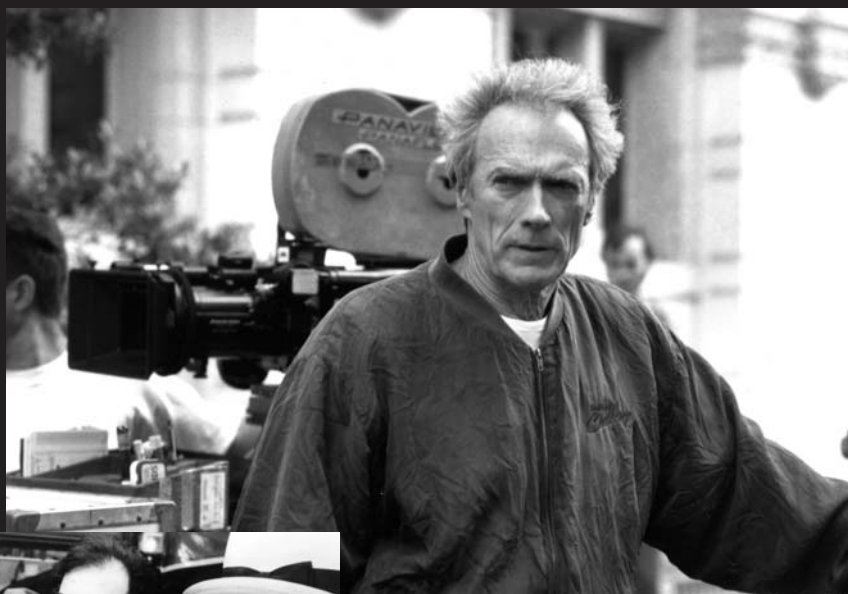




FILM VOICES



Interviews from Post Script



**EDITED BY
GERALD DUCHOVNAY**

FILM VOICES

T H E **S U N Y** S E R I E S

CULTURAL STUDIES IN CINEMA/VIDEO

W H E E L E R W I N S T O N D I X O N | E D I T O R

FILM VOICES



Interviews from *Post Script*

edited by

GERALD
DUCHOVNAY

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Dedicated to the Memory of

Arthur Stander

Charles Mazer

Robert E. Waxman

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P R E F A C E



In 1978, about a dozen colleges and university instructors interested in film and fiction participated in a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar at The Johns Hopkins University. The seminar was directed by Leo Braudy (now of the University of Southern California) and focused on how character is presented in fiction and film.

As is the case with many of these NEH seminars, participants often bond because of similar interests and general compatibility. Near the end of the seminar, six or seven of the participants wanted to continue the dialogue established during our six weeks together. We agreed to start a newsletter to discuss ideas begun in the seminar and to open the newsletter to others who might be interested in participating in our discussions. (This, of course, was prior to e-mail and chat rooms.) We agreed that if we could sustain the newsletter for a year or two, we would then try to change the format from newsletter to journal. After about eighteen months and several issues of the newsletter, some of us decided to begin a journal. Those collaborating on this project consisted of Robert Ginsberg (Penn State, Delaware County), Wade Jennings (Ball State University), Judy Rigglin (Northern Virginia Community College), the late T. J. (Ted) Ross (Fairleigh Dickinson University), Gerald Duchovnay (Jacksonville University, Florida), and Leo Braudy, who offered his good offices to assist us with establishing an editorial board. After several meetings, the group asked me if I would serve as the general editor. Without knowing what was involved, I agreed. The others said they would do what they could to raise funds and solicit editorial staff and submissions.

Since there were several other film journals at the time (and many more since), we thought an interdisciplinary journal, with articles that were accessible to scholars and the general reader, would be the approach we should take. The journal's name, *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, hammered out in a hotel suite at a film conference in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1980, sought to capture our intent. With nominal support from Jacksonville University and some

contributions by most of the members of the original editorial board, we secured enough funds and submissions to publish our first issue in November 1981.

Uncertain of the journal's reception and future funding, the editorial staff recommended that in addition to the articles, we should try to include substantive interviews and some book reviews. We knew that *Film Quarterly* had an issue devoted to book reviews, so we did not want to duplicate what they were doing. *Literature/Film Quarterly* focused on filmed adaptations, and numerous journals had interviews, but for the most part they were brief remarks connected to the director, actor, or cinematographer's latest film. Our goal was to try to go beyond the moment. By 1983 J. P. Telotte, one of the contributors to several of our early issues, joined the editorial board and suggested we consider adding an annual bibliography of film studies. This bibliography would list and annotate articles on film that appeared in English language publications that would be relatively accessible to most of our readers. The editorial staff agreed that this would be a useful resource for those who wanted a ready reference and who did not have access to the more substantive (and expensive) *Film/Literature Index* (State University of New York Press, Albany) or the *International Index to Film Periodicals* (Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, Belgium).

