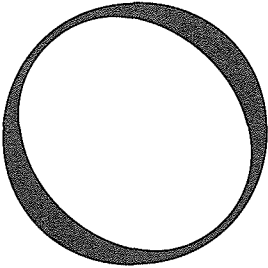


Cinema Paradiso

American blockbusters have conquered the world, yet in a strange way the culture of film has become less international than ever before. A noted film critic recounts the story of the movies' rise after the turn of the century, their transformation into an exhilarating international art form, and their recent decline into high-grossing irrelevance.

by Richard Schickel

f the several deeply depressing moments during this year's Academy Awards broadcast, none was more so than the one in which Roberto Benigni almost kicked Steven Spielberg in the head as he clambered over a row of seats to claim his best actor's prize. It wasn't just that Benigni had won for a genuinely bad performance—a wretched imitation of the inimitable Chaplin. Or that the film in which he had given it, *Life Is Beautiful*, had already won the best foreign language film award for its heedless travesty of the century's central tragedy, the Holocaust. Or even that his well-calculated representation of childish glee at his good fortune ill became a man who has not only survived but prospered in the notoriously cutthroat Italian film industry.

No, it was something else. This climax to the worldwide triumph of *Life Is Beautiful* says something deeply disturbing about the state of international cinema, about how it has changed, in little more than a few decades, from a realm dominated by the likes of Bergman and Fellini, Kurosawa and Truffaut—try to imagine one of them behaving like a ninny upon winning an Oscar—to one dominated by purveyors of feel-good entertainments that don't merely parody the values of their historical betters but, in cases like Benigni's, mercilessly crush them.



A detail from Robert Cottingham's Art (1992)

In seeking to place blame for the ascendancy of such lightweights, it is tempting to look for some failure of nerve or sensibility, not only in the United States but everywhere else. But the paradoxical, even perverse, truth is that we have only ourselves to blame, for it is the resounding (and unprecedented) success of American films in the international marketplace that has created the conditions in which Benigni (and a few others like him) have flourished.

Some simple statistics illustrate the point: In the 1990s, the American share of European box-office returns has grown from about 50 percent to more than 70 percent. Even in France, which currently has the continent's most competitive movie industry, close to 60 percent of the films released are American in origin. These figures are duplicated everywhere around the world.

When an industry representing a single nation, most especially a cultural industry, achieves market penetration of that sort, it causes alarm. Most obviously, in this case, it frightens people who make movies outside the United States as they face what appears to them, and is in fact, nearly insurmountable competition. It also concerns the self-appointed, but highly vocal, guardians of national cultural purity everywhere, especially in those countries, such as France, that take particular pride in the importance and singularity of their contributions to world civilization. You needed only to

glance at the French press during the final round of the talks surrounding the creation of the World Trade Organization during the early 1990s—the outrage that arose over the way American movies (and television and popular music) were dominating the local market, the passionate pleas for some enhanced defenses against this invasion—to gauge the fear and loathing stirred by our “cultural imperialism.”

Those critics are objecting to something that most American critics are also damning—the rise of what the *Economist* recently called “the generic blockbuster,” the kind of film that was originally made for brain-damaged American teenagers, but which, it was soon discovered, was going down very well overseas. Some trace the blockbuster’s genesis to *Jaws* in 1975, others to *Star Wars* in 1977, but that’s unimportant. What is important is that these films, as the magazine also observed, “are driven by special effects that can be appreciated by people with minimal grasp of English rather than by dialogue and plot. They eschew fine-grained cultural observation for generic subjects that anybody can identify with, regardless of national origin.” All through the postwar period, American producers had contented themselves with making about 30 percent of their grosses abroad. Now, pushed by all those *Terminators* and *Lethal Weapons*—not to mention subverbal grossout comedies such as *There’s Something about Mary*, which translate with equal immediacy overseas—that figure began to creep up to 50 percent. In many cases it was more than that; there are plenty of films that have doubled, tripled, even quadrupled their domestic grosses overseas.

