The Library of America Interviews
Phillip Lopate about Writing New York
and American Movie Critics

In connection with the publication in paperback in January 2008 of two volumes that Phillip Lopate has edited for The Library of America—the updated and expanded edition of Writing New York and the expanded edition of American Movie Critics—Rich Kelley conducted this exclusive interview for The Library of America e-Newsletter.

Sign up for the free monthly e-Newsletter at www.loa.org.

Reading Writing New York is a lot like visiting the city. You have to decide what to see first. You can read it through chronologically, or you can chart a path that focuses on sites of the city that have disappeared, or on memorable characters, or on different neighborhoods. But everyone has a few must-see sites. If you were to lead a tour through your book, which are your “must-see” pieces? Or, if that isn’t a fair question, would you lead us on, say, three separate thematic tours?

You’re right, it isn’t a fair question to ask me to pick my favorites. My job and passion as an anthologist is to compose a symphonic whole, in which each piece seems necessary and loved, at least by me. But I will propose three tours. The first might be called Small World, and conveys the degree to which New York culture in the early nineteenth century was still a small pond, where everyone ran into everyone else. So the actress Fanny Kemble was introduced to both Mayor Philip Hone and the ex-grocer autobiographer Grant Thorburn, and Walt Whitman recalled seeing Kemble act, and man-about-town author Nathaniel Parker Willis knew fellow-writers Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving, and Willis’s sister was the columnist Fanny Fern.

A second tour, which might be called Low to High, would take us through the seedy Five Points ghetto described by both Charles Dickens and Jacob Riis, and the poorhouse and Asylum for the Insane on Blackwell’s Island observed by Margaret Fuller, through the lower-middle-class/bohemian strivers of Willa Cather, Bernard Malamud, and A. J. Liebling, on to the tony townhouses and
cocktail parties of Edith Wharton, Louis Auchincloss, Dawn Powell, Weldon Kees, Mary McCarthy, and Joan Didion.

The third tour might be called Outer Borough and would encompass the writings of Henry David Thoreau in Staten Island, Edgar Allan Poe and George Templeton Strong responding very differently to a burgeoning Brooklyn, Henry Miller and Kate Simon growing up in Brooklyn and the Bronx respectively, and E. L. Doctorow taking us to the Queens World’s Fair, ending with Vijay Seshadri’s poem “North of Manhattan.”

American Movie Critics is well-named. It focuses on critics more than criticism and includes a short profile introducing each writer. Some critics, I suspect, are included because they are historically important and others because they continue to be influential. Which writers have had the greatest influence on today’s film critics?

Of the Fifties and Sixties veterans, Pauline Kael continues to have a profound influence, and after her, I would say Andrew Sarris for his historical overview, Manny Farber for his unorthodox views and prose style, and Roger Ebert for his populist, huge media presence. Of the next generation, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, with their interest in world cinema and experimental work, have served as models for many up-and-coming film critics.

It’s been ten years since Writing New York was first published. For this reissue in paperback you updated and expanded the selections and included a new postscript. What did you add and why did you add it?

I added three pieces: a poem by Vijay Seshadri, Colson Whitehead’s introduction to his book The Colossus of New York, and the first chapter of Don DeLillo’s Falling Man. All three are by highly-regarded writers whose work I personally admire; all three respond in some way to the changes wrought in New York City in the last decade, including the attacks on the World Trade Center and the influx of new immigrants and the diverse cultures they have brought to the literary mix.

Many of the pieces in American Movie Critics deal with individual films, yet I find the essays that illuminate a genre to be the most satisfying. Essays like Susan Sontag’s “The Imagination of Disaster,” Robert Warshow’s “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” or Molly Haskell’s “The Woman’s Film.” Aren’t these the true test of a critic?

Not necessarily—no more so than critiquing a single film. But I can well understand your enthusiasm for these essays on genre: they’re so rich, they...
operate on such a high analytical, synoptic level, they pull together so many strands into a concise statement. I would also add the genre essays by Pare Lorentz on documentaries, Lincoln Kirstein’s “Dancing in Films,” Geoffrey O’Brien (“The Italian System”), J. Hoberman on “Bad Movies,” and Brendan Gill on “Blue Movies.”

I have to agree with Garrison Keillor, who remarked in his New York Times review of the first edition of Writing New York in 1998 that the diary entries of George Templeton Strong and Philip Hone (especially Hone) are so vivid that selections from the literary wits are “unreadable by comparison.” Was selecting from diaries and letters different and perhaps more difficult than choosing which literary excerpt to include?

It was different, not always more difficult. Let me first say that New York was unique in having had an unbroken span of nineteenth-century diaries by two superlative journal-keepers, Hone and Strong. I actually think Strong is a much more polished and intriguing writer than Hone, and it was a thrill for me to cull from his thousands of diary pages a sort of novella’s worth of exciting material—the 1860s’ Draft Riots are especially involving and dramatic, but then he also comments on the Prince of Wales’s visits, musical events, the growth of Brooklyn. Someday I would like to edit a volume of Strong for The Library of America. In any case, these diary selections (Dawn Powell’s journals were another stimulating challenge) allowed me to work with the source material in a creative way, without altering a word of the texts, and arrive at a quintessential dual portrait of the writer and the city.

