CINEASTE

Review

Reviewed Work(s): A Shared Cinema: Michel Ciment—Conversations with N. T. Binh by Michel Ciment and N. T. Binh

Review by: David Sterritt

Source: *Cinéaste*, WINTER 2024, Vol. 50, No. 1 (WINTER 2024), pp. 69-70

Published by: Cineaste Publishers, Inc.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/preflight/10.2307/27350445

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Cineaste Publishers, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinéaste*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from 209.87.169.110 on Tue, 08 Jul 2025 13:16:35 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

than her election as SWG president for a third time in 1951, even as the House Un-American Activities Committee was plotting its second set of postwar Hollywood hearings. This third election was the occasion of the cheeky, gender-bending photo on the biography's cover.

At the same time, like many other professional women, McCall was sidelined by cultural dictates pressuring women to go "back" to the home after the war. For McCall, this pressure came especially from her second husband, David Bramson, an irredeemable villain in Smyth's telling. According to Smyth's interviews with McCall's daughters, Bramson was physically and emotionally abusive, his fragile ego unable to withstand her successful career even while he squandered its earnings. Smyth tries, unsatisfactorily, to psychologize—rather than historicize—McCall's tolerance of Bramson's sexism and abuse, pondering McCall's psyche rather than interrogating Cold War gender norms to answer the question, "How could she have put up with it?"

In any case, as film writing gigs dried up, and a spattering of TV scripts failed to make up the difference, the family's finances suffered mightily. By the late 1960s, McCall was living on a writer's guild pension; and by the early 1980s, living in an Alzheimer's ward in the Motion Picture Country Home, both part of a social safety net for film industry workers that McCall herself was instrumental in establishing. McCall died in April 1986, in the middle of the Reagan presidency, a Hollywood actor who cut his right-wing political teeth against McCall's friends and colleagues in the era of her demise. McCall's daughter told Smyth, "When I reminded [my mother], in the late stages of her Alzheimer's, that Ronnie Reagan was President, she just said, 'Oh, shit '"

Given the breadth of McCall's activist work and the prolific nature of her writing, Smyth has a lot of ground to cover, which she does admirably through exhaustive archival research, in the Hollywood trades, McCall's correspondence, and her public writings. Though I sometimes wished to hear more of McCall's own voice, I suspect that's because the bits Smyth does include suggest an exceptionally sharp wit. The best come from the author's interviews with McCall's children. For example, when the abusive Bramson threw dishes at the wall, McCall tried to lighten the mood, saying "Well, at least I won't have to wash *that* plate."

But that's just nitpicking. Undeniably, Smyth does a service to the field of Hollywood history—as well as labor history and U.S. women's history—with this biography. After all, the erasure of McCall's role was so complete by the twenty-first century that an SWG press release in 2009 errantly declared its 1990s President Victoria Riskin to have been "the first woman President in guild history." Restoring McCall to her rightful place, then, is a boon not only to this biography's subject but to all of us interested in making sense of that past and how it relates to the present. **—Megan Feeney**

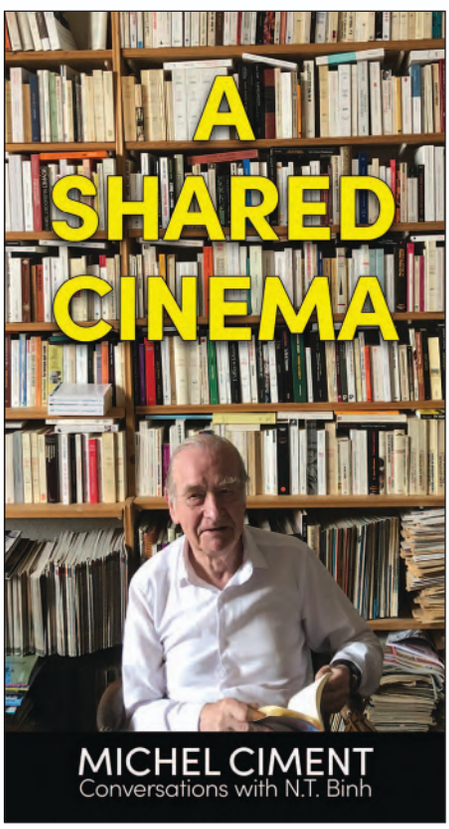
A Shared Cinema:

Michel Ciment—Conversations with N. T. Binh

by Michel Ciment and N. T. Binh. Sticking Place Books, 2024. 331 pp. Hardcover: 35.00 and Paperback: 25.00.

