Movies with My Mother—and James Agee [1]

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Essay by Marc Schiffman

Notes from an Underground Critic



My mother was an invalid. During the summer, on rainy days in the 1970s, I'd stay home and watch movies with her on TV. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of film. As I entered my teens, we'd dismantle the dialogue, point of view, and camera angles—analyzing them from a perspective that people used to call humanism.

One August evening, after watching the 1946 film noir classic *The Blue Dahlia*, she asked me, "What do you think?"

"I don't understand."

She stared at me with her raccoon eyes. Lack of sleep and the constant medication drew her face into an unsmiling, cruel mask. The sofa groaned as she shifted her massive weight.

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“The movie, honey, what did you think of it?”

“I didn’t know who the killer would be.”

“That’s a start. Tell me more.”

“I liked Alan Ladd. He was kind of a degenerate, similar to an early Steve McQueen from *The Sand Pebbles*.”

“Your father and I talked about sending you to military school. Maybe then you’ll grow a brain.” She pressed the television remote five or six times, until she found a channel that pleased her.

“I don’t care about the actors,” she said.

I sat at the far end of the sofa. She broke off a large piece of Nestlé’s chocolate and popped it into her mouth.

She chewed. When finished, she said, “The camera’s the heart, and the words are the soul. You should know that by now. Some films stink like a dead cat, while others have a pulse and a mind. What’s the theme of this movie, smart boy?”

“Trust no one. Everyone lies. Even the hero, but they can get away with it because at the end they do something right. Or the camera makes them look decent. Like Alan Ladd looks at the end of *The Blue Dahlia.*”

“I like that. Everyone lies. Like your father. He lies, even though you think his shit don’t smell.”

“And what did you like?” I asked, wanting to change the subject.

She scratched her chin, leaving a smudge of chocolate. “Humanism is important. Screw all critics who call it an intellectual fraud. We want intelligence in our art and in our films and in our leaders. Humanism is about being heroic and not conforming. That’s what’s good about *The Blue Dahlia*—it takes the hero and puts him on his head. You could call film noir the beginning of the antihero. Maybe. I know you haven’t an iota of an idea what I’m talking about.”

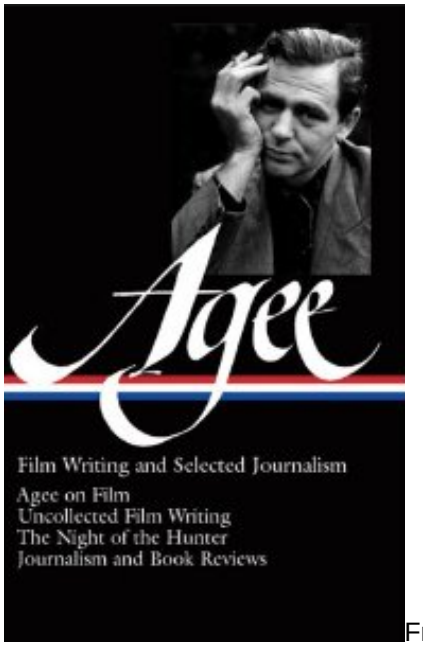
She broke off another chunk of chocolate. “Return to your comics and racy spy novels. Go to sleep. It’s near midnight.”

I went up to my bedroom and opened my paperback copy of *Agee on Film***.**

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My mother had given me James Agee’s collection of film criticism nearly two years before, on my fourteenth birthday. Unable to sleep, a curse of mine that remains to this day, I would thumb through this book late at night with a flashlight, making notes in the margins about movies I’d seen and ideas that sparked my imagination. *Agee on Film* was a means of escape from high school, which I found insular and claustrophobic, and my unpleasant home life. It and the other books that lined my desk were paths to exotic worlds, welcoming me without threat or discrimination.

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From 1941 to 1948, James Agee was a film critic for *Time* and the *Nation*. He also wrote *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which combines his account of Depression-era sharecroppers with photos by Walker Evans. Agee's book of film criticism came out in the late '50s, after his death in 1955. (He posthumously won the Pulitzer Prize in 1958 for his novel *A Death in the Family*.)

In 1946, Agee reviewed *The Blue Dahlia* for the *Nation*, a movie with a screenplay by Raymond Chandler in which a bomber just home from the war (Alan Ladd) looks for the killer of his wife in Hollywood. Agee noted:

> The picture is as neatly stylized and synchronized, and as uninterested in moral excitement, as a good ballet; it knows its own weight and size perfectly and carries them gracefully and without self-importance…. [I]t crawls with American types; and their mannerisms and affectations, and their chief preoccupations—blackmail and what's-in-it-for-me—all seem to me to reflect, however coolly, things that are deeply characteristic of this civilization.

That night in my bedroom, I read on. The hours clicked by. I couldn't get his phrase—*things that are deeply characteristic of this civilization*—out of my mind. I looked at the picture of my brother, who'd been killed in the Vietnam War. The word *civilization* took on a strange dimension in my thoughts, like a marijuana halo that at first seduces and next suffocates the view from one's field of vision.

I flipped through the book and stopped at Agee's article on John Huston. Of the directors whose work appealed to Agee, Huston was the one he most admired. The article, "Undirectable Director," first appeared in *Life* magazine in September 18, 1950. The next year, they worked together on *The African Queen*. Agee wrote:

> Most movies are made in the evident assumption that the audience is passive and wants to remain passive; every effort is made to do all the work—the seeing, the explaining, the understanding, even the feeling…. Huston's pictures (such as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*) are not acts of seduction or of benign enslavement but of liberation, and they require, of anyone who enjoys them, the responsibility of liberty.

