Otis Ferguson

Of the five greatest American film critics—Otis Ferguson, James Agee, Manny Farber, Pauline Kael, and Andrew Sarris—Ferguson (1907–1943) had the distinction of being the first. He began reviewing movies for *The New Republic* in 1934, when many critics and intellectuals were still condescending to the medium, bemoaning the death of silent film, and preferring Russian films to Hollywood's. Ferguson, who loved music and especially jazz, grasped that sound would expand the rhythmic, expressive, and realistic possibilities of the movies. He was ever on the lookout for original performers who embodied the tough, sassy, can-do American temperament—Jimmy Cagney, Mae West, the Marx Brothers, Humphrey Bogart, W. C. Fields, Katharine Hepburn. Today, the 1930s and early 40s look like a golden age of dynamic, entertaining moviemaking, with their lean gangster pictures, screwball comedies, musicals with audacious dance numbers by Busby Berkeley or Fred Astaire, Walt Disney's first animated features. Ferguson's contribution was to chronicle all this, and to register as somehow miraculous the way Hollywood studio craftsmen were perfecting an almost seamless storytelling technique. A humming little charmer like *Stage Door* or *Hands across the Table* might "indicate a wisdom of procedure that is good to find in pictures, where careless use of camera devices, the didactic cutting-in of wheels, clocks, calendar leaves and what not, and all the march-of-timing and Eisensteining in general, are often confused with intelligent and true exploitation of the medium. . . . It is encouraging to remember that anything which is delightful is never old in any real sense of the term, because delight is a fragile and immediate thing, and new always." His preference for invisible craft may explain why he took exception to the great, show-offy self-consciousness of *Citizen Kane*.

Ferguson's own writing took on an improvised, jazzy quality, the sentences speedy, conversational, the words juggled and kept in motion and never allowed to stagnate. His judgments were keen and unsentimental; he could pack three movie reviews in a column and make you feel none had been slighted. He also had a rugged appreciation for the spectacle of work, such as army movies, where "men do the impossible sometimes, doing and enduring in common." After Pearl Harbor, he joined the Merchant Marines as an able-bodied seaman; he was killed in 1943 when his ship was bombed in the Bay of Salerno. Manny Farber wrote, "Americans seem to have a special aptitude for allowing History to bury the toughest, most authentic native talents," and listed Otis Ferguson as a prime example. Though Ferguson has seemed at times the forgotten man of American film criticism, a collection called *The Film Criticism of Otis Ferguson* was published in 1971, and since then his importance has been more widely acknowledged.

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Hitchcock in Hollywood

Alfred Hitchcock seemed to be fooling around where he didn't belong in his last two pictures (*Jamaica Inn* and *Rebecca*), but in *Foreign Correspondent* the man has done it again. The plot is bare enough, a routine Oppenheimer about an American reporter who gets caught up in international intrigue between peacemakers and warmongers as of about a year ago—the better part of the action lying in Holland and England. But with Hitchcock it isn't ever so much what was done as what it was done with. He has explored the range of the modern story-film farther than any other man; and if you have any interest in the true motion and sweep of pictures, watching that man work is like listening to music.

Taking the picture for what it is, however—basically spy melodrama with more emphasis on keeping going than on where—there are still awkward bits. Joel McCrea is an awkward bit—at least when he figures that the part requires acting. The meeting of the peace society has prominently ham elements; the terrific secret is pretty meaningless; and the speechification is sometimes overdone, especially toward the end. Otherwise it goes like the night mail, from the home office to London to The Hague and a shooting in the rain. Then a wonderful sequence out in the flat country and inside the sinister windmill, the chase to London and the murderous practices uncovered there, evil closing in, the flight in the Clipper, the wreck (this last, with its eerie sensation of being fired upon and magnificent water shots, is one of the big dramatic effects in pictures).

Whatever the framework, a detective story with Hitchcock is no longer a detective story—though he's after the same action and suspense, and gets it. He loves details like a Dutch painter, and crowds his set with them, whether they are the wonderful mechanics of the windmill (a Hitchcock interior if you ever saw one) or the Great Dane lumbering around, or the Lett with the blue-plate eyes, or the silly dame, or the local constabulary all speaking Dutch. He loads his set with them without loading down his action; and because everything and everybody aren't direct accessories to the plot, so many mechanical aids, you get the effect of life, which also has its dogs and casual passers-by who are real without having anything to do with any plot you know about. He makes a character out of every extra.

Another of his tricks is to show you the little birdie—*i.e.*, he likes to have a bland face or a sweet old lady personify evil, and the tricky-looking fellow turn out to be a right one all along. Even here he shuffles the types around so there is still no rule-of-thumb, for Mr. Ciannelli and his mobsters are sinister enough, and the scene in the torture room is enough to leave you with the

creeps. Another trick is the strange-mechanical, like the reversing windmill, the assassin's camera, the disappearing car. And he likes to scare you with high and precarious places.

Above everything there is a feeling of how to use sound and things and people for suspensive effect that is like a painter's sense of color or like a musician's sense—if you haven't got it you can't buy one, and you can copy every last trick in a Hitchcock picture without having anything but Boris Karloff left. He likes to play with wind and rain, with natural music (as opposed to atmospheric scores, though there is too much of one here) and a natural background murmur of people talking without the words coming out, of street-noises or machinery or just the wind and rain by themselves. He knows where to set the microphone and camera to catch the effect he has figured out, and with all the devices of this complex art completely under his fingers, you may he sure a person never enters a deserted building or a dark alley without your wondering actively if he will ever come out.

Group scenes too, in action or repose. One of the hardest things film men have had to learn is not to spot one thing out of many by rubbing your nose in it; another, more often achieved, is how to keep a lot of people milling around desperately without the focus getting lost and the end confused.

Add humor. Hitchcock knows suspense should not get too tight, so there is always some absurd side-talk going on, often with edge to it. Robert Benchley is the principal funny man here—though others keep popping up—and the mixture of his feverish ride on the water wagon and his comments on the practice of foreign correspondence is a nice thing to have around. He apparently wrote his own part, and if he didn't have a hand in the general dialogue, somebody did who was good and witty.

In short, if you would like a seminar in how to make a movie travel the lightest and fastest way, in a kind of beauty that is peculiar to movies alone, you can see this once, and then again to see what you missed, and then study it twice. If all you're out for is an evening you'll have that too—or what do you want for 35–75 cents?

1940