The first thing you must admire about *A Shared Cinema* is its gracious, generous title. One expects those qualities from anything written by critic and editor Michel Ciment, but it's nice to have them highlighted before you even open the book. For him, cinema is grounded in sharing—the sharing that happens when artists collaborate to make a film, when critics communicate their thoughts to readers and viewers, when audiences experience a movie with strangers in a theater or friends in a living room. "One source of cinema's vitality," he says late in the book, is that it "doesn't allow itself to be locked in the hands of experts," or in the hands of anyone, for that matter. At times, "the audience can open the eyes of the critics, and the critic, as a scout, can alert the public to work it will enjoy." Measured, humane remarks like this infuse his observations with warmth as well as intelligence.

The second thing you have to admire about *A Shared Cinema* is the existence of the book itself, which grew from a series of lengthy interviews with Ciment conducted by N. T. Binh, a critic known by the pseudonym Yann Tobin to readers of *Positif*, the journal Ciment edited for half a century. When the book was published in French in 2014, the British American writer and filmmaker Paul Cronin talked with Ciment about a possible English-language version, and now—a year after Ciment's death, sad to say—that version has arrived, thanks to Cronin's newly revivified Sticking Place Books, a small press with an eye for the overlooked, the undervalued, and the independent. Subjects and writers in its catalogue range from Abbas Kiarostami and Stanley Kubrick to Werner Herzog and Paul Williams, and Cronin is organizing a string of interview books with notable critics. I can't think of a better pundit than Ciment to launch the enterprise.



The third thing to admire about this book, and easily the most important, is the elegance of Ciment's ideas, supported by the remarkable breadth of experience he acquired over the course of a long, varied career. He was an influential magazine editor, a widely published journalist, a prolific author, a busy media personality, a high-school and university teacher, and an active participant on the film-festival scene, selecting entries and serving on juries in his own country and abroad. He discusses all these activities in *A Shared Cinema*, and along the way he gives fascinating attention to his personal interactions with many of the filmmakers he interviewed and championed. Although he denies being a modern-day Plutarch, he teases out intriguing parallels between some of his favorites—Joseph Losey and Elia Kazan, Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick—and supplements his critical discussions with glimpses of the time he spent with them and the feelings of friendship (frequent) and tension (occasional) that were involved in these relationships. Even brief observations can cast revealing light on filmmakers he knew well. On Losey: "He drank a lot, which meant my problem was to stay lucid." On John Boorman: "He's a man possessed, a romantic who simultaneously turns his back on romanticism." On Theo Angelopoulos: "It was common knowledge how grumpy he was." On Kubrick: "Actually, because he hated interviews, what he dreamed of was not having to answer questions at all."

Readers can chart Ciment's directorial pantheon by noting the frequently recurring names in *A Shared Cinema*, including many of his French compatriots—Jean Renoir, Robert Bresson, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Alain Resnais, whom he calls the "ultimate" filmmaker—along with studio-system giants such as Alfred Hitchcock and John Ford, New Hollywood innovators like Robert Altman and Martin Scorsese, the Italian maestros Francesco Rosi and Michelangelo Antonioni, and one-of-a-kind auteurs such as Luis Buñuel and Ingmar Bergman. True to the tradition of French criticism, Ciment is attentive to directors insufficiently honored in their own lands, so Jerry Schatzberg looms large, and Jerry Lewis crops up a few times. And true to his own traditions, he's far more interested in advocating great cinema than in dissing cinema he dislikes, although he shows hints of skepticism about such popular figures as Richard Attenborough, Anthony Minghella, and John G. Avildsen, all honored by Academy

