

## A Conversation with David Thomson

David Thomson, one of the most accomplished and influential writers on film over the last half-century, is the author of well over two dozen books, including three landmark contributions: *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, “*Have You Seen...?*”: *A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*, and *The Big Screen: The Story of the Movies and What They Did to Us*. Legendarily prolific, his most recent books are *Sleeping with Strangers: How Movies Shaped Desire* (2019), *Murder and the Movies* (2020), and *A Light in the Dark: A History of Movie Directors* (2021). I have had the pleasure of corresponding with David over the last decade, and we decided to document a more elaborate conversation between us, with a focus on his reflections about the magic of the movies and his distinct approach to writing about film and filmmakers. What follows is a conversation that was recorded in the summer of 2020. The discussion starts off with what might seem like a blunt question; I should mention that after a consideration of various possibilities it was David who very much wanted to open the conversation in this way.

–Jonathan Kirshner

**JK:** As you are not a critic and no longer teaching film, what have you been trying to do?

**DT:** I’ve been trying to do what I realize, in hindsight, I’ve been trying to do since I was first taken to the movies – which is to reconcile the intense, often overwhelming sense of another reality up there on the screen with the gradual understanding that it is not a reality – or at least not a reality that I could enter into. That dilemma, that need to reconcile, has never left me.

What I’m trying to do is think about it and write about it. There are a number of ways which one can write about it, which vary from a rather set *academic* format—for instance, earlier today I agreed to review two books on Cary Grant for the *London Review of Books* and, obviously, you do a piece like that, and it will be done within the bounds and limits of what the *LRB* does, and which the *New York Review of Books* would have, and which basically publishing has . . . I will try to make sense of it, to refer to Grant’s life and his films in a useful way. But, beneath that and around it I have the feeling that Grant is a kind of companion in life. Granted that very odd sense that he seems much more palpably real than many people I do know . . . he’s dead now, but even when he was alive, he was sort of out of reach. I had a few phone conversations with him, that were absolutely riveting and shocking; very rewarding, but very upsetting, too, because that dilemma, that question – are you real, or are you something else? – was so present, and the nature of the conversation we had, very quickly got into this too . . . and I had the impression that he was laboring with a similar kind of dilemma, in that, he was aware that he was almost universally known, and largely held in affection and esteem, and yet he didn’t know who he was, he didn’t know who this version of himself onscreen was. Now, you may say, this is a very dark, almost occult alley to go down, and it doesn’t have a great deal to do with the formal estimate of art, but you asked what I am I doing, and that’s sort of what I’m doing, and if you or other people – as occasionally has been the case – say, well that’s crazy or that’s pretty close to crazy, I couldn’t argue with you, because it’s a disturbing thing, and while I have obtained an enormous amount of pleasure from the movies, and while I’ve just about earned a living from it, I think it’s been damaging and misleading for me. And that stuff in my life that has not worked well has a lot to do with this kind of problem that I’m talking about.

The question is a very big one, and it is really the one—what am I doing, what am I trying to do? And I know the answer is difficult and challenging but that is more or less my answer.

**JK:** Your thoughts here lead me to two additional questions, also big questions, I think, and I'll try and take the easier one first: Most people don't talk to Cary Grant on the phone. And so for most people who experience the movies, they see Cary Grant, and – I agree with you – they somehow think they *know* or have a relationship with Cary Grant. Now again you're a special case, having spoken with him. But as to that more general phenomenon, I'm curious as to whether you think this is a good thing, or a bad thing. Let me elaborate—I'm a close follower of the work of Bob Dylan, and we have been trained by his Bob-ness to understand that we do not know him, that he does not know us, that we are complete strangers, that he performs, that we can enjoy the performance or not, and that is the extent of our relationship. But people do seem to think that they *know* movie stars in a way, and I'm curious as to your thoughts about that.

