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Film on Paper: The Inner Life of Movies

Richard Schickel
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Commenting on a collection of reviews by John Simon, Richard Schickel notes that reviews are not meandering reflections but “consumer guidance” that must meet editorial demands of time and space. Schickel calls attention to Simon’s “numbing” organizational patterns and sometimes annoying prose style, but ultimately honors Simon as a “trustworthy witness to the culture of his times,” who “leads a discussion of aesthetic values that he (and I) regard as central to sustaining a good society.”

Readers of *Film on Paper* will make a similar observation about Richard Schickel himself. A longtime film reviewer for *Time*, Schickel has written, or co-written, many books about the movies, including biographies of Elia Kazan, Clint Eastwood, James Cagney, and Walt Disney. He has also produced, directed, and written more than thirty documentary films about Hollywood personalities. Here he presents a selection from his monthly “Film on Paper” column in the LA Times Book Review. All written since 2001, these 1,200-1,400 word “essaylets” are thankfully more personal and reflective than most book or film reviews. What they lack in close summary is more than made up for in sound-offs about films, film history and its icons, or the filmmaking process. Schickel takes on newly published books about everything from “grosses and gossip” to fanzines to “plodding reportage” of journalistic fact-gatherers to aesthetic theory delivered by “dull-witted academics.” He admits that he has more tolerance for the hit-and-miss, sometimes collaborative genius of Hollywood movie-making than for its commentators.

This collection will be enjoyed by film buffs as well as industry insiders, but it will be especially useful for students of film, film history, and journalism. Schickel is a superb writer who has earned his stripes as a critic of the culture and its artifacts. He strikes a rather formalist and populist critical pose. His opinions are well-argued and consistent, and he provides insights into the film world that he knows so well. Often, (examples can be found in reviews of books about Hepburn, Schwarzenegger, Stanley Kubrick, Gene Autry, and *Vanity Fair’s Hollywood*) Schickel takes issue with ideas and opinions, and then provides a correction from his perspective. When he is impressed or convinced, as is the case in books about Sergio Leone and Sam Fuller, as well as *John Simon on Film, 1982-2001*, readers can again expect honest, passionate responses from this genuine Hollywood cineaste.
JOE TAYLOR (February 14, 2008)

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