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CINECULT

Contemporary
Cinema
Magazine

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WELCOME TO CINECULT MAGAZINE

Cinecult is the Free Online Magazine about Movies that Define Modern Cinema.

We are a team of people with different backgrounds and cultures with one thing in common; we love Cinema.

We don't fear to explore the impact of Cinema on modern culture. Why some films are classic? Which films can be classified as "Cult"? How did they influence Contemporary Cinema?

We don't promise ready answers.

Our wishes and hopes are that the articles you will find in Cinecult Magazine, will open a dialogue, making you wonder and watch or re-watch the titles we discuss. We humbly invite you to follow us on social media and check out the video podcasts with our authors.

The first issue of Cinecult Magazine focuses on the films released in 1999.

With this choice we want to examine how Cinema entered the new millennium and what were the tendencies, both on mainstream and arthouse Cinema. For mainstream Hollywood Cinema, we discuss "Matrix" and "Fight Club", two iconic cult films from 1999 and then we review "Joker" and Christopher Nolan's filmography to examine how Hollywood looks today.

On the other hand, we will focus on "Auteur Cinema", with titles by filmmakers who challenge the status quo, both in U.S.A. and in Europe. Finally, for the horror film fans, our last two articles are dedicated to you. Check them out!

Having said all the above, we are excited about this new beginning and we really hope that you will enjoy it! Welcome to Cinecult!

Radoslava Nenkova
Founder of Cinecult Magazine

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THE EVOLUTION OF CINEMA POST-2000: A PERSPECTIVE

By Krasimir Kastelov

The question of what happened to cinema after 2000 could be answered in various ways, depending on the perspective of those responding.

For instance, younger audiences might express admiration for the technical advancements in modern films, which have made even the most fantastical special effects and visual techniques possible. All these being delivered in their favorite superhero movies based on comics, produced by the Marvel studio following its acquisition by Disney in 2008.

Since then, it has released 33 full-length titles under franchise known as the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" (MCU). Only from ticket sales in cinema theaters worldwide, it has earned nearly \$29.7 billion against production costs of \$6.7 billion, making it the most successful franchise in the history of film industry. (1)

Another \$7.14 billion was brought in by the franchise of the competing company DC (a division of Warner Bros), known as the "DC Extended Universe."

The revenue from the distribution of comic-based superhero movies reached a quarter of the total box office revenue (\$152 billion) of the American film industry during the period of 2008-2023. (2)

It's not coincidental that last year, The New Yorker published an article with the following title: "How Marvel's Cinematic Universe Has Swallowed Hollywood". The author summarizes the topic with the following quote: "Twenty years ago, few would have bet that a struggling comic book company would turn a group of second-rate superheroes into movie icons – let alone swallow the entire film industry."

Under the influence of Marvel, DC, and other Hollywood companies, the leaning towards superhero series, although not always comic-based, has become apparent. For example, the "Fast & Furious" franchise by Universal Pictures has brought in a total of \$7.3 billion from global distribution. (3)

According to data from The Numbers, the market share of American superhero films, which was a mere 6.53% in 2007, has nearly quintupled, reaching a peak of 32.08% in 2021. In 2019, the year before the pandemic, the total revenue from the distribution of superhero-themed films reached \$5.8 billion, half of all ticket sales revenue (\$11.36 billion). (4,5)

With such dominance of infantile content, it is entirely logical that 33% of the total number of moviegoers in the United States this year were children aged between 12 and 14.

Many interesting and in-depth studies tried to explain how franchises kill originality in Hollywood, including one which awarded the Best Non-Fiction Book Prize in 2018. (6)

The author, Ben Fritz, a journalist writing about the film business for authoritative media such as Variety, Los Angeles Times, and The Wall Street Journal, had the opportunity to closely observe the stunning metamorphosis of Hollywood over the past decade or so.

He recalls, for instance, how in 2016, at the peak of franchise popularity, Hollywood studios released 37 full-length sequels, spin-offs, and adaptations of popular comics. And by making a comparison with 1988 when "Rain Man" topped the U.S. box office, he confidently states that such a film couldn't be made today. No reasonable studio executive would bet a substantial sum of money on a film with an original screenplay and a star-studded cast.

Because even if it were released in theaters, the sharply declining DVD sales and the rise of international markets mean that it would be very difficult to make a profit. The risk would be much smaller to spend even more money, but on safer sequels of films like "Batman" and "Mission: Impossible," for example.

Older, cinema-tempted audiences are undoubtedly dissatisfied with this state of affairs and gradually stop going to the cinema theaters. People from the so-called third age feel strong nostalgia for the films of the 1970's, when the so-called New Hollywood was booming, and for a significant part of middle-aged viewers, the 1990s are the decade that made them love cinema.

And they probably have a point. It is hardly possible these days for a miracle like that of 1999 to happen again when the following films were released: "The Matrix", "Fight Club", "American Beauty", "Magnolia", "The Sixth Sense", "Being John Malkovich", "Eyes Wide Shut", "Man on the Moon", "Boys Don't Cry", "Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai", "All About My Mother", "Enemies of the People", "The Story of Us", "Rosetta" and others.

Even compared to the standards of some of the 1970's, when even innovative films turned mainstream, such as "MAS*H", "Taxi Driver", "Chinatown" and others, 1999 turned out to be the epicenter of masterpieces, the echoes of which still resonate in pop culture.



It is a rare case, when the definition "cult" does not seem exaggerated for at least a dozen titles that have shaped two generations of fans. All these films became cult for different reasons and for different circles, but they had one common thing: each of them managed to provide a different perspective on what was happening to American society at the end of the 20th century.

In the Marvel world, where I.P. outranks celebrity, Oscar winners are lining up to put on tights and capes. Illustration by Maxim Usik

The American journalist Brian Rafferty explores the phenomenon of "1999" in his book, "The Best Year in the History of Cinema". Over there, he thoroughly examines 30 of the most significant films released then.

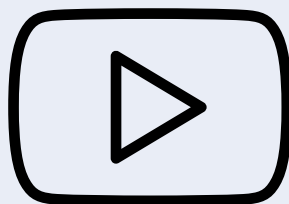
The author conducted over a hundred interviews with people who contributed to their production, and not only found an explanation for the phenomenon but also managed to shed light on the overall structure of nowadays Hollywood.

And now, through our electronic magazine "CINECULT," paying tribute to some of the films from that infamous year, we try to answer the question of their influence on contemporary cinema.

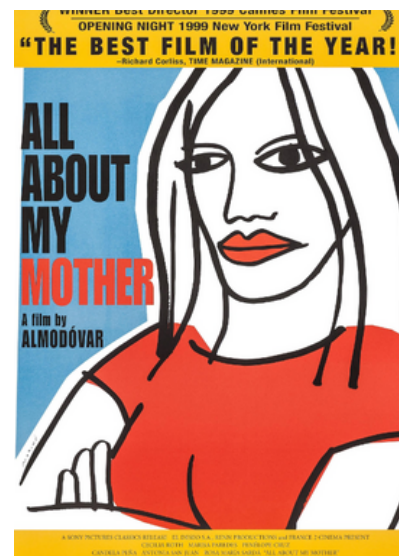
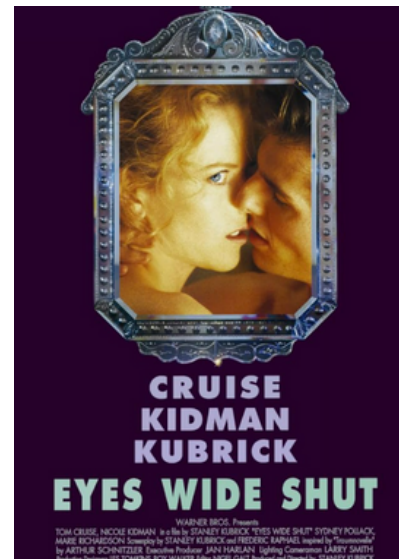
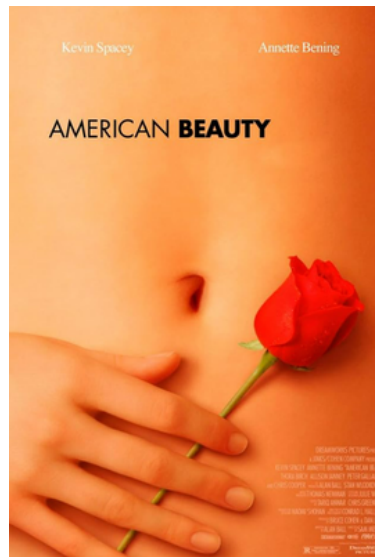
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1999 IN FILMS



25 YEARS IN "THE MATRIX"

HOW THE PATH OF MARVEL WAS PAVED

By Krasimir Kastelov

"The Matrix" is not just another hit released during the exceptional year for American cinema - 1999 -, but also the film that largely defined its development up to this day. Back then, hardly anyone would have guessed that this success would be achieved by the little-known directors Lana and Lilly Wachowski, who only had one film behind them - the thriller "Bound" (1996).

In the present day, no one disputes that "The Matrix" changed mainstream cinema in a way similar to how Cinema was influenced during the 1970's by "Jaws" and "Star Wars". However, it is quite debatable whether it succeeded in convincing ordinary viewers that entertainment cinema could be smart.



The Matrix. Warner Bros

The worldwide box office revenue of the \$63 million blockbuster amounts to \$478,683,941 (according to IMDB), which is 7.2 times more than the budget for its production.

This commercial success of the movie was unexpected, but still inevitable. Because in creating the film, the Wachowski duo used Tarantino's compilation method from "Pulp Fiction": to assemble their own product from various sources of contemporary pop culture (and not only), in which everyone could find something for themselves. In an interview, Larry Wachowski (now Lana Wachowski) stated: "Our main goal with "The Matrix" was to make an intellectual action movie. We like action movies, guns and kung fu, but we're tired of assembly-line action movies that are devoid of any intellectual content. We were determined to put as many ideas into the movie as we could, and purposefully set out to try to put images up on the screen that people haven't ever seen before".

And maybe they overdid it in this regard because "The Matrix" is overflowing with references to too many fantastic films, among which we can find: "The Wizard of Oz", "2001: A Space Odyssey", "Tron", "Star Wars", "The Arrival", "Blade Runner", "Terminator", "Back to the Future", "Dark City", "The Truman Show", "Johnny Mnemonic". The film is heavily influenced by many comics, graphic novels (including Japanese manga), Japanese animation ("Akira", "Ghost in the Shell"), music videos, TV commercials, and Hong Kong action films.

It is not difficult to find in it the presence of ideas and leitmotifs from various religions - Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, but also from Gnosticism, which radically differs from Christianity. "The Matrix" also uses key metaphors of science fiction. Its fans have probably felt the dystopian taste of the books by George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Philip K. Dick, and William Gibson, describing a future in which humans have fallen under the power of machines.

On the other hand, the screenplay used the novel "Neuromancer" (1984) by writer William Gibson, who is considered the founder of cyberpunk, as he was the first to describe virtual reality and the digital future of humanity, prompting a whole generation of readers to rethink their views on technologies and their role in life.

The film borrows his theory, according to which the programmed realities of the world around us are transmitted to humans not through sensory influence but through direct transmission of electrical impulses into the brain, which are intercepted as natural sensations. Thus, the brain does not perceive a difference between natural and computer-generated impulses. William Gibson named the megaprogram for generating artificial sensations as the Matrix. Another famous American science fiction author (Philip K. Dick) anticipated the Wachowski screenplay by more than 20 years, stating back in 1977 that the Universe is a much-advanced form of computer simulation.

And yet, one of the main reasons for the huge interest in the film is the moment of its appearance, which turned out to be particularly suitable for having such dark suspicions. Because it was precisely in 1999 that people trembled in fear of a global computer crash. The so-called "Y2K Problem" threatened the planet with apocalypse, simply because it was not clear whether computers would be able to transition into the new millennium without crashing.

