

## How I Became the Los Angeles Correspondent for *Cahiers du cinéma*

I GREW UP IN A SMALL TOWN in North Texas on the Oklahoma border. Living in a big house on the edge of town, I had access to the larger world through radio—still in its “Golden Age”—and television: *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952), which I still enjoy in reruns; *I Love Lucy* (1951); the many Warner Bros. television series; and countless westerns, a staple in theaters that filled the airwaves as well. Every week on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955), which began airing when I was ten, the maestro personally presented concentrated doses of his trademark cinema of suspense and black comedy, while Rod Serling did the same thing on *The Twilight Zone* (1959), a weekly series that began airing five years later, offering tales of fantasy and science fiction introduced and narrated by Serling. I first encountered Orson Welles in *The Fountain of Youth* (1958), an unsold pilot that aired on CBS in 1958 and won a Peabody Award. (I would later introduce it to French audiences via the *Cahiers du cinéma* when Welles was receiving an honor for his life’s work in France, accompanied by an interview conducted over the telephone between Los Angeles and New York for a special issue of the *Cahiers*.) The fundamentals of auteurism, a theory promulgated by the *Cahiers*, were already being communicated to me and future friends in other parts of the country, some of whom grew up to be auteurs of cinema and television: Joe Dante, John Landis, and in a more modest way me,

when editor Ed Marx and I finished a film for Welles in 1994, the *Four Men on a Raft* section of *It's All True* (1943), a three-part film he shot in Latin America in 1942 and was not permitted to finish.

The proximity to Oklahoma was important because the TV station in Lawton, just across the border, acquired the package of pre-1948 horror films (including James Whale's *Frankenstein* [1931] and Tod Browning's *Dracula* [1931]) released to television by Universal Studios and marketed by Screen Gems beginning in 1957 under the title *Shock Theater*. All over the country—and Lawton, which boasted a guy in an ape suit named Poor Pitiful Pearl, was no exception—“horror hosts,” who might be the local weatherman or TV news reporter, dressed up as ghouls, vampires, and monsters to introduce the films, creating a counterpoint to official religious celebrations on Sunday: a horror movie on Friday or Saturday night, viewed by teens (often in secret) without their families, and church on Sunday. Years later *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), starring Tim Curry as Dr. Frank N. Stein, paid tribute to this subversive dynamic in midnight screenings in movie theaters all over the country, as did Edward D. Wood Jr.'s *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), which is explicitly being broadcast on TV, with TV seer Criswell as host—a genuine auteur effort (written, produced, and directed by Wood) undertaken in utter seriousness, which unintentionally achieved the same results with audiences as the campy *Rocky Horror*. I had read about these films in magazines like *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, where horror and fantasy writer Charles Beaumont reviewed current films and compared them to the classics in “The Science Screen,” so the idea of writing seriously about films was instilled in me when I was entering my teens.

During the early days, the oil boom made my small town big. We had two movie theaters, the Grand, where I saw Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) when I was thirteen, and the Liberty, the kiddie theater, where the trailers for *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man* (1943) and *The Scarlet Claw* (1944) (which I hallucinated in color) introduced me to the work of Roy William Neill. Two publishers, Ballantine Books and The Science Fiction Book Club, stocked the shelves of a closet intended for toys next to my room with science fiction paperbacks and inexpensive hardbacks that introduced me to the novels and stories of Alfred Bester, Theodore Sturgeon, and lesser lights like George O. Smith. Subscriptions to *Galaxy Science Fiction*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, and *F&SF* also played an important role in my unofficial education.

My time was spent within the narrow confines of Electra, Texas, and nearby Wichita Falls, where my mother parked me, while she did her shopping, at theaters looking into the wider world of low-budget science

fiction and horror, including England's relatively sumptuous Hammer Films. But I spent a month every summer in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I could buy my favorite science fiction magazines at newsstands, along with the early books about a phenomenon that was science fiction come to life: Unidentified Flying Objects or, as they were commonly known, flying saucers. That is where I first saw Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and the greatest double bill in history, *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1958) and *Curse of the Demon* (Jacques Tourneur, 1957). And that is how the first part of my adolescence was lived, in oscillation between Texas and New Mexico, where the images that haunted me became real.

