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Life Itself

Abstract

This is a film review of the movie "Life Itself" (2014), Steve James' documentary about the life of film critic Roger Ebert.

Keywords

Roger Ebert, Ecclesiastes, Billy Graham, Michael Apted, Thomas Mann, Pauline Kael, A.O. Scott, Andrew Sarris, Stanley Kubrick, Terrence Malick, Martin Scorsese

Author Notes

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Life Itself, documentarian Steve James' adaptation of Roger Ebert's eponymously titled memoir, is a touching, entertaining, and often difficult movie to watch. As his devoted fans, longtime readers, and many others knew, Ebert's last several years on earth were enveloped by a crippling struggle with cancer of the jaw. Several complicated surgeries temporarily checked the cancer's growth without entirely eradicating it. Ebert eventually lost his physical mobility, most of his jaw, his ability to speak, and his ability to eat and drink. In his last few years of life, Ebert subsisted on a diet of liquids and puréed food fed directly into his esophagus through an intravenous tube and a suction mechanism. In the documentary's most difficult scene to watch, we even see an example of how this feeding was accomplished.

Observing Roger's suffering (and hereinafter I will call him Roger, for all his longtime readers—myself included—always felt like we knew him on a personal level), and especially thinking about it in the context of his erstwhile television combatant (and eventual dear friend) Gene Siskel's brain cancer, inevitably conjures the question of theodicy: why do bad things happen to good people? Why would a benevolent, omnipotent, omniscient God (assuming, *arguendo*, that these are our theological premises) let such unfortunate fates befall individuals who gave so much pleasure to so many people? If we believe in an authoritarian, strict-disciplinarian God, what could poor Roger have possibly done to deserve such a malevolent malady? To adequately explore the theodical issues implicated by James' film would exceed the scope of this review. However, these issues should not—nay, *can* not—be ignored by any thinking theologically-oriented cinephile. I defy any lover of Roger's writing (or, for that matter,

any compassionate soul) to watch the scene of Roger being fed through a suction tube and not inexorably question either God's benevolence, omniscience, or omnipotence.

Even though Roger lost his ability to speak, he did not lose his ability to write. And, like Stephen Hawking, he was even able to "speak" through a computerized voice by typing into a voice-enabled computer. His last few years were a triumph of his—and the human—spirit. He grew more silent, but because of his pioneering use of social media (he was an early adopter of blogging, Facebook, and twitter), he reached wider audiences and communicated with more people than ever before.

Because he shot *Life Itself* during Roger's last five months of life, James, the director of the groundbreaking 1994 documentary masterpiece *Hoop Dreams*, a film which Roger championed when it was inexplicably neglected by Oscar voters, understandably fills a great portion of this film with scenes, stories, and reminiscences of Roger's final, illness-plagued years. In a society such as ours in which illness and death are often outsourced from our homes as well as from our minds, these scenes are important to see. However, the majority of Roger's life was cancer-free; thus, the ratio of illness-to-non-illness scenes feels out of whack. *Life Itself* is weighted down by an excessively skewed focus upon the illness-encrusted portions of Roger's life.

When James does focus on the majority of Roger's rich, lively life, the documentary is enlightening, entertaining, and religiously illuminating. Roger, we learn, grew up as a single child in a small town in Illinois. He displayed a propensity for writing from an early age. He wanted to go to Harvard, but because his parents told him "there is no money to send you to Harvard," he went to the University of Illinois. Perhaps this twist of fortune was providential, for at Illinois, he was given a prominent platform at

“The Daily Illini,” and was then plucked by the Chicago Sun-Times for a plum entry-level newspaper position immediately upon graduating college.

Roger never set out to be a movie critic. He was an English major at Illinois, and was considering undertaking doctoral work in the subject. He began his Sun-Times tenure as a sportswriter, and was given the movie beat simply because there was no one else there who was doing it. (Before Roger was given the job, their movie reviews were often written by Mae Tonée—that is, “matinée,” meaning whichever Sun-Times writer happened to be going to the movies that afternoon.)

Even though writers like Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris were beginning to elevate film criticism to the level of an art-form, writing about the movies was still not regarded as a journalistically prestigious endeavor. Roger Ebert, though—with the help of Kael and Sarris, of course—changed all that. Roger signaled that he would be joining the Olympian ranks of those eminently esteemed critics when he accomplished a feat that not even Kael nor Sarris had achieved; in 1976, he became the first writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for film criticism. But unlike the more intellectual Kael and Sarris, Ebert was a populist. He believed that all films, even the great art films of Bergman, Antonioni, and Fellini, belonged to the people. And he believed that everyone should be able to appreciate and understand a film. As A.O. Scott astutely commented, Roger’s writing was always clear and compulsively readable, but even though his writing betrayed the wide learning and nuanced analysis of a sophisticated thinker, he never pandered or condescended to his audience.

He was a non-apologetic partisan of the cinema who wrote about the movies from a place of love, not—contra far too many critics—from a place of jaundiced jadedness.

When he doled out a bad review (as he was more want to do in his early than later years), he did it not out of contempt for the movie or the filmmaker but out of disappointment; he sincerely wanted to feel the sense of wonder from the movies, that *mysterium terribile et fascinans*¹—that inexpressible feeling of awe and transcendence that is constitutive of the religious experience—which made his movie-going a pseudo-spiritual, numinous experience.

Roger's most religious reviews ("religious" in this Ottonian sense), from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* (2011), exult in emotions of awe and transcendence at the mystery of existence and the wonder of the universe.

