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Cover Page Footnote

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ANDREW SARRIS AND MOLLY HASKELL

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Molly: We want all of you to get involved in this, and interrupt at any point. There are a lot of people who are film scholars in this wonderful faculty we've been talking to, and then there are students as well, and we want to bridge that gap whenever possible. We don't know what movies you've seen or what texts you've read, so in order to help us adapt to your context and your experience, please just jump in at any point.

By way of introducing Andrew, I used to drop in on his classes, and he was the first real mentor that I had. He used tell his classes at the beginning of each term that there are three stages in watching and thinking about movies. One stage is that wonderful, delirious surrender to movies. You let them wash over you, and you are passive, swept along by the story. It's a kind of primitive thing we all went through as adolescents, and some of us stay there forever. Then there's a critical phase, and in Andrew's case it was breaking the film apart, looking at the number of cuts, and so on. This is an awkward, uncomfortable stage, because everything that you responded to viscerally, suddenly you have to step back and look at it in a more detached way, and the whole process, this kind of surgical process, is very alienating. But then after that is the third stage, where you put it all together, and you still have that sort of immediate visceral response to film, and yet you now understand so many of the things about how it works and the people who put it together. In the first stage, the first movies you go to

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see, you don't know about scriptwriters or all the rest. You just think there are these beautiful people up there saying these witty things. And

then you finally put it all together, and then I think you have the richest experience you can have. So I thought I would just ask Andrew how you got to that.

Andrew: How did I get to that! Actually, I'm working on my own memoir now, and I think I have a great title. I think I'll try it out on you: *The Accidental Auteurist: A Random Memoir*. (laughter) Yeah, that's good, that's a good reaction. Maybe I'll go ahead and write the book now. Actually, the three stages that Molly referred to was something I wrote in *The Primal Screen*. How many people remember *The Primal Scream*? Ed Janov? Anyway, I called my collection at that time *The Primal Screen*. It didn't save me from a bad review in the *Times*. In that book I said that there were three stages of the primal screen. But here I'd like to switch it a little bit. For the first stage I was thinking of my own childhood. I go back to the age of radio, to the age that Woody Allen dealt with in *Radio Days*, to the age before television. That's the important thing, before television. And the family story is — I don't remember this, but my mother kept saying that this happened, so naturally I assume it did — that we were walking down Flatbush Avenue, in Brooklyn, past the Marine Theater. I think I was about three or four years old, because my brother I don't think had been born yet. My mother used to wheel me around Flatbush Avenue. And I suddenly saw these still pictures on the side of a building and I ran inside, just bolted inside. There was this strange world on the screen, much more interesting than my world. I stood there, and my mother came to take me out. We couldn't afford even those cheap seats back then, a quarter, and I began raising such a ruckus, crying. I was a terrible crybaby. The manager came and he said he'd let us stay there for nothing, if my mother would keep me from crying. And that's the story of my first movie.

Movies always had that kind of spell, that primal spell, that kind of magical experience. You sit in a dark space, you are all by yourself, and the movie is coming at you, and it's being projected by this strange ray of light. There's something magical about it: you don't know anything about projectors or film or anything else like that. And suddenly you are in this strange world, a world that's more appealing than your world by far, and that's what I called the first stage, the primal screen. And I think it's something that was experienced by my

pre-television generation. I think once television came in, it became a piece of furniture in a house. Most children today, their first images on the screen are domesticated.

I was talking one time during the Vietnam war, when all these demonstrations were taking place. I was on a panel with a much younger guy, who was a writer for *Variety*, and he said that kids today, kids of his time, whenever they didn't like a movie on television or anything on television, they'd just flip the button and it was gone. We didn't have that power when watching a movie, a magical thing coming on the screen. And he said that they'd look at the Vietnam war, and turn the button: I don't like it. Let's turn it off. There is that kind of sense of omnipotence you have with an article of furniture in your own house that you don't have when you go outside in your childhood and see that.

The second stage came when I was a little bit older, during the last years of grammar school or the first years of high school. There was this fan magazine stage when you suddenly realize you've learned enough about film, about the realities of the situation, to know that these are actors and they are doing stories. People join fan clubs and all that stuff. And you develop people you like, and don't like. And then the third stage is the stage when you begin to take the whole thing apart and look at it and put it together again. Anyway, that's pretty much what I said. It's not important. And I was attacked by Pauline Kael for stating these things, for putting them in such a theoretical framework.

I would say that my enjoyment of film today is much richer than it was even back in that first day when I ran into the theater because of everything I've learned about film, everything I've learned about film people and the process of making the film. In the beginning it was magical, it was a miracle. This beam of light was creating this other world. But now I know that there were all these crazy people, people in this place called Hollywood or other places where they make films, that there were all kinds of affairs going on, all kinds of controversy, that it was amazing, amazing that out of all this chaos and confusion great things could come out of it, or even coherent things, things with meaning and effectiveness. So that's pretty much the stage I'm in right now. I love film, and I have a great admiration for people in it, and the difficulties they have to make any kind of sense out of all the chaos

they inherit when they start on a film.

