

Memories of Injustice: Marcel Ophuls' Cinema of Conscience

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Memories of Injustice



Marcel Ophuls' Cinema of Conscience

By Kurt Jacobsen

Marcel Ophuls really would rather be making musicals. Honest. "People always laugh when I say that." He routinely protests that he never craved the role of minicam-toting conscience; it became his by happenstance. After all, the pay is lousy, the hours infinite, and one never ever runs out of injustices or the multitudes of small complicities that enable those injustices to take root. Officially sanctioned injustice is his lifelong topic; exposing complicity in all its subtle forms is his *métier*. Ophuls aptly has been likened to TV's Colombo, a sly, perpetually rumpled detective who deftly manages, through deceptively simple queries, to pin his smug prey squirming to the nearest wall. No one can surpass him at peeling away the protective devices and dodges through which hideous behavior is rationalized by cheerful criminals, outright collaborators, and the cowed families who are only being "realistic" by adjusting to thuggish regimes. Dissecting the reasons why ordinary people shut their eyes to historical horrors, from the deportation of Jews in occupied France to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, might prod us to open ours.

Ophuls seems fated from birth to be cosmopolitan, a filmmaker, and incorrigibly a thorn in the side of all authorities. He was born in Germany in 1927, the only child of director Max Ophuls and his wife Hilde. In 1932, with the Nazis on the brink of attaining state power, his family fled to Paris. When

France fell in 1940 they slipped into Switzerland; in 1941 they managed to emigrate to the United States. There Marcel attended Hollywood High, Occidental College, and the University of California at Berkeley. He served with the U.S. occupation forces in Japan and in 1950 became an American citizen. In 1951 he returned to Europe to work in a variety of directorial and writing capacities for French and German television. In the early Sixties he also directed two small films: an episode of *Love at Twenty* ('61) and an offbeat feature comedy, *Banana Peel* ('64).

But Ophuls's most striking works in that turbulent decade began as projects for the French state television network ORTF. In 1967 ORTF screened his caustic documentary of the diplomatic maneuvers behind the 1938 Munich agreement attempting to appease Hitler's appetite for *lebensraum*. A companion study of France under the Occupation, focusing on the town of Clermont-Ferrand in the Vichy zone, was under way when, during the "events" of May 1968, Ophuls took part in a directors' strike protesting state censorship in broadcasting. He was fired, after which he moved to Germany. With supreme irony, it was there that he scraped together the funds to complete his masterpiece in demystification.

The Sorrow and the Pity ('70) dispelled the myth of resistance solidarity, highlighted homegrown anti-Semitism, and examined the virtual state of civil war and vicious class conflict rending

France long before the Panzers rolled in. An ORTF official famously objected that the film “destroys myths that the people of France need.” The many memorable interviewees included a French Waffen SS officer, a shopkeeper who placed a newspaper ad in 1942 denying he was Jewish, and a Resistance fighter and Buchenwald survivor who now somehow lived peacefully beside the fellow Frenchman who had turned him in to the Gestapo. The government refused to screen *The Sorrow and the Pity* on TV, but the four-and-a-half-hour documentary played for years in a French cinema and created a furor anyway. A milder and fair-minded critique leveled by Harvard scholar Stanley Hoffman is that Ophuls’s film, while it ignited a necessary reappraisal, was too harsh a judgment insofar as it characterized all French behavior on the basis of a study of a single town. Only when Mitterand came to power in 1981 was *The Sorrow and the Pity* permitted on French TV.

In the category of marathon-length documentaries—though he made a few short films, too—Ophuls next ventured into the less familiar terrain of Northern Ireland in *A Sense of Loss* (’72), in which he concentrated on the grim, ground-level experience of sectarian oppression and nationalist struggle. In *The Memory of Justice* (’76) he scoured the Nuremberg trials and mordantly reflected on their legacy in the age of napalm and My Lai massacres. The Oscar-winning *Hotel Terminus* (’88) disclosed a sinister saga of collaboration among “free world” intelligence agencies that passed around and made use of the unsavory likes of Klaus Barbie, formerly chief of the German secret service in Lyons, 1942–44, whose vicious skills were harnessed to postwar anti-communism. Intelligence “professionals” obviously had more in common with crafty ex-Nazis than with the democratic values they were supposedly defending. The many meanings and implications of the fall of the Berlin wall formed the heady subject of *November Days* (’90).

