

## Young Cinema: Philip French Memorial Lecture, 28 July 2021

By Pamela Hutchinson

At a party a few years ago, I met a woman who was introduced to me as “the baroness”. I was introduced to the baroness as “a critic of the silent cinema”. The baroness smiled very politely as she shook my hand, and she said: “How very *recherché*.” As you know, and I do too, because I googled it on the tube journey home, *recherché* can mean choice, rare, or exquisite. A subject or object known only to connoisseurs. Like the vintage champagne being served at the party. But *recherché* can also mean pretentious or overblown. An affectation of studied refinement. And that hurt.

I am sure the baroness intended the former meaning, but her very polite note of surprise raised a question that I hear quite often about my strange job, more bluntly expressed. Why write about old films? Why would a critic be interested in movies that were made a century ago, when there are new films to be excited about every week? Isn’t it just an affectation?

Philip French would have had an answer to this question. I used to pore over his reviews in the Observer when I was a teenager, living miles from the nearest cinema. I was reading reviews of films I might not see for months, or years. They’d be a little old by the time I saw them. For French, film history was part of film present, and he would often start his reviews of new releases with a contextual preamble. French, and his erudite reviews, made it

delightfully apparent that new films did not appear from thin air, and neither did the people who made them. A few words could sketch out a filmmaker's CV, or a sense of their national cinema. He would recommend another film in the same vein, or a novel. It was from Philip French that I learned that if a critic offers a damning review of a film, you can read that review not as an attack, but as a signpost. This way, there are films like this one, but better: richer, more surprising, more innovative, more emotionally resonant than this. A film reviewer tells you whether a film is good or bad, worth the ticket price or not. A great film critic, like Philip French, gives you a wider view of cinema in each review – opens your eyes to more than is delimited by the terms of the film's marketing, the junket interviews, and the elevator pitch of its tagline.

But why do I write about old movies? And can critics work towards this festival's aim of reframing film heritage? To answer that, I'll talk a little about my practice, and the obligations of a critic. I will also redefine the term "old movies".

In 2010, I started a film blog devoted to silent movies, [Silent London](#). I shared listings and news, and as the site grew, I wrote reviews and features and festival reports. In other words I was blogging like a critic, but as "a critic of the silent cinema". There were a few assumptions behind the way I wrote about silent film, which I never really spelled out, but here they are. These are still the principles that animate most of my criticism, wherever it is published.

- One. To share the joy of silent cinema – a universal medium and an experimental, playful era of film history. My site was not just for people who were already fluent in silent film.

- Two. To write about silent films for audiences who are watching them now. Because whether you are streaming your films, or collecting discs, or attending repertory screenings, these vintage films are competing for your attention with the new releases. So I aimed to consider their value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as entertainment, as art and also as cultural documents, not simply their value as milestones in film history. I wasn't writing a textbook.
- Three. To write with care about the people who made those films – their intentions, their skills – and not just the directors.
- Four. To amplify the stories of female creatives in the silent era, whether screenwriters, producers, actresses, actress-producers, costume designers, editors or even directors. I aim to be more inclusive than this now. There is so much more to talk about.
- Five, and chances to do this well are rare. To write about new releases through the prism of film history. To bring the understanding of one era, or film, into the appreciation of another.

So I am not here to discuss writing about old films, because doing this work has led me to reject the standard definition of that term. My passion has always been for young cinema, those films that were made in a period of exploration when the medium was new and its possibilities had not been fully mapped out. This is why I say that films released in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are young, and films released in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are old. Please think of the analogy as a tree, growing stronger with each year, and each ring, but also, please don't push the analogy too far. Youth is relative, and I don't expect the tree to be felled any time soon.

And I love old films too. When I first saw *In the Mood For Love*, for example, experiencing its beauty, sincerity and classical perfection I knew it was the best kind of old film, a new release proudly showing its sophistication ... and now it is opening this festival of young cinema. Which proves, if nothing else, that youth is relative.

The best old films, the new releases, are old in as much as they are mature and thriving, enriched by a century or more of cinema – feeding them, shaping them, influencing them, inspiring them and even, perhaps especially, giving them something to rebel against. That rebellion is healthy. Without it, old cinema can also be diminished, derivative; corrupted rather than strengthened by its roots. When discussing films, as a critic, I think it helps to acknowledge both possibilities. And naturally, a critic who cannot tell the difference between a pastiche and an act of homage does their readership no favours.

It is impossible to disentangle old and young cinema, the roots and the branches – it is all one family tree. I am excited by both young and old cinema and I cover both in my criticism.