Molly: Well you and I both came to film in a pre-film school atmosphere. You are a decade older than I am, but when I went to college there were no film schools. Finally they were showing films, but art films, like Ingmar Bergman. This was really pre-Godard and Truffaut, pre-*Nouvelle Vague*. My first experience of a serious film, as I saw it — this was before we understood that Hitchcock was a great artist — my first experience of a serious film was a French film. This was in Richmond, Virginia. There was an art house which about twenty years after that went to porn, but at that time they used to show European films. I saw a film called *Diabolique*, which was a thriller. It was remade, as you may have seen: there was a Sharon Stone version some years ago. This was one of the most terrifying films ever, and it also took place in a girl's school, which was where I was at the time, so there were reverberations for me with these scary schoolteachers. And it was the French cinema, and I suddenly became interested in France, and interested in movies that had subtitles. Then I saw Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina* go to Paris. All of a sudden there was something, there was an awakening. It was the 1950s, so it was pre-feminist, pre-serious film criticism, but there were bubbles rising to the surface. I ended up going to France, and spending a year there, and in France people took films seriously. They didn't have the high-brow, low-brow, middle-brow divisions. The serious intellectuals in France wrote and thought about film, which hadn't yet happened in the U.S. Andrew was the one who really, I think, sort of single-handedly introduced that concept and application of serious theory to film. But they had the *Cinématèque*, so you could go and see revivals. There were very few revival houses in America at that time.

So I really came to thinking about film through French cinema. I ended up working in a place in New York called the French Film Office, where I put out a newsletter and bulletin on French films for American journalists. This was at the height of the *Nouvelle Vague*, and Godard and Truffaut were coming to this country, Agnes Varda, Alain Resnais. The New York Film Festival had just begun. The 1960s was when Andrew was writing his first review in the *Village Voice*, a complete rave for *Psycho*, in very intellectual terms, and this of course was unheard of in American film criticism at that time, to take

Hitchcock the great entertainer seriously as a film director. So things were really happening in New York, in this country. American directors were coming to be known as *auteurs*. Andrew, you may want to explain it in a word or two. *Auteur*: you want to just break in with that?

Andrew: I'll just break in to say that A.O. Scott wrote a recent article in the *Times* which is very interesting. I don't know if any of you have read it. It was a sort of a questioning of *auteurism*, questioning whether it's gone too far, whether people are extending it too far, too broadly, and everything else. But he credits the *politique des auteurs* to André Bazin, a great French critic. Now André Bazin was a great French critic, but he did not develop the *politique des auteurs*. It was François Truffaut in 1953, who wrote a pretty strange article called ``Une Certain Tendance du Cinéma Français." He was really criticizing a tendency in French cinema for the scriptwriters, for certain scriptwriters to dominate the cinema more than the directors did, and he was after particularly two villains in his mind, screenwriters Aurenche and Bost, to evaluate. It's a very complicated thing, and we don't have to go into it, but the point is he said it in 1953. Then André Bazin wrote an article attacking this theory, which was not a theory really, it was a policy: the policy of *Cahiers du Cinéma* to never give a bad review to a director they liked, and never give a good review to a director they didn't like.

Molly: The basic thing was that the director was the shaping force.

Andrew: The director was the shaping force. But that is something that every good critic, in France, England, or America, had already believed. And so there was nothing in that, but the argument I raised was based partly on Truffaut's argument, and partly Bazin's. The only thing I did was a very modest thing: I introduced the word *auteur* into the English language. ``Notes on the *Auteur* Theory in 1962" was the first time that anybody had used it in English. That's the only thing. But the nuances of the whole thing, that's still being debated. However, to get a little biographical, as Molly did with her introduction to film, I just want to note that I really stumbled into it. It was like the old joke about the girl in the funhouse in New Orleans. A customer asks her,

``What's a nice girl like you doing a place like this?" and she says, ``Lucky, I guess." That's my feeling about my coming into film. I'm just lucky, I guess, because I was going nowhere. I was struggling along in graduate school toward a Master of Arts degree at Columbia, for no good reason and getting academic deferments. This was during the Korean War, so finally I decided to drop out. I thought I had enough physical disabilities to be let out of the Army, but they were taking then anybody who could move, who could walk. So I found myself in the Army, which I didn't expect. But I stayed stateside: the Korean War was just ending when I got into the Army, and I stayed stateside. I was going to movies. There were three movies a week being shown and you could see them for free in the post theater, and for eight weeks I wrote a column in the *Fort Devens Dispatch*, which was basically a publicity column. All I was given was the title of the film, two of the actors, and a one sentence synopsis. How I could have used the *auteur* theory at that time! And I had to write little squibs about these pictures. It was really more publicity than anything else.

Then when I got out of the Army, I went to Teachers College. I thought I would teach high-school English. My writing was getting nowhere. I took one course. Roger Tilton was giving one course in the Center for Mass Communication at Columbia. This was 1954, the winter of 1954, and at that time I met a man named Jonas Mekas, who came to the class and said he was looking for an editor for his new film magazine, *Film Culture*. There was no money in it, but I talked to him and he said he'd let me review a film if I would do the editing. He had a lot of manuscripts, from European and Asian contributors, brilliant but in very bad English, and so I had to edit them. And then I reviewed my first film, which was in 1955, and that was the beginning of my career.

And then five years later — by this time I was working as a reader at Fox and doing other things — five years later I happened to bump into Mekas again. He was shooting a film in Brooklyn, and I happened to be working for the census in Brooklyn, of all things, and he said, ``Would you like to fill in for me for a couple of weeks in my movie column? I'm writing in a new paper called the *Village Voice*." At that time it was just eight pages. I said sure, and I walked in, sometime in 1960 with my first review, of *Psycho*, to an editor, Jerry Tallmer, who invented the term off-Broadway and Obies, and so forth, who was

more interested in theater than in movies, and who didn't know me from Adam. He was amazed to see me but he printed it, and we argued about it. He couldn't stand Janet Leigh's bra in the first scene. He felt there was something unreal about that. Anyway, I got a lot of hostile mail, which made my reputation at the *Voice*, and from that point on, from 1960 for 29 years, I just wrote for the *Voice*. And that was the way that I got started. But so much of it was luck. So much of it was just happening to be in the right place. I'm now teaching a seminar in criticism at Columbia, and some of the writing I'm getting from these kids is fantastic. I tell them, you're good enough right now. All you need is some luck. And that makes all the difference. So that's my story.

