

Reviews

• Gary Bettinson

Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, Routledge, 2004. ISBN: 0-415-17290-X

Of the various contributors to Routledge's National Cinema series, Yingjin Zhang is faced with one of the more problematic tasks. The principal spectre that threatens Zhang's undertaking also looms above the conception of the series as a whole: namely, the very postulation of the national cinema taxonomy, which hazards to appear not only narrowly provincial but also anachronistic in the contemporary context of globalisation and transnationality. Quite aside from the issue of globalisation, moreover, Zhang must reckon with the intra-national tensions and discontinuities that mark the Chinese nation, a country so multifarious that any monolithic articulation of the national is surely put out of reach. Historiography has consolidated the existence of 'three Chinas' (The People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), and in the past twenty years film studies has generally followed suit, demarcating three distinct if related cinemas that offer separate expressions of 'Chineseness'. Film scholars and historians have undermined any unitary paradigm of the national in Chinese cinema by noting the divisions – historical, political, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic – that mark the three Chinas off from one another. Add to this the variegations within *each territory, as well as the dispersal of the national across the global Chinese diaspora, and a coherent definition of Chineseness appears impossibly elusive and abstruse.*

Zhang's present study, all the more important for being one of the few authoritative histories of Chinese cinema to be published in English, squares up to the inherent difficulties involved in bringing Chinese national cinema into focus. The author's twin aim, which is in turn descriptive and exploratory, is to provide a chronological

history of Chinese cinema as it has developed in all three territories, and to excavate an image of the national that can accommodate the kinds of fundamental disunities described above. To this end, Zhang undertakes to map out the 'parallel, divergent and diverse developments in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan' (11). His overall strategy is to marry a diachronic and comparative perspective with a critical approach, examining the significant trends to have emerged from Chinese film in the last century. Much of the book's effectiveness proceeds from its skilful interweaving of these methodologies. Critical analysis allows Zhang to explore the emergence and transformation of stylistic, generic, and thematic norms. Historical exegesis situates the explicit and referential meanings of specific films within their precise socio-historical contexts. And a comparative approach lays bare the strained interactions that have typically characterised the relationship between the three interlocking cinemas.

Comparative analysis also enables Zhang to demonstrate a thesis that will answer the second of his principal inquiries (to articulate the national in Chinese cinema). In light of what he calls the 'messiness' of China and its indigenous cinema, and despite the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party to promote the image of unification, Zhang challenges the assumption that all inhabitants of the three Chinas are cut from the same national cloth. Consequently, Zhang argues that the 'Chinese' in 'Chinese cinema' cannot be conceptualised in holistic terms but must instead be reformulated as the sum aggregate of Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and mainland cinemas. What emerges therefore is not only the re-assertion of three distinct yet equally 'Chinese' cinemas, but also a corollary vision of the national that recognises the competing representations imaged by each of the three Chinas. As such, an exemplum of the national is not to be found in any single Chinese film, but rather arises from a collective

subjectivity that is socially, politically, and historically contingent. The book's comparative framework, then, permits Zhang to juxtapose the images of the national that are reciprocally contested within Chinese cinema(s), to lay out overlapping trends and parallels, and to demonstrate that the unitary model of national cinema is ultimately exceeded in the case of Chinese film, which negotiates the multiple voices laying claim to authentic Chineseness.

If there is a limitation in Zhang's approach, it is that, for the most part, his comparative framework is too narrowly parochial. This is not to reproach Zhang for adhering to his project's governing circumscription, that is, the focus on a specific *national* terrain. But because Zhang rarely strays outside the parameters of Chinese film, the developments and achievements of this domestic cinema are hardly assessed in the context of world cinema. By casting an occasional glance toward parallel developments in European and American filmmaking, we might achieve a clearer perspective on the growth and progress of Chinese film, both in terms of film history and of cinematic representations of the national. Compare, for example, the radically divergent activities taking place in French and mainland Chinese cinema when the likes of Godard and Truffaut were redefining cinema aesthetics. In comparison with the modernism of the *nouvelle vague*, the maturation of Chinese cinema looks even more seriously to have been obstructed by the Communist stranglehold on film production. A sustained exploration of the ontology of film did not take place in Chinese cinema until the immediate post-Mao era (twenty years after *A bout de souffle*), following a polemical article by two Chinese critics influenced by André Bazin. By casting the net of comparison a little wider, moreover, we may also arrive at a new appreciation of the Chinese realist filmmakers of the 1930s. In pursuit of verisimilitude, these innovative filmmakers introduced a set of formal techniques that would subsequently be employed more systematically by the Italian neo-realists. As a result of Zhang's somewhat hermetic approach to his subject, then, we are not furnished with an orienting

sense of how far, at any given time, Chinese cinema corresponded with the major advances being made within world cinema in general.

