

The Seven Cardinal Virtues of the Critic

An Interview with Michel Ciment

by N. T. Binh



Photo © Aurélie Lamachère, Arras Film Festival 2018

Michel Ciment (1938–2023) is among the towering, legendary figures of international film criticism. His profile differs, however, from the saintly halo ascribed to André Bazin or Roger Ebert, the ornery eccentricity of a Manny Farber, or the unrepentantly subjective taste-and-opinion-machine known as Pauline Kael.

Ciment was a person of the world, constantly in the public eye (in print, on radio and TV, at festivals and conferences), but rather than pushing the barrow of his own individual sensibility, he very much saw himself as the prime representative of a more-or-less collective perspective: that of the French film publication *Positif*, for which he first wrote (at age twenty-five) in 1963, and on which he served for many years, right up to his death on November 13, 2023, as chief editor. Indeed, his close colleagues Philippe Rouyer and Yann Tobin (aka N. T. Binh) go so far as to describe Ciment, in the editorial of their January 2024 issue, as the very “incarnation of the magazine.”

Intriguingly, from the 1980s onward, Ciment wrote precious few critiques or essays for *Positif*. But his presence was announced, above all, in the in-depth interviews with directors and other film workers that he tirelessly conducted, and in his often-incendiary editorials. As Marcos Uzal, the current editor of *Cahiers du cinéma*, sympathetically remarked, if the “*Positif/Cahiers war*” still registers in the cinephilic mind, it’s because Ciment single-mindedly did his level best to keep those polemics going.

In the 1980s, he mocked those faddish critics who, to his mind, overpraised a postmodern flash-in-the-pan such as Leos Carax, rather than attending to the mature works of Akira Kurosawa or Marco Bellocchio. In the ’90s, he led a one-man campaign against what he dubbed the “Bermuda triangle,” i.e., the proliferation of critics of the *Cahiers* persuasion into key newspapers and periodicals such as *Libération*, *Le Monde*, and *Les Inrockuptibles*. In the 2000s, he railed against the “interpretive delirium” of *Cinémathèque française* or *Centre Pompidou* programmers who proposed (for instance) that Hitchcock’s *Psycho* or Antonioni’s *L’avventura* are best read as symptomatic, unconscious reflections on the Holocaust. But these were not arguments just for the sake of arguing; in every case, Ciment sought to defend the achievements and values that he felt were in danger of being lost within film culture at large.

There was a classical side to Ciment’s deep cinephilia: he respected the craft of filmmaking as much as its art, and so was already ready to praise a solidly scripted, well-acted, professionally photographed piece. But he also recognized and prized what was novel, modern, and provocative whenever it emerged. The beloved auteurs who were the subjects of his much-translated books (usually integrating a large interview component)—Elia Kazan, Stanley Kubrick, John Boorman, Jane Campion, Joseph Losey, Francesco Rosi, or in *Film World: Interviews with Cinema’s Leading Directors*—represented, for Ciment, the ideal combination of the classical and the modern.

As the film world mourns one of its greatest film critics, we debut a newly translated interview with the legendary French author and *Positif* magazine editor in which he candidly discusses criticism and the essential qualities a critic must possess.

Some readers will have perhaps, by now, sensed an affinity between Ciment’s sensibility and this very publication, *Cineaste*. In fact, Ciment—who was a keen reader of film magazines from all over the world—wrote a letter to *Cineaste* published in our Winter 2020 issue to register his appreciation of the fact that *Positif* and *Cineaste* shared “the same political stand and identical love for cinema in all its forms and origins”—and that both magazines acted as a bulwark against “the decline of film criticism...reduced in length and marred

by trendy choices, ideological narrow-mindedness, ignorance of the past, and lack of curiosity.” In this rallying cry—amplified in the following translated extract from Binh’s superb 2014 interview book with Ciment, *Le cinéma en partage*—we are reminded of why the task of serious

