

The Academy Awards

William Clark

The New American Cinema

John Lewis, ed.
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In four sections: *Movies and Money*, *Cinema and Culture* and lastly *Independents and Independence* this is thirteen essays from thirteen academics. Presumably it had no descending hierarchy in mind, nor were they superstitious.

Funnily enough, the Academy in the old days justified itself as something to be taken seriously by a kind of morality of standards. It was all bound up with Religion. In the UK this dates back to the inception of our oldest schools of learning and religious characters such as Wycliffe and a theocratic approach. The process of evaluation of evidence grew with scientific rationalism to mirror that of the courts: opposing opinion being assayed and the different sides treated with impartiality. At some point the blindfold comes off and the sword of truth (a metaphor borrowed from the New Testament) divides, usually wrongly, but not in such a manner as to call the higher processes (i.e. conveniently God's) into question. But it was all about money really.

Today's experience tells us that we can assume nothing with academic credentials. Many fine people may work there but all manner of creatures end up in colleges and universities, which are magnets for people with no talent just as Children's Homes are magnets for abusers.

Several species of crackpot ideas and foul gibberish pervade the educational institutions. Most people would hold up film theory as harbouring particularly socially and intellectually useless notions with which we can have no faith. What tends now to get put on offer is an unconscious hierarchy of deranged standards as a prop for little more than laughable attempts at self promotion.

Yes good old Money in the form of Box office gross is a common enough determinant—even in the pretend egalitarian world of college professors—of evaluative criteria, and surfaces throughout the book. With the first paragraph of his own contribution, the editor of the collection, Jon Lewis takes the trouble to illustrate (with some crocodile tears) an aspect of film-making which he seems a little shocked by:

"The system stinks. It's fed by greed and ego...[Hollywood has] been changing and always in the same direction, which is more about money and much less about what movies are. I hate it, I hate it. But you can't ignore it. As much as you keep reminding yourself with the mantra, 'it's all about the movies; it's about the movies,' it's about the money.

Joe Roth, Chairman Disney Film Division"

So not all about cuddly little fluffy bunnies then. Lewis' own contribution, in its serious focus on the Corporate junk-bond financed leveraged mergers and acquisition era of the 80s traces roots back to the intrigue surrounding the combination of so-called *Paramount* decision (ostensibly to promote free trade) and the Hollywood blacklist (to restrict filthy pinkos trading). This is all pretty well-trodden ground by now. Cue Ronnie Reagan as the front man for the Screen Actors Guild joining with management to implement the ban against some of its members in the 50s, then cut to a flash forward as he unleashes 'Reaganomics' fronting for much the same crew of gangsters.

With the second section what each author determines to be cultural currency at times stretches into some far-fetched notions of value and relevance. With the third: well in its idealism all our hopes lie.

The wisdom of illustrating his theories by choosing the first *Rambo* movie as the 'locus classicus' of 'The Male Rampage Film' is not clear to me in Fred Pfeil's essay of the same name in the second section. His logic squirms uncomfortably, simply because 'First Blood' doesn't particularly fit the bi-polar thesis he slavishly tries to impose:

"...the mass audience for Hollywood product in the 1970s was offered a choice between two kinds of anti-establishment film: a "left" version, in which the protagonist uncovers an evil conspiracy of power elites and is usually defeated and killed before he can publicize or contest it in any effective way (*Chinatown*, 1974; *The Parallax View*, 1974); and a "right" version, in which the established authorities are so corrupt or impotent that they leave the hero no choice but to wage his own war against the scum who threaten him, his family, and All That Is Decent from below (*Dirty Harry*, 1972; *Walking Tall*, 1973). If so, *Rambo; First Blood* was one of the first movies of the 80s to dream these two sides or cycles together and thus to offer us the sight of a downscale, deauthorized figure going native ...Stallone as canny proto-Indian "savage"..."

