

FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review

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Jonathan Rosenbaum (2004) *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*.

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At the beginning of the 1990s, debates on the literary canon took up a significant portion of academic discourse. Fuelled by Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*, in which the author attacked the rise of "ideological" literary criticism such as Feminism and Marxism, literary scholars fought over the intrinsic and extrinsic merits of literary works. Canons – in the traditional disciplines of the humanities – have seemed intellectually dubious ever since.

When it comes to younger academic fields such as film studies, however, canons do not get such a bad press after all. On the contrary, canons abound when it comes to listing the national top 10 or selling the 100 most important films of all times. Film studies is thus in danger of being manipulated by commercial and purely national interests. And yet, canons can be a helpful starting-point for getting a first grip of the field, for forming one's own values and refining one's critical judgment.

That at least is the view of Jonathan Rosenbaum, a film critic for the alternative weekly *Chicago Reader* and the author of numerous books on film including *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See* (2002). His most recent *Essential Cinema. On the Necessity of Film Canons* (2004) continues the author's attacks on the American film industry while simultaneously re-evaluating the canon and stressing its

positive value of sparking interest and curiosity. However, it should be noted the variety of reviews and articles united here were written between 1975 and 2002 and received their theoretical "Überbau" only in retrospect. Rosenbaum is less interested in exploring the process of canonisation and in attacking ideological critics than in combating the reductive canons on American screens.

As those familiar with the author's provocative and often biting articles know, Rosenbaum loves to go against the grain. In *Essential Cinema*, his attack is threefold. First, he rails against the media for keeping readers ignorant about films not shown on U.S. screens. American mainstream critics, in his opinion, misunderstand journalism as promotion, are indifferent to true quality and ignore the intricacies of European and Asian masterpieces. Second, Rosenbaum accuses the film industry of mounting multimillion-dollar advertising campaigns for profoundly inconsequential "silly-season stuff" and of making available only those films that are profitable. Third, he complains about the national cinema approaches of film bureaucracies and academies, which do injustice to international and transnational filmmakers. Rosenbaum, for his part, reinstates the notion of a canon and masterpieces and concludes by launching an alternative, open, non-Western and highly personal canon, his own "1,000 Favorites" from 1895 to 2003.

Criticising the academic opposition of art vs. entertainment, Rosenbaum, in his provocative, passionate and deeply informed essays, blurs the distinction between academic and journalistic style in combining fine analysis with personal comment and sound background information on films and filmmakers. Instead of quoting press (i.e. advertising) material, Rosenbaum is one of the rare critics who prefers to consult scholarly sources. At the same time, however, he does not take himself to be a condescending semi-god, but readily acknowledges his limits. Above all, he tries to convey the pleasure of watching films, especially those that have yet to find their way onto U.S. screens. Rosenbaum is passionate about his subject. He cares about what has been left out by the Hollywood publicity machine and aims to enrich the reductive diet fed to US cinema-goers by providing mouth-watering recommendations of neglected masterpieces and talented filmmakers that are difficult to pigeonhole. His eclecticism is intentional, for it points out the blind spots and arbitrariness of the commercial distribution system.

Consider, for instance, the choice in his first section, "Classics": four French, two German, one Russian, one Hungarian, one Chinese and one Belgian film are examined as being essential to the canon. At least three of their filmmakers – Jovis Iven, Kira Muratova

and Bela Tarr – are most likely only familiar to film specialists, and Rosenbaum makes polemical choices to correct this lack of familiarity. The second section entitled “Special problems” is less about problems Rosenbaum has with specific films than about problems he sees in the film business in general: in the selection of best picture awards, for instance, in capturing literature on film, in the programming of film festivals or the writing of national film histories.

In his third section, “Other canons, other canonizers”, Rosenbaum highlights the different cultural attitudes critics and audiences in the US, Europe and Asia take towards film aesthetics and film criticism. Much like his second section, Rosenbaum’s fourth section entitled “Disputable contenders” challenges the ideological bases of alleged classics such as Bertolucci’s *Besieged* (1998), Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), Spielberg’s completion of Kubrick’s *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) or Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976). In his concluding part, “Filmmakers”, Rosenbaum lists artists from Anthony Mann and Otto Preminger to Rudy Wurlitzer and Alexander Dovzhenko who have not yet become part of the canon, yet who Rosenbaum finds worth canonizing. More generally, he explores the relationship among writing, acting and directing and situates specific films within a filmmaker’s overall oeuvre.

Rosenbaum’s knowledge and film experience are encyclopaedic and yet limited to the “high culture” of American-European film history. Popular film culture is clearly not his thing, and not a word is found about the world’s most powerful and influential film industry, Bollywood, nor about emerging African cinemas. Rosenbaum consistently highlights films that upset American tastes – films that include sex scenes, highlight class differences or depict communist society, for instance. Clearly, the author has a penchant for auteur cinema, engagé filmmakers and social dramas rather than virtual realities, special effects or romantic comedies. Rosenbaum treasures the “lived experience” these “authentic” films transmit, which he contrasts with the shallow Disney-Spielberg Hollywood blockbuster aesthetic, its clichéd archetypes and predictable TV personalities that are merely “an assembly of pasteboard movie conventions” (158).

Rosenbaum’s liking for Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* – he calls it “the best piece of literary criticism that I know” (185) – is revealing in this respect. Films, for Rosenbaum, as literature for Auerbach, are supposed to depict reality, i.e. represent the life of the common people. For all its erudition, therefore, there is a fairly predictable tendency in *Essential Cinema*, one that favours realistic films with a social value as the authentic artistic

form. Experimental films do not fit into this vision, and even though Rosenbaum includes the Canadian filmmaker Michael Snow among his essentials, it remains unclear why he values his experimental **Corpus Callosum* (2002) so highly and why it should bring out what is most essential about reality.

Rosenbaum's concluding top 1,000 list is partly nostalgic, longing for the good old days of art cinema, and partly alternative, going against commercial interests. Its very idiosyncrasy clearly serves its end in that it begs for amendments and therefore launches new discussions. One cannot help being curious about what Rosenbaum's list, a work in progress, would look like for the years 2004, 2005 and 2006.

Bibliography

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