

# BOOK REVIEWS

## ***Hard to Watch:***

### ***How to Fall in Love with Difficult Movies***

by Matthew Strohl. Lanham, MD: Applause Books, 2024. 207 pp., illus. Paperback: \$19.95 and Kindle: \$18.95.

Films can be hard to watch for all kinds of reasons. They can be difficult to find or to access, they can be difficult to understand without subtitles, or they can be offensive in any number of ways. Films can be difficult to watch if they contain scenes or images that appear sexist or racist to contemporary sensibilities. None of these qualify as challenges for Matthew Strohl, for whom films are hard to watch because they are competing for attention in the mediasphere of contemporary viewing practices. In his world, the tap has been turned on, but now that the riches of film history have become widely and easily accessible, they risk getting lost in the shower of escapist TV.

Strohl's book is not written for film scholars. He admits as much early on, but I wonder who his ideal reader might be. Students, critics, and filmmakers, like scholars, tend to watch films with purpose, trying to keep up with the latest new releases, or they watch and rewatch movies for projects of various kinds. We often rewatch films just because we love them, but the cinephilia described here is curiously dispassionate. Strohl's pitch lies somewhere between a self-help book and a cursory discussion of aesthetic philosophy. Although he cites a wide variety of film scholars, critics, philosophers, and cognitive theorists, the book is best described as one man's personal struggle with art cinema in the age of streaming. By sharing his insights, Strohl may or may not be helping anyone watch difficult movies (probably not), but he does provide an idiosyncratic overview of the place of art cinema in the contemporary attention economy.

To be fair, Strohl's media ecosystem extends to DVD purchases, loans, and actual theater outings—although the latter are increasingly rare for those living outside major urban centers. Nevertheless, the main culprit vying for attention, like an open cookie jar, is easily consumable TV. Those who enjoy the “all-you-can-eat junk food buffet” of Netflix are described as “weak-willed.” The author himself was weak of will until he watched *Twin Peaks: The Return* (Mark Frost and David Lynch, 2017), a series that instigated the introspective treatise that became this book. Weakness of will has something to do with our intensions for the “aesthetic slots” in our lives. Strohl

advocates watching difficult movies as a strategy for personal growth—like mountain-bike riding. He shifted his own viewing habits from “sticky” TV to demanding movies like one commits to an exercise routine. Confessing that he watched Terrence Malick's *Knight of Cups* (2015) eleven times, suggests that, following the physical exercise analogy, the author is singularly buff.

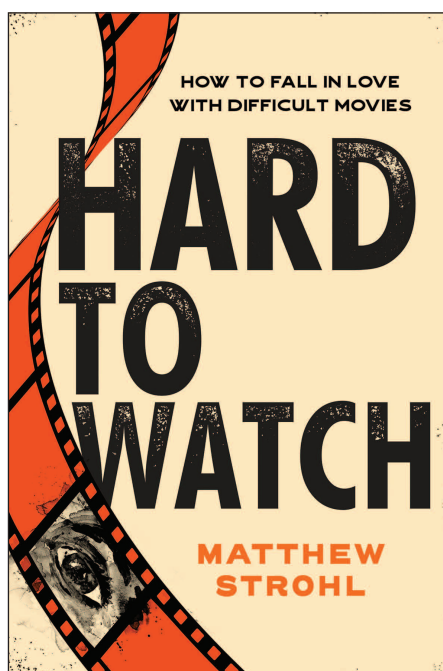
Strohl devotes an entire chapter to the role of film criticism in film appreciation. Readers of *Cineaste* will be happy to know that Strohl advises his reader to consult critics who can provide context and help viewers engage with movies by providing new insights and angles. Even so, the most rewarding path to film appreciation, even after reading the critics, is multiple viewings. He offers an example of Alain Resnais's *Muriel* (1963) as an example of a film that is deliberately obscure but offers up its rewards when viewed repeatedly from new approaches. Somehow in rehearsing these different angles, the Algerian War becomes little more than a plot point. Film criticism serves as a mechanism for cognitive engagement, but in Strohl's view, criticism remains outside history and political engagement. Cinephilia in this book is a game of puzzle-solving in which critics serve as guides rather than as writers with their own investment and agendas.

