



FILMMAKERS AT WORK BEYOND HOLLYWOOD

Edited by MICHAEL ATKINSON

Exile Cinema

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Exile Cinema

Filmmakers at Work beyond Hollywood



Michael Atkinson, editor

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
<i>Michael Atkinson</i>	
Part 1: Rockets from East Asia	9
1. Double Trouble: Tsui Hark & Ching Siu-tung	11
<i>Howard Hampton</i>	
2. Bullet Ballet: Seijun Suzuki	21
<i>Jonathan Rosenbaum</i>	
3. Kuala L'Impure: The Cinema of Amir Muhammad	27
<i>Dennis Lim</i>	
4. A Kurosawa Kiyoshi Kit	41
<i>B. Kite</i>	
5. The Bong Show: Bong Joon-ho	49
<i>Ed Park</i>	
Part 2. On the European Outskirts	55
6. Beyond the Clouds: The Films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan	57
<i>Geoff Andrew</i>	
7. Pawel Pawlikowski: Dreaming All My Life	63
<i>Jessica Winter</i>	

8. Bela Tarr <i>Jonathan Romney</i>	73
9. Blunt Force Trauma: Andrzej Zulawski <i>Michael Atkinson</i>	79
10. Sharunas Bartas <i>Laura Sinagra</i>	87
Part 3. Documentarians and Mad Scientists	93
11. Ken Jacobs <i>David Sterritt</i>	95
12. A Few Moments of Arousal in a Film by Martin Arnold <i>George Toles</i>	101
13. Ross McElwee <i>Godfrey Cheshire</i>	111
14. Judith Helfand: Secret Stories, Video Diaries, and Toxic Comedy <i>Patricia Aufderheide</i>	117
Part 4. Lost between Genre and Myth-Making	123
15. The Beardo: José Mojica Marins <i>Guy Maddin</i>	125
16. <i>Dellamorte Dellamore</i> and Michele Soavi <i>Maitland McDonagh</i>	131
17. Guy Maddin <i>Mark Peranson</i>	137
18. James Fotopoulos <i>Ed Halter</i>	145
19. Christopher Munch: For Those We Have Loved <i>Graham Fuller</i>	151

Part 5. Defiant Lions of the New Wave Generation	161
20. Pleasures of the Flesh: Walerian Borowczyk <i>David Thompson</i>	163
21. Chris Marker: The Return to Work at the Wonder Factory <i>Joshua Clover</i>	169
22. Moebius Dragstrip: Monte Hellman Circles Back <i>Chuck Stephens</i>	175
23. The Not-Too-Long Discourses of Chantal Akerman <i>Stuart Klawans</i>	189
List of Contributors	197
Index	203

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Introduction

MICHAEL ATKINSON

THIS BOOK COULD BE CONSIDERED A manifesto. Then again, virtually anything written by the essayists, critics, and scholars represented herein on the subject of film could be as well. Manifestos can be defined as such by their contexts, and any writing about cinema as an art form—not a commercial project or thoughtless distraction or an academically theorizable cultural phenomena—has by this late date acquired an insurrectionary character. What the writers collected in this volume are struggling to do—in my view—is insist on a cinephile’s view of movies, as a matter of bedazzlement, profundity, tangible cultural intercourse, and rampaging pleasure. It is not glamour-drunk sycophancy. It is not speculative, jargon-drenched “research,” performed for the benefit of tenure. It is an exaltation of film critics (to co-opt the group name for larks), exercising allegiance to their frantic medium’s neglected territories.

This is a necessary stance precisely because our perception of cinema today is shaped almost entirely by publicity. Ninety-nine percent of all culture “journalism” in this country—print, radio, TV, and Web—is performed at the behest of public relation firms. Celebrity profiles and cross-pollinating cable-marketings dominate, while too many workaday reviewers know little or nothing about cinema culture (editors blithely transferring them from a newspaper’s dance or restaurant or real estate desk is common), and are content in co-publicizing the profitable product of the week, regardless of its value. DVDs are routinely marketed as being “supplemented” by their own advertising; consumer-targeted Web sites offer

commercials as entertainment. Books published about film, primarily from small and university presses, are many and varied in their content, but those chosen to stock the scant “Film, TV & Radio” shelf in most of the nation’s “big box” bookstores are dominated by alphabetical video guides, coffee-table photo collections and unauthorized biographies. (Serious works of critical scholarship, such as J. Hoberman’s history of Yiddish cinema *Bridge of Light*, go unreviewed, unsold and unread.) What films get made, what films we see, and what filmmakers we know about are all matters largely predetermined by the cataract of marketing, advertising, and media exposure. Thus, a film’s importance is largely predetermined for us by those who will profit from it and who are willing to manufacture metric tons of marketing discourse toward that end.