In the United States today, some 66 percent of all movie tickets are sold to just 18 percent of the potential audience, to young people aged 15 to 24. Somewhat less than 30 million admissions are sold every week, mostly to that crowd, but that is just one-third of the tickets that were sold in this country in the late 1940s, when the general population was some 120 million less than it is now.

What this means is that, were it not for their use as a place for young people to go on dates, the movies today would not be mass entertainment at all. They would be a minority pleasure—something like the opera or symphony or ballet—possibly requiring some sort of subsidy to survive, but surely existing on the money they make from what are still rather quaintly called the ancillary markets, such as television licensing and home video sales. Indeed, for the last several years this has been the source of most of their domestic profits. In this adolescent-dominated climate, it is unsurprising that when a studio makes a serious but by no means esoteric movie—something like *L.A. Confidential* or

>RICHARD SCHICKEL is the movie reviewer for *Time* magazine. A collection of his essays, *Matinee Idylls: Reflections on the Movies*, will be published by Ivan R. Dee in the fall. A version of this essay was presented at a 1998 Wilson Center conference, “Popular Culture: America and the World.” Copyright © 1999 by Richard Schickel.

Without Limits—it does not understand how to market the film, and it almost inevitably fails. There is, of course, “indieprod,” a realm where filmmakers such as Stanley Tucci (*Big Night*), Bryan Singer (*The Usual Suspects*), and Kevin Smith (*Clerks*) can begin their careers on low budgets but with considerable freedom. But they often have trouble moving up to big-studio production, where the rough edges of their work are almost invariably worn down to conform to the mass-market template.

As for foreign filmmakers, what’s left to them, if they hope for substantial profits, is occasional access to a market now largely neglected by U.S. producers, what might be called the market for mature geniality, sweet-spirited, rose-hued movies that aren’t about anything very much, but which can, about once a year, get the older folks out of the house to attend a movie in a theater, just like they did in the good old days. Prior to *Life Is Beautiful*, the breakout hits in this category were *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and *The Full Monty*, each in its way an agreeable enough film, but none of them in danger of being confused with *The 400 Blows* or *Breathless* or *8½*.

I’m naturally suspicious of nostalgia. It’s the emotion that makes us old before our time and, often enough, stupid beyond belief. But I do think that there was a brief historical moment, beginning sometime in the 1950s and ending sometime in the 1970s, the passing of which all of us who value the unique expressive capacity of film must mourn. It was a period when the balance of trade with America tipped a little bit more favorably to foreign filmmakers. More important, it was a period when the intellectual balance in this country swung decisively toward the foreign film, which was good for its producers’ bank accounts but even better for our souls.

In this time, films coming into the United States from France and Italy and Sweden and Japan and Spain and India and Britain utterly dominated the conversation among critics and the knowing audience, including young filmmakers looking for new ways of expressing themselves. Everyone could see that the most basic grammar of film was being expanded in these offerings, and with it the range of subjects and ideas (which included the idea of film itself) that movies could address.

“Cinephilia,” Susan Sontag calls this spirit in a recent article lamenting the decline of the movies, both as popular and high art. The term, she says, reflects “a conviction that cinema was an art unlike any other: quintessentially modern, distinctively accessible; poetic and mysterious and erotic and moral—all at the same time.” It was, as she says, a religion, a crusade, and a worldview. It was also a way that culturally serious members of my generation, and those who immediately followed (including such important, and diverse, filmmakers as Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, and Steven Spielberg) defined themselves, set themselves apart from the somewhat cinephobic intellectual and artistic communities that preceded them.

Since some of our enthusiasm for the medium was based on our first encounters with the great works of the past, our passion partook, too, of a

renaissance spirit, with this difference: most people living through renaissances are not aware of their good fortune, while this one was clearly visible to those of us reveling in its excitements. It seemed especially glorious, perhaps, because American movies up to that time were in such a cautious phase, with the romantic elegance of the high silent era, the heedless verve of the talkies' first decade, and the dark mordancy of the early postwar years' *film noir* lost to Cinemascope and 1950s blandness and banality.

