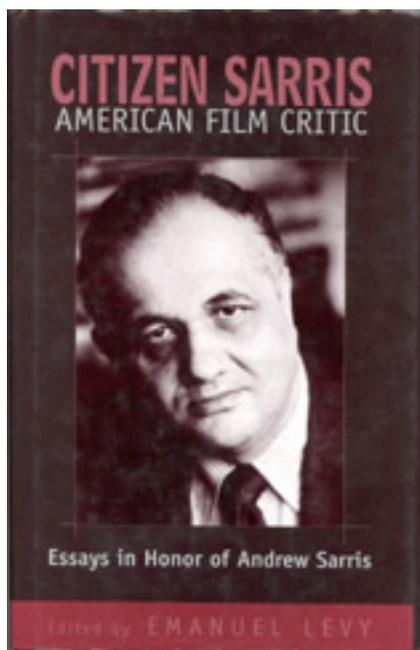


# *senses of cinema*

## Personal Memories: A Review of *Citizen Sarris*

👤 Keith Uhlich 🕒 June 2001 📁 Book Reviews 📖 Issue 14



[[HTTP://WWW.AMAZON.COM/EXEC/OBIDOS/ASIN/0810838915/SENSESOF CINEM-20](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/asin/0810838915/sensesofcinem-20)] *Citizen Sarris: American Film Critic – Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris* Edited by Emanuel Levy, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, and London, 2001.

Uneven. If given one word to describe *Citizen Sarris: American Film Critic* (and what an editorial restriction *that* would be!), I'd choose that oft used critical term. The problem then becomes the stigma attached to the word. Condemning, as it were, any work of art to this label practically guarantees indifference on the part of the prospective reader. "Uneven," unlike sister terms "Good," "Bad," "Great," "Hideous," etc, can automatically consign a work to the heap of obscurity.

This is just my way of saying read on, intelligent reader, because *Citizen Sarris*, flawed though it may be, is certainly worth your time. Subtitled *Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*, this is a festschrift conceived and edited by movie critic and scholar Emanuel Levy. It consists of thirty-nine essays of varying lengths, written by film scholars, filmmakers, and fans of Sarris, and, overall, exhibits a very personal tone. This is appropriate in lieu of its subject and inspiration. Sarris is one of the most influential movie critics in the history of the medium, and one whose style is most emphatically his own. In an age of blurb whores and pale imitations, Sarris is, undeniably, personal. As a result, the festschrift's 'personal tone' counts in two respects: it both echoes the significant impact that Sarris has had on the personal development of these writers' film appreciation and Sarris's own personalized style of writing.

*Citizen Sarris* lends itself to its subject's style. The essays contained herein are an eclectic mix of personal viewpoints and thus enjoyed subjectively by the reader. What one reader may like, another may not. Levy seems quite aware of the reader's subjective stance and thus states in his preface that, ".I had two alternatives. One was to arrange the essays alphabetically, with no regard to their topic. The other, which I finally opted for, was to place them according to their major theme." (p. xi) This was a wise choice on his part as Levy is then able to divide the essays categorically under eight distinct headings. Thus, a reader can make a thematic connection amongst the essays and feel somewhat more secure in the book's intentions. This helps to balance all the individual viewpoints so that one does not feel he or she is reading unorganized snippets with little interrelation.

What follows are my own reflections on the book. I do not review all the essays, merely those that made an impact on me one way or the other, though I will say that no essay contained in this collection is totally unworthy of a read.

Director Martin Scorsese provides a brief foreword (“The Fundamental Film Teacher”). It sets the personal tone for the book as Scorsese speaks of the profound influence Sarris had on his perception of movies. This leads me to my first criticism, however. As much as it is possible to speak wisely of a subject in short space, most of the writers who choose to write short herein do little but wax poetic about everything Sarris. In other words, they mistake the subtitle of the book, *In Honor Of*, to mean that every word they write must be congratulatory. I’m not suggesting that they be insulting to the man, but a little ambivalence can go a long way toward putting the subject in a more concrete, human perspective. As is, many of these short essays of no more than a paragraph (mostly written, interestingly enough, by movie directors: Scorsese, John Sayles, Peter Bogdanovich) have the adverse effect of idolization, subtle though it may be. As a result, a reader coming cold to this subject may very well be turned off, for idolatry is as one-dimensional a subject as condemnation. The best essays in the book, most of which I discuss below, draw on Sarris’s work as a prism through which their own views are clarified, supported, or challenged. Many of the essays that deviate from this model, especially the aforementioned short ones, put a slight wrench in the works.

