

## **Taking Film Studies to the Streets (and Back Again): On the Necessity of Criticism**

**Review of Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004**

by Brian Hu

Before I took a single film studies course, I was a movie reviewer and voracious reader of mainstream film criticism. My interest in serious cinema led me to film studies as an undergraduate, and the interdisciplinary nature and cultural studies inflection of the courses I took and the professors I met drastically compounded the number of films I saw and exploded my conceptions of what an interesting film could be. Throughout this experience, I remained a reviewer – at this time, for a university newspaper – churning out a piece per week on upcoming releases. However, I found my work in post-structuralist cultural studies increasingly at odds with my task as a reviewer, which was to inform a paying consumer which theatrical films were “good.” Since film studies – I’m badly generalizing here – took a turn away from the text and toward spectatorship and contextual determinants, and away from the aesthetically extreme and toward the popular, I found it difficult to argue that one film, because of its aesthetic qualities or narrative skill, could be better than another, or that I could even to claim to represent an entire student body and its heterogeneous film tastes. Furthermore, my experiences as a reviewer exposed me to the fact that film discourse in mainstream reviewing is to a disturbing extent predetermined by studio publicity and press kits, with a thumb up/down or star rating being the only variable between individual reviews. Hence my growing dissatisfaction with the reviews in metropolitan and national newspapers, as well as an increasing discomfort with my role as a critic.

I discovered the criticism of Jonathan Rosenbaum while doing research for a paper on Taiwanese filmmaker Edward Yang, in part because, and this is a crucial point in my newfound faith in reviewing, serious film critics are writing about the newest international talents well before academics are, mainly because they have the time and resources to attend festivals and network with other reviewers around the world. What surprised me most about Rosenbaum, who now writes for the alternative weekly *Chicago Reader*, is that, like many cultural scholars, he acknowledges his own personal locatedness, and thus the limits of his own cultural knowledge. Further, in his reviews, the evaluation of a film is often secondary to an evaluation of the film’s distribution, publicity, marketing, and the politics that tie such factors with the film’s aesthetics and our ability to appreciate them. In other words, he’s a scholar-friendly reviewer, even as he holds dearly to older, romantic notions of “film as art,” which reveal the influence of Manny Farber, Andrew Sarris, Noël Burch, and other critics from the 60s.

This article is a review of Rosenbaum’s latest collection of reviews, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*, but in the spirit of Rosenbaum’s writing, my article strives to go beyond its immediate object of review to comment on the important relationship between reviewing and current film/media studies in hopes that other graduate students, many of whom will surely eventually do reviewing of their own, become inspired to apply scholarly approaches to film reviewing far beyond Rosenbaum, who himself has, in my opinion, wrongly suggested that film studies’ “social science”

bent is partly responsible for stifling the mass appreciation of film as art (xiv-xv), when in fact, Rosenbaum's socially conscious approach to criticism is consistent, or at least in dialogue, with current scholarly topics such as post-colonialism, global Hollywood, and film historiography.

Rosenbaum begins his book with some thoughts on film canons, a topic that has increasingly been a central preoccupation in his work, as can be gathered from his angry chapter on the AFI in his 2000 book *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*. (1) The main point of his short introduction is that canonizing is essential because if critics and academics don't do it, then studios seeking to manipulate film history for profit will. He writes:

...the disinclination of American film academics to offer any alternative canons has continued to give the industry an unchallenged playing field, assisted by such recent promotional campaigns as the American Film Institute's various polls that list the one hundred greatest American films, stars, comedies, and so on. The restriction of such lists to Hollywood features only begins to describe the promotional aims of promoting particular products coming exclusively from the studios, mainly within the narrow range of what's already out on the market and readily available. (xv-xvi)

