RAGGED GLORY SUMMER IN THE 70s

WHY DO WE WATCH—AND REWATCH—OLD MOVIES? (AND IF WE DON’T, WHY SHOULD WE?)

The first and most obvious answer is simply to indulge the pleasure of nostalgia. Times, people, places change, but the movies capture an indelible snapshot of their times. And if we weren’t around back then, Cinema remains our best time machine.

Then there’s this: even if the movies don’t change, we do. A work of art we encounter in our 20s will speak to us differently in our 40s and 50s simply because our life experience informs what we are ready to see, hear, and comprehend. And part of that new perspective is bound up in our experience of time. And if we weren’t around back then, cinema remains our best time machine.

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Remarkably, the movies of the era express this national malaise with uncommon acuity. If we date the rise of Hollywood as the epicentre of western cinema to the 1920s, then the 70s becomes the midpoint in the development of American cinema. Like America, the Hollywood system had broken down at the end of the 60s. The kind of movies that had worked to sustain the studios for decades weren’t connecting any more. In a panic, and bowled over by the runaway hit Easy Rider, the industry turned over the keys to a younger generation, and “New Hollywood” was born.

These were the Movie Brats, kids who had grown up watching films obsessively, who had even been to film school, and who had been versed in French auteurism: the director as author. What followed was an unprecedented—and unique—period of artistic freedom. Filmmakers like Francis Coppola, Martin Scorsese, William Friedkin and Robert Altman were able to make challenging, radical, potent films aimed at an intelligent, curious adult audience.

Granted, this was still predominantly a (white) boys’ club. With only a handful of exceptions, women were still shut out, like Kay (Diane Keaton) at the end of The Godfather. Nevertheless, for all its blind spots, the New Hollywood produced a breathtaking range of masterly movies, many of them interrogating the foundational cultural touchstones old Hollywood propagated. Revisionist westerns (Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid; McCabe & Mrs Miller), neo-noir detective thrillers (Chinatown; Night Moves) and anti-war war movies (M*A*S*H, Deer Hunter; Apocalypse Now) all point to the real import of the phrase “counterculture.”

Watching these movies now, we are struck by how they forge a cinematic language that is bold, critical, and engaged. They still have things to tell us about the way America is put together, holding up a mirror to the dysfunctional society we share. Giving the lie to the traditional happy ending, they’re “feel-bad” films, cynical, despairing, but paradoxically progressive in that they compel us to question and consider alternative outcomes.

Compare and contrast today’s escapist juvenilia. (That is another gift of time travel: it sheds light on the present.)

The Hollywood Renaissance of the 70s disappeared concurrently with Reaganism. Conglomerates wrested power back from the artists, and box office bonanzas like Star Wars marked the beginning of the blockbuster era. Our series runs from July 15—Sept 4 and comprises just shy of seventy 70s films, from M*A*S*H (1970) to Apocalypse Now (1979), Harold and Maude (1971) to Being There (1979). Almost all the films show at least twice and on any given night you will find a couple of double bills to spark the conversation.

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