This renaissance was hard won. And it is, I think, useful to understand something of the historical conditions that created it. We must begin by acknowledging that in the industry's infancy the international playing field was quite level. Indeed, I was surprised to learn from Victoria de Grazia's very thorough 1989 essay on the American challenge to European cinema in the *Journal of Modern History* that in some of the years prior to World War I, the French actually produced and exported more films than Americans did, with the Italians not too far behind. It is not hard to imagine why this free cinematic trade worked so well.

In those days, films circulated more or less anonymously. They didn't carry credits, so audiences could not recognize their country of origin by the director's name or even by the names of their leading players. And, remember, these were silent films, so language was not a giveaway either. Translate the intertitles into the local idiom, and unless some famous landmark appeared in a shot, it was nearly impossible to tell where a picture was made.

It seems that for a while no one cared. It was the miracle of moving images that people cared about—especially when they were deployed in the service of gripping stories and spectacle. Early in this century's second decade, Europeans pioneered the feature film while Americans hesitated. Adolph Zukor, by importing a three-reel hand-colored *Passion Play*, a 1910 French adaptation of a German work, and by snapping up two years later the American rights to Sarah Bernhardt's somewhat longer *Queen Elizabeth*, proved that Americans could and would sit still for movies of substantial duration. We know, too, that D. W. Griffith was inspired to make *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915 by the example of *Quo Vadis?* and other Italian spectacles. It is certainly possible to imagine that if great and terrible events had not intervened, the film industries of the United States and the major European nations might have retained rough economic parity for a long time, though the sheer size of its domestic market would eventually have given America a clear economic advantage.

But World War I virtually shut down production in the European nations, and by the time it was over the American industry had, in effect, reinvented itself, creating a model that Europe could not hope to duplicate. Americans had developed the star system, built on the celebrity of Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and their like, their huge salaries more than justified by the stability their reliable drawing power brought to a notoriously unstable business. It turned out, of course, that

their iconic qualities were completely translatable in every corner of the globe—indeed, required no translation.

Almost everything I'm saying about the formative years of the motion picture industry can be encapsulated by the incident that serves as the prologue to *Movies and Money* (1998), an excellent economic history of the medium by producer David Puttnam and Neil Watson. The place is Moscow. The time is Christmas Eve 1925. Two films open that night. One is Sergei Eisenstein's national epic, *The Battleship Potemkin*. The other is an epic of quite a different sort—maybe we should call it an international epic—Douglas Fairbanks's *Robin Hood*. Both receive excellent reviews. But only one of them has what we have since learned to call “legs.” Eisenstein's film plays for a few weeks to sparse crowds in a dozen theaters, then is withdrawn. Fairbanks's movie plays for months to packed houses.

Both films have been mounted on a no-expense-spared basis. It might even be argued that the Russian movie has certain advantages over its competitor, in that it is by a native son and takes up a recent event of shaping significance in the lives of his compatriots in a manner so electrifying that it would influence directors around the world for decades to come. The Fairbanks film, by contrast, treats of a time, a place, and a myth remote from the Russian audience, and though it does so with great élan, no one argued then, and no one argues now, that it is a milestone in world cinematic history—though I must say, faced today with the choice confronting Muscovites 74 years ago, I think I'd opt for *Robin Hood*, too. Much more fun.

But *Robin Hood* had a great star at its center, a man of indefatigable charm and tireless energy. Moreover, even though he had cast himself up in Merrie Olde England, there was something distinctly, attractively American about Fairbanks. Here, as always, his character was populist, cheekily antielitist, genially subversive of authority, smart without being ideological or intellectual; and this movie, like all his movies, was romantic, dashing, humorous, optimistic, luxurious—and full of thrilling stunts that, like today's special effects, a lot of people wanted to see more than once to try to figure out how they were done.

Did Fairbanks and the makers of *Robin Hood* and other American filmmakers of the day understand, before their international receipts told them so, how universal the attitudes and aspirations projected in their films were? Of course not. When Fairbanks and his new bride, Mary Pickford, took a wedding trip to Europe in 1920, they were astonished at the riotous crowds that greeted them, even in staid London and Oslo.

