

# (DIS)AGREEMENTS

## Why do we need to return to film classics?

Javier Alcoriza

### introduction

What is a classic? The question has been so oft repeated that it seems to direct interest on itself rather than on its answer. However, one answer has been that reading the classics –and we should say with even greater conviction, viewing classic films– sharpens our gaze. We should see the classics to improve our visual capacity. This answer focuses on a human faculty rather than on the object to which it is applied, on an action rather than a result. In this way, the classics would become qualified judges of the world we contemplate in books and films. A reader or a viewer of the classics is a witness for the prosecution in the tribunal of taste. Instead of anarchy, whose seductive emblem would be freedom of opinion, the scholar of the classics will advocate for the indecipherable higher laws of Culture, with a capital “C”, as with such a perspective the risk of plurality can be safely avoided. To a certain extent, everything that sharpens absorbs the gaze. The breadth of vision will be one of depth rather than horizontal reach of the spirit. We select our classics to make ourselves curiously, not entirely arbitrarily, selective. The classics, if they do exist, belong either to one or to all cultures. Their appeal to our basic humanity disarms all pretensions of individuality. Cultures are at the service of man as both reader and viewer. It is also worth remembering that the reader



*The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) / Courtesy of Layons Multimedia S.L.

is an ancient figure, while the film viewer is a modern one. The art of reading ages us just as the art of viewing rejuvenates us. Are there such things then as film *classics*? Are we not begging the question by eluding this crucial idea that associates the classics with antiquity? The concept of *modern classics* seems to settle the question when in reality it obscures it. One cannot serve two masters, unless we transfer the meaning of classics from old or ancient to eternal. Consequently, to state that for the classics –whether ancient or modern, literary or cinematographic- time does not pass would be the same as stating that any art worthy of the name breaks free from history or time or, even better, art liberates *us* from time. Determining that such emancipation is fictitious is not as bad as believing that art entails no emancipation at all. If art does not liberate us, then the audience will be the product or victim of its circumstances and will unknowingly thrash around, ecstatically and violently, in a web of infinite preferences that cancel one another out. Indeed, to express an opinion is all we can do, but the mere act of speaking constitutes an exercise of arrogance and presumption that demands justification. An absolute lack of authority in the art world will never be an asset in itself. On the contrary, opinions are expressed, books are read, or films are watched inad-

vertently in an attempt to halt time in their value. Thoreau, as a spectator of the eternal, used to say that the time in which we really improve ourselves is not past, present, or future; and it seems impossible that such improvement would not be associated with our intellectual faculties. Cinema, as the quintessential modern art, would become the testing ground for this evident need for improvement. The test would be that we do not return to the classics but that film classics return to us in a way that is spontaneous and sporadic, but not unintelligible. There is a constellation of moments on screen that enrich our experience. In any event, we effectively return to films like the man who enters the cave to share and enlarge the truth of knowledge. The uncomfortable hierarchy of this image reminds us that it is impossible to attempt to completely democratize the art of filmmaking. Democracy is real in its aspiration to perfect the possibilities of communication, but not in the object being communicated itself. Would not cinema thus be politically at odds with the times we live in? And would it not be possible, and even desirable, out of a strange resistance to the pretentious mermaids of the present day, to speak of classic cinema? ■

# \_discussion

1. In every art form, a notion of the classic has ultimately been imposed that equates it with the atemporal or the eternal. In general, what can we understand classic to mean in cinema, one of the youngest art forms of our time?  
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## José Antonio Pérez-Bowie

I think we need to overcome the limitations arising from the habitual usage of the *classic cinema* label applied exclusively to a set of films that came out of the Hollywood factory during its golden years, characterised by a narrative based on the predictable mechanisms of certain traditional narrative forms informed by a mode of enunciation that aims for invisibility; a *transparent* story, in short, where the formal apparatus was concealed from viewers captivated by the story. Against this reductionist conception, the classic dimension of cinema could be based on the same premise as the one on which literary classicism is based: the universality and the validity of its messages, capable of connecting with any viewer, regardless of the place and time or the particular circumstances of that viewer. This potential of the message is inseparably linked to the formal apparatus upon which it stands; as the Russian formalists taught us, the content of an artwork is the result of the form's capacity to shock, which is what undoes the automatic nature of our perceptions of everyday reality and makes us delve beneath its surface and discover dimensions there that we were unaware of. This axiom obviously works in cinema although, as in the case of literature, it is temporal distance that consolidates the classic dimension by confirming the contemporary relevance of a film's content and its ability to transcend specific circumstances. Thus, products presented as vanguard often age quickly when the use of formal devices responds not to a need to delve beneath the surface of reality and transcend it but to a mere fascination for novelty. As Oscar Wilde put it: "Nothing is so *dangerous* as *being too* modern; one is apt to grow old-fashioned quite suddenly."