Molly: Don't you think that that moment was sort of the beginning of this revolution in the attitude towards film and taking it seriously? This was just before the beginning of having film courses in the academy.

Andrew: Tilton's was one of the first courses at Columbia that was given up to that point in America. There was somebody at NYU, but I can't remember his name. He was a terrible womanizer, and that kept him from getting tenure or something. He was giving very elaborate courses, but there was hardly anyone else teaching film. I had been reading a lot about film. A friend of mine, Eugene Archer, got a Fulbright. He graduated from general studies at Columbia, went to work at the *Times*, and got a Fulbright scholarship, because he entered from Texas, which improved his odds considerably. He got to France, and he began hobnobbing with these *Cahiers du Cinéma* types. I remember one year, about 1958, he wrote me a letter saying, ``Who the hell is Howard Hawks?" We had never taken Hawks seriously. I had seen most of Hawks's movies in all these revival houses during the time I was at Columbia, and that was the beginning of the *Cahiers* thing. And it kept going on and on.

Molly: Let's talk about where it's gotten to now. One of the things I became interested in was the treatment of women in the movies, and I wrote a book called *From Reverence to Rape* in the early '70s, because as I looked around it seemed as if women were disappearing from the screen. This was at the moment when feminism had been sort of

coming into the fore, and women were entering the professions, and all sorts of things were happening in the battle for women's equality, and yet, for some strange reason, in movies they were disappearing. My thesis, which went a bit against the grain of feminist thinking at the time, was actually they had been better served in the old days, under the Hollywood studio system than they were being served now, because now they were free agents. In the '30s and '40s you did have this very patriarchal system, and yet actresses certainly were of equal importance to the actors, and they had the same contracts, and they made three films a year.

Andrew: That was because women made up a large part of the audience then.

Molly: This is where I came against the grain of feminist thinking. I remember ***MS*** magazine and I had a sort of collision at that point, because they assumed that the bad old honchos of the studio system had oppressed and subordinated women, whereas now they were making all these great films, and it just wasn't true. I went on the Barbara Walters show, and another woman and I talked about the image of women in film. I was saying how they were ill-served by Hollywood, and they showed the tape, and Barbara Walters came on afterwards and said, ``I think they're paranoid, don't you?" John Chancellor, her co-host said, yes, I think they're paranoid. So nobody was ready for this idea at the time, that women were really ill-served. At the same time, how many of you are familiar with, I know the academics are, but how many of the students are familiar with an essay by Laura Mulvey called ``Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"? (no response) Well, I don't think we'll spend too much time on that.

Andrew: How many people have heard of Pauline Kael? (no response)

Molly: We don't want to get too much into that. Let's talk about movies.

Andrew: Let's talk about movies. What picture should have won the Oscar? (laughter)

Molly: Pauline Kael was one of these people who thought that movies should be fun. She was the film critic for the *New Yorker* for many years, and was very popular, but she insisted that she never saw a film twice. So she represented a sort of anti-academic position, that you shouldn't take film seriously, that you'd just see them once, and once you've had an opinion, it was in marble and you didn't change it. Whereas our feeling has always been that you change, films change. One of the most exciting things, I think, is seeing films again, and they become completely different. I mean, the way we saw them as children had so much to do with who we were then, and how we see them now, so it's an absolutely fluid process.

Andrew: It's a Heraclitean thing: you come out of the water in different places, you're a different person. And that sense of change is one of the things that makes us, both of us, a little bit suspicious of these rigid theories, these deconstructionists and people who don't add to the canon, who don't discover films. We discovered films, and the new people just reinterpret them, reinterpret the films we discovered. This is the advantage the rigid theoreticians have: they know, they are certain. It's a bit like religious fanatics. The fanatic: he is sure, he knows, he convinces you of that assurance. And we're not sure.

Molly: Getting back to Laura Mulvey for a moment, the idea that she formulated in a way — I think I discussed the same thing in my book, but not in a sort of theoretical way — was that she brought Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to bear, and she coined the term or she appropriated the term ``the gaze," and the idea that woman in classical cinema is always the object of the male gaze, that a woman is somehow created in this fetishistic way to satisfy male desire, or to allay his fears. And of course there is a lot of that. But the thing is, this was such a monolithic view. She saw all of cinema, or at least all classical cinema as an enactment of a kind of male aggression against the passive woman. But if you go to movies and see movies, this is always being belied and contradicted by the behavior of the women themselves. This is the kind of theory you have on paper, that all film will somehow conform to. But once you go to movies and see Carole Lombard playing one role, or Katherine Hepburn, the variety of these

women themselves contradicts this idea of wholesale male agency and male voyeurism.

Andrew: This is what Robert Warshow said, that the variety of faces and voices are comparable to literary tropes. In other words, that is where you get tremendous variation that makes it possible for us to take film very seriously. But to turn this thing around, I'd like to ask the women in this audience, how many of you think there is such a thing as a female gaze? I mean, how many of you look men over in a way that men are accused of looking women over?

