

Sixties that our culture has not been seriously challenged or critiqued by a younger generation. (We're really getting tired of carrying the ball. Why don't you kids try to tackle us?!)

So we need Jonathan Rosenbaum. We need him to remain the critical outsider. Forever young.

The book begins with a critique of Hollywood marketing techniques, then moves on to a discussion of recent requiems for the cinema (Sontag, Godard, Thomson, Denby). Criticizing the marketing of Hollywood product seems to me to be on the same level as criticizing the marketing of theme parks. It was ever so. Next come a couple of chapters on contemporary exhibition, distribution, promotion, and criticism that are well researched and offer some useful insights.

After a chapter railing at The American Film Institute for having the temerity to declare a list of 100 greatest American movies (he offers his own corrected list—I don't know why it's OK for him to indulge in listmaking, like his hero Andrew Sarris, but not the corporate AFI), he focuses for a few chapters on American isolationism. There's some truth here: we are less sensitive to influence from abroad than we were thirty years ago. Rosenbaum assumes that is because we are more self-centered. I'm not so sure. Rosenbaum offers several lists of interesting foreign directors (you know who they are) whose work has been received with mild enthusiasm by American audiences in the last fifteen years. But I knew Godard, Godard was a friend of mine. And let me tell you, these guys are no Godards.

As invigorating as the films of Kiarostami or Hou or Jarmusch may be, times have changed. Cinema is no longer where the intellectual action and cultural innovation are. (No, I don't know where they went. If you do, please e-mail me.) These are quieter times, where we worry more about technology than philosophy. It is nearly impossible to be a true iconoclast, as Godard was, in the midst of the postmodern normalcy that suffocates us. More's the pity.

Not surprisingly, Rosenbaum never convincingly demonstrates that cinema/movies/film is as vital and relevant today as it was thirty years ago. And that's the fatal flaw in his argument.

In fact, because of the electronic alternatives available today it is infinitely easier to view alternative, marginal, cult, and foreign films. It's also much easier to promote them. I'd be the first to agree with Rosenbaum that video isn't film, but it is not *Cliff's Notes*, as he suggests; film is to video as hardcover books are to cheap paperbacks. (And that is assuming that the multiplex you are sitting in is larger than your living room.) It doesn't matter. Films are far more available today than they were thirty years ago, even if what we see on disc or tape is a sickly shadow of the original. The title of the antithesis to this book might be: "How Sony/Philips, Amazon, and the Internet Conspire to

Drown You in More Movies Than You Might Ever Want to See."

Thirty years ago we often traveled hours to see a prized film. In one of the more poignant passages of the book, Rosenbaum recounts a 1968 bus trip to Philadelphia to catch a preview screening of Godard's *La Chinoise* two weeks prior to its New York opening. We used to do things like that back in the day! He then notes that the film ran for only a week in New York, but reminds us of the mythic relationship between the screening of *La Chinoise* and the student uprising at Columbia University several weeks later. If it only ran for a week, as he says, then it didn't have much more exposure than it would have had thirty-three years later in 2001. If it had a greater effect, perhaps that is a measure of its cinematic power. Or a measure of the decimation of campus politics.

A few pages later Rosenbaum reminds us how the legendary distributor Ben Barenholtz kept *Eraserver* playing in theaters at midnight for months on end until it finally took off. (I knew Ben Barenholtz. Ben Barenholtz was a friend of mine. And let me tell you, Ben Barenholtz was no Dan Talbot!)

People do make a difference.

Jonathan Rosenbaum reminds us several times that his family used to run a chain of independent cinemas in Atlanta. As I worked through his vigorous but repetitive critique of contemporary critics and distributors, this thought continued to grow: what if he'd stayed in the family business? What if there were a chain of Rosenbaum cinemas featuring all the artists he feels we neglect?

As we used to say in the Sixties: If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem. Of course it is specious to suggest that such a prolific and influential critic as Jonathan Rosenbaum has chosen the wrong career. But the point is that it is 'our' fault now, not 'theirs.' As Pogo said with such eerie prescience almost fifty years ago: "We have met the enemy. And they is us." How did Walt Kelly know this years before the rest of us had even defined the 'enemy'?

In the Sixties we took it as a given that if we said the right thing and did the right thing we would beat "the enemy." Well, we didn't. The world today, the cinema today, is our product. This is a responsibility that Rosenbaum does not accept.