Rosenbaum argues that if industry canonizers limit themselves to what's available on video (in order to make money off of them), there will be an adverse effect on cinephilia and a control on the kinds of films accessible to scholars. This explains why the film selections for the rest of the book are for the most part films neglected by canonizers like the AFI and the Oscars, as well as reviews that suggest the processes – be they economic, political, racial – that keep certain films excluded from the canon. For example, forgotten classics like *The Phenix City Story*, *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, and *The Young One* are rescued from oblivion, experimental cinema like *\*Corpus Callosum*, *Four Corners*, and *Scotch Tape* appear next to articles on *Fargo* and *Taxi Driver*, forgotten screenwriters and directors such as Frank Tashlin, Rudy Wurlitzer, and Elaine May are elevated to auteurs, and the newest talents (many undistributed in the states) such as Guy Maddin, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Abbas Kiarostami, Mark Rappaport, Stanley Kwan, and Kira Muratova are given the attention mainstream criticism – which limits its domain to only the latest theatrical releases – neglects to pay. *Essential Cinema* concludes with Rosenbaum's list of 1000 personal favorite films, his own contribution to the "alternative" canon seeking to take down the authority of the industry in writing film history and prescribing taste. Rosenbaum's philosophy on canonizing (as well as reviewing) is best summed up by his professed contrast with Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. These differences are: Rosenbaum's choices are global rather than "Western," his choices are not based solely on aesthetic factors but also social "value," his canon is an "active process of selection rather than a passive one of *reportage*," and finally his picks value films that can "make people into better citizens." (xiii-xiv) These differences not only reflect Rosenbaum's personal criteria for judging art, but more importantly, it suggests a radically different definition of a "canon" as a critical concept, which I will return to later.

## **Contextual approaches**

There is far too little in academia on the politics of film festivals, an increasingly critical issue because festivals, as well as art houses and distributors like Miramax and Sony Pictures Classics, are becoming the new cultural gatekeepers. Partly this lack of scholarship is practical: film festival research is a year-long task and requires travel and accommodation funds. Understandably, these practical considerations make film reviewers better candidates. Reviewers, if they choose to do so, also have the advantage of observing the role critics play in filtering cinema into their respective countries. Rosenbaum for example observes that at festival screenings of Béla Tarr's seven hour *Sátántangó*, many American critics admitted to him that they refused to watch the mammoth film because "they would rather risk seeing three or four bad films in a row than take a chance on this one." He then adds that a film as long as Tarr's shakes up what critics think their job ought to be (to report on as many films from a festival as possible) and "challenges the way the film business operates, especially in a climate where the value of a movie is largely gauged by the big-studio cash poured into its promotion." (48) And if reviewers don't take an initial stab at a film, particularly one as daring as *Sátántangó*, it is near impossible for the film to get picked up by theatrical or video distributors and receive an audience.

Reviewers are also more closely in contact with publicists and press kits, and therefore better understand the ways films are marketed to the press and public. The problem is that most critics keep this information to themselves; reliance on press kits is secret because it reveals the fact that critics don't know everything. Rosenbaum makes no secret his suspicion of such publicity materials, so he describes them to his readers in order to elucidate the lies of the publicity machine. For example, he begins his discussion of Turner Classic Movies' 239-version of Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* with a quote from its press release, before proceeding to explore the consequences of what TCM wants the public to think. In addition, when reviewing foreign films, Rosenbaum makes open the fact that while he's trying hard to be a global film viewer, he is still somewhat limited by the fact that his film knowledge comes from traditions of European art cinema and American b-films. Unlike other newspaper critics, Rosenbaum cites scholars when he doesn't know something (which means he actually reads scholarship). When confronted with the problem of his own ignorance of early Chinese cinema while reviewing Stanley Kwan's *Actress*, he borrows the knowledge of scholars Bérénice Reynaud and Stephen Teo. And Rosenbaum knows when to use press kits and other contextual material. Writing about Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman*, Rosenbaum uses a director's statement from the press book to get a peek at the culture of the filmmaker's studio (281), and in trying to grapple with why he enjoyed Takeshi Kitano's *Kikujiro*, Rosenbaum pries into a Takeshi quote for clues (313). He also borrows from scholar Ian Buruma on Japanese masculinity, just as he borrows from Hao Dazheng on Chinese landscape painting to talk about Li Shaohong's *Blush*, to fill in gaps in his knowledge. From an academic perspective, this is shoddy scholarship: there is no indication that Rosenbaum did extensive research beyond these quotes, nor does he provide thorough citations. Yet that's more admirable – and intellectually responsible – than most critics who simply rely on press kits not written by scholars but by public relations people. Imagine how far beyond Rosenbaum actual graduate students could reach if they had the opportunity to write reviews without interference from the industry.

