Being a film reviewer in the 1950s

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‘THE PAST IS a foreign country.’ This magical first sentence from *The Go-Between* (1953) was the opening line of the first novel I was ever sent to review. The *Manchester Guardian*, as it was then, had sent me a parcel of books and after reading L. P. Hartley’s masterly tale of love and snobbery and guile and much else I felt that if this was reviewing, it was a wonderful way of earning, not perhaps a living, but at least a crust. Soon afterwards I was asked, out of the blue, to be film critic of the *Spectator*, and entered what now seems a very foreign country indeed, the film world of the 1950s, in which I stayed for ten years. It was a past separated from us today not just by the changes in films and film-making, but by the social upheavals between then and now; its climate altogether different from ours, with attitudes and behaviour unrecognisable now, a past closer to the world of *The Go-Between* (which was set at the turn of the nineteenth century, just a hundred years ago) than to our world today. Foreign, even exotic, that 1950s world now seems.

My time in the film world spanned the crucial decade of change, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s (so that some of the films and events I mention will go a little beyond the 1950s). I said I was asked out of the blue by the *Spectator*, and this was the amateurish way things were done in those days. It would never happen now. All they knew of my tastes and interests and knowledge came from an article I had sent in (again out of the blue), which

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had nothing to do with the cinema, and perhaps a novel I had published, which had no film connections either. How could they know (well, of course they didn't) that for years I had been carrying on a secret love affair with the cinema, that my favourite films were seen over and over again, nine or ten times, that my copy of Roger Manvell's *Film* (the only easily available manual) was covered in underlinings and scrawls, that the Everyman and the Curzon and the Academy were familiar haunts of mine and film society shows in louche fleapits my idea of evening heaven? For all the *Spectator* knew, I might never have seen a film in my life. Today, a film critic would be expected to have years of experience, an education in the cinema, a knowledge far beyond any I had in those early days of ignorant enthusiasm. But none of this occurred to them or me, and I was simply flung in, displacing, rather to my shame and for no good reason, a gifted lady, my predecessor Virginia Graham.

The cinema, like the society around it, was then on what is sometimes called a cusp. This is taken to mean a time of change, a wave about to break. But it has a more literal meaning. It is the point at which two lines meet, similarly curved like the point of a spear or a trefoil. Push the image a bit further and it becomes one of lines coming together, overlapping, one side taking over from the other. Throughout the 1950s something like this was happening in the film world. Noticeably and fast, the cinema was being pushed from its central position in people's recreational lives by the advent and then the quick growth of television. Something similar was happening in society in general – also, to some extent, because of television.

Anyone who was not around in those days must find it hard to imagine the scale of these changes. In outlook, opinions, culture, everything was shifting. In society the changes took time to break through, to become visible, to overcome reluctance to alter the safe, familiar ways. But in the cinema the changes could be quantified. Film audiences in Britain had slipped from over 30 million a week to about 8 million by the 1960s. People sometimes asked me if it wasn't depressing to be involved in something so obviously in decline. They even wondered if the film was on its way out altogether, if its audience would dwindle to zero and within a few years would be sitting at home in front of a television set.

As we know, this didn't happen. The cinema ceased to be the *only* form of national entertainment, but it survived and flourished in a different way, learning new tricks and throwing up new talents. Before, a visit to the cinema had been a twice-weekly ritual for the majority of the British, a long, dogged session, perhaps sometimes almost a chore: three hours long, with two films shown, the 'big picture' and the 'B' picture, the occasional docu-

mentary or nature film, the advertisements (not just of films 'coming shortly' but of all kinds of local doings), the ice creams, and, in the big cinemas, the Wurlitzer organ that rose majestically from the depths to play to an audience of chatter and laughs. Shorter performances, a single film at a time, and slicker presentation took over. With so much more to do outside the cinema, people made filmgoing a special occasion rather than a habit, a more careful, sophisticated choice. With flagging attendances, cinemas closed all over the country; small towns no longer had them, so filmgoing became more deliberate, more metropolitan, a treat. As film critics, we had the concentrated experience of seeing a film without the trimmings. We arrived at one of the big West End cinemas at 10.30 a.m., an emotionally unsuitable hour for filmgoing, clutching our tickets and sometimes a friend (it made us more popular than we might have been), and at 2.30 p.m. did much the same. Between the two there was often a party or an interview. Drinks flowed. If some arrived bleary-eyed at the morning shows, some arrived in the early afternoon a little the worse for those midday drinks. We were not a drunken lot, far from it, but a few looked slightly askew, slumped in their seats, or walked rather carefully. Meeting the same people two or three times a week made for familiarity and on the whole friendliness, though with this went a certain wariness, even caution, in discussing the films we saw.