## Karen Fiss

As a scholar working between the fields of art, architecture and cinema, I have to admit I have rather little loyalty to the codified internal histories of each discipline. From the perspective of someone engaged in modern and contemporary cultural studies, the notion of a *classic* in any of these fields has very little connection to the *ancients* outside of rather obvious stylistic terms. When the non-temporal or timeless sense of achievement is evoked in discussions of the classics, what is really being anointed is the circumscribed territory of the canon, whose origins of authority reside in Western culture. While I agree that cinemas of the past can be

fertile ground or *training fields* as Javier Alcoriza states, I would argue that there are other unsung gems lurking in these shared pasts beyond the confines of the classics or what is typically considered vanguard cinema. I prefer the alternative posed by Javier that movie classics "return to us in a spontaneous and sporadic manner," along the lines of Walter Benjamin's resonant concept of *Jetztzeit* –an interruption of homogeneous and empty time from which the past "brings the present into a critical state" (part of this relies on the unlikely scenario of securing funding to preserve the vast quantity of threatened celluloid in film archives internationally).

## Patricia Keller

I would like to begin my answer to this first question with a series of theses in the style of Susan Sontag's well-known *Notes on Camp* (1964). For reasons of time and space I will not identify 58 independent theses, as Sontag does, but instead will offer a few propositions here—minor notes—on the theme of the *classic* as it relates to cinema: 1) *Classic* cinema is not *cult* cinema. While a classic may also fall into the category of *cult*, understood as a work that achieves a certain degree of popularity, recognition, and even cultivated and socially acceptable forms of *worship* (as the word *cult* implies) due to its aesthetics or political status, it does not necessarily mark a film as worthy of veneration, like the saints. A *classic* film may be praised by many and even adored by the masses, thus casting it into the realm of *cult*; yet not all cult films can be considered *classic*. I am thinking of two Spanish *cult classics*: Ivan Zulueta's *Arrebato* (1979) and Pedro Almodóvar's *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980). 2) *Classics*, in the plural (there is always more than one), can be and often are popular, though this is not universally true. The *classics*, however popular, should never be confused with *the popular*. For classic leans towards a resistance to the constraints of time, a weathering of the very storm of time, as if towards ruins that remain in the landscape of human civilization over time. Popular, on the other hand, in referring to the *populace*, the *people*, the *public*, must always change with the populace, people, or trends (whims?) of the public. For this reason, the criteria for evaluating what constitutes a classic does not hinge on popular taste. At the same time, we should remember that popularity could be —

and often is— a decisive factor in legitimating a film's classic status. 3) *Classic* implies a double movement: backwards and forwards through time. We return to something great erected in and of its own time, in order to measure its continued, and perhaps even persistent relevance. We often determine a work of art, film being no exception, as *classic* through a retrospective glance, looking back at it through the ages and recognising its continued relation to the present time and, in some instances, noting its unparalleled potential for future relevance, for remaining topical—that is, in some sense, its capacity to anticipate the future. Whereas we look back on the classics to evaluate their future orientation, we might say that the popular (picking up on thesis #2) is looked at from the moment of its very emergence, from the contemporary context in which it is born. 4) *Classics* stand the test of time. This is a common phrase often repeated as a way to define classic films. They *speak* to multiple times, generations, and audiences at once. Does this mean that they are *timeless*? What does this mean exactly? For something to be a *classic* means by definition that it is “of its time”, that it belongs to and is representative of its own time. This by definition makes the classic work unique to its own time. And while this time cannot necessarily be translated or inserted into another time, nor does it need to be in order to be of interest, or for it to be watchable. What the classic work of art says about its own time will inevitably resonate with future times and perhaps even with those times that we might call the distant past. This points to the idea that classic films are not so much *timeless* (what Hannah Arendt might call a notion of time unbound to the world because bound to a time beyond the world, or the time of the eternal), as much very much of time, or *timely*, as it were. This thesis directly connects to the next. 5) *Classics* are considered *classic* not because they are an endurance *out* of time, which would place them in the realm of the eternal, and thus disintegrated from the world, but rather because they constitute a product that endures *in* time. Classics are not eternal, but—as the Greeks knew all too well—speak to us of immortality. 6) *Classic* films have to do with content as much as form; with meaning as much as with style. *Classic* is about structure. But it always also denotes signification. 7) *Classic* marks the passage of judgement. A work that is *classic* has been judged over a period of time and as a result of this judgement, the work has been established through a set of socially and culturally accepted values. Having been recognized for this value does not deny that it might be subject to further judgement, but does legitimate the film as a work that should be seen. But how does that get determined? In other words, how does this judgement operate? Upon what criteria? This is the question of the canon, of the

archive, of the formation and categorisation of knowledges (again, in the plural). 8) *Classic* cinema (as distinct from one or more films or works of art) contributes to the construction of the public realm as well as our access to and manoeuvring within it. Returning briefly to Arendt, the public realm sustains the durability and permanence of the world—that is, it sustains artefacts beyond the natural life cycles of their makers, thus giving other meaning to their lives. The public opens up a question of posterity here. This means that the public realm—the space in which the world appears to us, the space in which we collectively gather, perceive, and experience the world in its worldliness—allows for permanence and connections between generations, connections between temporalities: past, present, future. I am now thinking of William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). I am also thinking of Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003).

