

# filmcomment

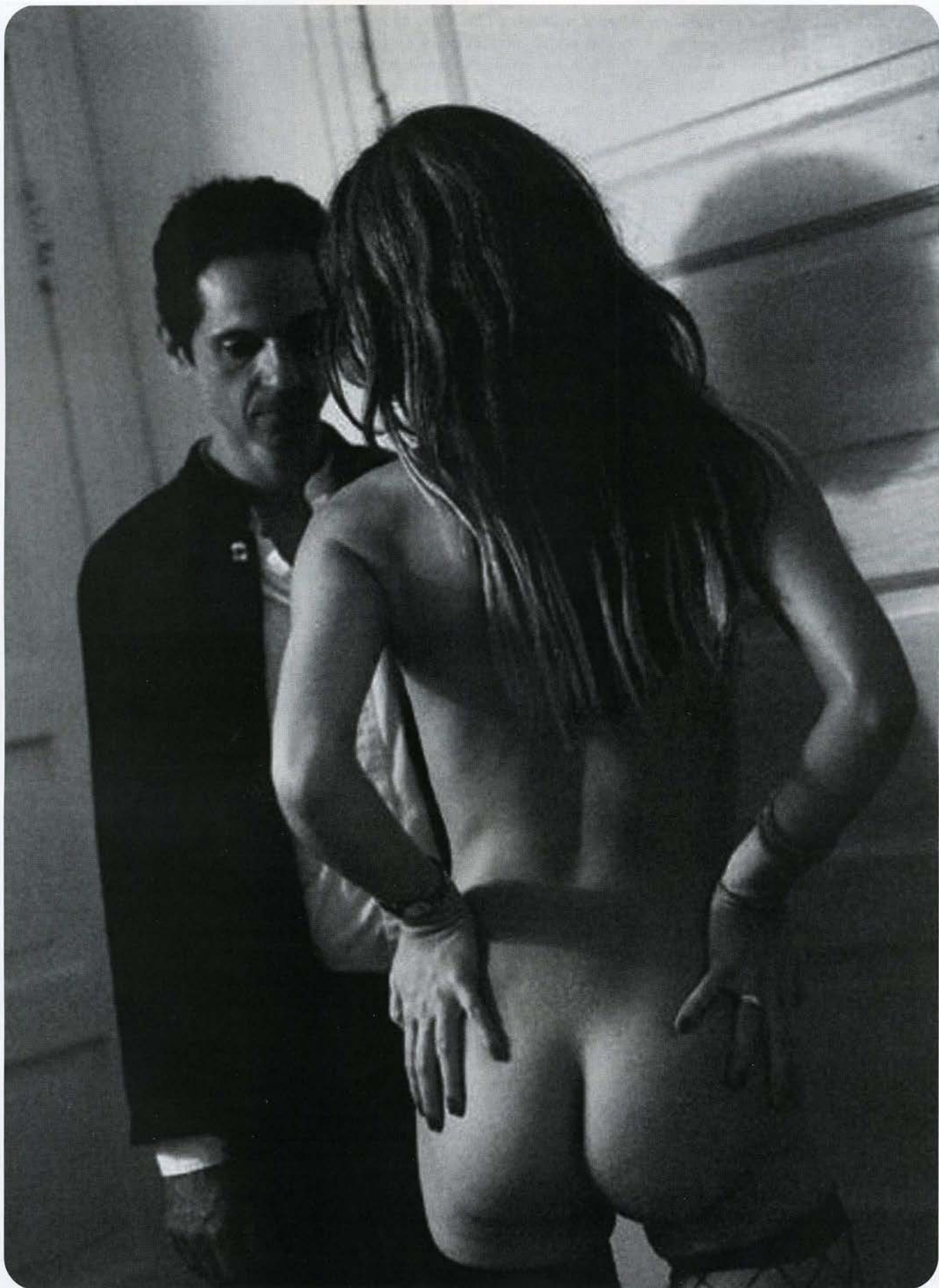
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## ONE LONG PARTY

