

# FILM COMMENT

SMART ABOUT MOVIES | PUBLISHED BY THE FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

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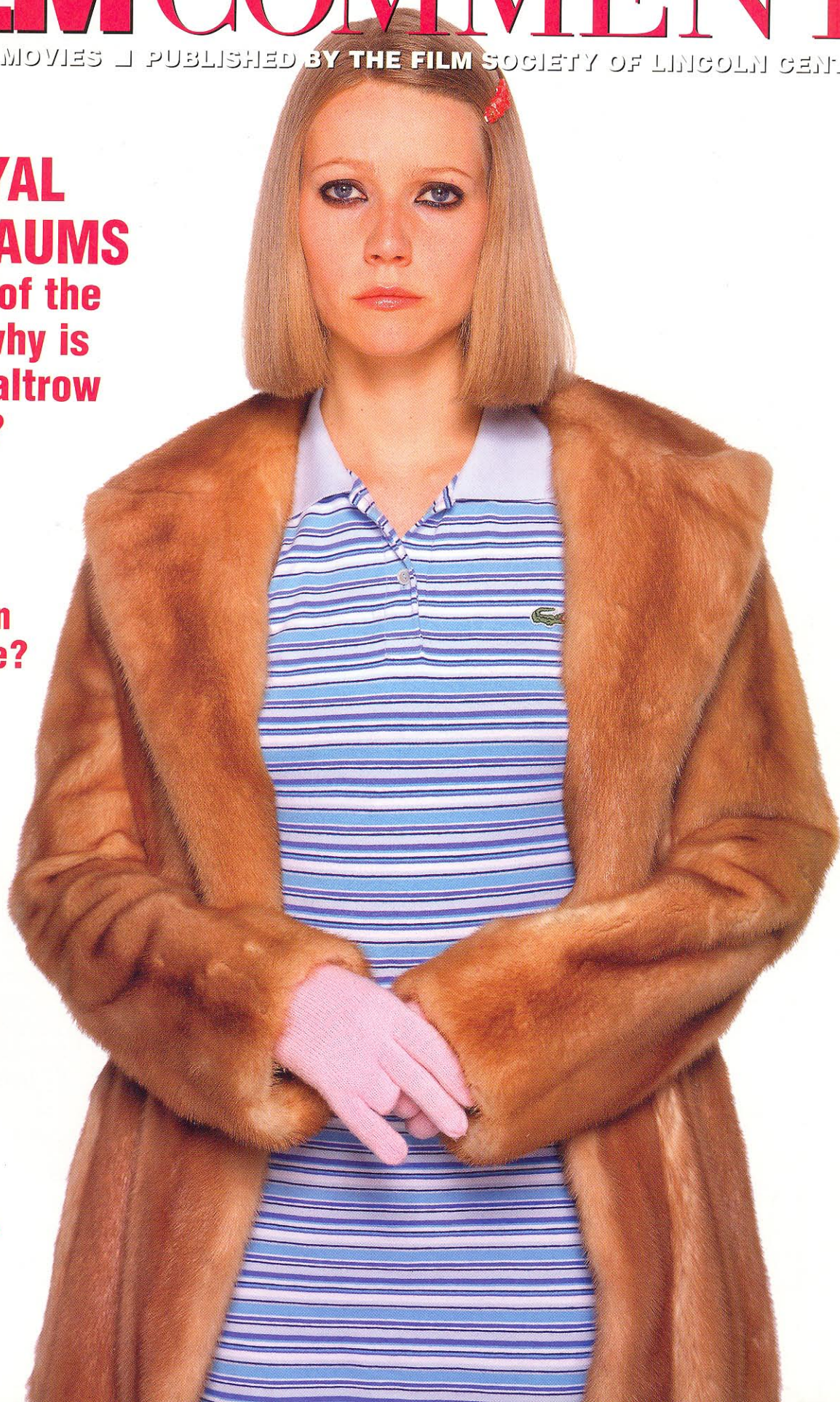
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# Pauline Kael, 1919–2001

I've always feared Pauline Kael's death, almost from the day I first met her. At first my reasons were simple and selfish; later they became more complex.

