
An Approach to Classical Hollywood History

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In the middle of November, the Faculty of Arts of Charles University offered a series of lectures by Professor Richard Maltby from Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. Richard Maltby is Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law in addition to being Matthew Flinders Distinguished Professor of Screen Studies. He moved to Flinders from the UK, where he established the Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture at the University of Exeter, before becoming Research Professor in Film Studies at Sheffield Hallam University. He is currently working on a history of regulation and the politics of Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s.

In the final of a series of lectures on approaches to 'Classical Hollywood', Prof. Richard Maltby focussed on the production, distribution and exhibition of entertainment films on an industrial scale. During the lecture Warner Bros film, *Jezebel* (1938, Director William Wyler), was showed as an example of the role of 'star vehicles' in Classical Hollywood's system.

Since the 1970s film making has become much more complicated and has influenced film critical thinking. Most notably, the idea of genre has become less and less tenable but Maltby argues that it is still important for understanding the history of the Hollywood Film making process. It has been argued that there are 775 different genres, but Classical Hollywood cinema was generic; '...all that has been pure has been sincere attempts to find order among variety' (Janet Straiger). In this way, genre is a set of conventions in the production of consumer quality. However, genre categorises audience and means that the products (the films) need to appeal to these categories of audience to be a success. Nowadays, this categorisation is done by age but for Classical Hollywood films it was done by gender and the contrasting expectations of urban and rural populations. In other words, it was based on whether the film would need to be sophisticated or not, as



well as where most of the population were situated because this would affect the film's turnover.

Genre is anachronistic (belonging to a period other than that being portrayed). According to Maltby this means that the approaches to Classical Hollywood are categorised according to the views of the people who are studying it. He had used the Google NGRAM statistics to show how categorisation had increased in popularity since 1960 and that previously, Classical Hollywood had been produced on a balance of risk over loss. The statistics showed that the word 'genre' increased 6 times in its use since the period of 1914-45 when the word only appeared 12 times a year (mostly used in music, journals, or artwork). One category was melodrama which was for male audiences as they included a fighting scene. Melodramas counted for 1 of 3 of the overall productions whereas 2 of 3 films were made for audiences with a female majority. Depending on the success of the various categories, the industry was compelled to produce more of the type as they knew it would gain revenue.

The Classical Hollywood film industry was certain that they produced movies in 'cycles', the same as the fashion industry. Maltby alluded to the idea that the categorisation of films into genres are recurring 'cycles'. Warner Bros. consistently claimed to be 'cycle starters', but unsurprisingly, other film makers such as Universal and Columbia, also claimed this, as did Paramount when advertising its film to some '70,000 witnesses'. These so called 'cycles' could be begun by a range of circumstances: commercial success, 'no sooner than a certain kind of story hits the screen and clicks, practically every company starts making pictures of the sure fire box-office type...' (Variety, 1927). But the cycle may also be ended, perhaps by failure; legal difficulties; or mere exhaustion of the cycle. The industry press talked a lot about 'cycles' to present how the industry gets into its pattern of production at a given period.

The 'pendulum public taste' was the driving force behind film fashion. The swing of the pendulum of the public's taste towards a production method would depend on some topical event that had taken place in the cultural landscape. 'Film stars' became very important as film producers were making films according to public taste rather than on more complex, unique story lines (as they are nowadays) so the film's success was afforded to the popularity of the star's role. The film's budget would therefore be decided on how much the film 'star' would make. *Jezebel*, starring Bette Davis, was

used by Maltby as an example of this production method. Maltby commented that the film 'looked pretty but the plot was not up to much'; hence Davis' starring role was paramount for the film to get a good return. Davis achieved stardom by her ability to show anger in Jezebel, rather than sexiness or glamour as other film stars of her time were famous for. She was a female star that viewers empathised with rather than emulated. In Jezebel, the scenes were pre-formed so that the star, Davis, could show off her characteristics best. This 'star vehicle' technique was arranged to deliver her characteristics more than anything else because this is what would make or break the film. The 'star vehicle' for Davis in Jezebel was certainly achieved: she won an Oscar and was nominated for the best actress for the following 4 years. Maltby described the possibility of success of the 'star vehicles' technique as 'a little like surfing: if you hit the wave right at beginning then it will be a good ride, but if you don't you will have a bad ride'.