#### Gonzalo Aguilar

The notion of a classic has not always been the same and much less so in cinema, where the category of classic—perhaps because it is a young art form—has a low density. The classics of cinema need a certain indulgence (although Borges' idea in his essay “The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader” that when we read a classic we tend to consider *all* its aspects as a model, suggests that such indulgence also applies to other arts). It is necessary to overlook certain things and tune in to the frequency that the history of cinema requires: unlike literature, where the classics are considered the *summa* of an endless knowledge, in cinema the first notion of a classic had to do with a mixture of history and aesthetics. The classics were those films which made progress in the aesthetic-technical field of procedures (the close-up, the alternating cut, the use of off-camera, innovations in editing, etc.) and which represented a leap in the historical continuum. But this same idea of a classic, as I said before, has changed. With the predominance of mannerism and post-modernism, the classics started to be defined as those films that expressed a suppressed or silenced point of view and approached the non-visible (expressing more than the new, the alternative or the anomalous). Fassbinder as a recent classic is a good example of this, but a more obvious example is the rise of the figure of Pasolini, if compared to Visconti or Fellini. This second definition of the classics required us to rake through the history of cinema according to new criteria, and suddenly a B-movie like *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942) was considered a classic. Thus, in the brief history of cinema, the notion of classic has been transformed.

**Hidenori Okada**

In principle, I am not interested in the theory of whether *classic in cinema* actually exists. I'd just like to think that the brilliance of every film will shine individually through the ages, although I do not intend to theorize it. The history of cinema is brief in comparison to other artistic disciplines, and yet I believe that there are lasting works whose value will transcend time. However, such durability is not easy: cinema does not only involve watching an object that has been created; it is conditioned by the

context and the techniques that enable its reception. For example, viewing a film in the darkness of the theatre equipped with a projector and individual viewing of a DVD are two intrinsically different acts. Consequently, there is a danger that differences in the medium of viewing may result in a qualitative deterioration of the film. The notion of *classic in cinema* may or may not survive depending on the continuity of this system that provides access to an indeterminate number of people to simultaneously contemplate the same work in a theatre.

**2. Is it possible to consider the notion of classic as a concept transversally related to cinematic geography and history? Are there classic movies of —and in—every culture?**  
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**José Antonio Pérez-Bowie**

Considering my answer to the previous question, it is obvious that film classicism is not a quality related to specific historical or geographical contexts. In all the ages of the still brief history of the seventh art and in most countries where its production has been developed, it is feasible to find films considered interesting and moving with stories that have continued and still continue speaking to viewers who are increasingly removed from the time they were filmed and which are also stimulating reflection, unleashing emotions and stirring consciences. As Frank Kermode claims, a classic is a text which “resists its reduction to the moment of the culture that consecrates it” and which can thus be the object of successive interpretations that increase its meaning potential and enrich it as it “offers resistance with its *energeia* against being reduced to the *ergon* of its canonicity as a stable element for reading.”

**Karen Fiss**

It is difficult to generalise or universalise the notion of the *classic* across geographies and histories in terms of *tribunals of taste*. It is obvious of course that within regions with longstanding cinema traditions, canons have been constructed through various means, and in locations lacking *industry*, films have been appropriated, localised, or disidentified with in a manner that constructs different cinematic histories. What is appealing about considering cinema transversally is surpassing the time-worn critical category of national cinema, which establishes parameters around certain film texts at the expense of others. Theories of globalisation espouse the end of the monocultural centre/periphery relation with the emergence of complex cultural flows from multiple centres and peripheries. While contemporary theories of globalisation no longer subscribe to the idea that the processes of globalisation have one possible outcome—colonisation by west-

ern monoculture—the flipside is that cinema has become one of the major sites at which the tensions between the local and the global, and the expectations of performing national identity, are enacted. This means that in our global era of mobility, with major productions involving a division of cultural labour that crosses numerous borders, films created in locations in the global South often have to exhibit a *readable* identity in the marketplace, in keeping with a certain logic of multiculturalism and branding.

**Patricia Keller**

Yes. In the same way that we can say the *classic* is multi-genre, we might also say that it is multi-cultural. In not being specific to any one genre, the logic might follow that the *classic* is not necessarily unique or specific to any one culture either. It is, however, true that some cultures might tend towards being a *cinema culture* more than others and this inevitably has to do with different levels of production, distribution, and consumption. Regarding time period, it seems that while certain national cinemas have experienced periods of producing *classics* (in the US context the cinema of Hollywood in the 40s and 50s might immediately come to mind), they are not unique to any particular time period or geography. Perhaps one of the best examples of this temporal and geographic transversal might be found in Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) which explores how the oldest known cave paintings discovered in southern France appear to have proto-cinematic qualities. The so-called *prehistoric* world, inhabited by beings who made the first known art works, displayed a sense of (if not a desire for) movement through the play of light and shadow, and the multi-dimensionality of surfaces, curves, and textures. Their images came to life through a kind of cinematic mimesis: the synthesis of time, light, and the frame-by-frame movement of the still image.

