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**LAJM INTERVIEW:
DAVID DENBY ON WRITING CRITICISM**

Editor's Note

For the past ten years, David Denby has been film critic for *New York Magazine*; before that time, he was film critic for *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Boston Phoenix*, the editor of several annual volumes of reviews by the National Society of Film Critics, and a contributor to *Harper's*, *The New York Times*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Film Quarterly*, among others. *Awake in the Dark: An Anthology of American Film Criticism, 1915 to the Present* (New York: Vintage, 1977), edited by Denby, is a highly regarded primer on American movie reviewing.

Denby has also taught film aesthetics and criticism at Stanford University, and in the interview from which these excerpts were taken, he clearly had in mind not only his own composing processes but also the experience of young writers struggling with critical expression. Reading his remarks about reviewing ought to help English teachers consider the problems their own students face with critical writing, problems Denby overcomes in part by experience with the topic, familiarity with the format, and regular and reliable patterns of work.

The interview was conducted in a conference room in the offices of *New York*, with the sounds of New York City traffic filtering persistently through the windows and the bustle of a major city magazine

the door. In the course of it staff members would interrupt, editors would send messages, and the awareness of impending deadlines permeated the air. Denby's task at the magazine is to write a column forty-eight weeks a year, usually between 1200 and 2000 words long, often consisting of one long review and one shorter review. Almost in spite of himself, he is prepared for the actual viewing of a film by exposure to promotional literature, news items about production, and pre-publicity. He usually sees the film in the company of other critics and invited guests of the producer in a private screening room a few weeks before the movie opens in commercial release. From his notes on that screening, often held a few days to a week before he begins to write, he sits down on Friday to start working directly on the review, which will occupy him through Saturday and Sunday. By Monday morning he will have a draft ready for his editor at *New York* and will also be preparing to start the cycle again with another viewing on Tuesday.

Writing in the Dark and Bringing It to Light

I decide myself what I'm going to review and at what length and in what style, on the basis of what I'm interested in and whether I have an edge on the movie, something I really want to say about it. The intensity of my feeling about a given movie is very important in determining how much I'm going to write about it and also whether I think the *New York* magazine readers need to know about this movie.

I sit there with a steno notebook in my lap and I take notes in the dark, which are then very hard to read the next day, but I find there's no other way of doing it. The notes are simply little fragments, a little bit of dialog or key word that will remind me of something that happened in the

scene, something about the lighting, or something about the actor's expression. They're intended to stimulate my memory of the movie when I sit down and write about it maybe three or four days or a week later. I may take a whole notebook full of notes with only a few lines on each page because I'm terrified in the dark of scribbling one note on top of the other.

I would see the movie Tuesday afternoon or Tuesday night, and, say, Friday afternoon at home I would sit down with this note pad in my lap and some paper on a clipboard and the cast and credits of the movie from the publicity material that the company gives you when you see it. Then I would try to replay the movie in my head using my notes as a memory aid, literally thinking through what happens. In other words, I might write down in my notes some reaction to a scene or a few of its visual components or plot elements and then try to reconstruct at home what it was that made me feel at that moment whatever it was I felt.

So I'll sit there and replay the movie in my head and then make fresh notes on my paper on the clipboard under separate headings. It may be as simple as writing down the word "theme" and then writing everything under that that deals with thematic development in the movie, or writing the name of the leading actor or actress and describing the performance, or describing the elements of the director's work. By the time I'm done with this process—which, depending how complicated the movie is and also the intensity of my feeling about it, will take anywhere from 40 minutes to five hours—I will come out with four or five pages of notes. The movie will have been broken down for purposes of analysis into separate topics in front of me. Then I'll read over that and probably

make an outline if the piece is going to be 1000 words or more. My mind is not particularly well organized, so I like to see where I'm going, and I like to see the whole piece in front of me on one page. It's just a good old solid high school outline.

But, after the outline is made up, I don't necessarily stick to it; that's the next point. All the major points of the piece are there in front of me in one page and I can see them now. As I'm doing it I may reshuffle something or throw it out all together, but at least I know what all the major points are and also what examples I'm going to use to illustrate them. Maybe it's a safety net or maybe it's a psychological thing—just for the security one wants to see all that in front of one in a longer piece before proceedings — but I know that several times when I've just started to write without an outline I sort of wander off down some lane and the piece winds up getting stuck in the sand, and then I have to sort of start over again and keep it on the main road, so it's better to know where you're going and what all the major points are.

Even when I write these very little pieces at the end of the thing, I almost never just put the page in the typewriter and sit down and write. I usually have to think about the order of the ideas or the order of the sentences, and I may scribble a few of them out in longhand and then do it. That's just the way I am. I like to know where I'm going when I start writing the piece.

Shaping the Draft

I'll try to write my lead to see where that's going to go and how the piece is going to develop. These pieces, particularly the ones that are

more than just a couple of paragraphs, really should read like essays. Certain notions in them should be developed through the piece rather than it just being a standard review in which you give your opinion in the first paragraph, then give a bit of the plot, and run down a laundry list of acting, directing, lighting, camera movement. That form of reviewing I think is boring whether it's well written or poorly written. What's more exciting is to organize whatever perceptions you have into some sort of essay that has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You can do that even in three paragraphs. I'm not saying I pull this off all the time but that's my ideal. With the other kind of review there's a lessening of reader interest when they get down to the different craft contributions in the movie, whereas this thing—if it's right—has a kind of dramatic logic that would hold you all the way through.