The crash did not happen, and the machines did not enslave (yet!) humanity, but thanks to "The Matrix", the dark predictions of futurists like William Gibson and Philip K. Dick prompted millions of people around the world to think about the real dangers associated with the rapid development of modern technologies.

It is entirely logical for such an ambitious combination of philosophy, science fiction, and martial arts to arouse interest not only among film critics but also among scientists - physicists and philosophers in particular.

Furthermore, "The Matrix" gives hope for a return to reality, while Baudrillard argues that it is no longer possible to hope for it. "When we have a reference to a famous theorist - concludes Andrew Gordon - whom we misunderstand or deliberately profane, then the film loses a substantial part of its intellectual message".

In this regard, Slovenian cultural theorist and social philosopher Slavoj Žižek pointed out very accurately: "The Matrix" is like a Rorschach test for philosophers who discover their favorite doctrines: existentialism, Marxism, feminism, Buddhism, nihilism, postmodernism. Name any philosophical "ism," and you'll find it in "The Matrix."

On the day of the film's release in the USA, the renowned film critic Roger Ebert wrote in the Chicago Sun - Times that "The Matrix" is more like a comic book for superheroes, in which the fate of the world boils down to a titanic fistfight between representatives of good and evil. And he is completely right, of course, because it is terribly absurd to put so many different provocative ideas on the table and then expect the audience to be satisfied with a shootout and a final martial arts duel.

Wachowski's colleagues were more condescending. Darren Aronofsky, for example, shared that after watching it, he thought about how difficult it would be to film science fiction in the future, after the Wachowskis managed, using the great sci-fi ideas of the 20th century, to make a pop-cultural sandwich that would appeal to the tastes of all humanity.

The prominent researchers of postmodernism and science fiction were divided into two camps. Some hailed "The Matrix" as "the first intellectual film in the action genre," while others defined it as a silly action with a philosophical wrapper. Dino Felluga, for example, says that there are few films made by Hollywood standards that so uniquely refer to key aspects of postmodern philosophy as "The Matrix"(1). Upon the first appearance of Neo at the beginning of the film, we see how he hides his hacker program in Jean Baudrillard's book "Simulacra and Simulation"(2).

"Do not jump to conclusions, "The Matrix" may be a great action film, but its philosophical claims are unfounded"(3), says Andrew Gordon. He claims that we should take more seriously the way the Wachowski duo makes a cultural statement on Baudrillard's theory - that of simulation. According to him, the ideas of the French philosopher are presented so superficially that they distort his true positions. For example, the matrix in the film creates a world in which people are forcibly immersed in the unreal, while today we willingly head in the same direction.

Other authors like Peter Jones argue that philosophers have the right to discuss philosophical motifs in literary works like "Anna Karenina," for example. It should be noted that these are self-sufficient plots that immerse the reader in a fictional reality. On the contrary, "The Matrix" forces viewers to seek its meaning in sources outside the film. At the same time, the rapid action and tension leave no time to concentrate on any philosophical questions(4). The recently launched artificial intelligence (Microsoft's Copilot) has different opinion when asked about the Matrix.

According to the fellow AI, **"The Matrix" may seem too eclectic, due to the many philosophical references, but they actually serve to support the central themes and ideas of the film (the nature of reality, the freedom of the will and meaning of human existence). They are not merely incidental or aimless, but rather an important part of what makes The Matrix such a unique and influential film."**

In the Matrix, green isn't just a color—it's a whole vibe! Think of it as the official hue of the Mind in this digital universe. The Matrix is practically the Emerald City, with each scene having specific green tint, creating a mesmerizing "Green World".

However, I share the opinion that it is deeply controversial because it tries to present itself as a critique of the consumer society and the capitalist system itself, given that it is itself a product of Warner Bros. - one of the major Hollywood companies. By the way, like any film based on a significant metaphor (and The Matrix contains the metaphor of getting out of the System), it can be interpreted in any number of ways (including as a metaphor for the transgender transition of the Washowskis themselves).

Despite everything, we have to admit that this film at least tried to make its audience think, which is unusual for a standard Hollywood production. Moreover, in the current mainstream, represented as a rule by technological superhero cinema based on comics, the boom of which was caused precisely by the "Matrix", there is absolutely nothing hidden behind the visual effects. The Marvel Cinematic Universe speaks to this most eloquently. Curiously, though, AI sees The Matrix's significant contribution to the post-2000 dominance of comic book superhero cinema as something positive.

Notes:

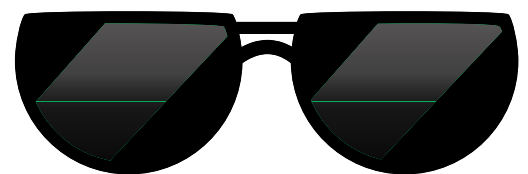
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Translation: Radoslava Nenkova



Apart from its mind-blowing concept, impressive action scenes, and captivating style, The Matrix films gained recognition for their distinct fashion sense. The sunglasses, in particular, played a significant role in shaping the movies' cyberpunk cool vibe. The iconic glasses were custom-made by Richard Walker from Blinde Design Project. Following the film's success, the company released a line of sunglasses inspired by The Matrix designs.

FIGHT CLUB: THE MORALITY OF EXISTENCE, MASCULINITY AND ROMANCE

By Soti Velo

It is time to break the rules of "Fight Club" and talk about this iconic movie. In 1996, Chuck Palahniuk released his most famous novel on which David Fincher based his film. The movie is a loyal adaptation to the book to a great extent, however Fincher added to its darkness and value. And he managed to accomplish a movie, which now has the "cult status". But what is "Fight Club" about? Although there are several themes discussed, like consumerism,, manhood, a postmodern culture denying its past and other social and moral values, for us it all comes down to one thing.

As the book highlights for its most part, the identity crisis and the struggle to find purpose and motivation are also portrayed in the movie.



Fight Club. 20th Century Fox

One's purpose and desire for finding meaning is the replication of a whole civilization. "Fight Club" was one of the first movies, at least in later years of modern cinema, to highlight that sometimes, real motivation comes from a person's need to establish his name in history.

As we get introduced to the main characters of the story, the narrator and Tyler Durden, we quickly get introduced to the movie's main theme as well: Identity crisis.

"Fight Club" uses these two characters to answer questions about masculinity in two very different ways. The narrator is passive while Tyler is active and this poses a question about which version is preferable. As Tyler sees it, society cannot accept men anymore. He feels oppressed, in a way "castrated", and pressured in a society taken over by women.

In his view, there's no such thing as toxic masculinity; or, rather, masculinity is only toxic when it's bottled up, allowing no release, which is why he starts "Fight Club". He believes that, for men, spiritual recovery is achieved through physical ferocity. And though not homosexual, au contraire - Tyler's a stud muffin supreme - he is homosocial.

Women aren't to be trusted. Men are better off sticking with their own kind. In this concept, the sole maternal presence in "Fight Club" is Bob, identified by his "bitch tits." Bob is a former bodybuilder, whose overuse of steroids has resulted in testicular cancer and in whose bosomy embrace Jack occasionally seeks solace.

Bob comes as a symbolism of a society bullying men and creating a more feminine version of them (large breasts, misses one testicle, higher voice). Bob goes to a testicular cancer group so he can share his feelings, have strength and courage to cry. He was previously a strong and independent male, but now he is pathetic and dependent.

Bob becomes more of a woman than a man because of how society views what a real man considers. It is because of Bob's big breast and his feminine side that made him become emasculated.

So, Bob somehow decided to join the "Fight Club" in order to feel less undermined.

As we get introduced to the men in "Fight Club", we come to realize that these are all men that women don't want.

Men struggle on their relationships with women and that alone can emasculate them. One of the driving narratives of the film actually, is the relationship between Jack and Marla. Boiled down to its essence, "Fight Club's" relationships between men and women take the form of hetero-normative "pursuit," the representative fictional and cultural ideal of the woman "pursued" by the man.

However, the novel's heterosexual romance is complicated by the quasi-homosexual romance between Jack and Tyler. In fact, numerous critics have remarked on the visible, or, perhaps, rather ill-disguised homoeroticism in "Fight Club". Indeed, "Fight Club's" homoeroticism indicates a more complex "love triangle" than traditional interpretations of romance might initially suggest: however, surprisingly, it is by that hetero-normative passion that Jack is finally redeemed, or, at least, saved from Tyler.

Finally, "Fight Club" is without argument concentrating on gender, highlighting on male gender instead of female. However, if we pay close attention, romance comes through a female character in the film, Marla. Is it a cliché on purpose? I think yes. I think Fincher plays with the expectations of not only the viewers, but mostly of his characters. Marla initiates Tyler's transformation and change comes through her.

Tyler's transformation though cannot be credited only to Marla. It is the realization, or character arc if you like, that the events happening during the film, lead him to believe that he has to change. He takes a shot. Tyler as a personality in the film targets members of generation X. Many young men would identify with him in 1999. This is perhaps most obvious on his famous speech:

"We're the middle children of history.... We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War is a spiritual war. Our Great Depression is our lives."

In 1999, Generation X was already getting crushed by the boomers, the prime generational group the U.S. ever produced in years, boring it to tears with their hippie mentality, their endless babble about the 60's and 70's and so on. Generation X had also to deal with the millennials, an even larger generational group, and a sadder collection of "spoiled-rotten crybabies you've never seen in your life" according to many, placing them for real in the middle. Tyler represented all this pressure and need for redemption.

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"JOKER" AS A DECONSTRUCTION OF THE SUPERHERO FILM

By Krasimir Kastelov

Superhero movies based on comic books are undoubtedly the most popular and highest-grossing in the last 15 years, and the film industry has now become something of a giant testing ground for the mass deployment of new technological breakthroughs in the creation of productions that, according to Martin Scorsese (and not only according to him), are not cinema at all, but amusement parks for mass entertainment.

The famous director clarified his position in the New York Times on November 4, 2019. According to him, for anyone just entering the cinema - the situation is brutally hostile to art: "For me, for the directors I love and respect, for my friends who started making films in my time, cinema was a revelation - an aesthetic, emotional and spiritual revelation." [1].



Joker. Warner Bros

The irony is that 2019, which has been hailed as "the year comics finally took over cinema" [2], has seen a shift in mainstream interest towards more worthy titles, such as "Joker", for example, which is similar in ideas and motifs to key works of the 1970's, such as "Taxi Driver", "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", "Network", etc. This film revived in some aspects the very cinema that Scorsese dreamed of returning. And despite its focus on characters from the DC comics, it differs from superhero films, which didn't stop it from reaping huge commercial success.

Worldwide ticket sales topped \$1 billion on production costs of \$55 million. This pleasantly surprised not only those who dislike comic-book cinema, but also those who dream of a different Hollywood that would bring people back to see serious movies in theaters.

Let's look into the messages of this landmark film

The "Joker" is the first film in the history of superhero comic book movies to focus entirely on a protagonist who not only isn't a superhero, but even becomes... a supervillain over the course of the narrative. Moreover, most of the time we sympathize with him because we perceive him as a victim, and even after his first murders we're more inclined to excuse him... It's a real enigma how this ambiguous film managed to achieve such a big audience success. This paradox could be explained by its engagement with cult characters well known to the comic-book-obsessed mass audience, but also by the fact that it touched on painful subjects for millions of people around the world who do not want to see social inequality deepen. Although, both of them hardly get into its deep meaning, which is not limited to political issues, as explained convincingly by the social philosopher Slavoj Žižek.

The reason for the contradictory interpretations of the film lies in its being perceived only as a drama of the unjustly rejected outsider, without taking into account the ironic attitude towards this "hero" of our time, who is the epitome of the offended and resentful "little man", harboring the potential to become a frenzied avenger like the Joker under certain circumstances.