**DT:** Well I think it's enormously problematic. What we are talking about probably begins historically with the relationship between the public and movie stars. Because movie stars did really define modern fame and celebrity and the whole quality of a suspect intimacy. But it has spread, and it has taken up almost every one that we know that we are inclined to call a celebrity. And I think it's a very very damaging thing. But, I don't think it's possible, these days, for anyone to lead a country or even to lead an idea, without entering into this relationship, which, can be exciting and can be arousing and fulfilling. I mean we want to be led, I think we crave the idea of a leader at the moment who will speak to us, even if it's a trick, even if it's a lie. Churchill obviously had a moment, where, really by speaking on the radio, he did something enormously valuable for the British people. He's now well into the status of reevaluation and reappraisal, so that we know, that in many ways, he was an unreliable, untrustworthy, even a bad person. So that his status changes.

**JK:** I want to explore further your comment that “people crave to be led.” I mean, I could talk about Churchill for a very long time – but let's not – in any event that's a profound conclusion to reach, and I'd like to bend that notion back towards movie stars. Is this instinct that you identify in humans, that they crave to be led, is that part of the relationship that people can think that they have with certain performers that become important to them?

**DT:** Oh absolutely. It always comes down to something personal I suppose. When I was 15 or 16, the impact of James Dean on me – and that's a very limited career, and one that was clearly, in a strange way, blessed by his early death – I was like Plato in *Rebel* if you will. I mean, I looked to Dean as a possible model in a complicated adolescent experience that most adolescents go through, and the set up, the arrangement, in that film, with the Natalie Wood character and the parental figures, was enormously influential on me – and it's still there – I see *Rebel* and *East of Eden* particularly quite often and I know that the films are dated in many ways, but personally the emotional allegiance, which is not simply adoring them – the character in *East of Eden* is a rather nasty kid – but nonetheless, my, let's call it identification for simplicity's sake, my identification with those characters is profound and probably as fresh as it ever was. And yet, I have kids now, who are relatively young, and, I've talked to them about this, and I don't think they see movies in the same way. They don't identify with characters in that way, and I don't think that movies, on the whole, are made to encourage that identification. In other words, I think historically, there was a period, and it's probably from late silents into the 60s, where fantasy identification with characters was a very big thing, and it was the thing that audiences trusted. They didn't have too much irony or suspicion about it—they went to movies to pretend they were these people. And pretend is self-conscious, because it suggests that you know what you are doing, when in fact the involvement, the identification, was

deeper than pretending. It was absolute complicity and identification. And I think that era has passed—it's become much more complicated. But historically and personally that's the era I grew up in, and it's part of what I'm talking about.

**JK:** Is that really true that the era has passed? Unfortunately for this conversation I actually haven't seen any of them, but there are scores of superhero movies out there, and I would have assumed that the audience was having the same relationship with those characters that one would have had with the heroic figures of the classical Hollywood era.

**DT:** You may be right. But I have the feeling that – take a superhero film – that the audience, particularly the teenage audience, they *know* that these are absurd figures, and they are expected to see them in the light of irony. Whereas you take the leading characters in *Red River*, say. I had a total belief in the fact that they were driving a herd of cattle to Kansas. And that what I was seeing was real, and I didn't have a glimmer of ironic superiority as far as it was concerned. And I'm not sure *that* complete immersion does exist anymore. Because superhero films are made so that you'll laugh at them a bit. I've done some work recently on the film *San Andreas*. And it's a very effective film. But Duane Johnson – the Rock – I think that he knows that we know he's kidding, and that's a very big part of the film, whereas, relatively speaking, I think Wayne and Clift in *Red River* were trying to believe in what they were doing. We can argue about whether the irony I'm talking about was there, once upon a time – maybe it was, and what I'm talking about is a child's response to it – however I'm well aware that even in what is supposedly adulthood and maturity, I have had a very similar kind of intense identification with a movie character or a presence on screen. I had it with the young Welles in *Kane*, for instance, and I remember Pauline Kael saying that it was far and away the best or even the only great piece of acting Welles ever did, because he had been trapped into being literally himself. I talked to people who were there at the time and they all said, in effect, that Welles was just totally unguarded, playing the young Kane. That's the way he was, and the film had been written with that in mind, because the people who made the film didn't really believe they were making a film about Hearst, they believed they were making a film about Orson Welles.