### Gonzalo Aguilar

Yes, there are classic films in every culture, although in certain cultures the indulgence I spoke of before needs to be greater. A classic of the Argentinean cinema is Lucas Demare's *La guerra gaucha* (1942), which any unsuspecting viewer (i.e., any foreigner) may consider, at most, passable. The classic would be a concept both transversal (universal film history) and local (national film histories). In the case of the local classics we are faced with a problem, because a classic, among other things, is a work that is worth rescuing from the past. This was the prevailing criterion in Argentinean cinema and many films were not archived and have even been wiped off the face of the earth. Today, however, this idea of a classic is applied to any work: any film of the past *should* be rescued. Everything, absolutely everything, is of interest (whether aesthetic, sociological, political, testimonial, or historical). And here the idea of a classic once again takes on a political slant: it is not only about what should be preserved, but also about what should be seen and made to be seen (I'm thinking of the pedagogical value of the classics). I believe that, at this point and especially in the peripheral cultures (in terms of film history), it is important to consider a synchronic-retrospective point of view (i.e., not to lose sight of the presentness of the gaze).

### Hidenori Okada

The notion of a classic that traverses geography and history deserves to be studied in relation to the fact that films are made in a specific place and time. The history of cinema is presented as something immobile, the selection of which films are to be canonized as classics. This appearance is dangerous, since it links cinema to an excessively rigid way of thinking. At the Pordenone Silent Film Festival held annually in Italy, there was practically no interest in Japanese silent films until the nineties. Yet it is fair to say that the festival enjoys a great reputation. In the 2010 edition, the presentation of the works of the directors Yasujiro Shimazu and Kiyohiko Ushihara, together with those of their colleagues of the Shochiku, Ozu and Naruse studios, had a fantastic reception. The classic can be constantly *rediscovered*, which shows that classicism can also be at the forefront of the cinematic art. The viewer needs to be constantly given opportunities to be made aware of this.

*Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (Werner Herzog, 2010) / Courtesy of Cameo





### 3. What movie, and why, could be considered a film classic?

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#### José Antonio Pérez-Bowie

If I adhere to what I've asserted above, it would not be possible to limit myself to just one example; I'd have to mention a series of films belonging to different eras and places, which respond fully to this notion of a classic. As the space available makes such a list unviable, I invite the reader to create it, bringing to his mind those films which, for him, have this ability to excite him, to arouse reflection, to *tell* him new things in each viewing, and which he would be willing to watch as often as he is given the chance. It is obvious that subjective factors would be decisive in this selection, but there is no doubt that it may include films ranging from the silent era to some emergent filmographies of the last few decades, such as Iranian cinema; from movies produced in the golden years of Hollywood to others by European directors of the sixties who established a personal style that questioned the parameters of the so-called *classic narrative*; or from films of faraway cultures, such as the Far East, to the closer and more familiar contributions of Italian neorealism. But if forced to mention just one title, I would choose one that is especially representative of Spanish cinema: *The Spirit of the Beehive* (El espíritu de la colmena, Víctor Erice, 1973). Enough time has gone by to confirm that its ideas continue to ring true and to bring together multiple generations of viewers. Its formal approach, in which ellipsis plays a key role, gives a poetic dimension to the story, in which universal themes like the ones it addresses (solitude, isolation, nostalgia for an irretrievable past, the oppressive atmosphere of a society that has recently emerged from a fratricidal conflict, the world of childhood with all its questions, its fantasies and its capacity to disengage from a stifling environment, etc.) guarantee a multiplicity of readings and the possibility that each viewer may feel that he is being spoken directly from the screen.

#### Karen Fiss

This is an impossible question for me, as I'm reasonably undisciplined when it comes to having an inner cadre of films. But to acknowledge the link being made in this context of exchange between *wild thought* and aesthetic form, I will call out Ritwik Ghatak's *Bari Theke Paliye* (1958), Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Not Reconciled* (Nicht versöhnt, 1965), and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), for their unique approaches to materialist filmmaking and their provocative interpretations of Brechtian epic theatre. Framing and narrative built from containment and excess, from the interstitial and lack, attain a memorable intensity that point to the presentness of history and time without reifying either.