Did their successors who presided over the classic and economically all-powerful Hollywood of the interwar years fully comprehend the breadth of their films' reach? Yes, absolutely. They were proud of the way their movies represented American values overseas. Did they understand the depth of their influence on foreign audiences and calculate ways of enhancing that influence? The answer to that has to be no. Their foreign takings were eco-

nomically significant to the American moguls, about 20 percent of their grosses, but not overwhelmingly so. On the whole, however, the moguls were fiercely ethnocentric and, in any case, had trouble enough keeping abreast of the domestic audience's mood swings. It is probably fair to say that they had no idea of how their movies were working on anyone, anywhere, anytime, that they had no sense of how that curious blend of reality and fantasy which is the American movie was, over time, reordering everyone's way of apprehending the world.

Finally, did the Americans have any intention of driving their European competitors out of business? I think not. Driving them to the wall was good enough for the moguls. By this I mean—and again I rely on de Grazia—they sought every advantage they could in their foreign trade.

I don't think we can entirely blame Hollywood for acting as it did in these years. It was, in effect, fighting fire with fire. From the 1920s onward, almost every European country with a substantial film industry tried to protect it with government subsidies, tariffs, and quotas. Critics pitched in by disparaging imported images. These defenses were feeble, and have often been deplored by economists and others. For selfish reasons, I disagree—not with their general principle, but with its application in this case. These subsidies and protections have, over many decades, proved vital to the survival of film industries that were essentially unable to defend themselves solely with their own resources. They were therefore vital to the production of many of world cinema's most influential and enduring masterpieces.

These policies had several downsides, notably the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of really bad movies made to satisfy protectionist laws ("quota quickies") or to sop up subsidies. We in America never saw these films, and most people in their countries of origin avoided them as well. The alternative strategy of trying to compete in the world mass market by imitating American movies produced films that were as a rule greeted with contempt everywhere. (A few



The Battleship Potemkin (1925)

notable exceptions included some of the French *films noirs* of the 1950s and, from Italy, the best spaghetti westerns of the 1960s, which revitalized the form.)

The largest successes of the European industries—the films that exerted an influence on filmmakers and cineastes the world over—came when they did what was most natural to them, which was to behave like an opera company or some other traditional producing arts organization, encouraging individual film artists to work in the old-fashioned way, expressing personal visions as they had been shaped by the national cultures in which these artists had been born and raised. These films, many of them landmarks of world film history, could not and would not have been made without some sort of official subvention.

German expressionism, the epic cinema of the Soviet Union, the romantic humanism of the French—all of these movements attracted a profitable minority audience internationally. More important, they exerted an influence on American filmmakers. Serious directors studied them and occasionally borrowed techniques from them. King Vidor, the greatest of American silent filmmakers, openly acknowledged the example set for him by Eisenstein and the other great Russians, and the influence of German expressionism on his sensibility is highly visible in his 1928 effort, *The Crowd*. In the long run, though, the largest effect European films had on American directors was the example of authorship they offered. Well before the auteur theory was promulgated, many American moviemakers learned to envy the relative autonomy of their leading foreign counterparts, their ability to assert openly their particular ways of seeing on the screen. The



Robin Hood (1922)

European directors were able to win this freedom because the houses in which they worked were so rickety that there were no domineering house styles they had to overcome. In time, when the power of the American studios declined, American directors would assert their own claim to the right of authorship the Europeans had established.

Mainly, however, in the years between the wars, the European industry functioned as a sort of farm system for Hollywood. The way it worked was caught rather nicely by Ralph Richardson. In 1938, as he and Laurence Olivier toiled in *Q Planes*, one of those hopeless, though not entirely unamusing, English attempts to compete with the Yanks, Olivier happened to mention on the set one day that he was entertaining an offer from Samuel Goldwyn to appear in *Wuthering Heights*. What should he do, he asked his best acting friend. To which Richardson replied: "Hollywood? Yes. Bit of fame. Good."

