

IN SEARCH OF LOST MAGIC

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For 60th Anniversary Festival of Cannes, Gilles Jacob, the prestigious cinema forum's long-time president, outlined an interesting project. He offered some leading film directors of the world to shoot short films 3-4 minutes in length to express their attitude toward the art of cinema.

The nostalgia toward old, "grand" cinema can be felt in the very first frames of this collection. Moreover, it can be traced even in the title, *To Each His Own Cinema* and then, in fine print, *Or, How Your Heart Stops Beating, When the Lights Are off and the Film Begins*.

More than 20 film directors of various style participated in the project; hence the collection is rather heterogeneous. Still, there was one thing that unified these diverse works. Most directors chose a movie theatre as a proper setting for the declaration of their love towards the art of filmmaking and decided to travel in the past: The Finnish workers in the sarcastic Aki Kaurismaeki's film watch *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* after a long workday; Nanni Moretti, sitting in a back row of a movie theatre, dedicates his 3 minutes to reminiscing as a viewer about everything that affected him.

In the collection initiated by Gilles Jacob waiting for the film to start in the darkness of the movie theatre is almost the same as waiting for a miracle. And the theatre itself turns into a territory of love and vanished magic. Still, despite multiple declarations of love towards the art of cinema, most films leave you with the feeling of sadness and pain associated with the loss of some magic.

One of the saddest of them all is probably Andrey Konchalovsky's *Dans le noir (Into the Dark)*, in which a lonely elderly cleaning lady is watching Fellini's *8 1/2* in a huge empty auditorium.

Notably, Jacob's project was conducted in 2007, when "grand cinema", as well as its marvelous actors, was not overshadowed by the world of highly artistic and extremely popular series and Netflix had not yet started streaming films.

In the past, Brother Lumière's outdid Thomas Edison, as their invention, cinematograph, was designed for mass

audience, whereas Edison's kinetoscope could only be watched by a single viewer. Today, we see an absolutely opposite trend: the screen, introducing films in our everyday life, becomes smaller and smaller and, practically, is reduced to the size of our smartphones, and the film can be paused, rewound, or switched off at any moment.

The beginning of nearly every past decade was marked by discussions on a crisis in the cinema genre. At first there was TV that enabled people to get their daily portion of entertainment without leaving home, then the gradual development of new technologies took place to offer endless new possibilities, but simultaneously, partly deprived the art of film of its individuality.

Without taking into consideration the Camera Obscuras or Laterna Magicas, created throughout the centuries, or the sketches of cinema camera created by Leonardo, we have to admit that during 125 years of its existence cinema has never found itself in such an unusual state, although some crises have occurred before. More and more frequent are conversations about the end of cinema, its dissolution and disappearance in the realm of global networks. During such major crises, cinema starts projecting its own past on the screen and, as a rule, begins shooting films about film.

Talks about the death of cinema were first heard when sound films substituted silent ones and numerous artists were not able to catch up with the new changes and were left behind the cinematographic realm. This is best depicted in Bill Wilders 1950 film *Sunset Boulevard*, where Gloria Swanson's character, Norma Desmond, a long-forgotten star of silent film declares that the art of film is dead, or rather, "murdered" after the advent of the sound era, which lead to the destruction of such icons, as Fairbanks, Gilbert and Valentino.

Norma Desmond, once adored by millions of movie fans, lives alone and forgotten in her huge house-sepulcher, she is accompanied only by her devoted butler Max, who is ready to fulfill all her wishes and commands. Max keeps Norma's illusions alive to prevent her from successfully completing a series of suicide attempts. Almost every

day he sends her letters on behalf of her non-existent admirers. The dramatism of the situation is enhanced by the fact that Gloria Swanson, who performs the role of Norma Desmond, was once herself a star of silent films.

There are many other “fallen idols” in Wilder’s film, who play themselves, e.g. one of the greatest comic actors of pre-Chaplin era, Buster Keaton with his characteristic—maybe, a bit aged, but still imperturbable—face-mask; Max von Mayerling (the character played by Erich von Stroheim, an European expatriate), once a promising film director and Norma Desmond’s ex-husband, who is so deeply in love with Norma and the old world of silent cinema that he willingly relegates himself to a humble position of a butler just to be by the side of his idol. Von Stroheim’s character mentions in the film that three most promising film directors of Old Hollywood were David Wark Griffith, Cecil Blount DeMille, and Max von Mayerling. American cinema critic Roger Ebert argues, if we substitute the last name with Erich von Stroheim, the main idea will remain practically the same.¹

In one scene from *Sunset Boulevard* when the idols of old times gather to play bridge at Norma’s house, another main character, a down-on-his-luck screenwriter Joe Gillis, wittily calls this gathering a waxworks’ party. Actually, Buster Keaton, von Stroheim, and Anna Q. Nilsson represent not just their own selves, but a whole era and a generation of former film stars who fail to accept new reality. Wilder often uses real-life names in his film, such as Darryl Zanuck, Greta Garbo, Tyrone Power. Moreover, in a scene shot in a real Paramount studio even legendary Cecil B. DeMille can be seen.