Roger was raised Catholic, and he eventually abandoned the jejune faith and conventional religiosity of his childhood. However, he retained an irrepressible interest in Catholicism throughout his life. In fact, one of the reasons that Roger championed (and was perpetually fascinated by) the work of Martin Scorsese—a reason James' film does not mention—is because Scorsese (a fellow Catholic) dramatized the very same crises of conscience, tortured attitude toward sexuality, and ineluctable sentiments of guilt that Ebert may have experienced himself. Witness his "Great Movies" essay on Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973):

Martin Scorsese's "Mean Streets" is not primarily about punk gangsters at all, but about living in a state of sin. For Catholics raised before Vatican II, it has a resonance that it may lack for other audiences. The film recalls days when there

was a great emphasis on sin—and rigid ground rules, inspiring dread of eternal suffering if a sinner died without absolution.²

One month before his death, Roger summed up his faith thusly:

I consider myself Catholic, lock, stock and barrel, with this technical loophole: I cannot believe in God. I refuse to call myself an atheist, however, because that indicates too great a certainty about the unknowable.³

Catholicism was the subtle, substantial strain of thought that always subsided in the substratum of Roger's work and life. Shakespeare's history plays consciously distanced themselves from their sources—the ideologically tinged historiography and Anglocentric narrative of Holinshed's and Halle's histories—without wholly abandoning the “Tudor myth” and the *weltanschauung* of English exceptionalism.⁴ So too, Roger distanced himself from the traditional theological truth-claims of Catholicism without entirely expunging the emotional elements of the religiosity which he absorbed in his childhood.

Towards the end of *Life Itself*, Roger says that the specter of death did not disturb him because, as someone who was raised Catholic, he had heard about death all the time. Religion has historically been much more adept at administering the *memento mori* than secularism; traditional religion especially excelled at reminding mankind of its mortality. In ancient times, Ecclesiastes advised that “it is better to go to a house of mourning than

to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart” [7:2]—or, as Heidegger, would have it, if we want to experience “*eigentlichkeit*,” if we want to be truly alive, we should spend more time in graveyards and less time with “*das Gerede*,” the hollow prattle of cocktail parties, the dull droning of infotainment, the insipid babble of “reality” television, and other such fearful phenomena of Salingerian phoniness. And in modern times, Billy Graham’s message, says Professor Robert P. George, was “as simple as it was powerful: Our lives on earth are short. Soon enough each of us will die. Do you want to go to heaven? Then you must give your life to Christ...Quoting Scripture, he would say, ‘Now is the accepted time; today is the day of salvation.’”⁵

To a large degree, *Life Itself* functions as a secular, film-length *memento mori*. It reminds us all that, like Roger, “[e]veryone shares the same fate—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad” (Ecclesiastes 9:2); it causes us to contemplate what Thomas Mann (in *The Magic Mountain*) termed the “transcendent strangeness” (“*unvergleichbaren Eigentümlichkeit*”) of death; and it beckons us to ask ourselves whether we are spending our brief sojourns on earth in the most valuable ways possible.

Since Roger’s passing, no one has yet emerged to fill the position of preeminent populist American film critic that Roger vacated. A.O. Scott comes close, but he can be a bit too intellectual for the *homme moyen sensuel*. Roger’s passing has left a void in my life as well. I have yet to find a critic whose writing resonates with me as profoundly as Roger’s did on every level. I have yet to find a critic whose reviews I read religiously—that is, a critic whose reviews I feel I must read because they are so influential that they

function as canonical commentaries on the films. I miss Roger's "Great Movies" essays, his *Citizen Kane* film commentaries, and his ardent admiration of Michael Apter's *Up* series—the series that you, Roger, so aptly called "the most noble use of film" that you've ever witnessed. I miss your enthusiasm for the horizon-expanding potential of the great science fiction film; I miss your rational, reasoned, learned, and always enthralling takes on religion. I miss your blog; I miss your Midwestern, all-American wholesomeness and the unadorned, pellucid prose style of the Chicagoan that you were; and I miss your paradoxically (yet consistently) high-minded attitude toward art, always insisting that video games were not, and could never be, "art." I miss the way you raised our collective literacy with the literary references you embedded in your reviews. I miss the way the movie-lover that you became was first and foremost a book-lover at heart. I miss the way you wrote about reading for pleasure, and I miss the way you steadfastly believed in the value of being well-read, even in this fast-paced, technologically obsessed infotainment age—an era that is enshrouded in information but shallow in wisdom. I miss the way you said "books do not furnish my office; *they furnish my life.*"

I miss your weekly Friday reviews, your yearly top-10 lists, and your annual post-Oscar column. I miss your movie dictionary, your Answer Man column, and your social media posts. I even miss the yellow background and red typeface of your old website. I still can't believe that we won't be hearing from you when the new Malick, Scorsese, and *Up* movies come out. I miss you, Roger. And, as always...I'll see you at the movies.

¹ Otto, Rudolph. 1923. *The Idea of the Holy, An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford), pp. 29-30.

² Ebert, Roger. 2003. "Great Movie: Mean Streets," *Rogerebert.com*, Dec. 31, 2003, accessed Jan. 7, 2015. <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-mean-streets-1973>

³ Ebert, "How I am a Roman Catholic." 2013. *Roger Ebert's Journal*, March 1, 2013, accessed Jan. 7, 2015. <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/how-i-am-a-roman-catholic>

⁴ See Neill, Michael. 1995. "Henry V: A Modern Perspective," in The Folger Library Edition of *Henry V* (New York: Washington Square Press), 253-278, at 253-4, referencing E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943); and Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Histories: Mirrors of Elizabethan Policy* (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1947).

⁵ George, Robert P. 2014. "The Evangelist" (review of *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, by Grant Wacker), in *The New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 21, 2014, p. 14.

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