

Alain Bergala: “I like it, I don’t like it, I’m bored”

Film critic, essayist, editor of publications and exhibitions, screenwriter, director and heretical rapporteur on film education in schools. Alain Bergala, who served the *Cahiers du Cinéma* for decades as editor and editor-in-chief, is one of those film theorists who are practically active on various levels, including politics.

The latter is vividly narrated in his book *THE CINEMA HYPOTHESIS*, recently published in Greek by the Olympia Int’l Film Festival, where Alain Bergala was the president of this year’s International Jury. His interview with film critic Robbie Eksiel was published in Greek at Flix.gr online film magazine, courtesy of which it is republished here.

You are one of the few film theorists who have put into practice what they love. Will you summarise it for us?

Alain Bergala: In the cinema business, I did almost all things I was interested in. I wrote in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, edited film publications, did a lot for education. I also taught cinema for several years at various universities and at the

Femis film school. And I made films as a director, many documentaries on arts and cinema, and four features.

During the 2000s, you worked with the then French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, as a consultant on film.

Bergala: I didn’t have a party affiliation but he wanted to see me mainly because of my educational skills. I saw him in June and he told me that he would like us to do something in schools by October. At the time, I was editing a Kiarostami DVD. I had to convince him of what I was thinking. I showed it to him, and then it all happened very quickly.

And very effectively.

Bergala: I would say that it changed a mentality, even though there were strong reactions at first. When Lang said there would be film lessons and classes would go out, it was something liberating. In addition, we knew exactly what we wanted to do. It wasn’t just film lessons in class, we had a line, a method. If we explained correctly to Lang and he agreed, it was implemented immediately. That was the most essential thing, we found



out. Having the Minister of Culture coming out and saying that film education in schools is something very important. That it is not just an entertainment subject, but as important as other subjects. That really changed things. For example, the P.A. teacher or language teacher could also make a movie if they wanted. If the cinema class needed an afternoon to shoot, say, the school principal would grant it. In the end, what Lang was asking for was the opposite of what was demanded by the traditional educational institution, which is always wary of

art, perhaps because it considers itself to involve something anarchistic.

Can you tell us about that method?

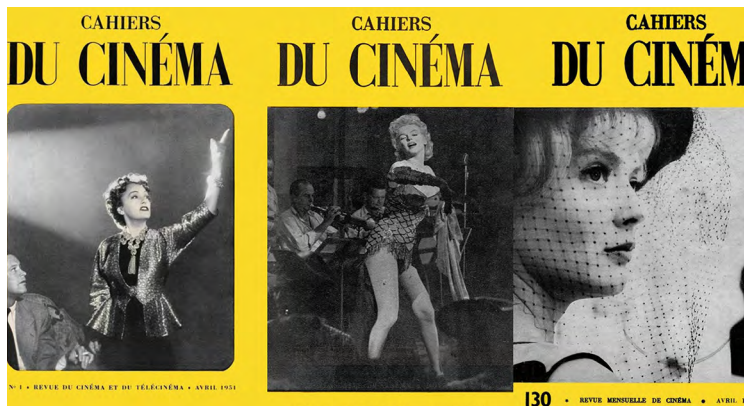
Bergala: It was crucial not to become boring. We didn’t want the typical class situation with an adult imparting knowledge to others. In this regard, I introduced the method of showing excerpts of films that helped to understand the process of cinema. Four fragments. Without talking in the process. Just looking and students discussing. They find common ground or differences, identify ideas, com-



ment on them. Only then the adult enters the conversation. I stressed to Lang the need to prepare DVDs with fragments. I made it a condition that I should be alone in this choice, that there should be no inspectors, so that we could avoid any backlash or bureaucracy. He approved it; he always trusted me. We had the money to acquire the rights to make 10 DVDs. It proved valuable. And the teachers who had not done film studies but loved cinema, saw how it works. The method was to avoid a vertical education. This does not mean that the role of the teacher is not very important. But it is important in retrospect, after the students have already understood.