**JK:** How would you compare that to his performance in *Touch of Evil*?

**DT:** His performance in *Touch of Evil* is a measure of his self-loathing, which often goes with the extraordinary narcissism that he had. And he's trying to act, he's trying to be someone different. Whereas in *Kane*, as the young man, almost without thinking about it he was himself. I mean the performance in *Touch of Evil* I find . . . effective but hammy. Because I don't think he was a very good actor—he was not a very accomplished actor.

**JK:** Well, he worked within a certain range.

**DT:** Yes, absolutely. And that range was tied into what he thought about himself—he was a very self-regarding person, and you could argue that all actors onscreen become like that. It happened to Cary Grant, certainly. And what I feel is special about the young man in *Kane* is that you do feel like you're just main-lining into him, directly, whereas in *Touch of Evil*, effective as it is, it's a study in bogusness. It's a very interesting film in that way because the only natural person in the film I think, is Janet Leigh probably.

**JK:** What about Menzies (Joseph Calleia)?

**DT:** It's a very good performance. It's the most moving performance in the film, it's almost the only moving performance in the film. And he was a very interesting actor. I happened to see him this week in a film from the thirties, *Riff Raff*, and he was a very clever actor.

**JK:** It took me about five viewings of *Touch of Evil* to come to the conclusion that the entire film was about Welles and Calleia.

**DT:** Yes.

**JK:** And the whole Heston-Leigh thing . . . it barely registers (laughs).

**DT:** It's a sidebar. But you know, almost all Orson Welles films – and not just the ones he directed – but often the ones that he acted in, they're about the relationship between two men, and, more or less, the issue of betrayal comes up.

**JK:** Right. Let's turn back to the discussion we were having about identification, and your experiences with the classical period of Hollywood films. But after that, there's a film that I know that you revere and that you have written about beautifully, *The King of Marvin Gardens* . . . surely you weren't with Nicholson or Dern, or Ellen Burstyn for that matter . . . I mean, these were such compromised people.

**DT:** Oh I was totally identifying with Nicholson from the moment that film began! One of the happiest situations I know is talking on radio – I was as much a child of radio as I was of film, and for a period of my life I was able to do more or less just what he does in that film, which is just to command the microphone and the darkness and talk to people. So, I don't know that there's a Nicholson film where I feel *closer* to him than that (laughs).

**JK:** Let's stick with this one for moment. There's a scene in the hotel, where they're waiting for the elevator, and Dern is going on and on about how he once did thirty days in Cincinnati or something, and Nicholson's response is "We've all done our time Jason."

**DT:** Yes, well, you know, that film . . . I don't think anyone quite intended or thought about it at the time, but it is a sort of display of – almost a diagram of – bipolarity, in that you've got these two brothers who are the different extremes, one is deeply depressive, one is completely manic, and as I say, I've talked to Rafelson and to Nicholson about it. I really don't think that was a model for them in doing the film. But it was there, and I would say that both Rafelson and Nicholson have a little bipolarity in them. And I love Nicholson as an actor, and I love his variety, but I think the bipolarity is there in others . . . it's there in *The Shining*, where you've got a guy who just cannot live in the middle. He tries sometimes to pretend he's an ordinary guy, but he's actually living at extremes of mania and melancholy. And if you were to write a book about Nicholson, that would almost be the way to get into it. I've spent a little time with him and believe me it's very strong in him. He's a guy who wants to have a wonderful time, but doesn't trust it one bit.