Ophuls’s latest documentary, *The Troubles We’ve Seen*, is a work-in-progress centered on war correspondents in Sarajevo that sifts through the seamy history of war reporting and focuses on the ethical tensions inherent in their trade. Can they only or ever be dispassionate analysts? Should they ever

champion a cause? Ophuls’s investigative ambit spans the Spanish Civil War—including an interview with Martha Gellhorn, who revels in the romance of “la causa,” and an inquiry into the authenticity of Robert Capa’s famous photograph of a Republican soldier at the instant of death—and extends to wry observations about the meticulously controlled coverage of the Gulf War. (A French journalist recalls informing his editors that in liberated Kuwait the man-in-the-street interview they innocently wanted could consist of nothing more than their esteemed correspondent dangling a microphone beside a highway to pick up the sound of fleets of Mercedes-Benzes whizzing by.) At one point Ophuls, the irrepressible *provocateur*, in a bathrobe and slippers pads around a nude woman in a Vienna hotel room for no other evident purpose than to tease provokable feminists.

BBC executive Paul Hayman, who collaborated on *November Days*, attests that Ophuls “like any great talent” is “a nightmare to work with” but is well worth the trouble. Ophuls is busy trying to fund and complete the third part of his Sarajevo documentary before he embarks, in all likelihood, on a fresh exploration of neo-fascism in Europe. Meanwhile, it’s renewed hope for *Troubles* Part Three that occasions the publication of this interview, conducted a year and a half ago as Parts One and Two were making the festival circuit and the NATO bombing and deployment of U.S. troops in Bosnia were still in the future. —K.J.

You have said in earlier interviews that it’s not your business to provide political solutions. Yet your latest film, *The Troubles We’ve Seen*, openly advocates a political solution—you wanted the West to intervene militarily in Bosnia. That stance is new.

Yes. That is new for me. But I think that part of a documentary filmmaker’s business is not to have any absolute principles, otherwise he closes too many doors in advance. So you must always be prepared not only to surprise other people but to surprise yourself. Something might happen to you in the course of events that changes your mind about previous statements in previous interviews.

Are you conscious of any difference that this advocacy may make in your work?

Oh, I still refrain from “voice of

God” commentary. I still don’t identify with André Malraux and I still try to avoid propaganda.

I think the question is very good. But, as a matter of fact, I started out advocating. *Sorrow and the Pity* is certainly not a relativistic or neutral film; it comes down very squarely on the side of the Resistance. The film is realistic enough to assume—even before being told—that the majority of people by nature and by circumstance are not resistance fighters. But that doesn’t mean that the film was philosophically or politically neutral. It was not.

In [the case of *The Troubles We’ve Seen*], frankly I can’t understand how anyone could get involved, whether on the ground or as a journalist, in what is happening to these people [in Sarajevo] without choosing sides. Certainly the very few journalists I have met who tried to maintain the neutral stance or came out on the Serbian side seemed to me to be *agents provocateurs*; they’re probably paid by the enemy. It’s that clear cut. *Why use foreign correspondents as your focal point?*

It’s their role as mediators. It’s because—whether reporting a fire in Chicago or as White House correspondents or as Woodward and Bernstein, or whether it’s what happening to Mitterand in France—the role of journalists as mediators is one of the most fascinating subjects of our time. I think it’s simply that problems of censorship, pressure, schooling, competition, sensationalism, jingoism—all of these problems become more acute and dramatic in a time of crisis and so obviously make the filmmaker’s job easier. In a time of violent crisis it’s more interesting to see a man or a woman on camera with bullets flying around than to find them just at the city desk. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t make the connection between the city desk and what is happening in Sarajevo. As a matter of fact, I hope I did, and if I ever get the chance to make the third part of the film the connection will be even stronger. *There is a tension between your interventionist stance, which is voiced especially via New York Times journalist John Burns, and the rest of the film, which displays how fallible correspondents are.*

I am not using John Burns—I think John and I just happen to have the same ideas on this. He says in the film that in other places it might not be a healthy thing that we all agree with one another.

I choose to showcase that statement, but it is his statement. I happen to agree with it.

