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James Agee

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James Agee : Agee on Film before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Agee on Film:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. ... only critic who could write as well as the best he reviewedBy SWGThe one and only critic who could write as well as the best he reviewed.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Poet as CriticBy R. KoppSince college, maybe before, my absolute favorite piece of criticism of any kind has been James Agee's "Comedy's Greatest Era." It appeared in Life magazine in 1949, at a time when Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon--not to mention folks like Ben Turpin and Mack Swain--were in danger of being completely forgotten by the general public; and Charlie Chaplin was being viciously attacked on all sorts of ridiculous trumped up political and personal grounds.Note that Agee's specific project was to demonstrate why the silent era of comedy and these specific comedians were "great." He didn't shy away from using the word, but he did strive to make it in this instance as concrete as possible. He recounted the old gags in such a vivid way that people who had never seen the films laughed out loud just reading about them; he deconstructed the build-up to each howler with a precision that would be the envy of any mechanical engineer or CSI forensic detective.These gags were scaffolded in a way that didn't simply make you titter or guffaw: they explained something deep and profound and essential and eternal about the human condition, and Agee wasn't afraid to say so. Maybe what was most remarkable was that these comedians spoke in a silent language that was universal and cut across every dividing line imaginable. Agee was quietly indignant that we might lose this legacy forever. The only way he knew to preserve it was to find the right words to help people understand what he himself felt so instinctively.He lovingly detailed what was there on the surface for all

to see but equally importantly he discovered a whole world of weird and wonderful living things lurking underneath. Agee found indelible ways to describe the persona of each performer. This is Agee on Langdon: "There was also a sinister flicker of depravity about the Langdon character, all the more disturbing because babies are pre-moral. He had an instinct for bringing his actual adulthood and figurative babyishness into frictions as crawling as a fingernail on a slate blackboard, and he wandered into areas of strangeness which were beyond other comedians." And this is Agee on Keaton: "No other comedian could do as much with the dead pan. He used this great, sad, motionless face to suggest various related things: a one-track mind near the track's end of pure insanity; mulish imperturbability under the wildest circumstances; how dead a human being can get and still be alive; an awe-inspiring sort of patience and power to endure, proper to granite but uncanny in flesh and blood." This is beautiful writing. Comparisons between the four comedians made clear their differences but also made us appreciate each one as a unique treasure. Even so, Agee was not above arguing their relative merits. "Of all comedians [Chaplin] worked most deeply and most shrewdly within a realization of what a human being is, and is up against. The Tramp is as centrally representative of humanity, as many-sided and mysterious, as Hamlet, and it seems unlikely that any dancer or actor can ever have excelled him in eloquence, variety or poignancy of motion." Now a reasonable person might object to this or any of Agee's other assertions, but because he builds his case from the ground up, based on direct observable phenomena, because he writes with the grace of a recording angel, no one could say that he hasn't made his case in the most persuasive manner imaginable. I believe that we only own ideas once we can articulate them. Until then, we're just borrowing them. Until we ourselves can articulate why a particular piece of art is great, we're really just borrowing the notion of greatness and there's no point trying to convert nonbelievers to our cause, however just. In "Comedy's Greatest Era" --reprinted here-- Agee found words for things so many of us felt but felt hopeless to describe. 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Critique of Film...and occasionally of Film Audiences. By Bryan Byrd The lion's share of 'Agee on Film, vol. I', is devoted to James Agee's work as a columnist for 'The Nation', where he wrote about film from 1942 to 1948. It isn't exactly clear if this volume contains every column he wrote for that magazine - nowhere is it mentioned one way or the other, and there are gaps in the dates attributed to the entries. That may be only because he didn't contribute to every issue, but it would be nice to know if this is all the material from this source - an author who rates the Library of America treatment rates a complete collection. Other sections of this volume include a few of Agee's weekly film reviews for 'Time Magazine' from 1941 to 1948, some miscellaneous articles for 'Partisan Review' and 'Sight and Sound', and two 'Life Magazine' features - 'Comedy's Greatest Era' and 'Undirectable Director'. The first of these features deals with the comedians of silent film - Chaplin, Keaton, Langdon, and Lloyd; the second concerns John Huston. Those are the nuts and bolts of the collection, so to speak, which doesn't address what value there might be in a book of mid-century film criticism, especially one concerning pictures which are either forgotten, or only appreciated anymore by niche viewers. In the world of DVD though, many of these films are probably more accessible now than when Agee was writing his column. From that perspective, there is undoubtedly some intrinsic value to these reviews for those interested in this era's film - not only is there the novelty of reading a contemporary opinion, but there may be films that Agee discusses that modern critics and reviewers gloss over due to the overwhelming amount of material to cover. But the book wasn't created to function as a film guide, even if it could be used that way. It is film criticism, though today it seems to be a peculiar brand of it. I am too used to criticism that is concerned with explaining what it is I should be getting out of the film - Agee, instead, is like a well-informed friend who has accompanied you to the theater and commiserates with you over the failure of the picture to meet its potential. That he can by turns commiserate with droll wit or short, acidic remarks makes him immensely entertaining as he does, though it's probably best read in small doses lest the pungency wears off. A few examples: On 'Carnegie Hall': 'the sickest and sourest mess of musical mulligatawny I have yet had to sit down to, a sort of aural compromise between the Johnstown flood and the Black Hole of Calcutta.' On 'Tycoon': 'Several tons of dynamite are set off during this movie; none of it under the right people.' On 'The Egg and I': 'Marjorie Main, in an occasional fit of fine, wild comedy, picks the show up and brandishes it as if she were wringing its neck. I wish to God she had.' At this point, the unfortunate impression I've probably left you with is that Mr. Agee was in the business simply to toss out snarky remarks and sniff at everything put before him - that impression would seriously shortchange his contributions. He did have high standards, yes - but he also loved the entertainment value in film too. There are far more examples where he admonishes a film in one breath but lifts it up in the next. In fact, from these articles, one of Mr. Agee's most apparent attributes is his even-handedness when evaluating a film. But digging somewhat deeper, past the book's purported subject, it's obvious that Mr. Agee looked at the world with an honest eye too. Since the medium of film is a reflection of the society around it, Mr. Agee often wasn't only critiquing the film, but the audience that it was directed at as well. Considering the time that these columns appeared, it should be plain that he was writing during a period of extreme emotion and action - then, as now, various forces were dedicated toward advancing certain viewpoints, viewpoints that may have seemed emotionally justified, yet morally compromised. Mr. Agee stood up to these popular cheerleading efforts, basically remarking that there is still some swill we should not swallow. In two fantastic examples he comments on the manipulation efforts of certain films to whip up a frenzy of emotion - in these particular cases they concern the defeated nations of WWII, but I could not help thinking of our last decade as in some ways they seem

