

An interview with film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum: “I’m trying to do something aesthetic through criticism”

By David Walsh
6 January 2020

I recently spoke to Jonathan Rosenbaum, the longtime and widely respected film critic for the *Chicago Reader* and author of numerous books on filmmaking. He has been writing about cinema and cultural life since the 1960s. His latest effort is a two-volume work, with the overall title of *Cinematic Encounters*, published by the University of Illinois Press. The first volume (November 2018) is subtitled *Interviews and Dialogues*, the second (June 2019) *Portraits and Polemics*. The books consist of essays, interviews and reviews covering several decades.

Rosenbaum was born in Florence, Alabama in 1943. His grandfather owned and operated a small chain of movie theaters in the South, including one in Florence. Remarkably, Rosenbaum was raised in a house designed for his parents by the illustrious architect Frank Lloyd Wright. In a memoir, the critic describes himself during his youth as “an Alabama moviegoer who largely grew up in my family’s movie theaters.”

The convulsions produced by the civil rights movement and other social struggles clearly influenced Rosenbaum, as they did many members of his generation. He participated in one of the famed Selma to Montgomery [Alabama] protest marches led by Martin Luther King, Jr. in March 1965. He describes it here.

Rosenbaum lived in Paris and London in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where he began writing movie and literary criticism and befriended numerous filmmakers. In the late 1970s he taught film criticism at University of California, San Diego, taking over classes taught by well-known critic Manny Farber.

Rosenbaum has contributed to many leading film publications. His books include *Moving Places: A Life in the Movies* (1980/1995); *Film: The Front Line 1983* (1983); *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (1995); *Movies as Politics* (1997); *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Films You See* (2000); *Discovering Orson Welles* (2007) and *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition* (2010).

Whether one agrees with his assessment in each case or not, Rosenbaum is an elegant and thoughtful writer. The pieces in the new books deal with a disparate group of filmmakers, from the widely known to the relatively obscure. One of Rosenbaum’s admirable qualities is his willingness to stick his neck out on behalf of figures neglected or even scorned by mainstream film reviewing.

Many readers of Rosenbaum’s commentaries over the years have been appreciative as well of his publicizing and championing global cinema in the face of American media parochialism and worse. The two new books include discussions with or about US, Canadian, Chilean, British, French, Belgian, Danish, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Hungarian, Czech, Iranian, Chinese, Taiwanese and Japanese filmmakers.

In *Interviews and Dialogues*, Rosenbaum speaks to a number of intriguing figures, among them Orson Welles, Geraldine Chaplin, Samuel

Fuller, Alain Resnais, Ivan Passer, John Carpenter, Raúl Ruiz and Jean-Luc Godard. Along with numerous others, directors Jerry Lewis, Luis Buñuel, Yasujiro Ozu, Ermanno Olmi, Jacques Rivette, Elaine May, James L. Brooks and Richard Linklater come in for consideration in *Portraits and Polemics*.

In my view, the material on Welles, Resnais, Fuller, May, Lewis, Rivette, Carl Dreyer, Jacques Tati, André Delvaux and Jacques Demy is the most rewarding.

There are many critical judgments expressed here in these two volumes. At their best, they attempt to place films and filmmakers in a comprehensible relationship to our lives and times. In a comment about French director Robert Bresson (in a 1997 essay), for example, Rosenbaum writes that it seems to him a “far more fruitful approach” to Bresson’s style “to see it growing out of concrete and material historical experience than to treat it as a timeless, transcendent, and ultimately mysterious expression of abstract spirituality.”

Rosenbaum goes on to expound the view that “cinema is concerned with the world, not with an alternative to it,” and that “cinema belongs to the world, including us,” or as he observed on another occasion, if film is an important art form, “it’s important because it addresses the way we live.”

In our recent telephone conversation, we spoke about a number of filmmakers who are not as well known today as they should be. We devoted some time, for example, to discussing French director Jacques Tati (1907-1982), an interview with whom—in late 1972—is one of the first in (and among the highlights of) *Interviews and Dialogues*. Tati, a one-time popular cabaret performer and mime, is one of the truly unusual figures in cinema history.

Tati’s *PlayTime* (1967), which took some nine years to make, is a satirical work set in Paris airports, office buildings, apartment houses and fashionable eating establishments. Tati appears in it, but only as one character among many. Fellow French director François Truffaut greeted it as “a film that comes from another planet, where they make films differently.” In *PlayTime*’s extended, final scene, Rosenbaum notes, as the posh restaurant “falls to pieces, everyone gets acquainted.”

