

Third Time's the Charm: A Memory Essay to Andrew Sarris

👤 Keith Uhlich © June 2001 📄 Andrew Sarris 📖 Issue 14

Prologue

“People that I thought were total creeps when I first met them turned out to be my closest friends and people who I liked and hit it off with always broke my heart.”

-Lara Means (Kristen Cloke) on *Millennium* (Chris Carter, 1996-1999)

1st Time

Two movie buffs walk into a New York City bookstore: critic Godfrey Cheshire and myself. If memory serves, we've probably just come from one of our lunches, meetings filled with the argumentative yet respectful conversation of committed cinephiles. Now contained within a shrine of the printed word we, of course, proceed with haste to the movie section. Our major intent is literary voyeurism, to scope out all those books that a little increase in income would allow us to have. Amongst the hastily written unauthorized biographies, the often dull academic critique, and those occasional gems of cinema literature, a white paperback book, adorned on the front with an image of red and blue film strips, catches Godfrey's eye. He reaches for it with a subtle reverence, a mixture of excitement and respect exhibited in his every gesture. After a quick flip, he passes it to me. I take it in my hands and turn to the table of contents. Godfrey takes this opportunity to heap praise on the tome. This book, he says, is of major importance to any movie lover. It *must* be in your library. I listen attentively, and with a certain amount of inquisitive respect, until I come across the kicker that infuriates my current sensibilities. Chapter Heading: "Less Than Meets the Eye", Subject: Billy Wilder. Strike One. Chapter Heading: "Strained Seriousness", Subject: Stanley Kubrick. Strike Two. This not being a baseball game, and the fact that I find such sport excruciating to watch, I accord no Strike Three. The book goes back on the shelf and I mutter an excuse about monetary difficulties. It's a bullshit statement, but after a lunch of heated movie conversation I do not wish to confess to Godfrey my impressionistic dislike of what many consider a classic. Awkward silence ensues until our eyes lock on the latest issue of *Projections*.

This was my first encounter with you Andrew. The book was yours: *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1). Based on what I saw in the book that day, I made up my mind that I hated you. It was a mistake on my part. I translated an impression into a full-blown judgment, leaving myself no room to grow and come to an understanding of both your writing and yourself. In retrospect, I should have seen history repeating itself. Godfrey Cheshire was also a critic whose writing and ideas, like yours, I wholly disagreed with at first to the point of abject hatred. I certainly wouldn't advocate hatred as the first choice on the path to understanding, but for me both these circumstances were beyond my choice. I discovered Godfrey and yourself at stagnant points in my life when choice seemed beyond my grasp. At these moments, a challenge to one's stagnancy can be off-putting at first, for it is very easy to become comfortable in one's discomfort. Godfrey I found in college and his writing came to help me through those years of transition between childhood and adulthood. I came across you in the first few years of post-collegiate life when one still searches for meaning, but without the anchor and habit that school so often provides. My initial meeting with you was through the printed word and I made a snap judgment that I expected to last. It was not the wrong choice. It was where I was then. The time was not right that day for me to try and understand you. I fully expected for that never to happen. Nonetheless, the seeds of understanding were planted that day. And for the next year and a half they lay dormant.

2nd Time

Two movie buffs walk into The American Museum of the Moving Image (AMMI). I've just met a young man named K.C. McLeod for the first time. We've been exchanging e-mails over the past few weeks, through which correspondence he requests I mentor him. It's an exciting prospect as, up to this point, I've been in the position of protégé. To pass on and nurture a love of movies in a younger person is a welcome challenge and I find the mentor side of it pretty easy to slip into. I pick this particular day for K.C.'s and my first meeting as there's an odd double feature playing at AMMI: *The Shop Around the Corner* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1940) and *The Fury* (Brian De Palma, 1978). In all honesty, I'm here for the De Palma screening – it's my first time seeing *The Fury* on the big screen – but I welcome the Lubitsch one as well. It's my first experience with his work and I'm excited about the knowledge and entertainment it might provide. So in this day of firsts, fate deals me a second: Andrew Sarris is introducing *The Shop Around the Corner*.

This is when I was able to put a face to the name Andrew. I doubt you'd remember me, as our exchange at AMMI was wordless. The closest I got was sitting at the next table in the museum's cafe. I didn't feel I had anything to say. My mind kept returning to the bookstore and my previous feelings. Yet as you sat there talking to David Schwartz, the museum curator, I got this sense that I had gravely underestimated you. It's interesting, is it not, when you see the actual person behind the words? I could feel my preconceptions falling away. Your introduction to *The Shop Around the Corner* continued the erosion of my misplaced hatred. Your remarks were those of a true movie lover. The cynicism I so often found in most critiques was nonexistent. What I particularly admired was your acknowledgment of changing tastes – how you felt thankful that you saw *The Shop Around the Corner* later in life as opposed to childhood, when your movie tastes ran towards loud war films. I don't think it's saying too much that that is as honest a statement as any critic could say, and you delivered it with a nonchalance that was devoid of ego. Your remembrance complemented the film as opposed to overwhelming it. It made for a fuller, richer experience. As a result, the next week I sought out your reviews on the Internet. *The New York Observer* archives run back to about 1998, so I had a good backlog of stuff to catch up on. Does it surprise you that I read through every review (every word, I promise!) in the space of an afternoon?