Molly: Isn't Brad Pitt a love object? I think movies are always about men and women. This is one of the most fascinating things about them, that they are always defining and redefining sexual roles. Even the silent films of D.W. Griffith are always talking about the new woman, or the old-fashioned woman. It meant something in the '20s, and it means something slightly different today, so there's always this kind of push-pull thing going back in this battle of the sexes, and it's not a prefabricated grid in which people are fitted. Just thinking of roles today, what happened was there was a big dip in women's roles in the '70s. Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave, and women themselves no longer bought this idea of being discovered. There was this great thing in an earlier years of women wanting to be discovered at Schwab's drugstore, and brought to Hollywood. I'm afraid that's had a resurgence. But in the '70s, women wanted to do political things, and finally in the '80s and '90s, I think women have come back in, but still at a lesser level. The top stars are all male, the guys who get $20 million a picture, are all Tom Cruise or Bruce Willis or Harrison Ford, and it goes on and on and on.

Andrew: I think that's a little misleading, because I think they get to $20 million because they have a global reach. They are so popular of abroad, these Hollywood action movies, and that's something that women don't have. If you have a ``chick flick,'' it doesn't travel well, like musicals. Musicals died in this country because there was no money to be gotten from the international market. So it's an industrial phenomenon. Julia Roberts is the only female star today comparable to the many female stars there were in the '30s and '40s.

Molly: First of all, the action film is certainly formulaic. It doesn't need much dialogue, so every country can see it without losing anything in translation. And of course Hollywood is pursuing the 15-year-old male audience, so all these things work against good women's roles. They work against really good men's roles too.

Andrew: Most women don't spend all their time looking for the first action film they can see on a weekend, to give it a huge sendoff. They wait, and then they look at things on television, like all kinds of things on HBO and so forth.

Molly: Didn't it used to be that if couples went to the movies, women were the ones who decided where they went?

Andrew: How does it work with you guys?

Man in the audience: You fight about it!

Molly: One night hers, the next night his?

Man in the audience: No, mostly hers! (laughter)

Woman with the man in the audience: He goes to his film that he wants to see, and if I don't want to see it, I don't go.

Man in the audience: But most of the time, we end up going together.

Molly: This thing comes in waves, but right now we've got all these so-called ``chick flicks,'' which is like the ``weepies,'' a sort of derogatory term for romantic films, films that would interest women, and then the action movies, which is not a derogatory term.

Andrew: But very often we have what Raymond Durgnat called ``male weepies,'' you know, you have two guys crying. ``Let me take the bullet, let me die instead of you!'' This is the male equivalent of the female weepies. I'm actually sick of war films. I'm sick of action films generally speaking. I think that one of the things that has happened

with mainstream films is that the writing of dialogue no longer has much priority. It's mostly concept, special effects, and whatever, and melodramatic extremes. We mentioned *That Hamilton Woman*. Well of course I had a thing with Vivien Leigh, that's definitely the case, but it was in other respects an intelligent films. It had some intelligent acting, with Olivier and Alan Mowbray. And Gladys Cooper gave a very good performance. It was a historical film, but it had some blood and guts.

Molly: Also, in the earlier days the studio heads were ambitious. A lot of them were immigrants, and they weren't educated themselves, but they wanted to make films that would have prestige, have respect. Some of the adaptations were silly. They did one of *Anna Karenina*, which of course had a happy ending, so that Garbo, instead of falling in front of a train, went off with Vronsky. They did these sort of weird upbeat adaptations of tragic novels, but they wanted to do prestige projects, whereas now, even when films like *The English Patient* or *American Beauty* win Academy Awards, Hollywood producers don't even want to make movies like that, because they don't make enough money.

Andrew: Well, didn't the editor of the *Times* fire the cultural editor, and say we want less of Peking Opera and more Britney Spears? This is the editor of the *New York Times* saying that!

Molly: So when the *Times* capitulates to this kind of thinking, I don't know what kind of hope there is for Hollywood. And yet there is.

Andrew: Hollywood doesn't exist anymore. There are 140 movies being made every year, and only about 15 or 20 can qualify, you might say, as mainstream movies. The rest are Sundance and movies from what I call the Anglophone periphery: Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Scotland, Ireland, now even Wales, and foreign films, with or without subtitles, in English or in foreign languages. A great many Asian films and so forth. The choices are infinite, they're much wider than they used to be, but it's all very dispersed. But Hollywood itself has ceased to exist.

Molly: Also, you've got all these actors experimenting. I've just been doing something on Nicole Kidman, who I think is a really interesting actress, and maybe part of it is her being Australian, sort of coming off center, as Russell Crowe and a lot of these extremely talented people are. She's going to do a Lars von Trier film, and she's doing *The Hours*, the Michael Cunningham Pulitzer prize-winning novel, a sort of recreation of Virginia Woolf's life. Nicole Kidman is going to do that movie. So that's very unusual. There are not many Hollywood stars that would do that. I think even of *Moulin Rouge*, which is not my favorite movie, but was a very bold and risky movie for Nicole Kidman at the height of her powers to do something like that.

Andrew: I'm just curious, how many people have seen *Moulin Rouge*? There are a number.

Molly: How many liked it? (laughter) That's about the way it goes. Half the people love it, and half the people don't like it all. It's one of those movies.

Andrew: A lot of movies are like that now: the people either hate them or love them. There's one with Isabella Huppert — be still my heart! But I hate this movie she's in, *The Piano Teacher*. Has anyone seen it?

Molly: Have you even heard of it?

Andrew: It just came out. People either admire it or they hate it. I'm closer to the hating it side.

Molly: It is one of the most disturbing movies you'll ever see. It's about this woman who is a sado-masochist. I won't get into it, but it's really very upsetting. But that's also an extremely bold move by her to do this. I think it's something interesting when stars do unsympathetic roles. I think it's something brave and challenging. This one is so beyond, it's really antipathetic. She's really a hateful character.

Question: Is that by the director who did *Funny Games*?

