

Ted Mahar: On criticism, Kael and Kubrick

Ted Mahar, veteran of 15 years of film criticism for "The Oregonian," spoke to a gathering of college and high school students last week at the fourth annual Clackamas Journalism Conference. Mahar pointed out three major ingredients that should be included in a review: information (who's in the show, who directed it, etc.), analysis (how is it like other films of the same genre), and the opinion of the critic, which Mahar called the least important aspect.

"A good critic is a teacher," he said. "He or she has studied the field of criticism, has a better understanding of films, and should be more knowledgeable about films than the reader."

Although Mahar believes the role of critic is important ("The critic is a consumer advocate," he says), an ominous cloud hangs over the occupation. "The entire profession is built on false expectations because, in the final analysis, no one can tell you whether you're going to like a movie or not."

Here is an edited segment of Mahar's forum:

Question: In your review of "The Shining," you mentioned that you read Stephen King's novel. How important is reading the book to writing the review?

Mahar: Ideally, that should be done in all cases. In practical terms, however, I see 180 films a year, and probably 100 of them are based on books, and I can tell you that I don't read 100 books a year. I try to read as many as I can, but I've never read an Agatha Christie novel.

In the case of "The Shining," I read the book, frankly, only because I knew that Stanley Kubrick was making the movie. I was really more interested in Kubrick the filmmaker than in King the author. As it turned out, the book was more interesting than the movie. The book was needlessly slow, and I was expecting Kubrick to tighten it up. Instead, the film was long and slow, too.

Question: Do you think reading the book put a limit in the critic's mind as to what the film characters could do?

Mahar: Not really, because the same characters were used, and the book explained the characters better than the movie. In the book, Jack Torrance

was a very complex character who actually became possessed with the Overlook. In the movie, it looked like Torrance was a man who enjoyed killing people from the start.

Question: How much of your own opinion do you put into your reviews?

Mahar: I'm often asked after my review has been printed what I thought of the movie. They ask if I liked it. My answer is, from reading the review, does it look like you would like it? Sometimes, my opinion dominates the review, like in my review for the new Jerry Lewis movie, "Hardly Working." My dislike for the movie saturated the review. I tend to be more aggressive when I hate a movie than when I like it. If I do, I try to state the positive points first. I always try to state something favorable within the first three paragraphs.

Question: Have you ever had to see a movie twice before reviewing it?

Mahar: Oh, I rarely have the time to see a movie twice before writing on it. I have to see four to five movies a week, and at least two plays. It's very, very seldom.

Question: Do you think there is a critical glut on the market? A glut to the point that everyone has an opinion, and only opinions that get notice are those made by "characters"? Which means the more intelligent critic's opinions, like John Simon, get lost in the shuffle.

Mahar: It's difficult to tell how people get to be famous critics. I don't

he's very knowledgeable and confident. I only read those who come over the wire services at "The Oregonian."

Question: Do you ever read a review before you go see a movie?

Mahar: Sometimes. I try not to, though. I like to go in surprised. I hate real-life surprises, but in movies, I don't mind surprises.

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Question: Have you ever criticized a movie that went for nothing but special visual effects? I remember a movie called "Barry Lyndon" that was like that.

Mahar: You could criticize the photography if it became literally distracting. "Barry Lyndon" was also long, slow and dull, but it was very beautiful. Many people are saying the same thing about "Tess." I think that in this case, people liked the movie "Tess" more because they liked the character of Tess more. "Barry Lyndon" was not a very likeable character, but I think the film was better than people thought.

Question: Do you feel obligated to sit through the entire movie regardless of whether you liked the show or not?

Mahar: No, I don't. The only obligation I have is that if I do walk out of a movie, I say so in my review. The only time I've really felt like walking out

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get to read many other critics. Some get on my nerves. Pauline Kael gets on my nerves. She seems to deliberately misinterpret films to get her points that she'd like to make across. She'll see things in films that I swear aren't there.

I get the same reaction when I'm watching Sneak Previews on Channel 10. Sometimes Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert (the two critics) are so inaccurate in their descriptions of the films, that it just annoys me. I enjoy reading Ebert, but on television, he looks like a fat fool. Ebert looks like he's trying to impress people. In print,

of a film was while watching "Caveman." It was really pretty dull. The best part was the dinosaurs.

Question: Can you take much sophomoric humor like in "The Blues Brothers?"