Yet you present evidence from Martha Gellhorn, on the Spanish Civil War, that gives audiences pause, encourages us to think about the manipulability of correspondents who can get so caught up in a cause that they lose critical distance. Which is not to say one cannot, like Orwell, be for the Republic and still refuse to ignore terrible things within it.

And not fake it. Yes. Why is Orwell's book [*Homage to Catalonia*] the only one we get out of the Civil War that still has meaning and value to us? As opposed to Malraux or some of the other propaganda writing? Because he saw through the bullshit. But that's also what this film is about.

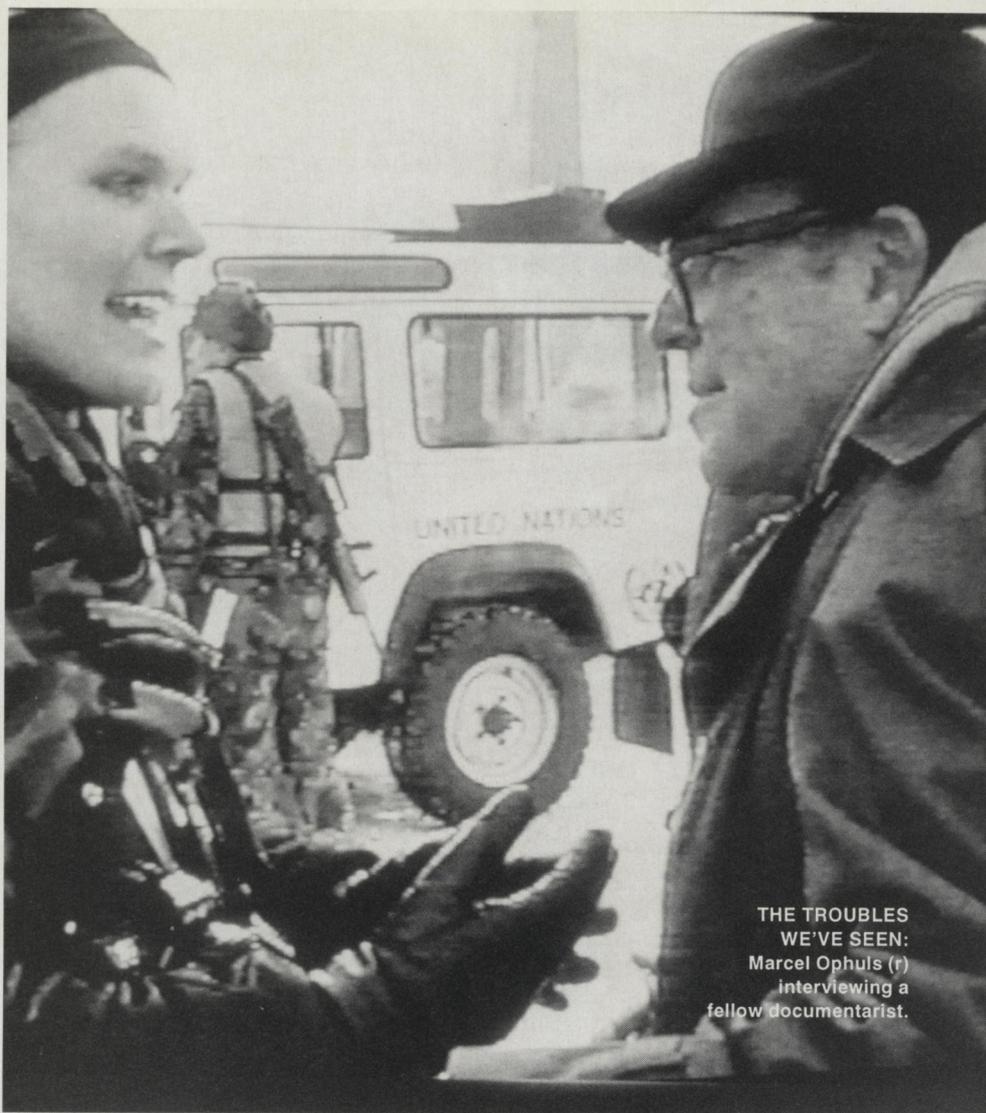
*You use what can seem like frivolous clips and references to Cagney, Rosalind Russell, and old films, including your father's film *De Mayerling à Sarajevo*.*

I think a general sign of maturity is that as we get older—by “we” I mean people who are paid to make personal statements in writing, painting, or whatever—we become more interested in form than in content. It's quite natural that people should feel that that fault is somewhat shocking in a documentary about death and violence and victimization. A filmmaker who says he is more interested in form than in subject matter seems to be saying he is getting bored with victimization and oppression. So I'm leaving myself open to that.