Films can be hard to watch because they are long and slow, challenging viewers to spend time with their distended temporalities and ponderous narratives. Strohl tackles

this obstacle by weighing into the “debate” around whether Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai de commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) is boring or not. Citing Akerman herself as well as other scholars and critics writing about the film, he takes it upon himself to painstakingly explain why it isn't boring. His conclusion, that the onus is on the viewer to look at the details, is hardly revelatory. His discussion of slow cinema and the distinctive form of engagement that it demands tends to short-circuit the range of experiences that directors as diverse as James Benning and Claire Denis create with their slow movies. Comparing slow cinema watching to meditation may help as an analogy but does disservice to filmmakers who are not only unsettling our experience of time, but also offering us aesthetic experiences that are full, not empty.

Movies that make viewers uncomfortable are important for Strohl because they challenge what he calls “nicecore”—the comfort movies that rock no boats. With reference to Geoff King and Pierre Bourdieu, he appreciates the thinking behind taste cultures, but he still wants to persuade his reader to get involved in the “particular, culturally situated set of practices” needed to watch difficult films. Why watch Kazuo Hara's *Goodbye CP* (1972), for example? This is a film featuring men with cerebral palsy flaunting their differently abled bodies in public. For Strohl, Hara enables viewers to engage with the men's suffering without hiding their misery, and without offering a space for “nobility” for the viewer. This does indeed seem like a punishing film and one that would invite off-screen dialogue about the film's ethics and the social problems it puts on display. Like many documentary films, *Goodbye CP* is not going to change the world, but it may spark discussion that might then provoke social change.

The editors of another recent book called *Unwatchable* (NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019) suggest that this emergent category of media marks a “critical juncture in the history of media and aesthetic theory” which Strohl's account helps to pinpoint. Where that editorial collective points to the “affective potential” of so-called unwatchable images to “promote previously unimaginable forms of social and political change,” Strohl's account remains on the level of individual struggle. His discussion of Julie Ducournau's *Titane* (2021) includes a useful overview of the very divided reception of a film that outrageously provokes shock and awe, but his solution to the “problem” of *Titane* is, as usual, to watch the film multiple times to reach his own conclusion—that the heroine



is “a being of pure defiance.” He learns that the film’s discomfort is purposeful and pointed and he ends up loving it—after putting in the work of rewatching and rebutting all the critics who think differently. The paradoxical pleasures of horror films are accounted for through a cognitive paradigm of distancing and embracing emotions, processes that all viewers handle differently. He doesn’t, however, even dip his toe into the vast literature on the horror genre and its popular appeal. The “negative emotions” generated by horror films seem to be akin to the feelings provoked by Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967) and Michael Bay’s *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), two films that have probably never before shared the same page in a book of film criticism.

As a primer for potential art-house viewers, Strohl offers two strategies for changing one’s diet from junky TV to cinephiliac pleasures. Firstly, he recommends a deep dive into a given director to “know” their cinema. He offers the examples of Claude Chabrol and John Ford, with a side helping of David DeCoteau. These surveys don’t need to be binged, and they can be combined to suit the different “aesthetic slots” in one’s lifestyle. Strohl reserves pre-Code Hollywood for breakfast, and John Ford for when his wife is out of the house. His second strategy is to share one’s viewing list with an online community on Letterboxd, X (formerly Twitter), or Facebook, and he goes on at length about the fellow fans he has exchanged opinions with online. He does not have much to say about the compromises we make with our families and friends to share live experiences of media. Besides her dislike of John Ford, Strohl’s wife is referred to only one other time as a viewer who is anxious about Jeanne Dielman’s potatoes overcooking and therefore anything but bored.

Strohl recognizes that cinephilia is a collaborative, communal pastime, and yet the communities that he engages with seem disinterested in what films are about, or how and why they may be innovative. He closes with a discussion of Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s *Drive My Car* (2021) that he first viewed “through the lens of a thousand social media posts, and it didn’t help the movie.” On re-viewing the film a year later, he understood one of the character’s motivations and “the subtlety of what’s really going on.” He has little to say about the filmmaker’s innovative scriptwriting and casting, or his engagement with Japanese history. The hard work that one must do as a cinephile seems geared toward understanding movies and being able to assess them as aesthetic experiences.