**JT:** Returning to the more “psychoanalytical” question . . . you referred to what you were doing as an act of reconciliation between these two understandings of the movies – or perhaps something larger than that. I found your answer a little abstract, though . . . if you could give me an example, or an illustration of what that act of reconciliation looks like. I’m thinking obviously of something you’ve written, which you could say, “this is how I was engaging in that action.”

**DT:** Good question. Let me try an example that might seem a little unexpected. Kidman in *The Hours* is, for me, a very compelling example . . . when I saw the film – obviously I saw it as a grown man – I had this weird difficulty in being unsure which part she was playing. I mean that sounds insane, particularly for someone who allegedly knows films inside out, and who had certainly seen everything she had done. But what she had done with her appearance felt natural, but, clearly, was a huge departure. She’d made a big . . . invasion of herself. And I was very intrigued by that. At the same time, I knew enough about the actual Virginia Woolf to know that what Kidman was doing was kind of absurd. But Kidman didn’t go that way, because instinctively she knew (and maybe the people on the film knew) that if you do that you lose all sympathy for the character. So there were great contrivances there, great dishonesties, but, I felt, I had never seen on screen, the presentation of a writer, struggling to say what they wanted to say, done as movingly and that’s a subject that’s very close to my heart, because I probably spend, and have spent, for decades, more time in that pit, trying to work out what I want to say properly than anything else I’ve done except breathing, probably. And writing, for me, the act of writing, the task of meeting a deadline, is absolutely the only guard I have against self-destruction.

**JK:** Well deadlines can do that for you—

**DT:** Yes, but, let me put it this way . . . occasionally I have been on vacation, with family or friends, and I have not written. And if I don’t write for three days in a row, I get frantic – and you don’t want to be around me – and if I start to write again, it’s as if I’ve taken a sedative or a tranquilizer – I can be in company again, if you know what I mean.

**JK:** This is something we very much want to discuss . . . but it’s jumping ahead a bit – so let’s hold that thought for a moment and return to reconciliation. I suspected that in your answer to that question of an illustration, the first thing you would reach for would be the Nicole Kidman book. And I wanted to mine that a bit more, because it may be an example where we – and I’m not choosing sides here – but as I mentioned to you in a previous conversation we had, that I’m so profoundly moved by the train station scene in *The Hours*, and her performance. And I consider her to be one of the great actors of her generation, and I’ve so admired her work . . . but I don’t feel for a moment that I know her. I’m thinking, for example, of an interview she did around the time of Stanley Kubrick’s death, talking about *Eyes Wide Shut*, and I actually . . . she was obviously being handled by her people, she was on a schedule, and she was wearing so much proper movie makeup that when she teared up – or pretended to tear up – and I said to myself I had no idea at the time which it was [*DT laughs in recognition here*], she started to wave her hand in front of her eyes. As a person who doesn’t wear makeup, I immediately assumed that she did not want to shed an actual tear, and despoil the makeup [*more laughter*] – and to me the whole interview seemed performative and I didn’t feel like I was watching an interview with Nicole Kidman as much as I was watching a performance by Nicole Kidman.

**DT:** I understand exactly what you're saying, and I agree with your general principle. What I want to say is that that level of pretending or dishonesty or whatever you want to call it – all those things are involved – that draws me to her even more, because I think – and I think this is true of Grant as well, and it's probably true of the actors I most like – I think they, early on, picked on the possibility, the risk, of being fake. And they were so naturally suited to self-performance, that they couldn't stop doing it, but . . . it troubled them from the beginning. It's there in Dean, I think, and for me that is a model of the incredible difficulty in talking to people naturally, and being natural and being yourself, and being true to yourself. This whole question of can a human being be true to themselves—I think it's tearing the culture apart, and it has a lot to do with the how the media have invaded the way that we deal with ourselves and the way that we deal with each other. And so that whole question of ambiguity – maybe I'm being too abstract – it's what really hold me about film. And this kind of identification, or *sympathy*, I can feel and have with an actress as much as with an actor. Now that was not always the case. Really that's why I did the Kidman book . . . I had done an earlier book on Warren Beatty, and the two books are meant to be companions, in that they're thinking about the relationship we have with someone who's been on screen and who has impressed us and touched us and provoked this kind of sympathy that I'm talking about. Is that clearer?