Sofia Coppola  
& Kirsten Dunst  
Do Versailles in  
MARIE  
ANTOINETTE

CANONIZED  
Paul Schrader Goes in  
Search of the Greatest  
Films of All Time





# Slings & Arrows

Indie filmmaker **CAVEH ZAHEDI** comes to terms with American film reviewers and their shortcomings

←  
“A critic is someone who comes onto the battlefield after the battle is over and shoots the wounded.”—ANONYMOUS

## January 27, 2005

My film *I Am a Sex Addict* premieres at the Rotterdam Film Festival. The very first screening is a press screening. About two dozen people are there. The only critic I recognize is Jonathan Rosenbaum. Alexander Payne is there as well (he's an old friend from film school), and most of the attention seems to be directed at him.

I stand at the back to make sure the projection is okay. I wasn't planning to stay, but I can't tear myself away and remain standing the entire movie. My heart soars every time I hear a laugh and plummets every time an intended laugh is met with silence. Still, the audience sounds like they're enjoying the film, and I am excited and hopeful.

After the screening, I stand near the exit, trying to be approachable without being invasive. The various critics walk past me without saying a word. I can't help wondering if that's just film-critic protocol or if they actually liked it less than I thought.

## February 2, 2005

The first review appears in *Screen International*. It is written by Jonathan Romney, who describes the film as “a witty and painful first-person essay with controversial potential” that “artfully treads a line between flippancy and soul-baring seriousness.” He also calls it “provocative and courageous” and writes that “the film is likely to do well” (!) and that “its arty, bohemian edge should make [it] a favorite with upmarket indie distributors.” He compares its box-office potential with that of *Tarnation* and *American Splendor*. The review is intelligent and overwhelmingly positive. I feel relieved and optimistic about the film's chances for success.

## February 17, 2005

The film's second review appears in *Variety*. This one is written by Deborah Young and is less unambiguously positive. Her review begins: “Turning personal obsession into deadpan comedy may seem like a description of Woody Allen's work, but Caveh Zahedi, the actor-director-subject of *I Am a Sex Addict*, creates his own sub-genre of screen narcissism.”

“Screen narcissism” doesn't sound very flattering, and I am immediately annoyed. I have been accused of narcissism ad nauseam, and I find the accusation exasperating. I would argue that my films are the exact opposite of narcissism,

since I never try to make myself look good and, if anything, exaggerate my character defects. To call my films narcissistic is to equate autobiography with narcissism, which is patently absurd. Were St. Augustine's *Confessions* an instance of narcissism?

## April 22, 2005

The film premieres in the U.S. at the Tribeca Film Festival. My sales agent, Cinetic Media, expressly forbids the festival from making video screeners available to the press so as to ensure that no copies are leaked to buyers and that the film is seen only in optimal conditions. *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden, however, is unable to attend the press screening due to a case of shingles, and so someone at the festival surreptitiously slips him a tape (which turns out to be an unfinished rough cut!). Because of the pain he is in from the shingles, Holden is only able to watch part of it, but nevertheless singles it out for special mention in an article about the festival. Here is how he describes me in the *Times*: “Mr. Zahedi, an unattractive creature who resembles a human bug, counters his own creepy narcissism with a deadpan sense of humor that wins you over.”

I am mortified. “An unattractive creature who resembles a human bug”? I read this just minutes before having to appear at the theater for a Q&A, and I want to crawl into a bug hole and die. Does this even qualify as journalism? Can you just say that about somebody? Aren't there journalistic rules and standards?

I am tempted to write an angry letter to the editor, arguing that Holden's comment was irrelevant, inappropriate, and arguably racist, but my wife dissuades me, insisting that the less attention drawn to it the better. Still, almost everyone I know has now read that description of me, and I find it deeply humiliating.

On the brighter side, I now have a deeper appreciation for how Gregor Samsa must have felt.