I met Pauline the summer of 1967 in New York City. As a college student I'd become interested in "cinema," specifically the European films of the Sixties. I'm not sure if it was because of their extraordinary vitality or because my church (and consequently my college, Calvin) had proscribed motion picture attendance and other "worldly amusements." Probably the latter. Revolt was in the air, and advocating movies was a way to be simultaneously an artist and a rebel. Definitely more prestigious than drinking, vandalism, or shoplifting, my previous forms of rebellion.

The problem was, there was no way to see foreign films in Grand Rapids, Michigan. (The local soft-core theater had attempted a run of Bergman films; it petered out.) So I saved my money and applied for summer courses at Columbia's film school. I stayed at John Jay, worked in the cafeteria, and took introductory courses in film history.

One night, after a European film history course, I found myself sitting as usual at the West End bar (the New York drinking age was 18). Pauline's second book, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, had just come out in paperback, and I was in a pitched discussion with the fellow beside me. We were both mad for the book. "So," he said after he returned from a bathroom break, "let's go see her. You want to?" His name was Paul Warshow. His father, Robert Warshow, had been a film critic for *The Nation*, writing seminal articles on the Western and gangster films. Robert Warshow had died young, and Pauline had been a friend to Paul ever since. A day or two later I got a message from Paul; he had spoken with Pauline, and we were going to her apartment for dinner.

I remember that first evening as vividly as a first date. Sitting around an oak table, beneath a spider-patterned Tiffany lamp, we ate and drank and argued: the quintessential Kael experience. I had seen only a couple dozen films but had strong opinions. I couldn't understand how she could champion *L'Avventura* but not *La Notte*. She found my advocacy of Buñuel and Bergman

quaint. I thought she was being harsh; later experience made me realize she was being kind. Pauline was then writing for *The New Republic*. She had recently reviewed *Masculin-Feminin* after it had lasted but a week at the New Yorker theater. Her review, blown up and mounted outside the movie house, brought Godard's film back for a successful run. Her bully pulpit techniques, the ones she'd honed at the Berkeley Cinema Guild, now worked in New York: she was on the cusp of exercising her clout. That headiness, that evangelical purpose, permeated the room.

The hour grew late. Paul Warshow left. Having drunk excessively, I ended up on the sofa. The following morning, after scrambled eggs and toast, she escorted me out. "You don't want to be a minister," she told me, "you want to be a film critic. We are going to keep in touch."

Thus I was ushered into the Paulettes. I saw her again that summer and corresponded after returning to Calvin College, sending her articles I'd written for the college paper. She had offered to help me get accepted at UCLA film school. UCLA was then, as now, very difficult to get into, the acme of film schools, but she was friends with its head, Colin Young. She assured me that her word would have weight.

Those were the days when I would go to bed at night and pray to God to keep Pauline alive. I dreaded picking up the paper and reading she'd died. She was my only way out of Calvin, the Christian Reformed Church, and Grand Rapids. If she died I'd be trapped there forever! Please God, just let her live another year. I won't ask anything else.

Well, she lived, I was accepted at UCLA, and my life changed. She helped me get a weekly reviewing gig at the *LA Free Press*. Like her other acolytes, I read her religiously, sent her everything I wrote, and waited for her call. The phone would ring. Pauline, in that passionate, bullying voice, would explain that such-and-such a film (*La Chinoise*, for example) needed our support and to the barricades we'd run.

Pauline was a complex mentor. On one hand, she infused your life like a whirlwind, dominating your thinking, affecting your

# My Family Drama by Paul Schrader

personal relationships, demanding fealty; on the other, she could not respect anyone who would not stand up to her. Love her too little and she attacked you, love her too much and she disregarded you. It was a formula for heartbreak, a heartbreak I think the acolytes felt more deeply than the mentor. Mine came in two stages.

The first was Christmas 1971. I had flown to New York to visit her. Even though I was increasingly influenced by the structuralist criticism of *Screen* magazine in London, I still considered her my mentor. I had been writing criticism for several years, editing a film magazine and working on a book. I was ready for the next step. At that time, newspapers and magazines around the country would solicit Pauline's recommendations before hiring a film critic; she was the clearinghouse. She explained that she was thinking of me for a paper in either Chicago or Seattle; Seattle, she felt, would be best. It was an arts town—a movie town, a serious town. I could develop a readership. I was in doubt. I had never made a living as a writer. Yet I was torn. I explained to her that I'd been experiencing some personal turmoil and had been thinking about writing a screenplay. If I left Los Angeles, I said, I was afraid that possibility would be gone forever. If I didn't try now, I never would. She was unmoved: "I need an answer." I asked her if I could have a week to think about it (it was the holidays after all). She said no. She needed my answer now. I said something to the effect, "If you need the answer now, the answer would have to be no." Silence. Some cold chitchat. My time, I realized, was up. I excused myself, left, returned to my hotel room, and made a plane reservation for Los Angeles. On the



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plane home I thought to myself, "Well, you fucked that up. You're no longer a film critic. You better try to be a screenwriter."