Molly: Michael Haneke, yes. It's about a sadistic story. A lot of directors are making movies about sadism, but the directors themselves: I think Lars von Trier is sadistic. There something so without redemption in these movies, so punishing, so bleak.

Andrew: Most people play the game. If you do a film that's awful at the end, nobody will jump on it too hard, because you're being honest. This is what life is like. But if you do a movie that's positive, where people resolve their problems and somehow come together, people say, Oh it's sentimental, it's well done but . . .

Molly: Like, for instance, *A Beautiful Mind*. All the big sophisticated New York critics were all saying that this a sort of sappy Hollywood love story. Well, in fact the book — I don't know if any of you ever read the book *A Beautiful Mind* by Sylvia Nasar — is a great love story. It's a little more complicated than what you get in the film. I was looking over some stuff that had been written in my folder about feminist film criticism, and I discovered that I had forgotten that somebody wrote about me — this was in the '90s, referring to my book which came out in the '70s — that I was an uncritical celebrator of heterosexual romance. (laughter) Well, in the '70s, there was just romance. The word heterosexual was not problematic, like the word homosexual.

Andrew: Well, once I was reacting against an article in the *New York Times* magazine by somebody who was very self-pitying, a gay confession, and I wrote a piece in the *Village Voice*, of all places, called ``Heteros Have Problems Too.'' And the reaction was so outraged that I had to write a subsequent column, practically eating crow. I had to say, well, of course there was Oscar Wilde, André Gide, Marcel Proust, etc. And then I got a very strange review from a gay intellectual who said, ``You know, I hated that piece that Sarris wrote, but part of me responded to it, because the other piece, the gay apologia, was so whimpering. And he was right. But then the second column he did, he was running for cover.'' And he was perfectly right, I was running for cover. Because one thing I discovered was that so many of my closest friends, people in the film community, in the film buff community certainly, were gay, and I had hurt them. From that

day on, I realized that we were part of this tiny enclave of people, and this whole gay-straight thing was unimportant.

Molly: We're so immersed in the period in which we grow up, and we don't see it critically. We were brought up with the movies of the '50s, romantic movies, and that was the language I learned. The language of romance was a language it takes a lot to deconstruct. When I started talking about movies like *A Brilliant Career* — did any of you see that? It's actually based on a true story. Judy Davis is a writer and Sam Neill is her lover and proposes to her. She finally finishes her book, and she puts it in a mailbox. It's this exhilarating moment, where the writer has finished her manuscript, and she turns Sam Neill down. He's a landowner, and if she marries him she'll have to become the *chatelaine* and have all these responsibilities, and she wants to be alone to write. I would show this movie, and all these feminists, who had said ``We don't want any more happy endings, we don't want any more romance," were furious that Judy Davis didn't marry Sam Neill. There's such a pull, when you do grow up on these romantic movies. There's such a pull. You see this man and woman up there on the screen. They have such tremendous chemistry, you want them to come together. And so you say, ``No, no, no" we have to resist that, we have to take a more Brechtian approach.

Andrew: How many of you have ever seen Chris Rock, seen his stand-up comedy? Very profane, in the Eddie Murphy tradition, the Richard Pryor tradition. Well, one time he said something that really struck me. He had a couple of African-American women on this program, actresses or something. And he said to them, ``You know, if there were twenty girls and twenty boys in a class, all twenty girls would go for the same two or three guys." In other words, the selection process applies both to men and to women. I think it reveals something that I think people often forget in movies: almost everybody in movies is better looking than we are. And in a way this is completely unreal, except that this is my rationalization: the surface beauty of people on the screen is merely a projection of their inner quality for us outside. That external beauty is a projection of some kind of inner beauty, and therefore the reason that they're beautiful. I've argued this, and people say no, no, no, but it would be difficult to sit for two hours

looking at somebody who is not attractive or not photogenic. It's just too much punishment! And that's why only photogenic people are on the screen, basically. Even the so-called ugly people are photogenic, I believe.

Molly: They're not that ugly, really.

Andrew: They're not that ugly. It's like in that movie *Kissing Jessica Stein*.

Molly: I was thinking of one of the few times that we've done this together. We were in Key West at a film and literature seminar. *Frankie and Johnny* had just come out, and Andrew was celebrating the fact that Michelle Pfeiffer was in it, as opposed to Kathy Bates, who had done it onstage. And all the women there started screaming.

Andrew: They all seem to have seen the stage play. That's very unusual.

Molly: This is where you and I part company. I think Kathy Bates is fantastic.

Andrew: Well, I think she's fantastic too, but I don't want to sit and watch her for two hours!

Molly: A difference of opinion there. (laughter)

Andrew: How many of you have seen *Kissing Jessica Stein*? Well, they talk about ugly sexy: Harvey Keitel, Mick Jagger, James Woods. Those are very sharp choices. They are people who are sexy, and they are ugly.

Molly: But there's no equivalent for women, there are no women who are like that.

Andrew: No, ugly doesn't work with women.

Molly: No, there's a tremendous double standard in those two

categories.

Question: You're having a lot of fun with film these days, but the picture you're painting is sort of dismal. How does that affect you as film critics? Is your job one of constantly disapproving or saying bad things? Are you still able to maintain enthusiasms about current films?

Molly: Andrew picks and chooses what he's going to review, and when I write for the *Times*, I write about selected films. Recently I did something on a movie called *Crush*. It's not a masterpiece, it's Andie MacDowell and three women in their forties. It's really about what happens when one of them, Andie MacDowell, falls in love, and these three women are supposed to be so supportive. They sit around and talk about men, they can't wait for each other to find a man, and yet when Andie MacDowell does, it just about kills the other two. This is something that's not talked about that much in women's relations, about how bereft you feel when one woman marries and the two of you are left behind.