But it is true that trying to [take] *His Girl Friday* and James Cagney, and connect these dramatically with Sarajevo and what is happening there, may seem repellent to some people. I choose to assume that risk. I choose to try to convince people that it is not frivolous.

*Women in Hawks's films such as *His Girl Friday* are as formidable as any man, if not more so. One can't help noticing, however, in one notorious scene in your film that you seem to go out of your way to needle feminists.*

I would quarrel with some modern women on their repressiveness, their terrorism, their narrowmindedness, their puritanism. But I would not quarrel with feminists who know about movies, as Molly Haskell does, who would explain to us that Hawks's basic attitude toward women was patronizing. I think it was. But that would not change the fact that he was one of the great directors of all time. Certainly Angie Dickinson in



THE TROUBLES
WE'VE SEEN:
Marcel Ophuis (r)
interviewing a
fellow documentarist.

Rio Bravo and Jean Arthur in *Only Angels Have Wings* and you name it, they are being made members of a club on an exceptional basis the way that some Jews got into a Harvard fraternity if they had the right credentials—but only on tolerance. Certainly from that point of view Hawks's attitude can be criticized. But it was coherent, it was intelligent, and, for the time he lived, it was generous. One thing we should always do is use a time perspective.

I hope that audiences will not misunderstand. They are more likely—from the first femi-fascist reaction I've been getting, from the bad vibes I've been getting in this country—to resent the presence of the call girl in the hotel room. They seem totally hung up on that. *But you are putting out the bait.*

Yes, I'm putting out the bait and I will continue putting out the bait. If they ever want to get anything done, they will have to stop that kind of shit. *Who are the femi-fascists? I shudder at*

you and Rush Limbaugh agreeing about anything.

These women are using victimization. Particularly in America, victimization is used as a form of collective identity to oppress and victimize others. We should fight that.

Let me see if I understand. You deal with indisputable victims: people who were turned in to the Nazis in the days of the Resistance, people who were tortured by Klaus Barbie, and so on. I suppose what you are complaining about is the debasing of the role of victim—a lack of proportion, perhaps. You want to comment?

No. You just said it. I think you have to make choices, and choices imply hierarchies, which are based not only on looking at your own navel but on a sense of proportion. I am not a Holocaust celebrationist and I don't say only Jews were victims of genocide. But until people are willing to face the fact that the gas chambers are the ultimate form

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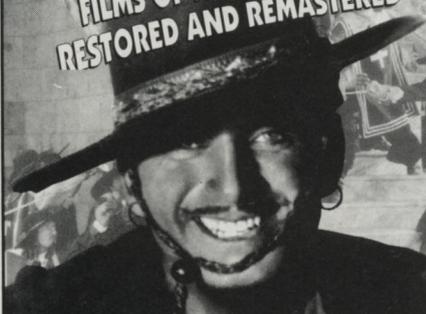
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(for the time being—it may get worse) of willful victimization. . . . This is not excluding other forms of genocide. Not at all. There's a good argument to be made that during decolonization there were many crimes against humanity committed. That there were many people who should have been brought to trial and condemned.

But unless you are willing to face the idea that it is not just a matter of whose ox is being gored, and unless you are willing to relativize your own suffering to what you know about history, I don't think you will be able to face any kind of reality. And reality will continue to fade into the background amidst all the violence and shit and frivolity. It will all become spectacle, all of it: narcissistic spectacle.

Can you reconcile good filmmaking with good reporting?

One of the people in the film says that one of the worst things that can happen "when I get back to Paris is that people say to me that they saw me in this film, because this makes it look as if I were only making a movie, and I am ashamed of that." I think what I am ultimately trying to convey in this film is that we have to lick the problem of *l'information spectacle*. We have to face the fact that we are in show business and then try to deal with it in a decent and humane way, and try to lick the problem. We're not licking the problem—we're getting licked by it. Not only the journalism but many feature films we've seen are just escalations of indecency. There's a virus around us that makes more and more people less and less able to discriminate between what is legitimate show business and what is perverted show business.