I would probably have spent the rest of my life in Electra, with side trips to Wichita Falls and Santa Fe, if my mother hadn't sent me away to a coeducational boarding school in Austin, St. Stephen's Episcopal School, where I was enrolled two years behind future filmmaker Terrence Malick. My new spartan lifestyle (students were called "Spartans") severely curtailed my consumption of films (I missed whole seasons of *The Outer Limits* [1963] and Boris Karloff's *Thriller* [1960]) but widened my perspective. It was there that I first saw Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for Life* (1956) projected in a sixteen-millimeter print in the school cafeteria and learned of the existence of other cinemas, notably the films of Federico Fellini and Satyajit Ray, from the St. Stephen's faculty, who were nothing if not arty. But that didn't stop me from sneaking away during a weekly town-trip to see Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (1963), a black-and-white horror movie I had read about in *Time* magazine, and François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960), a French film that was purported to contain a glimpse of a Michele Mercier's breast, which was my first contact with the New Wave and, through it, the *Cahiers*. The shot in question had unfortunately been cut from American prints. Much later I would travel all the way to France to see it—an adventure I subsequently recounted in the *Cahiers* special issue published on the occasion of Truffaut's untimely death.

The excellent preparation I received at St. Stephen's sent me away from Texas to Yale College in New Haven, Connecticut—narrowly avoiding a trip to Vietnam courtesy of fellow Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson—where my first act, after being deposited in my dorm at the freshman campus, was to see Fellini's *8½* (1963) at the Lincoln Theater, the local art house that would soon be rendered useless for my purposes by a record-breaking run of Vittorio de Sica's *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (1963), featuring a striptease by Sophia Loren. (Stripteases were all the rage: Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* [1960] had featured one by Nadia Gray.) My Yale studies marked the beginning of my long discipleship with Harold Bloom, whose theories of influence are applied to film—a

use Bloom never intended—throughout *Letters from Hollywood*. But they also introduced me to the *Cahiers*-influenced programming of the Yale Film Society, where I saw Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor* (1963) introduced by Andrew Sarris, whose 1968 book *The American Cinema* became the bible of American auteurism. My cinephile friends at Yale bonded over a mutual love of *Shoot the Piano Player* (especially George Delerue's score) and mutual detestation of the *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who had decreed that Jean-Luc Godard's films were silly japes on the level of TV's *Batman*. We were also privileged my freshman year to study art history with Robert Herbert, the Marxist expert on the Barbizon School. I learned visual analysis from Herbert, but when I returned to California it was Fuller I became friends with, and for the memorial issue on Truffaut I interviewed Delerue, a stocky peasant with a gift for writing breathtaking music, who revealed to me that throughout their relationship Truffaut never ate dinner with him until the very end, when he had the inoperable brain tumor that killed him. "When he asked me to dinner," Delerue said, "I knew he was going to die."

In the meantime I had become Los Angeles correspondent for the *Cahiers*, while writing for other publications both French (the magazine *Trafic*, which Serge Daney started when he left the *Cahiers*) and English (*The Economist*, the Australian blog *Rouge Cinema*, the American blog *Kino Slang*, and an array of others, many now lost to history). "Los Angeles correspondent for *Cahiers du cinéma*" is a title I still hold, although it has become purely honorific. Having transferred from Yale to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York to pursue my interest in the ideas of Georgian sage G. I. Gurdjieff—and to see more movies than I could see in New Haven—I became the American version of what French cinephiles would call "a rat of the Cinémathèque." During my immersion in the culture of New York City, I took as my guru Greg Ford, a student of the great critic Manny Farber, whom I knew through a Yale connection, his wife Ronnie Scheib. The epicenter of that culture was the screening program at the Museum of Modern Art, where Adrienne Mancina was programming complete retrospectives of filmmakers like Raoul Walsh. Apart from these cinephilic excursions, my immersion in the Bohemian culture of New York was complete: I was living in the D Block of the East Village, known as "Little Saigon."