In other words, one did things like *Q Planes* in part because they helped keep your presence alive on screen, fostering the hope that the Americans would eventually take notice, or perhaps take pity, and project it onto more and larger screens. *Wuthering Heights*, of course, did exactly that for Olivier, bringing him more than just a bit of fame. It brought him the worldwide recognition, the commercial clout, that made his Shakespeare films possible, gave him the power to undertake whatever stage roles he desired, and, finally, the prestige that was vital to the founding of England's national theater.

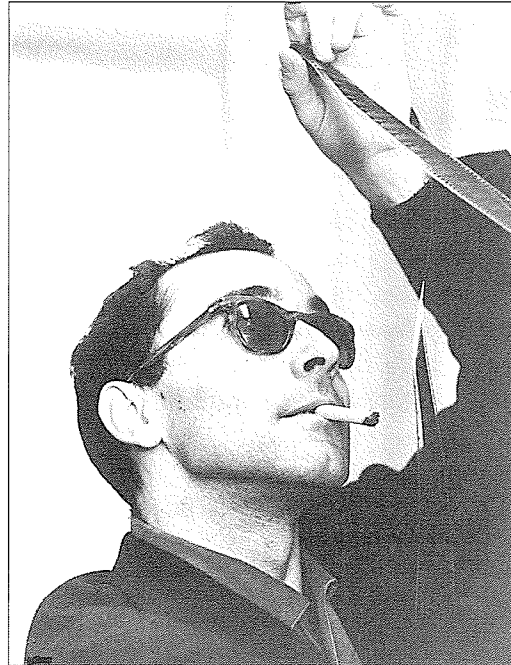
As with Olivier, so with dozens of other great stars and directors of the two decades between the wars. Having established themselves in their native lands, they were either swept up by offers from Hollywood that they couldn't refuse or, once Hitler came to power, fled there with at least some hope that their reputations had preceded them. Not all of them succeeded as Olivier did. But protectionism did at least permit the likes of Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, and Jean Renoir to develop their talents and their international renown more or less coherently in familiar, emotionally and artistically sustaining surroundings.

World War II did not have quite the same effect on worldwide film production that the first great war did. Fragile though they were, the European industries were too large simply to be shut down for the duration. In any case, the Nazis were eager to create what amounted to a European cinematic union, relying in particular on their Italian allies and the conquered French to help them supply theaters everywhere they ruled. Joseph Goebbels, the German propaganda minister, particularly loved the Hollywood manner and encouraged the production of slick escapist fare. It's eerie to see how closely many of the films made under Goebbels's aegis match the peppy, romantically patriotic mood of so many American movies of that time. To the mass media, all wars are alike—no matter which side they enlist with.

With the end of the war, a flood of pent-up creative energy was sudden-

ly released in film communities everywhere. One could see it most immediately in Italy, where filmmakers released from bondage to the fascist state and its frothy “white telephone” movies startled us with a neorealism (*Open City*, *The Bicycle Thief*) that sometimes shaded over into something like magical realism (*Miracle in Milan*). Not since the very earliest days of cinema had directors used the streets for their settings, the lives of ordinary people for their subjects, with this intensity. It struck people with revelatory force, and opened us up to other kinds of exoticism. Within the first post-war decade of film we would confront the violence of Kurosawa’s medieval Japan, the dour lusts of Bergman’s Sweden, the social confusions of Ray’s India. Meanwhile, in Paris, around the office of the film magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the New Wave was beginning to form.