Another artist who came up for discussion was Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1920), the Danish-born film director whose best-known films include *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *Vampyr* (1932), *Day of Wrath* (1943), *Ordet* (1955) and *Gertrud* (1964).

Day of Wrath, based on a Norwegian play, concerns itself with denunciations of alleged witchcraft in early 17th century Denmark. Rosenbaum observes that the film “was made and premiered during the darkest days of the Nazi occupation of Denmark, when Jews were being deported” and that “it clearly registers as one of the great Resistance films.”

Rosenbaum's books introduced me to the work of Belgian filmmaker André Delvaux (1926-2002). His 1966 film, *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*, based on a 1945 novel, recounts the fatal obsession of a respectable, repressed, middle-aged male high school teacher with one of his graduating female pupils (played by Beata Tyszkiewicz, the future wife of Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda).

As a final introductory note, in my view, Rosenbaum, in the recently published books and elsewhere, overvalues certain contemporary filmmakers, including Béla Tarr (Hungary), Pedro Costa (Portugal) and a number of others. Their efforts, I believe, more than anything else, reflect the *consequences* of critical social events and traumas (the rise and collapse of Stalinism, the social origins of fascism and the Holocaust, the betrayed or abortive revolutions in France, Portugal and elsewhere in the years 1968-1975) that the artists have not worked through or understood.

These directors' films tend to express, in other words, less the underlying social reality of our epoch, the unfinished 20th century, and more the confusion, disillusionment and even despair the aforementioned, intellectually and aesthetically undigested events have engendered in certain quarters.

The following is an edited version of our discussion.

David Walsh: You've been at film criticism a long time. What do you think your particular contribution has been to the discussion of film and art?

Jonathan Rosenbaum: This is partly based on the insights of other people from whom I've learned and listened to about my work.

I think the internationalism is significant. I have tried to bring films of all sorts to people's attention, sometimes relatively obscure ones.

I think there's also the particular way in which I use the first person, with the idea that people should know where my biases lie. The autobiographical aspect of my work is one I consider important—whether it's influential or not is another question.

Moreover, I argue strongly that the critic should not have the first or the last word, but should intervene in a public discussion that begins before the critic comes along, and continues after the critic leaves. I think that this position is probably not a usual one.

DW: What about your somewhat unusual or distinctive childhood, growing up in the South during the civil rights period? What influence do you think that had?

JR: It had a great deal of influence. I was very fortunate to have grown up when I did compared with people who are young today, who must find it incredibly difficult. I was very much influenced by the counter-culture. There was much that was deluded about it, but I also was in France, if not in May '68, in June '68 and the remainder of that summer.

One thing that had an enormous influence on me was becoming friends with members of the French Communist Party whose tastes in cinema and art were quite different from those of American leftists that I knew. They were much more drawn to a certain intellectual radicalism, as represented by people such as [filmmakers] Jacques Rivette, Robert Bresson and Jacques Tati.

Moreover, I fundamentally rediscovered American cinema through French criticism, and by living in Paris for five years. I think that had an impact on my work.

I'm not a mainstream writer. The most mainstream piece I've ever done, which got me a lot of attention, is a piece that was widely disliked and which I'm not fond of in its published form, an obituary of Ingmar Bergman published as an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* in August 2007. On my website, I published my original draft, which I think is acceptable, whereas I felt, in retrospect, that agreeing to do that piece in the way I did was almost like signing a pact with the devil.

DW: Why so?

JR: For one thing, it had to be rewritten several times to suit the editor's

biases. What most people took away from it was not what I was even interested in writing about. The headline the *Times* gave it was "Scenes From an Overrated Career." I wanted to talk about how important Bergman was as a theater director, and they cut all that out.

I think my objection was less to Bergman than to the way he was being received in the mainstream. To me, the superiority of [Danish filmmaker] Carl Dreyer over Bergman is very important. I think most people who worship Bergman don't even know Dreyer's work or life very well.

Dreyer's cinema is about challenges to belief rather than belief. I think that's an idea that would be harder for someone in the mainstream to accept, because so much of what conventional opinion is concerned with is closure, the "final word," feeling comfortable with something. It seems to me that my interest in Orson Welles, for example, goes very much against that, which is why I even titled my book, *Discovering Orson Welles*. In other words, it's an ongoing process.

DW: I think in addition to being apart from the mainstream, your being apart from academia, or largely apart from it, has been a generally fortunate thing. At least in recent decades.

JR: It's true, although I do try to keep up with what's going on in academic circles. I have a lot of ideological and artistic objections to academia—and not only because I was treated relatively badly by various institutions, something I mention in the introduction to one of the new books.