startlingly similar. In one, a Russian film titled 'The Rainbow', which chronicled atrocities in the Ukraine and subsequent calls for vengeance, Agee voices his concern not about the desire for revenge, but the advisability of putting it on film. 'I wonder,' he says, 'whether certain dreadful events, of the sort this picture is full of, are not so incalculably rich in the possibilities of moral and aesthetic blackmail that they can never be represented maturely or even undeceitfully, and so had better not be represented at all...Indeed, few films ever made have so vigorously seized the spectator by the throat and so implacably insisted, with one unprincipled bang over the head after another, that he turn himself into the wildest animal possible, and mistrust and hate with all his might any lingering question which troubles him about his obligations to do so.'The other instance does not involve a particular film, but instead the footage coming out of liberated Europe in the final stages of the war, when the true extent of the horror was appearing before the American public for the first time. The footage as presented, he believed, was another call for vengeance, and Mr. Agee's response is a brilliant piece that few will ever read, or reading, appreciate.'The passion for vengeance is a terrifyingly strong one, very easily and probably inevitably wrought up by such evidence (of atrocity), even at our distance. But however well aware I am of its strength, and that in its full immediate force and expression it is in some respects irrelevant to moral inquiry, I doubt that it is ever to be honored, or regarded as other than evil and in every direction fatally degrading and destructive; even when it is obeyed in hot blood or in a crisis of prevention; far worse when it is obeyed in cold blood and in the illusion of carrying out justice.'At the risk of making a too long review even longer, I'll simply add that it isn't necessary that one agree with his sentiments in all cases, it's the fact that I so rarely get an opportunity to read discourse like his that when I do find it I want to bang people over the head with it, with one unprincipled bang after another. Do I recommend it? Yes, very much so, provided one remember that this is still primarily a book about an entertainment medium, and despite several electric passages like the ones I've quoted, the overwhelming majority of the entries in the book reflect a lighter disposition, one more suited to musicals and westerns and comedy films. According to its front matter, the Modern Library edition of 'Agee on Film' reprints the same material found in this older version, with the exception of introductions by Martin Scorsese and David Denby. While Denby's comments are worthwhile, were I in need of this volume, I would probably look to this Library of America version, which also includes Agee's script for 'Night of the Hunter', uncollected film writing, and journalism pieces.

Agee on Film: Reviews and Comments by James Agee 432 pp. James Rufus Agee was an American author, journalist, poet, screenwriter and film critic. In the 1940s, he was one of the most influential film critics in the U.S. His autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family* (1957), won the author a posthumous 1958 Pulitzer Prize. Endorsed by W.H. Auden. Keywords: AMERICAN FILM HISTORY AGEE JAMES