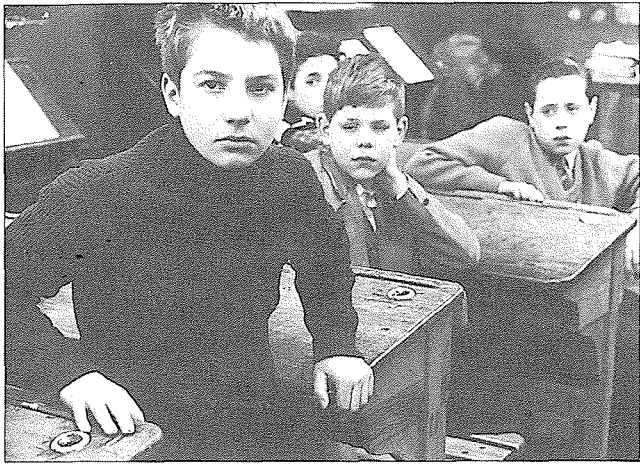
We need to pause over that for a moment, for this is where “cinephilia” found its voice and its theoretical foundation. Curiously, the first thing to animate the young cinephiles (most of whom would soon be cineastes) at *Cahiers* was the release in



French director Jean-Luc Godard

France of all the American movies that they had been denied by the war. This obviously represented something like unfair competition. But what did that matter to François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer? This flood of film struck them with an energizing force that these pictures could not have achieved had they appeared over several years in a routine release pattern. They drank in the work of directors such as Hitchcock, Howard Hawks, and Raoul Walsh, and many others who had been dismissed as mere entertainers in the United States, and their enthusiastic commentaries would eventually prove instrumental in rescuing the reputations of these artists. Moreover, the French cinephiles’ openness to all kinds of cinematic experience set a critical example for much of the world.

More important, the French directors began contemplating nothing less than a revolutionary reform of French cinema. They didn’t necessarily want it to imitate American styles and subject matter (though the cross-references in films they eventually made are countless), but rather to embrace



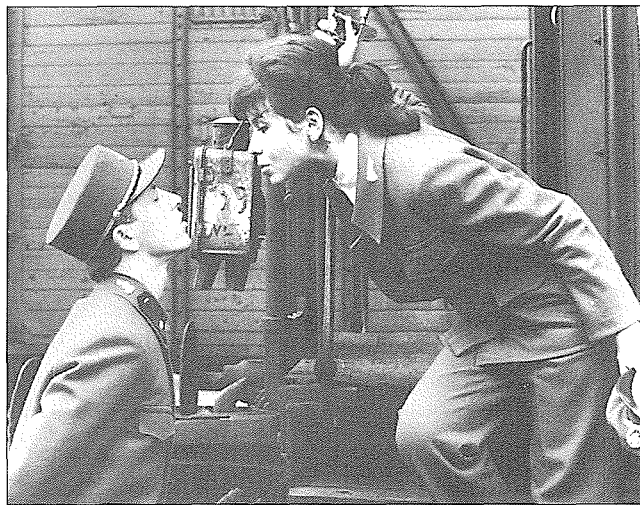
The 400 Blows (1958)

its populist spirit. French movies, in their view, were too devoted to literary subject matter, stiffened with bourgeois cultural aspirations. *Le cinéma de papa*, they called it. They found a model to inform their work in their cinema's prewar history, in the work of Jean Renoir. More significantly, their atti-

tudes—and by the mid-1950s, their films—both shaped and reflected the way all of us began to approach movies. I don't know if I had heard of *Cahiers du Cinéma* in those days, but what it stood for was somehow seeping into American movie culture, and rising up out of it as well. Local issues aside, the Parisian cinephiles were beginning to articulate ideas and attitudes that were less coherently held by the first postwar generation the world over.

When I left college in 1956 and moved to New York, some of my cinematic provincialism had already been rubbed off me. I had endured the long lines that typically surrounded the one theater in Madison, Wisconsin, that played the new foreign films. I had faithfully attended the film series at the student union that grounded us in the classics of world cinema, everything from *Intolerance* to *Rules of the Game*. I had helped found the university's first film society, which funded itself largely through slightly scandalous means, such as receipts from screenings of Leni Reifenstahl's *Olympiad* and, of course, *Ecstasy*, since the sight of a famous woman naked was not yet the routine guilty pleasure it has become.