That's part of the reason for making the outline, because I don't have any form. There isn't any set form; there are no rules for movie criticism—there are a thousand ways you can organize a review. I'm always afraid of repeating myself. Sometimes I start by describing a scene and using that as the epitome of what the entire movie is doing; other times I will start with discussing the actors and use that as a lead-in; other times I'll begin in a summary way with an opinion of the whole movie. That third way is more conventional and I don't like doing it as much, but it's the standard way that most criticism is written—give a strong opinion pro or con right at the top. I like to draw people in and sort of create a little bit of a movie first before tipping my hand, and if you really describe the movie well the reader should be able to tell what you think right from the descriptive tone, the choice of language, the mood of your writing. You don't have to use all those trite critical words, like "it was well acted"

or “the lighting is beautiful” or something like that; you just describe what it is that’s on the screen.

Then comes the first draft which, let’s say, is 1200 words so it would be a major review in a given week, maybe 4-1/2 double spaced typed pages long. That will take probably half a day to write—6 to 7 hours, I would say. The first draft is very slow for me; I’m not a quick writer most of the time. Occasionally, it just flows out but the stronger the response to a film obviously the easier it is to write a piece. It’s just things that sort of feel gray that are agonizing and then you really have to pull it out of yourself.

Getting It Down on Paper

I try to get it down on paper in the right order and get it to say more or less what I want it to say and not be too fussy about specific wording, because I know I’m going to do another draft. Also, I spend a lot of time on the lead. Generally a lot of these pieces, if you get the first paragraph right, the rest of it sort of just flows from that. I may then write two or three versions of the first paragraph, easing into the piece because that sort of sets the tone of the piece and the strategy. I may do that two or three times, but the rest of it, I think, I generally write down once, although it’s still slow and the first drafts are a mess physically and there’re lots of sentences crossed out or blacked out. I do it on the typewriter and make X’s through sentences or try to reshuffle the clauses. When that’s done I will probably do the same thing for the second movie that I’m going to review, which is generally the shorter review and may not require an outline; maybe only 500 words, say two pages, so it will be

quicker—I'll then type the first draft of that too. This might be on a Saturday, then on Sunday I'll just rewrite the whole thing.

I usually run the thing through my head a couple of times. As you're writing you don't want all the sentences to have the same rhythm, you don't want them all to have the verb form "to be," which is a weakness of mine that I don't use active verbs. I like beginning with dependent clauses. For instance, here it says, "Smart, a good athlete, Mason, eighteen, has to pay the bills and play daddy for Tex and it burns him up," so the subject of the sentence is Mason but it begins with a dependent clause and it's a nice way of picking up speed and also changing rhythm. But you can't do it twice in a row because it has a sort of sing-song rhythm then. So that's the kind of thing you think about when you're writing, although sometimes I don't notice that until I'm revising.

Sometimes you realize that it's richer than you thought as you start describing it and you realize that there was more to it, just because you find you have a lot to say. But it also works the other way around, that you find yourself with not much to say or not much to describe, and you realize that your reaction was really very limited and dry and some part of your willpower was making you think this was a good movie. In that case you've got to retool the piece, pull it out of the typewriter, look over your notes, and make a new outline, and start over again. It's no disaster...

Revising

I'll have this first draft and then I'll sleep on it and the next day I'll read it through and make a lot of verbal changes, moving sentences

around, crossing them out one place and writing them in another place in pen or pencil, right on the copy. Occasionally my wife will read the first draft, if it's readable, if it isn't such a mess that it's too hard to follow; she may criticize and say, "This is not organized well" and ask me to move a paragraph up or lead in a different way or something like that.

Then for the second draft I'll set the margins of the typewriter for something approximate to the actual column width which would be say 40 characters on the typewriter. I know at that point how many lines I have for the piece; I will have been given a line count by the magazine by the end of the previous week. Now when I'm doing my first draft I know pretty much the length of it, so I should have about the right amount of copy there anyway. When I set my margins more narrowly to 40 characters I will get an exact line count by the time I'm done and try to come out to within five to ten lines of where I'm supposed to be on either side. You never can be exactly sure because when the thing is set sometimes it changes a little bit; it mysteriously grows or it mysteriously shrinks and then you can cut it or expand it.

The second draft goes much more quickly and I find it very pleasurable. I find the first draft agony; the second draft I think is a lot of fun when you actually have something there to work with, to play with. It's at that point your feelings of craftsmanship take over and you start playing with sentences to make it flow better or to take out repeating rhythm or internal rhymes which often look terrible in prose; maybe to liven it up you put in a more metaphorical style or put in a simile to make something more powerful. That's where the polish comes, there in that

transition from the first to second draft. That's the most pleasurable part of the whole operation.

