

A SHARED CINEMA: MICHEL CIMENT - CONVERSATIONS WITH N.T. BINH

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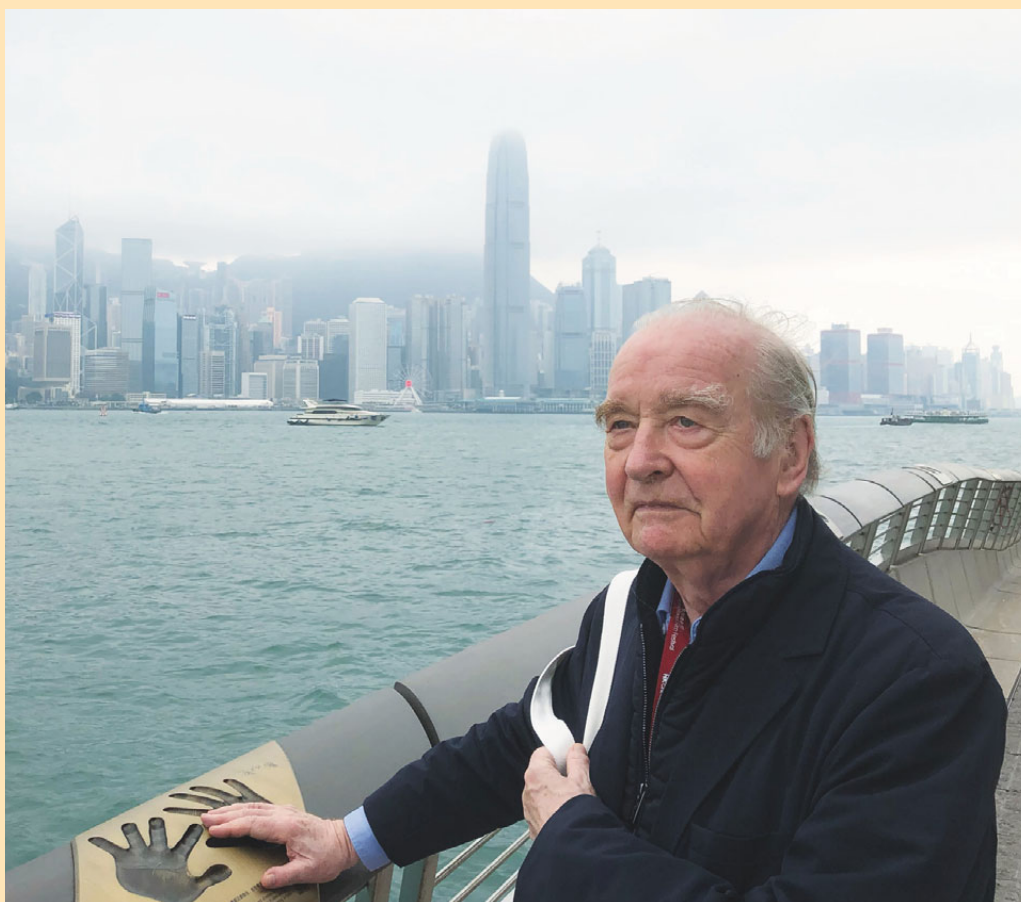
Michel Ciment, who died last year at the age of 85, was from 1966 chief editor of the French cinema magazine *Positif*. In this book-length series of conversations with the critic N.T. Binh (who writes under the name Yann Tobin), originally published in French in 2014 as *L. Cinéma n partag* and fluently translated by Paul Cronin, Ciment looks back over his long life of devotion to the movies and shares his insights, passions, memories and even in some cases – since he makes no pretensions to infallibility – his misjudgements.

Positif has long enjoyed playing its role as the polar opposite of the no less influential French movie magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. *Cahiers*, the home of such critics turned directors as François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Éric Rohmer and Jean-Luc Godard, became famous – one might well say notorious – in the 50s and 60s for its oracular pronouncements on the ‘*politique d saut urs*’, boosting the work of such supposedly underestimated filmmakers as Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, Nicholas Ray and Howard Hawks, besides contemptuously dismissing the tradition of the French ‘*cinéma d qualité*’ (otherwise written off as the ‘*cinéma d papa*’).