As I remember it, we thought it bad form to ask anyone, 'What did you think of that?' or even to mention unasked what we thought of this or that film. People wanted time for it to sink in, to come to a decision, perhaps to revise the initial reaction a little. To say something was great, then modify this in writing a day or two later, was to invite suspicion, even ill-will. So, when we met afterwards, most of us kept diplomatically silent on the film just seen and talked about almost anything else. In a world persuaded that critics were venal creatures likely to be in a conspiracy of some sort together, bribed by those drinks and modest treats, this was a necessary precaution. But suspicion of bribery and collusion was certainly misplaced. I remember Dilys Powell telling me that, as she and C. A. Lejeune, on respectively the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer*, were considered by some to be cinematic twins, a duo of some sort, people thought they got together to decide what they were going to say, splitting their views down the middle, as it were: an absurd belief, of course, but hard to dislodge if they ever happened to agree.

Of course there were treats and to outsiders ours seemed an enviable job, a round of parties with film stars where we were flattered into praising them. And of course there was real excitement and pleasure over the best films, the surprises, the breakthroughs, the arrival (in those insular days) of films from abroad, new trends, new expectations. But with four or five films to see each

week, much of our time was spent plodding through the mediocre or the plain awful. There were moments of absurdity in our filmgoing, mostly connected with late arrivals or large hats (which women still wore). My brush with absurdity came when I was selling raffle tickets. In those simple days, we held raffles in our village to raise money for this or that, and the top prize was often a live pig. Film parties were ideal for the sale of tickets: a captive group of varied people, better off than the average villager, would generally buy without fuss, and whether it was pigs or chocolates to be won no one much cared. But one Hollywood tycoon became seriously worried when he thought he might win a pig. How would he get it to America? What about quarantine, transport, vets and jabs, insurance?

Ructions and rows occasionally turned up as well: C. A. Lejeune storming out of *Psycho* (1960) after the murder in the shower, a dramatic moment made all the more so by the fact that Hitchcock was known to be a friend of hers; an elderly Jewish critic offended almost to tears and then to weeks of coldness and complaint by a scene in Kevin Brownlow's *It Happened Here* (1963), in which a National Front member – a 'real' person, not an actor – spewed out his own passionately anti-Semitic opinions; newspapers shutting down without warning, as the *News Chronicle* did, leaving its well-liked film man Paul Dehn high and dry (though not for long), to our passionate indignation and sympathy; a piece I had written about a particularly filthy film blown up hugely and jubilantly displayed outside the cinema where it was showing (it wasn't sexually filthy: it used physical handicaps for sensational effect, and taught me that such protests, as I should have known, excited nasty reactions).

Film stars in the flesh – perhaps our most envied perk – were nearly always a disappointment, shorter, older, less pretty and certainly less friendly than one had imagined or perhaps hoped. But what did we hope for? To them we were all church mice, dull outsiders they had to be polite to, just in case. Of the many actors I met in those days only three stand out in my memory as real people rather than well-drilled automata: John Cassavetes, Sophia Loren and Tom Courtenay. All of them I met and came to know a little, as it were, privately, outside the usual run of publicity parties. Cassavetes was as human as his films, as responsive as one could hope for. He sent a friend to see me when he got back to America, who terrified my baby-sitter by telephoning with (not surprisingly) an American accent. I came home to find two small children and the sitter clutching one another in terror on a sofa, convinced that a gangster had rung up and was going to pop round at any moment. (Village girls in Sussex were then a lot less knowledgeable and cool than they are now.) Sophia Loren was friendlier than anyone might

have expected, and remembered two visitors to her day's filming well enough to ask me, years later, with what seemed like real interest, what had become of the beautiful Italian au pair girl I had brought with me (everyone who saw her at the studio took her for a star). Tom Courtenay was hardly famous when I met him but he too had no 'side'. He was in training for *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and we ran over Waterloo Bridge together as part of the practice.

The big treats and extras, which came even to church-mice critics like me, depended a good deal on how much time you could spare for them. My first film festival was in Berlin in 1958, a city then divided between the West and the Soviets, the Western side gleaming with affluence and modernity, the Soviet side a desert of bomb sites, ragged streets and gloomy citizens, about which we made nervous jokes concerning salt mines and gulags. I was so naive about newspaper practice that I had arranged to write for no less than five national newspapers (*Times*, *Financial Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, the *Tablet* and my own *Spectator* – surely a criminal offence in journalistic terms). This seemed to me perfectly in order so long as I wrote quite discrete pieces for each one of them (a challenge? a nonsense?) and amazingly nobody questioned it (perhaps nobody read more than one of them). An unexpected spin-off was almost an entire evening spent talking to Willy Brandt, then at the height of his fame and prestige. Because I was introduced as the representative of *The Times*, he clearly thought me a lot more important than I was.

The whole festival was something of an eye-opener, its scale, its luxury after what was still a fairly drab London, the proliferation of stars, directors and film moguls (Walt Disney!), the sight of heroic figures like Giulietta Masina, the friendliness of the members of the international jury I was serving on, our cosy meals together and the chance, across the fortnight, to make new friends. Bjorn Rasmussen, a leading figure in the Danish film world, was on our jury – its chairman, if I remember rightly – a large, burly and entirely delightful man with seven young children at home in Copenhagen and a face recognised in the street there from his television appearances, so that his anonymity in Berlin was a relief. A very practising Catholic, he stood at the end of our long table and said grace without self-consciousness before each meal, like the abbot of his little flock. He liked everything English, spoke the language almost perfectly, and knew all about us, which was flattering and funny: the only mistake I ever caught him out in was when he mentioned 'Spencer and Marks'. He had a gripe about the Germans' determination to suggest they had all been heroic plotters against Hitler. This riled him so much that he sometimes lost some of his natural cordiality and sweetness. Alas, he died not long afterwards of a heart attack, alone in a

hotel in Rome without family or friends; but in Berlin he was the centre of all our doings and is still affectionately remembered.