After the first few years of testing the waters, *Post Script* established its format, which, except for a major design change when it moved from Jacksonville University to Texas A&M University-Commerce in 1990, has remained fairly consistent. Since 1981 we have published three issues a year. Those issues have included an annual bibliography, an occasional brief note on articles previously published, substantive essays on film acting, film as visual art and cinematic style, film history, aesthetics, film and technology, genre studies, and interdisciplinary studies, as well as book reviews and interviews. We have also devoted full issues to special topics—French cinema, Spanish cinema, film and philosophy, Shakespeare and film, Chinese cinema, Japanese cinema, Hong Kong cinema, autobiography and film, Gen-X film, Canadian cinema, Paul Verhoeven, the films of Kurosawa Akira, and literacy and film.

While we have not received (or published) as many interdisciplinary essays as we initially hoped for, our readers have frequently commented on the usefulness of the bibliography and especially the interviews. We have been asked on numerous occasions to collect and publish our interviews since they offer a window into the film-making process during the last twenty years. Those that are reprinted in this volume are representative of the diverse voices that have appeared since 1981 in *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



This collection would not be possible without the assistance of those who agreed to be interviewed and the individuals who did the interviewing and submitted the material to us for our consideration. The name that appears most frequently in this anthology is Ric Gentry, a member of the *Post Script* staff and a filmmaker and freelance writer. To Ric and to the others whose contributions have graced our pages—Leo Braudy, Robert Kolker, Mark Crispin Miller, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Wheeler Winston Dixon, Chris Shea, Wade Jennings, Peter Harcourt, Richard A. Macksey, and Gerald Wood—I, as general editor of *Post Script*, extend a sincere thank-you. Without them, our subscribers in this country and abroad, and our institutional cosponsors (Texas A&M University-Commerce and Georgia Institute of Technology), this collection of interviews would not be possible. Jay Telotte, my coeditor of *Post Script* since 1985, has been supportive of this project from its inception and assisted in the selection of the interviews. I would also like to thank Vivian Freeman, Stacie Bockemehl, and especially Marscha Brown, who have assisted in preparing transcripts of these interviews.

Crystal Hurley, Dick Fulkerson, and Donna Dunbar-Odom have been most gracious in tending to some administrative details so that I could find time to complete this collection. For their assistance I am most thankful. A manuscript owes much to those who shepherd it through the press. Wheeler Winston Dixon, the series editor, and James Peltz, the acquisitions editor, offered enthusiasm and encouragement; special kudos to Marilyn P. Semerad (production manager) and Margaret Copeley (copyeditor) for their editorial assistance.

Most of all I must thank my family for their continued support, and especially to Brian, Bram, and Aviva for their encouragement and love.

All the interviews in this book first appeared in *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities (PS)*. The editor of this volume gratefully acknowledges permission by Post Script, Inc. to reprint them here. He also wishes to thank Joseph Baum, former program director for the Maryland Film Guild and the Baltimore

Film Forum for permission to originally publish the dialogues with Louis Malle, Sydney Pollack, and Robert Altman.

Every reasonable effort has been made to contact the owners of copyright materials in this book, but in some instances this has proven impossible. The author and publisher will be glad to receive information leading to more complete acknowledgements in subsequent printings of the book and in the meantime extend their apologies for any omissions.

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INTRODUCTION



GERALD DUCHOVNAY

The interviews in this collection bring together major Hollywood directors and actors, independent filmmakers, screenwriters, an animator, a film editor, and several international voices. Even with this diversity and interviews that cover filmmaking in the last two decades, several motifs repeat themselves: the concern for quality films, the influence of business (“the suits”) and money on filmmaking, the importance of the script, casting, and audience, and technology’s impact on the filmmaking process.

When Robert Altman was interviewed in Baltimore, Maryland, on March 28, 1981, after a screening of *Health* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, he spoke candidly about those films and ten others (*The Long Goodbye*, *Three Women*, *Nashville*, *Brewster McCloud*, *Images*, *A Wedding*, *A Perfect Couple*, *Quintet*, *Pop-eye*, and *That Cold Day in the Park*). Considered more of an independent than a mainstream commercial director, Altman would prefer to sneak in a good film, made by artists, rather than satisfy audience appeal for action and horror films. Speaking more than two decades ago, but echoing today’s industry penchant for dollars over art, he observes that “there is so much money involved, and they [studio hierarchy] are so concerned about the money that they don’t want to take a chance of just making a film that will maybe break even or maybe take twenty percent. In most businesses, if you turn out a product and you can make fifty percent profit, it’s pretty good.”

Cognizant of the profit motive, Altman takes great joy in crafting “small” films. While highly regarded among industry professionals, many of whom are willing to work for scale for him, Altman has had few of the commercial successes craved by studio executives. *M*A*S*H** did well at the box office, but films like *The Player*, *Gosford Park*, and even *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (now considered a classic, but panned by most reviewers when it first opened), have done little to

assuage studio executives whose offices, like the home in D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking Horse Winner," shout out for "more money."

