

An interview with Jonathan Rosenbaum

THOMAS QUIST AND JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

Thomas Quist: *How would you define the type of criticism that you do?*

Jonathan Rosenbaum: First of all, I see myself as a writer before I see myself as a critic. I've been a writer for a longer period. Criticism is an offshoot. I try to bring other qualities of writing to criticism. I'm trying to make the book I'm writing now, *Uncanny Camera Movements*, literary in some way.

TQ: *Where do you see being a writer and being a critic diverging?*

JR: The popular meaning of critic is reviewer. Reviewer quickly translates, for most people, into consumer advice. Certainly, I have a different relation to criticism now than when I wrote for the *Chicago Reader*. At the *Reader* I was reviewing every week; I had a bunch of films that I had to see, many of which I only saw because of the job. There's some evaluation, but I think evaluation figures differently if you're a reviewer than if you're a critic (understood as oppositional to a reviewer). Sometimes the idea of the reviewer is responding to the question of "what should I see this week?" What I am involved with now doesn't have that connotation. What I like to see now could just as easily be an old film as a new film. In fact, I tend, maybe it's a reflection of my age, to like old films at least as much if not more than new films. I watched just today a film from the early '70s directed by Richard Fleischer, *The New Centurions* (1972), which I like a lot.

TQ: *Yeah, it's good.*

JR: I'm actually a big fan of Fleisher.

TQ: *I think he's great.... Are you cognizant of when you're trying to improve a film's reputation versus when you're advocating for its visibility or trying to influence how people watch it—I think your writing on Tati's *Playtime* (1967) is more an example of the latter.*

JR: Yeah. It's not just a matter of getting people to see it but getting people to see it in a particular way. For example, Paul Schrader is someone I respect as a critic for certain things. Yet, I was kind of amazed when he recently on Facebook said that the reason why he didn't like Tati was that he didn't have much taste for whimsy. And he seemed to think the point of liking or not liking Tati had something to do with your capacity for whimsy. To me, that is somebody who totally misses the point of what Tati's doing. Similarly, people can think the reason why you watch Bresson films is because you're religious or get closer to a religious experience or God, which has nothing to do with my liking of Bresson. Even though that might have something to do with Bresson's motives. It gets complicated. For example, Cineaste asked me to write a letter for the current issue reacting to the interview with Michel Ciment that they published. One thing that I took exception to, even though I find Ciment very valuable as a reporter more than a critic, was that he said the number one rule he has for criticism is not to take the film as something other than what its maker intended. That's totally getting off on the wrong foot, nobody can talk about intentionality, neither the artist nor the critic. It's not something that can be dealt with because it's unknowable really.

TQ: *It reminds me of something you mentioned the last time we spoke, where you said that your type of criticism is the extension of enigmas rather than the solving of an artwork, which has a certain aesthetic and political project to it in not trying to instrumentalize the artwork or make it easily digestible.*

JR: It's trying to extend what art does, to climb into it so to speak. A lot of people's attitudes towards what a critic is supposed to be like the John Simon model: not that you climb into it but that you climb outside of it, you make some appraisal from a distance. That, to me, is pretty boring. That's closer to what academic criticism can be. Even though I read some academic criticism, its main turn off for me is precisely this dispassion. It's a pose, a dispassionate pose.

TQ: *Your writing, then, sits in the middle of a continuum that runs between consumer guide on the one end and academic criticism on the other end.*

JR: Yeah, although sometimes it's very weird. Take somebody like Stanley Kubrick. If you talk about him as an artist you get into all these interesting areas but if you talk about him as critic of his own work or other people's work, he's really boring or uninteresting. Everything he has to say about his own work and other's is always the most obvious. It's like, if that's what art is, why be interested in it? There's an awful lot of criticism in that vein that turns me off for precisely that reason. I read something in the new *Cineaste* where the writer says "Oh Boetticher isn't as good as people say he is." That could be interesting if you're showing how and why but if your purpose is to just say that then my reaction is: "So what? Why does it matter?" It's more what you do with it. It always reminds me of famous exchange of Godard and Schrader at Telluride. Schrader went up to Godard and said, "I've taken something from your films for my latest film." And Godard said, "it doesn't matter what you take but where you take it to."

TQ: *This was backhanded, right?*

JR: I took it as Godard putting him down, yeah.

TQ: *Are there people that you feel are working in the same critical space as you?*

JR: I think generally, what artists have to say about their own art is sometimes more interesting than what critics say. I make the claim, which would be offensive to some people, that what I do is a form of art and I make artistic decisions when I'm writing. Maybe I identify more with that than with a person who is supposed to tell you what is good or what is bad.