Andrew: I don't buy the assumption that you make that today movies are so awful. Every decade, every year from 1915, people have said that movies are awful, terrible. People think of the revivals: they think that back in the '40s, for example, or the '30s and '40s, one day we went to see *Casablanca*, and then we went to see *Gone With the Wind*, then we went to see *Double Indemnity*, and then we went to see *Sunset Boulevard*. The truth of the matter is that every time we saw one of these films, before we saw them we'd see ten bad movies. The number of bad movies you forget. Most things are bad. Most paintings are bad. Most books are bad. Most everything is bad. (laughter) The badness of everything is a fact of life that anybody who works in that field has to accept. And what we do is we look, we try to pick out the few good things, and there always are.

Molly: This is the fun thing. I mean talk about taking movies seriously: the more you know, the more you can appreciate, and you see some actor that you haven't seen, there's a performance there. We just saw *The Cat's Meow*, Peter Bogdanovich's new movie about a killing that took place on William Randolph Hearst's yacht in the 1920s, and

Kirsten Dunst, who I've seen in a few films, is so great. Marion Davies was Hearst's mistress, of course, and also an actress, and he kept putting her — the Susan Alexander part in *Citizen Kane*, as some of you know, is based on that — he kept putting her in these serious period roles in which she was dreadful. In the new film, Charlie Chaplin says ``You've got to put her in a comedy, she's a comedian." Of course, this was true. It's what she was, and the minute they started putting her in comedy, she just flowered. So you have Kirsten Dunst doing this performance in which he gets revenge on the whole perception of Marion Davies that Orson Welles has left us. This is a sort of intricate overlay of movie knowledge and movie performance that I think is one of those things that is yielded when you do know something about movies.

Andrew: When I was in the hospital, nearly dying of some mysterious ailment back in 1984, 1985, the people in the Museum of Modern Art sent me a triptych, three pictures, and with all their signatures underneath, and the three women were Margaret Sullavan, Vivien Leigh, and Greta Garbo. They were my three great loves.

Molly: So when I came to visit him, he said, ``Who are you?" (laughter)

Andrew: Anyway, these are the three. So you would think that every time I went to see a movie I would say, ``Oh, you're not Vivien Leigh or Margaret Sullavan." No, I love Renée Zellwegger, I love these new people. If I were in real life the way I am vicariously in movies, I'd be the worst *roué* that the world has been ever seen, and the worst Don Juan. This is what Bazin said, and which other people have said: the reason movies will never die is that they're not entirely an art form, that they draw from life, that what we go to see are new things in life.

In other words, film is not a language, it's a grammar. We have enough footage right now of everything: we could make films taking a sunset here, and a parting there, and a train scene there, and a plane scene there. But people don't want that, they want a new film, a new thing. Now there are films on New York that will not show the Twin Towers, that will show an empty space where the Twin Towers were. We want to face the reality of what has happened. You are still seeing

movies with the New York skyline in the background with the Twin Towers there. They are sort of ghostly, there is something that's gone now. But we want to change, we want new people.

Molly: The whole idea of the theory of the gaze, and fetishism, and so on. That is not what women have to cope with so much as what he has just confessed to, which is men needing an endless supply of new, fresh females. (laughter) We're much more loyal to male stars. Harrison Ford is a hundred years old, and he's still playing young men, but all these men have to have new women. The shelf life of women is much shorter than men, for this reason.

Andrew: Hoist by my own petard! I've confessed. Well, what do you want?

Question: Is the movie industry totally controlled by the audience and their desires? Are there any pioneers or rebels out there who say, I don't give a damn what the people want, this is what I want to do as an artist? Or is that not possible?

Andrew: Well, there are, but they have a hard time getting distribution.

Molly: Or they accept smaller distribution.

Andrew: People have done surveys, focus groups, and all that sort of thing. The reason that movies have taken the turn that they have is that most people, most people our age certainly, have stopped going to movies as a habit. When I was growing up, the whole family went to a movie. We went to the movies, we didn't go to a certain movie that critics had liked, we went to the movies. We usually got there in the middle of the picture, and we sat there to the end of that picture, then we sat through the next picture, then we sat through the part of the picture we hadn't seen, and then somebody would nudge us and say, ``This is where we cam in," and off we went. This was the basic pattern. There was nothing you could put on the marquee that would keep us from going into the movies once we decided that we were going to the movies. We went to the movies. We didn't go to this movie or that movie, or pick this one movie or pick that one. So there

was a ``habit audience" that was the underpinning of the movie industry. That habit audience has disappeared, except for young kids, people 18 to 24, the target audience, male kids, who want to see action films, and they go for the bloodiest, goriest film, or the one with the best coming attractions.

Molly: You went as a whole family. Now the appeal is to different age groups, different ethnic groups, teen audiences. There's a kind of niche marketing, so that there's never that sense of a homogeneous audience to which all movies can appeal.

Andrew: The thinking right now, the pitches right now are rock bottom, they're down to the bottom. If you're talking about the industry, if you're talking about big stars, names, people who get $20 million, they're not going to make *The Brothers Karamazov* or anything that's ambitious.

Molly: There are certain directors, like Woody Allen, that they all want to work with, so they'll take a huge cut in salary to work with him. And there are a few other directors like this that they will work with. I mentioned Nicole Kidman. So there are stars who are willing to work for non-Hollywood salaries.

Andrew: And I think there are some people, like Stephen Soderbergh and various people who work within a smaller niche. Martin Scorsese. People want to work with him, but heaven knows what will happen if his new film is a disaster.

Question: Do you by any chance write about animated movies?