And the millions of superhero comic book fans hardly realize the importance of this intertextuality. But the numerous references to some of the most worthwhile films not only of the New Hollywood period but also of the earliest history of cinema ("The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" (1920), "The Man Who Laughs" (1928), etc.) express the author's attitude toward the superhero theme in general and comic book film in particular. And they also sound like a plea for a return to true values in cinema.

Like the protagonist in Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground", the protagonist in "Joker" believes he has arrived at the absolute truth about his life, which is ugly, hopeless and mind-boggling. The hero, or rather antihero, of the great Russian writer's novella is also a man turned in on himself, whose sensitivity to insults forces him to retreat into a corner and dream of how to avenge his humiliations[3].

If we are to trust the reviews that have flooded the world's internet space, we would have to assume that "Joker" is more a film about the mental disorder of a disgraced individual (Arthur Fleck, act. Joaquin Phoenix) caused by the callousness of modern capitalist society. Such interpretations may undermine the belief that the iconic Batman comic book character is the quintessential antihero - the embodiment of absolute evil - but they don't help an adequate perception of the film, which, unlike superhero movies based on comic books, focuses on the psychology of the main character rather than epic battles to save or destroy the world. This contributes to rethinking mainstream notions of what a "superhero" or "villain" is, questioning basic tenets of the genre.

Significant films do not serve their messages on a platter, because in addition to the viewer's empathy, they also rely on the understanding of a specific figurative language, which in "Joker" finds expression in the most recurrent motifs, such as mirrors, stairs, dance, laughter. Without their in-depth analysis, it is impossible to adequately perceive the author's intention of the film.

The masters of cinema prefer stories that are not so much subject to factual as to associative connections. In order to understand them - we are asked to follow not only the intricate plot moves, but above all the development of the leading motifs within them. Like leitmotifs in poetry, filmic leitmotifs are recurrent dynamic pictorial or verbal constructions loaded with key meanings[4].

THE MIRROR MOTIF

The recurring mirror reflections in "Joker" are among the most important meaning kernels because they relate to the theme of duality. They allude to the dual reality presented on screen - not only through the point of view of Arthur Fleck, who falls victim to unfortunate circumstances, but also through his hallucinations of his new identity (that of the vengeful Joker). This motif is set in the very first shots when the tearful clown sits in front of a mirror, stretching the ends of his lips with his fingers so that his face depicts a smile. Its significance is suggested by the very structure of the plot, suggesting that much of what we see on screen is actually the product of the acting character's subconscious, in which the tragic is a reflection of the comedic. Such mirrored parallels occur repeatedly.

For example, the close-up at the beginning of Arthur's sad face clinging to the window of a bus, and the smiling face of the Joker at the end, watching the street riots through the window of a police car. And when he climbs the steep staircase to his home with all his strength, and then descends it, literally dancing. Or when he hugs his idol Murray Franklin with adoration, and in the finale shoots him almost point-blank.

Of course, we shouldn't forget about the pivotal scene in the city toilet that took place after the first murders. In my opinion, it is at this moment that Arthur first manifests the Joker in his full power, and this manifestation is represented by the demonic dance in front of a... mirror.

THE STAIRCASE MOTIF

Through the scenes of Arthur Fleck/Joker ascending and descending the steep staircase, another important idea is suggested - that of degradation. It is no coincidence that this motif is among the most memorable in the film. It plays an important role with its symbolic significance arising from the fact that it is always easier to descend steep stairs than to ascend them - just as it is much harder to improve than to degrade. The descent down the steep stairs with a dance step is therefore a magnificently found image, symbolizing the acting character's descent as the Joker's nature begins to dominate him.

THE DANCE MOTIF

This motif finds its most vivid expression in the scene after the first murder, when the panicked clown bursts into a city toilet with the intention of hiding from possible pursuers, but unexpectedly begins to perform strange, almost ecstatic movements in front of the mirror, resembling a mystical dance ritual symbolizing his identification with the evil slumbering within him. Later, the initial stiffness of this dance gives way to the devilish subtlety with which Arthur Fleck descends the staircase.

THE LAUGHTER MOTIF

Perhaps we would come closer to an adequate perception of the author's intention if we focused on the last of the aforementioned motifs, insofar as it is directly related to the world of comedy, which has been the professional interest of the film's director, Todd Phillips, for years. The acting character's habit of smiling constantly, formed by force by his mother during his unhappy childhood, is a prerequisite for a psychological burden that causes sporadic bouts of unnatural laughter.

It is either uncontrollable laughter-crying, when it is a reaction to experienced mental pain due to misunderstanding by others, or controlled giggling, aimed at adjusting to the rudeness and cynicism of the surroundings.

Arthur laughs condescendingly at his colleagues' cruel taunts of the dwarf, but stops abruptly the moment he moves away from them. This is why he doesn't know what to say when the policeman asks him if his laughter is a professional trick or a disease. Because it is both. His inner transformation, unlocked after the brutal beating and subsequent unfair dismissal, is aimed at forming his own delusional notion of what is actually funny. Thanks to her, he will eventually be able to experience the perverse pleasure of the demonic laughter that bubbles up inside him at the sight of the pogroms of which he is the initiator. Laughter is not only the film's main meaning-making motif, but also the sinister element fatally dragging everything in its path.

The climax is naturally during the comedy show of Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro), Arthur's idol in life. The now Joker-turned-former clown goes there because he's attracted to the idea of killing himself in front of a TV audience of millions.

But he changes his mind, suddenly realizing that his efforts to make people laugh have been in vain, thanks to Murray Franklin in particular, who has become a key figure in the culture of laughter by virtue of being empowered to decide what's funny and what's not. His laughter, according to Arthur, is wrong because it cannot improve the world and contributes to making little people feel even more miserable and more disgusting in their relationships with each other.

The only thing left for him to do is to proclaim that "comedy is subjective" and therefore he has the right to laugh in the most mocking way deemed only right. And quite logically he rebels, sinking into his subconscious reality, where rules the Joker, whose idea of laughter is more repressive and man-hating even than that of Murray Franklin.

Filmmaker Todd Phillips, who had made a name for himself with the comedy trilogy that began with "The Hangover" (2009), warns us through "Joker" about the danger that lurks for the culture of laughter in today's situation of universal political correctness. Significant in this regard is what the American writer Seth Greenland said in an interview with the French newspaper "Figaro" on the occasion of the publication of his fourth novel "The Hazards of Good Fortune", describing the mechanisms of political correctness in today's America:

"In the US, there are two phenomena: call-out culture and cancel culture, which is an even more acute version of call-out culture, whose goal is literally to ruin the career of the person in question. The situation is unstoppable and the sense of humour is increasingly lacking. Because humour today is subject to direct control."[5]

Thankfully, "Joker" overflows with ambivalence and almost everything in it is questioned - reality and fantasy, love and hate, laughter and lament, victim and criminal, and last but not least, of course, comedy and tragedy. This is what makes it the perfect deconstruction of the superhero film. Because under the pretext of telling the origin story of one of the most popular characters in the history of comics, this film provokes thought on the subject of the transformation of laughter and its terrifying flip side.

Perhaps Alan Moore foresaw this most accurately in his famous comic strip Batman: The Killing Joke, in which he famously remarked, **"Only a failed comedian has the degree of desperation necessary to become a supervillain."**[6]

In 2023, superhero movies based on comic books didn't dominate the box office like they used to, which delighted connoisseurs of cinema as art. And while we don't want to believe that Marvel and DC will lose their influence on the industry, we still hope that at least the shift towards smarter movies won't end with the Joker sequel.

Notes:

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TRANSLATION: Manuela Daskalova

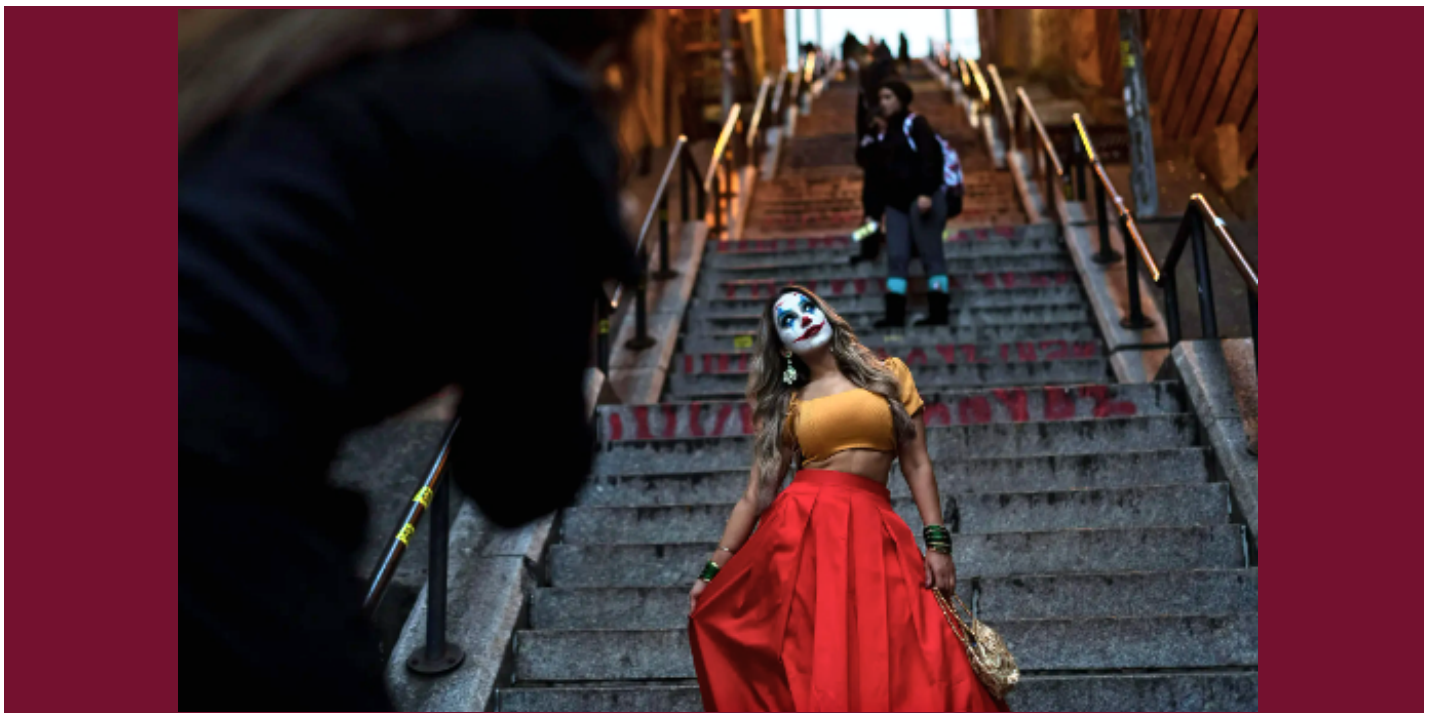


Photo: Karsten Moran, New York Times

The Bronx staircase, featured in "Joker," has attracted a large number of fans following the film's premiere. The step street is one of many found in the city, mainly in the rugged landscapes of Upper Manhattan and the Bronx. These unique pathways were designed for pedestrians as they were considered too steep for vehicles to navigate.

CHRISTOPHER NOLAN REWROTE THE NEW HISTORY OF HOLLYWOOD

By Krasimir Kastelov

The year 2023 is likely to leave a significant mark on cinema history for a number of good reasons. And not so much because it saw the release of many fine films, but mostly because there were serious works of cinematic art that captured the zeitgeist, as they say. Significantly, only masterpieces have been honored with major Academy Awards, influenced to one degree or another by the mortal danger looming over humanity - from "20 Days in Mariupol" (Oscar for Best Documentary) and "The Boy and the Heron" (Oscar for Best Animated Feature) to "The Zone of Interest" (Oscar for Best International Film) and most notably "Oppenheimer", which of course won the top Oscar for Best Picture.



