Silence Is Golden: *The Ferguson-Farber Affair*

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"Citizen Welles"
The Film Criticism Of Otis Ferguson
Otis Ferguson
Philadelphia: Temple
University Press, 1971, pp. 363-365.
"Welles and His Wonders:II"

The Film Criticism Of Otis Ferguson
Otis Ferguson
Philadelphia: Temple
University Press, 1971, pp. 368-371.
"The Gimp"

Negative Space: Manny Farber On The Movies
(Expanded Edition)
Manny Farber
New York: Da Capo Press, 1998, pp. 71-83.

In 1952, *Commentary* publishes Manny Farber's essay "The Gimp," in which the legendary critic plagiarizes from the equally important, but lesser-known, Otis Ferguson and his two-piece review of *Citizen Kane*, written 11 years earlier for *The New Republic*. I see no reason to mince words here —plagiarism is spot on, as I intend to show. Having made this 'discovery' and taken a few moments to digest the potential ramifications, I contacted the first person who came to mind, David Thomson, author of the infamous New *Biographical Dictionary of Film* and regular "Film Studies" columnist for London's *Independent*.

I had met Mr. Thomson late last summer on the event of a book signing at Paragraphe bookstore here in Montreal. Thomson was also in town for our city's International Film Festival, the 2003 installation of which he accurately described as a "crapshoot." As he concluded his musings on the 'sorry state of cinema' I approached him to have my book signed, at which point he asked me what I 'did.' Anxious to hear his thoughts about academia, I told him that I was in Film Studies, which he responded to by recounting a brief anecdote involving Pauline Kael and the advice she had given him when he was pondering taking a university teaching position. "Don't let them get their hands on you," she said, if memory serves. We then spoke briefly about the low level of respect that contemporary academic film studies has for critics like himself, Kael and Farber, and I added that I'd love to study Farber's criticism, in particular, a lot closer. "Have you ever met Manny?" he asked. (I'm sure my eyes at that very point were twinkling at the possibilities before me.) Naturally I had not, and upon discovering this, Thomson graciously jotted down my mailing address and offered to send me Farber's. "Do with it what you will— Manny would love to hear that his criticism is still read." For this reason I was quite disappointed that, by mid-November, I had heard nothing from him. I therefore decided, armed with my new discovery about the whole Farber-Ferguson-*Citizen Kane* situation, to email Thomson, which in retrospect was probably a mistake if I had ever really intended to get my hands on that address.

This is precisely how the message read:

> I have been studying the work of Otis Ferguson quite closely and come upon an interesting tidbit. In 1941, he reviewed *Citizen Kane* in two parts.

> Long story short, in 1952 Farber published an essay called "The Gimp," which, among other things, reviews *Kane*. This review, on pages 78 to 80 of the expanded version of *Negative Space*, shows that Farber, well, plagiarized several complete phrases from Ferguson's original reviews. Check it out for yourself; I don't think I'm exaggerating. It should be mentioned that Ferguson is not cited or mentioned at any point in Farber's article. Most would take this as evidence that film critics are lazy or untrustworthy or what-have-you, but in my view this case can be used to make some interesting historical remarks about film criticism of the period. Farber probably had a copy of *The New Republic* in which Ferguson's review initially appeared, and, in the course of writing this piece which he felt should include a discussion of *Kane*, he in all likelihood could not see *Kane* at the time (this, naturally being pre-video—and the 50s, for that matter, which according to my understanding, was a period in which *Kane* was almost never shown). So Farber decided to 'use' some of Ferguson's material. Naturally I'd NEVER use this to 'break the ice' with Farber, although I do think that this is an intriguing subject, and one that has never been mentioned anywhere. I can't help but wonder what he'd have to say about it—not in defense, but in order to give insight into his practices at the time (assuming he remembers). Any statements that he'd have to make about this would be important in piecing together a portrait of the conditions under which critics wrote at the time.

I then suggested, quite generously I believe, that Thomson take up the issue for one of his *Independent* "Film Studies" columns. Thomson never responded in any form and still hasn't.

Because I am well aware that email is not an entirely reliable form of communication, I hesitate to interpret Thomson's silence on these matters too strongly or literally. What I find odd and even unlikely is that no one—not Jonathan Rosenbaum, author of an important essay on Farber; not Myron Osborn Loundsbury, whose *Origins of American Film Criticism* is an indispensable reference source; not Greg Taylor, perhaps American film studies' leading scholar in 'metacriticism;' not David Denby, editor of *Awake in the Dark*; and not Thomson, for that matter—has ever taken notice of Farber's act of plagiarism here. But let's not inflate these findings beyond what they actually are, for as one writer put it:

> It is undeniable, that thousands of feeble writers are constantly at work, who subsist by Plagiarism, more or less covert. It is equally undeniable … that thousands of feeble critics subsist by detecting plagiarisms as imitations, real or supposed.