For the average filmgoer, for whom cinema once meant human drama, empathic involvement, and catapulting adventure (if not always, as it was in the post–World War II decades of imported film, poetic transcendence, and sociopolitical force), mainstream movies now ordinarily embody meaningless noise, visual patronization, and derivative retro-experience. Such American movies continue to rule the globe’s box office and media stream, but at least in South Korea, or France, or Egypt there’s a thriving local cinema offering up some resistance. We have little such luck, what with the absorption of independent film into the mainstream revenue stream, and the thorough neutering of the imported-film distribution marketplace. For a supremely testy autopsy on the entire phenomenon, see Jonathan Rosenbaum’s book *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Limit What Movies We Can See*; for now, let’s just note that the largest internationally grossing non–English-language film, Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, took in just a few more million (\$128 million, give or take) in its entire theatrical revenue life than Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* made in its first American weekend. The first weekend’s grosses, let’s remember, are not the results of word-of-mouth or any other expression of consumer satisfaction, but purely of marketing power. Sometimes willing reviewers can help to a marginal degree, but most of the time not.

It should go without saying—and it sometimes can for those of us lucky enough to live in or near cities where film distribution isn’t limited to the three or four weekly releases produced in Los Angeles, and who have persevered in acquiring a certain hunger for, grasp on, and perspective about cinematic aesthetics—that there’s more to the picture than we are ordinarily allowed to see. There is, in fact, a vast movie-crazed globe outside of the market kingdom, where madmen, geniuses, and apostates roam freely, subject to a relatively minimal degree, if at all, to corporate industry and spin control. These filmmakers battle the greatest odds a modern artist can face: the opposition of mass culture at large, in a medium

that nonetheless requires enormous expenditures in every stage of production and distribution. Naturally, the average American moviehead rarely gets a chance to see these marginalized directors' work and often knows about them only through dazzled rumors and rhapsodic hearsay.

Ironically, the films by these artists and many, many others are available to us now to a heretofore unimaginable degree—anyone with an inexpensive all-region DVD player, an Internet connection, and a credit card can order otherwise-impossible-to-see discs from anywhere on Earth. But to do so, you'd have to know what you're looking for, and therefore have acquired the resilience and tenacity and acculturated sophistication to swim upstream against the very culture that surrounds you and strives to curb your options. Every dyed-in-the-wool cinema connoisseur is aware that to prefer the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien to those of Steven Spielberg is to place yourself decidedly outside the primary cultural discourse of American life. But Hou occupies the inner, most ballyhooed circle of non-Industry artistes, an elite selection that may be occupied by a half-dozen candidates these days (Lars Von Trier or Zhang Yimou one moment, and then not the next); what about the rest of moviemaking mankind? In cinema as in literature, music and even news, the rest of the world is of little importance to stateside profiteers and so, therefore, largely unknown to consumers. How many Americans know the names Bong Joon-ho or Nuri Bilge Ceylan or Chantal Ackerman? How many even go to a movie because of a filmmaker's unique reputation rather than because of its advertising?

You probably do, because you're holding this book, but you belong to a minority that, if it can be gleaned from the movie tickets bought and DVDs sold annually, may be as small as 2 percent of the cinema-consuming public. Which, marketwise, makes you and I fish far too small to fry—if we depend on the businesses that run culture to do the cooking. Our tribe seeks out alternatives, not merely for the sake of iconoclasm but because the movies exiled from the deal table are usually exiled for fabulous reasons that are hard to sell: profound truth, formal rigor, idiosyncratic style, personal expression, fresh narrative engineering, outright experimentation, thematic substance, unorthodox (or culturally specific) visual syntax, political radicalism. In fact, this exile is more than just the result of difficult saleability: Modern, post-Reagan-era Hollywood homogeneity is a carefully calibrated, deliberately contrived system of visual syntax that, like television advertising, seeks to inculcate us to its ad-fast rhythms and sensations and thereby, in the longer run, make us less capable of wanting more—more sophistication, ambiguity, originality, depth. One could make the case that filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard, and Luis Bunuel could find sizable and attentive audiences in the 1960s

because our visual-narrative training was at that point nominal, and the Walter Lippmann-Edward Bernays-formulated industrial science devoted to controlling our view of life was still in its adolescent stages. Thus, an entire generation, liberated by postwar affluence and social progressiveness, was allowed to receive movies then in mutable, unpredictable, even confounding ways; the challenge of cinema was still viewed, to an open social mind, as a stimulus.

