

# FILM COMMENT

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1977

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Brendan Gill on **THE LAST TYCOON**  
De Laurentiis: 'King Kong Is Nice Guy'  
Robin Wood on Small-Town Film Noir  
Did Anti-Hype Make **ROCKY** a Hit?

Interviews: Elia Kazan, Sam Fuller, Robert  
Benton, Alan Rudolph, Barbet Schroeder

Is Film Criticism  
Too Violent?  
by Roger Greenspun





# FILM COMMENT

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on the cover:  
Sissy Spacek in CARRIE  
(photo: United Artists).

on this page:  
Art Carney in THE LATE SHOW (photo: Lion's Gate Films);  
John Considine in WELCOME TO L.A. (photo: Lion's Gate);  
Jessica Lange in KING KONG (photo: Paramount Pictures);  
Robert DeNiro in THE LAST TYCOON (photo: Paramount).



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# "KONG IS NICE GUY"

Dino De Laurentiis interviewed  
by Stuart Byron

PHOTOS: PARAMOUNT PICTURES

My ideal producer would probably last ten minutes in Hollywood. He would reassemble as many members of the old Arthur Freed unit as are still extant, and hand them over to Vincente Minnelli along with the latest Broadway musical hit. He would reclaim Sam Fuller and Budd Boetticher from involuntary retirement. He would be able to separate directorial talent from the schlock it is so often expended on early in its career, recognizing right now, for example, that Corman regulars George Armitage and Paul Bartel are more talented than a Broadway and TV emigré like Robert (MURDER BY DEATH) Moore, who lucked out commercially on his first film with a Neil Simon script and a top cast.

Obviously Dino De Laurentiis is not my ideal producer. But even confining oneself to the parameters of current Hollywood, he hardly seems one of the more courageous ones around. He not only constricts himself to known quantities to direct his films, but wants them to be quantities which have previously (and recently) directed the same *kind* of films. Since shifting his operations to the United States in 1972, he has never hired a first-time director, and perhaps that's asking too much. But he has also never permitted a director to make a budgetary or generic jump, either. There is no equivalent in his career to the chance Richard Zanuck and David Brown took with Steven Spielberg on *JAWS*, the one Robert Evans took with John Schlesinger on *MARATHON MAN*, the one William Castle took with Roman Polanski on *ROSEMARY'S BABY*, the one Philip D'Antoni took with William Friedkin on *THE FRENCH CONNECTION*. I don't like most of these films, but that's not the point; the point is that it took some courage and analysis to assign those directors at those points in

their careers to those particular projects.

Instead, De Laurentiis has an inordinate fondness for the faceless, impersonal hacks whom he can count on to be on schedule and under budget: Michael Winner (*DEATH WISH*, *THE STONE KILLER*), Michael Anderson (the forthcoming *ORCA*), Edward Dmytryk (*ANZIO*), Terence Young (*THE VALACHI PAPERS*). Otherwise, he's strictly a follower: Sidney Lumet for *SERPICO* after somebody else proved Lumet's commercial adeptness for the thriller with *THE ANDERSON TAPES*; John Frankenheimer for *BRINKS* after his apparent comeback (thanks to Robert Evans) with *BLACK SUNDAY*; Frank Pierson for *KING OF THE GYPSIES* after Streisand hired that unproven director for *A STAR IS BORN*. All of the candidates to direct *KING KONG* had previously directed \$20 million-plus grossers, including the eventual one assigned, John (THE TOWERING INFERNO) Guillermin.

I go into all this at such length because a producer's relationship with directors would seem to be the natural subject matter of an interview with a producer in this magazine. In the case of De Laurentiis, this seemed useless—and proved so when Ingmar Bergman was thrown into my face as the producer's current redeeming artistic value. No: It was best to approach De Laurentiis as a financier and showman—the best, maybe, in the film industry today. *KING KONG* the movie seems to me at best a modest success; *KING KONG* the financial deal and *KING KONG* the publicity campaign are clearly masterpieces. The interview took place on December 15th at De Laurentiis' New York offices in the Gulf + Western Building, a few days before *KING KONG* opened and several more before the film's reviews turned out to be more mixed than they appeared to be on that day.—S.B.