The exception does not prove a rule. Later Pfeil takes all the *Rambo* films to be the same thing, yet the fact is the first *Rambo* movie is qualitatively different from the sequels. His theorizing is meaningless. Leaving aside the fact that the hero *does* contest in an effective way and that he has *no* family, *First Blood* (1982) was directed by Ted Kotcheff, with writing credits David Morrell (who wrote the novel) and Michael Kozoll. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) was directed by George P. Cosmatos with writing credits for Kevin Jarre (story) and Sylvester Stallone. *Rambo III* (1988) was directed by our own Peter MacDonald with writing credits Sheldon Lettich, Sylvester Stallone (the source is www.imdb.com).

It would seem to me that Sly cleverly took the brand name (you feel like reminding Pfeil that *Rambo* isn't real) and started writing according to a more commercial logic to fit with the prevailing winds.

All the films bearing the *Rambo* brand are tainted because of old Ronnie again, who happened to mention his admiration for one of the later films and how he would like to adopt some of the character's approach to foreign policy/murdering people. It could be that Reagan 'thought' this one up himself, but it is more likely that his speech writers (and/or campaign managers) were trying to appeal to the bloodlust of their imaginary Joe Six-pack voter. The stupid amount of attention given to it probably diverted media attention away from the litany of crimes being committed by Oliver North and the gang.

The first movie starts on about Agent Orange and how it slowly killed Rambo's black buddy from The Nam, the main character spends most of the time shooting at the Cops and the National Guard and at the end of the movie our tough hero breaks down blubbing about the mind shattering horrors of war—but Pfeil casually places it along side the bally-ho of Reagan's re-election in the mid-80s, saying he will analyse it later; but never gets around to explaining the contradiction in terms of his argument. The sources cited for his line of thought are sparse and clearly not up-to-date. He is just prejudiced against *Rambo*—first he feigns intellectual detachment then promises intelligent analysis, later just referring to the film as 'obnoxious' (p 172).

In the early 80s when a spate of violent action adventures were successfully mass-marketed they were ignored by academia who criticised their audience as trash watching gratuitous trash which would numb their minds and make them violent.



Eventually feeling left out and never ones to miss out on self-indulgence, gratuitous trash suddenly became suitable for pseudo-intellectualisation and we had all these bores going on about semiotics in *Terminator* and feminist theory in *Alien 2*.

On the more comfortable subject of *Die Hard* Pfeil starts to provide us with a Greimasian rectangle (a wee diagram). Presumably you print it out on acetate and hang it over the screen while you're watching the movie. We'll leave him to it.

But the premium grade film theory gibberish is purveyed by Tania Modleski. Her essay "a Rose Is a Rose?" demolishes the terms *surely* and *purely* in its opening line:

"If there ever was a purely masculine genre, it is surely the war film."

So what about the brilliance of Larissa Shepitko's "The Ascent." Modleski's first footnote states that she is for hire while boasting about some huge endowment she has just received. Now we know what she is we can haggle about the price.

To make things surely and purely preposterous the article is predicated on a quote from Gilbert Adair which she thinks is a 'thoughtful critique' (here's that *surely* again):

"It is surely time that film-makers learned that the meticulous detailed aping of an atrocity is an atrocity; that the hyper-realistic depiction of an obscenity cannot avoid being contaminated with that obscenity; and that the unmediated representation of violence constitutes in itself an act of violence against the spectator."

Yes the map is the territory. Modleski then goes on to do what she and Gilbert find so distasteful in others—meticulous detailed aping. Let me commit an act of violence by quoting her:

"Thus, since "being there" has so far been out of the question for women (who are prohibited from combat), their authority on any issue related to war is discredited from the outset, and insofar as they may be inclined to question or oppose war (except in and on the terms granted them by men), they find themselves consigned to the ranks of the always already defeated."

This type of perversity enhances the victimisation of women and she is factually wrong on a prohibition against women being in combat. Pathetically so, although the article is about 'Vietnam films' it escapes her notice that many women fought and died in the NVA; similarly Russian armed forces contained women—indeed perhaps the most symbolic act of World War 2 was the planting of the Soviet flag on the Reichstag building: an act bravely completed by a female Soviet soldier.