Nor does Zhang slacken his limited ambit to examine the internationally-circulated image of the Chinese nation. Neither the images of Chineseness cultivated in Hollywood texts by cross-over stars (such as Michelle Yeoh and Jackie Chan), nor their degree of correspondence with the kinds of national image promulgated within indigenous film production, are taken up for discussion. Closer to home, Zhang neglects to investigate the image of Chineseness that is self-consciously contrived for transnational packaging, and which accompanies contemporary films like *Infernal Affairs* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Furthermore, given the flourishing star system in the Mandarin and Cantonese film industries, it is surprising that Zhang does not address the star text in terms of its personification of the national. Possibly Zhang feels that Chinese stars have received sufficient attention elsewhere, but the brevity of discussion devoted to Bruce Lee, for example, is hardly commensurate with the star's status in the histories of Hong Kong and world cinema. One cannot help but think these areas significant for a study explicitly preoccupied with issues of national identity.

Despite its rigidly delimited scope, Zhang's study remains a valuable and timely contribution to the contemporary discourse on Chinese film. The book serves as an impressive companion piece to Zhang's earlier *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (co-authored by Zhiwei Xiao), both volumes doing much to compensate for the relative paucity of English-language reference texts on Chinese cinema history. Of particular value to the field is Zhang's empirical investigation of market factors and historical reception. While recent literature on Chinese film has tended to focus on text-based issues of representation and national allegory, the area of audience consumption has been little attended to: *Chinese National Cinema* usefully redresses the balance. It is to be hoped that Zhang's study encourages further investigation into the remarkable history of Chinese cinema. (Still underdeveloped is the area

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of early Chinese cinema, the research into which has long been hindered by historians' lack of access to early film prints.) In the meantime, while it prepares the way for future explorations into Chinese national cinema and identity, Zhang's commendable text is certain to be much consulted and admired.

- Steven Peacock

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*, The John Hopkins University Press, 2004. ISBN: 0-8018-7840-3

In his review of Claude Chabrol's 1995 film *The Ceremony* (*La Cérémonie*), Jonathan Rosenbaum provides an indicative passage of criticism:

The plot of *The Ceremony* is fairly simple, but it's also full of ambiguity – something that corresponds at times to the elegant *mise-en-scène*. The very first shot, for example, follows Sophie Bonhomie (Sandrine Bonnaire) as she crosses the street toward the camera, turns to the left, enters a café, and is greeted by Catherine Lelièvre (Jacqueline Bisset), who calls her over. . . What makes it ambiguous is that it seems like an objective shot filmed from the approximate vantage point of Catherine, who's sitting inside the café watching Sophie approach through the plate-glass window. It isn't until the shot is more than half over that we glimpse Catherine in the foreground and realize that what we're seeing is subjective. (pp. 58–59).

Rosenbaum connects the confusion of vantage points to the film's shifting moral positions, leading to his central claim that "The brilliance of Chabrol's movie rests precisely in this dialectical ambivalence" (p. 60). The charge of *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* stems from its interest in forms of ambiguity; its achievements and challenges rest precisely in planes of dialectical ambivalence.

The polemical aims of the work seem clear enough, as pronounced in the standard-bearing title. The critical voices of each review collect in a rallying cry, as Rosenbaum calls attention to, and for attention to be paid to, the 'outlawed' notion of the canon. In and out of school, the writer

notes a disinclination to consider, order and re-order the ranks of film art, from academics clad in the irons of film theory, to the American Film Institute and "ill informed" studio publicists (p. xvi). Acknowledging the profound influence of prior works, in particular Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* and Andrew Sarris' *The American Directors*, Rosenbaum offers a further, grand gesture of classification. He asserts not only the necessity of the canon in shaping critical and cultural debate about film, but also the need for a re-organisation of the guiding principles of the canon. Rosenbaum's new catalogue of filmic achievement includes "non-Western" works alongside familiar Hollywood masterworks. Moreover, the writer identifies and collapses a set of false oppositions, between "art" and "entertainment", "cultural" and "literary" worth. Querying the Academy's lack of interest in matters of evaluation, Rosenbaum offers reproach as re-approach, equally sceptical of the prescribed organisation and definition of film's canons. Whilst retaining traditional criteria of aesthetic value, the book posits a renegotiation of status.

The measures of ambiguity that inform the structure and approach of the work at once obscure and calcify its aims. First, having clearly and precisely outlined a set of aims, Rosenbaum clusters sets of films into loosely organised groupings. A short paragraph hints at possible connections and 'general inquiries' (p. xix), and although the chapter headings recall the taut banners of Sarris's pantheon ranks – "Classics", "Special Problems", "Disputable Contenders" – the particular relationship between the films within the sections remains undeclared. Equally, the book refrains from providing an elucidation (or 'cataloguing') of the criteria informing its discriminations and evaluations. Rather, the viewer-as-reader is called upon to find precise connections and a patterning of evaluative vocabulary, to discern the nature of the book's claims. This putative methodological omission may be one of the work's greatest strengths. Immediately, the reader is encouraged to adopt an active role in the critical process; the precision, cohesion and coherence of the book

depends on our own careful scrutiny of the order and position of its judgements.