Are you talking about "reality shows"?

Yes, but not only the reality shows. Also some shows are extremely successful that display arrested development, a refusal to grow up, a tendency to blame our parents for everything. Here's a hierarchy of people who feel victimized accusing those whom they feel are responsible for their victimization. All of this escalation of anger leaves the people in Sarajevo more helpless and more alone because they are facing real genocide. People who make movies about justifying murder and mayhem because their parents weren't nice enough to them are not facing that kind of reality.

Who do you think was primarily to blame for the war?

The Europeans are. Bush refused to do anything, but it's more interesting to respond about the Clinton administration because Clinton made promises to the Bosnians which he hasn't kept. We all know why he hasn't kept them. He hasn't kept them because Mitterand and, in a minor way, John Major influenced him and prevented him. But perhaps it's like the movies' barroom fight where a fellow says, "Hold my coat because otherwise I'll get into it." It's a bad situation and I think we'll all be paying for it.

What about financing the film?

It's mainly due to friendship that's been going on for the past ten years with Bertrand Tavernier, who is just about the only Frenchman who worries about my getting employment in France, and who made tremendous efforts so that I could get enough money to make it. It hasn't been easy.

Then good old Beeb [the BBC] came in with £80 thousand, I think. And the French subsidy system. Again I happened to be lucky, because Jeanne Moreau is president of it right now. If not. . . .

You had a rather different experience with the BBC over A Sense of Loss?

At that time I was on very good terms with the BBC. They had shown *The Sorrow and the Pity*, they were very much interested in the next film, and the head of purchasing programs wanted to have an option. They were very anxious to see *Sense of Loss* because it was about their problem—and when they saw it they didn't want it. It was the only one of these marathon documentaries that never made it onto the BBC.

Here we are more than 20 years later and at last we have a fragile peace process in place in Northern Ireland. But up until 1994 your film could have been just as relevant as it was in 1972.

I think you are right—it would look like a current affair. In some ways that happened to *November Days*, which was a much more recent film about the joy of the fall of the Berlin Wall. But then the only excuse for either film is that I am not a political prophet. Matter of fact, I'm not very good at politics. I'm certainly not very good at predicting the course of human events.

I don't want to sound apologetic about it. I think *Sense of Loss* was a fairly good film [but]—I think the BBC may have been right—not the best work

I've done. I [was commissioned by American sponsors to do] the Irish republican movement with the same kind of awe, respect, and sympathy that you would feel for the French resistance. I never felt very comfortable with that idea. So I concentrated on the mayhem and the violence [in Northern Ireland] and what it means to people to be casualties in that kind of civil strife, which I suppose is an easy way out.

How did your sponsors react?

I think the sponsors were not terribly happy because the film did not make any money. [Laughs.] Possibly one of the reasons it did not make any money in the United States is that the original intention was to please the Irish-American community and of course it didn't do that. In fact, it was quite sarcastic in this respect, showing the contrast between the Saint Patrick's Day parade in New York and the business of collecting money for the IRA—this distance between all the folklore and what actually happens on the ground. That's how the film starts. So I'm trying to make elbow room in these films against pressures on both sides, between what the sponsors originally want and what they get.

Is making everyone unhappy a sort of victory?

At the Edinburgh film festival the response was just that—that it made everyone unhappy. But I don't think a film should just do that. It may be a sign of some sort of filmmaker's independence or stubbornness or whatever to make everyone unhappy, but it is not a moral victory.

Were you unhappy?

Not terribly, no. Because I think sympathizing with the oppressed and sympathizing with the victim is one of the easiest things a documentary filmmaker can do. It is part of correct political thinking, and I have never been a correct political thinker even before the term was coined. I am against it.

Too few people were concerned or interested enough to go after the facts. That seems to be your task—or to induce other people to go out there and dig out the facts in order to understand why the world is less civilized than it ought to be.

Well, don't cast me into the role of Atlas, because it is too heavy for me. I don't know the mythology. Does he still continue to carry it on his shoulders?

After a brief relief by Hercules, yes.

Well, that's a very flattering portrait. What your question implies, if I have

correctly understood it, is that other people are not doing that kind of job. That the world waits for me to come along and do it in the place of the other people. That's why I talk about Greek mythology, because I can't take that heavy a compliment.

