

Why the New York Times' list of "definitive" movies about America is so unsatisfactory

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On July 1, the *New York Times* posted a piece, asking "What is the Definitive Movie About America?" The newspaper set out its thrust: "Ten writers on the films that get at the hopes, dreams, heartbreak and hilarity of the U.S.A. as it turns 250." The writers are an assortment of film and culture critics, editors and reporters, primarily at the *Times* itself.

The published list is a generally confused one, or worse. There are a number of decent or better films here—*Killer of Sheep* (Charles Burnett, 1978), *Nothing But a Man* (Michael Roemer, 1964), *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) and the more recent *Dazed and Confused* (Richard Linklater, 1993) and *The Florida Project* (Sean Baker, 2017). There are also, in our view, two very poor ones, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2007), one insubstantial one, *Dirty Dancing* (1987, Emile Ardolino) and one unknown (to us at least), Steven Spielberg's new science fiction work *Disclosure Day* (2026).

An innovative list, but "innovation" in this case has not proved rewarding. The makers of older, more "traditional" lists had different inclinations. Where, for example, are Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (or *The Magnificent Ambersons*), Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*? Or William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives*, Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*? Or "minor," but telling masterpieces like Abe Polonsky's *Force of Evil*, Edgar Ulmer's *Ruthless* or Max Ophuls's *Caught* (the latter two films unflattering portrait of capitalists)? *Mildred Pierce*, *The Asphalt Jungle*, *White Heat*, *Imitation of Life*? Although these movies are decades old, they emerged at a time when artists were still prepared to question, at least by implication, fundamental assumptions about American life.

Along these same troubling lines, several features about the *Times* piece and its participants stand out. The article nominally marks the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, an event central to a titanic revolutionary struggle. Unfortunately, eclecticism and pettiness prevail among the film writers, as they do in the broader milieu in which they circulate.

On the one hand, the writers apparently interpreted their task to involve considering primarily newer films, presumably the better to sum up 250 years more effectively. There is one movie from the 1930s, none from the 1940s and 1950s, one from the 1960s, three from the 1970s and one each from each of the past five decades.

On the other, having generally chosen more recent films, none of the writers attempts an overall assessment of the state of American society after a quarter of a millennium, nor do their film choices on the whole make such estimates. *Nashville* is the one possible exception, although

its more expansive view of US conditions is limited by Altman's own limitations. *Zabriskie Point* and *There Will Be Blood* have pretensions toward something sweeping, but those remain merely misguided, muddled pretensions by and large.

In regard to the 1932 *Scarface*, Hoberman, longtime critic at the *Village Voice*, explains that the film

was bankrolled by a legendary Texas-born tycoon (Howard Hughes) and directed by a big-time Hollywood auteur (Howard Hawks) from a script mainly by a celebrated Chicago newshound (Ben Hecht) as a vehicle for a former idol of New York's Yiddish theater (Paul Muni), who plays a fictionalized portrait of the most notorious man in the country then (Al Capone).

Intriguing and suggestive facts, but it remains unclear how or why Hawks' violent gangster film reveals something "definitive" about America, although Hoberman might have mentioned that we now live under the rule of the "US oligarchy's crime boss."

Nothing But a Man and *Killer of Sheep* are sincere and meaningful films about racism and, in regard to the latter in particular, poverty and deprivation, but neither lands blows against the foundations of American capitalism. They are more in the order of legitimate protests, cries of anguish. *The Florida Project* movingly depicts the conditions of the working poor, but Baker went on from there to direct the much weaker and far less sympathetic (and more generously awarded) *Anora*.

If one were to choose a Spielberg film in the context of making a "definitive" statement about America, surely his *Lincoln* might have suggested itself. Moreover, it is significant that the murky, hysterical *There Will Be Blood* was chosen, but not Anderson's considerably superior *One Battle After Another*. As for *Dirty Dancing*, one can only shake one's head.

Filmmaking has played and continues to play an outsized role in American social and cultural development, yet none of the writers thought to view it in the light of the issues and events bound up with the 250-year anniversary—equality and democratic rights, aristocracy and monarchy, insurrection and revolution, life-and-death social and political struggles.

That would mean, first of all, coming to terms with the contemporary crisis of political and social life, the decades of war, the lurch to the right by the entire establishment, the death-bed of bourgeois democracy that has placed a fascist in the White House. The

Times specializes in soothing its readers' nerves and reassuring them nothing decisive has changed, nothing requiring radical measures.