Despite all my sophistication, I was not entirely prepared for the riches I found in New York. There were three theaters within walking distance of my



Closely Watched Trains (1966)

Greenwich Village apartment playing both new and old foreign films almost exclusively, with plenty more doing the same thing just a subway ride away. I'm not going to claim that we were a generation of aesthetes. Going to these movies in those days was, in some sense, morally bracing, a complex pleasure rather than a simple one like seeing an American film. But struggling to comprehend exotic cultures, trying to catch the beat of new filmic rhythms, soberly talking all this through, earnestly weighing, judging, opining, was also a wonderfully heady experience. If you will forgive the oxymoron, we felt part of a democratically self-selected elite that was in some way reshaping the culture.

And, you know what? We were. In the period between 1950 and the early 1970s, the number of theaters playing "art" films in the United States rose from 100 to more than 700. By 1958, the number of films imported to the United States actually exceeded the number produced domestically, a situation that would persist for another decade. By



Throne of Blood (1957)

1964, Hollywood, which had troubles that far exceeded those posed by foreign competition (the loss of its theater chains to antitrust action, the loss of its mass audience to television, the loss of corporate autonomy to independent, star-driven production), was asking Congress to do what governments abroad had done for their movie producers: grant subsidies. By 1974, Hollywood's hometown paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, was calling for a tariff to protect American producers against imported films.

I didn't know or care about any of this at the time. Neither did anyone else I knew. We continued to go to American movies, of course, despite the fact that a hugely creative period—the era of *film noir*, of socially conscious realism, of often mordant social criticism—was largely cut off by the introduction of CinemaScope in 1953 and its demand for elephantine spectacle. But we continued to hope for the best from American movies, and were sometimes rewarded by something like *The Sweet Smell of Success*, which appeared in 1957. I want to stress that we were not, most of us, self-consciously elitist. I thought then, and I think now, that a truly healthy movie culture is one in which some kind of balance is maintained between populism, which is where the roots of the medium are, and elitism, which is where its artistic future is usually predict-

ed. It's when people like Godard start saying things like "films are made for one or maybe two people" that we are in the deepest imaginable trouble.

The films we cinephiles talked about most earnestly, most excitedly, through the late 1950s and well into the 1970s admittedly were not great crowd pleasers: *The 400 Blows* and *Breathless* and *Jules and Jim* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Also *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*. Also *Rashomon* and *Throne of Blood*. Also *La Dolce Vita* and *8½* and *L'Avventura*. Also *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *Billy Liar* and *Room at the Top*. And, eventually, *Loves of a Blonde* and *Closely Watched Trains*.

But what a miraculous list that is! What a range of styles and subject matter it encompasses! How easily it could be extended into the hundreds. And, I cannot resist adding, how many of these films—notably those created by the New Wave, otherwise so rebellious against tradition—owed their existence to state subsidies and protections. Especially in the later years of this period, it's also appropriate to observe that many of our most acclaimed imports owed their existence to investments by major American studios, which now judged that those 700 art houses constituted a real market.

Not that the health of this market was solely dependent on the studios. There was in those days a small army of knowledgeable independent distributors, many of whom had been in the import trade for years, many of whom established relationships with foreign film artists that extended faithfully over many years, much as book publishers once maintained long-term relationships with their authors. These relationships were imitated by audiences. I mean, we went to "the new Fellini" or "the new Bergman," whatever our friends or the critics might have said about them. It was one of the obligations we owed to the art.

Journalism, too, began to feel that obligation. As Hollywood films approached the nadir of their popularity in the late 1960s, magazines and newspapers began, ironically, to expand and upgrade their coverage of movies. There was a feeling that old-line critics such as Bosley Crowther, for several decades the *New York Times's* lead reviewer, were just not coping with the Godardian jump cut, that younger, more flexible sensibilities were required.

I was one of those sensibilities, hired by *Life*, which then had the largest weekly circulation in America, to review pretty much whatever I cared to in its pages. I believed, based on my own formative moviegoing experiences, that such a creature as "the common viewer," kin to Virginia Woolf's "common reader," existed, and that it was my job to write for that by-no-means mythical creature. He or she was, I imagined, someone very much like me, possessed of a good general knowledge of the movies, conversant with their history and with what was going on with them now, not merely in Hollywood, but everywhere. I assumed that this knowledge was not specialized, that it coexisted with a similar knowledge of literature and

(according to taste) some of the other arts. I also assumed that we shared a certain enlightened, liberal-ish turn of mind in matters political, psychological, and sociological. Oh, all right, call us middlebrows.