Today, you must have the resources and instincts of a bounty hunter, prepared to step outside of the common dialogue and shirk your market conditioning. Small battles are won all the time by the true cinephiles every time someone buys a film festival ticket, subscribes to *Film Comment* or *Sight & Sound*, purchases a Criterion Collection DVD, or gets lost online at *Senses of Cinema*. These alternative-seekers are naturally a discontented lot, and this book is theirs, a salute, totem, hornbook, starting gun, and mission statement for the serious cinephile in a world of pulverizing thought control and megaplex homogeneity. At best, the interested reader here will have multiple windows thrown open for them and will be compelled to launch into cultural landscapes they might not have known existed.

The writers included herein were selected first, and the individual subjects were their choice. Underappreciated European giant, brand-new Asian wunderkind, psychotronic mini-master, American undergrounder—the writers made the call. The only guidelines imposed on the critics pertained to their subjects' mortality—they must be alive and at least potentially productive—as well as their subjects' visibility in the English-speaking world's media eye. As in, they should have as little as possible. The filmmakers' work could be distributed in the United States, but only sparsely, or badly, or invisibly. (Several have had no stateside exhibition to speak of, while others have had decades of shoddy or low-rent distribution.) Roughly speaking, if the directors had been profiled in *The New Yorker* or *Vanity Fair* or *Premiere*—welcomed to the machine, so to speak—then they were hardly eligible.

The resulting collection of viewpoints and celebrations is nothing if not whimsical and deeply subjective—being dedicated film lovers, each of the critics had baskets of candidates, and I sense that many final selections, either of new pieces written especially for the book or recently published essays rescued from the periodical abyss, were made out of the impulse to exact justice on an unfair world. But since the process was entirely personal, the book should not be taken as some kind of hierarchal statement—essays on *the best* international directors. The field is too monstrous and too rich for that. Indeed, additional volumes could come out annually, perpetually *in futuro*, without ever crisscrossing the same

terrain twice. In 2006, employing the same parameters, we could've just as easily surveyed the work of Jacques Rivette, Peter Watkins, Abderrahmane Sissako, Wojciech Has, Karoly Makk, Jan Nemeč, Craig Baldwin, Juraj Jakubisko, Claude Faraldo, Artavazd Peleshian, Elia Suleiman, Fred Kelemen, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Miklos Jancso, Alain Resnais, Hur Jin-ho, Stanley Kwan, Soulyemane Cisse, Yvonne Rainer, Jan Jakob Kolski, Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, Bruce Conner, Otar Iosseliani, Shinji Aoyama, Manuela Viegas, Gianluigi Toccafondo, Michael Snow, Alex de la Iglesias, Zeki Demirkubuz, Jem Cohen, Darius Mehrjui, Faouzi Bensaidi, Jean Rouch, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Helke Sander, Alexei German Sr. and Alexei German Jr., Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Fernando Solanas, Hong Sang-soo, Jan Lenica, Yuri Nourstein, Hans-Jurgen Syberberg, Jean Rollin, Lee Chang-dong, Roy Andersson, Ann Hui, Youssef Chahine, Yim Ho, Peter Solan, Lewis Klahr, Nils Malmros, Kazuo Hara, Andrew Kotting, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Nonzee Nimibutr, Pjer Zalica, Goran Paskaljevic, Vera Chytilova, Harun Farocki, Werner Schroeter, Lisandro Alonso, Vitali Kanevsky, Teresa Villaverde, Park Kwang-su, Jang Sun-woo, Marta Meszaros, Wisit Sasanatieng, William Greaves . . . and scores of others.