While Rosenbaum modestly looks to cultural “experts” for clues to films from around the world, his enthusiasm for “global” films and transnational filmmakers is troubling to me. Some of Rosenbaum’s favorite filmmakers (Raul Ruiz, Joris Ivens, Luis Buñuel) are artists who defy national boundaries of theme and style. For me, Rosenbaum’s idealism about transnationalism is about as convincing as globalization. Looking at Ruiz, Ivens, and Buñuel, we can see that each artist is “transnational” in very different ways, and given their different contexts, probably for very different reasons too. A hole in this idealism stands out when Rosenbaum admits that he’s less interested in Ruiz’s Chilean films and more in his border-hopping ones (244), suggesting that Rosenbaum, perhaps because he understands global urban culture more than he does Chilean ones, sees the “global” better than he does the national or local. The good thing about Rosenbaum’s approach is that it doesn’t assume directors must necessarily make films about their home countries (which would fall into the traps of Frederic Jameson’s national allegory logic); however it risks ignoring local or personal interpretations of “the global” by mixing all such filmmakers into a single category. (2) Rosenbaum likes to tell his story of a Peruvian colleague who says that Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien’s 1996 *Goodbye South Goodbye* says more about contemporary Peru than anything from Peru itself. Rosenbaum concludes that this is because Hou has something insightful to say about “global capitalism” (163), rather than, say, Taiwanese capitalism. What Rosenbaum’s story actually tells us isn’t that Hou is a global filmmaker, but that given an opportunity to see films from around the world, filmgoers such as Rosenbaum’s colleague in Peru can access a greater breadth of knowledge and thus be able to better interpret and improve their own socio-economic conditions.

Rosenbaum’s recent reviews are the work of an activist. He’s in love with individual films and filmmakers, but his observations about the injustices of film capitalism lead him to vent frustrations about the dismal state of distribution, which could be accused of Frankfurt School-type paranoia if not for the fact that Rosenbaum’s rants ring so frighteningly accurate. The typical Rosenbaum review in *Essential Cinema* can be split into two parts: the first about the film’s release or lack of release (and the politics that keep us from seeing the films the way they were meant to be seen), followed by a review of the film’s style and narrative that reflects Rosenbaum’s aesthetic agenda (he’s particularly sensitive to architectural motifs, jazz-like structures, and cinematic “rhymes”) as well as his uncommon skill at describing the qualities of a film while not pretending to completely understand it, especially in the case of foreign films. For all his contributions to film criticism by being politically opinionated (see also his collection *Movies as Politics*), Rosenbaum still delivers a hell of a textual analysis; check out his brilliant take on Bernard Herrmann’s score for *Taxi Driver* for a typical example. In fact, his *Taxi Driver* review, written on the occasion of the film’s twentieth anniversary, is exemplary in showing Rosenbaum’s ability to allow the earlier economic/political/historical commentary to inform the aesthetic considerations which follow, a union that contemporary film/media criticism needs to achieve in order to remain relevant to society and academia. First, he considers the film’s history and its cultural legacy before discussing the film text; he doesn’t just discuss the film in a vacuum and then wax nostalgic about how great films used to be, as is the tendency in most reviews of re-releases. Second, he seriously considers the film’s political positionings (while

complicating the notion of director as auteur), and echoes Robert Ray's claim in *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* that *Taxi Driver* is a film conflicted in its politics, but what the film ultimately means politically and ethically is in the hands of the reader. Third, he explores how (for better or worse) the film's disturbing ideas about violence and redemption are intimately connected with the film's influential and celebrated transformation of "experimental and European elements into razzle-dazzle Hollywood effects." (301)

In this way, "classic" films are never given a free pass. Films like *Greed*, *Contempt*, *Flaming Creatures*, and *M* are great films, he would argue, but what makes them worth reviewing today is not to confirm their greatness, but to reflect on what it means to be a "classic" in our current film culture. He's particularly suspicious of "restorations," which for him is just a term used for advertising. His long review of the 239-minute version of *Greed* is one of the book's highlights, especially in the way it critiques Turner Classic Movies for deceptively selling the cut as "Stroheim's 'original' masterpiece," while giving an in-depth, well-researched (Rosenbaum wrote a short book on *Greed* for the BFI) analysis of the problems of "restoring" the film, from questions of scoring an incomplete silent film to the issues of using film stills to replace lost footage. What Rosenbaum is reviewing isn't the film, but the process of selling and presenting a classic film based on new historical research and the current exhibition environment.