DW: You use the term "polemics" in one of your titles. Writing about British filmmaker Sally Potter, for example, you suggest that the fact her films have "both been widely and unfairly disparaged by other critics may have helped to intensify my support, but they certainly haven't caused it." Does it ever concern you that you might be saying B because the media says A, or because this or that critic you don't care for says A?

JR: Yes, it does. I'm sometimes reacting—which, by the way, was what Manny Farber, my favorite American film critic, said he tended to do very often. In other words, he basically reacts against conventional thinking. I test my own thinking in this manner, for example, when I critique the British critic David Thomson on James L. Brooks.

DW: I interviewed the director of a film entitled *Icebox* [2018], Daniel Sawka, about refugee children locked up by the US government. He mentioned that Brooks was the producer. He told me that Brooks was very passionate about the refugee issue, and that instantly gave me a more favorable opinion of him.

JR: Brooks is a very paradoxical figure and I think that's what fascinates me about him. He's not a figure one can pinpoint ideologically that easily. One of the things I find horrifying about *Broadcast News* [1987] is that it's impossible to establish whether the news reports are accurate or not. It's as though Brooks's entire sense of the ethics of reporting has to do with this more inner-directed business as to whether the tears of a given anchorman are genuine or not genuine, but not whether the actual impact of the report is progressive or reactionary. That's quite strange, but that's compatible with the whole way the television industry operates, so I think one can learn quite a bit from the film.

I think it's a pity that if I had to pick one film by Brooks on which to rest his importance it's one that no one can see, the original, musical version of *I'll Do Anything* [1994], which he destroyed himself.

DW: Your comments about Elaine May also interest me. I haven't seen all of her films. I saw *The New Leaf* [1971], *The Heartbreak Kid* [1972] and *Mikey and Nicky* [1976] many years ago. I certainly agree with you that the media trashing of *Ishtar* [1987] was overdone.

JR: *Ishtar* is her weakest film. When I met her a few years ago, I was asked in her presence which I thought were her best films. I mentioned *Mikey and Nicky* and *The Heartbreak Kid*, and she seemed pleased. I think she considers them her best as well.

DW: One of the things that's striking in your books is that you don't

wax nostalgic about the “good old days.”

JR: I think there’s a lot of distortion, for example, when people speak about the 1960s or ’70s as being the golden age of cinema. They forget that the [Jean-Luc] Godard films and others they like so much were attacked by critics and closed within a week.

DW: You make this comment in *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition* [2010]: “It’s sad in some ways to see the old paradigms of cinema dying in the U.S. But the emerging paradigms of cinephilia in this part of the world—which could significantly be almost anywhere else in world—are exciting to me, and I don’t believe that we’re obliged only to lament the new state of things.”

And this is from a recent interview: “One of the changes is in taste, which is different from aesthetic and conceptual changes. But it seems to me that young people are much more sympathetic to difficult films than they used to be, which is a very good sign. There are more interesting difficult films now than there were in the sixties, for example. ... When I was in college, I would see a film and it would have a big effect on me and I would wait two or three months before I met someone else who saw the film and before I read about it in a magazine. Now, I can see something really interesting and immediately read about it on the Internet. I think there’s an important difference in that, which actually helps communication and creates a new kind of community. What I also find interesting is that it’s a more natural growth.”

JR: Of course there’s a negative side to online culture too. I’m a somewhat skeptical admirer of Stanley Kubrick, but I am an admirer. However, if you go to the various websites devoted to Kubrick, it’s alarming to what extent they get into obsessive, quasi-religious discussions. They ascribe all sorts of ridiculous things to his films, hidden features in his films that no one could possibly see. It becomes a kind of a flight from reality.

Obviously, on the Internet you get more of everything, more that’s good and more that’s bad. More importantly, there’s an openness to material and issues.

DW: I watched Jacques Tati’s *PlayTime* [1967] again, as a result of reading your new books. And I was very struck by that film. I admire greatly the interview you did with Tati [“Tati’s Democracy”].

JR: *PlayTime* was a film that didn’t grab me immediately, but, as I got to know it better and better, it changed my relationship to living in cities. It actually made it easier or even possible to live in cities.

DW: There is so much there: the element of social critique, the comedy, the compassion, the choreography. You worked with him. What was Tati like, personally?

JR: He was not an intellectual. He was very responsive to what was going on immediately around him. So it was disconcerting, because before very long you’d be part of one of the gags he’d dream up.