#### Patricia Keller

There are no doubt many films that come to mind with this question. For me personally, I immediately think of the psychological force of Hitchcock's work—*Rebecca* (1940), *Notorious* (1946), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), *The Birds* (1963). There are countless others. But the film I wish to discuss here is of another sort of *classic* film—one that both was inspired by Hitchcock and that could be considered a *minor film* in the Deleuzian sense of *minor literature*—political, collective, even revolutionary. And one that structurally and symbolically rests on the logic of assemblage. The film I have in mind is Chris Marker's 1962 masterpiece *La Jetée*. Influenced by Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and in turn influencing figures like David Bowie (the man who fell to earth, etc.) and Terry Gilliam (*12 Monkeys*) among numerous other artists and icons. Weaving together multiple mediums (photography, cinema, photogram), multiple genres (science fiction, experimental film, documentary, drama), and multiple temporalities (the image from the past that haunts the protagonist, war, the post-apocalyptic future, the space and time of dreams and memories), *La Jetée* both is about and consciously performs the idea of cinematic time. It operates structurally through a narrative that transcends any one unified concept of time and aesthetically through its visual presentation, framing a series of repetitions that themselves perform the movement of cinema. Likewise, the film's narrative is as much a story about survival and aftermath as it is about the vitality and death of cinema, about the image as immortal, as something that governs our lives, cropping up and persisting in our field of vision.

A meditation on the construction and artefact of film, the desires produced and enhanced through cinema, the parallels between the film image and memory, and last but not least the experience of viewing, Marker invites us to ask how the past can be edited, replayed, repeated, and thus relived. In sum, *La Jetée* is considered a *classic* not because of any aesthetic achievement of beauty or style, but because it consciously delves into the very *classic* questions of metaphysics, human form and existence, of matter and memory—the connections between mind, body and soul, image, time and death.

#### Gonzalo Aguilar

There are classics that should be considered in their context, located in a past time: the most classic example of this is *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), although it is applicable to countless films. They are

the films in which we have to learn to see the innovations they introduced into the language of cinema and are now an integral part of it. Another type of classic are those films that bring us closer to the origin of overarching cultural myths: for example, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), or the films of Marilyn Monroe or James Dean. They are consolation classics: cinema as pop-international mass culture shines in our own prosthesis-memory. The third category is the one I find the most interesting: those films which pose questions that take us to a limit and which, because of their potency, are open to an infinite number of readings. If I had to choose just one, it would be *Ordet* (Carl T. Dreyer, 1955) because its story raises a timeless question (life after death) and is told in a way that says a lot about cinema as a medium: the body in films is a living dead person.

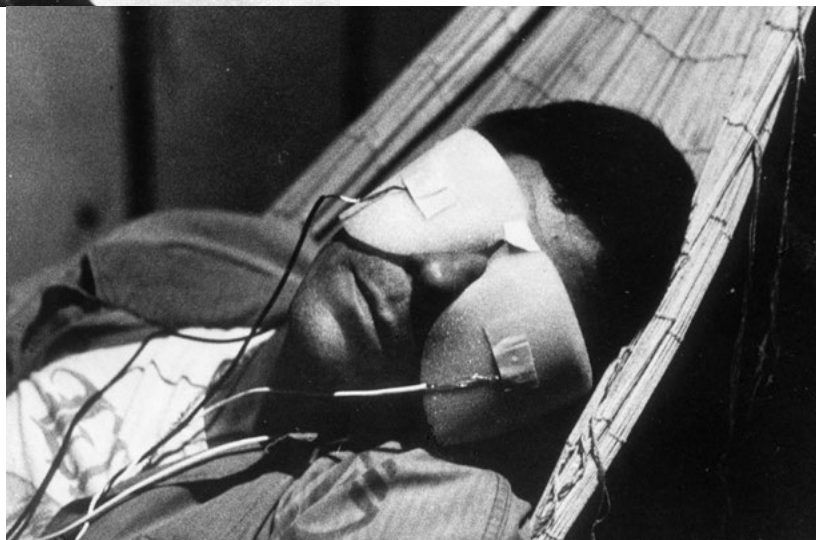
In the category of films of James Dean or Marilyn, this place would be held by *Dracula* (Tod Browning, 1931) or *Return of the Living Dead* (Dan O'Bannon, 1985). But if Dreyer qualifies for the third category is because it is not a pleasure of consolation (Dracula as a myth established in our memory and sensibility), but an advance towards the experience of resurrection. Rather than consolation, there is uneasiness, and the viewer reaches a limit of culture: in a world bereft of transcendence, the question about what lies beyond death still challenges us.

#### Hidenori Okada

Because of the reasons described above, I cannot point at one title and say "that film is a classic". To make a choice in a strict sense is impossible.