film criticism is still worth fighting for.—Adrian Martin

What You Should Not Do

N. T. Binh: What advice would you give an aspiring critic?

Michel Ciment: First and foremost, the temptation to be avoided at all costs—and that can become a critic’s vice—is to want a film to be something other than what its author set out to make. In other words, the critic is writing about a different film, the one he wanted to see or make. We should judge a work in relation to its intent, then assess whether or not it’s successful. Given its scale, a modest project might be wildly successful, but if it exceeds the filmmaker’s resources, it might also be a failure. What should absolutely be avoided is discussing a film that exists nowhere but in the critic’s mind. As Billy Wilder said, “You can’t blame Johann Strauss for not having composed Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony.” Someone who writes a polka isn’t composing *Twilight of the Gods*. This should be recognized from the start. In short, the critic must look at the film as it is, not as what he wants it to be, or claims it is.

I’m reminded of the work of Clément Rosset, author of *Le Réel et son double* and *Lettre sur les chimpanzés*. His thesis—which resonates with me—is that reality is more real than the ideas we form of it, that reality is resistant to interpretation, to being distorted by lies and misrepresentation. For Rosset, facing reality was the ultimate test, which seems to me an extremely important philosophical lesson—and applicable to film criticism.

Binh: You answered the question by first stating what not to do.

Ciment: And now, in no particular order, are the seven qualities that a good film critic must have.

1. Information

Ciment: First is information, which is to say that the critic must know as much as possible about the film and its director in order to be able to convey details to the reader. How does it fit into the filmmaker’s oeuvre? Who is the screenwriter? What are his previous credits and what influence has he been able to exert? What was the role of the cinematographer, the production designer, the composer?



Michel Ciment at the home in Ardèche that he shared with his wife, Evelyne, a huge house with several rooms all filled with floor to ceiling shelves of books and magazines. (photo © 2020 by Gilles Ciment)

And, of course, the choice of main actors: have they worked with the director before? What do they represent in the director's imagination? These are things that the critic may already have some knowledge of, and which can be augmented with the help of the Internet. A critic can pull this off because he has studied cinema and has accumulated knowledge for ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or fifty years. He owes it to his readers—whether children, secretaries, doctors, or lawyers—who have other things to do with their time than study the history of cinema. You might just as well ask a mailman or nurse for their opinion. They might have interesting things to say, but lack the foundational knowledge that, in principle, the critic has. It's regrettable to note the ignorance of some critics and the factual errors that punctuate their writing. I consider such things to be of paramount importance.

2. Analysis

Ciment: The second quality required of the critic is analytic ability. He must not content himself with saying "I like it" or "I don't like it," or "It's great" or "I lost interest." We couldn't care less about such things, because all this does is let us know if the critic had fun or was bored. It tells us absolutely nothing about the film. A piece of criticism must *analyze* a film—which unfortunately doesn't always happen. This analysis, in my opinion, should not be constructed according to a single framework, which locks the work away in a straitjacket. This way of doing things actually isn't much of a problem these days, and after having prevailed for so long, in such a negative way, the phenomenon has given way to a total absence of anal-

ysis. There were, for example, critics who reduced everything to a psychoanalytical interpretation. I reproached the Marxists for dismissing psychoanalysis, just as I did the fanatics of psychoanalysis for dismissing historical, political, or sociological factors. There isn't just one way of looking at things. At one time, students revered semiology, Lacan, Marxism-Leninism, because they thought that a single interpretive tool was enough to unlock everything and analyze all films the same way. But not every film should be approached the same way.