## November 30, 2005

My film has been nominated for a Gotham Award for “Best Picture Not Playing at a Theater Near You.” What this means is that no distributors have picked up the film. The nominees were chosen by *Filmmaker* magazine, from a list suggested by festival programmers (who were asked to recommend two films that had not received theatrical distribution). The other nominees are: *Al otro lado*, *In a Nutshell*, *Police Beat*, and *Sir! No Sir!*

As actress Maria Bello is about to announce the winner, I am suddenly so overtaken with stage fright that I actually pray to God to please not let it be me. I am terrified at the prospect of having to get up in front of all those people and make a televised speech. When she announces my name, I feel as if I have just been found guilty and sentenced to death. I make my way to the podium like a man on his way to the gallows. I am so nervous that I can barely speak. But I somehow manage to make people laugh (including Bill Murray!), and I can tell from the applause that I did okay. Now I am ecstatic, and I proceed to have about as much fun that night as I've ever had in my life.

## December 15, 2005

Cinetic Media informs me that IFC Films is interested in distributing the film. Jonathan Sehring, the head of IFC, was at the Gothams and liked my acceptance speech. He had apparently never seen the film and asked to watch it. He liked the film and showed it to his boss, who also liked it. The person at IFC who had previously passed on the film had since left the company. And Ryan Werner, who had loved the film when he was at Wellspring but was unable to acquire it because the head of Wellspring hadn't liked it, had since joined IFC. So suddenly, there was a groundswell of support for the film at IFC Films, and all because of the Gotham Award.

## April 5, 2006

The film opens theatrically in San Francisco. Mick La Salle, the critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, writes a glowing review. I am thrilled, touched, and impressed by his intelligence, insight, and prose style. His writing is clear, simple, and illuminating. His review begins: "Going in, a few things need to be said about *I Am a Sex Addict*. There's no other film like it. It's embarrassingly frank and self-revealing, sometimes funny, sometimes creepy, sometimes both. It makes sex addiction look almost fun, at first, then ugly and dispiriting. And it just might be the truest film about addiction, of any kind, that has ever been made."

La Salle also writes something about one of the actresses that strikes me as uncanny in its elucidative insight: "[Amanda] Henderson stands out in particular, infusing Devin with a personal philosophy and the sense of some underlying, rueful history." I had never thought about it that way, but he's absolutely right. It's an enlivening experience to discover things about your own film from reading a review.

## April 12, 2006

The film opens in New York. Everyone tells me that the most important review is the *Times* review, and it is with apprehension that I read it when it appears. My first reaction is, "Why is it so short?" In the old days, whenever any film opened in New York for at least a week, the *Times* would give it a full review. But now, with so many films coming out each week (almost a dozen opened the same day as mine), the *Times* decides in advance which films get full reviews and which films get short

ones. Mine, for some reason, gets a short one.

The review, written by Nathan Lee, is mostly positive ("Mr. Zahedi is charming and disarming even at his most debased") and impeccably well written: "[The film] never mugs for our good will, only our witness, which it rewards with honesty and wit." But I am nevertheless angered by two passages. The first, "The film is a minor triumph of sincerity," strikes me as a back-handed compliment. The second—"But tonic honesty and lack of cool are precisely what saves *Sex Addict* from going too far down the path of *Tarnation*, another exercise in mixed-up aesthetics, sordid subject matter and maniacal self-exposure"—sounds like a dig masquerading as a plaudit. "Mixed-up aesthetics" sounds like I don't know what I'm doing, "sordid subject matter" sounds like my film is exploitative and arguably vulgar, and "maniacal self-exposure" sounds like I'm insane.

IFC had asked me to start a blog to help promote the film, so I write a rather angry response titled "Contra Nathan Lee," which ends with the following paragraph: "None of this would matter very much, and the dig in question could be easily laughed off, if it weren't for the fact that a *New York Times* reviewer has the power to make or break a film, and that an off-handed remark like that can mean the difference between success or failure at the box office. And it's not just the fate of the film that is at stake, it's also the fate of the filmmaker and of his or her ability to make more films in the future. With such power comes a dizzying responsibility, and it saddens me to see film critics wield their formidable power with such breezy insouciance."

Within hours, Lee has posted a thoughtful and detailed rebuttal on my blog. It begins: "I'm not often in the habit of responding to criticism of my criticism, but given the nature of this particular film (confess!), my respect for Mr. Zahedi's work, and certain misconceptions my words have fostered, I thought I'd weigh in. Plus, I'm bored at my day job, and this is way more interesting."