*La Jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962)





**4. If we have, in a way of speaking, the films that we deserve as an audience, that is to say, in our condition as a community of spectators, could one affirm that the exceptional nature of the classics today is a symptom of a degraded taste?**

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**José Antonio Pérez-Bowie**

We must not forget that cinema has been since its origins, and still is, a mass art and that the productions to which the label of classic can be applied are not a very significant percentage. The problem is that the universality of the language of the seventh art and its ability to connect with all kinds of audiences mean that the reach of many of these products do not limit their reach to minority groups of cinephiles but have enjoyed a wide reception. It is obvious that economic factors are increasingly decisive in the plans of the film industry, given that the conquest of markets calls for huge investments in the products (and in their essential advertising), which necessarily contributes to their standardisation to reach the greatest number of viewers possible. This effectively means that the exceptional nature of the classics could be considered a symptom of the degradation of audience tastes; but this is not merely a current problem, since it has accompanied cinema (and all forms of artistic expression) throughout its history, although perhaps not to the extent it does today. An eloquent example of this current degradation is undoubtedly the abundance of remakes: with the pretext of a supposed modernisation, classic titles are victims of vulgarising manipulations in which the intimate link between content and form that drove the original is often destroyed.

**Karen Fiss**

There are many audiences, but with few exceptions, only one kind of profit-driven market structure that aligns with current neoliberal economic policies. The same monetization of cultural capital extends to the insane copyright issues that block many a historical documentary from being produced or publicly screened. In our age of social media, the hive makes its preferences and opinions known in numerous ways and on multiple platforms. It's a different kind of community of spectators—not one lulled into false consciousness by seamless Hollywood narrative in dark picture palaces—but people in disparate locations and time zones streaming YouTube or bootleg video. These same disparate individuals can potentially be motivated to support alternative cinema by joining together through crowdsourcing websites. I recently interviewed a young Berlin-based filmmaker who funded her last project by raising ten times more money through a crowdfunding site than the stipend she got from a government film foundation.

**Patricia Keller**

Two problems arise with this question: first, the notion of degraded taste and, second, the concept of community. That the *classic* remains a kind of gold standard throughout different epochs does not necessarily have to be read as testament to the failure or decline in taste, in my opinion. On the contrary, it might very well underscore the notion that tastes have—to some degree and for better or worse—stayed the same. Taking this one step further, I think we could easily say that cinema (arguably like any form of visual art) calls into question notions of “taste,” that is, in other words, that cinema functions as a marker—an identifier rather than a stabilizer—of taste. It reveals to us what tastes are valued, which allows us in turn to interrogate the origins, nature, and pertinence of taste, rather than fixing it in a static or inflexible way.

With cinema, we should remember, there is always the possibility not only for collective production, but also for collective viewing. This collective viewing is only in part conditioned by the object viewed—for collective spectatorship also makes possible new ways of viewing the world and ourselves in it. The notion of “community of spectators” brings to mind Jacques Rancière’s concept, articulated in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2011), which has to do with sense, with viewing something (a photograph, a performance, a theatre production, and we could easily extend this to film) and then having a perceptual experience that in turn affects our relation to the world. Spectators enter into a community not by virtue of collective viewing, but through arriving at new modes of sensing, perceiving, and knowing.

**Gonzalo Aguilar**

I don't think that the question of the classics can be posited within the topic of the degradation: a classic should not be imposed as a canon, but it should be able to resist all adversities. No one would doubt that Homer's *Odyssey* is a classic... but in which forms is it still being read and where is it circulated? Almost all adolescent sagas are based on Homer and on Greek mythology, and Homer must hold his own when a reader moves from *Percy Jackson* to the *original*. What the critic can do is construct reading machines: to show the reason why a film should be watched. And here the notion of a classic is secondary because the main thing is not the work itself, but the readings we build on it.

### Hidenori Okada

I have the impression that, little by little, a generation with little historical conscience is gaining strength. There is an increasing number of people who are close to the cinematic world who, at the same time, make films without thinking that cinema has a history. Nowadays it is becoming more common to have a relationship with cinema as a means of personal expression that does not depend on history. In any case, in cinema there is now only the *present*. The films that circulate as merchandise do so in an established commercial system, where the latest relea-

ses are the ones that should receive the most attention. The situation is definitely not favourable for classic cinema, but even so we cannot deduce that there is a decline in the aesthetic sense of the viewer. One of the aspects that worries me is whether modern films will receive the immutable value that the classic works continue to be given. Will *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013) have the same timeless recognition as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)? Contemporary films increasingly tend to be treated as objects for immediate consumption, but we need to reactivate a discourse that goes beyond this.

## 5. In what sense can the idea of the classic compel us to rethink the future instead of the past of the cinema; in other words, to what extent could the idea of the classic, as “wild thought”, destroy any pretence of authority founded on the history of the cinema?

