

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Cinema

### The Years of Launching.

#### EARLY STAGE: LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO WW II

**Light.** Already as early as 1802 Humphrey Davy had experimented with electric light bulbs, and had devised a practical way to illuminate a room. There were experiments galore, throughout the century, leading up to what is acknowledged as the birthday of the movies, the Lumière Brothers' presentation of the first paying film, on December 28, 1895. The film was entitled *Workers leaving the Lumiere Factory*, and was shown in the basement of the Grand Café in Paris. What had in effect been an army of scientific workers and brilliant tinkerers (like Thomas Edison), in Europe and the United States, had achieved a result with consequences which none, even at the end of the nineteenth century, had been able to imagine—the launching of an industry which would prosper at least through the next century—who knows how much longer—and would enrich/modify/and exploit the possibilities of human artistic expression. It was not long, of course, before the greed of an industry in formation had taken charge of the destiny of an invention.

**France.** The essential inventions, for establishing the new industry, had been mastered by the first World War, and the Europe which had settled on the path of nationalism, and war, was quick to lay its diverse claims to film mastery. The French patriotism, to which Napoleon had long before given the go ahead, had been sharpened by advances in math, physics, and biology, in the course of the nineteenth century, and was a natural launching pad for French cinema, in which the founding achievements could reasonably be claimed by Paris. Prior to WW I, consequently, French cinema dominated the European scene, making itself particularly known for brilliant comedy, as well as for the *Film d'art* movement, founded in 1908, which produced a large flurry of films dealing with everyday life in France.

**Competition.** Before the start of the First World War, almost seventy per cent of global films derived from studios in Paris. Importantly enough, though, the War itself depleted the growing French film industry, which was gradually pushed aside both by Hollywood, which was not screening seventy percent of its films in Paris, and by the burgeoning German film industry. We are on the cusp of a film world in which national competition will drive many of the gestures, of what is in itself a kind of world war for public attention. We are still in a film world, however, in which the prestige of the French film achievement is highly respected, even by its competitors. Between 1920-1930, and despite the exhausting aftermaths of WW I, French cinema (the so called New Wave) had been making quiet and forceful advances: with jump cuts that gave the director new freedom, with wide lenses and hand held cameras, that reduced cost and maximized 'the sense of actuality,' and with new freedoms in shortcutting narrative developments—freedoms from too much 'telling the story.'

**Italy.** From 1922-1943, Italy developed under the thumb of a rigid dictator, Benito Mussolini. It was the promotion of a national film industry, under Mussolini, that led Italians into the streets, in the thirties and forties, not simply to view and film, but to size up the ravages of war torn cities, the kind of sizing up that was to lead into the world-influential Neo realism of Italian cinema. Pre WW II Italian realism was on the street realism, the results of free inquiry with hand held cameras, into the many impoverished areas of Italy, and, after the second War, into the culture of the streets which we see so unsparingly (and often touchingly) outspread before the lenses of Rossellini, Fellini, and Antonioni. To these great directors the working class is the only cinematic hero, and a tough one at that. In 1932 the Italian cinema elite established the first Venice Film Festival, while *Cinecitta* was active, throughout the 1930's, as the first film studio complex, and the working milieu for Italy's star directors.

**Germany.** Expressionism—which has such forefathers as Edvard Munch, August Strindberg, and Sigmund Freud—emerged as the dominant practice of German film in the early part of the twentieth century, as well as one of the main modernist thrusts of German music, painting and poetry. Where French film of the twenties highlighted the realism of the streets of France, and Italian Neorealism discovered the unique beauty and pathos of those streets, and of many of the people who live in them, German film—check out Fritz Lang and his *Dr. Mabuse*—was fixated on film noir and horror (of the *Nosferatu*, vampire sort).

#### FROM THE END OF WWII TO 2000

**Classics.** It is not easy to wrap and package a living tradition like that of Western European film, especially at a particular period in its development. We have made some initial notes on the early stages of Western European film, through the cataclysmic World Wars that both allowed for rapid film development, and left conscientious auteurs—Godard, Bergman, Fassbinder—wondering how to deal with the individuals who have come out on the other side of war. Perhaps we should take this second stage, of our observations, to reflect on the directions adopted by national film industries in the years from 1950-2000. We find that the influence of Hollywood has grown in Europe, far out of proportion to the smaller budgets of the European national film industries, that we live, today, in a cinema climate in which most of the well heeled filming in the world is bankrolled out of California, but in which independent (and nationally backed) European film industries consistently generate the highest level of auteurship.

**Germany.** Fassbinder and Herzog are living sensibilities of the postwar. Close up to their societies, these auteurs live as awareness of the hurt around them—drug trafficking, purposelessness, alienation, sexual dysphobia, infinite loneliness; the whole package of post war urban ills for which we have to blame a half century of large scale wars—and for which we are still paying the penalty in our contemporary world. Take a run of five films, for example: 1969 (*Katzelmacher*, Fassbinder); 1969 (*Gods of the Plague*, Fassbinder); 1973, *All Fear eats the soul*, Fassbinder; 1974 (*Kaspar Hauser*, Herzog); 1975 (*Fox and Friends*, Fassbinder). Unemployment, immigration pains, social maladjustment, underworld corruption on the bar stool and police raid level, blank social disorientation: the ills of the post war bust in central Europe. There is much else of high value: the salutes to the America of trends and dreams—Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road* (1976) or *Alice in the Cities* (1977)—a salute which flashcards the dreams and hopes of a society still on its knees from defeat, and looking to potential. There is the off the charts dreaming of Werner Herzog, who in *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) or *Heart of Glass* (1976) evokes heroisms, tragic senses of human evil, and transcendent moves in soul which dwarf the social evils that surround them.