Written by Thomas de Quincey, these words are cited by Christopher Hitchens in "In Defense of Plagiarism," to which he adds, "[j]ust as writers should beware of joining the first category, so readers should not be too eager to enlist in the second" (242). The risk of becoming just such a reader is worth taking in order to make the following point. What the whole Ferguson-Farber affair illustrates best is the yawning abyss between academic film research and the practice of front-line film criticism and the underdeveloped state of the academic or formal study of this large body of film writing.

It is safe to assume that if Farber and Ferguson had been so-called 'film theorists,' the former's pilferage of several passages from the latter's writings would have been acknowledged (in print) decades ago. Such is the pro-'theory' bias of scholarly research into film culture. With this in mind, I would add that, in the wrong hands, this fact could easily be the source of a slew of dismissive claims about the critic and 'journalistic' film criticism in general. What requires sensitive consideration here is the context in which Farber wrote "The Gimp," for only then can we piece together the historical circumstances that gave birth to the sometimes bizarre or underground creature that was pre-academic film writing. Due to limitations of space and resources, I simply cannot provide an exhaustive account of these elements here. What I will do is provide overdue evidence that this is in fact an act of plagiarism and then engage in (hopefully fruitful) speculation about the reasons for it.

Those familiar with two of the most distinctive writing styles in the history of American movie criticism will be somewhat shocked to hear that the stolen Ferguson phrases meld smoothly with Farber's text. What's not shocking is that the appropriation forces Farber to remain loyal to Ferguson's overall tone, to his negative take on the film. Ferguson's articles were dead-set on debunking the fervor of Welles-amania, yet considering that this has become something of a sport in certain critical circles since the 40s, what distinguishes them is his attempt to demonstrate that *Citizen Kane* is actually a "retrogression" in film technique (371). Hardly has such a course ever been undertaken, even by the film's

most fanatical detractors who at times are willing to admit that despite its overall failure as a work of art, the film is technically impressive. Ferguson's attack on *Kane* for drowning the viewer in a series of unoriginal cinematographic devices would be developed by Farber into an important element of the oppositional critical stance for which he would become known.

Ferguson is perhaps the most engaging list-maker I know of. Gregg Toland's camera "here [l]oves deep perspectives, long rooms, rooms seen through doors and giving into rooms through other doors, rooms lengthened out by low ceilings or made immense by high-angle shots where the ceiling seems to be the sky." "The camera loves partial lighting or underlighting, with faces or figures blacked out, features emphasized or thrown into shadow, with one point of high light in an area of gloom or foreground figures black against brightness, with the key shifting according to mood, with every scene modeled for special effects with batteries of varying function and power, gobos, barndoors, screens, and what not." But here's the catch: "[t]hese things are all written into the accomplished cameraman's handbook." "There's nothing newer about shooting into lights than shooting into the sun," he adds, "but there is, I suppose, something new in having the whole book thrown at you at once" (369).

Manny Farber uses this same approach to describe how Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, also commented upon in "The Gimp," 'pitches' its style. "There is nothing new about shallow perspectives, figures gazing into mirrors with the camera smack up against the surface, or low intimate views that expand facial features and pry into skin-pores, weaves of cloth, and sweaty undershirts." "But," he continues, mimicking Ferguson, "there is something new in having the whole movie thrown at you in shallow dimension" (76). The main thrust of Farber's article is essentially Fergusonian, even when the latter is not literally present in the form of appropriated phrases. The "Gimp" is, according to Farber, "the technique, in effect, of enhancing the ordinary with a different dimension, sensational and yet seemingly credible. Camera set-ups, bits of business, lines […] are contrived into saying too much" (73). This is his way of expressing his mentor's disgust for films that rely too heavily upon "tricks" and "symbols" (terms that are, not coincidentally, used by Farber on the article's first page), for filmmakers that don't realize that the main problem of film is always "story, story, story" (365). Farber attributes *Kane*'s gimpiness directly to Gregg Toland's reckless use of camera trickery. "[He] threw into the film every device ever written into the accomplished cameraman's handbook," writes Farber, 'inspired' by his predecessor. Mention of the film's manipulation of "undercranking," "crane-shots," "two-shots," "floorshots," of "camera angles that had been thoroughly exploited by experimental films" are but a few among many points that he pilfers virtually word-for-word from Ferguson. (See page 370 of the latter's original review particularly.) Speaking the precise words of his 30s counterpart, Farber illustrates that the technique of undercranking is used "to make the people in the 'newreels' clips jerk and scuttle" (Farber, page 78; Ferguson, page 370).