One day, however, I noticed that the Bleecker Street Cinema in Greenwich Village was playing interesting double bills, like *Nathalie Granger* (1972) by Marguerite Duras and *Cops* (1922) by Buster Keaton, so I arranged an introduction to Jackie Raynal, the French woman who programmed the Bleecker. Jackie had left France after May '68, during which she had been gang-raped by gendarmes, and had become a

construction worker in upstate New York, where she met and married Sid Geffen, a real estate broker with an interest in film who bought her the Bleecker to program. She showed me her film, a radical example of the underground cinema financed by the heiress Sylvina Boissonnas for her Zanzibar films—*Deux Fois* (*Twice Upon a Time* [1968]), which ended with a twenty-minute scream by Jackie—hoping that as a film critic I could suggest a way to sell it, although the extent of my film criticism at this point was a piece on Terence Fisher and a blurb on Walsh's despised remake of *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941), *One Sunday Afternoon* (1948), published in magazines that were mimeographed and distributed to cognoscenti in New York.

In the course of our discussions I discovered that Jackie had gone to high school in Paris with Daney, who had become the editor-in-chief of the *Cahiers* after Parisian intellectuals' disastrous fling with Sinophilia post-May '68. Now that the *Cahiers* was bouncing back from publishing only articles about vaccination programs in Red China, Serge wanted to let Americans know that it was back by staging the first *Semaine des Cahiers* at the Bleecker Street. He was coming to New York to present a selection of films by new directors ranging from Chantal Akerman to René Allio, and Jackie wanted to publish a little booklet to accompany the series. Accordingly I typed up a series of questions which Jackie delivered to Serge in Paris; my questions and his responses became the core of the booklet that was distributed at the *Semaine*.

I did eventually meet Serge at Sid and Jackie's apartment on Central Park South, and we became friends. To secure my position with the magazine I obtained an interview with Nicholas Ray, who was teaching at the Lee Strasberg School, and Serge named me the American correspondent for the magazine: the third in its history after Herman G. Weinberg and Axel Madsen. I flew to Paris, where I oversaw the layout of the interview in the *Cahiers*, meeting Serge's friend Jean-Claude Biette, who had recently joined the magazine, and other collaborators who had been only illustrious names to me before this. (Jean-Claude found what he described as "a sublime typo" in the article: "Nicholas *radis*," which is French for "radish.") On my return to the States, however, I flew to California and interviewed Roger Corman about his activities as a producer and "maker of filmmakers"—then unknown in France—and subsequently chose to live in Los Angeles, where I learned my way around the studios.

In fact, after settling in Westwood, I found the negative for *It's All True*, a film Welles had shot in Brazil but hadn't been allowed to finish, in a vault at Paramount. While waiting for that project to come to fruition, I got a job editing press kits at 20th Century Fox—a wait that lasted eleven years. During the day I was an employee of the marketing

department at Fox, sitting in on meetings of the department and observing the workings of a major studio firsthand; at night I wrote my articles for the *Cabiers* and faxed them to the magazine's general secretary, Claudine Paquot, and her assistant Delphine Pineau, who faxed them back to me translated for my corrections the next day. This rhythm continued from 1982 to 1993, when I quit my job at Fox to go to Brazil and film the documentary portions of what became *It's All True: Based on an Unfinished Film by Orson Welles*, which premiered at Lincoln Center in 1994 and bombed. My subsequent trips to France were made for personal reasons that have nothing to do with the magazine, although its writers and editorial staff always supported me when I was in Paris en route to the South of France, where my new interests took me. Living at that time in the college town of Westwood, I was able to offer visiting writers for the *Cabiers* a place to sleep and a guide to California when the adventurous ones leapfrogged over New York, reputed to be the center of American culture, and made straight for California, where I have been living since that time—first in Hollywood and, for the last year, in the seaside town of Long Beach.

Sadly, I understand from a friend who recently visited Paris that young people there think the *Cabiers* isn't worth reading anymore, which is the death blow for a magazine that has never had more than five thousand paid subscribers but has exercised an influence out of proportion to its circulation.

I have a plan to repair the damage, but that's another story. Meanwhile, you hold in your hands an important part (newly edited for this volume) of my contribution to the magazine, which will always have a *raison d'être* as long as good films, and passionate writing about them, exist.

### Notations

The eulogy for François Truffaut was "Detour" in *Le roman de François Truffaut*, supplement to *Cabiers du cinéma* 366 (December 1984): 121.

My interview with Nicholas Ray is in *Cabiers du cinéma* 288 (May 1978).

My interview with Roger Corman is in *Cabiers du cinéma* 296 (January 1979).