

# On films and form: a letter from a reader

31 December 1998

*In response to a request from arts editor David Walsh, a reader sent the following contribution.*

Mr. Walsh,

You've just pushed every film buff's button by asking about my favorite filmmakers. I can't resist, so let's start with my favorite films, in chronological order:

Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* . . . Surreal and poetry in motion.

Carl Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* . . . . . The ultimate tearjerker.

Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* . . . . . Possibly the greatest film ever made. It changed my life!

Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible I & II* . . . . . A formalist wet dream.

Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* . . . . . A humanist masterpiece.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* . . . . . The darkest film I've ever seen.

Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* . . . . . Vintage Godard.

Jacques Tati's *Playtime* . . . . . The most visually inventive movie in history. My own *Citizen Kane*.

Jacques Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* . . . . . Supreme masterpiece of the French new wave.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* . . . . . My only favorite not by an auteur.

Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* . . . . . The only masterpiece of essay-film.

Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* . . . . . Sublime.

Abbas Kiarostami's *And Life Goes on...* . . . . . Renewed my faith in cinema and humanity.

Of course there are lot more than the above and if I add one more to the list, I would not be able to control myself.

As an atheist, going to the movies offers me the closest thing to a religious experience. I always found myself fascinated by religious art. It is perhaps the conviction of the artist that moves me. Artists I admire tend to have this supreme single-mindedness that is

sublime. I don't know why I love Robert Bresson so much; he is, I think, the greatest living filmmaker. I think it has to do with form. Religion gives rigor to the form. I agree with exponents of Russian Formalism, such as David Bordwell, that awareness of form is the key to the appreciation of art.

As you can see, my favorites are formalists with a humanist bend. Not just in movies but in the other arts as well. The music of John Coltrane and Olivier Messiaen or the works of Michelangelo all have this religious intensity.

As a Chinese, I'm proud that the Chinese cinema has finally produce a master, Hou Hsiao-hsien. Along with Kiarostami, he is one of the greatest active filmmakers today. Unfortunately, the mainland has not had an equal. The closest being Tian Zhuangzhuang ( *The Horse Thief*, *Blue Kite*). Chan Kaige and Zhang Yimou are becoming more and more banal. The once interesting Chan with his debut, *Yellow Earth*, inspired me to go to film school. Now, I consider his later films very annoying.

I'm very jealous of the Taiwanese whose cinema can produce artists such as Hou and Edward Yang. Hou is the only Asian whose work is worthy of being compared to the masters of Japanese cinema: Ozu, Mizoguchi, Naruse and Oshima. Closer examination of his works reveals he is a closet avant-gardist and one of the great formal innovators. Critics tend to pay attention to the austerity and family relationships or moralism of his films. Humanist and impressionist criticism cannot do justice to his work. The secret is in the form. *The Puppetmaster* shows he is a genius of editing, but most critics pay all the attention to the visuals. I truly believe Hou and Kiarostami have pushed the medium a few significant inches.

There is a genre emerging in world cinema. It is the fusion of fiction and documentary. Films of this kind produce some of the most important works of this and the last decades. Examples are Hou's *The*

*Puppetmaster*; most of Kiarostami's works; Victor Erice's *The Quince Tree Sun*; Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*; Joris Ivens's *A Tale of the Wind*; to a lesser degree, Stanley Kwan's *Actress*; Olivier Assayas's *Irma Vep*. The inseparability of fiction and documentary to me is utterly fascinating. Critic Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote an article on this subject and predicts it's the future of the cinema. Indeed, indeed.

I agree with your article about the lack of intensity in movies today, especially those so-called American independents. As a twenty-something, Generation X member, I find most of them really boring. In the 80s, every film student wanted to be like Martin Scorsese (myself included), but now it's Quentin Tarantino. I find the hipness and the post-modern showboating of Tarantino a big turn-off. I always feel alienated among my peers whose idols are either the movie brat generation (Scorsese, Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg) or Europeans I hate (Fellini, Bergman, Greenaway). Intensity is a word I used often and it's crucial to my appreciation of a work. My heroes are the cinematic obsessives: Bresson, Rivette, Leos Carax, et al.

Thank you for your web site.

Sincerely,

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