

“The Best Job in the World” Notes of a film Reviewer

By Mike Canning

For years now, whenever I tell people I review movies, they invariably exclaim: “Hey, you are **so** lucky; how can I get that job?” So, how does one get what so many have told me must be “the best job in the world?” In my case, by answering an ad.

In 1993, after 28 years in the Foreign Service, I was attending a retirement course and wondering what would come next. While reading my local biweekly on Capitol Hill, the *Hill Rag*, I noticed a classified ad for a “movie reviewer,” my dream job. I submitted a brisk résumé and my own hurried review—as requested in the ad—of a current film then playing in town. Bless the publishers, I was hired and have been writing about motion pictures ever since.

Thus, I have been able to indulge a desire I have held since I was about four: to go to the movies for *free* and write about those I care about. Even better, I am invited to private critics’ advance screenings at local cinemas, often at mid-morning (very decadent), with no interruptions or ads, no noisome customers, and excellent projection. Best of all, I write for my own neighbors and friends—the *Hill Rag* is very much a community newspaper—and get very personal feedback. No movie-lover could ask for more. One is hardly born a movie reviewer, of course, one starts as a movie-lover...

As one of the last pre-television kids (b.1941), my youthful entertainment in Fargo, North Dakota, was radio--and the picture show. Fargo was the “big town” in North Dakota, so it boasted half-a-dozen downtown movie houses where I grew up on Saturday morning cartoons and serials, Western double features, Disney features, standard Hollywood studio fare, and the occasional big deal “road show” (with overtures and all!).

Going to the university in my home town, I saw, like many college kids at the time, my first foreign-language films. I was captured by the exoticism and sheer strangeness of “foreign” films (I was particularly knocked out by *La Dolce Vita*) and began to participate in a local film society. The draw to foreign films was further stimulated—even accelerated--by graduate study in Germany, when, during the early 1960’s, notable foreign directors were producing, year after year, what came to be called “a regular succession of masterpieces.”

After Germany, intrigued in part by foreign climes which the cinema had induced in me, I was accepted into the Foreign Service with the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). There, as a press or cultural officer, I was often able to indulge my film bent. Since I was presenting *all* aspects of American culture to overseas audiences, I found ways to emphasize movies and, thus, led film discussions, fashioned film festivals, and wrote about films of all types. I even did a stint in the USIA’s Film and Television Division where I was in charge of the film acquisitions for Embassy posts and cultural centers overseas. My service abroad also allowed me to discover the cinemas of other countries--and to compare

them with our own.

Movies, then, were a life-long passion that persisted after my retirement from the Foreign Service, when I fortuitously answered that *Hill Rag* advertisement.

When I started reviewing in 1993, I was looking forward to nailing some cinematic turkeys with blistering put-downs. Having read much film criticism, I remembered fondly a few scorchers, and I hoped I would have the wit to come up with some of my own. What I found very early on, however, was that the hard knock might be fun but it was also facile and fleeting. Bashing movies made the whole enterprise of filmmaking seem more wasteful and pointless than it sometimes really is, and it left me with a foul taste in my mouth—this from a guy who truly loved movies and who wanted to tell others about them.

What I quickly came to focus on were films that, because they intrigued me, moved me, or otherwise interested me, might interest those friends and neighbors for whom I was writing, people more or less like me. I came to see myself as more than a mere assessor or grader but as a writer who could impart information and studied impressions about movies to movie-minded folk.

I am, admittedly, somewhat didactic in what I write: providing background on a certain director's or performer's work, offering a little lore about a film's location, setting the cultural context for a foreign film, etc., but basically I am offering one person's opinion which my readers can take or leave. My opinions and prejudices are my own, and, over time, readers can match them against theirs—which is exactly how I look at other reviewers.

Guiding those opinions and prejudices are my own basic criteria for "quality" in filmmaking: I favor literate, believable scripts fashioned into coherent, compelling stories, peopled by competent, credible actors who are directed with pace and weight appropriate to the material. These are my core values. All the other *accoutrements*--cinematography, production design, lighting, music, effects, etc.--all are important, all can enhance a motion picture, but, to this reviewer, they are finally *secondary* to good scripts, acting, and direction. Period.

Writing this piece has led me to other musings on all the movies I've seen over the last years (some 2,500) and all those reviews I've written (more than 300). I usually avoid the standard reviewer devices, such as star ratings, thumb directions, and top ten lists. I do this not out of superciliousness, but rather because I honestly feel such raw measures leave out nuance and variation. They also require comparisons that stretch credulity. How can you "rank," e.g., (citing just notable films from the 2006 season) a gripping docu-drama like "United 93" with a delicious take-off like "The Devil Wears Prada" --or compare either of them with the grave "Letters from Iwo Jima?"

Anybody I meet who either knows or learns that I review movies--after first remarking what a great job that must be--invariably asks, often bluntly or with a somewhat defiant attitude: "So what should I see?" After all, I'm *supposed* to have an opinion, right? Such a question always gives me pause because I have to gauge my interlocutor's cinematic tastes from what I already know about them (with friends and neighbors) to offer good advice, or I must make a crude guess (with strangers) as to what their tastes might be.

I should state up front that, as a reviewer for a community newspaper in Washington, DC, I do not feel it is essential that I provide assessments of pictures that are broadly hyped or strongly marketed. Thus, I tend to focus on films that are out of the mainstream, ones which are likely to be overlooked or bypassed, ones which haven't been widely reviewed or publicized. I also err on the side of *adult* (by which I mean grown-up, not porno) cinema, being very adult myself by now, which means less attention paid to children's or teenagers' movies (except for the occasionally brilliant Pixar animated film).

Some people who know I see a lot of movies (I average about 10-15 screenings a month) wonder out loud how I can stand it—given all the crap out there! The fact is, that after more than a 15 years viewing and reviewing films, I can also confirm that, like so much else in life, commercial cinema aligns itself with the statistical “normal curve distribution” applicable to almost any human output. Restated, that means that about five percent of films are fabulous, 15 percent are good, something like 60 percent are variably mediocre, and some 20 percent stink up the place.

I am so lucky. I have had indulgent, kind editors who allow me to ruminate in my (now) monthly column. I am never ordered to review anything; I write about what interests me. I rarely write about the standard Hollywood blockbuster of the week (nobody, I insist, needs my opinion on *Die Hard 12*) but prefer to introduce or do riffs on the quirky independent effort or the intriguing new foreign flick. That doesn't mean that I review only in the ghetto of the “offbeat;” I happily consider product from the major studios also. I firmly believe that good entertainment—even art—can come from nearly any source if you look hard enough. In discovering any good flick for myself through writing about it, I hope to trigger interest in it for my reader.

At best, my writing on film is like having a good conversation (if a bit one-sided) with a good companion, exactly like conversations I have had with many friends and acquaintances who know I write reviews and readily ask me for my opinion (I always have one). It gives me a chance to share my enthusiasm about the movies. The outcomes of those conversations can be as stimulating as a genial agree-to-disagree or as simply splendid as having someone say: “Hey, I saw that movie you recommended—and it was great!” That kind of remark can make my day, my week, my month. What a great gig...you realize that it's the best job in the world.