For the new paperback edition of American Movie Critics you added three movie critics: Stephanie Zacharek, Nathan Lee, and David Bordwell. Why these three?

I wanted to show that the story of American film criticism is ongoing, still vibrant, still in flux. Obviously I was limited in terms of the number of pages I could add to an already chunky volume, or I might have added twenty critics! But I wanted my choices to reflect Internet criticism (an area we had neglected in the hardback edition) and the influence of other media on film. Stephanie Zacharek and Nathan Lee are two respected, skillful, knowledgeable younger critics, and I have always found David Bordwell an impressive writer/scholar. The fact that Bordwell had started a blog gave me the opportunity to honor his work at the same time as illustrating how the Internet might be changing the character of film criticism in subtle ways.
Putting together Writing New York had to involve an arduous process of discovery, deliberation, and perhaps even transformation. How did you become the editor of this magnificent volume and did you encounter any surprises or realizations as you pulled the selections together?

There’s no question that editing Writing New York was a great adventure for me. I think I was selected for the job partly because I have always featured the city so prominently in my own writing (novels, poetry, personal essay collections) as a prominent character. I am known as an unabashed champion of New York, and of urban life in general. I had served on various committees of the Municipal Arts Society and as one of the “experts” or talking heads interviewed for Ric Burns’s PBS series on the history of New York. I also had the experience of editing a successful, door-stop anthology, The Art of the Personal Essay, which prepared me for the job of ploughing through hundreds of books and journals in search of vibrant material. Some of the surprises for me included the belleslettres pleasures of Nathaniel Parker Willis and James Huneker, the variety of Strong’s diaries, the literary contributions of visitors such as Paul Morand and Stephen Graham, and the priceless humor of John McNulty.

Do any of the essays or reviews in American Movie Critics meet the two criteria Dwight Macdonald used in his later years to evaluate a film: 1) did it change your way of thinking? And 2) does it stand up after the 2nd, 3rd, nth reading?

My way of thinking about film has been so shaped and altered incrementally by my reading about it that I would be hard-pressed to find single instances of radical change. But there are certain film essays or reviews I can read again and again (and have) for pleasure: Manny Farber’s “Underground Films” and “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art,” anything by James Agee, Pauline Kael’s “Trash, Art, and the Movies,” Susan Sontag’s “The Imagination of Disaster,” Molly Haskell’s book From Reverence to Rape, and at least a dozen of Otis Ferguson’s pieces.

You write that a piece of film criticism has to succeed as a literary performance, and you include a number of pieces by writers better known as literary figures than as critics. Did you use different criteria in selecting the pieces by Edmund Wilson, John Ashbery, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Paul Goodman?

As I was editing this anthology for The Library of America—the repository of all that is supposedly great and enduring in American literature—it seemed to me that here was a chance to make the case for film criticism as a
species of national letters, and I was thrilled to include the voices, the textures
of these unassailably first-rate authors who were “amateur” film critics. Actually, James Baldwin wrote a whole book of commentary on the movies [The Devil Finds Work], and Paul Goodman had a regular film reviewing column for a while—both were cineastes, you might say—whereas Edmund Wilson rarely wrote about movies, and John Ashbery did just this one piece. I know of no other essay by Ralph Ellison on the movies, but “The Shadow and the Act” was so thoughtful and sensitively written that it would have made it in on any criteria. Some other literary figures I included were the poets Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, HD and Melvin B. Tolson. You might be interested to know that there were other major writers we considered who didn’t make the cut, because their film pieces were written a little too casually—a form of intellectual slumming.

You have written articles about movies for The New York Times, Vogue, Esquire, Film Comment, Film Quarterly, American Film, and many of your essays accompany DVDs from the Criterion Collection, yet you did not include any of your work in American Movie Critics. You do, however, say that whether you agreed with a piece of writing was often a factor in selecting it for inclusion in the book. So I have to ask you how you would characterize your approach to criticizing movies and is it close to any of the writers you include? Who has influenced you the most?

First of all, I struggled with the decision of whether to include myself in the book. In the end I decided to leave myself out, not out of false modesty but space limitations—there were too many other writers I wanted to get in, so I didn’t make the cut. I also felt I was already having my say in the introduction, the headnotes, and the selections; no sense being greedy! I would say my approach to film criticism proceeds from the fact that I am an essayist first and foremost, which means I circle the subject at hand and try to bring out points of tension, contradiction, humor, historical context, and emotional power, as I would in any essay. Maybe that’s why I’m so drawn to Susan Sontag’s film criticism, because she is also an essayist. As a young man I was most influenced by Andrew Sarris’s “auteur” approach, and still find his humanity and historical knowledge very appealing. Some of the other key influences on my film criticism were Manny Farber, Andre Bazin, and Pauline Kael (with whom I often argue in my head). I have also come to double my appreciation of Stanley Kauffmann’s remarkable craft, consistency, and staying power, and the idiosyncratic takes of Parker Tyler. Otis Ferguson is the biggest discovery I have made in the last twenty years—too late to change my own film criticism but not too late to savor his stylistic felicities.