

Further video suggestions from a reader

FM

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To the Arts Editor:

The list of some 250 American films on video, spanning the years from 1919 to 1987, raises some very interesting questions, which I am sure was part of your intention. The explanatory introduction to the list only briefly alludes to these issues.

Why was Hollywood under the studio system, the system so justifiably detested by many of the professionals who worked in it, nevertheless able to produce so many films of merit compared to today? And why is this body of work, available on video for quite a few years, so little known even by those who consider themselves fairly knowledgeable about movies?

I count myself among those who have at least a smattering of movie knowledge; I've been watching films for nearly 50 years. Nevertheless, I must admit that over one-third of the directors listed were completely unknown to me, and perhaps another third of the names were only vaguely recognizable. As far as the films listed, I've seen only about 25 of them, and heard of another 30 or so.

Hollywood's indifference to its own history is part of a broader pragmatic outlook which has deep roots in this country. The film industry is interested in taking in billions at the box office. They pay lip service to Hollywood's history at the annual Academy Awards, but there is little interest in the work of the past.

This is obviously a big subject. The decline of the film industry to the point where it stands today, as you note, "by and large, for intellectual and moral degradation", is bound up with broader social and historical questions. American capitalism is less and less able to depict with any honesty the conditions it has created. And the audience, to the extent it looks for or at least accepts what is dished out, is also reflecting a social, cultural and intellectual climate in which "entertainment" is totally counterposed to thought.

Most of what comes out of Hollywood today is characterized by extreme cynicism. The occasional attempts to deal with social issues are characterized by a political correctness and official liberalism — as most recently in *Amistad* — which robs them of any spontaneity or conviction.

While I agree with the general evaluation you make of the state of Hollywood, I do think one should beware of allowing a kind of nostalgia to color one's assessment. A recent e-mail correspondent, for instance, says it's wonderful to see a list that doesn't include "the terrible films churned out today." I'm sure you will agree that much trash was produced in earlier decades, and not everything today is lacking in "at least an element, or elements, of artistry," to use your own words. While the second rate dominates, there are instances, even if only a few, of something new and fresh trying to find expression.

The list of videos doesn't claim to be complete, I realize, but why include 87 notable films from the 1940s, and another 65 from the 50s, while recommending only four films from the 70s and 80s? How about *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Sting* (1973), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Bound for Glory* (1976), *Annie Hall* (1977), *Breaking Away* (1979), *The Elephant Man* (1980), *Atlantic City* (1981), *Tootsie* (1982) and *Tender Mercies* (1983)? Why no mention of the work of Robert Altman, Coppola, Scorsese, Louis Malle or Mike Nichols? It isn't easy to come up with these relatively few significant films of the past generation, but it is not the complete wasteland that the list seems to imply. Certainly there has been a tremendous degeneration, and a glance at the names of some of today's prominent filmmakers underscores this: Stone (Oliver), Lee (Spike), and the later work of Woody Allen, for example.

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