Memento. Summit Entertainment

And while it would be an exaggeration to make a comparison with the fantastic vintage of 1999, we cannot overlook some significant facts that gave some grounds for optimism compared to the decline of the artistic level of so-called mass cinema in the last 15-20 years.

Paradoxically, it is a fact that at the 96th Academy Awards a high-budget film triumphed, which had already reached a significant part of the world audience, collecting record revenues (nearly \$1 billion) from its distribution in cinemas. Consequently, for the first time in a long time, the winner of the Oscars race was... a blockbuster. Perhaps key to its commercial success was the fact that it reached screens at a time of shattering global unrest. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which occurred just as Nolan and his team were beginning production, increased fears of a potential nuclear conflict.

Meanwhile, for years, the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded mostly low-budget independent arthouse productions ("Everything Everywhere All at Once", "CODA" (Child of Deaf Adults), "Nomadland", "Green Book", "Moonlight", "Spotlight", "Birdman", "12 Years a Slave", "The Artist", "The Hurt Locker", "Crash"), which very rarely reached \$100 million revenues. And some even remained completely unknown to the general public, who reveled in the superhero comic adventures that Hollywood studios churned out through a stream of sequels and spinoffs. Thankfully, none of these blockbusters made it to any of the major Oscars.

The last time a miracle similar to the current one happened - a worthwhile blockbuster triumphing at the Oscars - was in 2004, in which "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" won 11 Oscars and \$1.15 billion in ticket sales in theaters worldwide, according to boxofficemojo.com. It was even longer than "Oppenheimer" by 20 minutes, but as a mix of action, adventure and drama it was easily understandable even for teen audiences.

While Nolan's film, whose "R" rating limited its distribution to 17 years, is a three-hour biographical drama that most of the time features world-renowned scientists arguing about physics, or cross-examining Robert Oppenheimer about his ties to communists before and during World War II at various meetings of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission's Personnel Security Board.

"The torments and indignities Oppenheimer endured in 1954 were not unique to the era of McCarthyism, but he was no ordinary defendant. He was the American Prometheus, the 'father of the atom bomb,' who wrested from nature the fearsome fire of the sun for his homeland in time of war", wrote American journalists Kay Bird and Martin Sherwin in their book about the charismatic physicist, which served as the basis for the film's screenplay [1].

The bosses of Universal Pictures were aware that a film with such content and excessive length could not be expected to make a profit, but they still hoped that its hundred million budget would not be buried, relying on Christopher Nolan's reputation among his many fans.

But no one dreamed of billions of dollars in revenue[2].

It would be wonderful, but unlikely, that the blockbusters of the future will be films like "Oppenheimer". Because it would be a shame if the blockbuster dominance of the Marvel Cinematic Universe drags on. In fact, Christopher Nolan has already countered this danger with his Batman films ("The Dark Knight", most notably), through which he has tried to deconstruct the standard superhero blockbuster based on comic books, proving that this type of film can be not only lucrative, but also smart.

But whether Hollywood's current notion of entertainment will be reshaped by "popcorn" blockbuster cinema, we will be able to see at the end of this year.

Nolan's path began in independent genre cinema with his debut "Following"(1999), self-financed on a meager budget of \$6,000, and the experimental neo-noir "Memento" (2000), made for \$9 million but earning \$40 million from theatrical distribution.

"MEMENTO" - NOLAN'S MAJOR EXPERIMENT

In one of his essays, the famous American researcher of cinema David Bordwell writes that Christopher Nolan's films are always perceived absolutely differently by the professional critics.[3] However, Bordwell himself does not hide his admiration for Nolan's films and claims that the British proved to be an undisputed innovator in film industry. Furthermore all of his career so far, according to Bordwell, prompts reflection on key aspects related to creativity in modern cinema.

A particularly vivid proof of this is "Memento" - a neo-noir with dizzying structure and atmosphere of unsettling but incredibly lucid dream.

According to Claire Mallow, this film stands out with the following innovative directorial decisions – inverted narrative, ambiguity that results from shifts between objective and subjective flashbacks, and a lack of clues to help the viewer resolve the contradictions between what is seen and what is heard. The effect is completed disorientation, which becomes even more complex in the final scene, when instead of providing answers, the film forces viewers to find out for themselves and reach an independent decision on what happened.[4]

Christopher Nolan explains that the idea of using extreme and unusual narrative structure was born in connection with the so-called false memory syndrome. Because in reality our memory does not work the way we imagine.

That's what "Memento" is all about. "All films belong to their era," says Nolan, as quoted by Tom Shawn in the book *The Nolan Variations: The Movies, Mysteries and Wonders of Christopher Nolan*. "In the early seventies, cinema was too experimentally and tried various techniques to excite, shock or simply amaze viewers. I consider myself the heir of these avant-garde directors who tried to constantly renew the cinema language in order to reveal its potential."

After managing to rock the superhero genre solidly with his Batman trilogy, Nolan did the same with sci-fi cinema with his groundbreaking "Inception" and "Interstellar" films.

Undoubtedly, and it would be the most incorrect to say about Nolan that he relies on easily digestible entertainment, yet, apparently like Kubrick, he has managed to find a way to make interpretive genre films that are not only commercially successful in the pop culture world, but also appeal to a more sophisticated audience of intellectuals, cinephiles, critics, artists, and his fellow filmmakers.

And like his great predecessor, he has always appeared as a screenwriter or co-screenwriter of his own works, so he can rightly be seen as one of the few true "auteurs" of blockbusters.

It's a very narrow circle that includes, besides him, only Peter Jackson and James Cameron, in contrast to whom Nolan continues to shoot original works instead of nurturing the development of his most successful franchises as they have been doing lately.

It's strange how this unconventional filmmaker manages to appeal to mainstream audiences when the typical Nolan film always resembles a complex jigsaw puzzle that must be arranged by the viewer, jumping back and forth in the timeline until the individual pieces of the puzzle begin to form a clearly delineated meaningful whole.

"Of all the flamboyant debutants of the late 1990s who were successful with audiences and/or critics - Paul Thomas Anderson, the Wachowskis, David Fincher, Darren Aronovsky - no filmmaker of that generation has had as meteoric a career as Christopher Nolan", writes noted film historian and university professor David Bordwell.

In just two decades, the incredible Brit, who in addition to directing also co-produces his films with his wife Emma Thomas, has managed to travel the steep path from shorts and experimental films for a selected audience to high-budget cinema and blockbusters for multi-million audiences, while staying true to his style.

And the combined receipts of all his films now exceed \$6 billion, making him the most successful British director since Alfred Hitchcock. And of his contemporaries, only Spielberg and Cameron are ahead of him, with \$10.6 billion and \$8.7 billion respectively in revenue from the distribution of their films in cinemas.

Notes:

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Translation: Manuela Daskalova



Oppenheimer Universal

AUTEUR CINEMA IN 1999

By Georgios Savvidis and Soti Velo

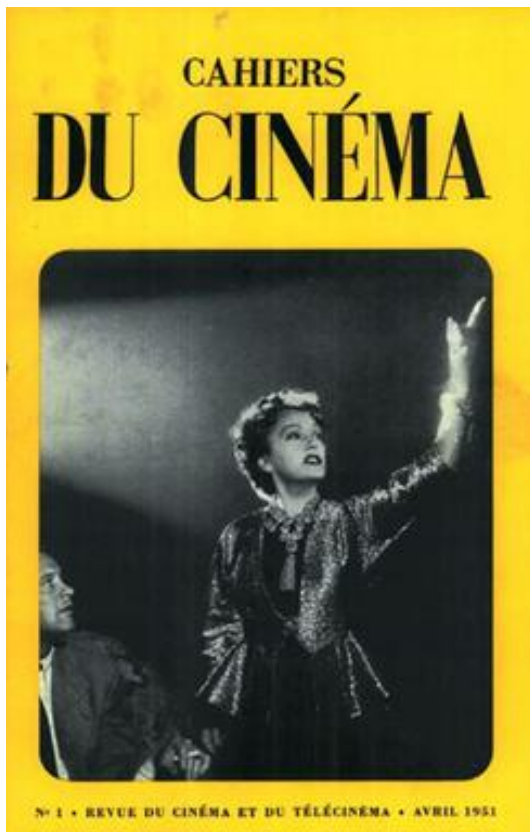
The term "auteur" (author) in Cinema appeared for the first time during the 1950's in Paris, where the legendary François Truffaut wrote about "the policy of auteurs".

According to Truffaut, an auteur is a director who has a status higher than the other participants of a film creation, because the auteur has persistently planned and elaborated the idea of the film and participated in all parts of production.

Instead of being categorized in a genre, the auteurs have their own themes and ideas that explore throughout their filmography.



Illustration - <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/auteur-theory/>



François Truffaut was part of the magazine "Cahiers du Cinema" along with other future filmmakers and when he expressed his "policy of auteurs", he had in mind the works of Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles and Nicholas Ray. Although this theory received heavy criticism during the following decades, it became extremely popular across Europe and other parts of the world. And we have somehow accepted it and use it in our lives.

Cover of the inaugural issue (April 1951)

For example, every time that Woody Allen or Martin Scorsese release a new movie, we start discussing about this movie by mentioning "the new Allen's or Scorsese's movie" and then we speak about the protagonists, the script etc. And several times we are motivated to watch a film (or not) based on whether we like the director's previous films and not based on the genre it might belong.

Having said all the above, we figured out that it was crucial to review how this theory evolved by the end of the 20th century. We felt it was extremely important to discuss the themes of filmmakers who have the "auteur" status nowadays and what were their thoughts and fears in 1999, before the beginning of the new millennium.

And finally, we wanted to compare American with European filmmakers, that's why we decided to analyze two films from the United States of America ("Eyes Wide Shut" by Stanley Kubrick and "American Beauty" by Sam Mendes) and two from Europe ("All About My Mother" by Pedro Almodóvar and "Rosetta" by Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne).

EYES WIDE SHUT TO EVIL

By Krasimir Kastelov

March 7, 2024 marked the 25th anniversary of Stanley Kubrick's death. He died of a heart attack at the age of 70 - just five days after his final film, "Eyes Wide Shut", was shown at a private screening in New York for Warner Bros. executives.

The odyssey of its creation lasted almost two and a half years (400 shooting days plus nearly a year of editing). Lead performers Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman were among the few who got to see this initial version of the long-awaited film. The screening ended shortly after midnight, after which the star couple wished to watch the film again.



Eyes wide shut. Warner Bros

"The first time we were in shock," Kidman says afterwards, "but after the second viewing I said, 'Wow, there's going to be a lot to argue about.'[1]

The film was released in the US and Canada on July 16, 1999 - again in this exceptional year for American cinema. The premiere was accompanied by an advertising campaign inadequate to its serious content, presenting it as an erotic thriller based on the "scandalous" stripping of the married couple Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. However, this definition is more in line with the attitude of distributors and interpreters towards Kubrick's work. Their "eyes wide shut" on the great director's anxiety about the survival of love in our world of moral decline only proves that the irony in the title of his latest work is entirely appropriate. Alas, misunderstanding has always accompanied Stanley Kubrick's films.

There is hardly another master of cinema who has been so rediscovered over time. It's hard to believe now that immortal classics like "2001: A Space Odyssey", "Barry Lyndon", "A Clockwork Orange" and "The Shining" have also met fierce resistance since their appearance. But within just a decade or two, both critics and the general public began to realize that these were true works of art that defied easy categorization because they were far more complexly constructed than they were originally expected to be. It is no coincidence that Kubrick owes his popularity to the more seventh-art-savvy art-house cinema-goers, who were far more numerous in the 1960s and 1970s than they are today. He has never made blockbusters aimed at a teenage audience, like Spielberg and Lucas, for example. "2001: A Space Odyssey" was in the truest sense an art film that they didn't understand, but watched and discussed anyway. And the prejudice about the coldness of the director's style stems from a misunderstanding that it is the result of his conscious rejection of Hollywood sentimentality. In reality, however, his films also move, but generate emotions through their intellect and understanding.