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### José Antonio Pérez-Bowie

The question prompts various reflections. One relates to the possibility that cinema in its still brief history has yet to consolidate a corpus of masterpieces big enough to serve as irrefutable models for future creators. This is what Eric Rohmer must have thought back in 1949 when, in an article published in the journal *Combat* titled “The Classical Age of Cinema”, he claimed that “the classical age of cinema is not behind us, but ahead”. But I believe we should stop conceiving of the classics along the lines defended by literary tradition through the centuries, as insuperable models worth imitating, and approach them, according to current literary theory, as texts with an inexhaustible capacity to provide meanings that emerge with each reading and make them a constant source of commentary and reflection, as well as serving as a stimulus for creation, to the extent that they allow dialogue, discussion, the refutation or the development of motifs or ideas that appear latent or hinted at in a germinal state. Thus, this idea of the classic as *wild thought* that destroys any pretence of authority, it could be said, although not drastically, is being accomplished in literature, cinema, and other art forms. According to Kermode’s idea mentioned above, the classics have ceased to be objects subject to veneration, a solidified *energeia*, to become *ergon*, living organisms susceptible to readings and multiple interpretations by those who establish a dialogue with them. In the specific field of cinema there is thus no point in speaking of the *irrefutable authority* of the great names of film history, of their consideration as insuperable models, but of the ability they still have to provoke reflection, to deepen our understanding of reality and, in a special way, to serve as a stimulus for new creations, for *rewritings*. It is worth recalling here Borges’ apparently paradoxical recommendation about the need to examine not so much

the influence of the classic writers on current authors as the influence of current authors on the great authors of the past, and to apply this to the task that so enriches our comprehension of the greatest films in history offered by the analyses of contemporary scholars or the works filmed by subsequent filmmakers inspired by those classics.

### Karen Fiss

I still find that I am taken aback when my students report that they have a hard time focusing their attention on many of the films I consider seminal works. They want to be engaged by these films, but complain that they are too *slow*. While cinema may let us *escape time*, I would argue that perhaps one of the ways to value historical films is for exactly the opposite reason – to make us that much more aware of the mediation of our experience in time and space, not only through cinema, but in our daily lives of constant and competing interfaces with technology. On another note, and to return again to the notion of *Jetztzeit*, mining cinema’s histories leave open the possibility for the medium to redeem itself as an agent of memory and change. When organizing the film exhibition *El cine de 1930. Flores azules en un paisaje catastrófico* for the Museo Reina Sofía, which marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Picasso’s *Guernica* and the Spanish Civil War, my title deliberately evoked Benjamin’s reinterpretation of the romanticist Blaue Blume. Oscillating between the irrational and the ideal, between destruction and redemption, the trope signalled a utopian moment in his critical text whereby fragments have the potential to become legible emblems of a “forgotten future”. The film program—which intermingled documentary, newsreel, advertising, animation, industrial, mainstream and experimental film productions—was a historical and conceptual exploration of 1930s cinematic imaginary, while at the same time ac-

knowledge of the relevance of this past turbulent decade for today—as a potential means of imagining alternative futures amidst our current social, economic and political struggles.

#### Patricia Keller

Insofar as classic cinema—like all cinema—is always about replaying (returning to the past) and projection (bringing the past into the present and future through the power of repetition and illumination), it is thus always fundamentally a tension between temporalities. As such, it is always indebted to this dual temporality. We might extend this line of thinking to say that the essentially classic in cinema is therefore also determined by a practice of duration and endurance. Classic cinema operates on the combination of material ephemerality and the non-ephemeral, lasting immateriality of images, the way they persist as images over time in our memory. It might not be a question of authority, but rather of tradition to which the classics might help us turn. They might not dictate the future of cinema, but they undoubtedly have had and will continue to have a hand in shaping that future, of revealing the desires, anxieties, dreams, and realities of the present and future as they are shaped by the past.

#### Gonzalo Aguilar

The idea of a classic has changed, as has the idea of the history of cinema. When I was a lecturer at the Universidad del Cine in the nineties I still felt sheltered by a diachronic vision of the material. When I talked to them about *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), the students had to go to the video club, look for it, watch it that day and give it a place in their experience. Now in the new century, the film is in the air, on wi-fi, and coexists not only with other films, but with texts, video clips, photos, information on Facebook

or Twitter, etc. The whole history of cinema became synchronic: what, then, would a classic be in that ocean of permanent contemporaneity? A film that offers us a more intense experience? If it were, much of the battle to become a classic would take place online, and the task of web users who support the classics would be to find them a space and a context that would make them more present than the present itself. For the critical word, this would be no small task.

#### Hidenori Okada

For example, in Japan there was a director called Torajirō Saitō, who was a genius of absurd comedy. Although he worked until the fifties, he is said to have achieved his greatest absurd humour in his first films in the silent era, from the late twenties to the early thirties. As most of his first works no longer exist, the legend of his genius was cut short, but the few works that have been discovered in recent years have shown, one by one, the extraordinary quality of his gags. When watching them it is not unusual to think of them as *old* cinema, with a style of depiction that nowadays is dismissed as excessively free. But with the passage of time, the development of film techniques has not necessarily entailed an evolution in creativity. The cinema of the past can enlighten the present, and this is a very provocative thought when considering the future of cinema. Returning to the classics is always a very effective instrument for measuring our creativity. I don't think our sensibility is going to deteriorate, as there should always be people who understand its true value. However, when we think of the perpetuation of cinema as an industry, there is an increasing tendency towards the simple, towards extolling the *superficial*. My hope is that keener attention will be given to the difference between these two values. ■