Young cinema deserves criticism that is alert to its youth and unpredictability and old cinema deserves something more considered than a hot take, which ignores what has gone before. If we look at criticism from the young cinema age, we find a combination, often simultaneous, of delight in the mind-boggling sensations created by the big screen and an earnest plea that the medium keep reaching for new heights, become the artform it promises to be. Wondering, as Virginia Woolf did, “what the cinema might do if left to its

own devices.” A loving criticism, written hot in the fever of first attraction, but with a view to the century to follow.

If I believe that my passion for young cinema is more than an affectation, then criticism is the proof of that. I must offer something more productive than a chronology, or a backstory. Because there is no single narrative of film history, there is no single frame through which to view it – even if we have been encouraged to believe that there is. Plaiting the various strands of film history together, tying knots that hitch young cinema to old, forms what So Mayer calls “not an archive but an anarchive – a living and therefore unassailable web of interconnections that can only be seen in fragments as they scintillate.”

Let me give you an example. In January 1914, two precociously talented stage performers, both born in 1889, made their film debut. They swiftly created iconic screen characters whose influence spans the subsequent history of cinema. They would both write, direct and produce films in which they also starred. Their work displayed great wit, innovation and a pronounced social conscience. One of those performers was Charlie Chaplin, and I think we all know what happened next in his story.

The other was Musidora, whom you may know best as the black-clad jewel thief Irma Vep, that icon of “total cinema”, beloved by popular audiences, critics, artists and filmmakers. Follow the Musidora thread of film history, and you will find a trail that is resolutely anti-auteurist, engaged with the fragility and multiplication of star images, often self-parodic and characterised by female collaboration, experimentation, and poetry. Musidora constantly questioned the conventions of cinema. She died in 1957, twenty years before Chaplin, but

her final job was at Head of Press and Head Librarian at the Cinémathèque Française in the 1940s and 1950s, a time and place that takes us to another key point in the widely recognised story of film, where young critics engaged with young cinema. There is always a new way to navigate familiar film history.

Musidora's presence in our story should remind us also that film criticism in the young cinema age believed that the medium's success lay in appealing to a female audience. As CA Lejeune, who vacated the job of film critic at the Observer 18 years before Philip French began, wrote in 1926: "The kinema must please the women or die."

With decades of exposure to new forms of cinema, and all its devices, behind us, we owe the current era nothing less than that kind of passion and perfectionism. Likewise, writing about young cinema should offer a more active engagement with the past than browsing in a vintage boutique: the admiring backwards gaze that Simon Reynolds describes as "retromania", a critical dead end. And neither should young cinema be merely dismissed as incompatible with our late-period sophistication and our enlightened values,.

On that point, one of the critic's obligations is to describe as well as to advise and while we can be subjective in the connections we make, we must always be honest about the archive. Not everything is to be recommended in everything that we recommend. A film worthy of critical praise also deserves frank criticism of those aspects that are offensive, gruesome, discriminatory or unjust. Karina Longworth, who has done more than most critics to animate our appreciation of young cinema, said recently "speaking from the future, you can connect those dots". Movies reflect the society in which they are made, and to ignore

cultural artefacts of our historic prejudices is to pretend that the horrors of history, horrors that shamefully persist, never happened. Denying this history is an offence to marginalised people.

As critics we also understand the power of an audience to choose what to watch and when, and their resilience to and distaste for dishonesty. And it should go without saying, it is even less forgivable to see these attitudes in contemporary films, films that are old enough to know better.

Thankfully, the critic has an active as well as reactive role. To assist in the appreciation of films that resist the narratives of prejudice and division, especially films by marginalised filmmakers. Anarchive cinema. To focus on the work of women, or people of colour, of queer or disabled filmmakers, of people whose films were censored by the state, or not widely distributed. Uncredited. Or merely underappreciated. To say this film is important not just because it exists, but that it has a value in itself. Not because it was the first or only of its kind. Those statements are often unwittingly false, and feed into an outdated draft of film history, one that pretends all the interesting films were made at studios by successful white men, that all the interesting films are the ones that we already know, the ones that survive.

I am treading a fine line between film criticism and film history here, but let me show you the joy of being a critic. I am often asked a simple historical question: “Who was the female equivalent to [this or that great male filmmaker of the young cinema age]?” And I can only

answer that question as a critic, by talking about talent – by sharing Lois Weber’s *Suspense*, or Alice Guy’s *Madame’s Cravings*, or Stella Simon’s *Hands*, or the work of any one of the doyennes of cinema who did, or did not ever call “action”, who cut film, who wrote scenarios, who animated paper and card. As critics we are entitled to ignore the industrial parameters of success, by saying: “I don’t care how long her career was, or that he never got a studio distribution deal – look at the quality of the work, look at the ambition.” And then in a quiet voice I might ask in return: “Why make comparisons at all?”