### **Canons and maps**

The most obvious problem with Rosenbaum's book, and what will make it endlessly controversial, is his use of the word "canon." The term, as Rosenbaum admits, is not exactly in vogue among academics, but he sticks to it throughout and even defends the concept in the book's title. Rosenbaum's strategy is to be a polemic – and he is – but the use of the loaded term makes his book seem as elitist or pretentious as "greatest film" lists by *Time Magazine*, *Sight and Sound*, the *Village Voice*, the *New York Times*, or the National Society of Film Critics. What makes *Essential Cinema* valuable to critics and scholars are Rosenbaum's insights, gathered through years as a reviewer, on the state of distribution, art houses, and film festivals, and not his list of 1000 favorite films. However, his polemical use of the word "canon" risks making the reader suspicious of his overall intentions, even though the conception of the "canon" he proposes is politically different from the "canon" he critiques. In the title of the appendix, Rosenbaum calls his 1000 favorites "a personal canon," which is something of a rhetorical oxymoron: he inserts a personality into the process of canon formation ("the best film histories come from individuals rather than institutions" (215) he later writes) to playfully destabilize the meaning of "canon." Yet, ironically, because Rosenbaum's knowledge of Euro-American film history is so deep, a "canon" of 1000 films no matter how personal comes off as even more monolithic and authoritative, and thus questionable and problematic. My criticism may seem like petty semantics, but the success of Rosenbaum's rhetorical strategy hangs by how much readers can believe he's not simply replacing one canon with another.

Critic Adrian Martin has written that there are three kinds of film canons: the “supposedly populist canon” (*Sound of Music*, *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park*) based on box-office receipts and popularity, the “old guard, old-fashioned canon” (*Citizen Kane*, *Pather Panchali*) based on a nostalgic conception of art cinema derived from film festivals and art houses, and the “alternative canon” which seeks to correct the wrongs of both the “populist” and “old guard” canons by being polemical, amorphous, and surprising. I agree with Martin’s categories, although the third type is much more complex and political than he suggests, a reason why I believe “canon,” even “alternative canon,” is a poor name for it. At one point in Martin’s piece, he paraphrases Jorge Luis Borges to suggest a metaphor which I find more useful and less loaded than “canon” in describing the third type: map. In other critics’ personal top ten lists, Martin sees “other people’s wild histories, canons and maps of the cinema.” The word “map” captures the pedagogical dimension of the canon, but not the authoritativeness. Rather, a “map of the cinema” is a pathway, a road once traveled, a hand to hold, a sketch in the cine-traveler’s diaries based on the cineaste’s adventures, always cognizant of the fact that there is still plenty of sea to explore.

As does Rosenbaum, Martin sees these maps as personal ones. In the world of cyberspace, everyone can have a desert island list, in effect making nobody’s list authoritative as a traditional canon necessarily is. Instead, a personal top ten list becomes a way of introducing oneself to other filmlovers. Popular online communities such as Friendster let users list favorite movies on their personal profile, and these lists become maps of one’s journeys and tastes, as well as recommendations to online friends. Between filmlovers, these lists become windows into personalities and preferences; thus these lists also facilitate dialogue. The Australian online film journal *Senses of Cinema* has an ambitious and ingeniously simple [database of top ten lists](#) of its readers, which contributors can revise in future issues as their preferences change. Contributors come from all corners of the globe, although the database is obviously skewed toward English-readers. Going through the 485 (and counting) top ten lists (Rosenbaum’s is included), one senses that the entries are responding to each other (“my *Tokyo Drifter* to your *Tokyo Story!*”), creating the ultimate film-nerd discussion of great cinema, told through film titles famous and obscure, exemplifying Rosenbaum’s idea that the canon can be “an active process of selection” rather than a pretentious, static catalog of greatness. This list of lists is not unlike *Sight and Sound*’s greatest films poll held every ten years since 1952. Its culminating “top ten” films of all time, determined by weighing the picks on each contributor’s list, is compromised, obvious, and redundant. On the other hand, the individual contributions by critics and filmmakers, which *Sight and Sound* wisely includes in the print issue (a tradition, I was surprised to learn, which began in the inaugural 1952 issue) and now [online](#), is exciting and breathtaking in the scope and audacity of each contributor’s picks, reflecting the breadth of international cinephilia today. In film studies parlance, “canons” impose limitations on the passive, helpless viewer, while these “maps” provide spaces for spectators to become active readers and interpreters, commenting on the films they can see based on their geographic and class positions, professing their own tastes, and teaching others in a virtual community. I read Rosenbaum’s 1000 films as just one of these many lists which reveal their makers’ personalities. Strangely, I’m reminded here of Harold Bloom when he writes that “the

principal pragmatic function of the Canon” is “the remembering and ordering of a lifetime’s reading” (Bloom 39); in other words, it is an autobiography told in titles.