**W**ell, I have to say that you seem to be right—at least commercially. Everybody in the industry who sees KING KONG does entertain the possibility that it will outgross JAWS.

JAWS is \$240 million, worldwide. I don't know if there exists in history of our business a movie that can gross \$241 million to beat JAWS. We hope to beat JAWS—because in many territories JAWS forbidden to fourteen years children. Now, in my opinion, for KONG we have the same audience JAWS had plus the children.

Was this what you had in mind from the start? To "beat JAWS"?

No. I must say, in all honesty: When we started KONG, what was our attitude? "Let's bring back KONG. We're gonna do business; we're gonna make money. Let's try to make a picture \$7-8 million." We never think about JAWS, about anything like that. Then, when we make the budget: Oh my God! Then, when I start to see the picture can be quality, not only commercial but *quality* too—we can make happy the audience in the street and you [points to interviewer]—then I say: We ought to do some sequences in special way, we ought to spend more. We decided to go to twenty-four. At this point, I begin to think: Maybe we have possibility to make boxoffice look like JAWS. Then I speak of JAWS.

It seems to me that you made a basic decision—and the correctness or incorrectness of this decision will determine if you outgross JAWS. You made the character King Kong the victim totally. The audience never screams in fear of Kong.

Yes!

It is not a scary movie.

Correct! This is the difference between the old one and the new one. We decide to go in different way from the old movie. Let's have new angle: This we decide in the script. Kong very *simpatico*, and let's make a love story. When we built Kong, we spent three million dollars. Why? Because when we built the first Kong, it looked like PLANET OF THE APES. I say I no like—let's start again. When we built the second one it look like a gorilla. I say I no like! Let's start again! Because he's our leading man—our leading character in the movie. They say, "Mr. Dino, what you want?" I say, "The face of Kong must be charming, *simpatico*, and not look to any gorillas or any apes. Must look completely friendly to everyone." Then [Kong engineer-constructor Carlo] Rambaldi did what I like. You're only scared with Kong first time he come in. In the second sequence, when he start play with girl, the audience realize Kong is nice guy.

And you don't think this will prevent it from making a stratospheric amount of money?

Is possible. We can't predict the audience. But I no believe the people go see

movie because it's scary or not. The people just want a big entertainment. And in my opinion, if you try to make KONG like JAWS or any other movie—is already wrong. Give something new to the audience. JAWS was scary. This is *simpatico* character, touching everybody, especially the women. Because women strongly believe in '77 not just anymore man ready to die for the first girl! And Kong ready to die!

I don't want to go over the mechanics of the special effects and of the Kong character—they've been exhaustively covered elsewhere—but I remember a big controversy when you started. Black actors claimed that you were looking for an "ape-like black" to be inside an ape suit.

This is completely wrong information from the press. We don't interview only black. When we start to need man in the suit, we see black guy, white guy, yellow guy—because we don't need the face; the face come black or yellow or red. We need somebody like Marcel Marceau: *Mimo!* *Mimo!* We need just some special attitude in move like an ape. You understand that?

Was there ever a debate as to whether to keep KONG in period?

Yeah, we had long long discussion with [scriptwriter] Lorenzo Semple for one month only about the "period or modern?" And I said to Lorenzo, "There's no way to make it in period. Because when old one was made, it was

made in 1932, and for 1932 it was modern movie. Now why we have to make same movie and come back into period to 1932?"

I'll answer that.

Yeah?

Because in 1932 it was still common for professional explorers to find strange things in remote areas of the world and "bring 'em back alive" to civilization. There's no need now. You'd just send in the television cameras and show it on "Wild Kingdom."