And since this is not easy, we usually get annoyed by their impenetrability, which in turn prompts us to watch them again and again. "Eyes Wide Shut" may be most in need of a new viewing because its rediscovery has yet to come, unlike Kubrick's other films. Which is odd, especially considering that the director himself has given it special importance, calling it "my greatest contribution to cinema."

Only recently more serious researchers have begun to prevail over those who consider it boring and pretentious. Among the most insightful of these, in my opinion, is Nick Dobrinsky, a Vancouver-based writer, rapper and comic book artist whose blog 'Boy Drinks Ink' reflects various aspects of his creative interests. Central to them is Stanley Kubrick's last film, which opened Dobrinsky's mind and eyes, by his own admission. "Over the last twenty years I have been drawn to watch 'Eyes Wide Shut' over and over again, studying it in an attempt to understand it. And each new trajectory of exploration reveals more fascinating details and unexpected layers of meaning... to mind-boggling degrees", he writes.

Valuable films do not give their messages on a platter, but rather rely on understanding the specific film language expressed through recurring visual motifs loaded with meaning. Nick Dobrinsky has analyzed in great depth the images contained in Kubrick's latest film: eyes, stars, mirrors, Christmas trees, paintings, rainbows, shadows, windows, twins, toys, and of course... dreams and masks. The overall exploration of various aspects of transtextuality in this unique film leads to a labyrinth of enigmatic symbolism, strange connections and cross-references to elements in other films, literary and musical works of art, ancient myths and even in Kubrick's own real life.

Some have criticized the film's dialogue as flat and unrealistic, but this is no doubt intentional on Kubrick's part. The measured way in which his characters speak - especially Bill and Alice - gives us time to observe surroundings rife with symbolic meanings, and to make sense of each sentence, resonating on many levels.

Much of the dialogue functions not only as communication between characters, but also as important commentary on the film itself. The very first line, "Have you seen my wallet, honey?" hints at the central importance of money in the life of Dr. Bill Hartford, who imagines he can buy anything. But as we discover in the course of the film, he himself is brought to be a mid-level servant of the powerful upper class. There are countless allusions in the film to past, present, overt and covert power organizations, as well as symbols associated with religion, mythology, the occult, Freemasonry, Scientology, the CIA, Rockefeller, Rothschild, the Christian church, the church of Satan, etc.

Entire books have been written about the presence of such references in Kubrick's films. And the mysteriousness of some of them adds to the impression that they seem to be tailor-made for conspiracy theorists. Though strange, this makes perfect sense given the director's long-standing interest and obsessive fascination with solving puzzles and chess problems.

"The Shining", for example, has long provoked an Internet backlash among its many admirers, who have continually interpreted it as direct evidence that the filmmaker agreed, at NASA's behest, to help the U.S. government in its lunar race with the Soviet Union.[2] And since the release of "Eyes Wide Shut", coded warnings about the danger of Illuminati and pedophile cults among the highest echelons of society have been discussed with no less intoxication. Kubrick's films do indeed predispose to the most diverse interpretations, precisely because they are true works of art, not riddles waiting to be deciphered.

And while they may seem very different, due to the disparate genre connotations (from thrillers and dramas to horror and film noir), they are literally imbued (to varying degrees, of course) with the theme of "universal evil." And the director himself said during the filming of "The Shining" in 1979 that he had been drawn to the dark side of human nature all his life.



2001: A Space Odyssey MGM

Many researchers of his work admire the way the "conquest" of space is presented in his most famous film "2001: A Space Odyssey".

But for Kubrick, the demonstration of the spectacle of future technical progress in this film is not an end in itself, but a means to be able to highlight against its background the complete lack of progress in moral terms. It is no coincidence that the transition from the prehistoric age to the space age is represented by an unforgettable episode in which a discarded bone from a dead animal turns into a space rocket from the future.

This brilliant metaphor is an unequivocal expression of Kubrick's conviction in the amoral nature of human progress, which made a qualitative leap thanks to our human forefathers' first use of weapons to subdue their fellow humans.

Whether it be animal bones in the distant past or space rockets in the unforeseeable future makes no difference. For the catalyst of so-called progress continues to be our indomitable drive for supremacy. Civilization and science not only don't make us better, but they don't contribute to figuring out the meaning of life, Kubrick suggests.

So at the end of *The Odyssey*..., the hero of the film stares at the mysterious black monument with the same incomprehension as that of his ancestors at the dawn of human history.

In his latest work Kubrick remains true to his interest in the theme of the aggressive nature of human nature, a manifestation of which, according to him, is not only violence, but also sex. Because the motive of supremacy dominates also in the sphere of intimate relations, rather naively defined by many as delicate. In reality, it is a real battlefield, during which we do not choose our weapons, which are sometimes lethal.

"*Eyes Wide Shut*" pushes us to the sad conclusion that sexual relations between people have become a major fetish of the pagan times in which we live. Why does Kubrick never show sex between people who really love each other? John Baxter observes in this regard, "Kubrick, like Mickey Spillane, exploits the hidden and violent manifestations of sexual experience: voyeurism, possessiveness, bondage, violence." [3]



Eyes wide shut. Warner Bros

In his last film, Stanley Kubrick brought to perfection the subtlety of the narrative and the methodical calculation of the smallest details. And he showed real genius in achieving the disconcerting ambiguity that has become the cause of fierce controversy, especially over the final scene and Nicole Kidman's key line in it. Among the most surprising summations of the film I've read on the Internet was the following, "Eyes Wide Shut" is one of Kubrick's most personal and hopeful films, shattering the façade of a perfect marriage to reveal emotional honesty and a reaffirmation of love."

Because, in my opinion, there is and can be nothing hopeful in this film and especially in its finale. Far more compelling is James Narmore's comment, "It is no coincidence that the final word "fuck" is uttered by the female character... Kidman's quiet, slightly mocking voice conveys both tenderness and a realization of the harsh truth that the rickety edifice of partnered marriage is built on primitive desires." [4]

The reconciliation of the spouses through possible sexual intercourse sounded to me like a murderous irony against the backdrop of the whole narrative. But it does most accurately express Kubrick's pessimistic conclusion that we prefer to live with our eyes wide shut to the evil not only in the world around us, but in ourselves, for fear of going mad.

Notes:

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[3] Baxter, John. Stanley Kubrick: A Biography, HarperCollins, 1997.

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Translation: Manuela Daskalova

HAS “AMERICAN BEAUTY” AGED WELL?

By Georgios Savvidis and Soti Velo

“American Beauty” is a 1999 film directed by Sam Mendes and written by Alan Ball. We follow a year in the life of the Burnham family and how their lives are transformed. Kevin Spacey portrays Lester Burnham, an advertising executive with a midlife crisis, who decides to change his life when he meets his daughter’s friend, Angela and immediately becomes obsessed with her.

Annette Benning is Carolyn, Lester’s wife, a real estate agent who wants everything to be perfect although she knows that nothing goes well and Thora Birch is Jane Burnham, the couple’s teenage daughter, a person with low esteem who hates her parents.



American Beauty. Dreamworks

Before getting into analyzing the film, we need to mention that it grossed over 350 million dollars worldwide, making it one of the most successful films of the 1990's. In addition to this, the film won five Oscars at the 72th Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director for Sam Mendes, Best Actor for Kevin Spacey, Best Screenplay for Alan Ball and Best Cinematography for Conrad Hall. Having said all the above, we are going to ask (and try to reply throughout this article) the following question: "Has "American Beauty" aged well?"

A closer look into the Burnham family

Lester Burnham admits that he is "a chronic loser", or at least his wife and daughter feel that way about him. He is estranged from his wife, they do not have a sexual life (one of the first shots in the movie shows him masturbating alone in the shower) and they barely communicate. He is unnecessary at work, as he is doing the same repetitive work for 14 years and his superior is someone who just came to the company and wants Lester to prove why he is crucial for the company, so he doesn't get fired. Lester is alienated from his daughter as they do not spend any time together apart from the absurd dinners with classical music and he doesn't even want to go to her cheerleader performance. His wife convinces him that they have to go and once there, a whole new world is revealed upon him, as he watches Angela, his daughter's friend, performing her dance and he starts having sexual fantasies with her.

From then on, his life changes drastically. He decides to quit his job by blackmailing his company to pay him one year in advance so he does not share the company's secrets, he starts exercising daily, he buys a Pontiac Firebird and starts smoking marijuana which he gets from his neighbor. Some would argue that this is a typical behavior of a man who has a midlife crisis and tries to get his life back on hand.

On the other side, Carolyn Burnham is a pragmatist who strives for perfection. Her garden is trim and neat, her house in perfect order, the dinner is balanced. While at work, she cleans very hard in order to make an ugly house look beautiful. On a meeting with other real estate agents, she wants her husband to behave properly and while he doesn't, she finds herself admiring the "King of Real Estate" when he speaks to her and tells her he wants everything to be perfect. She is also alienated with her daughter, although she does not want to admit that, and finally she does not want to have a sexual relationship with her husband, that's why she goes into a cheap motel with the "King of Real Estate".

Finally, Jane Burnham is a teenager with low self-esteem who looks on the internet ads for breast augmentation, is close friend with the most popular girl on school, Angela, even if they do not have things in common and starts a relationship with her neighbor next door, Ricky, although in the beginning she is creeped out by his behavior. He films her all the time with his camera but she gets to know him, only to discover that he is not the sociopath everybody at school believes he is. Jane hates her parents because she thinks that they do not understand her needs, they are not there for her and she is freaked out that her dad is so desperately in love with her friend Angela. She does not even hesitate to ask Ricky to kill her father so he stops being miserable.

Is it a comedy or a drama?

According to the famous film critic, Roger Ebert: "'American Beauty' is a comedy because we laugh at the absurdity of the hero's problems. And a tragedy because we can identify with his failure--not the specific details, but the general outline." [1] From the very first words of the protagonist, we hear him on voice-over saying "I'll be dead in a year". Hearing these words, we would think that we are going to watch a dramatic film. But, from the tone of his voice and the upbeat soundtrack, it does not feel like a drama.



American Beauty. Dreamworks

Throughout the movie, Lester's loneliness becomes one of the main themes. But instead of a sad and dark film, Lester is trying to fight this sadness by trying to return to his youth, when he was working on a fast-food chain, smoking marijuana and driving a sports car. He even wonders why the woman he fell in love with, Carolyn, who used to be the same way, cannot return back to those times. Lester's nostalgia comes in a comical way and his rebellion as a deliverance from the miserable life he was leading up until the point he met Angela.

Similar to Lester, Carolyn is a caricature of a strong and independent woman, who runs her own business and brings money to the house but at the same time, it feels like she got out from a 1950's movie, where women were cooking dinner, taking care of their gardens and their lives were evolving around their households. Her story arc, especially till Lester finds out about her relationship with "the King of Real Estate" is funny and cringe and only later on it becomes dark.

On the contrary, Jane is one of the dramatic figures in the film. She does not have a funny moment, although she is the youngest person of all. While the adults deal with their situations in childish, inappropriate and immature ways, Jane takes everything very seriously. She criticizes her friend Angela, because she only thinks about sex and is very superficial. Even in her moments with Ricky, with whom she starts a relationship, she does not have fun but rather tries to escape from her reality and her family.

Even more than Jane, Ricky is by far the darkest character of the film.

He follows Jane everywhere with his camera. He sells marijuana so he can make some money and escape from his parents. He shows respect in front of his dad (a retired Marine Colonel) but he lies to him all the time. His mom is catatonic and receives heavy medication and in several cases she seems to be absent. Ricky needs to be heard and his videos to be seen and seems happy only when he is around Jane.