However, back to the complexity of Martin’s third type of “canon.” The term “alternative” contains a political dimension since it is a challenge to authority. To deny canonization, Rosenbaum argues, is to deny a political voice. For him, that voice is a personal one. For others, it can assume a collective voice. Lists like the American Film Institute’s maintain the dominance of white, heterosexual, male, bourgeois film as representative of “the American cinema,” as if Hollywood were synonymous with what could be called “American national cinema.” In the wake of the AFI list, countless critics provided alternate lists, although many were as obvious as the AFI’s. And then there are lists like the tongue-in-cheek but eye-opening “Aztlán Film Institute’s Top 100 List” (“the other AFI” it jokingly claims) of 100 Chicano films compiled by film scholar Chon Noriega representing the UCLA Chicano Studies and Research Center. He defends the need to polemically defy the American Film Institute’s list, “because the list is done in our name.... Indeed, when an industry and an institute team up to lay claim to the sum of our nationality, we lose the one thing they are claiming to preserve: our heritage. Our complex, diverse, and rich heritage” (Noriega 65). Unlike other lists, Noriega’s has as many documentaries, experimental films, and videos as feature films. But what makes his list frustrating – and therefore infinitely valuable – can be summed up in the final thought of his piece: “If you have not heard of these titles, or if you do not know where to find them, be sure to ask yourself why. There is an answer.” (Noriega 66) And get this: none of the 100 Chicano films are on Rosenbaum’s list of 1000. This fact doesn’t make Rosenbaum a racist; taking Rosenbaum and Noriega’s lists as a dialogue with each other rather than two canons fighting for authority, we realize the extent to which the industry canonizers have written Chicanos out of film history.

In early 2005, on the occasion of the 100th year of Chinese cinema, the Hong Kong Film Awards made their list of the 100 greatest Chinese films. It raises several questions: isn’t such a list as problematic as the AFI’s, which was compiled on the occasion of American cinema’s centenary? Doesn’t a list of “Chinese” films neglect the local differences between Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Mainland, and other Chinese communities? What gives the Hong Kong Film Awards the authority to speak for all “Chinese”? Why are so many of the listed films past Hong Kong Film Award winners? All such questions are valid and must be posed. However, that should not make the list irrelevant. I read their top 100 as a strategic positioning of power. The monopolization of Chinese film markets by Hollywood (among other reasons) has made Chinese films increasingly less popular among younger audiences in Chinese communities. Such a list is not just a celebration of a 100 year tradition; it is a desperate attempt to win back audiences and to educate a younger generation about Chinese film history. Unlike the AFI list, the HKFA list strove to popularize films that weren’t already popular and readily available on video. To some extent it worked: the local media reported the list (released during the star-studded awards season), Fei Mu’s 1948 classic *Spring in a Small Town* (which topped the list) re-entered popular discourse, and stores such as YesAsia exploited the list in its [online marketplace](#) to sell DVDs and VCDs that normally would have been ignored by its global consumers. For the record, of the 100 Chinese films on the HKFA list, 30 are in

Rosenbaum's 1000, while only half of Rosenbaum's 30 are in the HKFA 100. Most revealing is that, with the exception of *Spring in a Small Town*, all of Rosenbaum's Chinese selections are films made in 1983 or later. Such observations don't tell us a thing about what are truly the canonical 100 greatest Chinese films ever made; rather they tell us that Rosenbaum likes certain Chinese films that Chinese critics don't like as much, and Rosenbaum (and perhaps the West in general) has a long way to go before understanding the histories of Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Mainland cinema before the famous "new waves" of the 80s. The HKFA list, though hardly a representative list, can be one place to start.

(1) An earlier version of this chapter, appearing in the pages of the *Chicago Reader*, can be read [here](#)

(2) In a dialogue with Iranian American film critic Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa on Abbas Kiarostami, Rosenbaum writes, "For me, Kiarostami is first of all a global filmmaker and secondarily an Iranian filmmaker. For you, he's first of all an Iranian filmmaker. Even though I'm interested in learning about Iran through Iranian cinema, and his films are certainly part of that, I feel that I go to his films to learn about the world, not just Iran." Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum, 81.

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