

Camille Does the Movies: Program notes

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Camille Paglia

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Camille Paglia's notes for films shown at the National Film Theatre, June 1999 program, under the auspices of the British Film Institute.

Films for me are life experiences. They have formed the way I see the world, and they have populated my mind with mythic personae. As a scholar and critic, I can trace my guiding ideas, emotions, and tastes to the first films I saw in early childhood (such as Walt Disney's "Snow White" and "Fantasia").

The features selected for the present series are those that dominated my adolescence and school years and that energized my rebellion against the suffocating conformism of the middle-class postwar U.S. Films like "All About Eve," "Auntie Mame," "Suddenly, Last Summer," "Butterfield 8" and "Valley of the Dolls" had a brash energy and passionate expressiveness that were missing in established WASP mores, which as a volatile Italian-American I found intolerably oppressive.

"The Philadelphia Story," on the other hand, which I saw for the first time on late-night television when I was 12, electrified me with its vision of aristocratic high style — the same thing savored and satirized by Oscar Wilde in "The Importance of Being Earnest." Katharine Hepburn knocked me for a loop, and I became a fanatical devotee of her films, through which I learned about my still-favorite period in feminism, the 1920s and 1930s, after suffrage was won.

In the pantheon of sexual personae, Elizabeth Taylor sewn into her slinky white slip in "Butterfield 8" was the Amazonian Hepburn's opposite number. I was breathless with excitement for the entire school day after a luminous Taylor won the Oscar for that 1960 film. Her call-girl character gave me my enduring reverence for the vamp and prostitute as defiant pagan images of sexually liberated womanhood. In the Doris Day/Debbie Reynolds era of cheerful, simpering blondes, Taylor was the smouldering brunette avenger.

"The Ten Commandments" is a canonical example of the lavish, wide-screen epic favored by Hollywood in the 1950s, when television was drawing away audiences. How sad that today's young people are condemned to cramped multiplexes and will never enjoy those monumental images that swept us away into long-dead worlds. I love biblical or pagan spectacles like "Ben-Hur," "Spartacus," and "The Egyptian," which despite the odd error give an authentic historical sense to the mass audience.

Foreign films were constantly shown at my wintry upstate New York college, and I got a splendid education in the European art film, then at its height. The interweaving of sex and

religion in “La Dolce Vita” helped confirm the master thesis of my life’s work — the continuity of paganism from ancient to modern times. The Surrealist poetics of “Orphee,” from which I literally staggered into the campus night, was like a searing revelation from the gods of art.

When I saw “Persona” (twice in one day in New York City) at its American release in my senior year of college, I felt that it captured all the points about sex and power that I had been struggling toward during the psychedelic 1960s. The title of my doctoral dissertation and first book was an *hommage* to that masterpiece. “Darling” shows another aspect of the 1960s, neglected by politics-focused historians — the exhilarating burst of cultural vitality in stylish, charming, restlessly kinetic new women like Julie Christie. “A quicksilver face,” I wrote excitedly in my notebook after I saw “Darling” in 1966.

“Niagara,” like “Suddenly Last Summer,” unveils the power of nature, which is far greater than that of any political regime. Sex itself is torrential here, destroying all in its path. Niagara Falls is for me what Mount Sinai is in “The Ten Commandments” — sacred ground where one hears the voice of God. The Niagara escarpment was left by the same Ice Age glacier that carved out upstate New York, the dramatic landscape where I was born and which taught me to love the sublime.

“Darling”

Coltish, mercurial Julie Christie embodies the sexy, smart-mouthed, free-spirited new woman of the 1960s in John Schlesinger’s breezy examination of the clash between modern mass media and the old class system in swinging London. Campy see-saw between innocence and decadence featuring mordant, magnetic performances by Dirk Bogarde and Laurence Harvey. Oscars were won by Christie for best actress, Frederick Raphael for the witty screenplay, and Julie Harris for costume design. UK 1965/ Dir John Schlesinger. 127 mins.

“Butterfield 8”

Elizabeth Taylor as a sultry, top-of-the-line call-girl cutting a swath through the well-heeled men of Manhattan. A glossy adaptation of John O’Hara’s novel that earned Hollywood bad girl Taylor a long-overdue Oscar, briefly restoring her respectability before the on-set scandals of Cleopatra . Babylonian soap opera with snappy, stiletto-like dialogue. With Laurence Harvey, Dina Merrill, Mildred Dunnock, and a very hangdog Eddie Fisher (snatched by Liz from Debbie Reynolds and soon dumped). US 1960/ Dir Daniel Mann. 108 mins.

“The Philadelphia Story”

This dazzling version of Philip Barry's hit stage comedy triumphantly revived Katharine Hepburn's floundering career. Arrogant, athletic Tracy Lord was based partly on Hepburn and partly on a vivacious, real-life Main Line horsewoman. This was Hepburn's first film for high-glamour M-G-M, which gave her Adrian's stunning costumes and Franz Waxman's sprightly score. Wonderful performances by Cary Grant, James Stewart, and Ruth Hussey. Oscars won by Stewart for best actor and Donald Ogden Stewart for screenplay adaptation. US 1940/ Dir George Cukor. 112 mins.

"All About Eve"

A Hollywood masterpiece exploring the tension in the actor's life between craftsmanship and ego. Bette Davis won the bitchy role of aging diva Margo Channing when Claudette Colbert hurt her back while skiing. Based on a Mary Orr story about actress Elisabeth Bergner, who was actually stalked by a fan. With Anne Baxter, George Sanders, Celeste Holm, Gary Merrill, Thelma Ritter, and Marilyn Monroe. Oscars for best picture; direction and screenplay (Mankiewicz); supporting actor (Sanders); costume design; and sound. US 1950/ Dir Joseph L. Mankiewicz. 138 mins.

