

Paper # 1

Overlapping Trends in Post-WWII Film Review:

Twelve Angry Men as a Counter-Study to Staiger's Argument

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Janet Staiger's article "With the Compliments of the Auteur" uses Bordwell's sequential typography of film "reading strategies" to argue that post-WWII highbrow audiences made sense of art cinema through a process of identifying realism and authorial expressivity. However, my case study of reviews for *Twelve Angry Men* (Lumet, 1957) gathered that the similarities and disparities between values of both General Interest and Highbrow reviews are contrary to the expectations garnered by Staiger's conclusion. While Staiger's ideas of realism and authorial expressivity are reflected in the holistic group of *Twelve Angry Men* reviews, they were not the exclusive functions of a "Highbrow" audience, and her argument is therefore overly simplistic. In contrast, my analysis suggests that film reception, instead of functioning as a site of 2 discrete avenues of meaning production, is a broader spectrum of reading strategies, and the difference between the two audiences is more a cyclical function of reviewers themselves than the audiences they attempt to reflect.

Although Staiger does not completely distinguish between the reading procedures employed by distinct groups of reviewers (such as General Interest vs Highbrow journals), she does discuss what is essentially the "Highbrow" audience segment as the group who would employ the reading strategies she details. Expanding on Bordwell's ideas of art cinema reading strategies, Staiger argues that audiences first explain variations in form as a type of realism (objective realism in the earlier post-WWII period, and subjective realism in the latter portion), and – when that tactic fails to rationalize departures from the Hollywood norm – audiences move to a view of authorial expressivity to make sense of films. Ultimately, however, spectators "use authorship to make the experience coherent" (Staiger 180). Staiger asserts that films viewed as 'different' from the classical Hollywood model were thus articulated not only as being narratively "realistic" but containing a

“serious” subject matter, and that consequently reviewers argued for an interpretive freedom from which an outside creator’s “message” could be inferred (Staiger 182). Staiger’s most particular argument, to be contested with *Twelve Angry Men*’s case study, is that these strategies were employed only by “socially conscious patrons, the groups who are tired of Hollywood fare”, and that the “masses” themselves (the General Interest audience) were “not especially attracted to “realism” or “message” pictures” (Staiger 183-6).

Twelve Angry Men provides a potent source of counterargument to Staiger’s claims, largely because of the overlap between General Interest and Highbrow reviews in the reading strategies these reviewers employ, as well as the assumptions they make in regard to their respective audiences’ tastes and values. I expected General Interest reviews to focus largely on the film’s star appeal and entertainment value, and Highbrow reviews to instead concentrate on finding realism and/or a more emphatically thematic authorial message within the film to divine its meaning. The extent to which General Interest reviews featured discussions of realism and an authorial message in the film and Highbrow reviews included focus on the film’s cast and entertainment value was initially a surprise, but upon analysis serves as evidence for the gaps in Staiger’s argument, and the idea of a potential disconnect between segmented film reviewers and their respective audiences.

In terms of a ‘spectrum’ of reading strategies, several strategies of cinematic meaning-production stand out in that they span both types of publication, rather than sorting into two groups of a wide and complex audience. Realism, firstly, is a strategy which significantly overlaps the two ‘segments’ of reviews for *Twelve Angry Men*. In concordance with Staiger’s claims for “highbrow” audiences, the Highbrow review from *Commonweal* on *Twelve Angry Men* contains a significant focus on searching for an objective realism in the film. In terms of assessing the film’s value, the reviewer hones in on details comparable to real life, commenting that “except for certain cinematic license... “12 Angry Men” is remarkably accurate”, and criticizing that “the lively script...is

somewhat contrived in that the jurors are given numbers instead of names (in real life the roll is called so often that jurors soon begin using names)” (“Judicial and Prejudicial” 65). This almost nit-picking tendency continues with the reviewer’s praise for the realism of the acting, but this extreme example of Staiger’s realist reading strategy is muffled when compared to the other Highbrow reviews of *Twelve Angry Men*, neither of which concentrate on realism to communicate an essence of the film to their readers. Robert Hatch of *Nation* instead focuses on criticisms of the film’s narrative elements than a representation of real life, and the *New Yorker* review equally omits the topic of objective realism (while subjective realism is absent from all reviews). However, the General Interest reviewers express arguably more of an interest in deciphering objective realism from the film than their Highbrow counterparts, counter to Staiger’s divided audience model. Paul Jones of *The Atlanta Constitution* describes the film as an “honest, almost documentary drama”, and A. H. Weller of *New York Times* writes about the film’s psychological realism in revealing “the stuff of which such “peers” can be made”, as well as a relatable realism found in the “tough, realistic, “slice of life” that entrances a viewer” (Jones 8; Weller 24, 93).