At the end of the day, Strohl’s cinephilia seems somewhat empty. We all watch movies for our own reasons and in our own ways, and we do so in conjunction with other pleasures, including watching sports and news programming, eating, and socializing. By comparing film viewing to physical

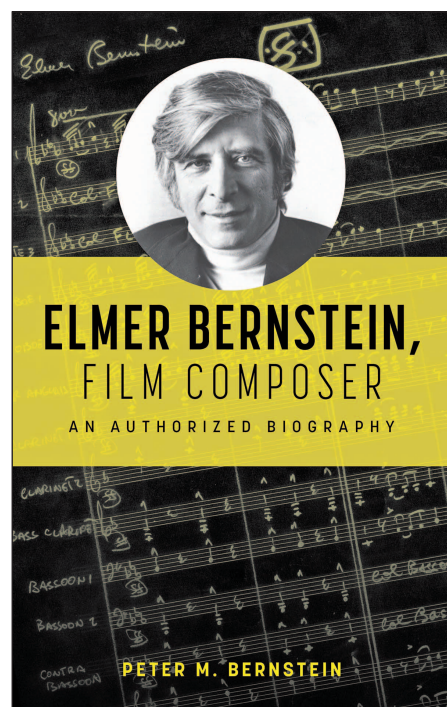
training or healthy eating, the creative work of filmmakers seems curiously devalued. Viewing becomes an exercise in problem-solving and mastery, rather than a matter of gaining insight into history, society, and culture, or spending time within the sensory worlds that films create. Innovations in film style such as that of Hamaguchi do not necessarily need multiple viewings to be appreciated (even if re-viewing can be immensely rewarding) and Strohl’s primer says much more about his own struggle with art cinema in the attention economy than it does about the wealth of cinematic treasures that may or may not be at our fingertips. If nothing else, this curious book provides a snapshot of the place of art cinema within a media-scape in transition.—Catherine Russell

## Elmer Bernstein, Film Composer:

### An Authorized Biography

by Peter M. Bernstein. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2024. 250 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$34.00 and E-book: \$32.00.

Film composer par excellence Elmer Bernstein accomplished so much in his eighty years that he had no time to memorialize his achievements, a task that fell to his son, Peter, who besides maintaining his own career scoring for film and television, devoted much time since his father’s passing in 2004 to compiling this book. There’s a lot to get in. Elmer by the numbers: about one hundred fifty film scores and sixty or so for television. Fourteen Oscar nominations and one win. Two Emmy nominations and one win. Seven Golden Globe nominations and two wins. Five Grammy and two Tony nominations.



Numerous other concert compositions and live performances, music for Ray and Charles Eames’s 1964 World’s Fair IBM Pavilion, and a constellation of laurels. Activism of various kinds. His own mail-order record label to boost the visibility of film music. Three wives and four children. Thoroughbreds, yachts, fast cars, family campers, and houses. He jetted around the world, sometimes composing soundtracks on pencil and paper during flights, through his senior years. The pace was unflagging and the quality of the work exceptional, right up until the end. “Life should be fun,” he said. For all the ups and downs, it seems to have been.

Not an easy person to keep up with, but Peter has done his best. An “authorized” volume threatens evasion, particularly when the author is a blood relation. Other than marital difficulties and the occasional fit of temper when recording sessions went awry, though, there was no scandal in Elmer’s life to be swept under the rug or minimized, and Peter is honest about his dad not always having the money to pay for those thoroughbreds, yachts, fast cars, family campers, and houses, not to mention that well-intentioned but ill-fated soundtrack company venture. Residuals from *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), two of his most famed credits, only went so far, so it was back to the soundtrack salt mines for a *Leonard Part 6* (1987) or some other dog Bernstein couldn’t deflea. By all accounts (and Peter has assembled many), Elmer was a mensch, who helped and promoted others while uplifting the lot of fellow composers and cementing his own place in the firmament. He promised producer Noel Pearson that he would score *My Left Foot* (1989) for free if he got the film off the ground and was as good as his word.