"Orphie"

Ingenious, theatrical, and profound, this modernization of the ancient Orpheus myth, based on Cocteau's 1925 one-act play, is the apex of Surrealist cinema. The homoerotically beautiful poet (played by Cocteau's companion, Jean Marais) is haunted by Death (Maria Casarhs as a dominatrix attended by hell's angel motorcyclists) and hunted by feminist Maenads (led by Juliette Greco) amid rowdy cafes and wartime rubble. Cocteau's dreamlike special effects are now legendary. Winner of the International Grand Prix at Venice. France 1949/ Dir Jean Cocteau. 94 mins.

"The Ten Commandments"

Cecil B. DeMille's second filming of Exodus (the first was in 1923), a VistaVision extravaganza that captures the power and glory of the Pharaohs and the suffering of the Hebrews in bondage. Egyptian architecture, furniture, sculpture, costume, and weapons are beautifully reproduced. Rugged Moses (Charlton Heston) and elegant Ramses (Yul Brynner) war for Nefertari (Anne Baxter). An all-star cast featuring Cedric Hardwicke, Judith Anderson, and Vincent Price. Scandalously, won only one Oscar (for Yahweh's special effects). US 1956/ Dir Cecil B. DeMille. 226 mins.

"La Dolce Vita"

The film that gave “paparazzo” to the world. The mad, amoral swarming of the tabloid media meets the grandeur of modern Rome, in hedonistic, decadent decline. An epic view of the mingled pagan sensuality and Catholic religiosity of Italian culture. Marcello Mastroianni is superb as a weary, callous, yet yearning journalist. Anita Ekberg plays an archetypal blonde Venus of the waters, while Anouk Aimee sizzles as a rich debauchee. Music by Nino Rota. Italy/France 1960/ Dir Federico Fellini. 173 mins.

“Auntie Mame”

Rosalind Russell in a tour de force of screen acting as flamboyant Mame Dennis, the heroine of Patrick Dennis’ novel about his madcap aunt. Because Russell and Peggy Cass (as Agnes Gooch) played their roles on Broadway, their lines and gestures have been refined to perfection. Cutting through multiple American periods, regions, and classes, the film succinctly satirizes their trends and styles. With Coral Browne and Joanna Barnes. Script by Betty Comden and Adolph Green. US 1958/ Dir Morton DaCosta. 143 mins.

“Suddenly, Last Summer”

Luridly operatic version of obscure Tennessee Williams play, adapted by Gore Vidal. Katharine Hepburn as a New Orleans matriarch tending her primeval garden and mourning her dead son, Sebastian, a dandified aesthete who solicited one boy too many. The gory recitatives — Hepburn’s about Darwinian nature and the voluptuous Elizabeth Taylor’s about ritual sacrifice — are unmatched in film. As an idealistic neurosurgeon, Montgomery Clift (depressed and scarred after an auto accident) barely got through his role. US 1959/ Dir Joseph L. Mankiewicz. 114 mins.

“Persona”

One of the century’s supreme films, suggestive, enigmatic, and audacious. Partly based on Strindberg’s short play, “The Stronger,” “Persona” pits two beguiling women against each other — an actress who falls mute and a nurse who talks her way into painful Freudian memory. They blend and vampirically mind-meld, revealing our cruel will-to-power and the fissures in the modern psyche. Deft, perspicacious performances by Liv Ullmann and Bibi Andersson. Sven Nykvist’s crisp, high-contrast cinematography is superb. Sweden 1966/ Dir Ingmar Bergman. 81 mins.

“Accident”

Sex and aggression surge and boil like a subterranean river as Losey's languid camera contemplates Oxford's grand facades and social rituals. Ambivalence, greed, deceit, disillusion: "Accident's" wealth of sophisticated observation shows what filmmaking can be. Dirk Bogarde as a baffled, questing don and Vivien Merchant as his stoical wife. Also featuring Michael York, Stanley Baker, Delphine Seyrig, and Jacqueline Sassard. Script by Harold Pinter from a Nicholas Mosley novel. Marvelous score by John Dankworth. UK 1967/ Dir Joseph Losey. 105 mins.

"Valley of the Dolls"

The high-camp screen version of Jacqueline Susann's mega-bestseller. A critical disaster when it was released, this melodramatic, fangs-and-claws show-biz saga became a cult favorite of gay men and finally came into its own in the tabloid 1990s. The doom-ridden, pills-and-booze Patty Duke role was modelled on Judy Garland. With Barbara Parkins, Susan Hayward, and Sharon Tate (a year before her murder). Susann has a cameo as a reporter. US 1967/ Dir Mark Robson. 123 mins.

"Glennnda and Camille Do Downtown"

Drag queen Glennnda Orgasm (Glenn Belverio) romps through downtown Manhattan with Camille Paglia, as they champion pornography and deride political correctness. US 1993/ Dir Glenn Belverio. 29 mins.

"Niagara"

An eerie film noir in full, glorious color. Marilyn Monroe as a vampy, trampy wife cheating on her brooding older husband (Joseph Cotten), set against the thundering background of Niagara Falls. Jean Peters as a sensitive wife on her second honeymoon with an overbearingly glad-handing and typically American spouse. Very accurately calibrates fine gradations between the lower and middle classes in the postwar years. Produced and cowritten by Charles Brackett ("The Lost Weekend," "Sunset Boulevard"). US 1953/ Dir Henry Hathaway. 89 mins.