But call us also a community—a community capable of sustaining, through our interest, coherent artistic careers for the great filmmakers of the world. That community began to break up sometime in the 1970s. The reasons for this are many, but perhaps the most important is that Hollywood recovered from its long swoon. It was, in part, reclaiming our interest with movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (which owed much to the New Wave), *The Godfather* pictures, and *Chinatown*. But several other, bigger things changed the commercial equation for Hollywood. The most important was that it had by this time learned to stop worrying and love television. Producing for it and licensing films to it for extraordinary fees, the studios found the economic stability they had been seeking since the loss of their theater chains. The opening of the home video market in the 1980s iced that cake. And the steady rise in the American studios' foreign grosses placed the candles on it.

The number of screens playing imports here is now perhaps two percent of the total. “We are kept on reservations, like the Cherokee or the Navajo,” the French director Bertrand Tavernier said not long ago. Occasionally, foreign films of the non-feel-good sort escape the reservation, but only if they can be publicized as shocking (like *Trainspotting*) or if they raise political issues that stir journalistic interest (like films from mainland China, which



The Seventh Seal (1957)

must overcome totalitarian restraints to reach the West).

But, on the whole, foreign “product” fails here and does less well than it once did at home. We are witnessing everywhere the ultimate triumph of Neal Gabler’s Republic of Entertainment. Or should we call it, finally, by its rightful name: The Tyranny of Entertainment?

It was inevitable, of course, that the revered figures of the worldwide cinematic renaissance that began in the 1950s should age, fall ill, retire, and die. It was inevitable that some of them, before their time, should succumb to distractions, as Godard did. That’s not the problem. The problem is that sometime about a quarter of a century ago it became impossible for their would-be successors to build the kind of coherent careers these artists once enjoyed. Susan Sontag justifiably wonders if the likes of Krzysztof Zanussi, Theo Angelopoulos, Béla Tarr, and Aleksandr Sokurov—all contemporary directors working at a level that once would have made them names to be reckoned with in the international film world—can persist, let alone prosper, in today’s film world. No one anywhere can conveniently see their work, save by haunting the film festivals. Only a very few viewers can develop an intelligent sense of these directors’ themes, their development as artists. And who is left for them to talk to?

They are caught up, as we all are, in a machine that is best described as a viciously reciprocating engine. Without major artistic figures around which its interests may coalesce, the old cinephile community becomes distracted, wanders off. Without such a community to address, without the faithful audience it once promised, serious filmmakers cannot build steadily functioning careers, steadily developing bodies of work. Certainly the most important of all artists’ rights—the right to fail—is denied them. Meanwhile, the independent film distributors who are vital to the health of the cinephile community falter and fail. Journalism loses interest—just try to get substantial space for an essay on a serious, subtitled movie today—and devotes itself more and more to industry economic gossip about last week’s grosses, next week’s executive shuffle. In the film schools, in the college community in general, there is no interest in the movie past, which for most students today seems to begin and end with *Star Wars*. In short, there is nothing resembling the film culture as we once knew it.

And if, by chance, *Star Wars* did not exist and someone set out to make it today, that person would not know, as George Lucas did, to look to Kurosawa’s *Hidden Fortress* for ideas and inspiration. Nor would that person help subsidize one of the Japanese master’s late works, *Kagemusha*, as Lucas and Martin Scorsese did out of gratitude and lifelong admiration.

Perhaps, out of generational loyalty, I sentimentalize the lost cinematic community of my formative years. Possibly, in offering these generalizations, I exaggerate the consequences of its demise. Yet, it seems to me that the dismal figures don’t profoundly lie. And that the evidence of decline, of irrecoverable loss, is placed before us every week on the screen. In what we see. In what we no longer see.