The character of Norma Desmond herself was inspired by certain aspects from the lives of several silent movie female stars. The character portrayed by Gloria Swanson lives as a recluse away from crowds just like Mary Pickford, once adored by millions of American viewers. Like another silent movie star Mae Murray, she also struggles with mental disorders.² Swanson plays her character in a theatrical manner characteristic of silent movies, with expressive gestures and eccentricity close to hysteria, which reveals the contrast between the reality of the 1950s and the old movie world Norma Desmond

used to belong to. It is impossible to unsympathetically watch the last scene of the movie, where, after killing Gillis, Norma loses her sanity completely and, surrounded by cameras, imagines herself starring in a new film.

Former idols themselves reacted differently to *Sunset Boulevard*. After the closed premiere in Hollywood, Barbara Stanwyck kneeled in front of Gloria Swanson and kissed her dress. However, Mary Pickford left before the movie was over. Mae Murray also considered the film to be insulting. By the way, both actresses were previously viewed as possible candidates for the lead role.

Still, it is hard to disagree with Roger Ebert claiming that “*Sunset Boulevard* remains the best drama about the film industry as it attempts to see beyond illusions, though Norma herself fails to do so”.³

Wilder’s film is a real-life drama of people left outside the movie world, where there is room for the sympathy toward former stars who have now become shadows of the past, as well as for the proper irony toward them and due criticism of the film industry. Because of this, Louis B. Mayer even called the director “ungrateful.”⁴ Movies about the film industry shot in the postmodern era are completely different. They are clearly characterized by cinephilia and nostalgia.

In 2016, American film directors, brothers Ethan and Joel Coen, made a film *Hail, Caesar!* In which they sarcastically portrayed the end of a huge studio era in 1950s and the “witch hunt” of the McCarthyism period. *Hail, Caesar!* Is not the best work by the Coens, but it definitely is an interesting example of how the approach of movies toward representing themselves has changed over the years. The reviewer of Sight and Sound Magazine Ben Walters asserts that “the film’s mission might be to save the movies from themselves—to celebrate the classical system’s capacity to generate delight without overlooking the ugliness and absurdity involved in the process.”⁵

Coen brothers are never reluctant to reveal this absurdity. At the beginning of the film, during the making of *Hail, Caesar!* at a fictional studio *Capitol Pictures*, lead actor Baird Whitlock (George Clooney) disappears. This proves to be most painful for Eddie Mannix, a conflict “fixer” responsible for the productivity of the studio. He

1 Ebert R. *Sunset Boulevard*.

2 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043014/trivia?ref_=tt_ql_2

3 <https://www.rogerebert.com>

4 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0043014/trivia?ref_=tt_ql_2

5 Walters B. *Film of the Week: Heil, Ceaser!*

not only has to find the missing person as soon as possible, but also should prevent the media from finding out anything about the fact, which can cause a scandal and be destructive for the studio's reputation, something sacred to Mannix, who spends countless sleepless nights and restless days to maintain it at the expense of care for his family and himself. All these things have exhausted him so much that he has been looking for another job for some time and even meets a potential employer at the beginning of the film.

Throughout most of the film, Coen brothers use cues and quotes from classic Hollywood movies, getting to the classic genres of Hollywood one by one or to their related stereotypes during the studio system domination period. The characters of the film themselves represent a kind of cumulative artistic faces of actors of different times related to these genres.

The film shot by Capitol Pictures is a typical multi-million peplum like *Ben Hur* (1959) or *Quo Vadis* (1951). Thousands of associations can be found with the character of Ralph Fiennes, a European grandmaster director of salon melodramas who is forced to film cowboys by talentless actors moving from westerns into his film because the studio management decided so.

Coen brothers also portrayed the two main rages of classic Hollywood in their film: Luella Parson and Hedda Hopper. They united them in the double character of Tilda Swinton. Swinton here simultaneously plays the role of twin sisters who hunt for the piquant details of the personal lives of movie stars. For more associative, Coen brothers also added weird hats to these characters, which have become Hedda Hopper's trademark. In a word, a film is a real gift for any cinephile who can recognize familiar films, actors or directors in it.