We don't talk about *Puzzle of a Downfall Child* the way we do about *Salvatore Giuliano*. For the former, psychoanalysis is certainly a useful tool, and for the latter, knowledge of Sicily, of Italian political life and the Mediterranean mindset is crucial. You can adapt the tools to the film before you. This doesn't mean that for *Puzzle of a Downfall Child* a psychoanalytical interpretation is the *only* one that counts, but it is certainly going to be useful. As for *Salvatore Giuliano*, a socioeconomic analysis can be applied, but consider also comparing the story to that of Christ, surrounded by the twelve apostles—as represented by Pisciotta's mob, which accompanied Giuliano. With his mother shrieking over his corpse, the Pietà is replayed in a small Sicilian village. Giuliano died at the age of thirty-three—the same as Christ—eliminated by an occupying power and because of his betrayal by Pisciotta, a Judas figure. We can also see in *Salvatore Giuliano* a metaphor for the war in Algeria, with an occupying contingent arriving from France. Moreover, disdainful Italians spoke of southern Italy as "*Africa a casa*"—"Africa at home." When I saw *Giuliano* in 1962, it struck me quite clearly as a film



Michel Ciment and *Positif* photographer Nicolas Guérin with Martin Scorsese in 2011. (photo © Nicolas Guérin, nicolasguerinphoto.com)



Michel Ciment with Jane Campion, the subject of one of his many books devoted to filmmakers. (photo © Nicolas Guérin, nicolasguerinphoto.com)

about the Algerian War, which means that we can discuss it in economic, mythological, and political contexts all at the same time. Conceptual tools can help with the analysis of a film, but you should never have just one theory to hand. This is why I think that the more the critic knows about culture in general, the more he will be able to deliver up competent and grounded analysis. Cinema—and it does need to be said again and again—is a synthesis of all the arts. It's the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as Wagner defined opera, twenty years before the birth of cinema.

Binh: *The "total work of art"?*

Ciment: With Wagner's demise, cinema comes to life, merging dramatic storytelling, visual arts, music, and performance. That's why a good critic should have a broad knowledge of the arts. The same goes for great filmmakers. This might be what many young directors lack. The titans of cinema—Fritz Lang, Welles, Eisenstein, Renoir, Kubrick, etc.—knew so much. Visconti, Fellini, and Tarkovsky were as familiar with painting as they were with literature. I wish students at La Fémis [France's national film school] would pay regular visits to the Louvre, read as many books as possible, and watch lots of films at the Cinémathèque. And so, my second recommendation concerns the theoretical tools and cultural foundations that facilitate analysis. Without them, once again, anyone's opinion is valid—spontaneous and unburdened by the correctives and presuppositions of the critic.

3. Style

Ciment: Third, criticism is a literary activity. It's a form of writing, even a literary genre. There's a beauty to be found in essays about cinema, just as there is in those about literature and painting. One can delight in reading an essay if it's well written, even if it's a minor genre. For example, I consider Baudelaire's writing on art to be magnificent, but *Les Fleurs du mal* is even more magnificent. Gide's literary reviews are beautiful, but *The Counterfeiters* is even more beautiful. Some people are more essayists than creators.

Without placing the critic on the same level as the artist, criticism is an act of creation. Hence, style becomes a third necessary quality for a good critic. Georges Sadoul and even Jean Mitry never really struck a chord with me, although I appreciated their writing. But when I read Bazin, Truffaut, Rohmer, [Robert] Benayoun, or [Roger] Tailleur, it was their *style* that really affected me, that made me truly understand the films they were writing about. Here again, the critical essay must in some way recapitulate the qualities of the work under discussion. The great filmmakers are creators who know how to shoot, who understand the texture of images and sounds, and how to direct actors. It's through their style that they get you involved in understanding the film. Similarly, we critics try to convey our thoughts through literary expression and the aesthetic emotion of style.

Of course, no critic possesses all these qualities in equal measure. Some have great analytic skills but are lacking in style. Others seduce us with style, but in the end we realize that they aren't quite as profound as they appear to be.

4. Passion

Ciment: The fourth quality is passion, enthusiasm, a certain fervor. We readers must sense it in a critic—someone who is driven by a desire to convince, to share, to transmit. Perhaps I'm talking about myself here. In 1963, when I saw all the different kinds of cinema emerging from France and Italy, when I saw a Buñuel film, I told myself that I absolutely had to dive in and say something about it all. It was an extraordinary moment in time, and I was part of it. I was burning to express myself about what I had seen. If not much had been happening, if it had been a moment of quiet, as it was for example in the world of painting, I probably wouldn't have had the energy I did. So: passion and conviction. I think the great critics I've mentioned were similarly inspired. A desire to communicate their enthusiasm was palpable.

5. Curiosity

Ciment: In my view, a critic shouldn't stick to the narrow field they have marked out for themselves and with which they are very familiar. They shouldn't be afraid to explore in new directions. Curiosity must be maintained. Without wanting to disrespect him, I don't think that Truffaut—who had the knowledge, analysis, style, and passion—was genuinely curious. He had his preferences and passions, and chose French cinema, Hollywood cinema, and one handpicked filmmaker from each country: Rossellini in Italy, Munk in Poland, Dreyer in Scandinavia. But he never explored much beyond that. He walked out of a screening of *Pather Panchali*, Satyajit Ray's Indian masterpiece, after half an hour, saying it was of no interest. He never ventured beyond the parameters of a relatively limited film culture. He read American and French literature, but I never got the feeling that he knew much about Italian literature. Perhaps he lacked curiosity.

6. A Hierarchy of Judgment

Ciment: The sixth quality is the recognition of hierarchy, which means being able to say, "This is one of the three or four best films of the year," and to be able to explain why. I think I can say why *Barry Lyndon*, *Salvatore Giuliano*, *Providence*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Stalker*, or *Casanova* are superior to most films that appeared the same year. This is an approach that has been frowned upon by some, because for them hierarchy means inequality. It's "undemocratic." Who are you to claim that a Mozart symphony is worth more than someone banging on a tin can? What gives you the right to judge? But that's a false sense of equality, which leads people to declare, "Why not me? I have as much right to the Palme d'Or as you do!" Personally, I'm an Aristotelian. I think that for more than two thousand years, aestheticians, art critics, people who judge artists, have been continuously creating hierarchies. Vasari told us who, in his opinion, were the greatest painters of the Renaissance. Explaining why I find one film is more important than another allows me to refine my understanding of my own tastes, while also shedding light on the work I'm writing about. Simply put, Shakespeare is a greater playwright than Jean de Létra [1897–1954]. This isn't always appreciated today, because everyone must be given a chance, everything is equal, everything is on the same level. We're told not to be so judgmental.

Binh: *It's often said that the only true judgment is the test of time. We make mistakes by overestimating or underestimating.*

Ciment: Absolutely. Time will ultimately decide both whether something will endure and if the critical judgement passed on it is still relevant. If I particularly like certain critics, it's because when I reread what they wrote fifty years ago, I see that the films they praised still hold up. It's what every journal does. *Positif* never stops making judgments and assigning grades. It does so every single month. Why feature a certain film on the cover? Why have three or four interviews per issue instead of twenty? To begin with, we don't have room for twenty interviews, so choices must be made. Life is a constant series of choices. Why does a particular person write for *Positif* and not elsewhere? Because someone else didn't make the cut. We can't publish everyone. Some people refuse to serve on juries because it's impossible to choose one film over another. But that feels insincere. We do it all the time.

The issue then becomes how relevant are the choices we make. For a journal or a critic, that's a risk worth taking. We judge a journal or a critic on the entirety of their choices over time. Does *Positif*, sixty years old, hold up? Is an issue published seventeen years ago largely irrelevant? Or do I want to read the whole thing because I'm interested in every one of the films mentioned in it? And have those films themselves remained interesting and are they still worth watching?

To get back to the antagonisms between *Cahiers* and *Positif*, I think that in more than sixty years, these two journals, between them, haven't missed a single important filmmaker. I challenge anyone to name a director in the history of cinema who wasn't noticed by at least one of us, if not both. Sometimes together, sometimes separately, we have identified every outstanding filmmaker, regardless of what the filmmakers themselves have to say. After all, film directors are extremely touchy and sensitive to criticism, including those who claim never to read what's written about them.

Binh: *Should we believe them?*

Ciment: It's nonsense. I don't believe it for a second. Every filmmaker reads their reviews. Back in the day, when Henri Verneuil was at the peak of his commercial and critical glory, when his films were all over popular media, when he could cast whichever star he wanted and his films were making millions at the box office—why did he rage on television and get so worked up about *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Positif* disliking them? Because deep down, he knew—despite his tremendous successes—that twenty or thirty years after his death people all over the world would be talking more about Bresson or Buñuel, even though they had a fraction of his financial success. Verneuil could have said, taking his lead from that well-known American catchphrase, “After reading the reviews, I wept all the way to the bank.” But that's not how it plays out. They go to the bank and want the critics on their side. They dream of both. I can understand why a director whose films get good reviews but are unsuccessful with the public might be bitter and resentful. He can't understand why no one wants to see his work.

The truth is that apart from a handful of troubled characters, or those with psychological issues, real artists long for success. Maybe they get used to failure, and even cultivate it, because it means they can position themselves as losers, which allows them to generate a certain cult following. When he made *The Rules of the Game*, Jean Renoir never said that he wanted to make a film that audiences would jeer at. He was convinced he had found a magic formula—a comedy, a drama, a mix of genres, a devilish tragicomedy, which would be a hit. It's generally mediocre people who say they aren't looking to be successful and who do everything they can to

ensure that things don't work out for them. Maybe when they've chased after success so many times and come up short, they make failure the engine of their aesthetic, thinking that at least they'll have the critics on their side. If they were suddenly successful, they would no longer be able to use failure as a crutch.

I think, fundamentally, that great artists are upset by commercial failure and a lack of public appreciation. But a lack of critical recognition is just as agonizing. Voltaire, for example, considered the greatest playwright of his time, whose tragedies were enormous successes, had every critic on his side, along with a considerable audience. And yet who today ever stages his work? It's important to be humble. There is no guarantee that three hundred years from now, even with the support of *Cahiers* and *Positif*, the filmmakers we have championed for the past sixty years will remain the greatest filmmakers in history.

7. Insight

Ciment: The seventh quality is what I would call “insight,” a specific ability to “see.” Max Friedländer writes about this in his book *On Art and Connoisseurship*:

The expert's weapon and possession are less photographs, books, or a dictionary of characteristics, than concepts of visual imagination, gained in pleasurable contemplation and retained by a vigorous visual memory...And one should not underestimate knowledge. He who knows most, sees most. One should not, however, on the other hand overestimate knowledge. It is of no use to him who cannot see.

An art critic with “insight” can determine the identity and value of a painter by observing a mere detail in the canvas. “This isn't a Bronzino, it's a Rosso Fiorentino.” That's what [American art historian] Bernard Berenson used to do.

Binh: *Aren't you just talking about expertise when it comes to the history of art?*

Ciment: No. What I'm interested in is applying this idea to the discovery of new talent. The biggest problem for festival directors is debut films. A film student with a minimum knowledge of film culture could curate an outstanding festival selection by including fifteen big names. What's more difficult is to thread in among them three unknowns. When Pierre Rissient was in a darkened room watching an anonymous film, he immediately knew when there was something worth looking at and that it was the work of someone he should keep an eye on. That's what I call “insight,” for a film critic. It could also be the insight of an expert, like someone able to recognize a painter's unique style at a glance. But the most important thing is the discovery of talent, without having any technical details, without the slightest knowledge of the filmmaker's previous work. When I was a member of the selection committee, this was what made La Semaine de la critique [Critic's Week at Cannes] so exciting.

Binh: *You've listed seven qualities that a good film critic should have. But having four or five of the seven isn't too bad, is it?*

Ciment: Of course. Perhaps the only person I've ever known who possessed all seven cardinal virtues is Roger Tailleur. I'm not saying he was the best critic ever, but he is, in any case, one of the great French critics of the postwar period, and I think he ticked all the boxes that I've been talking about. Just read his anthology that Louis Seguin and I edited, called *Viv(r) le cinéma [(Long) Live Cinema]*. A great title, don't you think? ■



Michel Ciment at a book signing and promotional event for *Positif* in 2019.

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