3rd Time

A lone movie buff walks into Lincoln Center. I'm meeting Godfrey again for a special event: Andrew Sarris is being honored in conjunction with the release of Emanuel Levy's *Citizen Sarris (2)* festschrift. I pace back and forth in front of a bay of elevators, somewhat anxious. I'm pretty much a Sarris fan now, so the prospect of seeing him again is infused with all the nervousness that that implies. Godfrey walks in none too soon, interrupting my silent struggle, and we ascend to the upper floors. It is here I meet Emanuel Levy, an imposing, though extremely kind man, who offers much words of encouragement to this burgeoning cinephile. If I didn't thank him then I thank him now. Janet Maslin pops in next. She's smaller than my mind's eye pictured, but likewise a pleasant personality. I almost bring up her dislike of *The X-Files* (Rob Bowman, 1998) as provocation, but quickly decide against that. No use starting a fight on your first meeting – I guess I've learned something. Then another writer I admire walks in, Phillip Lopate. He's an occasional film critic and essayist of tall and broad physicality, though soft manner. I'm pretty much speechless in his presence as he makes the rounds. Finally the doors part and (hyperbole alert!) Sarris comes walking from the elevator triumphantly with a broad step and a determined gaze.

Of course Andrew I exaggerate, this is mainly recalled through the eyes of a fan. But you did seem to have something in your step that day. Graciousness mixed with bemusement perhaps? As you took to the stage and sat centrally among the panelists I could sense your happiness, though I also detected – not a discomfort – but a desire to balance the scales. I realize it now only in retrospect, but you had that room in perfect synch. You recognized how easily this symposium could turn into idolatry and you seamlessly took control of everything. Over the course of the symposium my respect for you was enhanced. After it was all over you were to introduce a screening of *Sunrise* (F.W. Murnau, 1927) in the Walter Reade Theater. Godfrey waxed poetic about this one too, but this time I was prepared. After a while you learn to downplay your friends’s praise and balance it with your own thoughts. You probably remember what happened next. You were coming down off the stage and I rushed over to you. It seemed you needed help. My mistake again. You said you were fine and descended gracefully on your own. It was at this point that Godfrey came over and asked if you would walk me down to the screening of *Sunrise*. My heart skipped a beat when you agreed, but I think I kept it pretty well under wraps. I knew I didn’t want to waste this short time I had with you. All in all, I gave myself three minutes. What can two movie buffs talk about in three minutes? Why, movies of course. So I picked a fortuitous combination, *The Virgin Suicides* (Sofia Coppola, 1999) as compared with *Almost Famous* (Cameron Crowe, 2000). We were pretty much in agreement on the pleasures of the former and the failure of the latter, especially in their evocation of an era. As always, you balanced your critique stating the positives and the negatives of both. You don’t go in for blind movie love and I appreciate that. This conversation went by quickly but it is one I will always remember, not least of all because of your last words to me that day. Do you remember? We entered the Walter Reade, the audience humming with anticipation for the first sign of the dimming lights. I thanked you for walking me downstairs and finished by saying that this was my first time seeing *Sunrise* and expressing how excited I was. Your response? “I envy you.”

Epilogue

Third time’s the charm, as they say. Andrew, your words that day were flattering in the truest sense of the word. It wasn’t so much a passing of the torch as it was a reminder by a fellow movie buff that there are always discoveries to be made. That what we love and hate, nay feel, is subject to constant change and re-evaluation. I thank you sir for your wisdom and your contributions to my and many other cinephiles’s lives. I look forward to the future of movies, and life, with an eye to the past and always mindful of the present. And allow me Andrew to take this opportunity to apologize for our first meeting in the bookstore. In spite of my dislike of baseball, I should have accorded you a Strike Three. So anytime you wish to “discuss” *The Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968) remember, I’m just a cineplex away.

Endnotes

1. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968*, Da Capo Press, 1968, 1985, 1996.
2. Emanuel Levy (ed.), *Citizen Sarris, American Film Critic: Essays in Honor of Andrew Sarris*, Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2001.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keith Uhlich [[HTTP://SENSESOFCINEMA.COM/AUTHOR/KEITH-UHLICH/](http://sensesofcinema.com/author/keith-uhlich/)]

Keith Uhlich is a writer based in New York. A member of the **Online Film Critics Society** [[HTTP://WWW.OFC-S.ORG/](http://www.ofcs.org/)] , you can read him at www.culturedose.net [[HTTP://WWW.CULTUREDLOSE.NET/](http://www.culturedose.net/)] and www.slantmagazine.com [[HTTP://WWW.SLANTMAGAZINE.COM/](http://www.slantmagazine.com/)] . His e-mail is keithuhlich@hotmail.com.