The second break was in 1979. I was preparing *American Gigolo* at Paramount. Pauline also had an office on the lot, having been brought out by Warren Beatty to develop scripts. (Warren is the master of patient seduction. He is also the master of patient revenge. In manipulating Pauline, the critical *bête noire* of commercial Hollywood, he accomplished both.) I had seen her a couple times in the intervening years. I'd sent her the script of *Taxi Driver* and had dinner with her and Brian DePalma at the Algonquin after the film's release. She'd seemingly forgiven me for forsaking criticism. Now I was hearing disturbing stories. She'd told David Chasen, a vice president at Columbia, that I was a good writer but a terrible director. I asked her to lunch on the lot. I explained that she was free to say anything about me she wished in print, but when she badmouthed me at a cocktail party she was not acting as a critic but as a Hollywood insider. And was thus my enemy. The break was then complete. Communication ended. I used to look forward to her comments. Now I appreciated when, for whatever reason, she chose not to review a film I was involved in.

I began to fear her death anew. My mother had died in 1978, and I blamed myself for not expressing my love for her until after it was too late. What if this ultimate family drama were to be reenacted? What if Pauline, my second mother, the enabler of my creative life, were to die before I had a chance to express my gratitude?

Fortunately, an opportunity for rapprochement availed itself ten years later. Not all family dramas end in silence and darkness. Terry Rafferty, *New Yorker* film critic, moved near my country house in Chappaqua. He mentioned Pauline, and I asked if he would call her, speak to her on my behalf. Terry arranged for us to drive up to Great Barrington and visit Pauline. I got out of the car with trepidation, walked toward her rambling brown Victorian. Terry trailed thoughtfully behind. She appeared on the porch, smaller than I'd remembered, and opened her arms. After a sustained embrace she said to

me, "I saw your film, *Comfort of Strangers*. I liked it. You've become a good director." I didn't care so much if she thought I was a good director; what mattered was that she cared for me.

Over the last decade I visited Pauline most summers. One occasion stands out. I was returning from Canyon Ranch in the Berkshires; I called and said I'd like to stop by. I knew she had just returned to Great Barrington after two operations in Boston. She said she wasn't fit for company. I said I would stop by nonetheless. Her daughter Gina ushered me up to Pauline's bedroom, and I was taken aback by her appearance. Always small, she now seemed skin and bones. I could encompass her wrist between my thumb and forefinger. I pulled up a chair and began time-honored bedside chatter: how are things, fall is early, blah, blah, blah. But she would have none of it. She wanted my opinions on movies. I spoke in gentle tones, clearly a mistake. Retorts shot from her mouth like spinning razor blades, adjectives zipping past my head, adverbs cutting my bare arms, clauses battering my torso. Ever formidable. I told her the thing I had never told my own mother on her deathbed. I told her that I loved her.

Two years ago, on her 80th birthday, there was a convocation of the tribes in Great Barrington. Pauline had always resisted attempts to honor her. (Once, Altman, Bertolucci, and I attempted to manage a tribute at the Museum of Modern Art. Pauline firmly declined. "I'm too small to put on a pedestal," she told me by phone.) Now Gina had convinced her to have a birthday fest. Her sister came from Berkeley. As did three generations of acolytes, most, if not all, with emotions as conflicted as my own. From the first generation, there were David Denby, Joe Morgenstern, and I; from the second, Terry Rafferty and Meredith Brody; from the third, David Edelstein (and others I've neglected to mention).

James Hamilton took a group photo and mailed it to all the participants. It hangs in my office.

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*Paul Schrader is a director, screenwriter, and former critic. He last wrote for FILM COMMENT on the films of Budd Boetticher.*