TQ: *It relates to something you've written about, as has Serge Daney, about how films act as criticism. Godard's Histoire(s) du cinéma (1998) being the apex of that.*

JR: It's Nicole Brenez, actually, who says the best criticism of a film is another film. One of the gripes I have against the so-called "Hollywood Brats" is that what they're offering is not criticism, it's validation of some kind. I compare it, in something I wrote recently, to a dog pissing on something as a way of saying "this is my property, this is mine." If Brian De Palma, for the umpteenth time, gives you a 360-degree camera movement of an embracing couple, it's not to make a comment of any kind on Hitchcock, it's more to say: "He's mine, I like him, he's part of my collection." It's about ownership, it's not about appreciation even. To me, it doesn't make sense why it should be

valuable to do that. Orson Welles said the worst thing in contemporary cinema was the homage. Alternatively, with someone like Alain Resnais, when he takes something from a filmmaker, you get it returned to you with critical insight into it.

TQ: *Are there other writers you feel aligned with?*

JR: People that praise Otis Ferguson lose me. I've never found anything Otis Ferguson wrote about Jazz or film to be interesting, maybe it's my problem or maybe somebody could show me what's interesting about it. One person who is almost never mentioned is Harry Alan Potamkin. What I identify with in Potamkin is that he was, first of all, an artist himself and a poet. He was a globetrotter. He very early on in the '20s was in Europe, interviewing people like Dreyer. He had a good sense of form, but he also wrote, for example, a piece on *Shanghai Express* (1932) that is a political attack saying this is a fascist film.

Also, Manny Farber, who I've mentioned many times before. He was an artist as well. That has an awful lot to do with it. You could say James Agee but the problem with Agee is that he was a terrific writer but very flawed as a critic. He could be really good but his lack of sophistication about many areas makes me feel like he's overrated. I've learned more from the few pieces by Robert Warshaw than 90% of what Agee wrote. Particularly the stuff for *Time Magazine*, which is so useless that the *Library of America* collection of Agee's writing claimed that a lot of the things in *Time* were written by Agee when it was discovered that a lot of it wasn't, they were written by other people. They couldn't even tell the difference! This includes a piece on D.W. Griffith. There's a whole romanticism around Agee and I certainly was a victim of that myself. It was like romanticizing chain-smoking and drinking and dying young, the whole kind of mythology around people like that.

TQ: *Does your affection for people that are both artists and critics relate to something you've held dearly to in your career, a claim to being an amateur?*

JR: That's right. I hate the whole notion of being a professional. It's what makes people discuss figures like Rex Reed as someone we should pay attention to. It accounts for why when someone is a professional then we automatically pay attention to them compared to other people.

TQ: *On the theme of "Next," your praise for Nicole Brenez's On the Figure in General and on the Body in Particular, reads that it is a book that you think filmgoers "will still be learning from half a century from now."*

JR: I have to say, I regard Nicole as a genius. She's an amazing person in all sorts of ways. I also have to acknowledge that her taste is very different than mine. A lot of things I like she has no interest in, and vice versa.

TQ: *She has a real taste for very masculine films, Cassavetes and John Woo. I'm a bit allergic to those type of films at times.*

JR: I could be wrong but part of it has something to do with growing up in a Catholic society, I think. There's also an idea of being a rebel, which is so intrinsic to French culture. In a way that, if you're not from there, can seem even laughable. For example, I thought Philippe Garrel's film about May '68 [*Les Amants réguliers/Regular Lovers* (2005)] was a hoot, whereas most French people took it very seriously and solemnly. I just thought it's about these spoiled rich kids and not about politics at all. But it comes out of greater respect for art and a different respect for art, out of the tradition of Rimbaud and Artaud, people like that.

TQ: *The poète maudit.*

JR: Certainly.

TQ: *To get back to your quote, are there writers or artists you hope will have an influence on the next half century of thinking about film?*

JR: There are certain people that are unrecognized because they don't belong to the right tribe, so to speak. A strong example of what I mean is Peter Thompson. Most people have no idea who he is. He was a friend, but he was an important filmmaker whose oeuvre was limited. He didn't even think of himself as a filmmaker, just someone who was interested in sound and image. He just happened to make films because that was the quickest way to do what he wanted to do. Also, my championship of the first major film of Françoise Romand, *Mix-Up* (1986). It does all sorts of things that aren't adequately appreciated. It all has an awful lot to do with tribes as I said. It is hard to account for these things. Over time, tribes change into other tribes. I'm not interested in being a prophet, to me that's the least interesting thing about science fiction. Even if you're right about your predictions, you're wrong about why it happened or what it means when it does happen.

