



**Exploding the Film Canon -1. What makes a film classic?
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'Exploding canons' might sound more like *The Charge of the Light Brigade* than talking about why some films are rated or valued more highly than others – but that's what I'm going to talk about in this lecture. 'Canon', with just one 'n', is a rather solemn way of discussing what's in and what's out – what we think is most important. The idea goes back to antiquity, and has been more often used in talking about, for instance, which books made it into the Bible; or what belongs in the canon of English poetry, or American novels, or Abstract Expressionist painting... really any attempt to say what's best in a particular category of creative work.

Now you might be thinking: why does this matter? Well, one reason is that canonic authors and works - classics we might call them - get much more attention than those outside the canon. And this affects what's printed, what's in libraries, what's taught in schools and colleges. In a way, it's a self-perpetuating process: because when some works are widely available and better known, they remain better known – and what lies outside the canon suffers from relative neglect.

But why should we bother about this in the case of cinema? Don't we have 'top ten' lists, box-office champions lists? Indeed, don't we have websites like IMDb, which actually list films according to which have been most highly voted by some millions who visit the site. Surely that's an improvement on judgements made by a small group of critics who may be out of touch with wider taste?

Perhaps, but look at the IMDb top 50, and you realise that is heavily skewed towards recent films that are shown in big mainstream cinemas. The oldest films included are Chaplin's *City Lights* and Fritz Lang's *M*, both dating from 1931, ranked 43 and 92; while another, *Hamilton*, hasn't even reached cinemas, since it came out online in 2020. Given this heavy bias toward what's recent, with sporadic representation of older films, we know this list will change over time, so it doesn't help much with establishing what are the defining classics of cinema.

So, is that what 'canonicity' means: establishing the classics? Well, yes – because classic works, and their authors, are what have 'stood the test of time'. They're not just a matter of fashion, or of big marketing budgets, but works that people have come to value over a long period, and for different reasons. One of the most interesting definitions of a classic that I know was put forward by the critic Frank Kermode, in a series of lectures on 'The Classic', where he showed how the idea of a classic changed from being something unchanging to being valued for quite different reasons in different periods. What makes them 'classic', he suggests is just this capacity to be revalued over the long term.

For us, of course, Shakespeare is at the core of our sense of a classic. But we should remember that Shakespeare's position wasn't widely accepted until the mid-18th century. Before that, there were many attempts to 'improve' the plays and make them acceptable to prevailing taste. But through the 19th century Shakespeare became central to histories of English Literature, buttressed by star performers making their name in the plays, and the Stratford on Avon birthplace became the focus of a heritage tourism industry, together with its theatre.

We could draw a parallel here for the history of cinema: how about Charlie Chaplin as central to the history of cinema? English literature may be a much bigger field than the history of cinema, but the presence of Chaplin is central to almost every history of cinema. Is this because he was supremely popular in the late 'teens and 20s? Of course, that's true, but it's also because of the esteem in which Chaplin was held by the first critics and historians of cinema. But now, let me fast-forward to the moment when critics were invited to vote for what they considered the greatest films of cinema's first half-century, in the BFI magazine *Sight & Sound* in 1952. The result was two of Chaplin's films reaching the top ten, which underlines how 'canonic' judgements become embedded. Considering that few of those voting in 1952 could have refreshed their memory of Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* or *City Lights*, they must have been relying on memory or reputation, or a combination of these.

Now cinema canons are very different from literary ones, since they're premised on cinema having been a 'global' phenomenon from the start – even if it became dominated by the early US studios in the late 'teens (see Kristin Thompson's *Exporting Entertainment* for an account of this). Literary canons obviously have a strong basis in national literatures – French, German, Russian etc. But cinema is assumed to be international, leaving a problem for 'national cinemas' which may have little visibility on the world's screens. And this problem is acute for one cinema in particular – Britain's – in view of the shared language, shared personnel, and shared facilities. The UK could be seen as 'Hollywood's extra studios', with such cases as Stanley Kubrick being based in England throughout his career; the *Star Wars* series having started life in the UK; and of course, the *Harry Potter* films made in Britain, in a studio specially constructed by Warner Bros. Britain's relationship with 'Hollywood cinema' is unique, and complex.

Canonic ranking often reflects critics' desire to pay tribute to the importance of certain non-US national cinemas at different periods in cinema history. Hence Soviet, Japanese, German, Italian and French films are all represented in such lists since 1952, along with a majority of American films. Three British-born directors have appeared in the *Sight and Sound* Top Ten director lists of 1992 and 2002: Chaplin, Hitchcock and Lean. But we can assume that these were all there on the basis of their US studio-backed work. Historically, only one British film has ever appeared in the *Sight and Sound* international critics' Ten Best: Lean's *Brief Encounter*, briefly at no. 10 in 1952. Subsequently, the highest British entry has been *The Third Man* at no. 35 in 2002.

So, what does the ten-yearly S&S poll tell us? Essentially that critical opinion has been very conservative, very conscious of precedent, very 'western', and largely static for fifty years – until some small, though significant changes in the last iteration, in 2012. *Citizen Kane* reigned supreme, until in 2012, it was toppled by Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (see my commentaries on the *Sight & Sound* poll on BFI website).