He's the last true cinephile, and the last Young Turk in a world where there are no "Turks" young enough not to join the AARP.

At least he's kept the faith.—**James Monaco**

MOVING?

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SHORT TAKES

Friendly Persuasion: Iranian Cinema After the Revolution

Jamsheed Akrami's interview/excerpt documentary goes a long way in offering exposition into one of the most discussed back stories in recent international cinema: the surprising ascendancy of Iranian film to the preeminent position it currently holds, despite the political and religious restrictions with which the directors have had to contend. Filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Dariush Mehrjui, and Jafar Panahi, offer their views on issues ranging from the use of children in Iranian cinema to how they were able to rebuild an industry which was almost nonexistent in the years following the Revolution. But Akrami's film is best on the problem of censorship, chipping away at the canard of a uniform Iranian film community and revealing a group of artists with diverse tactics with which to accommodate a stifling creative climate giving government officials the final cut. Kiarostami, with tranquil determination, tells the censor, "You do your work, and we'll do ours. Ultimately it is our work that will survive." Makhmalbaf, on the other hand, seems frustrated to the point of near collapse: "I feel like I have been struggling for a thousand and five hundred years, half of which in vain." Most of the directors agree though that efforts to circumvent those codes have somehow helped to define Iranian cinema's neorealist style and humanistic bent. And there is a justifiable claim made that the banning of Hollywood films has saved Iran from the destruction of their own national cinema that other countries have had to endure. Choppy editing and poor lighting give Akrami's film the appearance of meager production resources, but that's a negligible complaint considering the insight the film offers into a group of directors whose resilience and artistry almost assures that Kiarostami's prophecy will be realized. (Distributed by Jamsheed Akrami, 2 Laird Place, Cliffside Park, NY 07010, phone/fax (201) 941-9395)—**John Watson**

Hidden Wars of Desert Storm

The August 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's forces sparked the largest international crisis since the breakup of the Soviet Union, with Western regiments reciprocating in an all-out offensive whose air raids wreaked destruction comparable to seven-and-a-half Hiroshimas in forty-two days. But were Iraqi actions nearly as unmotivated or bullying as the (first) Bush Administration had us believe? Highly touted surveillance photographs of the alleged Iraqi military buildup never surfaced from the Pentagon, and the U.S. government's historically duplicitous dealings in the Middle East hardly inspire trust. Gerard Ungerman and Audrey Brody's documentary skeptically investigates *Defense Department justifications for deploying nearly 700,000 American soldiers to bulldoze Hussein's feckless troops*. The filmmakers persuasively demonstrate probable motive to incriminate Operation Desert Storm as a *Wag the Dog*-style created war, in which U.S. oil interests dictated military policy and villainized Hussein as Washington's most convenient bogeyman. More disturbing still are revelations that the U.N.-sanctioned embargo's crippling effects on Iraqi citizens brazenly defies Geneva

Conventions on warfare and can justifiably be deemed genocidal. Still reeling from the bombed-out devastation of its infrastructure and food chain, decade-long sanctions on food and medicine have succeeded in bringing every Iraqi but Hussein to his knees. Widespread malnutrition and soaring infant death rates are tragically countered by the growing certainty that the mysterious Gulf War Syndrome, afflicting thousands of veterans and untold scores of local populations, is the result of the American military's covert use of ammunition containing depleted uranium. While its sentimental score and superfluous close-ups of despairing children at times yank the heartstrings too obtrusively, *Hidden Wars* reveals unflinchingly the degree to which humanitarian considerations are never enough to change military policy. (Distributed by Free-Will Productions, P.O. Box 5476, N. Hollywood, CA 91616, phone (818) 487-2879)—**Maria San Filippo**

