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Andrew Sarris Papers, 1955-1988

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SUMMARY INFORMATION

Creator

Andrew Sarris, 1928-

Title and dates

Andrew Sarris Papers, 1955-1988.

Abstract

This collection contains documents related to the life and career of Andrew Sarris, an influential American film critic and Professor in the Film Division of Columbia University's School of the Arts. Professional and personal correspondence, rough drafts of articles, clippings of newspaper columns written by Sarris and his peers, and back issues of film periodicals represent the bulk of this collection. The documents span several decades, from his start as a film critic and theorist in the mid-1950s to the last years of his long tenure at *The Village Voice* in the late 1980s.

Size

1.67 linear feet (4 document boxes)

Call number

MS# 1451

Location

Columbia University
Butler Library, 6th Floor
Rare Book and Manuscript Library
535 West 114th Street
New York, NY 10027

Language(s) of material

English

Biographical Note

A prominent American film critic perhaps best known for his "Films in Focus" column, which ran in New York City's alternative weekly newspaper, *The Village Voice*, for much of its history, Andrew Sarris upheld the *Voice*'s reputation as a piquant publication with his lively and frequently contentious writings on cinema.

Born in Brooklyn on October 31, 1928, Sarris was the child of immigrant parents who fell on hard times with the onset of the Great Depression. In 1946, he enrolled at Columbia for his undergraduate studies, but around this time, he developed a love of cinema that interfered with his schoolwork, and consequently his grades were poor. From 1952 to 1954 he served in the United States Army; subsequently, he enrolled at Columbia for his long-interrupted postgraduate studies, which he finally completed in 1998.

Sarris's career as a film critic began in 1955 when he met Jonas Mekas, co-editor of the fledgling cinema journal *Film Culture*, in a film appreciation class the two young men were taking at the Center of Mass Communications. Mekas invited Sarris to contribute to the publication, and Sarris, then an unenthusiastic graduate student, joined Jonas and his brother Adolfas to help produce the journal's second issue. The Mekas brothers had already published a premier edition in January 1955; now, they enlisted the twenty-six-year-old Sarris as an occasional reviewer and editor. He retained this position for several years while working at what he has characterized as "a half-assed job at Fox as a reader."

In 1960, Jonas Mekas, who was at this point working as a film reviewer at *The Village Voice*, asked Sarris to substitute for him temporarily as he shot *Guns of the Trees*, an avant-garde film he had been working on. Sarris's first piece for the *Voice*, a review of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, appeared on August 11, 1960. This controversial review caused an uproar sufficient for the editor and publisher of the *Voice* – itself still a young and boisterous publication at this point – to take notice, and to keep Sarris around as a reviewer. Early in his career at the *Voice*, Sarris was charged with covering the Cannes Film Festival, but upon his arrival in France, Sarris, saddled with writer's block, was unable to fulfill the brief. Instead, he has said, he "spent six or seven months in Paris, you know, went to the Cinémathèque." On returning back in New York, he resumed his old life, continuing to write for the *Voice* regularly, but Sarris's French film-going experiences would have an indelible impact on him.

Around this time, Sarris's ongoing position at *Film Culture* proved itself a launching pad to greater renown – and notoriety – for the fledgling film critic. Sarris was deeply interested in the *nouvelle vague* (New Wave) movement in French cinema, and the critical approaches to film that were concomitant with its emergence, particularly the writings of François Truffaut and other contributors to the influential journal *Cahiers du cinéma*. He brought this cultural development to English-speaking audiences when he published "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" in *Film Culture*. At the crux of this piece, and at the crux of Sarris's critical approach more generally, is the concept of auteurism: the belief that a film is the product of the personal creative vision of its director. (*Auteur*, the French word for author, typically denotes the director in discussions of cinema.) The French/English phrase that Sarris coined in his article, "auteur theory," is now a critical commonplace. Sarris's essay, much to his surprise, aroused considerable attention and

controversy: suddenly, he and his critical approach were the target of sharp disparagement from other critics who did not share his perspective. Most notable among these was Pauline Kael, whose article, "Circles and Squares," published in the journal *Film Quarterly* in 1963, took aim at the concept of auteurism in general, and at Sarris's deployment of this critical lens in particular. A public and protracted feud followed, and consequently, Sarris attained a level of celebrity with minimal effort on his part. To this day, he remains somewhat bemused about the controversy: as he says, "When Pauline Kael attacked me I was amazed that I was considered so important... I didn't realize what had happened. I had just been plodding along." But Sarris's popularity was not simply the result of his ability to stir up controversy. Undoubtedly, readers were attracted to Sarris's unique perspective on film as well as his vibrant, colloquial writing style. "Films in Focus" became a popular fixture in *The Village Voice*, and he was later named a Senior Editor at the paper. Throughout his time at the *Voice*, Sarris had a loyal readership, and as much of his correspondence illustrates, his readers felt comfortable interacting with him, whether to praise his insights or to quibble with them.

Sarris has been married to the feminist film critic Molly Haskell since 1969. The two met in the 1960s, when Haskell worked at the French Film Office in New York. Haskell has written several books, the best-known being her 1974 text, *From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies*, and today, she writes on film, gender and popular culture for publications that include the *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*.

In 1984, Sarris was afflicted with a very serious but initially unidentifiable illness, and was forced to put his writing on hold. Eventually, after several agonizing months, his ailment was identified as a cytomegalovirus infection; with treatment, he regained his health and resumed work at the *Voice*. Haskell recounts the impact this illness had on Sarris, and on their marriage, in her 1990 memoir, *Love and Other Infectious Diseases*. Many of the pieces of correspondence available in this collection illustrate *The Village Voice* readers' disappointment at his column's absence, and their relief and enthusiasm upon its return. It would seem that by the mid-1980s, Sarris had himself achieved something of a cult following, and the absence of his column from the pages of *The Village Voice* was a conspicuous one. He continued to write for the *Voice* until 1989, when he accepted a position as film critic at the *The New York Observer*.

Over the years, Sarris has complemented his articles with several book-length studies. These include *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (1968), in which he expanded upon his auteurist approach and classified some prominent American auteurs, *Confessions of a Cultist* (1970), *The Primal Screen* (1972), *Politics And Cinema* (1978), *The John Ford Movie Mystery* (1976) and *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet: The American Talking Film – History and Memory, 1927-1949* (1998).

Along with teaching at Columbia, Sarris has held academic positions at Yale, New York University, The School of Visual Arts, and Juilliard. He has received awards and accolades that include the Rockefeller Fellowship at Bellagio (1991); a Guggenheim Fellowship (1969); Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1982); Special Award from the L.A. Critics Circle (1985); Maurice Bessy Award, Montreal (1995); City of Sydney Salutes, Sydney, Australia (1995). He was also a runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism (2000). Today, Sarris continues to write for *The New York Observer* and teach undergraduate- and graduate-level courses in the film division of Columbia's School of the Arts.

Description

The collection contains Sarris's personal and professional correspondence; drafts of several of his written pieces for *The Village Voice* and other publications; clippings of Sarris's and other writers' articles from *The Village Voice* and other publications; early issues of *Film Culture*, for which Sarris was an early contributor and collaborator; other cinema-related journals and books; and miscellaneous mementos.

Arrangement

This collection is arranged in three series.

Series I: Correspondence, 1968-1988	PAGE 7
Series II: Printed Material, 1955-1988	PAGE 7
Subseries I.1: Clippings, 1964-1988	PAGE 7
Subseries I.2: Periodicals, 1955-1987	PAGE 7
Series III: Writings and Work, undated	PAGE 7

Series I: Correspondence, 1968-1988

This series contains both professional and personal correspondence. Because Sarris was a public figure with a considerable readership, particularly in his later years at *The Village Voice*, the line between his professional life and his private life was indistinct. Among the correspondence available here are letters from: readers of "Films in Focus" and other of Sarris's published pieces; Sarris's fellow writers at *The Village Voice* and other publications; editorial staff at various other periodicals and publishing houses; Sarris's colleagues and students at Columbia; professors at other universities as well as senior employees of museums and galleries, often requesting Sarris's presence at conferences and other events; various people involved in the movie industry, primarily executives and directors. The correspondence is arranged chronologically.

Series II: Printed Material, 1955-1988

This series consists of published writings, primarily by Sarris.

Subseries 1: Clippings, 1964-1988. The bulk of the material in this subseries consists of clippings of *Village Voice* columns authored by Sarris. His "Films in Focus" column is very well represented here, as is his "Revivals in Focus" column, which discussed revival screenings of older films that were happening in New York City theaters. The vast majority of these clippings date back to the mid-1980s. Also available are a small selection of clippings of Sarris's writing in other publications; several clippings of advertisements and articles that make mention of Sarris (including year-end collections of prominent film critics' picks, and advertisements that feature pull quotes from Sarris's reviews).

Subseries 2: Periodicals, 1955-1987. This subseries contains magazines, journals and newsletters; some feature Sarris's writing, while others engage with his interests. Represented in this collection are several issues of *Film Culture*; these range from its second-ever issue, from 1955, in which Sarris got his start as a film critic, to a 1970 issue. In this subseries there are also a considerable number of early issues of *Continental Film Review*. This magazine, now largely forgotten, offered writings on cutting-edge (and frequently racy) European cinema. In addition to these two publications, this subseries features a number of other periodicals. Sarris's writing is present in some of these publications, including the second-ever issue of the cinema journal *Moviegoer*, which features an article by Sarris as well as one by a young Susan Sontag, while

others, including *New American Review*, *Cinéaste*, *Black Film Review*, and *Film History*, do not feature Sarris's work.

Series III: Writings and Work, undated

This series contains drafts and rough notes, in various stages of completeness, that Sarris generated over the course of his career. Many of these drafts went on to become articles published in *The Village Voice* and other publications to which Sarris contributed. As virtually none of these drafts is dated, this collection does not appear in chronological order. In addition to these drafts, this series contains documents, and film-related mementos and photographs that Sarris accumulated.

ACCESS AND USE

Access

This collection has no restrictions.

This collection is located off-site. You will need to request this material at least twenty-four (24) hours in advance to use the collection in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library reading room.

Restrictions on Use and Copyright Information

Single photocopies may be made for research purposes. Permission to publish material from the collection must be requested from the Curator of Manuscripts, Rare Book and Manuscript Library (RBML). The RBML approves permission to publish that which it physically owns; the responsibility to secure copyright permission rests with the patron.

Other Finding Aids

There are no other finding aids available.

PROCESSING AND OTHER INFORMATION

Processing Information

This collection was processed by Annie Rudd, Graduate School of Journalism 2013. Finding aid written by Annie Rudd in June 2008.

Descriptive Rules Used

Finding aid adheres to that prescribed by *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.

Encoding

Finding aid written in English.

Preferred Citation

Identification of specific item; Date (if known); Andrew Sarris Papers; Box and Folder; **Rare Book and Manuscript Library**, Columbia University Library.

Subject Headings

These papers have been indexed in the Columbia University Library online catalog using the following terms. Those seeking related materials should search under these terms.

Columbia University
Continental Film Review
Film culture.
Haskell, Molly
Moviegoer
New American review (Brooklyn, New York, N.Y.)
New York observer (New York, N.Y.)
Sarris, Andrew
Village voice (Greenwich Village, New York, N.Y.)

Series I: Correspondence, 1968-1988

- Box 1**
F. 1-4 1968-1988, undated (4 folders)
F. 5 Outgoing, 1982-1988

Series II: Printed Material, 1955-1988

Subseries II.1: Clippings, 1964-1988

- The Village Voice*
F. 6-8 Articles by Sarris, 1964-1984 (3 folders)

Box 2

- F. 1-6 Articles by Sarris, 1984-1988 (6 folders)
F. 7 Articles by others, 1976-1985
Other Publications
F. 8 Articles by Sarris, undated
F. 9 Articles and Advertisements--Mention of Sarris, 1971-1988
F. 10 General, 1977-1986

Subseries II.2: Periodicals, 1955-1987

- F. 11-12 Articles by Sarris, 1964-1987 (2 folders)

Box 3

- F. 1-3 *Continental Film Review*, 1959-1972 (3 folders)
F. 4-6 *Film Culture*, 1955-1970 (3 folders)
F. 7 General, 1971-1983

Box 4

- F. 1 General, 1985-1988

Series III: Writings and Work, circa 1974-1988

- F. 2-4 Drafts, circa 1974 -1988 (3 folders)
F. 5 Drafts--Fragments, undated
F. 6-7 General, 1975-1988 (2 folders)
F. 8 Photographs, undated