To Modleski all 'Vietnam films' are intrinsically evil. Speaking of Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*:

“Here we see an example of the commonplace phenomenon in Vietnam films in which exploited people (in this instance, the prostitutes) are further exploited by the films themselves for the symbolic value that they hold for the hero. Thus do the films perpetuate the social and cultural insensitivity that led to America’s involvement in the war and the atrocities committed there.”

Imagine believing that someone acting the part of a prostitute in a film *is the same* as a human catastrophe on the scale of the Vietnam war.

Modleski’s pathetic revisions, with a slender grasp of reality are of no use to anyone: male, female or somewhere in between. On this evidence she is only capable of trying to infect other minds with imprecise thought delivered with the insouciant arrogance of someone who has been getting away with it for too long.

Christopher Sharrett’s analysis of the reactionary responses to Stone’s *JFK* contains stimulating, well-researched material expressing legitimate concern with America’s ‘Deep Politics’—the clandestine institutional political culture:

“Garrison’s investigation was roundly condemned not for legal impropriety, but for its assertions about the legitimacy of the state. Perhaps more important, this investigation (and those of many independent researchers) ultimately forces us into a reassessment of some commonly and blithely held assumptions about the political-economic order. Students of this matter cannot help but intuit John Dewey’s assertion that government is but the shadow cast by business, thus assassinations, coups, and other forms of political violence flow from economic assumptions. Garrison’s later writing placed the JFK assassination within the context of the CIA support of coups in Guatemala, Iran, Chile, the Congo, and elsewhere; this work, largely unknown to Stone’s audience, stands with the most important progressive indictments of the real dynamics of contemporary state power as it serves specific class interests. Stone’s adaptation of Garrison’s work

prompted media commentators to suggest that further conspiracy talk might push a nation already suffering a profound legitimation crisis into catastrophe.”

Sharrett was one of the consultants to the US Congress’ House select Committee on assassinations and is a much needed saner voice than some of the psychobabble. It is a fair analysis of Stone’s work. It frees and opens up the implications—more is known now about the reality of the US political culture and covert alliances of the early 60s—of the dogged persistence of investigative journalists. That this should find an expression in mass audience movies was too much for the majority of commentators working for big business/the US press. And it is also refreshing to see someone challenge the commonplace American waking dream that the crimes associated with state power are so huge and entrenched that they can only be taken as normality.

“...research shows that Shaw was far more than an international businessman giving the odd tip to the CIA, nor was he merely the shadowy protector, a la Monks in *Oliver Twist*, observing the Ferrie/Banister gang of young anticommunist, anti-civil rights provocateurs, which is the main role that the film ascribes to him. Cumulative study, including work done by the Italian and Canadian media, suggests that Shaw worked for U.S. intelligence since his service on the staff of General Charles Thrasher, deputy commander of the Western theater of operations during World War II. There is compelling evidence that Thrasher and Shaw were among the U.S. army officers and other officials responsible for constructing Operation Paperclip, which created the “rat lines” central to the migration of Nazi military brass, intelligence officials, and scientists, including Reinhard Gehlen, who orchestrated the “Gehlen Org,” a powerful arm of Western intelligence within the eastern Bloc during the post war years; Klaus Barbie, the notorious Butcher of Lyon; and Walter Dornberger and Wernher von Braun, the scientists who pioneered the V-2 “buzz bomb” ballistic missile at Peenemunde (murdering many slave laborers at the



Nordhausen concentration camp in the process) and became central to the construction of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The “rat lines” project is chronicled in documentary filmmaker Marcel Ophuls’s *Hotel Terminus* (1988), among other sources. During these operations, general Thrasher was simultaneously responsible for the gratuitous murder of ordinary German POWs (mainly old men and boys) while their officers actually became part of the U.S. state apparatus.”

The title of the collection is now something of an anachronism. I wonder if the 20th century will be romantically thought of as being dominated by celluloid film which is now a medium no longer required. What effect this will have on independent film makers, distribution cartels and the whole junket marketing culture remains to be seen. The last few screenings I have been to have been digital. Will people still want to meet in the dark and watch a projection in complexes whose screens are getting smaller as those at home get bigger?