Molly: Animated movies? Not so often. Well, *Shrek* we wrote about, because we just loved it, but it's not one of the genres that we see a lot of.

Andrew: Animation is growing, and it's making huge amounts of money, and it's getting better. It has this guaranteed child audience that none of the adult movies have necessarily. And at its best, it appeals to all levels, but it will never win an Oscar. That's why they invented the

special animation category, because most of the membership of the Academy are actors, and they're not going to vote for something that's going to put them out of work. But right now, it's a golden age of animation.

Molly: And also the Japanese animation industry is putting pressure on Hollywood.

Andrew: And also movies like the one you saw, *Waking Life*, can be made very cheaply and yet it has a kind of animated force.

Molly: I thought that last year went as usual. The first ten months there wasn't anything you wanted to go see, and then the last two months there were all these movies that were candidates for Academy Awards, things like *Gosford Park* and *Monster's Ball*. There were about twenty movies that were really worth seeing.

Andrew: Animation is also very successful in television, with *The Simpsons* and all those other things.

Molly: You can actually say things in animated films that you can't say in live-action films.

Andrew: You can get away with a lot more, particularly in language.

Molly: Language and situations.

Question: What sort of experiences have you had in terms of writing about someone or a film that was not favorable? Have you had confrontations and did it affect your later writing?

Molly: Well, you are always meeting the people that you said not nice things about. You never meet the people that you've said nice things about. I've never had any really unpleasant things happen.

Andrew: Mickey Rourke wrote me a letter one time threatening to knock my block off, and naturally I responded as any courageous critic would: I stopped reviewing his movies. (laughter) After all, I had

worked so hard to get my dental work done that I was not going to jeopardize it. But he's always picking fights with everybody. He's been trouble. But I like him actually. In *The Pope of Greenwich Village*, I liked him. But the only thing I complained about was that I couldn't understand what he was saying. Could he speak a little more clearly? I don't know why he got mad about that! But that's about the only time that people have said unpleasant things. The pleasant things: today I got a call. Last week in the *Observer* I said that Dorothy McGuire died last year and she was the only important person who was not listed in the *In Memoriam* section of the Oscars. I thought that she was a great actress, and I listed my ten favorite films of hers. Her career was a little spotty, but I thought that she was always one of the most underrated actresses. Today I got a call from a man, a journalist, who also worked in a studio, who dated her when many years ago, and he said how happy he was that somebody remembered her. That gave me a great deal of pleasure, that somebody who knew her well before and who liked her, who thought she was a wonderful woman. That kind of reaction I get makes it all worthwhile.

Molly: You don't have that much power as a movie critic to make or break a movie. It's not like writing about the theater or some things like that. And also, most of the people who make movies are out on the West Coast, so you don't run into them that much.

Andrew: And they make much more money than we do.

Molly: That's right, so they don't care about us.

Question: How do you react to movies made by people like Spike Lee and John Singleton?

Andrew: I was on a program one time with Spike Lee, and we got into it. I said he has a problem. Very often right in the middle of a movie he's making he tries to make an aesthetic statement. There's a kind of pretentiousness in what he does sometimes. I think the best film by an African-American director, possibly the most promising one, although he hasn't got good reviews for his latest movies, is Carl Franklin. I thought *One False Move* was one of the best movies by an

African-American director. Singleton is interesting. Years ago, when the first *Shaft* movies came out and the *Superfly* movies came out, I was very much for them, because I felt that this was a possibility for the African-Americans to take over, to take a part of these action things, and then the African-American intellectuals came out against these movies: ``Bad image, we don't want a bad image, we don't want this image." And I thought that that was a mistake. So consequently what you have now is all these excellent African-American actors playing second banana to the white action heroes. They're in every film, they play all kinds of parts.

Molly: I don't think that's so true any more.

Andrew: It's not so true. Don Cheadle I think is probably the best African-American actor, and he tends to be subordinate all the time.

Molly: Or Will Smith and Denzel Washington and Samuel L. Jackson.

Andrew: Yes, but they were all in films by white directors.

Molly: But I think that their parts are just rising and rising. I think that major progress has been made in the last few years for black actors and directors. Just like women. I mean there are not that many great women directors. They've been working and working, and there's not that much opportunity for them in Hollywood, but it's coming. I just think it's not happening as fast as we want it to happen.

Andrew: I think Spike Lee is in a unique position. He's become an official spokesman, and he has a political significance.

Molly: But he's also producing and sponsoring other blacks.

Andrew: He is also supporting other people, yeh. He is important. His first movie was quite fantastic. I think personally he's a better actor then he is a director. I think he's a very good actor, a very interesting actor, and I wish he'd do more acting then directing. That's just my opinion.

Question: You were talking about Truffaut and auteurism before. He was such a good storyteller, which may be why he was so effective. Who's picked up the mantle today?

Molly: I was thinking when Andrew was talking earlier about the way we used to look at movies and how young people that have grown up on television don't, and it may be that some thing in the art of movie narrative has been lost. Not just dialogue, but the whole structure of stories. I think young people don't mind a more disjointed story. Sometimes it can be more creative. You have these linear, layered narrative, like Altman's work — he's post-television — that are not the arc of the traditional narrative, but I think the whole discipline of writing that kind of story has faded. Although Truffaut and Godard aren't exactly the classic storytellers.

Andrew: Godard especially.

Molly: But even Truffaut. There the emphasis was on doing things with a kind of spontaneity, an anti-literary approach to film. It looks more literary today than it did then, because so much of the rest of film is not.