The vital artists ignored and kept to the distribution-exhibition margins are legion, and if aging cinephiles such as Richard Schickel and the late Susan Sontag have kvetched loudly in the last years about the “death” and “decay” of cinema (as compared to the new-wave heyday of the 1960s), this might very well be because they only saw what the present-day distribution channels would allow them to see. Beyond that, cinema thrives without our attention—indeed, one could argue that success within the American system for any or all of the above-listed directors, or any of the filmmakers written about herein, could spell disaster or at least summon hurdles, for their visions and integrity. Perhaps—but the implicit argument of this book is not taken from the artists' perspective, but from the viewers' only. Filmgoers are the last stop, the lions on the food chain of movie culture; the filmmakers can fend for themselves, and probably will. As devotees, we can only be concerned with why the zebras are so spindly, and the wildebeest so few. And with meaty prey that takes a little more hunting to find and enjoy. To which end the present volume of cinephiliac evangelisms, testaments from the frontier, is pressed upon you by a healthy wedge of the English-speaking world's best film essayists—not, I reaffirm, academics “reading signs” and employing post-Freudian theory that's as useless and enjoyable to digest as ground glass, but film-loving writers unafraid of aesthetics and movie-love and canonical thinking. As such, the book is also something of a paean to movie critics themselves. Lumped into this demographic are festival reporters, devoted

editors, programmers who write and passionate cineastes who may not have regular weekly columns anywhere but who make it a career-and-lifestyle choice to attend the fests, hunt for the DVDs, pay to see the gone-in-a-blink-of-the-eye imports and write for the handful of periodicals that are authentically concerned with cinema.

Generally, professional American film criticism is a beleaguered, betrodnen profession, glutted with illiterates, shysters, and camera hogs, and yet only these obsessives see enough movies to claim with validity any knowledge about the state of the art. Only they report from the ramparts of new film releases without the agendas of marketing. It is the critic's job, performed well or not or not at all, to embrace the visual text in question as a totality—as an expression, a creation, a consummable product, a market agent, a social symptom—but as a totality with intent. That intent is to be viewed, by people, for enjoyment, stimulation, and/or satisfaction, and so the critic is the cultural pointman, the reconnoiterer for his fellow citizens for whom a movie is an experience to be had, enjoyed, contemplated, and argued over, nothing less and often little more. Their responsibilities begin and end in the seat, in the dark, watching, with their readers. Perhaps only 20 percent of them can, in the end, write an interesting sentence, but from that subgroup (substantially represented here) comes our culture's only dependable exegesis on this most mysterious and commerce-corrupted art form. Consider what their absence would mean, and at the same time—since film critics do not, ostensibly, suck at the marketing teat and therefore are a force to be neutered one way or another—how substantially disempowered they've become, in import, currency, and page space, since the wild west of Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, Judith Crist, Parker Tyler, Manny Farber, John Simon, Vincent Canby, et al.

A naturally occurring bugbear that should be addressed in the process is the relative paucity of women filmmakers represented (two out of twenty-three) and women critics engaged (four out of twenty-three). There are several, dovetailing circumstances reflected in this happenstance—hardly a conscious editorial choice—and they should all come as no suprise. On one hand, the international filmmaking community, as well as the community of film writers, remains disproportionately male, due to the typical and familiar nexus of socioeconomic reasons. On the other hand, while insightful film critics are difficult to find in any gender, female filmmakers are hardly scarce, and I would have loved to procure essays about, say, Samira Makhmalbaf, Lucrecia Martel, Kira Muratova, Nadir Mokneche, Keren Yedaya, Barbara Hammer, and Judit Elek, just as I would have loved to include exhortations on dozens of additional artists in general. That said, many other notable women working in the field at

the moment—Agnes Jaoui, Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Lea Pool, Lynne Ramsay, Liv Ullmann, Brigitte Roïan, Suzanne Bier, Allison Anders, Nancy Savoca, Jane Campion, and so on—often do find American distribution at least partially on the strength of their marketable feminism, and, having had a measure of success, wouldn't be quite eligible in any case. There is, perhaps, another book waiting to be assembled on women filmmakers marginalized in American culture.

In fact, many books—and articles and symposiums and DVD entrepreneurialships and art-house programs—could be summoned onto the cultural stage addressing the contemporary cinema that the current American business model keeps us from experiencing. It does seem to be, in the end, largely a matter of economic resistance, and counter-publicizing that which is not easily sellable to stateside filmgoers. Let's hope, then, that I am, or at least could be, wailing to a substantial choir, and that the audience for off-radar cinema might be more of a robust minority than I sense on my darker days. In which case, *Exile Cinema* could serve as a salve for the cineaste's lonesome fury. Not that such ire isn't useful—cultural rebellion can be a sweet thing, and the sooner a national community forms around the idea of rescuing film from the soulless skill of consent manufacture, the better. As a ferocious short film by Canadian filmmaker Guy Maddin, represented here both as subject and author, once cried in exuberance, *kino! Kino! KINO!*

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PART 1

Rockets from East Asia