Most amazingly, I once saw him perform 20 minutes for a dog in a restaurant where he went to lunch, which was in the same building as his office. He wasn’t concerned about anyone else there, only the dog as an audience. The thing that I found really touching, which I only learned recently, is that when he was preparing *Mon Oncle* [1958], he would follow dogs around for days, just to see where they went and what they did. He had that child’s curiosity about him.

DW: And, as well, as your essay’s title suggests, he had a “democratic” spirit. What was Tati’s political or social outlook?

JR: I don’t know how he voted, but he was a funny kind of combination of being very progressive about some things and being very reactionary about others.

That’s how the French criticism tended to regard him. For example, Jean-André Fieschi from the *Cahiers du Cinéma* [a prominent film journal], one of the people who influenced me, and a Communist, criticized Tati for that.

DW: Although you do cite Fieschi as saying “Never, perhaps, has a film

[*PlayTime*] placed so much confidence in the intelligence and activity of the spectator.”

JR: I think that’s true. That’s an important part of my own politics, relative to my own book, *Movie Wars* [2000]—which, by the way, is by far my most popular book, and that’s interesting because it had no advertising budget whatsoever. The book hit a nerve.

One of the arguments in that book is that the industry tends to look at the audience as a bunch of fools.

DW: One of the essays that raises issues closest to my heart is the one on Carl Dreyer’s *Day of Wrath* [1943]. It raises the complex relationship between history, social life, the personal history or personality of the artist and his or her artwork.

JR: Do you consider *Day of Wrath* a Resistance film?

DW: I think you’d have a more informed opinion about that than I do. I haven’t seen the film in a long time.

JR: Dreyer himself was in denial about it, but I think it was. Even though it’s complicated by the fact that the Nazis apparently liked the film!

DW: You point out that Dreyer’s comment, “One never knows, of course, what goes on in one’s subconsciousness” also suggests “that some works of art ultimately know and say more than their makers do.” I would tend to argue, all important works of art ultimately know and say more than their individual makers do.

JR: One of things that’s always stuck with me in regard to *Don Quixote* is Harold Bloom’s comment—that you can criticize both Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as being foolish and deluded, but together, Bloom commented, they know more than we do. I find that an extraordinary statement.

DW: I agree, it’s excellent. But I have to confess I’m thinking about this in the context of writing about the various efforts at present to eliminate artists from the past or the present because of their moral or sexual failings.

JR: On my website I attack [*Variety* critic] Owen Gleiberman because when Roman Polanski’s Dreyfus film [*J’accuse*, or *An Officer and a Spy*] showed in Venice, and Polanski in some interview said he identified with Dreyfus. Gleiberman said, how dare he! A “rapist” who was guilty comparing himself to Dreyfus who was innocent, etc. He was completely overlooking that fact, for example, that more recently Polanski was involved in very involved libel suits that he successfully brought against people who claimed things that he hadn’t done, acts that he hadn’t committed.

The way the media works now, the only thing of significance about Polanski is that he had sex with a young teenage girl more than 40 years ago—what he’s done since then has no consequence at all. I find that incredibly unfair. I was so shocked when I read a columnist comparing Polanski to a Nazi-collaborating French official [Maurice Papon], when Polanski’s parents were sent to the camps and his mother died there! To say that was such a disgusting thing.

And Woody Allen, whom I don’t care for as a filmmaker, it’s not at all clear that he’s guilty of anything.

DW: I don’t care for his last number of films, but his virtual blacklisting is disgraceful.

JR: Well, it all boils down, in my opinion, to this: “We can’t get rid of Donald Trump, so who can we get rid of?” It’s frustration or a distraction.

DW: There may be frustration and impotence, but it’s also being manipulated in the sense that, along with anti-Russia hysteria and various other things, it’s the Democratic Party’s attempt to ensure that opposition to Trump remains right-wing.

JR: And now Michael Bloomberg has entered the race. His purpose seems to be to get rid of Elizabeth Warren.

DW: In defense of beleaguered billionaires. But I was speaking as well

about the effort to get rid of artists from the past, having recently written against the *New York Times* piece in November headlined “Is It Time [neo-Impressionist French painter Paul] Gauguin Got Canceled?”

JR: I read that piece. It’s an amazing notion.

DW: Who speaks like that? To “cancel” Gauguin, or any major artist.

JR: That’s like the 1984 version of journalism.

DW: Returning to the passages on Carl Dreyer, you go on, “Dreyer remained so faithful to his art that he may have wound up saying more about his own times than most direct commentators.” This is what a good deal of honest, serious art does.

