

A comment on Robert Osborne (1932-2017), host of Turner Classic Movies

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Robert Osborne, the longtime principal host for cable channel Turner Classic Movies (TCM), died March 6 at 84. He had been largely absent from the channel since early 2016. The cause of his death has not been announced.

Osborne was a calming, affable and intelligent presence on American television—something terribly rare! He came across as a decent person and clearly had a genuine commitment to the films he introduced.

In recent years, in the face of the overall condition of American television, it felt at times not simply that TCM was the best channel, but that it was *the only channel* one could watch.

Osborne was born in the small town of Colfax, in eastern Washington. His father was a high school principal. Osborne fell in love with the movies at an early age. After graduating from the University of Washington, he tried to find work as an actor, with limited success. Lucille Ball, at whose Desilu Productions Osborne was under contract as an actor, suggested he concentrate on writing about American film history. He eventually became a critic and columnist for the *Hollywood Reporter*. He also wrote *Academy Awards Illustrated* (1965), with an introduction by Bette Davis. He became a host at TCM on its launch in 1994.

What role Osborne played in TCM film programming over the years is difficult to say, but clearly intriguing things happened in an undertaking with which he was associated. He certainly had a feeling for film history and traditions. Turner Classic Movies began operations, quite deliberately, on April 14, 1994, in New York City. In his introduction to *52 Must-See Movies and Why They Matter* (2016), Osborne explains: “That day marked the 100th anniversary of film in the United States. It had been on April 14, 1894, that the first

kinetoscope [early moving picture device] parlor opened in New York City—the launch of the film industry in the U.S. of A.”

Over the past 23 years, in a generally difficult cultural landscape, TCM has proved one of the few locales in the American media-entertainment universe where decisions were made largely on the basis of artistic merit. However and by whoever it was established, a certain integrity seemed to reign there. The cable channel continues to broadcast several hundred older films a week, most made before 1970, uncut and without commercials.

In regard to the latter issue, Osborne told an interviewer, “It’s so essential to see films without commercial breaks and interruptions. If you see Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* ... that whole movie is predicated on mood and slow suspense. You can’t break that mood for a commercial. You lose the rhythm and the impact of it.” Readers around the world may not find the thought of commercial-free film presentation so startling, but, unhappily, in the US, where television is largely a scaffolding for corporate promotion—in November 2015, nearly 20 percent of all programming minutes were devoted to paid advertising (the figure is closer to 25 percent on major networks)—it is extremely, almost provocatively, unusual.

Speaking of a certain integrity, Osborne publicly identified himself with opposition to the Hollywood purges, hosting “Survivors of the Blacklist: A Panel Discussion” in November 2009 in New York. Actress and blacklist victim Lee Grant, along with Christopher Trumbo (son of screenwriter Dalton Trumbo) and Joe Gilford (son of Jack Gilford) were among the panelists.

It is not necessary, of course, to make Osborne into more than he was. At its weakest, Osborne and TCM pandered to Hollywood nostalgia, small talk and star

worship. Not every one of his introductions was especially profound.

But then on TCM, out of the blue, one would encounter Satyajit Ray's *The Apu Trilogy*, or Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite* or a program of 26 films by Akira Kurosawa (in March 2010, to mark 100 years since the Japanese filmmaker's birth)—and one's jaw would drop. This—something that doesn't obviously and immediately earn large profits, something that seems to be done merely for the beauty or the interest of it—on American television! It won't last, someone will see to *that*!

It is probably true that no other enterprise has done as much to make important films accessible to a wide audience. According to media reports, TCM has an audience in the US of some 62 million people a month, many of them unswervingly loyal.

To Osborne's credit, he insisted on showing a variety of films. In his introduction to *52 Must-See Movies*, he wrote: "The programming plan for the channel was always to show movies from all countries and from all eras, big productions, small ones, legendary ones, as well as B-budget movies."

Where else on American television would you have had the chance to see *Nine Days in One Year*, the 1962 Soviet black-and-white drama film directed by Mikhail Romm, or *The Cranes Are Flying* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957), another Soviet film? Or R.W. Fassbinder's 1973 *World on a Wire*? Or various Italian neo-realist works? Or Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1959)? Or films by Michael Powell, Jean Renoir, Fritz Lang, Sergei Eisenstein, Ingmar Bergman, Kenji Mizoguchi, Federico Fellini, Carl Theodor Dreyer, Abbas Kiarostami, Michelangelo Antonioni, Max Ophuls, Yasujiro Ozu and Alain Resnais?

Aside from introducing younger audiences, and others, to some of the remarkable and complex efforts made by American studio directors from the 1930s to the 1960s, TCM programmers have made genuine efforts to broaden its viewers' tastes, showing silent films, short films, and documentaries and raising the issue as well of those who have been largely excluded from Hollywood productions. The cable channel broadcast "Black Images on Film" in 2006, "Asian Images on Film" in 2008, "Latino Images on Film" in 2009, "Native American Images on Film" in 2010 and "Arab Images on Film" in 2011. In 2007, TCM aired

the series "Screened Out," on the history of the representation of homosexuality on film.

In its "Star of the Month" segment, TCM focuses on dozens of films by a particular performer, often bringing to light relatively obscure or forgotten works. Aside from the obvious luminaries, those performers have included Leslie Howard, Christopher Lee, Jane Wyman, Kay Francis, Myrna Loy, William Powell, Robert Ryan, Jean Harlow, Susan Hayward, Fred MacMurray, Marie Dressler, Ava Gardner, Ann Sothern, Rita Hayworth, Sterling Hayden, Lauren Bacall, Stewart Granger, David Niven, John Garfield and many others.

In one of the more intimate and often charming TCM segments, various contemporary performers or commentators (or offspring) pay brief tribute to actors and actresses of a previous period. So, over film imagery, we hear Elizabeth Taylor on Montgomery Clift, Robert Redford on Natalie Wood, Kevin Spacey on Jack Lemmon, Janet Leigh on Norma Shearer, Julianne Moore on Myrna Loy, Bill Irwin on Harold Lloyd, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Laura Dern on Barbara Stanwyck, Tony Curtis on Cary Grant, Claire Bloom on Charlie Chaplin, Jane Fonda on Henry Fonda, Ernest Borgnine on Robert Ryan and so on.

There are many reasons for the decline of American filmmaking, and this is not the occasion to discuss them. But just let it be said here that, without for one second intending to, the mild-mannered, unassuming Osborne and the countless films he introduced stood as a sharp and *constant* rebuke to the generally empty, crude, noisy and dull efforts of the contemporary movie industry.



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