Peter Davis is a friend of mine and I think *Hearts and Minds* is a very important film. [But] we are not alone; you can add Claude Lanzmann and others. There are historians and investigative journalists who come out with important work all the time. The fact that we try to put it together audiovisually is just a temporary phenomenon. Again we get into this business of *l'information spectacle*. We may tend to overvalue right now the impact that nonfiction filmmaking has on people. I think it is going to have less and less impact because of television, because there is so much crammed onto the evening news that I don't think we can adapt and deal with.

Why are you talking about retirement from these kinds of films?

I think my way of dealing with it—long films, long interviews—is not going to bring home the bacon anymore. After all, the only commercial success I ever had with these films is *The Sorrow and the Pity*. There are reasons for that. It has to do with people no longer being able to afford the attention span that is necessary. So you have to find something else. Peter Davis and I are obsolete. We really are.

I wonder whether your life's work is spurred by the early contrasts you experienced as a teenager. There you are, a European Jewish émigré enrolling at Hollywood High of all places, with the Nazi menace as a very vivid memory. Your parents, of course, fill your environment with high culture and a sense of purpose out there in La-La Land. Am I warm?

were very privileged and we got out much earlier than other people did. It did not at the time have all that profound an influence on me. We did not get near a concentration camp. We were in unoccupied France in various dangerous situations. Most of them were kept from me because my parents were very good parents—very intelligent, very cultured, very knowing, very sophisticated. As you say, wonderful parents. So they tried to soften or cushion both the Hollywood experience and the Vichy experiences. They didn't entirely succeed, otherwise I wouldn't have

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become the fucked-up person that I've become. Parents never entirely succeed. But that doesn't mean they should be blamed.

My response to that culture shock was very simple: I became a French snob. I retreated into bookwormish, wallflowerish behavior because I couldn't cope with the dating system. So I never met Marilyn Monroe—but then she couldn't cope with the dating system there, either. I only ceased being a French snob when I went into the American Army, which was a very happy experience.

What years were those?

In 1946-47. Before I went to college I went to Japan as an occupier. I didn't drop the atom bomb, so I refuse to be blamed for it. All those clichés. Anyway, I was very happy. I had a very good time both in basic training and in Tokyo. I discovered American movies before I ever came to America, but jazz and Brooklyn and Tennessee and all these things that are closer to the American reality than Hollywood High School, are things I discovered in the American army—things that make me very fond of this country. So by the time I got out of the army I was no longer the snob. But Hollywood High was pretty bad, yes.

In the Sixties you made a Love at 20 episode and Banana Peel. Why did you move to nonfiction? The obvious guess, of course, is lack of money.

That's right. I was married. I was a family man. There was no work. I just happened to be spending an evening with friends and a woman who worked for French television. We got to talking. What would I want to do if I worked for French television? I said, "I don't want to work on cheap fiction stuff because the directors are working under terrible conditions and you can't possibly do any good work there. So if I were to work on French television it would be *reportage*, a magazine piece." She said, "Well, do you have anybody special in mind?" I said, "Yes. I see some anti-Gaullist stuff that I rather like. There seems to be a small group of good people there who are doing good work, and if I could work with them that would be okay." She said, "We'll set up an appointment for you."

I left the country. I didn't believe anything would happen. But when I came back I found messages from this woman for three different appoint-

ments. So for two years, thanks to her having me meet these television producers and journalists, I very happily and for very little money would do 20-minute pieces for something like America's "60 Minutes." That's what got me into it.

Then one day a producer said to me, "Would you like to do Munich? We are going to do historical evenings on Channel 2 and we would like you to start off because you are our senior director." I was middle-aged by that time. I remember saying, "Munich the town or Munich the agreement?" He replied, "The agreement, of course." And that became a three-and-a-half-hour film of interviews and archives. That basically is what I have been doing ever since. There is no explanation [for my career] except anecdote and circumstance.

Did you start out wanting to tackle these terrible moral subjects?

No. I would have much preferred to do musicals. People always laugh when I say that. People like John Simon in New York have written about this—that here I am, such a profound thinker of our time, and I actually like *Top Hat*. Well, I like John Simon but I think he is quite wrong when he thinks he can patronize *Top Hat* or Fred Astaire or the people who made it. No, the great artists of the 20th century in filmmaking—including my father—are [in fictional films]. I've always thought that.