TQ: *Are there writers–film theorists even–that articulate a way of watching cinema that you hope will become more influential? Judging by your quote, Brenez is an example.*

JR: I haven't that much of a taste for theory, to tell you the truth. I've not been interested in it compared to my colleagues, particularly those in academia.

People in the mainstream usually aren't interested at all in theory. I'm much more interested in Bazin as a critic than as a theorist, even though I think there are aspects of his theory that inform his criticism which can be thought-provoking. For example, I was interested in thinking of exploring *Playtime* as something that fulfilled what he dreamed of in terms of giving the viewer more freedom in what to look at and how to look at it.

TQ: *Conversely, are there people—filmmakers, writers—that you hope will have less of an influence on the next fifty years?*

JR: That's a long list [laughs]. More it has to do with a certain way of thinking. I'll tell you an example. I find a relationship, which I've written about, between Richard Linklater's *The Newton Boys* (1998) and Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* (1991). What those films illustrate is the inverse of the ideology of Disneyland. Where in Disneyland, Main Street, U.S.A. was planned by Disney so that every brick and shingle was to be 5/7th the original size, in other words the past is smaller than the present. That thinking gets reflected every time someone at MSNBC talks about how historic the times were living in are, as though we are living in a bigger universe than people prior to us. I don't believe in that at all, so I love the idea of films that show the past as bigger than the present. *The Newton Boys* does that, *Center Stage* does that. The past is something you can get lost in. There's a connection between that and my love for *Finnegan's Wake* even. I like getting lost in that, bathing in it.

It has to do with categories, too. It's amazing the distance that has been traveled from Jacques Rivette's *Out 1* (1971) being seen as outrageous and ridiculous to somebody thinking, well hey it's a TV miniseries. The fact that it exists in more than one edition on DVD now amazes me. This is just to say things change. When I was getting interested in film as an art form, Bresson was regarded as a joke and he's not now. One thing that has changed in my lifetime, in an agreeable way and in a way that I hope continues, is that people like difficult films now.

TQ: *What do think accounts for this shift toward desiring difficult films?*

JR: I think it's connected partly to social media. And that people can do things in their own time and in their own way. You don't have to be at particular place at a particular time. For example, my friend Jim Naremore—whose taste is close to mine—hadn't seen *Out 1*. Then it was playing in Chicago when he was there. I said, "you have to come see it" and he said, "I can't because that's my wedding anniversary, so we were planning something

else.” So, I said, “well you can always celebrate it a different day.” [Laughs]. It has to do with being an academic too, you’re in less of a rush to see certain things. All to say, you have the freedom with the internet to choose when you watch something, and you can think about it on your own time. This has all facilitated the tolerance of difficulty. You can see when they did the first Bresson retrospectives, they were really popular. The same thing happened with Tarkovsky. He was considered anathema before, then all of a sudden people were interested in him. That’s part of the same phenomenon, which has to do with the greater freedom of spectators now, which sometimes adds up to being a social freedom. You can be a hermit and like films. You can talk about it or not talk about it. There’s a greater range with things now.

TQ: *The conversation about history reminds me of your line about the possibility for cinema is in the richness of its own history. It relates to the idea of history being bigger than the present.*

JR: Also the fact—and this is really important for me—that we haven’t exhausted the past. There’s still the rediscovery of things. Mistakes are made in every era about what’s important and what’s not, so consequently we can go back to the past and reevaluate it and see all the things people missed. The total blindness of James Agee to Jacques Tourneur would be an obvious example to the kind of thing I mean. One could come up with many others.

TQ: *A whole generation’s blindness to Tourneur, really...*

JR: Yeah, but that’s because Tourneur was also self-deprecating.

TQ: *Your new book, In Dreams Begin Responsibilities, takes its title from a Delmore Schwartz story, which is from a line of Yeats. The line is a refrain for you throughout your career. The Schwartz story is about cinema’s power to show the one thing you can’t see: the romance of your parents that leads to your birth. Last time we spoke you said, in your 80s, that you were trying to live without parental figures. Yet your book is named after a story that suggests cinema’s power to always conjure our parents.*

JR: One of the things that is interesting to me about the phrase is the whole notion of validating irresponsibility. That’s what’s attractive about dreams, that one isn’t responsible for them in a certain way. It’s the starting point of the process, then finding responsibility within the irresponsibility is a later stage, but they are two separate stages, and both are important. There’s a freedom that comes from irresponsibility, which is a kind of infantile freedom really. My first serious experience of a drug was having peyote at 17.