**France.** Grab a seventeen year period out of French film, from the second half of the twentieth century. Isn't there a consistency, as we suspected there was among the grab bag of terrific German films we highlighted in the previous section? Cocteau, *Orphée*, 1950; Bresson, *Diary of a Country Priest*, 1951; Bresson, *A Man Escaped*, 1957; Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*, 1960; Godard, *Week End*, 1967. In the crush of post war anomie, the individual thrashes through a life looking for identity points, for 'what he is.' Unsatisfied with viewing himself as a set of information points in a bureaucratic file, condemned to death for an answer, he claims his *Existenz*, as the war time French existentialists cared to put it: he is that evanescent soul inside us, which is looking for reassurance. Bresson hits it on the head—as does Bergman in *Winter Light* (1963)—when he takes us inside the mind of a believer, in fact a pastor, who can no longer summon his faith clearly. (In literature he reminds us of Unamuno's priest, in *San Manuel Bueno Martir* (1931), who has lost his faith but cannot bring himself to confess it to his congregation, and therefore has to live a long priestly life as a lie.) The world crushing the individuals in these five films is a world Godard stares in the face in *Week-end*, the portrait of a society in a sustained downspiral, the highways no longer functional, personal values no longer operative, societies reduced to armed camps.

**Italy.** Three films from 1949: Rossellini, *Germany, year 0*; *Bitter Rice* directed by De Santis; de Sica's *Bicycle Thief*. Only four years after the end of the war that left Italian cities in conditions ranging from rubble to chaos. And add two films from a little later: *La Strada* (1956) and *Amarcord* (1974), both directed by Fellini. A five film sample of the Italian turn in postwar suffering. Just look at the urban streets in three of these films. Just look at the havoc of time for the little guy or gal on those streets, just look at the working man or woman's condition, if he loses a precious bicycle, if she is broken down to working in

the literally killing rice fields of the north. Fellini flavors this bitter historical sociology with a retrospective film like *Amarcord*, which rehearses his own boyhood. The sweetness of time is greatly spread across us, as we walk again the streets and familiar practices of his own home town.

**Sweden.** Sweden means Bergman (1918-2007), and Bergman means a voluminous statue of strong, searching, daring, experimental films, a few of them turned on a spit of wit, a few tragic, very few that do not surprise and provoke. 1951 *Summer Interlude*; 1955 *Smiles of a Summer Night*; 1940 *Virgin Spring*; 1962, *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*; 1966, *Persona*. Bergman is capable of a light turn—*Summer interlude* evoking a summer of young love, but one overshadowed by the sense of doom, and by the death of the protagonist's lover—a film thus about the interhatching of tragedy and joy—while Bergman's *The Silence* arranges the trip of two sisters and a child through a mysterious post war city, with which they cannot communicate, while the sisters' alienation from one another grows silently toxic, in the halls of a vast and almost unoccupied hotel. These films are Bergman, his step into the dark regions his time was opening up to him. *Persona* takes the adventure into the mysteries, and terrors, of personal identity, while *Virgin Spring* is a kind of mediaeval horror tale, about the rape of an innocent girls, and the long trip grace must take, to restore beauty to a destroyed world.

**The Launching of great art.** Western European postwar cinema, like world cinema, is of global extent and power. It expresses nationalisms, gives a voice to spokespeople who are far ahead of their time's insight, opens up opposition view points, and performs all of these achievements in a public arena—a film is not a book that you take into your study and meditate with—which is a full time scenario for debate. Without question the post war European film serves all of these essential functions, opens all these avenues for social growth and intelligence. It stops nowhere, and in our latest time, the productive time engulfing us we inscribe these words on screen, Western European cinema, which has long felt the financial support of the Hollywood Industry, feels the dramatic breath of new technologies—shall we say **digital cinema**, for shortcut—and more broadly for streamlined ways to guarantee the commercial profitability of film distribution. One point to be made, in the face of this inevitable economization of an Industry, which is more directly a public commodity than is literature, is that great film looks to be created into an existentially pressing situation. This is no prophetic weisheit, but still it appears to be borne out by the example of the major postwar cinema sampled above. The special roughness of the twentieth century clearly demanded existential art, and got it. The same cannot be assumed for today's western European (or any other) cinema, that gets involved with itself as technique, and loses its status as a deep response to life.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**Science.** Film has its deep origins in the electricity experimentations of such British scientists as Michael Faraday and Humphry Davy, in the nineteenth century. These men opened up the processes by which eventually, around 1900, photography would be made possible in all its fantastic ramifications. Is film essentially tied to its mechanical facilitation processes? Is its destiny more closely related to technique and materials than to 'movements of spirit'? How does film relate to literature in this regard?

**Nationalism.** What is the relationship of nationalism to the development of film in Western Europe? Was nationalism a stimulus to competition, or a drag against cooperation and alliance?

What is the relation of the film industry in Europe to the formation of the European Union in 1993? Is the quality level of the Western European film closely involved with the members' relation to the EU? On a broader level, would you say that independent film enterprises are more likely to succeed than institution-backed efforts?

## SUGGESTED READINGS

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