So it's mostly groceries now. That doesn't mean I patronize myself. It doesn't mean I think that I've been doing unimportant work. Circumstance, the groceries, and pressures have brought me time and again into situations of filmmaking where I think am a good one. But that is not for me to say. *Your father's reputation had deepened over the years in part because people have had the chance to see restored versions of his work.*

But why do they get that chance? Certainly not because of the distributors and the money people. There is one very simple answer for the posthumous revival and fame of my father—which he certainly deserves. François Truffaut did it, and a few friends in Paris. Like so many other things. François was the leader because he had the talent and was interested enough, he was crazy enough, he was fanatic enough. *Still, your father's reputation seems to have stood very well and is even undergoing a revival.*

A great deal of it has to do with fashion. And a great deal of it has to do with people's ways of making a living. In other words, for film critics it has become more and more important not only to their own ego but also to the size of their bank account to be seen at the source of a rediscovery. That's why you get all this business about restored versions when in fact, as in the case of my father's *La Ronde*, I had to fight off these art historians because they disregarded my father's right to final cut. "Ah," they say, "but he was pressured into shortening the film." Then somebody had come up for very suspect reasons with a restored version of *La Ronde*. I had to defend my dead father's rights against this being restored because he is no longer around to be asked whether he was pressured.

We have to be careful not to fall prey to this kind of vicious circle of fanatic film buffery. Reevaluation is good and is necessary. But one of the things I think we discover is that posterity is no judge of art either. Shaw, I think, said people who write for posterity are pompous asses.

Aren't you tempted to play the investigative role again? There are so many targets around.

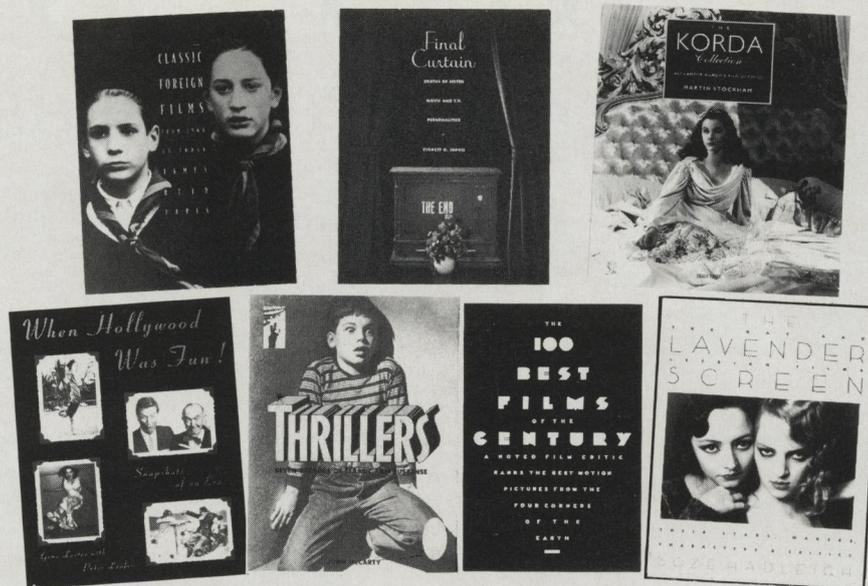
The BBC wants me to do a thing on the revival of fascism. But fascism is always with us—it is not being revived. Anyway, I don't want to spend another two years living these nightmares. For one thing, my memory is fading. I have to rely too much on other people. Fortunately I have found very good people to help me. But the business of keeping one hundred to two hundred hours of rushes in my head is something that is becoming too difficult and too strenuous to deal with.

So I said, "If you want me to interview that creep in Russia, or if you want me to interview Berlusconi, I'll do it if the BBC pays me well and I can add another room or two to my retirement home. But I will not otherwise spend two years dealing again with the nightmare of the problems that these people—the neo-fascists—are banking on. I've already done it." ☉

Kurt Jacobsen, author of Chasing Progress in the Irish Republic (Cambridge) and Dead Reckonings (forthcoming from Humanities), has written on film in the London Guardian, Chicago Reader, and Irish Times.

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