I am so touched by his respectful tone and willingness to respond, that I write an overstated and almost sycophantic apology, which ends with the following: "Thank you again, and I will try harder (with my next film) to earn from you the epithet 'major' in describing my work." Lee soon posts another comment on my blog, writing: "Thanks for the thanks. But wait a second, what is this, a circle jerk?" A bit ashamed at my sudden about-face, I retreat into superciliousness (and pretension): "My contention is that you do not in fact really and truly understand my film because despite your perspicaciousness, you are still seeing it through the looking glass of a previous paradigm, and the film represents something paradigmatically new in the cinematic landscape, something for which there are not yet any viable categories."

Lee realizes, at this point, that the less said the better, and he refrains from responding to my last comment.

## April 13, 2006

In a review for the *New York Post*, V.A. Musetto writes: "How many times can you listen to this obnoxious man's neurotic

ramblings? And, you must wonder, what in hell did all those beautiful, intelligent women ever see in this scrawny, neurotic, sicko nerd?" My publicist is horrified by the viciousness of the attack, but to my mind, Musetto's remarks are so over-the-top as to be almost comical. Consequently, I am less upset than I was by Lee's infinitely more positive but also more incisive review.

Nevertheless, I decide once again to respond on my blog, with an entry entitled "V.A. Musetto Is a Sex Addict." My admittedly tenuous argument is that the vituperativeness of Musetto's attack seems to belie some sexual addiction of his own, and that his self-righteousness is evidence of my film's hitting a little too close to home. I have noticed that it's often those who feel most conflicted about their own sexual desires who express the most indignation about my own.

## April 25, 2006

The good news is that Anthony Lane has decided to do a full review of *I Am a Sex Addict* for *The New Yorker*, arguably the most prestigious magazine in America. The bad news is that the review he writes is trivial and inane, more of a pretext for him to make sex jokes than a serious discussion of the film. For instance, he writes: "Prostitutes, my ass: with this grade of self-attention, I think we know what this guy's favorite turn-on has to be." The imputation of narcissism rubs me the wrong way. Plus, he doesn't seem to grasp the film's radicality, writing that "the overriding reason to see the film" is my resemblance to Harpo Marx. Well, whatever my resemblance to Harpo Marx may be, it's hardly the overriding reason to see the film.

I write an angry response on my blog, despite the fact that everyone I know tells me I shouldn't cross Lane, because he is so "powerful." But I feel that it is ridiculous that he be allowed to write such inanities. What has film reviewing come to? Is it just another form of entertainment? Lane's reviews are entirely about him and his formidable wit, and not about the films they purport to describe. Talk about narcissism!

On my blog, I write: "The breezy, ironic tone of most film critics (of whom Mr. Lane is only one of many, unfortunately), while arguably entertaining, in the end serves no one, but only contributes to the on-going debasement of public discourse." Needless to say, he doesn't respond to my posting. But what he does do is rewrite the review for the following week's briefs.

*New Yorker* critic Richard Brody had already written a favorable (and insightful) capsule review of the film that had appeared the week before Lane's much longer review came out. The week after my posting, Brody's capsule was replaced by Lane's, which became markedly harsher and more negative. Lane's original review began: "There is one overriding reason to see *I Am a Sex Addict* and it has nothing do with sex." The revised capsule review begins: "Dedicated smut hunters will want to stay away from this film, for the good reason that it offers a minimum—and not always a bare minimum—of actual sex." The two sentences say the same thing, but the first sounds like a recommendation, and the second like a warning.

# Motion Picture Arts Gallery

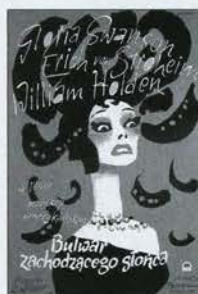
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←  
**April 29, 2006**

The film opens in L.A. on my birthday. *Los Angeles Times* critic Carina Chocano writes an irate review, the title of which is "Narcissist Turns Camera on Himself." She writes: "It probably goes against current trends in addiction treatment to suggest that shame was appropriate, not a demon to be exorcised at the expense of his partners' mental well-being." Her review smacks of a wounded feminist consciousness projecting past personal resentments onto my character. This has been a fairly common response from some women, although by no means has it been the only one.