**JK:** Yes, but I want to pursue this thread still further, again, your theme of reconciliation. Two performers leapt to my mind; one is Peter Sellers, who legendarily doesn't exist when he's not performing. So do you have a relationship – I don't mean a real relationship, but a screen relationship – with Peter Sellers, whose claim to fame is that there is *nothing* there – that's he's not even alive unless he's performing in character?

**DT:** I don't feel a thing for Sellers on screen.

**JK:** That may be a function of that.

**DT:** It could be. But what I meant was I came first to Sellers as a radio performer. He was on The Goon Show, in the 50s it was *the* show that kids had to listen to. And Sellers did a whole string of different voices; radio was very kind to that in you didn't have to imagine what these people looked like – and I think Sellers on radio was a genius. And once he got to the movies, his ego began to get in the way and he became a less and less interesting actor. So that for instance, I loathe him in *Lolita*, which I think is not a bad film, granted the problems of that daring book, and I don't like him at all, as a screen actor, because I don't think he had taken the risk of playing with his own ego. If you compare him with Grant, which is not an easy comparison, but Grant, from very early on, was saying to himself, "I'm going to do something here that makes me . . . other than attractive. And I'm going to do something that's unexpected, and enlarges my own sense of what I might be." I think you get that with Nicholson, and with some other actors. I think you get it with Daniel Day Lewis. I don't think you get it with Peter Sellers at all. So that I always feel that Sellers on screen, even in a thing like Kozinski's novel *Being There* – I never feel he is there – now you can argue that that's part of the conceit—he's not there. But he just doesn't interest me as a screen actor. Whereas, if you go back to *Lolita*, I think James Mason is fascinating in that film.

**JK:** Well, James Mason, you know . . .

**DT:** He's a great actor

**JK:** I revere James Mason

**DT:** I agree (laughter).

**JK:** And for the other one, speaking still of reconciliation . . . I was curious about the famous line that was possibly never uttered, but attributed to Rita Hayworth, that men would go to bed with Gilda but wake up with her, whether that was relevant to your relationship with—

**DT:** Oh definitely . . . In this sense, I think that, and I think that Welles actually said something to this effect, that it was impossible to be married to a woman who had that uncertainty. And it's not that Rita Hayworth was a particularly interesting actress. But somehow she had cottoned on to the notion that her sexual appeal prevented her from being fully realized sexually or romantically as a person. I think it's a fascinating idea, and it's the reason why actors, in my opinion, marry other actors. Because they know instinctively that ordinary people – if we allow that ordinary people exist – just will never comprehend this constant game they're playing with themselves, and are simply unsuited to it. Whereas betrayal is a courtship ploy for so many actors, you know so that they'll marry not just one actor, but a whole string of them.