American Beauty. Dreamworks

Conclusion

The movie poses several questions during its running time. "American Beauty" emphasizes on the middle class family of American suburbs and it tries to deconstruct this ideal through the representation of the hollow lives of the protagonists. The looks matter the most, whether we speak about a face, a garden, a behavior. When these are shattered, life can take a turning point.

"American Beauty" works as a metaphor for imprisonment and the escape that beauty can offer. However, there are several dark points here. Lester falls in love with Angela, who is a minor. This certainly hasn't aged well, especially if we take into consideration that Kevin Spacey is an accused sex predator in real life. Although at the end of the movie, Lester declines Angela's offer to have sex with her, the whole idea that a middle-aged man changes his life only because he met and fell in love with a teenager is extremely problematic.

Furthermore, we have already established that "American Beauty" indicates on several occasions its nostalgia for older times, where everything was simpler. Looking back at 1999, where the American economy was booming and unemployment was not an issue, it is disturbing to see that a privileged white middle-aged American is not happy with what he already has (a beautiful family, a big house and a job), something that becomes more and more difficult for younger generations, especially in our days. Let's also add that it is a very "white" film, as there is no representation of African-Americans, Latin-Americans etc.

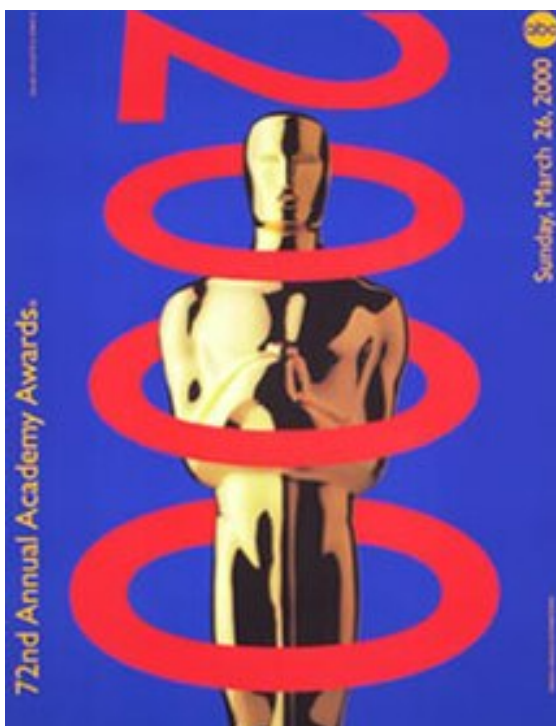
The film critic Guy Lodge has added to his review the following: "Ask film critics of various ages about it now and you will tend to meet with a uniform sneer, along with a blanket dismissal of its cheap-shot picket-fence satire, its broad characterisation, its purportedly misogynistic view of career women, or its awestruck command of metaphor as flimsy and floaty as, well, a plastic bag dancing in the breeze.

You might hear grudging acknowledgement of its formal artistry, including the satin tactility of the late Conrad L Hall's cinematography, or the eerie, echo-y, endlessly imitated percussion of Thomas Newman's once-ubiquitous score. But that, too, is tempered with dismissiveness toward its makers." [2]

Looking back into the film, we come to the point that while its intentions may have been sincere, time has not been an ally for it. Regardless of its flaws, "American Beauty" has played a vital role in pop culture, specifically the first years of its release, and it can work as a good example, especially for young filmmakers, of how a film can stop shining over the years.

Notes:

1. Ebert, R. (1999). "American Beauty", RogerEbert.com, 24 September, accessed 7 March 2024, <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/american-beauty-1999>>.
2. Lodge, G. (2019). "American Beauty at 20: is the Oscar-winning hit worth a closer look?", The Guardian, 13 September, accessed 8 March 2024, <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/sep/13/american-beauty-20th-anniversary-analysis>>.



American Beauty won five awards in 2000 (72nd Academy Awards) including Best Picture, Best director for Sam Mendes and Best actor for Kevin Spacey.

FEMALE AND QUEER REPRESENTATION IN “ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER”

By Georgios Savvidis and Soti Velo

“All About My Mother” is a 1999 film written and directed by the Spanish director, Pedro Almodóvar, and starring Cecilia Roth, Marisa Paredes and others. The film was a critical success and won many awards internationally, including the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film and the Cannes Film Festival Prize of the Ecumenical Jury.

In “All About My Mother”, we follow Manuela’s story, a nurse who supervises donor organ transplants in a hospital in Madrid and also a single mother to a 17-years-old boy, Esteban, whose dream is to become a writer.



All About My Mother. Warner Sogefilms

On Esteban's birthday, he and Manuela visited a theater in order to watch Tennessee Williams' play "A Streetcar Named Desire". After the play, Esteban waits on the street for the protagonist in order to get her autograph, but while chasing her, he will be hit by a car and die. Devastated by her son's loss, Manuela donates her son's organs and decides to go back to Barcelona and search for Esteban's father, Lola, who is a transvestite. During her search, she will reunite with an old friend of hers, Agrado, who is a transsexual sex worker but wants to quit her job, and will meet Rosa, a nurse who got pregnant by Lola and is HIV positive, and Huma Rojo, a lesbian actress, who starred as Blanche Dubois in the play Manuela and her son went to see together before he died.

Different types of motherhood representation

As indicated in the film's title, motherhood plays a crucial role in the film. Manuela is a caring mother, who spends time with her son and encourages him to follow his dream. They make jokes to each other, there is trust and understanding in their relationship and they even share the household chores, with Manuela cooking dinner while Esteban washing the dishes after. Almodóvar spends some time on this scene, because he wants to avoid the stereotypical representation where women do all the household chores while men can sit and watch TV. He builds on this gender equality with the way he shoots this scene, using medium shots while keeping them both on frame.

However, not all mothers are that caring. While in Barcelona and after having met Rosa, Manuela, who pretends to be a sex worker, asks for a job and Rosa suggests that she can work at her parents' house. Rosa has a conversation with her mother and over there we witness a different representation of motherhood. Rosa's mother is austere, with conservative values and strict manners. She cannot accept her daughter's life choices, such as working and assisting prostitutes or the fact that she wants to go on a mission in El Salvador. She even tries to manipulate Rosa, by suggesting to her that she will hire Manuela if she does not go to El Salvador.

While Manuela had a very healthy relationship with her son, Rosa and her mother are totally alienated. These two contrasting representations of motherhood highlight the two faces of the Spanish society, the progressive one where there is equality and understanding between genders and ages compared to the conservative one, where the elder have the power and the younger need to obey, something that we can easily categorize as Almodóvar's criticism to Franco's 40-year dictatorship.

Throughout the film, Manuela behaves as a "mother" figure to all the characters of the film, in different ways. She will help Rosa during her pregnancy and will raise her child. She will work with the actress Huma Rojo and try to assist her with her relationship with Nina, a younger actress who is a drug addict. Even with the latter, she will try to help her get rid of her addiction. She is a true friend to Agrado, as we mentioned above, and Agrado mentions her as a mother of all. A mother who stands next to the people who need her. This is an innovative representation of motherhood, where it is not related only with biological terms, such as giving birth to a child, but with the social representations that motherhood can bring on.

Female independence and friendship

In Almodóvar's filmography, women do not only appear as mothers. According to Marsha Kinder (as it appears in Allinson,2001): "Almodóvar managed to succeed a radical sexual change on the Spanish national stereotype. Heading away from "macho" men and passive women of the legendary, conservative past, Almodóvar, for better or worse, highlights strong women and violently deconstructs male characters".[1]

Women become the protagonists, as they are socially, economically and sexually independent. They do not depend on men. We just have to remember that female friendships were rare in Mainstream Cinema till that time, as the women normally tend to antagonize one another (and most likely to win a man's heart).

On the contrary, Almodóvar declares himself as a “women’s director” and in his universe, female friendships are essential and heart-warming.[2]

Especially on “All About My Mother”, the male presence is almost absent. It is a film dedicated to women, who give their fights every single day. Almodóvar highlights their problems and struggles. He dives into their personalities and gives them the space to express themselves. And they create strong relationships and friendships which last and evolve throughout the movie.

Queer Representation: Agrado’s example

Queer Theory was developed in the early 1990’s. It tried to focus on gender and sexuality, including the relationships of homosexual, transsexual and transvestites, how gender is constructed and deconstructed and showcase its fluidity. This was a productive dialogue in order to create new visions on the already established “norms” regarding sexuality and how it was represented on Mainstream Cinema till that time.[3]



All About My Mother. Warner Sogefilms

Throughout his filmography, Almodóvar takes as granted the existence of lesbian and gay characters. They do not need to "come out", because their differences have been already established. They do not need to justify themselves for their sexual choices and the other characters do not comment on their gender and sexual identity.[4]

On "All About My Mother", Agrado's character is vital for trans visibility and acceptance, not only in Almodóvar's filmography, but generally in the Spanish Cinema. Agrado is a transsexual who is a sex worker and decides to quit after being attacked. When she confesses her wish to her friends Manuela and Rosa, she also expresses her emotions about sex workers, drags and transsexual. She distinguishes herself as a transsexual and attacks drag queens as terrible people who confuse transvestism with circus. Even though her ideas might seem inappropriate, Agrado has the strength to share them with her friends and Almodóvar gives her this freedom.

Agrado is an authentic character and her uniqueness will shine during her monologue in the theater. Over there, she announces that the play "A Streetcar Named Desire" is canceled and that the audience can get a refund. But if they stay, they can listen to the story of her life. And she starts sharing, with a sense of humor, how much the surgeries cost so she can be the person the audience sees now on stage. She becomes the main star and she enjoys that. She has this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reveal her identity, her experiences and the efforts she has done all the previous years in her attempt to be unique. Almodóvar uses close shots for this monologue, managing to reveal Agrado's feminine side, the one she tried to build all those years.

While on stage, Agrado gives a performance on gender identity, how fluid it can be and how hard she tries so she can look the way she always dreamt. With her monologue, Almodóvar gives freedom of speech to all those who were unheard all the previous decades not only on Spanish Cinema but also on Spanish society.

Notes:

1. Allinson, M. (2001). A Spanish Labyrinth. The Films of Pedro Almodóvar. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, a division of St. Martin's Press.
2. Jordan, B. & Morgan-Tamosunas, R. (1998). Contemporary Spanish Cinema. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
3. Needham, G. (2011). Transamerica (2005): the Road to the Multiplex after New Queer Cinema. Found on Radner, H. & Stringer, R. (edited). Feminism at the Movies. Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema. New York: Routledge.
4. Acevedo-Munoz, E.R. (2007). The Body and Spain: Pedro Almodovar's All About My Mother. Found in Codell, J.F. (edited). Genre, Gender, Race and World Cinema. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Almodóvar's first feature-length film, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980), which he also wrote, explores the punk rock scene in Madrid in the years after Franco's death



All About My Mother won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2000. (72nd Academy Awards) And Golden Globe in the same category.

Spanish theatrical release poster by Oscar Mariné

"ROSETTA" AND THE SOCIAL CINEMA

By Krasimir Kastelov

"In the famous year of 1999, the world of cinema was shaken by a film miracle that revived quite a few hopes. It happened in the middle of Europe - at the Cannes Film Festival, which awarded the Palme d'Or to "Rosetta" - the second feature film of the brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, almost unknown filmmakers from Belgium. This choice of the international jury, headed by the famous Canadian director David Cronenberg, sounded like a bolt from the blue, shocking the cinematographic establishment, which expected the prestigious festival to legitimize on the eve of the new century the dominance of postmodern culture, crowning one of the masters who became classics of the cinema of the 80s and 90s (David Lynch, Pedro Almodovar, Peter Greenaway, Jim Jarmusch...)



Rosetta. Les Films du Fleuve

Even the acting honors were not given to any of the stars who appeared in their films, but to completely unknown performers - de facto non-professionals - such as the underage Emily Deken for her role in "Rosetta" and Emmanuel Schotte for his performance in Bruno Dumont's "Humanity".