For all his maverick status in Hollywood, Altman bridges independent and commercial films. He created his own production company, Lion's Gate Films, in order to maintain artistic control over his films, but he turns to studios or distributors to market them. Sometimes, as in the case of *The Long Goodbye*, the marketing campaign does not capture the tenor of the film; in other cases (*Health*) studio management changes and the film is buried or given to a distribution house that will market it in limited release on university campuses and to revival houses.

Often described as an "actor's director," Robert Altman tries to eschew politics. Although he wanted *Health*, a film he describes as an "essay," to open during the Carter presidency, he most often delights in the accidents of production (eight days of snow during the shooting of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* allowed a look and feel that would not have otherwise been possible), or actors who collaborate on "interior" films or films of observation. His goal is "to show you something or let you see something that I see. Obviously, I'm manipulating the audience every time I make a cut or by what I show, but I'm trying to leave enough openness there so that you can bring your own interpretation to it, because I don't think a film has any value, or that any work of art is a work of art, unless it's something that the beholder meets half way and brings his own experience to." He is conscious of those who have come before (Federico Fellini, Max Ophuls) and he is not adverse to borrowing from his own films (*Images* and *The Long Goodbye*; *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *Popeye*), but his fondest wish is that "all of the people who are in it for the money, would go into shopping centers and leave the making of the films to the artists."

Francis Ford Coppola's distinguished career has included *Apocalypse Now*, *Godfather, Parts I, II, and III*, and *The Conversation*, but when he spoke to Ric Gentry in 1987, he had just completed "Rip Van Winkle," an episode of *Fairie Tale Theatre* for Shelley Duvall and was anxious to talk about that experience and his desire to use new technology for an "electronic cinema" in an "electronic studio." Working in television, and specifically on this production, gave Coppola the opportunity to explore differences in acting and editing not normally open to him in film and recalled high school and college experiences in the theater, and especially his dream of becoming a playwright. In 1987 his goal was to become "a writer of original full-length dramatic material for an audio-visual medium" that would involve live performances. In "Rip Van Winkle" Coppola uses stylized aspects of Japanese Kabuki theater, especially the linking of scenery and settings to the story's ideas, to help convey the fairy tale.

Oliver Stone revels in how imagery, aided by technology, helps him to get at "fractured" biographies. In his discussion with Ric Gentry about *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Heaven and Earth*, *Salvador*, *Nixon*, *JFK*, and especially *Natural Born Killers*, Stone emphasizes how important the cinematographer is and how

the camera “has been reflective of [his] subjective point of view.” To Stone it is the tension between the close-up and the long lens that creates the dynamics of cinematography.

Robert Altman and Clint Eastwood are also interested in technology, but in more traditional ways. Altman often chooses his cinematographer and soundman early on in the process, gives them a sense of where he wants to go with the picture, and collaborates with them throughout. Eastwood knows what he is about, doesn't storyboard his films, and has confidence in his cast and crew to accomplish his goals. Altman, Eastwood, and Stone use some degree of improvisation, but that works for them because they place a premium on casting. Pollack is a director who acts, while Eastwood is an actor who directs. Altman is a director who more than Eastwood, Pollack, or Coppola, gives greater freedom to his actors, sometimes (*Three Women*, for example) working only with an outline and no formal script. Casting, then, becomes essential, with Altman claiming that it is 90 percent of his process. Eastwood sees the cast as a jazz ensemble: “They're very much like jazz musicians in that within the scene they're doing a lot of things that aren't scripted—where they go, how they give the line, sometimes changing the line to have it make more sense or become more natural to them though not necessarily changing the meaning.”

In *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* Eastwood encouraged the actors to “find the soul” of their characters by allowing them to improvise, to “reveal in a given moment or situation, something ideally only that character or personality would do or express.” To get immediacy, spontaneity, and energy from his actors, Eastwood rarely does extended takes: “The best takes are usually the first ones, before the actors fall into a pattern.” He likes to work instinctively, but even with allowances for improvisation, there is only one person in charge. Not unlike his Man-with-No Name character, to Eastwood the director's view of the film is *the* view: “There only needs to be one perspective and that's the director's, not that I'm unresponsive to someone saying they think they could've done something better.” There is collaboration and trust, but his role of director embodies the traits of many of his characters in his films—“independence and isolation and, by necessity, . . . moral autonomy.”

Oliver Stone tries to build in time to rehearse before going in front of the camera. Because actors “bring enormous contributions,” there is room for improvisation. Nevertheless, because he frequently has been involved in writing the script, because he thinks visually, and because he plans what his shots will be, “improvisation comes out of preparation.” Like Sydney Pollack, Stone is trying to work out new combinations in order to make room for new perceptions, for enlightenment during the process. Each film is a test in which the director is a warrior-athlete, competing with himself, but also with actors and studio executives.

The importance of money, the influence of the studio and the ratings system, and the power of actors and producers make filmmaking a dangerous sport