Well, you could bring Kong back if you have a crazy character like Grodin, because he goes to the island to bring back oil and then he flop with the oil situation and so instead he bring back Kong.

But first you have to make him a geologist—because that kind of explorer doesn't really exist anymore—and then you ask us to accept that, on his own, he would suddenly decide, "I'm the vice-president of public relations," and bring back Kong as an advertising symbol.

Is too much logical explanation. Movie no need logical explanation! Everything need not be true psychologically. The true is what look like true. If we make Kong not real, then you are right. Look at the sequence in the supertanker—so beautiful, one of the best sequences in whole movie.

I almost think it's the best sequence.

Ah! You see? Now you have reason to bring Kong to New York—to make just this sequence!





**H**ow did you go about deciding who should direct KING KONG?

Very simple. The first guy I ask was Steven Spielberg. Then Milos Forman, then Polanski, Sydney Pollack—everybody was worried about to do a remake from a classic movie. So then I decided to go with Guillermin, because to me John Guillermin is a talent guy. He is a strange character, but this don't mean anything to me. All directors are strange characters. Bergman is a strange character, Fellini is a strange character—all directors. He was very open to special effects. And then, he believe in the story; he believe in the love story. And if he believe in it, it works. Because John Guillermin believe in this fantastically human love story.

*But in going to Guillermin as opposed to those other people, you were going with somebody with a reputation as a technician rather than somebody who makes the kind of film which the critics like and which wins awards.*

Well, you know, every director at one point jump from one category to another category. No director can be genius from first movie. You must give a chance when people are talented. And I recognize in John some quality. And he did it with KONG. He surprised you, surprised all critics. We have smashing reviews from [Los Angeles Times critic Charles] Champlin—he says KING KONG number two better than number one. *Variety*. *Hollywood Reporter*. Fantastic reviews.

*Do you think it has a chance for the Best Picture Oscar?*

For the nomination, I think so. It win? We have to see the other competition. You know, my dear friend, you must recognize: Is more difficult for everyone to make good movie with KING KONG than with ROCKY or BOUND FOR GLORY or NETWORK. STAR IS BORN—is more easy to do it, because you have Barbra Streisand, she have great personality. TAXI DRIVER—we have two good people like Scorsese and DeNiro. Is more difficult to convince you that KONG is a good movie than it would be for any other movie. Here we have practically well-unknown director because nobody know really John quality—and big ape. And all unknown people around him. For the fact that when you're believing in apes, you already start losing quality with people like you. And if I convince Champlin one hundred percent, *Variety* one hundred percent, you fifty or seventy-five percent—it's not easy. Because it's a big head; they have to act with big head.

*Was it ever considered going with big stars?*

No, you need one big star in movie. We have Kong. Jeff Bridges is well-known, very good actor. Grodin was brought in because in my opinion Grodin some movie symbol of some execu-

tives in the American industry now, with mentality, "Everything has to be done with promotion, publicity." You know what I mean? And we try to make realistic. From the other hand: Why we have this Grodin with funny line? If you see the picture with the audience, you'd be surprised how many laughs we have with Grodin. Because—this was my attitude—you must make Kong real, serious, but around him you must have some humor. In 1977, you cannot have KING KONG 100 percent straight, serious. It's impossible. You must play around him in some way.

*Has any movie besides CLEOPATRA cost more than \$24 million?*

I don't think so. And it's certainly the most expensive movie made in history in the most short time. We start January 15; in ten months we finish the movie, we're ready for release in the most big openings in the history of the industry—2,200 cinema worldwide—with Italian version ready, French version ready, German version ready, Spanish version ready, Japanese version ready. No studio can do it. I guarantee you. No studio in the United States are capable to do this opening: finish the picture November 15 and on same day five dubbed versions ready. No studio. One-man operation, yes. But no one studio. I make any bet.

