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 requirements 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 (it 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 Clift’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 demarcation of campus politics.

A few pages later Rosenbaum reminds us how the legendary director Ben Barenholtz kept Eraserhead 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 spurious to suggest that such a prolific and influential critic as Jonathan Rosenbaum has chosen the wrong career. But the point is that it’s 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 ‘Tursky young enough to join the AARP.

At least he’s kept the faith.—James Monaco

MOVING?

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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 ascendance of Iranian film to the prominent position it currently holds. Despite the upheaval in Tehran as Washington's watch, 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 governing government officials the film cuts. Kiarostami, with tranquil determination, tells the census, "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 censors 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 insights the film offers into a group of directors whose resilience and artistry almost assure that Kiarostami's prophecy will be realized. [Distributed by Jamshed Akrami, 2 Lard Lane, Clifford Park, NY 10810, phone/fax (917) 912-1929]—John Watson

Once Upon a Time in China

Tens years on, Hong Kong actor Tsui Hark's sweeping martial-arts epic, restored in a new print, still stirs with emotion, metaphor, and relevance. Aging gracefully despite his girth, the film's 1980s setting is a period of social and political change in China, and it remains a testament to the power of storytelling. Hark's direction is masterful, and the action sequences are breathtaking. [Distributed by Free Will Producers, P.O. Box 5476, N. Hollywood, CA 91616, phone (818) 487-2699]—María San Filippo

Unfinished Symphony

This fine film depicts the ideological atmosphere that gave rise to the GI antitwar movement, and specifically to its most important organization, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Documentaries of American firefighters and of brutal treatment of Vietnamese captives is interspersed with scenes from the 1971 "Winter Soldier" investigations, during which former GI's testified about atrocities they saw or participated in. Central focus of the film is on the 1971 VVAV march from Lexington, Massachusetts, to Bunker Hill, which retraced Paul Revere's route of 1775 and ended in a mass arrest of over 400 veterans and civilians by the Lexington police for camping overnight on the village green. John Kerry, then VVAV's leading spokesman, now junior U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, states the vets' moral revulsion against the war that would follow it. [Distributed by Maia Wachs, 182 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10012, phone (212) 625-6524]—Leonard Quart

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 some Iraqis actions nearly as unprovoked or horrifying 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 capricious dealings in the Middle East hardly inspire trust. Gerard Ungarman and Audrey Brot's documentary, which extensively investigates Defense Department justifications for deploying nearly 700,000 American soldiers to beef up Hussein's feckless troops. The filmmakers persuasively demonstrate probable motive to incite Operation Desert Storm as A Way the Dog-style created war, in which U.S. oil interests dictated military policy. [Distributed by Northern Light Productions, 150 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, phone (617) 731-9108 X261]—Grover Furr

Sisters in Resistance

Mai Wechsher’s Sisters in Resistance strikingly demonstrates that one can make an emotionally striking film about the Vietnam War that also makes an intellectual statement about the cinematic means. The film consists of four eloquent, elderly French women talking to the director and each other, and some unexpected 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 sustain horror, 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 silent. The Sài Gòn, the film of the women in the Resistance, is a document 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 for fifty years. These are exceptional women, whose luminous existence, amidst the corruption and carnage of politics and social life, could move even the most jaded in heart. [Distributed by Maia Wachs, 182 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10012, phone (212) 625-6524]—Leonard Quart

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