Once Upon a Time in China

Ten years on, Hong Kong auteur Tsui Hark's sweeping martial-arts epic (restored in a new print) still stirs with emotion, metaphor, and relevance, aging as gracefully as its star, Jet Li. Set in the early 1800s, the film is primarily concerned with legendary Chinese folk hero Wong Fei-Hung (Li) and his efforts to hold onto tradition in his homeland. He is faced with the triple threat of American slave traders, a competitor who wants to open up a rival school, and his "Aunt 13" (Rosamund Kwan), who is trying to segue him into the future by introducing him to photography—and their unacknowledged love for one another. But all that is merely surface material for Tsui Hark to paint thematic brush strokes with, as he twists and turns every element in the film to evoke something deeper. Hark turns the tables on traditional Western stereotypes of Asians; here all foreigners in China are called "aliens" and native countrymen who cannot speak their own language are scolded for their abandonment of values. Chinese characters are consistently interrupted by priests touting Christianity or ships' horns blowing, and Wong himself is constantly getting told, "It's better to keep the peace" rather than get into a fight. Indeed it's as if all of the industrialization (of trains, telegraphs, and ships) forces him into action. *Once Upon a Time...* (simply called *Wong Fei-Hung in China*) manages to touch upon nationalism, class issues, sovereignty, real and subjugated familial values, martial-arts traditions, masculinity, and issues of linguistic clarity. The grace with which Hark constructs the fight scenes only serves to amplify the underlying concerns at hand. And in his breakthrough role, Li's acting is as formidable as his martial-arts moves (which are something to behold), and through his face we see China's pain and sorrow at loss of tradition, and tentative movement towards the future. Fans of Li's Hollywood films should find just as much of a thrill in finding out where he got started. (Distributed by Columbia/TriStar Home Video/DVD).—**Michael Duffy**

Sisters in Resistance

Maia Wechsler's *Sisters in Resistance* strikingly demonstrates that one can make an emotionally stirring documentary using the most minimal of cinematic means. The film consists of four eloquent, elderly French women talking to the director and each other, and some unexceptional archival

footage of De Gaulle, the German occupation, and the Resistance. The four women are heroines—intellectual, courageous, idealistic, and deeply caring. They talk about their roles in the Resistance, their arrest and interrogation, their years in Ravensbrück concentration camp ("the 7th Circle of Hell"), and their capacity to vanquish horrific memories and successfully rebuild their lives after the war—marriage, children, and the continuing commitment to justice. The four women speak modestly, without any posturing or self-aggrandizement, about their unwillingness to remain passive in the face of evil. They also speak of how the loving bonds and sense of solidarity they forged in Ravensbrück raised their spirits and helped them survive. Their close friendship has endured over fifty years. These are exceptional women, whose luminous existence, amidst the corruption and carnage of political and social life, could move even the most cynical of us to renew our faith in humanity. (Distributed by Maia Wechsler, 182 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10013, phone (212) 625-9624)—**Leonard Quart**

Unfinished Symphony

This fine film depicts the ideological atmosphere that gave rise to the GI antiwar movement, and specifically to its most important organization, the Vietnam Veterans against the War. Documentary footage of American firepower and of brutal treatment of Vietnamese captives is interspersed with scenes from the 1971 "Winter Soldier" investigations, during which former GIs testified about atrocities they saw or participated in. Central focus of the film is on the 1971 VVAW march from Lexington, Massachusetts, to Bunker Hill, which retraced Paul Revere's ride of 1775 and ended in a massive arrest of 410 veterans and civilians by the Lexington police for camping overnight on the village green. John Kerry, then VVAW's leading spokesman, now junior U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, states the vets' moral revulsion against the war and the way they were duped into fighting it; interviewees, including Professor Howard Zinn, provide historical context. The moral and political weight of the film is borne by the many short statements both of veterans and of Lexington townspeople, many of whom are shown voicing antiwar views, openly supporting the vets' march or even joining it—a dramatic reminder of a time not long ago when dissent against government policy was a mass phenomenon. An unusual but effective formal choice blends this footage with Polish composer Henryk Górecki's moving Symphony No. 3 ("Symphony of Sorrowful Songs"). The "symphony" metaphor thus divides the film, somewhat arbitrarily, into three parts: the lies that justified the war and its brutalities; the parallels with previous movements of dissent in American history; and the responsibility to take action to oppose the war. At the end, we see former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara still excusing American policy during a meeting with Vietnamese leaders in 1997. Ho Chi Minh's letter to President Truman of February 1946—a noble and uncommunist claim of the right to independence, and one that Truman never answered—is quoted. The "symphony" of the title remains "unfinished" presumably because today, thirty years later, Vietnam Veterans Against the War still has the job to teach a new generation about the Vietnam War. (Distributed by Northern Light Productions, 1050 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, phone (617) 731-9100 X201).—**Grover Furr**