**JK:** Shifting gears, another topic we wished to discuss was what you considered to be your essential influences.

**DT:** Well, the essential influence for me was that mystification—that delighted mystification that I felt at the movies from the age of 4 and which has more or less never left me. An extension of that is the fact that I chose to go to film school, rather than going to Oxford to read history. By the time I was at the threshold of being able to go to Oxford, I loathed the whole idea of that kind of education. I went to film school – and the school was very bad – but it was an absolutely foundational experience for me in that I got involved with some other people in trying to make films. I had seen films and loved them and thought “oh I might like to do that” but once I got into the process, it became absolutely inescapable. And it isn't simply that I've thought about where you put a camera, or how you cut two shots together – which once upon a time, technically I could do – it's much more than that . . . it's the notion that life itself exists as a series of shots that someone needs to identify, and that passing time is a matter of how you cut. It's a really organic sense of what the medium does to how we look at ourselves and look at other people. And learning how to edit . . . had a huge effect on how I write. The notion that you can, if you've got the daring, or the confidence or whatever it is, you can go from a to z without any explanation. You know once upon a time if you were writing prose fiction you simply could not do that, and gradually we got more and more comfortable with it, so that now you almost have to do it. And if someone came to me and said look I really want to be a novelist or whatever, a writer, what should I do, I think I would say “edit a few films.” Because it will teach you more about the structures in narrative and in holding people's attention, in ways that will be invaluable to you. So the influence of being involved, although it was for a relatively short period of time, in making films, that was a huge influence, and far bigger than I hoped or dreamed it would be. Beyond that, when I came to America, an extraordinary new window opened up, which was that I could maybe meet some of these people. When I was in England, when I wrote *The Biographical Dictionary of Film* I don't think I had met anyone who was in the book. And that may have led to or enabled a certain type of romantic distancing. But, once I came to America, once I was

writing for the *Real Paper* in Boston, I got assigned to go to the press Junket for *Coming Home*. And the way press junkets were done in those days, actors, let's say, did sessions with one group of reporters then a second group then a third. And I started out with Bruce Dern. I could have started with Jon Voight, but I thought Dern was amazing. And after one group of reporters had finished with Dern we were supposed to move out and another group of reporters came in. But I stayed, and Dern sort of looked at me and said "what the fuck are you doing here again?" And then I was there for the third time. I hadn't got the daring to say to him "I find you fascinating" but that's what it amounted to and I'm sure he intuited that. I give that example because I began to meet people who made films. The culmination of that was having to become a surrogate member of the Selznick family, which I am still, to a degree, and these were the most compelling, unreliable people I could ever have dreamed of. I had met some comparably unreliable people in real life, like my father even, but these were just fascinating, because they had so much zest and energy for being unreliable. And I fell in love with that group of people. And I can only tell you that for years, I would go down to Hollywood – and eventually I was going down to Hollywood not just to interview Rafelson, say, or Nicholson, but to have story conferences with big studio people like Medavoy and Katzenberg – and I never trusted them one inch. But I could have sat there listening to them talk, forever, because they talked like people who were playing themselves. And that was a huge influence, and it's a source of whatever little comedy I allow myself in writing. Beatty is a classic case of that. Beatty is an inveterate modest showoff. I haven't talked to him for some years, but I'm sure it's unchanged. And it was the thing about him that drew me to him, attracted me to him. And Hollywood – or the film world, because it isn't just Hollywood it's a much broader thing – they'll say anything to hold your attention, and you're the idiot who will allow his attention to be held, because they say it with such panache. And this changed my view of the world.

**JK:** This raises for me a central question I'm curious to discuss. But first, to clarify, what was the year of the first edition of *Biographical Dictionary*?

**DT:** Seventy-five.

**JK:** And where were you then?

**DT:** Well, that book was done in England. And in fact, at almost the same moment it was published in England, I came to America, not for the first time, but for the first time to work here.

**JK:** So in the first edition, surely you wrote about Dern and Beatty?

**DT:** Beatty for sure . . . I would imagine Dern is in there . . . I would have to check to be sure—

**JK:** Well we can narrow this to Beatty because here's something I'm quite curious about, and I think it speaks to that central question "what are you doing with your work?" which is—there are entries in the first and presumably the second edition of the book about people you had not met, and then in the intervening decade, or fifteen years, you interacted with them, and then there would be a new edition of the book eventually, and you'd be writing about them having had these interactions with them—

**DT:** Right.



**JK:** —how did this shape the way in which you would be crafting those entries, first totally innocent of the person, and then later on having some personal sense of them?