What you learn from that is that when you look at a traffic light, you're not unaware that the traffic signifies stop and go, but that you're seeing red without the "stop" and green without the "go." That you can experience these things much more directly without the labels.

TQ: *I think this is what Brenez's book is about, in a way.*

JR: Yes. It's about returning to an infantile freedom.

TQ: *Right, the knowledge you have before you learn to read.... A lot of critics in your generation went on to institutional jobs—film festivals, academic posts—yet you've remained a writer and critic for your whole career. Were you ever tempted by such positions?*

JR: I've been very much at the mercy of what gets offered to me. If I hadn't been offered the job at the *Chicago Reader*, my life would be very different. That job came with more freedom than any other critic's job. I don't know of other critics that had unlimited length—which I had at the *Reader*. I think the fact that I take pleasure in writing has been one of the things that has guided my life.

TQ: *Is that why you continue to write, the pleasure you get out of it?*

JR: To a large extent, yes.

TQ: *Are there films or filmmakers that you love that you don't feel you're able to write about?*

JR: I do feel that the films that mean the most to me are the ones that are the hardest to write about. It becomes a personal triumph for me if I'm able to write about them.

TQ: *In our various recent conversations, I've asked thinly veiled versions of the same question, but I'll make it explicit because I am staring down the barrel of a life devoted to writing about films: How do you feel now about devoting your life to writing about cinema?*

JR: Well, there was a certain frustration through much of my life that I didn't become a novelist which is what I really wanted to be. I want to talk about my relationship to Wallace Shawn, who was a classmate at boarding school. He was the only classmate of mine who asked to read my first novel. But he was somebody who treated me horribly. Now he's somebody who's automatically regarded as an artist, but to my mind he's of no interest from the point of view of art. I got even with him when I worked at *Soho Weekly News* when I wrote a double review of *Lightning Over Water* (1980) and *My Dinner with*

Andre (1981) in which I compare how I was treated by Wim Wenders and Nicholas Ray with how I got treated by Wally Shawn. I said he's just as nice as someone could possibly be to someone he regards as a social inferior. So, there was a sense of regret that I couldn't be part of literature but was a part of this despised group of people called the critics. In a sense, that's why it became important to me to declare in *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* that I consider myself an artist. It wasn't something I've said in print before that.

There's a conflict most artists have with on the one hand being loved by as many people as possible and on the other hand wanting to be true to oneself, which sometimes means saying "fuck you" to most of your audience. In the early 80s, I was practically run out of New York on a rail. [Laughs]. I was much more combative as a writer, when I attacked people, I really attacked them in a much more direct way. The Wally Shawn example is only one of them, but there were lots of people who would literally not speak to me on the street if I saw them and said hello. I've mellowed since then, which comes fairly naturally with age.

If I had a major regret in my life, it was that I was brought up to believe publishing in *The New Yorker* or *The New Review of Books* was the height of success. I'm able to get up to the edges of the mainstream without making it there. I've never published an article with *Harpers* or *The Atlantic*. For a lot of people, I'm off the table for that reason alone. You could say the reason I've embraced being a cult writer is that I don't have a choice but at the same time one constructs one's own life even if one does it unconsciously. The life I have now is one I made for myself. That's the sense in which I can say I don't regret it but there's probably part of me that still does.

TQ: *Is there still a writing project that you'd like to do? I know you have a few on the horizon.*

JR: I used to think I wanted to get back into the free form of writing that *Moving Places* was. I felt like I'd started something and want to continue it, but I don't know how. I had a very concrete subject to write about then. I would need a subject. I think that innovative art is always motivated by a desire to express content that couldn't be expressed any other way. Somehow *Moving Places* was a way to express or deal with certain conflicts and contradictions that I couldn't deal with otherwise. I instinctively arrived at that. So, I can't be too methodical about it, but I would love to get into a writing project that has that scale of ambition.

Thomas Quist is a PhD student at the University of Toronto in the Cinema Studies Institute, where he is working on a dissertation about the relation of the cinematic image to the self. He co-runs both the Figural Analysis reading group and Critical Function writing workshop. He has written film criticism for MUBI Notebook, among other venues.

Jonathan Rosenbaum is a film critic who wrote for the Chicago Reader from 1987 to 2008. His most recent books are *Camera Movements that Confound Us* (forthcoming, 2025) and *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities: a Jonathan Rosenbaum Reader* (Hat & Beard, 2024). He has taught at the University of California (Berkeley, San Diego, and Santa Barbara), the University of Chicago, the University of St. Andrews (Scotland), the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, KinoKlub Split (Croatia), and FilmFactory (Sarajevo). He maintains a web site archiving most of his work at jonathanrosenbaum.net.