

Pauline Kael: The Critic's Critic.

On the morning of July 4, 1982, *The New Yorker* published a review of director Ridley Scott's latest epic, *Blade Runner* (1982). Upon reading the four-page spread, Scott vowed to never read another review of his work; to this day, for all we know, he hasn't¹. This text was the work of notorious critic Pauline Kael. Now, don't get me wrong, it was not a lack of good writing or acumen that discouraged Scott; rather, it was quite the opposite. Kael's review was ruthlessly unapologetic in its dissection of his work. Eloquently, intelligently and with cheek, Kael crafted an argument so beguiling it demanded attention and respect, even from those with opposing views. It's no wonder, then, that this shook Scott; there exists a certain terror in the recalcitrant quality of an authentic, uncensored opinion. It's these characteristics in Kael's writing, her resonance of personal truth and fearless nonconformity, that I argue inspired and subsequently moulded today's generation of critics.

Kael's introduction to criticism came about by accident. It was the autumn of 1952, and Kael sat at a café gripped in a heated debate among friends over the film, *Limelight* (1952), "I don't care if he is a genius," she said of Charlie Chaplin, "I don't like that man"². Her unrestrained, conversational sincerity caught the ear of *Lighthouse Magazine* editor Peter Martin in the opposite booth; he offered her a job on the spot³. This organic encounter rather adeptly captured the unique tone and outspoken nature that would go on to define Kael's career.

In the evolving film critic landscape of the 1960s, Kael's voice stood out like a sore thumb. Before the 1940s-50s, criticism was largely considered a boys' club⁴ characterised by critical objectivity, entrenched in formulaic responses and arduous retellings⁵. Defined by their detached nature and stringent affiliation with academic analysis, Kael referred to these voices as "the gentleman's critic"². It is exactly this from which Kael attempted to distance herself, saying, "Only bad critics impose an academic formula; one does not need to rationalise one's instincts"². Kael was adamant that criticism should not dismiss emotion; retain sentiment over academics.

Throughout her career, Kael adopted a charismatic, intimate, and unapologetic tone that struck a chord among readers. This can be attributed to Kael's emphasis on conveying the persona behind the pen; she described her desire to create sentences that could "breathe" and "have the sound of a human voice"². This voice, in Kael's case, was fierce. Fellow critic, Derek Malcom, referred to Kael's ruthlessness as a lack of hesitance to "castigate those she thought fundamentally untalented"⁶. Kael gladly enacted this ruthlessness regardless of popular thinking. Of Jean-Luc Goddard's celebrated *Weekend* (1967), Kael (1968) said, "Who can assimilate and evaluate this chunk of theory thrown at us in the middle of a movie? Probably most of us blank out". Kael's unapologetic candour reads almost conspiratorially, as though the reader is in on a joke. In a practice that once toed the line of discrediting itself with objective consensus⁷, Kael's tone was noisy, a crisp packet in an otherwise silent theatre.

Kael's critical mêlée was not only confined to the films she appraised but extended to the works of her peers and criticism itself. Her contempt for "highbrow European arthouse"²

manifested in her fierce interrogation of academic criticism and the suffocating role it could play in assessing value. In Kael's third book, *Trash, Art, and the Movies*, she asserts "most films are not art"⁸ and, on this merit, were subsequently dismissed by the "gentleman's critic". Kael argues that this is an unfair deduction, that the value of films outside of the art-house label – also termed American trash – exists in the feelings they can rouse. A film may not be "arthouse", but to Kael, this was often a good thing. This critical perspective challenged the likes of Richard Schickel and Andrew Sarris, who adhered more stringently to academic influences of emerging European film theorists⁹. I believe it would be misplaced to take Kael's dogged approach to mean she was irrefutably correct. Nonetheless, right and wrong aside, I stress that it was Kael's fearlessness to contest the boundaries of criticism that was the catalyst for her enduring legacy.

Kael's provocative approach was career-defining, hers certainly – but perhaps more so for those who followed in her footsteps. Inspired by her refreshing tone, young critic aspirants began to mimic Kael's style. So tenacious were her disciples, they were termed – not always kindly – "The Paulette's"¹⁰. Today, a slew of published articles written by well-respected critics – James Woilcott, David Edelstein, and Roger Ebert – praise Kael's sharp, intelligent, and visceral persona. There appears to be a shared consensus among these influential names that Kael's words lit up a generation of young minds.

The inspiration that Kael generated coincided with a period in which American cinema was undergoing somewhat of a renaissance. The growing popularity of television in the 1970s saw a departure from cinemas¹¹. Dwindling profits and disillusioned audiences forced studios to take risks on lesser-known names; think Coppola, Scorsese, and DePalma. These up-and-comers were yet to prove themselves; they were a risk and received little studio backing¹¹. Undeterred by this, Kael considered these works worthy of critique, be it positive or negative². This saw her champion many of these yet-to-be-known names and encouraged younger generations to be unafraid of doing the same.

It's here, I believe Kael's influence was most transformative. She prompted a reimagining of not only what could be appreciated on screen, but what was allowed to be appreciated. It is one thing to critique a film, but it is another to critique the critics of those films. I posit that Kael's tone – personal, charismatic, and ruthless – brought a quality to her work that caught the eye of up-and-comers. Kael's fearless examination of what qualified as legitimate in the eyes of critics transcended the criticism operating at the time. One can't help but wonder how Kael would stand among the critics of today – everyone.

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- ¹ Minow L (2019) *What She Said: The Art of Pauline Kael*, Roger Ebert.com, accessed 9 October 2023. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/what-she-said-the-art-of-pauline-kael-movie-review-2019>
- ² Garver R (Director) (2018) *What She Said: The Art of Pauline Kael* [motion picture], Juno Films, United States.
- ³ Rich F (27 October 2011) "Roaring at the Screen With Pauline Kael", The New York Times accessed 09 October 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/books/review/roaring-at-the-screen-with-pauline-kael.html>
- ⁴ Henley A (2019), *Review: What She Said: The Art of Pauline Kael*, Seventh Row, accessed 9 October 2023 <https://seventh-row.com/2020/01/17/review-she-said-the-art-of-pauline-kael/>
- ⁵ Jarvie I (1961) "Towards an Objective Film criticism", *Film Quarterly*, Volume 14 (3):19-20 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1210064>
- ⁶ Houston P (5 September 2001) "Pauline Kael", *The Guardian*, accessed October 10 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/sep/05/guardianobituaries.arts1>
- ⁷ Battaglia J (2010), "Everyone's a Critic: Film Criticism Through History and Into the Digital Age [senior Honours], Brockport, <https://soar.suny.edu/handle/20.500.12648/6777>
- ⁸ Kael P (1969), *Trash Art and the Movies*, Harper's, United States
- ⁹ Roberts J (2010) *The Complete History of American Film Criticism*, Santa Monica Press, Santa Monica.
- ¹⁰ Edelstein D (7 June 2019) "'Oh, honey, you shouldn't be showing that to anyone:' Why Pauline Kael Was My Critic", Vulture, accessed 8 October 2023 <https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/remembering-pauline-kael-film-critic.html>
- ¹¹ San Filippo M (2001), *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions*, Senses Of Cinema, accessed 9 October 2023, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2001/book-reviews/american_70s/