This was perceived by international critics as a serious challenge to cinema - not, of course, the classical cinema left in the past, but to postmodern cinema. Some even saw that the festival results should not be seen as a manifestation of extravagance on the part of the jury, but as a deliberate act, aiming to suggest that at the threshold of the new century, cinema is undergoing a revolution, forcing it to return to its realistic roots. I wonder if the social realism of feature filmmaking in the coming years would be the one we know if its direction had been set not by the radical Rosetta but by the equally radical films of Lars von Trier ("The Idiots") and Thomas Vinterberg ("The Celebration"), presented at Cannes the previous year? Perhaps it was their failure that influenced Lars von Trier's surprising decision to declare that the Dogma '95 experiment was over at the end of 1998...

Unlike the USA, where the cinematic explosion of 1999 did not lead to a New Hollywood like that of the 1970s, the launch of "Rosetta" and the repeated triumph of the Dardenne brothers at Cannes with "The Child" in 2005, played a key role in the turn of cinema (mostly in Europe) towards social realism and humanism – contrary to the genre experiments and cynicism of the postmodern era.

THE ROMANIAN CONTRIBUTION

A new impetus in this direction was given by the Cannes festival in 2007, awarding "4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days" by Cristian Mungiu the Palme d'Or. However, this triumph was not a surprise, since two films from Romania – "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu" by Cristi Puiu and "12:08 East of Bucharest" by Corneliu Porumboiu had already won in parallel programs at this festival.

The searches of Romanian cinema in the field of social realism were also encouraged by the Berlinale with a Golden Bear for Christian Netzer's "Child's Pose" (2013) and Radu Jude's "Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn" (2021), which today is among the most daring innovators. And although the filmmakers themselves in Romania denied belonging to a common trend ("new wave"), it was not difficult for experts to discover its characteristic features - strict documentary and impartial observation of the lives of ordinary people, which is the exact alternative to the manipulateness characteristic for commercial Hollywood-type cinema. Essential in this approach was the radicalism of realism, called hyperrealism or new realism.

THE BRITISH CONTRIBUTION

Invaluable is the merit of the British master of social cinema Ken Loach, who only in the years since 1999 made 16 feature films, winning the Cannes Film Festival - in 2006 and 2016 with "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" and "I, Daniel Blake".

This triumph capped a more than fifty-year career dedicated to films that resisted the escapism imposed by Hollywood. He is among the few today who reveal in an inimitable way the dramatic struggles of ordinary working people to preserve their human dignity in a world where this is becoming an increasingly impossible task. That is why his work is considered the most representative in the overall tradition of British social-realist cinema, which gained international fame already in the middle of the last century with the rise of the "new wave of angry youth". Like the directors of the famous French New Wave, they also challenged the status quo of their national filmmaking, but by focusing on social injustices in society. Especially highly appreciated not only by critics, but also by the public were dozens of titles that acquired the status of immortal classics. The most famous are: "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning" (1960) by Karel Reisz; Lindsay Anderson's "This Sporting Life" (1963), "If..." (1968) and "Oh Lucky" (1973).

In the decades that followed, the baton of British social realism was picked up by Mike Leigh ("Moments", 1971), Alan Clarke ("Scum", 1979), Bill Forsyth (Gregory's Girl, 1980 and Local Hero, 1983), Stephen Frears (My Beautiful Laundrette) and others. Mike Leigh, who won the Golden Leopard at Locarno in his debut in 1971, deserves no less recognition than Ken Loach, for in the 1990s he became the most penetrating analyst of the processes at work in British society. It will hardly be an exaggeration if we call two of his films from this period masterpieces – "Naked" (award for directing at Cannes in 1993) and "Secrets and Lies", awarded the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1996, with the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) Award for Best British Film and five Oscar nominations.

The 1999 Cannes festival also marked the debut of "Ratcatcher" by Lynne Ramsay, who together with Andrea Arnold ("Fish Tank", 2009) and Clio Barnard ("The Selfish Giant", 2013) established themselves among the most prominent female directors of the new British social cinema.

Meanwhile, Hollywood, which developed genre cinema to perfection, never managed to give birth to its own outstanding representative of social-realist cinema. At the time of the so-called New Hollywood (1967–1979) Michael Cimino moved towards that direction ("The Deer Hunter", 1978). But Paul Schrader showed a marked interest in the life of the working class already with his debut independent film "Blue Collar" (1978). We learn about the social problems of American society, namely from low-budget independent films, which win awards from the most prestigious international festivals, and are regularly among the winners in the "Oscar" competitions.

John Cassavetes, who is considered the founder of American independent cinema, debuted in the late 1950s with a social realist film called "Shadows", and in 1974 raised the bar for this type of cinema with "A Woman Under the Influence", nominated for an Oscar in two categories (best director and best actress in a leading role).

A key figure among the independent creators of the USA is John Sayles, also with nominations for "Oscar" and international recognition for his two most significant social-realist films - "Matewan" (1987) and "Lone Star" (1996).

In recent years, the social issues of American society continue to be reflected in independent productions, such as "The Eighth Mile" (2002), "Frozen River" (2008), "Precious" (2009) and others. And more recently, films like "The Florida Project" (2017, dir. Sean Baker), "Patti Cake\$" (2017, dir. Jeremy Jasper) and especially "Nomadland" (2020, dir. Chloe Zhao) have proven the power of social realist cinema in USA. However, what is characteristic of them is that they mainly portray characters who prefer to escape from reality, unlike their European colleagues (Dardenne brothers and Ken Loach in particular!), who always emphasize the readiness to fight of their wronged heroes. This emphasis on escapism has led some scholars to call American social realism in cinema "escapist realism."

Notes:

Sinead McCausland -The New Social Realism of American Cinema, URL: <https://filmschoolrejects.com/new-social-realism-american-cinema/>, 2018.

Translation: Manuela Daskalova

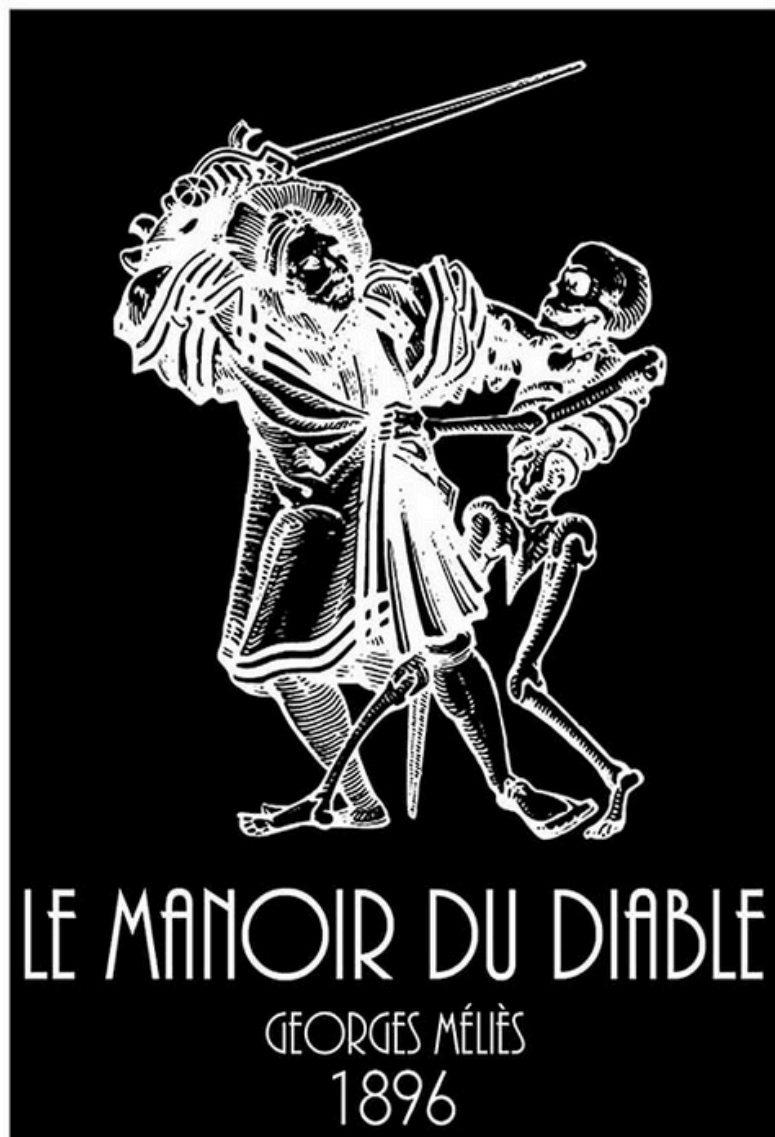
Rosetta Law

The movie did not actually lead to the creation of a new "Rosetta Law" in Belgium, as commonly thought. This law, which prohibits employers from paying teenage workers below the minimum wage and incorporates other youth labor reforms, had already been in existence.

In an interview with the Dardenne brothers by The Guardian, Jean-Pierre clarified the misunderstanding by stating, "No, that law already existed; it simply had not been passed yet. Reality is often less fascinating than fiction."

WHY ARE HORROR FILMS SO INTRIGUING?

By Georgios Savvidis and Soti Velo



Horror Films have been part of Cinema since the beginning of Cinema itself.

If we can all agree that the birth of Cinema was on December 28, 1895, with the premiere of the first short films by Lumière Brothers, then we need to address that the first horror film was released in 1896. We refer to Georges Méliès' film "The House of the Devil", where a bat transforms into Devil, a skeleton dances and a crucifix makes Devil to vanish.

Le Manoir Du Diable. G.Melies

From 1896 till nowadays, horror films have evolved, many sub-genres appeared and there were different representations of fear and terror based on which country the movies have been produced and in which audience they were referring to. Some of the most beloved sub-genres include slasher, comedy horror, supernatural horror, psychological horror etc. And several countries and their filmmakers have created their unique style, such as Italy with Giallo horror, United Kingdom with Hammer Film Productions and their Gothic Films, etc.

But why horror films are so intriguing?

Many people claim that horror films allow us to examine darker parts of ourselves. Parts that we do not reveal in our real lives, but, when depicted on screen, they offer pleasure and excitement. In addition to this, horror films expose us to stimulation and the scarier the film, the more adrenaline will be released.

Finally, horror films are a gateway to new experiences, things that do not happen in our regular lives (we hope!) and expose us to situations that we have to think what we would do in the place of the protagonists.

No matter what reasons we have in order to watch horror films, the important thing is that Horror is a key figure in the evolution of cinematic language and there will always be people willing to explore new films or discover old horror films. That's why we decided to dedicate two articles of our 1st magazine on Horror Films that we believe you should watch (or re-watch) and will amaze you.

On the first article, we will speak about two South Korean films from the 2010's, "I See The Devil" (2010) and "The Wailing" (2016). We focus on South Korean horror films, because they have built a tradition in films which are violently explicit and they have gained international recognition by the horror fans around the world. Then we explore the phenomenal "The Blair Witch Project", which also came out in 1999.

“I SAW THE DEVIL” AND “THE WAILING” : TWO EXAMPLES OF SOUTH KOREAN HORROR CINEMA

By Georgios Savvidis and Soti Velo

Many critics claim that the first cycle of South Korean Horror Cinema begins in the 1960's with Kim Ki-young's film, "The Housemaid". A gothic melodrama, highly erotic, which scandalized the critics and the audience back in its time, but now is considered a "cult classic" and the movie which actually initiated filmmakers to focus on the "horror" genre. During the 1960's, the horror movies will share some characteristic themes, such as moral dilemmas, social commentaries and modern look on traditional and folk tales.



I saw the Devil. Showbox

However, it was not until the late 1990's that the genre experienced a renewal and the international recognition came in the next decade. "Oldboy" by Park Chan-wook, which was released in 2003, was a massive success and made Chan-wook one of the most recognizable Asian directors.

