



Far from Hollywood: New Kinds of Classic Film
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In the first of these lectures about film classics, I looked at the history of 'ten best films' as cinema's version of the age-old business of establishing 'canons' of excellence. For this, I took Sight & Sound's ten-yearly polls as a baseline, but also points out that cinema has alternative processes of canon-formation: some based on economic success, and others based on 'popularity', as voted by filmgoers. Now I'm turning to the question of how the canon might change – looking at efforts to shake, or challenge that canon that Sight & Sound and other cinephile magazines had built up since the 1950s?

In fact, the challenges came quite soon, when the 1960s saw a generation of cinephiles emerge who had grown up with school and college film societies, indeed were often their organisers, and had access to more than new mainstream releases through the growing networks of 'alternative' commercial cinemas, some of these known as 'repertory', others catering for specialised tastes – like the Electric in Portobello Road, which has survived, although in very different form. Some of these films showed B-movies and revivals of genre pictures. Others specialised in 'foreign' or 'continental' films, which were often more sexually explicit – even after censorship – than standard British and American productions. So, it wasn't uncommon, if you wanted to see a new film by Ingmar Bergman, to have to visit a cinema catering for 'specialised tastes'... And famously, the poster for Martin Scorsese's TAXI DRIVER in 1976 would feature his hero, Travis Bickle, against a background of such 'adult' movie theatres around Times Square in New York, which would be where Scorsese and his generation of new directors saw many arthouse imports. In Europe, too, some of the organisers of arts labs and co-ops were also would-be filmmakers, and activists. Here you can see some of the founders of the London Filmmakers Co-op, including Steve Dwoskin... and one of those activists, David Curtis, has recently published a valuable memoir about the Arts Lab era, which gave many artist-filmmakers their first shows – and indeed artists in other fields, such as David Bowie.

Now I'm going to profile two groupings of these activists, through two of the many magazines that started during this period. One was **Movie**, started in 1961 by a group of recent Oxford graduates, with a crusading zeal for, especially, popular American cinema. The other was a short-lived magazine, originally from Cambridge, called simply **Cinema**, which asked some of its contributors to make their '10 best' lists in 1969.

Let's start with *Movie*, which was strongly influenced by the French journal *Cahiers du cinema*. In its first issue in 1962, *Movie* published a diagram ('histogram') ranking over 200 directors according to their aesthetic quality. This became notorious for a number of reasons – not least its complete dismissal of almost all British filmmakers, in favour of a range of Americans, some very little known indeed. There was an article by one of *Movie*'s founders, Victor Perkins, complaining about British cinema being completely rubbish, compared with American and French filmmaking. Seven years later, a younger and more diverse group of cinephiles – though also all male - published their 17

lists, in what was billed an ‘all-American’ issue – with lists which were encouraged to be ‘as eclectic as possible’, ignoring the ‘restrictions of established taste and fashionability’.

These lists were organised in two parts: best directors and best films, which allowed some latitude for contributors to include one-off discoveries – in my own case, for instance, Edmund Goulding’s *NIGHTMARE ALLEY*, Rossen’s *THE HUSTLER* and Malle’s *LE FEU FOLLET*. But otherwise, my own – and many other contributors’ lists reflected a mix of arthouse heroes of the period – Bergman, Godard, Fellini, Bunuel, along with ‘alternative’ choices from American cinema, notably Sam Fuller – who had recently had a major retrospective at Edinburgh and in London, Billy Wilder and Fritz Lang, who was being celebrated for both his German and Hollywood careers. Several of the contributors reflect radical alternatives to these feature-film lists. David Curtis named mainly American avant-garde filmmakers, such as Stan Brakhage, Andy Warhol and Gregory Markopoulos, while including NASA ‘space movies’. And Peter Wollen, already a major influence on the study of film with his book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, included ‘computer’, presumably as a gesture towards the likelihood of computers being mobilised – remember this was 1969, before anyone had a personal computer! If we look at Cinema magazine’s ‘pantheon’ or averaged rankings, we find an intriguing mix – of the vintage, the traditional, the relatively new – and the avant-garde, with Kenneth Anger and Walerian Borowczyk. It’s a different ‘pantheon’ from Sight & Sound, and from Movie, and I think offers an interesting ‘anatomy’ of the taste that would shape the infant discipline of ‘film studies’.

There were other platforms offering canons at this time. In America, Andrew Sarris produced an extraordinary mapping of the entire output of Hollywood up to the late 60s in his *The American cinema: Directors and Directions*, which he divided into ten ranks, ranging from a ‘Pantheon’ to ‘Subjects for Further Research, with some memorable categories in between, such as ‘Less than meets the eye’ and ‘Strained Seriousness’. Some of the most admired filmmakers of the era were cut down to size by Sarris’s caustic judgements. And of course, some hitherto little-known directors were promoted to dizzying heights – who would have thought that the director of *She Married Her Boss*, the former animator Gregory La Cava, would rank far above David Lean, Stanley Kubrick, Billy Wilder and Joe Mankiewicz, according to Sarris’ ranking?

