in her anguished (and exaggerated) expression. In this case, Singer notes, Hitchcock says that the drama is in her hand juxtaposed with the knife. Believing that the creation of emotional tension and release in the audience is his task, and believing that montage is the engine of this process, Hitchcock naturally regards all the photographic objects in the frame -- including people -- as things, as material to be cut together and assembled into the sequence that will achieve this effect. Hitchcock, Singer concludes, is a machinist. His conscious beliefs about art's intersection with reality are functional: human beings need excitement without real danger, and the kind of thrills Hitchcock films provide through this quite mechanical process provide that service. Singer shows, however, that the combination of distinctive musical effects (he confesses to a distaste for Herrmann's jagged, intrusive score in the first act of *Psycho* but acknowledges its functionality to carry the audience through the long dialogue-free stretches) with carefully constructed montage reveals more than Hitchcock intends. It shows that the director regards relationships as external and schematic, whether it is the relationships between his characters onscreen or between the film and its viewers; their attendant emotions are not interesting in and of themselves, but as gears in the machinery of manipulation. Hitchcock's desire to manipulate the elements of his films and those who watch them is not the reprehensible megalomania of the tyrant, but the careful tuning of the mechanic, crafting a machine that runs perfectly to achieve a rather simple, but nonetheless elegant and difficult end.

Turning to Welles, Singer develops a somewhat different metaphor: the director as magician. Welles is much more interested in the internal states of characters than Hitchcock, as evidenced by his sympathy for villains and "heavies" like MacBeth or Harry Lime. But his true obsession is time. For Welles, the magic of film is that it can travel back into the past and bring to life realities long

disintegrated -- if only temporarily, and somewhat tragically. Singer, relying on Welles' revealing conversations with Peter Bogdanovich, takes the director at his word when he protests that *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* were not exercises in nostalgia for his own childhood. But the larger project of unraveling the present through not only the facts of the past, but our feelings and impressions about those facts, clearly resonates with Welles throughout his career. Singer takes the entire Welles catalog seriously; indeed, one of the great strengths of his writing is his loving appreciation and rehabilitation of works often considered minor or failed. The author's use of such works is not contrarian, but enthusiastic, making him an engaging guide to film history and awakening the reader's desire to revisit the depths of the directors' catalogs.

As he did with Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* remake, Singer uses Alfonso Arau's version of *Ambersons* and the reconstruction of Welles' butchered *Touch of Evil* to illuminate the director's imitable touch -- not only technically, but also philosophically. What he finds missing or altered in the remakes is for Singer a clue to the attitude toward reality and art that comes expressly from the original director. While not a thoroughgoing auteurist by any stretch of the imagination, the author chooses these three directors for their renowned involvement in many aspects of their films (not simply the on-set direction) and their conception and execution of the role of the director as an authorial force. Yet this authorship does not always imply control, as it did in Hitchcock's case. Welles uses an ensemble of actors whom he clearly respects as artists in their own right, and who responded with fierce loyalty. Famously, in *Kane*, Welles placed his own credit as Charles Foster Kane at the very end of the cast list, and shared equal billing as a filmmaker with his cinematographer Gregg Toland. Yet in his eclectic (some might even say opportunistic) oeuvre of plays and novels and odd ideas adapted into films, matched or perhaps exceeded by the long list of projects in which he lost interest or never found a way to begin, Singer finds a man whose unsystematized metaphysics was syncretistic, expansive, and inclusive, while remaining tightly focused on recurring themes and processes that the director sensed held the key to reality and human experience.

Jean Renoir represents for the author the other end of the directorial continuum from Hitchcock. Instead of controlling objects, Renoir empowers human beings to tell their stories on film. Instead of working toward a perfectly-functioning machine, Renoir allows his films to grow organically, as much in the (to some extent unpredictable) minds of the audience as in the *mise-en-scène* and montage. Singer regards him as a conversationalist, an equal partner with his collaborators and with the audience in allowing stories and ideas to emerge. Fittingly, Renoir encouraged his actors to improvise; much like the latter-day iconoclast Robert Altman, he did not believe he needed to know what was going to happen before

turning on the cameras. Instead, he constructed a proposal for the audience out of the occurrences during filming -- a proposal, Singer believes, about the nature of reality and the role of art within it. The artist, for whom Renoir's camera is a surrogate, is a compassionate humanist who highlights the hidden moments and makes values visible. Singer notes that Renoir helps us, his audience, assume the position of concerned observers who become involved in the story because it is as much ours as Renoir's, or his characters.

Yet Singer notes that Renoir does not achieve this humanistic effect with realism *per se*, but with a kind of artifice that consciously conceals the filmmaking enterprise itself. Again drawing from the director's published interviews and essays, he suggests that Renoir found the ideal historical setting for filmed narratives to be just before the invention of cinema. In this moment when photography had become firmly ensconced in culture as a reproduction of reality, but before movement and time could be captured, Renoir felt that audiences could connect with characters who were not themselves aware that their timestreams could be captured and revisited, while comfortable with the concept of representation as such. No doubt Renoir's judgment is affected by his own history and that of the European classes he chronicles, but Singer astutely connects this statement to the director's tacit understanding of the reality he wished to convey through his films.

Singer concludes his study with a brief summary and comparison of his three subjects on several topics, including their relationship with the "common," their attitude toward improvisation and accident, and their concept of the audience. Here, as throughout the book, he writes in short sections, achieving a mosaic effect rather than attempting to build a sustained and complex argument. The method is not unlike montage itself; meaning arises in the juxtaposition of elements rather than in a single "shot." Yet this is not to say that Singer writes tangentially, allusively, or indirectly. To the contrary, his clarity and honesty provide the ideal setting for his sparkling interpretive gems. The fact that the book comes across as a meditation and appreciation, rather than an argument or theoretical exposition, is entirely to its credit. At the end of the final chapter, Singer alludes to the work from which he drew his title, Santayana's *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe*. Unlike Santayana, Singer says, he does not see his three directorial subjects arrayed in a pantheon into which others, past, present, and future, should also be slotted according to their skill and worth. Film history, for Singer, is a storehouse of value that neither exhausts film's artistic capacity, nor provides an unwavering standard by which each new wave of cinematic innovation should be judged. Instead it is a place to discover our selves and our reality as it extends backward and forward, into what formed us and what is rushing toward us. Each cinematic master helps us do that in a

different mode. Singer's singular genius, expressed with modest reserve but nonetheless monumental, is to guide us into that appreciation.

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