It's different approach. Because major usually starts the publicity campaign when the picture is finished. The people sit down in the screening room, see the picture, then the next day sit down to decide what is to be done. Because the

major believes the most of publicity must be five, six, seven weeks before the picture opens. *I disagree completely entirely.* Promotion in my opinion must start when the picture start shooting.

*So you would think Francis Ford Coppola is being stupid with APOCALYPSE NOW? No publicity during production, etc.*

Well, I don't know. Coppola I respect as one of the best directors we have in the world, especially in the United States. I have no idea why he wants no publicity. If I was producer, I guarantee you I start the publicity eight months ago. But Coppola's seems to be the policy of all American people. I disagree for a very simple reason: The States we have 250 million people. You cannot reach big mass of 250 million people in four weeks. It's too great to believe. Better to go little by little, little by little. . .

*But you're only talking about the kind of picture which has elements in it which are publicizable from the beginning, aren't you?*

Well, of course, what I'm talking about can only be done with a special movie. APOCALYPSE is one of these movies where it could be done. You have big personalities—Coppola, Brando. A special story—the first big movie about Vietnam. Reason enough to start publicity eight months ago.

**I**n your method of operation, you don't get your financing from a major who takes on worldwide distribution in exchange. Rather, you get advances against receipts from local distributors in each country, sometimes in-

## BOB & BARBRA & BRUCE & BERGMAN

### THE ALTMAN RAG

*Both sides of the RAGTIME controversy—your firing of Robert Altman in favor of Milos Forman as director of your forthcoming production of the book—have been amply aired in the press, but there's one question that sticks in my mind. Did you buy the property and then assign it to Altman, or did he bring it to you?*

No. I buy the property when all major studio refuse to buy it. And when it was not published, when it was not big best-seller, when it was just manuscript. And I buy. And then I give it to Bob Altman to read.

### THIS YEAR'S STAR'S BEEN BORN

*Last year New York magazine reported you as interviewing Bruce Springsteen to star in your forthcoming production of Peter Maas's KING OF THE GYPSIES. Now you've assigned Frank R. Pierson, of A STAR IS BORN, to write and direct. What's happened to the Springsteen idea?*

Well, it's still possibility. But I like better Stallone, I must say.

## BLACK WIDOW

*Why didn't Streisand want to do THE MERRY WIDOW for you and Ingmar Bergman?*

No. Streisand want to do it!

*What? She did? Every report has said the opposite.*

She called—[agent] Sue Mengers called all the time—she want to do it. But Bergman want to go with somebody else. Very simple.

*When Bergman came to Los Angeles right after he left Sweden, there was a report in the press. Bergman said, "Dino has a marvelous casting idea for MERRY WIDOW," but he wouldn't say what it is. Can you say what it is?*

Yeah. The marvelous idea is to use black girl.

Diana Ross?

We don't mention name. The idea for cast is to go with complete new different approach. Black girl. It can be located in Martinique. The story—the "widow" go from Martinique to Spain. For Bergman, was very exciting idea. But we don't mention any name.

*Do you think it will be his next film?*

Oh, sure. But we don't know with who.





cluding majors who are taking the film only for one or two countries. The question is: Are you a producer, or are you a studio head?

I believe only one-man operation in the industry. I believe like when in 1930 the American industry was great in the world, when men like Darryl Zanuck, Zukor, Selznick, Louis B. Mayer, etc., make really the American industry, was one-man operation. And I still believe today the only way to go—one-man operation. Now: If I am studio, or if I am producer, I leave for you to decide. But my answer is: I am one-man operation.

But you're involved in so many pictures at once that it must vary from film to film. It seems to me that a guy like Martin Bregman, who got the actual producer credit on *SERPICO*—a so-called "Dino De Laurentiis Production"—had more responsibility than anybody but you yourself had on *KING KONG*, where you're actually called the producer.