There were also calls to shun Hollywood and look instead to the new radical cinemas of Latin America that had emerged following the Cuban revolution of 1959. Or to the New York based ‘New American Cinema’ of Jonas Mekas and film artists such as Stan Brakhage and Hollis Frampton. Both of these were the province of another British magazine, *Afterimage*, started 1970, which continued intermittently until the end of the 90s. It was indeed a time of lists, and of polemics – here’s a list from one of the polls by the influential French critic Jean Douchet, which shows how critics of this period were struggling to accommodate very different traditions, and discovering, within the straitjacket of ‘10 best’ lists. It was also a time of scrambling to see films that would never come to mainstream cinemas, or to television – as the influential critic and theorist Peter Wollen recalled in a later essay entitled ‘The Canon’.

By the end of the 1970s, it would be fair to say that the scale of values representing by S&S’s ten-best list was starting to reflect some of these new judgements. Here’s the 1982 poll – and as you can see, although Orson Welles was represented twice, by his first two films, there was a Hollywood musical *Singin’ in the Rain*, Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* - which would eventually come top of the S&S poll in 2012 - and what was emerging as the favourite among John Ford’s Westerns. Five of the ten could be classed as Hollywood, and the other five hailed from France, Italy, Japan and the Soviet Union. What we can see at work here is the process by which canons are shaped by a mass of different, often conflicting judgements – and how they move, over time. Of course, many other things had changed, outside the rather small world of judging films – the political upheaval of 1968 had produced a ‘counterculture’ which remained a force in cultural and academic life on both sides of the Atlantic. Feminism and campaigns to legalise homosexuality were under way during the

1970s... Film had also entered the academic curriculum during the 1970s, with a range of colleges and universities starting to teach film criticism and history – although having a GCSE was still some distance in the future...

'Canons' had also become a hot issue, largely in American university and intellectual life. In 1987 Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* took a stand against the various currents of liberalisation that had been under way, maintaining that these had 'dumbed down' universities and lowered the quality of cultural and intellectual life. Against Bloom, protests were staged in many quarters, demanding that his 'Western canon' did indeed need to be replaced by a more diverse range of 'great works'. In university and college life, 'Western civilisation' was having to explain itself... Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* in 1994, and still being argued over...

Did this have any impact on the film canon, even in the days before video publishing would dramatically expand the range of film history available to view? I think there is evidence that new thinking about the history of cinema which began in the 1970s and 80s did *gradually* start to change ideas about what matters in cinema, making it one of the arenas where these issues were argued out and demonstrated. So, let's look at four areas where there has been a real shift of attitude: the role of women in cinema; of ethnic minorities; sexual dissidence and difference; and films outside the major production centres.

1972 saw the first Women's Film event in Britain, held as part of the Edinburgh International Film Festival. This came after feminism erupted into British consciousness through several events in 1970: the publication of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and the disruption of the Miss World contest at the Albert Hall. The Women's Event in Edinburgh received considerably less attention but may have had a longer-term impact. The programme gathered over 30 films directed by women, dating from the early 1920s – Germaine Dulac's *Souriante Mme Beudet* – up to 1972 itself, and demonstrated that there was a plausible fifty-year lineage of filmmaking by women. Some of the films shown were controversial – Leni Riefenstahl had long been demonised for her Nazi propaganda films *Triumph of the Will* and *The Berlin Olympiad*. But before these she had directed mountain films like *The Blue Light* (1932). And Leontine Sagan's *Madchen in Uniform*, set in a girls' boarding school, had the underserved reputation of being a notorious lesbian film. But there were many others... including Maya Deren, Dorothy Arzner working in Hollywood, Vera Chytilova in Czechoslovakia and Nelly Kaplan in France. Jane Arden's *The Other Side of the Underneath* was the most recent, and the first feature-length independent film directed by a woman. Some of what are now the best-known women's films, such as Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielmann* and Agnes Varda's *One Sing's the Other Doesn't* had yet to be made. But what the Edinburgh programme demonstrated was a largely unknown continuous history of women as directors. The later 70s would see an upsurge of feminist filmmaking, criticism and theory – which remains vital today – but I think that 1972 programme had 'canonic' implications. Here's an extract from one of the earliest discoveries, Germaine Dulac's *Smiling Mme Beudet* – in which a tyrannised housewife dreams of revenge against her overbearing husband...

The role of ethnic minorities, specifically Black film filmmakers would also start to become visible in the 1970s. If we just consider Britain, historically, the first feature was *Pressure*, directed by Trinidad-born Horace Ove with funding from the BFI in 1975. Set among the Caribbean community around Ladbrooke Grove, the film actually includes a recreation of the street protests that were dramatized more recently in Steve McQueen's *Mangrove*.

