

AFI's 100 Greatest Movies: Some serious questions

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The American Film Institute's celebration of a century of filmmaking in the US could have been an extraordinary event. Instead, both the list of the supposed 100 greatest American movies and the June 17 three-hour CBS special during which the list was revealed were predictable and mediocre.

The CBS program was disgraceful. How does one go about rendering boring and innocuous the presentation of such a rich and suggestive history? Hardly any of the comments went beyond the gushing, the superficial and the obvious. The selection of commentators played no small role in this. There is no apparent reason why the opinions on the film arts of, for example, broadcasters Dan Rather and Walter Cronkite, talk show host Larry King, singer Carly Simon or magician David Copperfield should be of any interest. It seemed something of an intellectual conflict of interest as well that nearly all the directors interviewed—including Woody Allen, Sidney Lumet, Martin Scorsese, William Friedkin and Steven Spielberg—had one or more of their films on the list. Were they expected to provide some critical overview? Everyone was too busy pontificating or patting everyone else on the back for any serious analysis to emerge.

The celebration was a thoroughly tame and establishment affair. Was one supposed to be pleased to read in an Institute press release that the AFI would “be joined in this celebration of movie excellence by some of the world’s most prestigious corporations, led by General Motors’ Cadillac Division, who want to be part of the magic, glamour and excitement of not just one great movie, but the 100 greatest movies ever made”? Note here the intrusion of nationalism: not the 100 greatest *American* movies ever made, but the 100 greatest movies ever made.

The entire business was somewhat tainted, in my

view, by the fact that representatives of the major studios took part in the selection of the 100 films, the same studios that will now join with the AFI in vigorously marketing videos of those films.

The list itself included at least two dozen films that, in my opinion, obviously did not belong there, including *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Star Wars*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *E.T.*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *West Side Story*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Sound of Music*, *Fantasia*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Tootsie*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The French Connection*, *Forrest Gump*, *Ben-Hur*, *Dances with Wolves*, *American Graffiti*, *Rocky*, *Unforgiven* and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, and several dozen more that probably did not.

The list included no films by Buster Keaton, Robert Flaherty, Josef von Sternberg, Preston Sturges, King Vidor, Ernst Lubitsch, Raoul Walsh, Frank Borzage, Otto Preminger, Douglas Sirk, Erich von Stroheim or Anthony Mann, nor any of the American films of Jean Renoir, Max Ophuls, F.W. Murnau or Fritz Lang. Remarkably, the list included no film with either Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich. Was this again the nationalist element, or simply insensitivity?

Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (his most highly-ranked film) came in seventy-fourth place, behind *Forrest Gump* (71) and just ahead of *Dances with Wolves* (75). D.W. Griffith made the list with only one film; in all, only two silent films were selected. The voters chose one work by Howard Hawks, which turned up ninety-seventh. Orson Welles’s *Citizen Kane* finished in first place, but none of the director’s other films rated placement in the top 100. Steven Spielberg placed five films on the AFI list, the only director to be so rewarded, while Francis Ford Coppola placed three,

the same number as John Ford. Four of Alfred Hitchcock's films were selected, but *Vertigo* (61) placed behind *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (60), *Fantasia* (58) and *The Sound of Music* (55).

All in all, a worshipful attitude toward box office success, limited knowledge of film history and present-day market concerns seem to have governed the selection process. A poor showing.



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