This content downloaded from
209.87.169.110 on Tue, 08 Jul 2025 13:16:35 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Awards while Fritz Lang, Terrence Malick, and John Cassavetes received nominations or nothing. Ciment even seems hesitant about Chantal Akerman's celebrated *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, which represents a kind of film that generates enthusiasm among cinephiles because "even though audiences might find it boring, the critics can throw out commentary and interpretation." Ditto for some of Béla Tarr's pictures ("five hours can be a bit much") and other movies that seem "plain monotonous and repetitive" to general audiences. In keeping with Ciment's profound affection for cinema, he's invariably geared to shoring up its best rather than tearing down its disappointments; his remarks may be scrappy but they're never hostile, and he rarely loses his sense of critical balance: "I may detest Spielberg's *Tintin* or *War Horse*," he writes, "and at the same time love *Minority Report*." You can always imagine him stating his mind directly to a filmmaker over an espresso (or to Losey over a scotch).

In his thoughtful and laudatory introduction to *A Shared Cinema*, critic Adrian Martin takes issue with a few of Ciment's tenets. One is the idea that interpretation must remain grounded in the intentions and sources of inspiration of the maker, and another is the belief in a "hierarchy of merit" that would make "a Kubrick film…at all times and in all levels, superior to a Jesús Franco movie," in Martin's example, although Ciment's case for the hierarchy is more subtle than that implies. I agree with Martin on both counts while still sharing Ciment's suspicion of interpretive flights that lose the actual artwork in the dust, as when a certain French critic deemed movies like Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Antonioni's *L'Avventura* to be Holocaust films because a character disappears, a notion Ciment derisively shoots down.

My own criticism of *A Shared Cinema* is its lack of attention to avant-garde film and nonnarrative filmmakers in general. Stan Brakhage gets one mention, Andy Warhol gets four (and *Sleep* is badly misdescribed), most others get none. Ciment makes a very weak case against experimental film, noting that avant-garde artworks often get assimilated into the mainstream (obviously true, but beside the point), resorting to exaggeration—has anyone really called Jean-Marie Straub "the greatest creative force" of the twentieth century?—and quoting a remark by Otto Preminger ("I'll make underground films when I'm dead") as if a wisecrack amounted to an argument. This blind or at least myopic spot is shared by many otherwise perceptive critics, and I wish Ciment were as open to the avant-garde as he is to narrative directors with a flair for the fantastical. "I like filmmakers who stress rationality," he writes, "but take it as far as it can go—into irrationality." Hence, his fondness for surrealism and his overall preference for "the great directors of the imagination," from F. W. Murnau and Andrei Tarkovsky to Roman Polanski and Terry Gilliam, over their "realistic" cousins, even ones as inspired as Howard Hawks and the Dardenne brothers.

Although his eyes are turned mostly to films and filmmakers, Ciment looks to his own trade now and then, disclosing some of his habits and practices—he rarely takes notes at a screening, since you miss too much of the film—and describing himself as a "monomaniac" who isn't always a joy to live with, although as someone who knew him for many years, I can testify to his affable, companionable nature. "I can't imagine separating my love life from my passion for film and the arts," he says when talking about his two wives—Jeannine Ciment (who died in 1986) and Evelyne Hazan-Ciment—both strong cinephiles. "I don't separate the emotional and sexual from the intellectual." Near the end of the book, he discusses the requirements of good criticism—information, analysis, style, passion, curiosity, insight, and the aforementioned hierarchy of judgment. One needn't concur with all of Ciment's judgements to agree that those seven terms pretty well cover the territory—a territory shared by every thinking moviegoer, as he reminds us throughout this marvelous book.

—**David Sterritt**

A Complicated Passion:

The Life and Work of Agnès Varda

by Carrie Rickey. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2024. 272 pp., illus. Hardcover: 29.99.