**DT:** Well, it was a difficult transition—and I would not claim that I managed it tidily or decently. I was born and raised in a tradition which said that “you look at a film, you think what you think, you write it.” But you certainly don’t want to get involved with the people who did it. I come to America, and see the possibility of actually meeting them – for professional reasons at first but then, out of friendship more than that kind of thing – and I remember having a very good conversation with Richard Corliss, we were very close, Richard was film critic at *Time* for many years and he was an extremely good professional critic. And he said to me, “You go and actually meet these people?” I said “well sometimes, if I can,” and he said “oh I think that’s sort of terribly dangerous.” And I think he meant really that it’s almost illegitimate. And he was right on both counts, because your judgement is deeply affected. For instance, despite what I still think is an amazing first film, *Fingers*, if I had never met Jim Toback, my sense of him would have been enormously altered, because the later films, I think, on the whole, are not nearly of the quality of that first one. I had met him, I spent a lot of time with him, we were really close friends. And I understood a lot of what he was trying to do and I understood about what he was avoiding. But it affected what I thought. And I think it’s a perfectly reasonable attack on me to say that my critical objectivity was compromised, not just by that, but by meeting a lot of these people.

**JK:** I’m less curious about it as an attack than I am about just how you can pull it off. I mean, I’m thinking of myself . . . I would be so intimidated by trying to write about people I had feelings about. Let me take two examples from your general peer group . . . Roger Ebert knew a lot of people personally – Scorsese for example – and obviously Ebert had his idiosyncrasies, his tastes, his biases and whatever, but I felt that I could trust him. I knew that he would be rooting for a Scorsese picture when he would sit down to watch a new one expecting, of course, to write about it, but I never thought he would craft a review with that purpose. Whereas Pauline Kael, I thought, went too far, and was an advocate for her favorites.

**DT:** I think she was a penetrating and insightful writer, but it’s a fair comment, and I would say that she got . . . let’s call it muddled . . . about how you deal with these people – in the way that I think I’ve been muddled. And I think that she . . . felt she could give these people advice on how to make a film.

**JK:** Right

**DT:** And she probably could. But it was an illegitimate stance to hold, and some of the people she was trying to advise resisted it, and shrugged her off cause of that. I’ve been in that kind of situation too, and it’s very tricky.

**JK:** No, I don’t see that. I don’t see that in your writing. I don’t see you . . . telling people what to do.

**DT:** I hope you’re right—

**JK:** —I see it in her writing, and this is different from whether . . . this is different from the challenge of writing about the people you know – which, again, personally, I would find incredibly daunting

and I want to talk more about how you pull that off – but I don't think . . . I don't feel the lecture from you the way I do from her. And I say that as someone who owns at least five volumes of her collected writings—I take her extremely seriously as a critic. But let's go back to you. I mean you walk into a theater, you see a movie by someone whom, say you are friends with, and . . . you know, first of all you're watching it knowing a friend made it, but then you either like it or you don't like it. If you don't like it, that's got to be a terrible feeling, but if you like it, you've also got to have some kind of . . . fear . . . that you're being too easy on them. At least that's the reaction I would have; I'd be afraid of that instinct.

**DT:** Absolutely. And I felt, personally, increasingly compromised by the stance of being the author of the *Biographical Dictionary*, which in many respects seems like an objective academic book. Now in fact if you read it carefully or even if you just read it, there's a lot of giveaways, nudges, that say "I know that this is a very dubious stance I'm taking." But as time went by I found that getting to be more and more difficult. So that, for instance, at a certain stage, the entry on Toback is not really a formal entry, it's a letter.

**JK:** Yes, I remember it.

**DT:** And I don't think I could do the dictionary now. I just don't have the sort of semi-academic confidence to do that. And it's not that I'm ashamed of the book, but I think it was a book for its time. And it had value in the 70s-80s-90s, that kind of era, but I couldn't do it anymore . . . and I had to sort of find different ways of writing about those people.