The problem with such a review is that it is based on a confusion between Caveh-the-character and Caveh-the-filmmaker who portrays this character in a critical light. The review evinces an indignant knee-jerk moralism at "my" behavior but fails to take into account the subtle dialectic between character and filmmaker. Granted, the dialectic is especially confusing as I play a character with my own name and life story, but it is precisely this moral ambiguity that makes the film interesting.

Unfortunately, Chocano's review seems to have a big effect on the box office, because the film tanks in L.A. In other cities, there were both positive and negative reviews, but in L.A., the only other review was a wishy-washy take in the *L.A. Weekly* so nondescript as to be the equivalent of having no review at all.

**June 26, 2006**

*I Am a Sex Addict* is nearing the end of its theatrical run. As the film makes its way from the urban centers to the more out-of-the-way places, the reviews have tended to get more negative, more indignant, less well written, and less insightful. In the *Orlando Sentinel*, Roger Moore writes: "Zahedi, a Woody-Allen homely little weasel with a thing for drugs (his *I Was Possessed by God* recounts a vivid mushroom trip), women, and most of all, himself, creates these little pseudo-biographical essays that suggest he's either a spoiled jerk with access to cameras, or a wit whose jerkiness is something of a pose." In the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sean Means writes: "Making this confessional film may have been therapeutic for Zahedi, but it's pure torture for an audience to watch him replay his sexual history as he narrates his constant rationalizations." And in the *Tucson Weekly Review*, James DiGiovanna writes: "He may be the most self-involved person on the face of the Earth, and he plays himself in this unbelievably uncomprehending self-examination."

Still, the majority of reviews have been positive, many of them overwhelmingly so. The Rotten Tomatoes website's "tomatometer" lists 17 positive reviews as opposed to 11 negative ones, for an average rating of 6.2 out of 10, which is actually quite good. That means it got better reviews than

*X-Men: The Last Stand*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, *Nacho Libre*, and *The Omen*, all of which made fortunes at the box office.

Also, I've gotten so used to the negative reviews that they no longer make my blood boil the way they used to, and I no longer feel the same need to blog about them. I've been surprised by the hostility, the arrogance, and the mind-boggling ignorance of an alarming number of reviewers, but I've also learned not to expect much. It's unfortunate that there aren't more film-literate reviewers out there who not only write well but are also able to shed light on a film and provide a way of thinking about it that stimulates the imagination rather than shutting it down.

It seems to me that even a review of a bad film should be able to help one see it in a more interesting way and to enliven one's thinking about it. A good example is Manny Farber's negative but brilliant review of *Taxi Driver* entitled "The Power and the Gory." Farber's critique is merciless, but the review somehow adds to the experience of watching the movie rather than diminishing it. But most of the negative reviews of my film that I came across were simply a motley assortment of preexisting prejudices and opinions masquerading as ideas. What I have found most disturbing in all this is the smugness with which people who know very little about film history, and who in some cases were reassigned to the film section of their newspaper after having covered sports or restaurants for a number of years, feel qualified to pass judgment on films they simply don't have the critical background to understand.

I found only one critic who had the humility to at least acknowledge his lack of expertise (although he gave me a negative review anyway). Jeremy Buckley, in the *Daily Nebraskan*, wrote: "Maybe it's because I don't personally have any experience with being addicted to sex, or my lack of background in art films, but it seems this film is meant for a crowd of people that aren't looking for a specific issue to be resolved in a movie." Now that's honest at least, and surprisingly open-minded.

If more critics were humble enough to be able to imagine that there might be other ways of thinking about a particular film besides their own, the whole cultural conversation about cinema would immediately take on a more inspiring (and respectful) tone. There would be fewer low blows and a sincere interest in trying to understand a film's radical otherness. The best critics, like Manny Farber or André Bazin, invariably deepen our relationship not only to cinema but also to the world in which we all must learn to live. □

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**Caveh Zahedi's** *I Am a Sex Addict* will be available on DVD September 12 from IFC Films.