

Innumerable Centres of Culture: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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IN JUNE 2016, I RECEIVED AN EMAIL ON BEHALF OF THE SCARILY NAMED 'BBC CULTURE' department in the UK. It was an invitation to yet another canon-making poll: this time, 'the greatest films of the 21st century'. As usual, I submitted to the demand, and spent a total of around five minutes dashing off a list of ten titles from the top of my head; as usual, I was annoyed to see the dull, highly publicised consensus tabulation that emerged a month later. And then the inevitable Internet discussions began: corroborations, denunciations, a 'counter-poll' established ...

I do not take canons, in any of the arts, terribly seriously. I can see that many people have an evident drive toward contributing to them, and/or reviewing the result; and I can understand why all manner of institutions—museums, government funding agencies, cinémathèques, publishers, television stations, and the like—have a use for them, to help set their decision-making priorities (what to subsidise, what to program, what to cover, etc.). But all canons are erected on shifting sand (time will rearrange them soon enough), and even that sand can be pretty ersatz: there is always too much excluded from view, from consideration, before the individual lists even begin to be formulated.

But the individual lists, finally, are the only thing in this process that I enjoy, or believe in: some snapshot (however kooky) of a subjective sensibility, a person

arranging a hodgepodge from what Roland Barthes once rightly called ‘the innumerable centres of culture’. Because innumerable they surely are, and must remain: whenever I compose one of these lists, my mind races to grab at some certified movie classic, a short avant-garde experiment, a trashy comedy, a completely obscure or unknown gem, a film nobody else but myself likes ... and so on.

In this sense, the best lists can be provocative, polemical, political—inspiring or maddening. Canons, on the contrary, are invariably dreary and conformist. The filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier expressed this well: ‘Too many beautiful and important films are missing, and they leave out the texture, the richness and life of cinema by not including all those “imperfect” films which are more meaningful and alive than frozen, dated “classics”’.

When I read Adam Kotsko’s text, as smart and logical as it is, I am reminded once more of my deep antipathy toward a culture—Australia’s, formed in the shadow of Mother England—that bestows such a special privilege on The Literary, literature as the great repository of human values, Great Works, grand traditions, and the like. Only in literature can anyone get away with trotting out the litany of Canonical Masterworks that any citizen should reasonably become familiar with: Homer, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dante ... Try it with virtually any other art form or medium, and the exercise quickly breaks down: what is the special music, chosen from across the history of the world, that we all must hear, must know? The painting? The theatre? The design? The radio? The closer an art’s or medium’s invention comes to our present, the more patently absurd the very notion becomes.

Western Literature depends on its long, historic time span to reinforce the central, justifying argument for maintaining a canon. Kotsko, in his fashion, rehearses it: if we want to understand the West itself, the attitudes and ideas that ‘formed us’, we need to know those founding works of Homer et al. They are the works that set the templates of narrative, of language, of imagination! But let’s now switch to cinema. What are the films that we can persuasively say are not merely classics in themselves, but also formed our present culture, our world? Charlie Chaplin and/or Buster Keaton? The Fritz Lang of *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931)? D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)? Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941)? Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958)? I cannot answer in the affirmative, because I am of the conviction that, to study, explore and appreciate the genres, modes, elements and aesthetics of world cinema, you can—and should—start absolutely anywhere, with any film. Just the way that individuals, on their hopefully unpredictable paths, discover one film and then another ...

When I rattled off a list of those institutions with vested interests in the canons of art, I left out the university. Yet it is the institution of tertiary-level teaching that Kotsko's argument fundamentally rests upon. I often think we mystify this context with appeals to Great Traditions and whatnot. The fact is that most young students, kids in their late teens or early 20s, are not (yet) terribly concerned about establishing the 'origins of Western culture'—they're more interested in the immediate experience of what they can discover, connect up and 'network' for themselves. What some of them—especially those of middle class-or-upward background—are dimly aware of, however, is that university is meant as their veritable finishing school, where they will pick up just enough of the good old cultural capital of their forebears to navigate job interviews, dinner parties, and the like. You don't have to be an expert in Bourdieu to see that this is how a certain social machine works.

The last time I taught at a university, I was facing certain young students already half-formed, at the age of 18, within soirées of family and friends, by 'Criterion DVD Nights': they knew some European masterpieces, some Old Hollywood classics. And they already had deeply ingrained prejudices against so many things: Jerry Lewis comedies, Brian De Palma thrillers, 'wanky' experimental films ... In this scenario, Criterion (a company that has been phenomenally, horrifyingly successful in shaping the film taste of a new generation) has taken over the role of any 'Great Books' curriculum of yesteryear. In this context, the role of education (at any level) should not be to confirm such citadels of taste, but to question, undermine and smash them. This is one of many reasons why I love the cinema, because that possibility of subversion is still there, and still alive.

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