

Fifty Years of Film with LA Times Critic Kevin Thomas

Film Critic Kevin Thomas has been reviewing films for over fifty years. With a staff position at the LA Times from December 5, 1965 until March 2012, Mr. Thomas has watched thousands of films and developed a special relationship with the Laemmle family. We sat down with Mr. Thomas to look back over the past fifty years and the impact Laemmle has had on the LA film scene.

“You have seen many movies over the years.
How do you remember them all?”

If somebody ever really wanted to survey, I probably was the most prolific movie reviewer of my time. I was a glutton for work and I loved it passionately. And starting in 1984, I was particularly productive because the UCLA film archive was emerging, as well as American Cinematheque and LACMA. Our daily calendar editor said that I was using up too much space for all these scattered things, in addition to mainstream reviews. So I called a



Kevin Thomas, Bob and Greg Laemmle

meeting and proposed a column called “Screening Room,” which still exists but in a different format. I would go to see anything, something like six to eight extra pictures, and do capsule reviews. This would call attention to key films in film festivals, the series at LACMA, the UCLA film archive and American Cinematheque. In all honesty I think that I was really crucial in creating audiences for those three institutions from day one.

As for the quality of the movies, I remember the good ones. The bad stuff you sort of flush out immediately because

you want room for the good stuff. I’ve been privileged to review many great films, but I’ve also covered miles and miles and miles of junk. That goes with the territory. I think it’s very healthy to be a movie reviewer in a big mainstream daily, because you have to be confronted with everything. A lot of the time, I got things that were a little more on the esoteric side that suited my temperament. And in that way I reviewed a lot of really great major films.

What is your first memory of meeting Max Laemmle?

I met Max Laemmle when I was assigned to review a French film called the *Mirror Has Two Faces* starring the beautiful Michelle Morgan in 1963. I had done a ton of reviews, and most of them foreign films. Not long after I met Max he said, “Kevin, do you think I dare show a series of six French films?” And I said, “If you dare, I will support you.” He got prints of those six films, and on six Saturday mornings in a row, I went over to the Los Feliz theatre before the matinee screening and then came to the paper and wrote up an overview as a way of

calling attention to them before they were released. After that was a success he said, “Now, I’m thinking maybe I should do the same thing with six Italian films.” So I had six Saturdays looking at Italian films and did an overview of that.

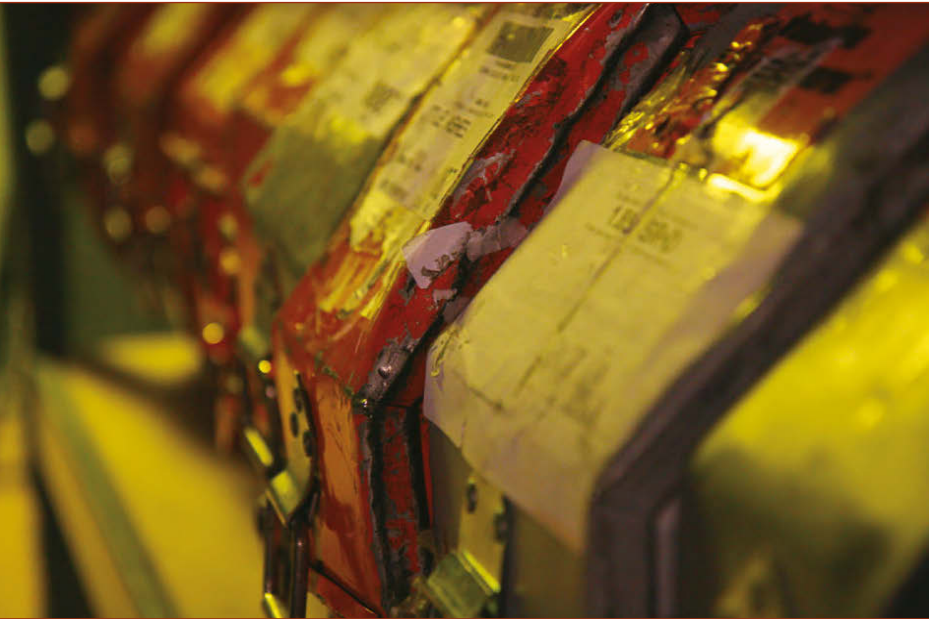
Was your relationship with the Laemmle’s social or strictly professional?

We did not “socialize” but I think Max was generally fond of me as I was fond of him. I remember when I first met Max, there was a period he could get very angry with me if I didn’t think everything he showed was a

masterpiece. Towards the end of the first year we met, we got into a shouting match. I can remember trying to slam the door at the Los Feliz but it was spring loaded and I couldn’t get the dramatic “Boom” so instead there was a less forceful, rather funny, “Ugghhh!” which had a lesser impact. Then around Christmas, Max called me up and said, “Kevin, listen, I don’t want to have bad feelings between us as the holiday season approaches,” and I said, “Well, that’s wonderful, Max.” Because of course I adored him – he was a dynamic, courageous man. He was passionate about music; he had a sense of obligation to support good causes; He was passionate about trying to be a quality exhibitor.

What set the Laemmle’s apart from other exhibitors?

Max had determination and imagination. He realized that you had to create an audience for these films and you didn’t have the internet, Netflix or other alternatives. Max’s staff developed an incredible card catalogue system. They had flyers in the Los Feliz for people to sign up for their newsletters so that they could get a mailing list and keep their customers apprised at what was coming down the pike. This was a tremendous amount of work and dedication. And Max thought beyond that. If you were going to show a French film, any French publications, French organizations, cultural organizations, the consulate were





contacted by his staff. He also reached out to schools if it was a suitable film for children. And various organizations, which were nationality or culturally oriented would be contacted and offered group rates. There was a tremendous amount of detail work put into each film and as far as I know, no other theater ever in fifty years did this

kind of personalized, focused marketing. And all of this intense, imaginative and creative effort is the foundation of the whole Laemmle chain. I think that you could say that the Laemmles were responsible for creating a healthier climate for alternative cinema, so to speak. And I think they continue to do that role increasingly single-handedly.

Advanced screenings have always been an important part of promoting a film. Has this changed over the years?

It's very interesting because when I started reviewing films, mainstream theaters, in particular, had their changeover day on Wednesday. The drive-in movies, of which I reviewed hundreds and hundreds, double features and other routine stuff often would open without previews. They would open on a Wednesday, so you would go to the matinee, and then you would schlep down to the paper and knock out a review for Friday. Friday is the weekend paper, the one that people actually read most to see what they want to see of the pick of the new crop of pictures opening that day. In the old days when these *Beach Blanket Bingo*-type pictures opened without a review on a Wednesday they'd set themselves up for a Friday review, because the deadlines were too tight to get in the Thursday edition. So, if the picture wasn't very good they were just setting themselves perfectly for a negative review to appear on the opening day of the weekend. The trade then got smarter as the years got on and opened on Fridays. I would either go over to some old movie palace on Hollywood Boulevard or on South Broadway and dart back to the paper and knock out my review for Monday.

Did you always know you want to write about films?

As a kid, I loved movies. I was 5 1/2 at the time of Pearl Harbor and all of America went to the movies every week. This is where you saw the newsreels and could visually see what was going on with the war in the Pacific or Europe, because we didn't have television yet. As far as I know and can recall, the first movie I saw was in 1940. Paulette Goddard was the leading lady in the *Great Dictator* at the lovely old United Artists Theatre on south Broadway. I loved the movie-going experience and I grew up going to the Saturday movies on my own. The turning point was at Berendo Junior High, near Pico and Vermont. I had a very inspiring teacher in drama class who was so vivacious and passionate about things.

She gave us an assignment that would change my life. She told us that all of the students were to keep a scrapbook of reviews, mainly of movies. I must have been about thirteen and I don't think I had ever read a movie review, but I clipped out the reviews of what were



known as the “three S’s” — Edmund Schallert, who was at the LA Times from 1921-1958, Phil Scheuer, who was there from 1927-1967, and John Scott, who was also there from 1927-1967. I remember thinking, “Oh my God, people can actually get paid for going to the movies and then writing them up. They can make a living at this, and they get their name in the paper and everything.”

How did you get your start at the LA Times?

I started on December 5, 1961 in a menial, temporary job in circulation, filling orders for the “Learn a Language” record offer promotion and looking for winners in the cash word contest. But by November of 1962 I got a break to try to start writing reviews because Phil Scheuer, the long-time lead drama critic and movie critic, had me do a test review of the *Manchurian Candidate*. He said, “If you can write a good review of that film, you’re in. You can review anything if you can review that.” Well, I labored mightily. I was a desk assistant in the weekend news section ‘perspective

and opinion’ and there were about four or five guys in there — the editor and the writers of that section — and they all helped me edit this. What they taught me was how to turn a term paper into an actual newspaper movie review. I was a stringer [freelancer] until I got on staff on December 5, 1965 where I stayed until my last review in March, 2012.

How has film criticism evolved over the years?

I think the standards are going up all the time and the tragedy is that it is an endangered profession. I think it’s always been an esoteric profession and you’re crazy to try to get into it unless you have an absolutely burning passion, and then you have to have a lot of luck. I was at the right place at the right time and I lucked out, big time.

Big metropolitan print dailies are really endangered species and with cutbacks, the first non-essential is a film critic. So many people today are reduced to being freelancers or part-timers. I’d hate to be starting out now — the competition is beyond belief and the opportunities miniscule. But, I think that younger critics are probably better-trained as writers and as critics because they’ve studied courses in critical writing and film history. And, if you have that burning passion, go for it because nobody’s going to stop you anyway.

- Written by Allison Levine