But on *SERPICO*, I choose the story, I read only ten page before the book is finish, and I decide to buy. Then, true, I put Bregman in charge to produce the movie. But was I just studio head? Would any studio decide to buy book for half a million dollars by reading ten page? I don't think any studio is in position to do that. No one. Because if head of the studio go into board and say, "I read ten page from the book that will be 500 page, and I want to buy for \$500,000," the board say, "Please, you would resign from now on?"

But one thing is the billing in the United States. I buy story *DEATH WISH* from two producer—I don't remember the name. I never saw these two guy. They never came into production, never

do anything, but when I buy book from them, one of the obligations was producer credit. So I gave them producer credit; the billing was "produced by." Because everybody in United States become crazy about billing. I don't give a shit who has the credit, the billing, really.

Well, for *KING KONG* maybe it's a little different because you have to psychologically understand: \$24 million is tremendous gamble, is different from picture cost four. If I give up something about picture cost four, I don't give up anything for picture costing twenty-four.

Do any of these distributors ever exercise any creative control, or veto power? Can they bow out if the elements change, or...

No! Nobody decide anything. I just say, "I'm making *BRINKS*, probably directed by John Frankenheimer. I want X dollars from Germany." That's all. Finished. He just take my picture. He trust me. He want Dino De Laurentiis movie. I don't give a damn about my distributors. I just give my name and the title of the movie. And then I make change, I make cast, I make starring the way I want. I don't need approval from anyone. Look now. I make Bergman's *SERPENT'S EGG*. Four million dollars production cost. When you add overhead, and interest, and producer's fee, you have more like five million dollars. When Richard Harris get sick and we substitute David Carradine, we don't need approval from anyone, because I want Bergman to make movie the way he wants.

When I start *KING KONG*, with original

budget \$16 million, no major want to be involved as United States distributor, including Paramount. I start picture anyway. I don't need approval of anyone, because if I want I make picture with my own money—or money I loan from banks—like I did with *THE BIBLE*. I spent \$17 million in 1962 without asking anyone what to do with it, and at end of picture I make deal with Fox.

When Dimitri de Grunwald made *SHALAKO*, the Sean Connery-Brigitte Bardot western, that way several years back—with advances from individual countries—The New York Times had a story in its financial section which showed that de Grunwald had a profit before the picture even opened. The individual distributors could lose money if the picture failed in any one of their countries—but de Grunwald was home free.

It's possible.

Has that ever happened to you? What is your breakeven on *KING KONG*?

Fifty million dollars. Yes, we already have that in; from Paramount alone we have \$25 million minimum guarantee for the American distribution. We're at breakeven before we open. But *KING KONG* special case. You know, I work with these people from forty years and I don't charge too much. I charge what is necessary to charge. Is insane to try to have a profit before and then your people lose money. I don't want my people to lose money. Why? Because when I call next year, and say, "I have four pictures this year. I want \$2 million from Germany, or from Italy," it's done. Because these people know me for years, years, years—I cannot make this kind of a joke.

It's well-known that you've received some lucrative offers to sell out to a big company.

I already receive proposition from one conglomerate—I cannot tell you the name—to buy my company. If I sell the company. I cannot make movie. I cannot work with anybody control. I can listen to everyone, sure—but...

Well, I worked for Joe Levine in 1966-67...

He's a great man.

... and he also, at that time, didn't want to accept any offers to sell out. But when, a year later, he had *THE GRADUATE*, the profit was so large that he had no choice but to sell Embassy Pictures to Avco. Because the American tax system taxes capital gains at half the rate it taxes profits, he just had to convert a profit into a capital gain. If *KING KONG* is as big as *JAWS*, might that not happen to you? Won't your lawyers come to you and say, "If you don't sell, it's \$20 million more in taxes you have to pay?"

Well, if it's that profitable...

Maybe you could pull off the ideal. Not even Joe Levine could do it. You sell to a conglomerate, but without a contract for your personal services. Then you form a new company!

Everything's possible. ☆