Ove's film had nothing like the exposure McQueen's *Small Axe* series would receive late last year. But arguably it set in train a realisation that British cinema was failing to represent a significant aspect of British society. Menelik Shabazz's *Burning an Illusion* would follow in 1981, also set in Notting Hill, but now placing a Black woman, played by Cassie McFarlane at its centre, as she reacts to police violence against her boyfriend. Black and Asian films have remained intermittent in Britain,

and it is telling that much of Steve McQueen's success and recognition has come in America. But the importance of 'self-representation' had been recognised, and would be supported by the great sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall in his 1989 essay 'New ethnicities', where he explained the importance of a series of British black films, including *The Passion of Remembrance*, *Handsworth Songs* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* – written, although not directed by a Black filmmaker – in terms of these films' 'refusal to represent the black experience in Britain as monolithic, self-contained, sexually stabilized and always 'right-on''. Here's a crucial, taboo breaking moment in MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE.

That last phrase, 'sexually stabilised', provides a link to another vitally important area in which post-1960s filmmaking has, arguably, played an important part in opening up understanding of, and sympathy for, sexual minorities. *Laundrette* wasn't just about an interracial relationship but about a gay one, and it would prove immensely successful with audiences, seen in cinemas as well as on Channel Four television, which had commissioned it. Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels* (1991) would also show gay relationships among West Indians Chris and Caz who run a pirate radio station from a tower block in Dalston, East London, and their friend is murdered their friend TJ while cruising for sex in the local park at night. Co-written by Paul Hallam, who, with Ron Peck, had written *Nighthawks* in 1978 – another landmark film in the representation of gay relationships.

So what have these independent films, seen by much smaller audiences than almost any Hollywood production, got to do with canon formation, of change? You may remember that I mentioned in the first of these lectures two reports commissioned by the British Film Institute and UK Film Council. The first of these *Stories we Tell ourselves*, largely written by Bertrand Moullier and myself, looked at the issue of 'cultural impact' – basically how films might be shown to have influenced actual attitudes and behaviour. Could films be said, and proved, to have cultural impact? We asked. And we argued that they could have, over long periods of time and through appearing on different platforms and media. The films I've mentioned here are all discussed in that report, where we argued that they have all contributed to long-term changes in cultural attitudes and perception.

So, do lists and pantheons matter? Peter Wollen thought they did, writing in 2002 about the controversies over who was and wasn't an 'auteur' – a term that has now become largely meaningless through overuse...

Looking back on those years, I can now see that 'auteurism' was the last major and explicit attempt to rewrite the film canon. Rather than simply a theory of 'authorship' per se, it involved championing a specific set of film-makers. These were the 'auteurs' celebrated in critical articles and named, in hierarchical order, in the *Cabiers* 'Top Ten Lists', in *Movie* magazine's histogram of British and American directors, and in Andrew Sarris's Pantheon (two versions, with promotions and demotions which I carefully studied).² Lists seem trivial, but in fact they are crucial symptomatic indices of underlying struggles over taste, evaluation and the construction of a canon.

But I think what I've been sketching here points to a different kind of canonicity from that of the 'ten best' list. Many of the films I've mentioned here are now embedded in a variety of histories. If you set out to explore what lies behind new trends in representation of diversity and minority experience, you'll discover these films pointed towards future needs and potential. If there are now less 'monolithic' (as Stuart Hall put it) portrayals of women, and of ethnic and sexual minority experience

across film and television today, it is largely because of pioneering productions and events that tackled the monoliths.

And I would add that we are now much more likely to see films produced in – and representing – more diverse regions and cultures than was the case back in the 1960s. Film has always had the potential to open windows on remote places and societies – that was part of its early appeal, for instance in the early documentaries of Robert Flaherty – *Nanook of the North* filmed in the Arctic, *Moana* in the South Seas, and *Man of Aran* off the coast of Ireland. Here's part of a recent restoration of Flaherty's *MOANA*, using original sound recording to help bring this 1926 film 'forward' into our image world:

I think arguably we're regaining something of that panoramic insight, although much of it comes through television rather than cinema – so that a recent film like *EMBRACE OF THE SERPENT*, which transports us very wonderfully to the remoteness of the Colombian Amazon, is something of an exception. But a welcome one that recalls the primordial power of film to 'take us out of ourselves'.

None of what I've been describing means that canons are changing fast, or are going to disappear... Don't hold your breath for the 2022 Sight and Sound poll to announce dramatic shifts. But do look at the recent *Senses of Cinema* 'Worldpoll', with lists of films that impressed over a hundred critics around the world (including me), and you'll see just how much diversity has entered at least this list-making... And do join me for the next in this series, in which I'll be considering how much the new ways we consume film – mainly through streaming onto home-based devices – may be changing the sense of a filmic canon.

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