Ciment, whose open-mindedness shines through every page of this book (*‘Ev ryon can be wrong,’* he warns, emphatically not excluding himself), can’t resist now and then teasing the rival magazine for its rigid party line. Auteurism he describes as “the same old rehashed falsehood, which stems from Godard’s audacious, self-promotional outbursts”. He also takes aim at “Truffaut’s famous aphorism that the words ‘cinema’ and ‘English’ are incompatible”, citing the work of Michael Powell, Carol Reed, Alexander Mackendrick, David Lean, Karel Reisz and half a dozen others. “The French,” he adds, “think the English are homogenised and conformist, when in reality they’re really quite wild... There’s no doubt that British cinema has played an important role in my life.”

This magazine comes in for a few friendly sideswipes, too. Ciment, who spent time in London in the 50s and spoke fluent English, recalls *Sight and Sound* as “an excellent quarterly... not at all partisan like *Cahiers* or *Positif*,” but noted “a lack of passion” in the contributions. “*Sight and Sound* did an excellent job of dealing with film history, but there was no real excitement behind any of it.”

There’s certainly no lack of excitement in Ciment’s often provocative opinions.



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BOVE
Michel Ciment in Hong Kong in 2019

“Keep controversy alive!” he exhorts. “I’ll always kick out at things.” He doesn’t hesitate to note the limitations even of those filmmakers he admires. “Bresson is a genius,” he observes, “but all he ever does is ‘Bresson’.” He can’t do anything else.” He’ll also readily champion a lesser-known French filmmaker like Claude Sautet (*Class tous risqu s*, 1960; *César t Rosali*, 1972; *Un Co ur n hiv r*, 1992) over the far more celebrated Truffaut. “Tell me,” he asks, “which of his films are bad? There are some less accomplished than others, but a bad Sautet film – I don’t know of any.... Meanwhile there are Truffaut films that are duds.” A lover of classic Japanese cinema, he once observed: “One speaks about the world of Ozu, of Kurosawa, of Naruse; one does not speak about the world of Mizoguchi because Mizoguchi is the world.”

During his long life Ciment was privileged to spend time with many of the great directors, not least Elia Kazan, Francesco Rosi, John Boorman (“a delightful man”), Joseph Losey, Stanley Kubrick, Theo Angelopoulos and Jane Campion (“one of the greatest filmmakers in the history of cinema and a director whose tastes align exactly with my own”). Each of his conversations with them became a book. He also published *Pass - port pour Hollywood*, featuring interviews with Billy Wilder, John Huston, Joseph Mankiewicz, Roman Polanski, Miloš Forman and Wim Wenders.

Ciment also made documentaries on Kazan, Wilder and Joseph Mankiewicz. He was a tireless attender of film festivals around the world, serving on the juries at Cannes, Berlin, Venice and Locarno,

and in 2003 acted as guest programmer for the 46th San Francisco International Film Festival. For many years he held a post teaching American studies at the University of Paris. His exceptionally wide internationalist tastes he ascribed partly to his background. His father Sandor was a Hungarian Jew who came to Paris in the early 1920s, narrowly escaped the Nazi round-up in 1942 and took refuge with his son in a village in Normandy. Other members of the family had moved to England or to Argentina.

Perhaps because of this, Ciment suggests, “almost everyone I’ve been drawn to is also in some way a migrant or an exile”. He cites Kubrick, who “came from America to live in England – like Losey, but under very different circumstances. Kazan is an Anatolian Greek who emigrated to the United States. Wilder and Lang both left Vienna via Germany and finally reached Hollywood via Paris. All of this resonates deeply with my internationalist sensibilities. I have never felt stuck within the boundaries of French culture, although it has been a crucial part of my life.”

Browsing through this absorbing book, one is constantly surprised by new insights, challenging or humorous – and often both at once. Towards the end we find Ciment’s ‘Seven Cardinal Virtues of the Critic’, prefaced by “what *not* to do”: “First and foremost, the temptation to be avoided at all costs... is to want a film to be something other than what its author set out to make.... What should absolutely be avoided is discussing a film that exists nowhere but in the critic’s mind.” Sounder advice would be hard to find.