Andrew: A lot of young directors coming out now are brought up on MTV. The emphasis there is on jazzy cutting and special effects and games to play with time and space. You think about some of the classic old films, and how many of them showed places that were fixed, like Tara and Manderley, that people stayed in all their lives, through generations. This gives you a kind of stability in the locus, and the characters just flow through this stable space or this stable time or stable city, or whatever. Now, everybody's always on the move. You have so many films now where people are getting off one plane and getting on another. They don't even use trains anymore. And cars chasing each other, and this and that. So technically there is a kind of destabilizing mobility there, which makes a coherent narrative harder to sustain, particularly when people want the thrills of all this movement, which are very cinematic after all. It's harder to stay in touch with the character.

Molly: The idea of stability carries over into personal relationships, which are not stable any longer either. Once upon a time, you made a decision: you chose this person, and that was your life, that was forever. And now, you are constantly starting over, you are constantly breaking up and starting over, and that also works against narrative as we knew it.

Andrew: Something else, something I remember now from the '30s particularly. In the '30s, there was an enormous number of movies about what people did in work, the work they did. There were all kinds of jobs, not just police and firemen and so forth, but people who worked on telephone lines, people who worked in department stores. The locus was where people worked. Now we no longer have workers, we have consumers. Everybody is a consumer. And there's a sense that who wants to see people work? Truffaut himself once said that when he was very young he worked in a factory, and the last thing that he wanted when he went out at night was to go to a movie to see other people working in a factory. (laughter) People tend to want to escape, and they escaped with the Secret Service, and flying here and flying there, and violence and all this kind of thing. There are very few good stories anymore.

Question: You were talking about how disjointed the movies are. That's how postmodern literature is now, too. Everything is quick, quick, quick, jumping around.

Andrew: And the disjointed things are the things that get book awards, prizes, and so on.

Molly: Or you have a narrator that is completely unreliable. You have somebody telling the story and you are on very shaky grounds right from the outset.

Question: The old screen codes, where actors and actresses had to sleep in opposite beds . . .

Andrew: And the husband had to keep one foot on the floor when he sat up with his wife in bed.

Question: I came to narrative film in the early '70s, watching those old films when the codes were still in place. The dialogue, the scripts were so lively, because they had to fit their sexual reparteé and *double entendre* in so creatively. I became interested in film as a text about what we all really desire and what we want to do, but can't do it, can't show it. So those codes on profanity and codes on explicit sex were very interesting. Now of course we've seen those codes, for sex and violence, leak and seep, and now they seem to just be breaking open. I don't think we can go back, but maybe you could speak to this, to the Greek notion that we should put a veil over some of this and use the imagination, both for violence and for sex.

Andrew: We were talking about scripts before, about dialogue. There are a thousand ways to say no, but there's only one way to say yes. Very often, movies start where movies used to end in the past. You'd think some of our greatest literature has worked with its own production codes. There are no sexy bedroom scenes in Tolstoy, Dostoevski. So much great literature, so much great theater, does not transgress in this way, in this obvious way. Julia Roberts recently said why she will never go topless: because then it becomes a documentary, and she wants to stay in drama. Our whole theatrical tradition, despite the recent things on Broadway, is toward people being clothed, and the clothing they wear is part of their identity and character. And there's a kind of sanctity to that.

Molly: Also, I think there was more going on under the surface in these films. You see this in Hitchcock: you have the story on one level, but all sorts of feverish homoerotic or hostile, complex emotions on another level. I was struck by the Surrealist exhibit at the Metropolitan, and how much of it is uninteresting and a lot of it has become dated because it's all subtext. Everything there was going on in the world of the unconscious, which they rather naively thought could be bodied forth in explicit terms. You don't have these different layers. You don't have one layer where you have a story going on, and another where something is sort of inchoate, but now you have to spell it out. Once you spell everything out, it ceases to appeal to the imagination. There's nothing for the viewer to do. We talk about the passivity we felt toward

the movies of the old days but I don't think it was a passive experience, in the sense that there were different dynamics going on. Right now things are more blatant, overt, and one-dimensional. That's a generalization, because it's not true of a lot of films. Still, you don't want to bring back the past restrictions.

Andrew: You don't want to bring back the restrictions, no we don't. There's some nudity in a movie that I like that didn't do anything. I'm sure nobody has seen it: it's called *Maze*, and it's about somebody who has Tourette's syndrome. When the movie starts with him doing that, I thought, how long is he going to keep doing that? He does it all through the movie. But there's a point when Laura Linney poses nude for him, for his painting, and it's very exciting for that two or three seconds that they do it. But the point is that she doesn't sacrifice her character to do that. The characters remain intact. Now this couldn't have been done, under any circumstances, in the old days. But we don't lose all that much when everything else is genuine, when everything else is authentic, when the feelings are what are important. I think that's the answer. I think we don't have to go back, but we don't have to push the envelope too much further forward either.

Question: I knew you mentioned *American Beauty* earlier. Hard-core pornography is slowly seeping in to even our mainstream film values, as well as hard-core militaristic sado-masochistic violence that our culture seems to really be turned on by. These two form a magnetic field around certain films that the director and the scriptwriters capture and focus on. I thought *American Beauty* sort of held them in tension, without saying let's give in and transgress to a ridiculous extreme.

Andrew: You know, *American Beauty* had about four endings, and this ending they have now doesn't explain what the two kids are doing in the house, just hanging around. There's no tension or feeling. They weren't quite sure what to do. And the part I didn't like is the homophobe. I think it's a little too theoretical, the whole thing. It's worked out theoretically, but it doesn't make sense in terms of the characters, and I think that there is a lot of that going on now, that they figured out theoretically, but it isn't worked out in terms of the character or human being or something else. And that's the feeling I

have with a lot of things these days.