Like many pieces in the *Times*, this one has the whiff of having been organized backward from *a priori* political conceptions. Of course, ten different individuals were involved here. But not ten individuals whose names were drawn from a hat. Ten individuals from the *Times* or its orbit. The ultimate results would have only been a total mystery to the naïve. Asking individuals whose ideological leanings were a known quantity, the newspaper could be assured that race would feature prominently and opposition would be largely limited to the countercultural, "radical"-bohemian variety.

In the spirit of the *Times'* *1619 Project* and similar efforts, which portray the American Revolution and the Civil War as cynical maneuvers by a white ruling elite, Maya Salam (a *Times* editor and reporter "focusing primarily on pop culture across genres") includes this in her comment:

Not long into "Dazed and Confused," as Texas high schoolers pour out of classrooms for summer break in 1976, the cool teacher hollers about the impending Bicentennial: "Don't forget what you're celebrating, and that's the fact that a bunch of slave-owning, aristocratic white males didn't want to pay their taxes."

Contrary to this, Marxists view the two American revolutions as proclaiming principles they were unable to bring to fruition. That doesn't make them a "fraud," or the action of hypocrites, but events, like all others, shaped and bounded by socio-historical circumstances.

A chief difficulty is that the various *Times* writers and critics have no substantive or objective criteria for making their selections.

None of them appears to have a meaningful theory about American society and its historical development. The result is a collection of relatively arbitrary and subjective shots in the dark. The overall outlook owes something to what Friedrich Engels termed an "essentially pragmatic" approach that "divides men who act in history into noble and ignoble and then finds that as a rule the noble are defrauded and the ignoble are victorious." Therefore, "nothing very edifying is to be got from the study of history."

One commentator, for example, refers to left-wing singer Paul Robeson, "whose career was derailed during the Red Scare," another to "unfettered capitalists with no scruples and grifters who steal religion for their own ends," a third to "working-class struggle required to keep...dreams alive," but all of this to no great effect, or rather it is only that, a loose, limp, "radical" effect without focused political content or passion. A writer describes Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* as "a hypnotic meditation on American ideals," and that should be enough by itself to set off alarm bells. Film critics resort to the phrase "a meditation on" when they have no idea what a work is saying or what they themselves think about it.

The birth of the movies in the US coincided almost exactly with America's emergence as an imperialist power. The ensuing 125 years have witnessed earthshaking upheavals and many different stages in the struggle between the social classes. The vicissitudes of the social conflict have profoundly influenced filmmaking and art as a whole. As we have suggested before, perhaps because it is an art form bound up with modern industry and mass society, filmmaking tends to be most fresh and original, and ground-breaking, under conditions of

intense popular mobility and activity. Strikes, protests, social discontent often propel the filmmakers, in ways that the artists themselves may not fully understand.

Individual filmmakers encounter and represent life differently, but not as free-floating atoms doing as they please. Generalized national, generational, institutional, class features and pressures shape them as they do everyone, the *uniqueness* lying in the particular "welding together" of the latter. What "serves as a bridge from soul to soul," in other words, "is not the unique, but the common." And the common is configured in humanity by the "the deepest and most persistent conditions which make up his 'soul,' by the social conditions of education, of existence, of work, and of associations. The social conditions in historic human society are, first of all, the conditions of class affiliation" (Trotsky).

An orientation to "class affiliation" and to the history of the struggle that erupts on the basis of class affiliation does not solve the problem of creating an artistically striking and memorable work (or criticizing one), but it does push to the forefront the questions and problems that inspire the sharpest artistic perceptions and inspirations, because *they are* the "deepest and most persistent conditions which make up [mankind's] 'soul.'" The filmmaker is neither a "free-floating atom" nor an empty machine for producing form. He or she is a participant in social life, tied to his or her social environment and times by the strongest and most necessary ties.

It is illuminating that the *Times* writers manage to avoid choosing a single work from the years in which Hollywood filmmaking was at the height of its realism and social *and aesthetic* seriousness, the late 1930s to the early 1950s, before the fully chilling effect of the anti-communist purges and the virtual illegalization of left-wing thought in the American cinema. During that decade and a half, writers, directors, actors and producers created scores of films that grappled with varying degrees of success with the conditions and challenges of life, not simply for the upper middle class, but for broader layers.

The *Times* piece cuts away at the social connections and responsibilities of the artists, reducing the filmmaker to a version of the social type in which the writers see themselves: "independent-minded," beholden to no one, "spiritual" rebels, wry and skeptical (and passive) observers of the passing scene. From our point of view, they come across for the most part as "dazed and confused" in their own right, with very little grasp of America's past or present.



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