This is an argument I was making in the Gauguin piece. It’s not the same point, but it’s related: the artist, in his or her art, is often better than he or she is as a human being.

JR: Although I agree with you some extent about [director and informer] Elia Kazan in *The Sky Between the Leaves*, one thing tends to get overlooked. The real villains in the Hollywood blacklist were the producers and the studio heads, the people who actually imposed the blacklist, rather than the people who ratted. They even name awards after these people. It seems to me a little unfair that they get away with murder while Kazan gets shafted.

Parenthetically, I do agree with you in your book that Chaplin, Orson Welles and John Ford are probably the three greatest figures in American cinema.

DW: I think if an artist of some repute, such as Kazan, had stood up to the blacklist, it would have had an enormous impact. In that piece, I tried to avoid an ad hominem attack on Kazan. I watched his films, or as many of them as I could get hold of. I thought some of them were interesting, I thought some of them were not interesting or convincing. There is that edge of hysteria and bad faith in a lot of them. *On the Waterfront* [1954] I reject *in toto*, intellectually and artistically.

JR: I hate its self-righteousness about informing. To me, *Wild River* [1960] may be Kazan’s best film.

DW:

I wanted to ask you about the Frank Lloyd Wright house you grew up in.

JR: My best friend in Chicago, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, has just finished a film about it that’s going to be premiering in January. It’s called *A House is Not a Home: Wright or Wrong*.

The Wright house was commissioned by my parents. Mehrnaz has basically made a film about how difficult it becomes when you find yourself living inside a work of art or trying to live inside a work of art.

DW: What was it like growing up in that extraordinary house?

JR: In some ways, it was like a fortress, which is also true of other Wright homes. In other words, there was an ideology about private space and not being part of a community, which I have negative feelings about. The house is now a museum, it’s actually owned by the city.

I attribute part of my liking for [widescreen] CinemaScope, Yasujir? Ozu, Alain Resnais, and some other filmmakers to the experience of growing up in that house. You know, Nicholas Ray said that he learned his respect for the horizontal line from Wright. It’s a very horizontal house.

DW: Many members of your generation, and mine, have fallen by the wayside, gotten rich, become conservative or simply cheaply misanthropic. Do you have any thoughts on why you have remained true to the artistic and intellectual principles you more or less started out with?

JR: One conclusion I’ve come to recently is that if you’re independent of the mainstream, you can brand yourself. If you’re in the mainstream, it’s the mainstream that brands you.

If one is called, for example, an avant-garde artist, then one has a certain flexibility in the choices one can make. Even the fact that I’m claiming—which in many people’s minds would be incredibly arrogant or pretentious—that what I’m doing in these two books is artistic, it’s not

simply a social act, I’m actually trying to do something aesthetic through criticism, that’s something I have the freedom to claim, which I would not have if I were writing for the mainstream.

DW: You’re speaking about the ability to maintain a certain independence, economically and intellectually.

JR: Yes. I was brought up to think that if I didn’t write for the *New Yorker* or *Time* magazine, I was a failure. I’ve come to feel that although I now have a much smaller audience than I did when I was writing for the *Chicago Reader*, I actually think I’m succeeding more as a writer now than I did then, because it’s a much more relevant, focused audience.

I have between 800 and 1,000 people visiting my website each day, but it’s important to me that at least half of them are not from the US. Very far-flung places. That’s very satisfying to me, that I’ve created a community, which is kind of like an intellectual, artistic community.

History gets changed by a group of people agreeing upon something, which eventually becomes embraced by a larger group of people. That was what the French New Wave was, or you could talk about Soviet cinema, or Italian neo-realism.

It would seem to me that the internet would have enormous political potentiality. The big corporations are doing the same things all over the world. So, it would seem that there must be all sorts of ways the left could organize internationally.

DW: Absolutely, that’s our firm conviction, and experience already. I think the possibilities are almost limitless. We’ve had a year of mass protest and the movements are often being organized on people’s cellphones. Somebody called it the year of the “leaderless” revolutions. Now, none of them have succeeded and I wouldn’t want to idealize the current level of thinking in the slightest, but the potential is enormous. I believe they have to be international in character.

There’s a problem with historical and social knowledge, especially among the younger generation, through absolutely no fault of their own.

JR: That’s in part because the educational system in this country is totally screwed up. On the other hand, I’m much more popular with people in their 30s and younger than I am with people my own age or even closer to my own age. The people who read me tend to be in their 20s and 30s.

DW: Again, finally, I wanted to register my appreciation for your efforts on behalf of film and art against philistinism and commercialism.

JR: Thank you.

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