But alongside critics' polls such as S&S, and a growing number of others, boosted by websites such as IMDb over the last 30 years, there's also the ranking of Box-Office results, perhaps unique to cinema. As we all know, films are routinely judged by their early release BO, resulting in a financial canon which bears little or no relation to a critical canon. In fact, while working on a study for the BFI back in 2008, *Stories We Tell Ourselves*, on the 'cultural impact' of British Cinema, I made the point that any measurement of true cultural impact' of films would need to take account of a growing number of other indicators. Neither the S&S ten-yearly poll, nor BO ranking, are remotely adequate for judging the cinema canon.

So, what is? Well, in *Stories*, we proposed an extended range of indicators – restoration, appearance in new formats, even ranking in retrospective polls, etc. But here we were only dealing with British cinema. Later, in another study for the BFI/Film Council, *Opening Our Eyes*, we looked at the wider picture: what did cinema – all cinema – mean to a statistical cross-section of UK citizens, of all ages, ethnicities etc. Here, not surprisingly with range of films picked out was wider – and closer to, but

not the same as, that box-office ranking. That study, done in 2011, came soon after the release of *The king's Speech*, which came top among films cited as 'having a personal effect' on respondents – a view unlikely to be repeated today, when later films would likely have replaced it in recent memory. But the next three most cited films are interesting: *Schindler's List*, *Avatar*, and *Slumdog Millionaire*; then two old favourites in all listings: *Titanic* and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

So here we're dealing with lists, or 'canons', based on something like 'emotional impact' – different from box-office (largely), and from critics' choices. *Schindler's List* was widely shown in schools, as part of modern history of the Holocaust. *Shawshank* seems to be very much a product of the video and internet age – long topping IMDb polls of 'best' or 'favourite' films. But the two Cameron films are also interesting: not only were they very widely seen in cinemas on initial release, but also seem to have tapped into deep-seated emotional/cultural responses (*Titanic* had led to a museum in Belfast; and *Avatar* effectively launched the era of digital projection in cinemas worldwide, as well as starting a boom in 3D, however short-lived). And video certainly has had a huge impact on film canons of all kinds, as viewers have been able to collect their personal libraries, and re-view ad lib (we collected high scores for the *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises and *Dirty Dancing*, as much reviewed titles).

In 2022 *Sight & Sound* is due to carry out another worldwide poll of critics and filmmakers. That'll be the first since streaming became worldwide; and also, since the pandemic changed our relation to cinema's past and present. Many other factors are no doubt relevant and can be expected to affect the canon – the MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. Can these be reflected in simple lists of ten-best? Will generational, locational, and other factors lead to a 'splintering' of any consensus about the best films?

And what about the importance of canons for *programming*? I would argue that canons underpin much programming, whether for cinema, or television, or video and now streaming. For instance, when we launched the BFI's original video series *Connoisseur*, back in 1990, we saw this as a way to make key films from cinema history available to view, when there were often neither 35mm prints nor screens to show these – films like *The Seven Samurai* by Kurosawa, or the work of Jean Renoir, Orson Welles, Max Ophuls – the core of 'arthouse' filmic appreciation...

Which brings us back to where we started. Is there a 'core curriculum' of 'works that are generally agreed to be good, important, and worth studying' in cinema? Should that be taught to schoolchildren, alongside Shakespeare etc – or even instead of? What about Hitchcock vs Shakespeare? Or is all this ranking and selection old-fashioned, retrograde? But if it is, what do we put in its place, to encourage viewers to range more widely? Programming – whether for cinemas, channels, streaming platforms - involves making choices: this, rather than that. And it involves taking audiences with you. Today with streaming increasingly how films reach viewers, especially under current conditions, we're seeing what may be a massive shift in taste that will ultimately affect the future canon. In my next two lectures in this series, I'll be looking at what may change the film canon. Will it be demands to break out of the tradition of white male directors, or to range far beyond Europe and North America?

Let me end this first lecture by quoting the great Italian writer Italo Calvino, who was also a keen film enthusiast. I've adapted the beginning of his list of reasons why we should read the classics – to explain why we should watch, and re-watch the classics of cinema:

1. The classics are those films about which you usually hear people saying: 'I'm re-watching...', never 'I'm watching'...
2. The classics are those films which constitute a treasured experience for those who have seen and loved them; but they remain just as rich an experience for those who reserve the chance to see them for when they are in the best condition to enjoy them.

3. The classics are films which exercise a particular influence, both when they imprint themselves on our imagination as unforgettable, and when they hide in the layers of memory disguised as the individual's or the collective unconscious.
4. A classic is a film which with each re-viewing offers as much of a sense of discovery as the first viewing.
5. A classic is a film which even when we see it for the first time gives the sense of reviewing something we have seen before.
6. A classic is a film which has never exhausted all it has to say to its viewers.

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Sight & Sound has made extensive coverage of its 10-yearly poll available online. See for instance: <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/polls-surveys/greatest-films-all-time/top-ten-1962>

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