This greater concentration on objective realism in General Interest reviews is paired with the overlap in authorial expressivity and “serious” theme. Once again, Staiger’s idea of an auteur’s higher message is indeed present in the Highbrow reviews, but *not* in exclusivity *or* as a strategy across all of the Highbrow journalistic audience. Robert Hatch for *Nation* states clearly that “it is the author’s intention, [he believes], to celebrate the institution of trial by jury” (Hatch 379); the *Commonweal* review views the film as a “thoughtful examination of the jury system”, again implying an author (“Judicial and Prejudicial” 65). The *New Yorker* review makes no mention of an authorial purpose (although it is brief, other reviews on the same page do contain further descriptions/thematic emphases). Rather than ‘authorial expressivity’ functioning as a reading strategy across all Highbrow reviews, it is only partially emphasized, and this tactic actually spans the audience spectrum to feature more significantly for the General Interest reviews. John Beaufort writes for *The Christian*

Science Monitor that *Twelve Angry Men* can be understood through writer Rose's "twin purpose of sustaining suspense and revealing character" (Beaufort 6). The General Interest review for *New York Times* ironically mirrors Staiger's assertion that the Highbrow post-WWII art cinema audience was unique in favoring "serious films" with a "message" (Staiger 186); the reviewer, though supposedly writing for the 'masses', focuses on *Twelve Angry Men* as a "serious work on [a] worthy theme", and writes that "what [it] had to say was important" (Weiler 93). This General Interest review even more literally mimics Staiger's previous conception of the Highbrow audience in spelling out that "Mr. Rose's moral, it would seem, is that man's fate is the problem of every man" (Weiler 93). Although Weiler's other review for *New York Times* and Jones' for *The Atlanta Constitution* touch on authorial expressivity more indirectly (through allusions to the psychology of the characters, or the broader effects of the narrative), Richard L. Coe for *The Washington Post and Times Herald* contains the greatest emphasis on not only examining an outside message being transmitted through the film – "examining the jury system" – but extrapolating on these authorial themes in a modernist context. He applies the "message" to a series of increasingly potent questions concerning "our Anglo-Saxon tradition," culminating in a call for the audience's critical assessment should the jury system fall to prejudice: "How then fares Judgment by one's peers?" (Coe 10). Rather than disproving the contextualization through realism and auteurism used by Highbrow reviewers, this evidence supports the idea of a significant overlap between the two audience 'segments', in that much of General Interest film criticism of the period engages with the same reading strategies as Staiger's previously exclusive Highbrow group. Even the values of *Twelve Angry Men* as pure entertainment cross over each subset of the film audience: *The Christian Science Monitor* (a General Interest journal), for example, praises the film as "an actor's picture", while *New Yorker* (a Highbrow journal) dedicates its brief review largely to a shout out of major star names (Beaufort 6; "12 Angry Men" 16). In light of this overlap, the major delineating quality of these two types of reviews is their own authorial voice in relation to their audience's perceived values. General Interest reviews emphasize a

communal ‘relatability’ in *Twelve Angry Men*: “we have served on juries and we know”, or “it clearly mirrors the mind and heart of a variety of citizens in our town” (Jones 8; Weiler 93). In contrast, Highbrow reviews feature a distinctly first-person voice, asserting reviewers’ opinions with “I suppose...”, “reminded...of something a judge said at the end of a case on which *I* once served”, as well as personally contradictory combinations of praise (“melodrama of personality”) and criticism (“incredibly histrionic jury”) (“Judicial and Prejudicial” 65; Hatch 379-80).

Therefore, instead of Staiger’s expectation of a mutually exclusive set of reading strategies with critical realism and authorial expressivity wielded only by Highbrow reviewers, the post-WWII film audience comprised a spectrum of strategies through which reviewers and readers attempted to produce meaning from a film. Reviews in both audience segments for *Twelve Angry Men* contributed valuable evidence of this overlap; rather than keeping to their ‘separate’ strategies, reviews portrayed a range of tools with which reviewers divined the contextualized application they thought audiences valued most. Contrary to prior belief, General Interest journals included realism and authorial messages, and Highbrow journals included commentary on entertainment value and acting. The striking difference, then, in these publications is found not in a starkly divided audience, but with the construct of the journals themselves. Based on the clear variations in tone, in which General Interest reviewers favor the use of “we” and specific attempts to relate *Twelve Angry Men* to their local audience, and Highbrow reviewers prioritize their own academic musings to comprehend the film’s departures from standard Hollywood fare, it is the journalists’ self-identification within a particular segment of film criticism that separates the audiences. Therefore, by projecting altered priorities of how each audience segment *should* “read” these films, ambiguity in comprehension is created during meaning production as the reviewer’s constructed assumptions about “general” vs “highbrow” audience values reinforce the self-feeding cycle of how they use reading strategies to present these analyses to their audience.

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