Part One of *Citizen Sarris* is entitled “Personal Reflections.” It begins with Sarris’s foreword to his book “Confessions of a Cultist.” This essay shows Sarris as a balanced writer whose barbs are almost never one-sided cynical remarks. Compare these two passages:

“Indeed, I have always been impatient as a critic with characters (like Ginger Coffey) who manage to mess up every job. The trouble with failure as a subject is that it is not instructive in any way and only contributes to an audience’s false sense of superiority.” (1)

And then this a few paragraphs later:

“As I look back on the past I have very mixed feelings about all the slights I have suffered and all the furors I have caused. People were always telling me that I was lucky to be attacked in print and that the only thing that really mattered was the correct spelling of my name. However, it has been my observation that no one enjoys being attacked in print or in person no matter what publicity may accrue from the aggression.” (2)

In the space of the same essay, Sarris manages to make his critical points while also taking a self-reflexive look at his own place in the equation of art. His best writing does this, which makes this essay's inclusion an important focal point through which the rest of the book's essays are brought into view. Sarris himself sets the bar for his own book, years before its conception!

Sarris's wife, Molly Haskell, provides the second essay ("Life With Andrew. and Film") in this section. It serves as a perfect yang to the first essay's yin. There are many levels contained within, from personal investment in the subject to a distanced reading of Sarris's place in the world of criticism. Haskell traverses these paths with the ease of a pro. Consider the following two selections, the first a distanced reading of Sarris's work, the next a personal consideration of the man himself:

"Andrew's writing was an idiosyncratic combination of visual analysis and psychoanalytic insight, Freud and Bazin being the twin discoveries to which auteurism led him." (3)

And:

"It's hard for me to separate Andrew the film critic from Andrew the husband, so much has our life together revolved around films and so much have movies fed his inexhaustible curiosity and charm as a conversationalist." (4)

Haskell manages to analyze the many facets of her relationship with Sarris without ever resorting to obvious metaphors or simplification.

Both essays – Sarris's and Haskell's – written years apart, show the many complexities of their relationship, both that with their readers and with each other. This is comparable, we might say, to the best movie couples. The one that leaps to mind is the Anna Karina – Jean-Paul Belmondo pairing in *Pierrot Le Fou* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965). That is: an attractive couple, destined to be together and share a passionate love, mixed with intellectual discourse that simultaneously drive them apart and bring them together. And when the inevitable happens, they will be joined together in one voice, speaking through the hearts and minds of masses of movie lovers. Together these essays form a most powerful opening to the festschrift.

The second essay in Part Two (“Sarris’s Magnum Opus”) is a fine two-page piece by director Curtis Hanson (“The Best \$2.95 Investment in the World”) that examines the personal effect which Sarris’s book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* had on him. Hanson manages to do what many of the other movie director contributors do not. Through straightforward prose and with a jaunty sense of fun, Hanson speaks of the time he purchased Sarris’s book with all the admiration and skepticism of an inquisitive human being. An example:

“Other ideas were startlingly new. He introduced me to a few directors and prompted me to reevaluate others. When I agreed with him about a filmmaker, my own opinion was reinforced, supported by additional evidence. When I disagreed, and continued to do so after considering his argument, I found my own opinion to be stronger for having been challenged.” (5)

Similarly, Phillip Lopate’s “The Gallant Andrew Sarris” takes this balancing of viewpoints into consideration. His prose is more that of a full time intellectual, though it is by no means dry or inaccessible, and it is certainly effective. The essay is most powerful in its analysis of Sarris’s career path, a path that, to an extent, is disappointing for Lopate and encourages nostalgia, as this climactic passage shows:

“So essentially what Sarris’s [New York Observer] weekly column offers is the opportunity to watch him shifting through the celluloid sand of time, pronouncing on the day’s headlines and sharing his enthusiasms for some aspect of a new movie. Gone is the hierarchical itch, however. I miss the old lawgiver: it’s a bit like watching one’s once-terrifying father sink into a mild, fond embrace of the moment.” (6)

I found screenwriter/producer James Schamus’ essay (“Sixteen Fragments on Auteur Theory, or Sarris’s Revenge”) in Part Four (“Sarris and Film Studies”) very dry to the point of indifference. It is a sixteen-step list inspired by the theory Sarris brought over from France, and its humor is of a pseudo-intellectual sort that becomes increasingly annoying as it goes on. A short snippet:

“3. The founding gesture of the version of film “theory” is the evacuation of the question of individual human agency from the study of the production and consumption of films. Two words – *ideology* and *apparatus* – exemplify this move. To spend time tracing the stylistic residues that may or may not mark an individual film text, as opposed to studying the cinema as an institution, seemed at best frivolous and at worst a belletristic obfuscation.” (7)

Four pages of similar language goes a long way, and I readily admit it's not my cup of tea. Beyond that, however, I didn't believe a word of what Schamus was writing. The language suggests an expert, but the overall impression is of an incoherent improviser. Also, the writing feels very detached from the subjects at hand, both auteurism and Andrew Sarris, to the point that it reads like one long in-joke that only Schamus understands. This lack of engagement then extends to the reader who, lost in a sea of strung-together words, will come away less than enlightened on Sarris and his theories.

The most successful section, in my opinion, is Part Six, entitled "Sarris the Career Maker." Four movie critics, Dave Kehr, Godfrey Cheshire, Gerald Peary, and Todd McCarthy, provide their own accounts of Sarris's influence on their career choice. On a base level these essays go well together as the writing styles are quite similar. This is not to suggest that the essays themselves are indistinguishable – far from it. Each essay in this section is quite clearly the product of the person writing. None feel anonymous. Most powerfully, however, the essays complement each other through the singular theme of memory. I believe, myself, that memory is key to understanding movies. Through memory the highest caliber cinephile remembers not only the movie as its own individual entity but is likewise able to place it in the context of its time, as well as within the stages of his/her own life. The writers in this section all have this connection to the art form, and it is reflected powerfully in their essays. I wouldn't dream of spoiling this section so allow me to tempt with their opening lines:

From Dave Kehr's "An Auteurist Adolescence":

"When the slim white volume appeared on the shelf of the suburban Chicago library near my home, I had no reason to think it would change my life." (8)

From Godfrey Cheshire's "My Own Private Shinbone":

"Four boys are at play in that shimmering but soft-edged field called memory, refracting an actual field in Raleigh, North Carolina, when I was eleven years old." (9)

From Gerald Peary's "I Was a Preteenage Auteurist":

“How can I forget that fateful day in 1965 when, strolling about Broadway in the West 80s, I wandered into Dan Talbot’s New Yorker Bookstore, a second-floor adjunct to his legendary New Yorker Theater?” (10)

From Todd McCarthy’s “Sarris and Paris”:

“When I went to Europe as a student in 1970, I took with me any number of books. But by the end of the year only two of them were so thumbed, pored over, underlined, note-ridden, and worn that they barely survived with their bindings intact: Montaigne’s *Essays and Selected Writings* and Andrew Sarris’s *The American Cinema*.” (11)

One of the book’s most memorable essays appears in Part Seven (“Sarris the Creator of American Movie Culture”). Ed Sikov’s “Circles, Squares, and Pink Triangles: Confessions of a Gay Cultist” is the most polemical of the contributions. Its title is a clever pun, incorporating first Pauline Kael’s essay titled “Circles and Squares” in which she attacked Sarris and other auteurist critics’s beliefs, and, secondly, Sarris’s title of his 1970 book collection. From there, Sikov details his tumultuous relationship between the two critics. He started out a Kael fan, but soon came to find her quite the homophobe, thus changing camps to Sarris. There’s an interesting subtext here in that, for Sikov, Kael and Sarris appear to stand in for “straight” and “gay”, respectively. I mean this only in terms of their writing and its effect on Sikov’s own views. This is set up in the opening of the second paragraph. The italics are mine:

“But for me, the Sarris-Kael debates of the 1960s take on a personal resonance. I confess I’m an ex-Kaelian. I really thought she was great when I was a teenager. But the more I saw onscreen the more I loved; the more I read of Kael, the less I liked. As a *film lover*, it was Andrew Sarris who was my inspiration.” (12)

From there Sikov viciously attacks Kael for several pages. Indeed Sarris is hardly mentioned until the essay’s close, and then in a thoroughly positive light. The essay overall reflects a militant personality, one that some might find severely off-putting, but Sikov writes as a man possessed and I could see only the most closed-minded of readers not willing to go along for the whole ride. Sikov is possessed by passion. You can sense it in every word, and it gives his essay a memorable resonance. In this excerpt, for example, where Sikov criticizes Kael’s review of *Rich and Famous* (George Cukor, 1981), his mix of passionate verbiage and confrontational ideas reveal a person at odds with himself while simultaneously being completely comfortable in his own skin:

“Calling Kael’s *Rich and Famous* piece “homophobic” really fails to describe the sarcasm, desperation, and overt fag baiting in which Kael dealt there and elsewhere. While she is by no means the only major film critic to fall into this kind of sewer – the ever egregious John Simon once described a play as “faggot nonsense” – Kael’s literary stature, not to mention her clout among acolyte journalists, gave her remarks added weight and smell. Her fans, and they are still legion, labor under the belief that Kael is no mere movie reviewer. Transcending the “Movie Minute” world of hype and cheap opinion, Kael they chant is a diva, a stylist, a mind. All the more intriguing then are those moments when the subject of homosexuality taps directly into the diva’s unsettled psyche.” (13)

There are many ideas brought up within Sikov’s essay, not all of them followed through. At times the anger overwhelms the argument, at other times not. Either way, it is a fascinating read, whether you agree with him or not. And Sikov also comes across as fascinating, “a walking contradiction” as was once said of a famous movie character. This embrace of ambiguity makes it one of the book’s best essays.

I try not to climax on negative notes, but in my critique of the book, at least, I feel I must. *Citizen Sarris* ends very weakly with a section entitled “Sarris’s Impact Overseas.” I don’t fault the essays in this section, all of which are competent in their own ways, but they do not have the cumulative effect of a final word. I fault the structure of the book here, specifically the placement of this section last. On the one hand, it reduces the effects of Sarris’s work both in America and on foreign countries to little more than footnote status. I also think it might have been fascinating to hear from some of the original *Cahiers du Cinéma* group (e.g. Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol) on Sarris’s and their perceived effects with regards to cinema. I realize, of course, that this may or may not have been attempted in some way and, for whatever reason, could not occur. Therefore, working with the essays in the book, it might have been structured better if the overseas section were placed earlier, perhaps in the middle, and one of the other essays was moved into its own section as an epilogue.

My personal nomination would be one of the editor’s, Emanuel Levy’s, essays, specifically “Sarris, Kael, and American Movie Culture”, which reads very much like a summation of the festschrift’s ideas. Levy examines the Sarris/Kael dynamic, and in the process comments upon many of the themes that the other festschrift contributors touch on. Memory, influence, auteurism: these and other themes make return appearances in Levy’s essay and do a good job of joining together the threads of the other writers’s work. And the last paragraph would make a fitting end as it provides closure while remaining open-ended enough to suggest there is life beyond the book:

“As always, the last word belongs to Sarris., “And here I am, as always, too much of an academic for the journalists, and too much of a journalist for the academics. Yet it is through a mix of these two disciplines that I seek to recapture the past without foreclosing the future.”

Amen!” (14)

So where do we stand? *Citizen Sarris* is a mixed bag. As a tribute to a great mind, it is admirable and above reproach. In its structure, it almost succeeds. In its contributions, some work and some do not. Yet through its flaws and successes both, what finally emerges is a portrait of an artist in all his ideological and emotional complexities. The final success of *Citizen Sarris* is that it ably portrays, to all kinds of readers, the man behind the words. And, uneven or not, what a sight it is to behold.

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## Endnotes

1. Andrew Sarris, “Confessions of a Cultist”, reprinted in *Citizen Sarris: American Film Critic – Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*, ed. Emanuel Levy, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, and London, 2001.
2. Ibid.
3. Molly Haskell, “Life With Andrew. and Film”, *Citizen Sarris*
4. Ibid.
5. Curtis Hanson, “The Best \$2.95 Investment in the World”, *Citizen Sarris*
6. Phillip Lopate, “The Gallant Andrew Sarris”, *Citizen Sarris*
7. James Schamus, “Sixteen Fragments on Auteur Theory, or Sarris’s Revenge”, *Citizen Sarris*
8. Dave Kehr, “An Auteurist Adolescence”, *Citizen Sarris*
9. Godfrey Cheshire, “My Own Private Shinbone”, *Citizen Sarris*
10. Gerald Peary, “I Was a Preteenage Auteurist”, *Citizen Sarris*
11. Todd McCarthy, “Sarris and Paris”, *Citizen Sarris*
12. Ed Sikov, “Circles, Squares, and Pick Triangles: Confessions of a Gay Cultist”, *Citizen Sarris*
13. Ibid.
14. Emanuel Levy, “Sarris, Kael, and American Movie Culture”, *Citizen Sarris*

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