Coen brothers and their audience are quite a long time away from the stories told in the film, and a lot has changed both in cinema and in the world as a whole. Time, on the other hand, has one strange feature: it presents even the most difficult events of the past with a kind of nostalgia and romanticism. After some time, even in the era of McCarthyism, it can be shown with irony and grotesque. That is why George Clooney's protagonist is kidnapped by a group of overwhelmed screenwriters sympathetic to the Communists, and the latter's dream is to travel to the great Soviet Union.

In the end, the victory in the Coen film remains with

the cinematograph. George Clooney's character also returns to the set, and Eddie Mannix overcomes the temptation to move to a new, quieter job and stays true to the film studio.

Most modern directors are horrible cinephiles, they respect the idols of the past, and their films are full of abundant quotes from classic cinema, but the biggest of them all is still Quentin Tarantino. All his filmography is continuous replicas and homages to the old cinema, be it spaghetti westerns or films about Eastern warfare. According to *The Guardian*, his *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* is nothing more than a love letter to the 1960s Hollywood.⁶

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood is probably Tarantino's most atmospheric film—the director allows himself to enjoy the visualization of the past to the end. Brad Pitt's character runs for 6 minutes on the famous Beverly Hills serpentine, slowly darkens, neon lights of bars or restaurants are lit, rock and roll on the radio, the noise of the city is heard in the evening, cars enter a drive-in cinema. Or Sharon Tate, gold-tanned with California's sun, played by Margo Robb, the epitome of youth, beauty and success, drives to the city center in her little car, picks up a hip girl along the way, and then buys a book for her husband at a second-hand shop. Suddenly she reads her name on the movie poster and enters to watch a movie, while in the movie theater, with her legs folded on the backs of the front row seats, she silently removes her glasses and happily looks at herself on the screen.

It is rare in modern Western cinema to have so much screen time devoted to episodes unrelated to action development. Those who waited for Tarantino action, cross-narration, dynamic editing and pools of blood in this film were a little disappointed, because the "brand" Tarantino only appears in the last episode of the film, for a very short time. The protagonist of the film is neither Leonardo DiCaprio's aged TV western actor Nick Dalton, nor his faithful "armor-bearer" Cliff Butt (Brad Pitt), nor Charles Manson, whose horrible ghost will shine in just a few seconds. The protagonist of the film is time itself, the 1960s, a time of rebellious freedom, rock and roll and youth protest, when it seemed to everyone that it was still possible to change the world for the better.

The ghost will glow in just a few seconds in one of the episodes. But despite the sense of atmosphere, Tarantino still leaves the viewer in a state of constant

6 Ide W. *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* review.

suspense, and it does not require much effort. When you know the story of the real assassination of Sharon Tate, Charles Manson's momentary flash on the screen will make you panic and keep you unknowingly waiting for a fatal ending.

It was a bit strange when Tarantino, at the Cannes Film Festival, demanded with maniac-like obsession the audience to keep the finale of the film in secret.

After all, Tarantino knows best that cinema is not just a plot, and it is even more surprising that he fears spoilers. It can be assumed that his behavior may have two reasons. One is that Tarantino has once again shattered the public obsessed with the fear of spoilers, which is not really surprising from him, and the other is that by saving Sharon Tate, he has saved cinema and the entire era with it. Film critic Gogi Gvakharia writes: "Quentin Tarantino has dedicated his new film to the Grand Cinema," which no longer exists and has been replaced by 'consumer goods' which, in turn, can be cheap if you act like a harmful monkey and tell the plot to the audience in advance. Quentin Tarantino himself wrote that the film was a desire to restore the 'epic Hollywood' that ended in 1969."⁷

All three films we have reviewed are dedicated to the separation from a particular era in the history of cinema. In today's world, it is difficult to make any predictions about the further development of cinema, especially in the face of a changed reality by the coronavirus. Netflix has already managed the "Homemade" premiere of the pandemic film almanac, for which 18 directors made short films about their self-isolation.⁸ The directors of the Cannes Film Festival categorically refused to hold the festival in an incomplete, online mode and limited themselves to publishing the list of films that would participate in the film forum. In an interview with the British Film Site, Thierry Frémaux, the festival's general director, said that the festival should be presented in the best possible way, "with the participation of stars, spectators, the press and experts", which is impossible under the coronavirus.⁹ Accordingly, the compromise option was not considered either.

In the final scene of Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, Gloria Swenson's character addresses the director with a royal gesture and says: "Nothing else, only we, the cameras, and these wonderful people in the dark." It is really hard to disagree with her.

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⁷ Gvakharia G. Tarantino.

⁸ Лаврецкий Н. Альманах Homemade.

⁹ Goodfellow M. Thierry Frémaux talks Cannes 2020 Official Selection plans, saving cinema, and Spike Lee's return (exclusive).