**JK:** I do feel the need to pause here to say that I think it's one of your three grand books.

**DT:** Well thank you. I'll pause too, then (laughs).

**JK:** I still want to give you space to tell me what you do when you go into a theater, sit down, watch a movie made by a friend, and then you have to write about it.

**DT:** Well, I think, to this day, if I had to write about a film by a friend that I did not like, I would say, "I don't like it." And indeed there have been a few cases where I've lost friendships over that. I'm not going to spell out who, thought there was one friendship, one quite close friendship, that was interrupted for maybe five or six years, because I had disliked one of his films, and—

**JK:** —Wait a moment – I don't want you to tell me who that was, but I want to hear more about the basis of the rift. Did they feel that you'd somehow betrayed them? Could they just not live in a world knowing they had made a movie that you didn't like? (chuckles) Did they think you were out of bounds for criticizing them in public? It's a very fascinating thing . . .

**DT:** Yeah, and I'm not sure I can give you a precise answer. But I think . . . the vulnerability of being a creative figure is such that you do not expect a friend to say "no" to you. Particularly a friend who might have a bit of clout. There's a difference between telling someone personally "I didn't like your last film," and saying it in print. I feel the same. If someone doesn't like one of my books and they say it in print, that hurts, and I probably remember bad reviews much better than good reviews. And I think most people in this line do go that way. But . . . the breach I'm talking about healed eventually.

But I think there are others that haven't healed, and I think probably it's a reason why regular reviewing is not a thing for which I was well suited. And, you know, I've only been a regular reviewer irregularly, and for short periods of time. It never quite worked, and by not doing that, I think I have been able to get into different ways of writing about films, so that one of the things that I would value about what I've done is that I've found several new ways of writing about film. They're not all successful, maybe, but I've said, "Look, you could write about a film or a group of films, in a different kind of way." And the Beatty book and the Kidman book – which have never been popular, and got a lot of academic abuse – they're examples of that. And I think one day someone will sit back and say "those were books that got into the alchemy of being involved imaginatively with a person on screen in a way that not too many other books have done." So for me, books like that, and *Suspects*, they mean more to me than even the Dictionary. The Dictionary has been my life in a lot of ways, certainly it's been my income in a lot of ways, so it's churlish of me not to agree with *your* estimate of it (laughs), and I think it's the book that has been of most influence to most people without a question. But for me, the daring in the book – and there was daring in seventy-five and for some time afterwards – that daring has faded away. And I like the things I'm doing to be daring. Which is another word for self-destructive.

**JK:** How do you position your Welles biography with the Kidman and the Beatty?

**DT:** Well the Welles biography is much more fully an attempt to deal with the life as an historian. I did a lot of basic research on that book. Whereas Beatty and Kidman were almost beyond research because I was getting into depths of personality. I talked to her, and it was a good talk – I would wish it had gone on longer because she is a pretty smart woman – and I talked to Beatty much more afterwards, because he was . . . he was very friendly after the book came out. And there were a whole lot of complications to it because his cousin had been very helpful to me on the book, clearly at Beatty's instruction, and then his cousin really had a disastrous life and that was a big complication. But—

**JK:** —But the Welles book is not a traditionally framed biography.

**DT:** No, certainly not, but it does cover the bases—

**JK:** Yes, certainly

**DT:** —in semi-formal way. But I agree with you, it's . . . I can't write that kind of book like that, you know what I mean?

**JK:** Yes

**DT:** I did a book like that on Laurence Sterne in 1972 – not the most suitable subject for a formal biography really – but I did and I enjoyed doing the book and it taught me a great deal, and I like the book still, but . . . There was a chance a few years ago that I would do a book on Cary Grant. And I just couldn't face going through the routine of the research, of covering all the bases, when what I wanted to say about Grant would have been more like ten pages on a moment from *Suspicion*. That kind of thing. So I'd rather do it that way. My publishers have pointed out to me that this is not actually playing the game the way they want it to be played.