Near the beginning of the 1962 French New Wave classic *Cléo from 5 to 7*, director Agnès Varda's dazed Parisian heroine walks down several flights of stairs after departing the apartment of a fortune teller, distraught that her life is fated to be cut short by cancer. As Cléo (Corinne Marchand) begins her literal and symbolic descent from on high in Varda's groundbreaking feminist feature, that existential shock brilliantly registers as a spasm of close-ups on Cléo's face—jump cuts that might also cleverly translate into Varda's PG-rated take on Marcel Duchamp's 1912 cubist *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*.

Now, hold (or freeze-frame) that thought and crosscut to a decade later and director Martin Scorsese's equally audacious 1973 breakthrough, *Mean Streets*, which sent him on the road to cinematic superstardom. As Scorsese's guilt-wracked Italian American antihero (played by Harvey Keitel) falls back on his bed after being awakened by a nightmare, his head hits the pillow in a frisson of déjà vu jump cuts that also serve to trigger the Ronettes' rousing "Be My Baby" on the soundtrack.

Cineaste and cinephile extraordinaire Scorsese undoubtedly learned and borrowed from a litany of films and filmmakers, but it is noteworthy that a director legendary for his raw, sinewy, and testosterone-fueled crime films can count the "mother of the New Wave" among his transatlantic ocean of cinematic inspirations. He has said as much over the years, telling author and film critic Carrie Rickey in 2023 that viewing *Cléo* as a nineteen-year-old New York University undergraduate left him "shocked" and "opened my thinking in many ways." In Rickey's pithy but welcome biography *A Complicated Passion, The Life and Work of Agnès Varda*, Scorsese adds that he "felt like I was seeing the world and experiencing time from a woman's point of view for the first time in movies."

In the century-plus annals of global cinema, it's well-known that female directors have been that rara avis, at least until the 1970s in the wake of "Second Wave" Anglo-American feminism. There was Hollywood's Lois Weber and France's Alice Guy-Blaché in the silent era and, of course, the great (and still controversial) Leni Riefenstahl in 1930s Germany. Dorothy Arzner's Hollywood directing career stretched from the silent era until World War II, while actress Ida Lupino helmed several independent, low-budget Hollywood films in the 1950s, followed by another decade directing for TV. The U.S. avant-garde can point to Maya Deren, whose precious few shorts included such small masterpieces as 1943's *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Yet, in the retrospective "big picture," surely no female director had the longevity or the inspiring, female-centric influence of Varda (1928–2019), the elfin, bob-haired French Belgian auteur who still stands as a giant for her lauded, sixty-plus year career.

While on the breezy, short-winded side, Rickey's 225-page profile should please most Vardaphiles, though likely not those looking for extended critical analyses of her many features, shorts, and documentary films. Given that there are relatively few English-language works that zoom in on the biographical and contextual details framing Varda's oeuvre, Rickey's book will be a real revelation, starting with the thirty-plus-year "complicated passion" Varda shared with her husband and fellow director Jacques Demy. Indeed, the *coup de foudre* blow that struck Cléo must have hit Varda with the same blunt force when Demy disclosed to her in the 1980s—not known widely until recently—that he had contracted the HIV virus. This was after he had been clandestinely living off and on with another man in California. Demy would return to spend the dire final years of his life with Varda in her longtime Paris home/studio on the aptly named rue Daguerre in Montparnasse, dying in 1990.

Even abridged, Varda's eventful (and just plain full) life story as recounted by Rickey is above all as a survivor, not only personally but also as a feisty female artist with a Sisyphean grit who battled crushing odds in a profession that in her time was dominated and guarded—typically chauvinistically—by men. And all this in a *tres*-traditional postwar France so mired in an ancien régime patriarchy that it would compel Simone de Beauvoir to publish her landmark feminist manifesto *The Second Sex* in 1949, when Varda was twenty-one (by then calling herself Agnès, not the née

This content downloaded from
209.87.169.110 on Tue, 08 Jul 2025 13:16:35 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms