



CHINA

SHOP

*Alienated*

Like most people, I am drawn to certain entertainments, and take pleasure in their unfolding, because I do not know how they will end. Very few people re-watch videos of election night coverage, for instance, because while such entertainment has certain plastic qualities, the colour-coded computer graphics and interviews with sweaty-lipped politicians are subordinate to the result. People read detective novels, not just for the quality of their prose, but from a curiosity to see the mystery solved. A convention of reviewing is that a reviewer should not reveal the ending of an entertainment of this kind. This same convention applies to films.

Recently *Alien 3*, a film I had been looking forward to, was reviewed on the Radio National program *Daybreak*. The comments of the reviewer, whose name I have happily forgotten, were both banal and pretentious. She is, of course, not alone among film reviewers in possessing these qualities. However, to disclose the ending of a film of this nature is not only arrogant, it is a grotesque discourtesy both to the artists involved in its making and to listeners who make up part of its potential audience. I did see *Alien 3* a few days later and was then able to enjoy its cinematic features, but the review had indeed managed to

poison my enjoyment of the plot. Not the least irritating thing about the incident is that she was actually praising the film. If she thinks about it at all, she probably rather smugly feels that she has provided insights which may help people like me to a more perfect understanding of the movie.

I know several otherwise sensible people are guided in their entertainment choices by reviews. To make sure that we don't waste our time seeing something we might not like, we allow complete duds like the Radio National reviewer to steal some of the piquancy of our aesthetic experience by explaining what is already perfectly clear.

The poltroons who present movies on television are no better. Bill Collins is the most widely reviled of these, but he is actually the best. The comments that are often made about the brightness of Collins' clothing reflect more upon a certain mindless conformity in Australian cultural expectations than upon his (usually rather smart) appearance. Collins compliments his audience by assuming that they will be as interested as he is in the minutiae of cinema history.

More plausible-looking characters offer nothing more worthwhile than their own opinions and a few gleanings from standard film guides. John Hinde, on the ABC, does not seem as pompous as SBS's David Stratton, but Hinde tends to outline even more of the plot. Channel Seven's Ivan Hutchinson looks so much like a sad but faithful old dog that I can hardly bear to watch any film that I know he is going to introduce. However, I have to admit that the 'Ask Ivan' column in *TV Week* can be compelling reading, full of questions like: "To settle a bet, is Jana Wendt the sister of Hannah Arendt?"; and "Is Gerontion de'-Anthell, who played Methuselah in the 1919 version of *The Bible*, still alive?"

Bill, John, David and Ivan may be amiable characters but most people don't need a savant to anticipate the

details listed in the credits, or to describe 'arresting visuals' or 'powerful performances'. They are capable of seeing the virtues and faults of a film, regardless of whether it is given the imprimatur of 'Movie of the Week'.

For those who do feel the need for such interpretations, the standard of film criticism in Australia is generally low. Take, for example, the fourth paragraph of Evan Williams' recent review of *Batman Returns* in *The Australian*:

The most likely audiences would appear to be immature adults, fans of Michelle Pfeiffer, and those interested in the silent German expressionist cinema of the 1920s.

In the final paragraph of the same review, he states:

Those most likely to enjoy it will be penguin fanciers, admirers of Mussolini's architectural style, fans of Pfeiffer, sports car enthusiasts, and everyone likely to appreciate in-jokes about German expressionist cinema.

To call such writing sloppy would be a compliment.

An acquaintance of mine was a film reviewer on the main newspaper of a large Queensland city in the 1960s. This person had no idea which films he ought to praise and, since overseas films took months to arrive in Australia at that time, he simply consulted back issues of *Time* magazine and borrowed its critical stance. It may have been comical to see him draw a salary for such shameless plagiarism, but unthinking assent to any point of view is frightening. Too many filmgoers differ from this person only in that they are not paid for their failure to use their critical intelligence.

MICHAEL CONATY would like to see a media embargo on *Lethal Weapon 3*.