Mahar: If I like it, it isn't sophomoric. Comedy is a very personal thing. What people think is funny is so unpredictable. It is much more personal than say, a romance or a drama.

Question: How important do you think that the theaters are to the films and your enjoyment?

Mahar: Portland theaters have ruined more movies for more audiences than anything else. A film that's persistently out of focus keeps you out of the film. If a film has scratches on it, you worry about it breaking, and you brace yourself for it. It's a nationwide problem and Portland theaters aren't much worse than anyplace else. It's a cooperative adventure between the

owners and the audience.

Audiences leave crap on the floors and managers leave it there because they don't have time, the staff, or they just don't care. There are enough pigs in the audience to make it nearly impossible for the managers to keep it clean. The ingredients in the food and drinks are also working against the managers. Tom Moyer actually took out seats at the Southgate Theater to put in garbage cans, but it still doesn't work.

Question: What is your favorite theater?

Mahar: I don't go there as much as I could, but I would have to say the Roseway is my favorite.

Question: What do you think brings about a cult film?

Mahar: I think that an immediate rejection by the movie world helps enormously. It took "Harold and Maude" five years to break even. Many of these films are also about weird people in general. "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" pretty much explains the characters.

Question: Do you think that because the producers are now in control of Hollywood, that we'll see more produced films like "The Blues Brothers," as opposed to creative works?

Mahar: They've been making stock films for the past decade through sequels and remakes. It has characterized the '70s. Besides, any director who makes two popular films in a row will pretty much get his own way in the industry. Money still controls Hollywood and that is why Michael Cimino had his way with "Heaven's Gate," because he made so much money with "The Deer Hunter."

briefs

Speech team finals at finale

Call it the end, the finis, the finale, the terminus, the cessation, the expiration, the denouement. Whatever you call it, it can only mean one thing: the end of the speech team's season.

Like the Oakland Raiders, like the Boston Celtics, like the Indiana Hoosiers, like the American Olympic Hockey team, Frank Harlow's speech team finished its 1980-81 season with a bang, as four students scrapped their way into the finals of the Community College Regional Tournament last weekend at Portland Community College. Ed ("Too Tall") Coyne, Tracy Watson, Dorothy Grenier and

Jennifer Wright all enunciated their way into finals of the last tournament of the year. Coyne finished in impromptu, Tracy Watson clawed his way into the expository finals, Dorothy Grenier editorialized on sex education in high schools in order to gain finals, and Tracy Watson combined with Jennifer Wright to slide into the finals of the dual interpretation competition.

Sidewalk day planned

Students from six area high schools are joining the Clackamas Community College Foreign Language Department in featuring a sidewalk cafe day from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on campus today.

Rex Putnam, Oregon City, West Linn, Molalla, Estacada, and Milwaukie high schools along with foreign students from CCC, are presenting music, dances, skits and poetry recitations from France, Japan, Spain, Germany, Africa, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laotian, and Hmong from 10:05 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

From 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., foreign films are being shown in CC 101. Films on schedule include "Mexico City," "Spring in Tirol," "Taxco," "Paris jamais vu," "Acapulco," "Le Ballon Rouge" and "Saltillo en Fiesta."

Shuey speaks

Veteran backpacker Scott Shuey, who gave a slide show

of the Pacific Crest Trail last term, will return to campus May 18 for a "Backpacking-Part Two" lecture.

While last term's session covered the essentials needed to begin backpacking, this month's presentation will be geared for more advanced hikers.

In addition to the lecture, Shuey will present a slide show of hiking the Great Divide in the Rocky Mountains. Kelly Sullivan, College outdoor and recreation specialist, promises, "It's going to be just faantaastic!"

The lecture will be given from 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., and the slide show will run from 7:30-9 p.m., both in the Fireside Lounge.

Shuey will also lead a group of students on a hike up the Wahkeena Falls trail in the Columbia Gorge on May 23. The idea is to give students a chance to practice what they have learned in the lecture, and to spark some interest in backpacking among those who have never tried it.

The hike will cover five miles, and include views of both Wahkeena and Multnomah Falls. Spring is prime time for short day hikes the Gorge. Seasonal rains give the area a rainforest appearance, and the varied types of ferns, wild Oregon strawberry, moss and first trees add tranquility to the hike.

Sign-up sheets for the hike are posted on the wall in the Community Center.