“Legendary” isn’t a word to be used lightly but it fits the only person nominated for an Academy Award in every decade in which he was active (the 1950s to the 2000s), whose other credits, encompassing an overflowing palette of moods, emotions, and intensities, include *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), *Hawaii* (1966), *True Grit* (1969), *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (1978), *Airplane!* (1980), *Ghostbusters* (1984), *The Grifters* (1990), *The Age of Innocence* (1993), and *Far from Heaven* (2002).

That far-from-comprehensive list leaves out a few of his Oscar nominees, including the lone winner, the underscore for the tripping 1967 musical *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. (Bernstein, who was conducting the Academy Awards orchestra that evening, figured Quincy Jones would triumph for the groundbreaking *In Cold Blood* [1967] and readied the orchestra to play him on.) And then there are his rousing themes for *The Great Escape* (1963), which, in reviewing the Criterion Blu-ray amidst the COVID-19



would do what we could to prevent this policy, but we also felt an increasing sense of dread that we would not be able to prevent it.” White is made prominent in the frame by placing him against a slightly out-of-focus darkish gray background with lighting that matches the intensity of his voice and precision of his comments. The power of Morris’s method is an effective counterpoint to Soboroff’s style and intentions.

While Soboroff’s book is focused on the process through which he and fellow reporters uncovered the story of family separation, Morris is interested in the story itself, with White emerging as its moral compass. White and Jallyn Sualog, who succeeded White as Deputy Director for Children’s Programs and is also interviewed, embody the so-called “deep state”—they did what they could to resist and mitigate the worst impulses of the Trump administration. Their binary opposites are two political appointees that Morris did manage to interview: White’s immediate boss Scott Lloyd, an antiabortion militant, and Elaine Duke, acting head of the Department of Homeland Security, a Republican with decades-long involvement in government. Duke was ready to pursue the Department of Homeland Security’s efforts at “deterrence” but wanted to try other methods before signing off on a family separation policy; she was replaced by Kirstjen Nielsen, who did sign off on the policy. From the outset, Lloyd looked for direction from the likes of Trump’s Senior Policy Advisor Stephen Miller. White characterizes Lloyd, who was the individual specifically responsible for children in the Unaccompanied Children’s Program, as the nation’s most prolific child abuser. Uncomfortable being interviewed, Lloyd seems over his head and ethically clueless.

Morris also provides interviews with two people outside of government: NBC correspondent and the book’s author, Jacob Soboroff, who helped to break the story of family separation; and Deputy Director of the

ACLU Immigrants’ Rights Project, Lee Gelert, who successfully sued the U.S. government for its family separation policy, producing a court order to reunite separated families—a responsibility that was ultimately handed over to Jonathan White. Soboroff introduces himself in a charming, self-deprecating manner, saying that he never thought of himself as a reporter breaking a news story. He never went to journalism school. He was NBC’s version of an attractive on-air personality—a man concerned about his hair and married to a woman in the fashion business. Soboroff seemingly surprised himself by his outrage and growing commitment to expose the family separation scandal. Morris pairs him with White, who acknowledges that he had never before talked publicly about family separation because that would be inconsistent with his job. The urgency of the situation changed his mind. White, the principled deep-state resister, and Soboroff, the accidental investigative reporter, function in parallel to provide the film’s narrative thrust and overarching architecture.

Reviewers have consistently applauded *Separated* for forcefully telling the story of family separation yet have criticized Morris either for making an overly conventional film or for being too ossified in his style and most consistently for his questionable decision to use actors. One underlying irony is that mainstream documentarians have adopted many of Morris’s radical representational strategies, while Morris himself has avoided fully embracing the mainstream, resulting often in odd critical observations. Robert Abele of the *Los Angeles Times*, for instance, finds *Separated* “to be an unusual Morris project in that the morality here is straightforward.” Yet, despite its unconventional methods, one would find it hard to imagine a film more straightforward in its moral outrage than Morris’s landmark *The Thin Blue Line*. Morris’s ongoing body of work remains challenging for critics—even as it gets richer and more interesting with each new film.—Charles Musser ■



Jacob Soboroff’s reports on the remarkable cruelty of Trump’s “zero tolerance” immigration policy, including separation of children from their parents, are referenced in *Separated*.

## Contributors

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