# \_conclusion

Javier Alcoriza

Opening a discussion about the need to return to the classics of cinema brings with it the difficulty of closing it. The question about the need for the classics was, first and foremost, a question about the existence of the classics themselves, about the definition of a classic, and secondly, a question about whether they are necessary; a question about the need for something, as when a critic would claim that a book is worthless unless it is worth a lot, or that if a book is not worth reading twice it is not worth reading once. In a first, perhaps highly superficial but nonetheless indispensable attempt to answer, we can conclude that the classics are those films that we have to watch again or, at least, that we have watched with the indelible feeling that it should not be the only time we watch them. Thus, the classics make a timeless demand for our attention, based on the inclination to consider them *eternal*, even though, or precisely because—as has been highlighted in our discussion—they are deeply rooted in the materiality of the factors that affect their production. Whether we come back to the films or it is them that come back to us, the truth is that the label of classic tends to be applied not so much to a work as to a moment or moments of a work, because of the ability of cinema to transfuse the present of a film's reality with the present of our viewing. Pauline Kael said there are good things in bad films. The demand for the classic label, which might indeed overwhelm us with its echoes of *studia humanitatis*, has been made extraordinarily light because of the way cinema reactivates our faith in artistic languages. "Classic" would be a metaphor for the eternal revealed through the experience of watching certain films. In a manner of speaking, we have moved from the weight of our heritage to a razor's edge. The substance of the classics shrinks under our gaze, and cinema, like any art form that has been alive in the past,

humanizes us in unexpected and wonderful ways. Beneath this “new, as yet unattainable” lightness, there persists the responsibility to know that the world could have been different from what the screens have shown us. When we see the shaken look of James Stewart as George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life!* (Frank Capra, 1946), we remember the dual responsibility that we have as viewers, first to suspend and then to recover our disbelief about what we have watched. Emerson said we are “natural believers”, but also that he knew that the realities with which he conversed were not the same ones about which he thought. Through cinema we inhabit two worlds, and with the notion of the classic we set our feet once more on the ground after having let them wander among its ghosts. The old comic actor points it out to his convalescent friend in *Limelight* (Charles Chaplin, 1952): “This is the greatest toy ever created... Here lies the secret of all happiness”. Finally, once the material of the classic has turned into education for our gaze, if this has been possible, if cinema has made it possible, we must deconstruct the second question and read it in a rhetorical sense as if, indeed,

there was no need to return to the classics of cinema once we recognise them. Why would we need to return to that which naturally forms part of our experience with the worlds of art? The compelling nature of the classics would not make us return, but recognise that we have already been in certain places or times or films where we have had to learn to familiarise ourselves with things that we thought we knew. There is nothing like a classic film to free us of the “baggage of the habitual”. These unaccustomed explorers, as the precursors to the domestication of the cinematic culture knew, would also be, along the endless road of exchange between aesthetics and politics, the citizens and viewers of the democracy we want to live in. ■

#### Notes

\* The introduction and questions in Spanish have been translated into English by Laura Alcoriza and the statements in Spanish by Gonzalo Aguilar, José Antonio Pérez Bowie and Hidenori Okada, as well as the conclusion, have been translated into English by Paula Saiz Hontangas and reviewed by Martin Boyd.

*Limelight* (Charles Chaplin, 1952) / Courtesy of Savor Ediciones S. L.



**Javier Alcoriza** (Valencia, 1969) holds a BA in Philosophy and in Art History from the Universitat València, and a PhD in Philosophy from the Universidad de Murcia. In addition to working as a translator and editor of more than thirty works for different Spanish publishers, he is also the author of various books, including *La experiencia política americana. Un ensayo sobre Henry Adams* (Biblioteca Nueva, 2005), *La democracia de la vida: Notas sobre una metáfora ética* (Verbum, 2009), *La patria invisible: Judaísmo y ética de la literatura* (Hebraica Ediciones, 2010), *Educación la mirada. Lecciones sobre la historia del pensamiento* (Psylicom, 2012), *El tigre de Hircania. Ensayos de lectura creativa* (Plaza y Valdés, 2012) and *Látigos de escorpiones. Un ensayo sobre el arte de la interpretación* (forthcoming). He was Professor of Philosophy at the Universitat València from 2009 to 2013, has co-directed two periodicals, *Caracteres literarios* (1997-2005) and *La Torre del Virrey. Revista de estudios culturales* (2005-2009) and has contributed to a wide range of books on cinema, including, *La filosofía y el cine* (Verbum, 2002), *Estudios sobre cine* (Verbum, 2004), *Ingmar Bergman, buscador de perlas* (Morphos, 2008), and *Stanley Cavell, mundos vistos y ciudades de palabras* (Plaza y Valdés, 2010).

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