I imagine that 80% of the revision is for style. When you read the first draft over you may still see that there are holes in it. There are things that you simply haven't said or that are out of balance—you've gone too far along in developing a point and left the other points out. I wouldn't say it's entirely style. I may compose fresh sentences in the beginning and try to write them onto the copy, just peg them in the right place before sitting down to the second draft, because the more work you do on the first draft the easier it is to write the second draft obviously. But I think it's very important that you run it through the typewriter again because it just gets so much better. There are a lot of people, good journalists, who just do one draft and make it up with a pencil and hand it in. I don't think I've ever done that in my life except for very, very short pieces. I find that as a piece of writing it just looks so much better; if I had time I might even do a third draft. I used to when I wrote for monthlies.

When that's done, which is often very late Sunday night or even Monday morning, say 3:00 a.m. Monday morning, I'll read the thing over and do more tuning of it with a pencil, crossing out words and writing in new ones, and then that goes to my editor on Monday.

Preparing for Publication

Then Monday morning we'll put it in the pouch to the typesetter at noon and it will come back by 4:00 set in columns on galley sheets and we'll be able to see the length of it. Generally I'm a little bit over so I'll

have to cut, say, ten lines or 15 lines, and I can make further changes at that point. Sometimes there are things you don't see until you read it in print; when you read it in print you read it so much faster because it's clean and you see that you've repeated words, that you have two contradictory notions, two nuances leaning in opposite directions fairly near each other, so you have to iron that out. It's just because you're reading it faster and you see things that you don't see on the typescript unless the typescript is absolutely clean, but mine never is because I'm always changing and marking it up until the time it's grabbed out of my hands. So I do still more revisions in the galleys and this is almost always just for style and rhythm and then I cut or, on those occasions when I'm short, I add a few sentences to fill out the space.

Some Observations on Writing Criticism

When you're sitting there in the movie, there are really two media: the medium of movie that's playing on the screen and then there's yourself which is kind of a receiving medium and you want to recreate what it was on the screen that produced those feelings in you that you had at that moment. Are you sitting there feeling bored or excited or upset or angry or aroused or horrified or something? Because the whole process of movie criticism is objectifying those feelings you have, those very subjective impressions, and any successful piece of criticism is going to have elements of both the gut reaction of "This is lousy" or "This is great" and the very specific elements on the screen, something an actor did, something a director did. A review that consists entirely of description of a movie or entirely "I felt this, I felt that" would be inadequate. There's always this communication back and forth between those two reactions.

It doesn't matter how you do it, you don't have to lay it out quite that explicitly, but you have to some way give the kind of movie it is, the genre, whether it's comedy or whether it's serious, and enough of the premise, the movie's thematic concerns as well as plot, to hold the reader's interest. Readers can be held by different things: they can be held by a purely thematic analysis of the movie or of the director's career, but that tends to be a little dry, and you've got to be a very good writer to pull it off. It's easier to hold people's attention and also to write well about the human material in the movie, the acting, the performance, the character, the fate of a character. It's a narrative medium and that's what finally people respond to in movies. One way of holding the readers is to involve them in the fate of a given character.

I drew readers into a review of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, for example, with a discussion of characters, and I have one, two, three, three whole paragraphs of plot and about how the movie is seen "from a sympathetic but skeptical feminine eye." I don't get to judgment of whether the movie is good or not until the fourth paragraph, where it says, "From the ads you might get the impression that *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* is another raucously blue beer party celebration of raunchy teens like the repulsive big success *Porkie's*, but it's actually very sweet, a fresh funny exploration of adolescent anxieties and confusion." That paragraph could have run right at the beginning and most critics would have put it at the beginning, I think. Instead, I thought it would be more interesting to draw people in by discussing the characters and what they're going through. I think that's something that takes a little bit of experience because at first you're nervous and afraid you're not going to be able to sustain interest that way. But I do it as often as I can, and

also it should be clear just from the seriousness with which I'm describing this that I like this movie to some extent, or at least take it seriously, without giving the judgment right away. You've got to reassure the reader with your tone that you know what you're doing.

The Importance of a Regular Rhythm of Work

I want to insist that my life is not a model for anyone. But the fact is that it's a regular rhythm that works for the production of this column and also for the other work that I do. I find the weekly schedule is heaven. I mean I wasn't really happy as a movie critic until I started at the *Boston Phoenix* in 1975. There's enough time to say what you want to say and to write and rewrite, which I keep stressing is so important, and yet it's every week. You don't get slack and rusty because writing is really like hitting in baseball. If you get three weeks off, you're going to be rusty when you get back. Your timing is off, you have trouble formulating sentences. It's amazing. On the other hand, if you write every day you get stale, not rusty; you start to write the same way, use the same formulations. So I feel very lucky to have this weekly job. I think it's a nice rhythm.

Let's face it, writing is very hard; what I've been describing is very hard. Even though I can do it and I can do it every week, it's still as hard as anything I can think of doing. It's a lot easier working in an office. I've done some teaching and teaching is hard too, but I think writing is harder. It's harder than driving a truck. It's not as physically demanding, but it takes a lot out of you psychologically, particularly when it doesn't go well. You have to get yourself up and keep up the pressure or else you're just going to settle for second best.