Another festival I went to was in Acapulco, where the Critics Circle in London was invited to send a member to serve on another jury. Ten London people wanted to go so we put our names in a hat and I (who still find myself declaring I never win raffles) was amazingly picked. This was an even more exotic affair, hot in early December beside a transparent blue sea and swarming with starlets and paparazzi. A famous English couple was there on a well-publicised bolt from spouses at home and as they spoke no Spanish, I, who did speak it, occasionally had to get between them and aggressive Mexican journalists. Another visitor was Josef von Sternberg, old, saturnine, impressive. For some reason I saw a good deal of him. My most vivid memory of the great man was his expression when a young starlet asked him, in the tone that might be used to an Alzheimer's patient in a home, 'Did you ever work in the cinema, Mr von Sternberg?'

As in Berlin, our jury became a friendly band and we went about together. One was a Dutchman 6 foot 10 inches tall, and wherever we went we were followed by an exclaiming, even shrieking crowd of mostly squat Mexicans. Was he monster or superman? Whether to be proud or embarrassed was a constant problem. When he wore a hat, which the hot sun often demanded, our Dutchman touched at least 7 foot, and a little of his exotic quality seemed to spread to the rest of us.

But these were the frills of the job. Day-to-day work was much more sober, often a hassle to get things fitted in and copy delivered on time. Sometimes we were at the mercy of outside events: transport strikes or parking rules, minor illnesses or extremes in the weather. My filmgoing days covered the winter when Britain froze for three months (again, no-one who wasn't there will credit what it was like): hard thick ice on every road, mountainous snow-drifts, impossibly dangerous driving, all combined to keep country film critics snug at home instead of in slushy London. So how did we manage? I remember missing a broadcast I was to make and an alarming announcement being put out to explain my absence, but films somehow got seen and somehow written about. Before faxes and e-mails this of course meant post (which might be lost in a snow-drift), or the telephone, which marvellously survived.

And all the while, across the decade, things were moving on as movements came and sometimes went, fashions rose and always fell, and, at a deeper level, society shook itself and decided that it would never be the same again: Pandora's box, the genie in the bottle, the end, fifty years after its official ending, of the nineteenth century. The British cinema had by then

moved far from its recent past of Ealing comedies and familiar cliché. Influenced by kitchen-sink theatre and the new aspects of life around it, it was turning out vigorous, outspoken films that reflected the new atmosphere, whereas Italian cinema had gone in an almost opposite direction, changing radically from its postwar realism to the smoothest of modern fantasies, a kind of mannerist style and a newer realism of luxury. The American cinema continued to send us its daily diet, which, for all the developments in life and film-making, seemed more familiar than any other and still gave the screens a high percentage of their protein. From the rest of the world new arrivals meant new riches: they came in from India and Japan, Scandinavia and Australia, from Czechoslovakia and Poland and the USSR, South America and the Middle East and other places here and there, and were seen not just by specialised audiences, as in the past.

Technical innovations were supposed to save the cinema from extinction but most of them proved to be gimmicks soon forgotten – Cinerama, 3-D, CinemaScope, Technirama, VistaVision, Panavision, Todd-AO, with hugely wide screens and sometimes special spectacles to wear with them – and the cinema survived without or even despite them. The great rival and bogeyman, television, was ironically spreading knowledge of films by showing them in large numbers on the small screen, in private, very different conditions from those for which they were made. Film watching was no longer a communal experience, but something more intimate, whatever the original large subject. Yet it became easier to be a film buff, to study the history of the cinema from way back, than it had been in the days of specialised performances in those hard-to-find fleapits.

Alongside these cinematic changes the world was making its great social shifts throughout the 1950s, and early in the 1960s – quite suddenly, it seemed to many, as it did in Philip Larkin's poem 'High Windows' – it was another place, with other customs that again to many seemed unrecognisable. Taboos in sexual matters and much else counted for less and the new openness and freedom had their champions but also their disconcerted critics. One example of the kind of thing that was happening came in 1956 when a Czech film actress, Eva Bartok, had an illegitimate child. Of course there had been plenty of illegitimate children around but not openly, without apology, born to someone well known and apparently not in hiding. At the end of that year a well-known cartoonist published a drawing summarising the big political and social events of the year, the things people had been talking about around the world (it was the year of Suez, cataclysmic and alarming). In the corner of his picture, among the great events, stood (as if she mattered uniquely and everyone was agog to see her) a recognisable but

waif-like figure with a shawl round her shoulders, and in her arms what in the novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) they called a shameful bundle. To me, that seems to sum up the attitudes of the time as memorably as anything. A foreign country indeed. Ten years later, such a phrase and such a cartoon would have seemed grotesque.