Even more crucial was the presence of a filmmaker in the classroom...

Bergala: Undoubtedly. Having a professional with the teacher was valuable in many ways. Someone who did not represent the education system. The students were much more relaxed and felt equal towards the object. It was something that abolished the distinction between “good” and “bad” students. I had many mediocre students who were talented and proficient in cinema. The teacher also felt more confident. He had someone to interact and discuss with. Together



er they could spread cinematic consciousness.

“Cinematic consciousness”?

Bergala: If there’s one thing in France that doesn’t exist in other countries, it is its uninterrupted film history. During the war, there were roughly communists and Catholics. In the interbellum there was no connection between them, but after the common resistance during the war they allied to make great educational movements. The main thing was the cinema. With screenings, either in factories or universities... Anywhere, at a time when it was an art that could touch anyone. Thus cinema became the cutting edge in this post-war cultural policy.

And this policy has practically never stopped. It sounds like a utopia to talk about a country where communists and Christians worked together, and yet... Later came the movie clubs that were very powerful. There was a strong need to show movies and talk about them. This also never stopped, even though it was threatened by the home withdrawal imposed by television. And now it is impossible to stop, because it is inscribed in our memory and renewed in practice.

How important was the role of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, where you were editor-in-chief for years, in this process? And how important is it now, in the age of online democracy, where



anyone can express an opinion about cinema, expert or not?

Bergala: The *Cahiers du Cinéma* are still doing a great job. They have always had a symbolic power, and they often discovered creators. There are dozens of directors with films that participated in parallel sections at Cannes, discovered by the magazine. Many have told me that if it weren’t for the *Cahiers*, they would no longer be making films. Because these weren’t necessarily films that would cut tickets or be liked by the local audience. France, I would say, has kept this. It is the place where films and filmmakers are recognised and many foreigners, who when we supported their films and happened to have a



distinction from Cannes, back in their country had continuity. Because the *Cahiers* had an evaluative system. Today, in the internet universe, there is no evaluative system. Nothing is

trial norms. There is, of course, the problem of the state of cinema. When I was writing for the magazine, there were at least six premieres a month that gave you a lot to talk about. We



structured. Impressionist criticism prevails - I like it, I don't like it, I'm bored. But criticism is necessary, perhaps now more than ever. Because when there is no more convincing criticism, the only thing that counts will be the tickets, that is, the accounting. The short film will disappear, and cinema will increasingly adapt to indus-

were struggling to decide which one to put first. Now, there are months when I personally can't find anything to write about. Because the films that come out don't provide me with enough material to defend. Not that they don't arise from time to time, but it's at least four times less than the '80s.

Do you keep writing reviews?

Bergala: Not for some publication. I write only for myself. I have always done so, leaving me with around 800 pages of unpublished material.

Which cinema would you say stands out today?

Bergala: Asian cinema. A lot is going on there. It is the cinema that inspires me the most nowadays, that gives me the opportunity to connect the criticism of a film with a more general perception of cinema. Because that is where I think the issue of criticism lies, in this connection, which is now rapidly losing its power. Today, what runs rampant is amnesia. Good or less good films, two months later the world has forgotten them. And the only way for these films to continue to exist is cultivation. For me, the main problem today is this. What constitutes a real film and what does not?

And the TV? With its cinematic series, would you consider it real cinema?

Bergala: I watch series! It takes a long time, but when I'm interested, I do. I fanatically watch, say, *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*. But as an experience, however, cinema and series are not comparable. While watching a series you can do something else. Stop

it whenever you want, playing with your mobile phone... Things that are not done in the condition of the cinema. What I fear is the invasion. I am appalled by the fact that most of the DVD shops are now full of series, and less and less space is given to films. However, I believe that even good series are not exactly cinema. For me, if there's one, it's *THE SOPRANOS*. This series is almost cinematic, and I confess that I sometimes refer to episodes or scenes of it.

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Translated by Pantelis Panteloglou