The second question I get asked a lot is: “How did her career end, why haven’t I heard of her?” And I can answer this question historically but I prefer not to. I prefer to swing back to being a critic, and discuss the brilliance of the work itself. Musidora, you will already have calculated or guessed, did not make as many films as Chaplin, but that doesn’t diminish her importance. Or the thrill of her image-making.

Famously, the great Nora Ephron famously did not enjoy appearing on “Panels on women in film”. So, I have no intention of posthumously trapping female filmmakers in Nora Ephron’s idea of hell. In a sidebar. So when it comes to Musidora’s work, or that of some of the other filmmakers I have been thinking about recently – Mai Zetterling, Lois Weber, Mae West, Maria Lassnig, Bette Davis, Asta Nielsen – the “women in film” questions can wait. I have films to watch first.

This is just one way of saying that if we don’t like the film history we have, we can reframe it. And this energy is palpable in our film culture right now, the canon is under fire, though I

predict it will re-emerge having undergone another transformation. The critical appraisal and often reappraisal of work by marginalised filmmakers is key to the next draft of film history. This new draft celebrates the abundance of talent, of compelling work, while acknowledging the reasons why those films have been omitted from previous drafts of the story. Critics don't own the films we promote. We only own our own approach to the film, our choice of how and why to engage with them, our frame. This new history, which is already being written, will cite as sources historians, curators and archivists who are sharing the best, and the broadest definition of young cinema. In parallel, critics will make the case for the inclusion of films that audiences may not be familiar with: on the schedule of the local repertory house, on your syllabus and in your textbook, on your streaming service, in your Blu-ray collection, and at the top of your lists.

Lists. Show me five films and there is nothing I would like to do less than stack them one on top of another. Listmaking is a diluted, despised form of criticism, the consensus is always boring, and canon formation is inherently biased. Lists written by people who ignore young cinema are toppled by their recency bias; lists with too much reverence for the lists that came before them repackage tired ideas about what cinema is meant to be. But I believe that most people know this and I claim no moral high ground. As long as there are lists, we can wield our own biases so as to disrupt the old ones. Lists are meant to be disagreed with. And rewritten.

Apart from that, I take as much notice of lists as I do of star ratings, the headlines on film reviews and any reviews that fit into the space of a tweet. Criticism needs a little more room. And a little more time. I am interested in expanding cinema rather than reducing it,

another lesson that I learned from reading Philip French. One of the reasons that critics should write about movies that are more than one week old, is that the best criticism is the result of more than a first look. We know this, and yet critics are still encouraged to publish reviews rush-written to beat a deadline, and social media responses, thumb-typed in the cinema foyer. On a good day, writing about young cinema is a small act of resistance to the press lists and studio embargoes that on a bad day, make film criticism feel more like film marketing.

It can be a struggle to publish criticism about films that are not being marketed, but there is a demand for it. Archive cinema is easy to access, but sometimes bewildering to navigate. A person only needs a signpost or two to find the good stuff. In this regard, a critic is preferable to an algorithm, a list or a filmography. I cannot stress enough that completism is not mandatory, and there are no films that you must see, just as there are no films that you mustn't. Where the critic can help most is by emphasising those connections between old and young movies, drawing the audience's attention from something they can hardly avoid, to something they might otherwise miss.

This guidance should never be gatekeeping – a tedious practice that we can trample over in our enthusiasm to watch more films. I do not want young cinema to be a subject “known only to connoisseurs”. Neither does it only have value if it is choice, rare or exquisite.

Sidenote: the language that we use to describe classic films can sometimes do more harm than good. Rare would one of those words.

Finally, I write about young cinema, because so many of us are watching it. And criticism, like filmmaking, is a collaborative process. As critics and audiences together we reframe archive cinema, we reorder the lists, we write new stories about how cinema grew to this age. I talk about collaboration because critics, like films, are redundant without an audience. Critics work for the benefit of the audience who will watch the film, not the vanity of its makers. As audiences, and other critics, share our delight in a broader selection of films, we are all better off. There is so much I don't know, and I want to. So, when I write or talk about young cinema as I will be doing a lot this weekend, I am thinking of the audience – and what they will take away from this introduction, this review, this frame. That's what my favourite criticism does. Critical writing isn't producing a text filled with factual information (though that can be interesting), it's about sharing your vision of the film with someone else. Allowing them to see it through your eyes. And in the case of the films that are showing this weekend, making a young film feel young again.

Old cinema thrives on deep roots. And young cinema, given the opportunity to return to the screen, to be enjoyed by new audiences, is ready to be reframed. Every day cinema is reframed, because each screening represents a new encounter with the film, whether it's old or young, or at one of those difficult in-between ages. Even a familiar film can be rediscovered, as this festival puts it. Searched for and found. Or as the French might say, *recherché*.