Leaping across to Ferguson's first piece on Kane for inspiration (all these previous fragments were excavated from the second), Farber forges the line: "This unpeeling of a tycoon was clearly the most iconoclastic stroke in a major studio since the days when D. W. Griffith and his cameraman, Billy Bitzer, were freeing the movies from imitation of the stage" (78). The original Ferguson reads: "The things to be said are that it is the boldest free stroke in a major screen production since Griffith and Bitzer were running wild to unshackle the camera […]" (363).

Examples could be duplicated *ad nauseum*. That said, most of Farber's borrowings concentrate themselves in one paragraph on one page of the article. But a point that has not yet been made is that Farber's undeniable pilferage acts as a springboard to developing Ferguson's original views further in his *own* words, and in the process, to popularize, render more accessible, and distill into a single term ("the Gimp") Ferguson's distaste for film techniques that present themselves as techniques and therefore compromise the experience of the 'story' itself. With increasing consistency, Ferguson viewed himself as a mouthpiece for film's craftsmen. Welles and Toland had broken the film craftsman's code of ethics that dictates that, in Ferguson's words, "*the devices for illusion [remain] always and necessarily hidden in the natural emergence of the illusion itself*" (368; emphasis in source). Farber makes this view his own and gives it an appropriately 'Farberian' twist that reflects his persona as a key figure in underground film culture of the 50s through the 70s: a name with pointedly sexual connotations, as the anecdote that opens the piece demonstrates. In Farber's words, lady golfers of the Victorian era used a device called "Gimp" to help their game. Mysteries of the mechanics of the device aside, a "gimp," which was "a cord running from hem of skirt to waistband," would for a brief moment expose the lower parts of the women's ankles and legs when used, revealing "high-button shoes" (71). Film gimmickry

works in an analogous fashion, with directors' "Gimp-strings" tugged to reveal to the viewer "curious and exotic but 'psychic' images" meant to distract and imbue segments of film with added meaning.

In the course of making this critical tool more useful, Farber applies it to a wider body of films, including *Sunset Boulevard, People Will Talk, Detective Story, A Place in the Sun, and Grapes of Wrath*, among others. He also broadens Ferguson's charge against Welles' film, blaming him for showing "Hollywood craftsmen how to inject trite philosophy, 'liberalism,' psychoanalysis, etc., into the very mechanics of filmmaking, so that what the spectator saw on the screen was not only a fat, contrived actor screaming down a staircase, but also some exotically rendered editorializing contributed by everyone from the actor to the set designer" (80). Grasping as Ferguson perhaps did not the urgent ramifications of filmmakers' reliance upon 'the Gimp,' Farber shows that Welles' film might just be the source of our contemporary predilection for interpreting and responding to films in the most unfounded, 'conventionalized' ways, focusing on what we 'make' of the film rather than on the film itself. Rather than presenting the viewer with "some intelligible, structured image of reality," these films pepper him with "completely unrelated pellets of message," shocking him "into a lubricated state of mind where he is forced to think seriously about the phony implications of what he is seeing" (71).

On these terms, and by virtue of the insight that Farber himself brings to this issue, plagiarism, if I may be a judge here, is eminently excusable. But if plagiarism consists of claiming another's words and ideas as one's own, then Farber cannot escape the charge—which brings us to the unavoidable question of motivation. I wonder if, in a pre-institutionalized (or even an anti-institutional) environment, lacking in stable and immediate structures of mentorship such as the one in which Farber found himself in the 50s, 'copying' a practitioner that one considers a predecessor might seem to be a viable option— pedagogically at least [1]. It is, as we know, a common artistic one, and while certainly disreputable in discursive forms of expression, it has been exploited more often than one might think, such as in Susan Sontag's recent novel, In America, in which the author annexes some sentences from a novel by Willa Cather for 'literary effect.' (Hitchens' "In Defense of Plagiarism" chronicles other high-profile instances.)

As Greg Taylor illustrates in *Artists in the Audience*, Farber occupied the guise of the critic-as-artist, and therefore operated by his own rules, which could account for his 'quotations' without quotation marks, for his 'informal' appropriation. But these are euphemisms and only serve to patronize the author. In the end, only Farber knows for sure why he did this, and, if I may speculate further, the reasons are probably more practical then the ones offered here and in all likelihood linked to issues of time constraint and the need to meet deadlines. Would it not be intriguing to hear Farber explain the pressures and intentions, the context itself, behind the act? Surely it would, Mr. Thomson. Silence on this issue has been broken. Now hopefully the controversial author of The *New Biographical Dictionary of Film* will break his while Farber is still around to tell his side of the story.

Colin Burnett is the current Book/ Article Review Editor for Synoptique. He has an article on Otis Ferguson in Issue 30 of Senses of Cinema and a review of New Yorker critic Anthony Lane's *Nobody's Perfect* in the current issue of Canadian Journal of Film Studies.

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