"A Tale of Two Sisters", which was released in the same year and was directed by Kim Jee-woon was also very successful and was praised in many countries around the world. In these two specific films, we can examine the differences inside the horror genre.

From one side, "Oldboy" emphasizes on "**revenge**" through action while it becomes very provocative and gore. On the other side, "A Tale of Two Sisters" is a psychological horror film which balances between sadness and horror, presents the idea of a "**female ghost**", an element that appears on several occasions in South Korean horror films, and the way the events are shown makes us understand that important points of the story were withheld till the climax of the film.

It is crucial to mention, though, that in both these films, emotions change all the time.

One of the main differences between Hollywood and the South Korean horror films appears in the treatment of morality and justice. While in the American horror movies, the narration frequently emphasizes in a group of innocent people who try to get away from serial killers until the final countdown between the killer and innocent girl, on the contrary, in the South Korean horror movies, apart from the emotion of fear, we also tend to feel sadness, as part of the narrative structure.

The victims, though, are rarely entirely innocent. Revenge is a leitmotif in the South Korean horror films and on several occasions, we tend to empathize with the serial killer, something that almost never happens in the American horror movies. [2]

Other notable South Korean horror films are "The Host", by Bong Joon-ho and released in 2006, which is the story of a monster terrorizing a city and the attempts of a father to save his child; 2013's "Snowpiercer", by the same director and in this case we have a sci-fi horror story with ecological and political allegories; and "Train to Busan" by Yeon Sang-ho, released in 2016. This film was a huge success and it narrates the battle for survival against zombies.

I Saw The Devil

"I Saw The Devil" was directed by Kim Jee-woon and was released in 2010. It tells the story of Kim Soo-nyun who seeks revenge for the brutal death of his wife. After tracking down her murderer, Jang Kyung-chul, he tortures him, lets him free and then continues doing the same thing. Most of the critics were favorable towards the film, which also competed in several festivals around the world, mostly in festivals dedicated to horror films.



I saw the Devil. Showbox

The main theme in many South Korean horror films is revenge. And "I Saw The Devil" is a fine paradigm of that. The main elements are given very quickly. A grieving husband seeking revenge. But our empathy for the protagonist ends very soon. By the moment he manages to track down the serial killer who brutally murdered his wife, Kim Soo-nyun becomes monstrous himself. The way he behaves towards the murderer is sadistic and extremely gore. Obviously, we cannot empathize with Jang Kyung-chul, but we seem in distance with Soo-nyun as well. The levels of violence and abuse are very high, even for South Korean standards. Nevertheless, even in this torture porn film, we stay focused on our seats due to the viscerally engaging way Kim Jee-woon structured his film and the exceptional cinematography by Lee Mo-gae. Finally, we have to praise the performances of Lee Byung-hun as Kim Soo-nyun, but most importantly, the exquisite acting of Choi Min-sik, one of the most talented South Korean actors of his generation, that we all admired in "Oldboy".

The Wailing

"The Wailing" was directed by Na Hong-jin and was released in 2016. It follows the story of Jong-goo, a policeman in a rural area, who investigates a series of gruesome murders in his village, while at the same time, several people fall sick under a mysterious illness, which also affects his daughter. In his efforts to solve the murder cases but also to help his daughter, Jong-goo will have to make unorthodox calls, collaborate with a shaman who will fight against the Evil, etc.

Na Hong-jin delivers a horror film that lasts over 2 hours and 30 minutes, something extremely unusual for the genre. Moreover, in the first part of the movie, there is a comic tone (even with all these murders), by presenting Jong-goo as the funny, goofy guy.



The Wailing. 20th Century Fox

Something that drastically changes when his daughter becomes ill. Over there, we will see the dramatic attempt of a father trying to do everything in order to save his child.

It is essential to mention that the idea of a “female ghost” is also present in this film as well, although it appears in the last part of the movie.

According to Lincoln Michel: “This is a horror film that jumbles up ghosts, zombies, body horror, Eastern exorcism, Christian mythology, demonic curses, creepy children, and a lot more into one sustained narrative. This description may make it sound like the movie is a messy mash-up, but director Na Hong-jin ties it all together seamlessly. Instead of being a mess, the combination of tropes makes each individual one feel both fresh and terrifying”.^[3]

Conclusion

As we have already analyzed, South Korean horror films use stylish directing and an unconventional mixing of genres. Their key themes are revenge and the supernatural presence, mostly in the appearance of a female ghost. In both of the examples we mentioned, "I Saw The Devil" and "The Wailing", revenge and supernatural activity are crucial for the narrative structure and their appealing to the audiences, especially in the West, have made the South Korean Horror Cinema so popular that even the biggest streaming platforms, such as Netflix, produce and distribute horror films from this Asian country.

Notes:

1. Peirse, A. & Martin D. (Eds.) (2013). Korean Horror Cinema. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
2. Martin, D. (2019). A Tale of Two Sisters. Sadness and Suffering in South Korean Horror. In S. Lee (ed.), Rediscovering Korean Cinema (pp. 395-407). University of Michigan Press
3. Michel, L. (2018) "The Wailing is the Spookiest Movie on Netflix", GQ, 6 October, accessed 15 February 2024, <<https://www.gq.com/story/the-wailing-is-the-spookiest-movie-on-netflix>>.

According to the **Korean concept of Han** **한** : "When a woman harbors resentment, it can bring frost during May and June," possibly shedding light on the prevalence of female ghosts in Korean horror movies. The intense bitterness she carries is believed to be freezing enough to cool the warm air of those months. Her quest for revenge is a formidable force, making her a terrifying figure in horror narratives.

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT: INNOVATIVE CINEMATIC STYLE AND IMMEDIATE SUCCESS

By Soti Velo

Up to this day, "The Blair Witch Project" remains one of the most successful horror movies ever made (if not the most successful). The film made its way to a wide audience and had a tremendous impact for the years to come. It became a forerunner for a new "style" of cinema, which had its good days, but eventually got lost. Unarguably, there have been movies which changed the history of cinema before and after "The Blair Witch Project" and we can create a long list with them.



The Blair Witch Project. Summit Entertainment

Hitchcock, Cameron, Coppola, Parajanov, Haneke, Kurosawa, are some of the names that come to mind immediately. We can add some giants to the horror genre as well, including Sam Raimi, George Romero and F.W Murnau among others; names which are associated with innovation and contribution to the otherwise massive industry of horror cinema. The question is, where do Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, creators of "The Blair Witch Project" stand among these names and why is their film important for the timeline of the genre?

In the first place, the film managed a worthy achievement by meeting immediate success, given the fact that it lacked the recipe that usually made films box-office successes up to that point. One may argue that it lacked even the basics - experienced Hollywood actors, special effects, up to date equipment and a well-planned script writing among other things.

Regardless of all those, it was its innovative style that made the film a huge hit. Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick intentionally created a new cinematic style which left audiences in awe and focused deep on new ways of realism in order to convey fear and horror. With an amazing marketing campaign and a combination of fact and fiction, it managed to captivate and convince even the most demanding fans of horror films and fill the cinemas around the world.

The story of "The Blair Witch Project" starts way before its pre-production. Sanchez and Myrick loved horror films, but they believed that there was not an actual horror film scary enough for their taste and many people around them felt the same. The two of them also spent a lot of time watching documentaries. They came up with the idea to combine their two favorite genres in order to create something which was never done before. Although many horror films were produced in the 1990s, there was nothing scary enough out there.

Some might claim that only in 1990 three major horror films were released.

"Misery" and "It", both based on Stephen King's books and George Romero's, "Night of the Living Dead" remake, for which Roger Ebert said that 'the remake is so close to the original that there is no reason to see both.' These ambitious productions set the decade to be very promising for the fans of the genre. And it is true that these films are, even to this day, checkpoints for horror fans, but are they really scary?

Sanchez and Myrick didn't want to make a well shot, big budget movie which would compete with the giants of the time. They just wanted to make a "scary movie". At least scarier than the average movies out there. For this reason, they concentrated exclusively on the treatment of their 35 pages screenplay. Everything was pretty much improvised. The preparations for the project began in secret, while the creators started searching for a production team and investors.

Along with some friends who believed in their idea, they founded Haxan Films, which served as the production company of the film. Casting sessions and meetings started taking place, but nothing was official yet. Not until Artisan Entertainment decided to snatch the film up for distribution. Artisan purchased the full rights of the film right after its premiere beating even Miramax, a giant in the industry which gained recognition due to the production of Wes Craven's "Scream". This presented a big opportunity for the production team, which provided the Artisan with the first pieces of footage. While the reshoots that the distributor asked for, as well as a different ending they demanded proved to be costly, what's remarkable is that the film was still cheap to make.

Still, "The Blair Witch Project" didn't invent the so-called found-footage movie. By 1999, reality TV programs like "Cops" and "The Real World" were on the rise, and the internet was providing a conspiratorial and conversational hub for its users, according to Jake Kring-Schreifels. Creators knew that viewers would be up for embracing a low-fi idea, which in the right hands and with the right treatment could lead to something great.

What's great about "The Blair Witch Project" is the fact that it managed to be a low budget film. "For us, video was about to become as good as film", Sánchez said. "All of a sudden, you could edit on your computer". Audiences seemed willing, he added, to accept "these new types of media and new types of stories that were being told."

Additionally, as the film's production didn't cost as much money as one would think, most part of the budget was dedicated to marketing. We don't know how much of the \$60,000 were spent on distribution and marketing exactly. We do know for sure that Louise Levison, a famous indie film consultant, was the one to prepare the business plan for the film. Levison incorporated the marketing into the movie itself. She created a campaign online for finding the "missing students" who were being hunted by a supernatural entity.



The Blair Witch Project. Summit Entertainment

No one knew that the story was fictional and "The Blair Witch Project" was on everyone's mind. Even though the Internet wasn't part of every house back then, the official website www.blairwitch.com got more than 150 million users worldwide watching and rewatching the film searching for clues, one month after the premiere. Such was the hype, that people shared the footage, printed leaflets, even involved the police, trying to convince them that the events in the film were true. A further settlement was an agreement with the actors to not make public appearances. When some short footage videos of the film were played in Sundance film festival, different actors were used, convincing viewers that the original ones were missing and the events on the film were not fiction. The short films were presented as documentaries. They were made available many years after the release of the original movie.

Artisan Entertainment immediately after penning the deal, announced that a documentary about the making of "The Blair Witch Project" was in the making and also a journal of one of the characters – Heather - was posted on the internet. This is another proof of how popular the movie had become. Moreover, this blunt move proved to be essential for the movie's marketing success. Finally, the producers made one more important decision: they used a teaser on one of the biggest films of the 1990's, "Star Wars: Episode I- The Phantom Menace". In this way it lured fans of other genres too and not only horror fanatics.

It is easy to see how genius "The Blair Witch Project" is. A not so special movie, if we compare it to its contemporaries, and surely there have been greater movies that followed. But we can't deny a couple of things. First, it was exactly this film that opened the door for a new sub-genre in the horror industry. Many movies followed the recipe that Sanchez and Myrick wrote first. "Cloverfield", "Paranormal Activity", "Willow Creek" and "V/H/S" are only a few examples that come from the top of our head.

Besides, we might claim that internet and social media have changed a lot over the course of time, especially since 1999, and these changes have dramatically affected the way movie promoters do things, however, it is undeniably a fact that “The Blair Witch Project” managed to succeed in an era that it was extremely hard to use the limited services that internet could offer. Its marketing campaign was so successful, that they even attempted to pass the characters of the movie as real missing persons, and there were thousands to believe this. Artisan Entertainment literally broke the boundaries between fiction and reality. An achievement every movie maker would dream about.

Notes:

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“At a time when digital techniques can show us almost anything, The Blair Witch Project is a reminder that what really scares us is the stuff we can't see. The noise in the dark is almost always scarier than what makes the noise in the dark.”

—Roger Ebert, writing for the Chicago Sun-Times



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