I grabbed my baseball glove from the night table, running my fingers over the leather, dark brown from countless applications of Neatsfoot oil to soften it. I placed the mitt to my nose and smelled the sweet oil. I realized then why this kind of writing could evoke so much. Agee acknowledged that film had the potential to change people, to generate ideas and elicit hope.

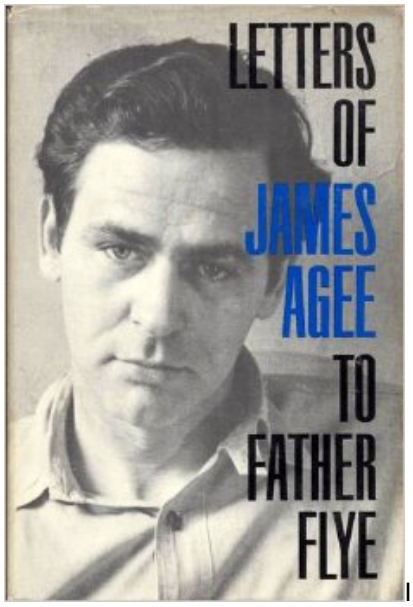
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In the margin of his Huston article, I wrote *be true to your dreams.*

I climbed out of bed, opened my bedroom door, and could still hear the movie voices circling at the bottom of the staircase like lost and scared children in a forest. Those voices would remain in my memory, as vivid as my mother's terse words.

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After I left high school, I didn't see my mother for twenty years. She and my father divorced. My older sister informed me that my mother had lost a hundred pounds and was a sales agent for Bloomingdale's. She'd had an affair with a millionaire and cruised the Mediterranean with him, until she had an epileptic seizure and he dumped her in Cairo with a first-class airline ticket home to New York City.



In 1995, in a used bookstore in San Francisco, I came across *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye.* The letters reveal the artist Agee—his longings, exaltations, despair—and his continual quest to write fiction while eking out a living writing film reviews. The reviews testify to his craft, but his devotion to them meant he put his own projects aside; the letters testify to his suffering.

When he was ten, Agee met the Episcopal priest at his boarding school, where Father Flye was his history teacher. Agee began writing to Flye in his teens, and their friendship and communication spanned thirty years, until Agee's death at 45. The collection of letters, compiled by the priest, was originally published in 1962.

I bought the book. In a bar in the Tenderloin district, I opened it, and the following passage from Agee, written when he was in his late twenties, caught my eye:

> Frenchtown, New Jersey
> August 12, 1938
>
> I feel as if I were disintegrating and 'growing up,' whatever that means, simultaneously, and that there is a race or bloody grappling going on between the two in my head and solar plexus. I would like to learn how to be relieved of such pain and poison as is not necessary, and how to stand that which is inevitable.

I recognized the same struggle within myself. Time had etched tolerance into my features and seeded my heart with a form of forgiveness. It also fostered the war within that I could not quiet.

The next month, in January, I called my mother. Her voice was steady, and she invited me to her New Jersey

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apartment for dinner. I flew across the country to see her.

She was larger than she had ever been. She used a stroller to get around her one-bedroom apartment. While she cooked, I looked through the perfectly arranged books in her armoire and noted that many of them were mine from high school—the books she claimed to have thrown out with everything of mine after I left home.

I picked out *Agee on Film* and thumbed through it. In the margins, above my own blue-scrawled ink, were notations my mother had made in crafted black ballpoint: *has promise, not bad, something new in this idea, sonny*.

She placed the dinner plates with sliced pot roast, mashed potatoes, and green beans on flimsy metal trays and scarecrow legs in front of the television.

“There’s gray in your hair,” she said.

“I know.”

“At least you’re not bald like your grandfather.”

With some difficulty, she sat down on the sofa and handed me the remote. “They’re showing *The Wizard of Oz* on the Turner Network. I remember it scared the bejesus out of you when you were a kid. Let’s see if it still holds up.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said.

Later that night, I sat in a chair in my hotel room and read more from *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye:*

> New York City
> March 2, 1948
>
> I’ve been very much preoccupied for several months with a piece of writing I’m trying to do, that has so soaked up my interest that I’ve felt relatively little else to think or talk about…. This (and unexpected pieces of hard work for the job, the *Nation*) has gradually brought on an unusually deep and lasting depression, mental and physical, from which for several weeks now I’ve had only a few hours escape per week…. Just now I seem to be on a tight rope between such depression and reasonable well-being.

It was nearly 3 a.m. I rose and went to the window. The small New Jersey suburban town was silent, the road lights changing color in perfect symmetry. I believed I could see my mother’s apartment building in the distance. The television set was on, and she sat on the couch in her heavy bathrobe, watching a movie in the dark.

Publishing Information

- *Agee on Film: Criticism and Comment on the Movies* by James Agee (McDowell, Obolensky, 1958; Random House, 2000).
- Letters of James Agee to Father Flye. *[5]* originally published in 1962 (Melville House, 2014).

Art Information

- "Our Parlor / Living Room Boro Park Brooklyn 1976 [6]" © Anthony Catalano; Creative Commons license.

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Marc Schiffman has published short stories in the *Xavier Review*, *Literary Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Sycamore Review,* and other journals. His novel, *The Man Who Controls the Earth*, was published in 2012.

He's lived in Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. When asked if he could change one thing about himself, he says, “I’d give more and take less.” Instead of being a writer, he'd be a “pilgrim/traveler/itinerant golfer.”

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