This relationship binds reader and reviewer together; as Rosenbaum tests and refines his understanding of the particular merits and achievements of his chosen group of films, we check his experience against our own. As a crucial measure of the value of criticism, we can adjudge whether or not the words of the critic unlock meanings of the works at hand, in turn enriching our appreciation of film and films. As in his previous works – *Placing Movies* (1995), *Movies as Politics* (1997) – Rosenbaum draws together existing reviews, mostly taken from the *Chicago Reader*, from 1988 to 2002. Across the chapters, the reviews focus on three categories of films and points of focus: revisiting established classics of the cinema (including *Greed*, *M*, *Rear Window*); testing the value of modern “disputed” classics (*Nashville*, *Fargo*, *Eyes Wide Shut*); and drawing attention to overlooked (master)works (*Sátántangó*, *The Ceremony*, *Archangel*). As befits an approach of close critical analysis, Rosenbaum’s writing is at its best when dealing with particular details and accomplishments, rather than attempting to encapsulate the essence of a film, or a director’s body of work. His consideration of *Rear Window* is exemplary; Rosenbaum achieves a critical examination of a well-known work that is at once fresh and insightful, skilfully and fruitfully combining “cultural” and “literary” modes of evaluation as set out in the introduction. The decision to concentrate on individual details or understandings – the “comic strip” aspect of *Rear Window* (p. 27) – is well judged, allowing for precise discriminations and illuminative interpretations. The merit of Rosenbaum’s critical discoveries lessens when the net is cast wider, in “catch-all” considerations of lighting, editing, and the focus of camera and character (pp. 28–29).

Across his alternative canon, Rosenbaum sees ambiguity as key to the achievements of individual works. Alongside his claims for Chabrol’s *The Ceremony*, the writer draws attention to corresponding aspects of dialectical ambivalence in, amongst others, Terrence Malick’s *The Thin*

Red Line, Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*, and Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. In a series of taut articles, Rosenbaum points up the significance of Malick’s investigation of the hesitancy between abstract and particular, the ugly beauty of *Breaking the Waves*, and the beguiling irresolution of ideas in Spielberg and Kubrick’s sci-fi vision. Claiming as meaningful these films’ attention to ambiguities, Rosenbaum looks to reshape abiding definitions of a “masterpiece”: “Calling a movie a masterpiece is in some cases little more than an impatient desire to close off discussion of its ambiguities and uncertainties, to deny that it’s a living, and therefore evolving, work of art” (p. 272).

Fortunately, a concentration on ambivalence and ambiguity, on clash and equivocity, does not mean a recourse to vague expression or the obfuscation of technical language. Rosenbaum’s writing is unshackled from the jargon favoured by many contemporary scholars of film; instead, the writer provides clear, precise arguments, resisting reductive analysis, leaving the way open for individual evaluation. This point leads to a final plane of ambiguity, recalling the concerns of the opening passage of criticism, on the hesitation in *La Cérémonie* between understanding a viewpoint as subjective or objective. As in his previous works, most notably *Moving Places: A Life at the Movies* (1980), Rosenbaum places great emphasis on the personal nature of his project, calling attention to his experiences of film as profoundly subjective. Moreover, in *Essential Cinema*, the writer takes great pains to distinguish between the book’s “process of canonization”, and the “1000 favourites” list that serves as a “personal and provisional” coda to the text (p. xix). The nature of the distinction, however, remains unclear. In studying the list of personal favourites, the reader cannot help but judge the films against those in the preceding chapters, searching for connections and family resemblances amongst the titles and groupings. Rather than as a personal project, the true strength of the book lies in its encouragement of the *collaborative* process of criticism. In proposing an alternative canonical system,

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Rosenbaum places emphasis on the act and art of critical judgements. And, as F. R. Leavis reminds us:

[A] critical judgement has the form, "This is so, isn't it?" And the concurrence appealed for must be real, or it serves no critical purpose. . . What, of its very nature, the critical activity aims at, in fact, is an exchange, a collaborative exchange, a corrective and creative interplay of judgements. For though my judgement asks to be confirmed and appeals for agreement that the thing is so, the response I expect at best will be of the form, "Yes, but-", the "but" standing for qualifications, corrections, shifts of

emphasis, additions, refinements. The process of personal judgement from its very outset, of course, is in subtle ways essentially collaborative. (Leavis, 1969, p. 47).

In checking and expressing his experience of the films, Rosenbaum is making discoveries, and, in turn, inviting others to make discoveries of their own. There will, inevitably, be cries of 'élitism' directed towards the aims and approach of this important book. Yet, in repeatedly and successfully placing the reader's response at the heart of the project, Rosenbaum democratises the critical process.

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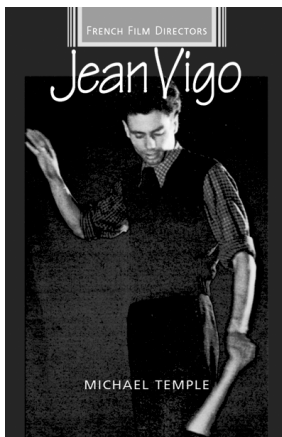
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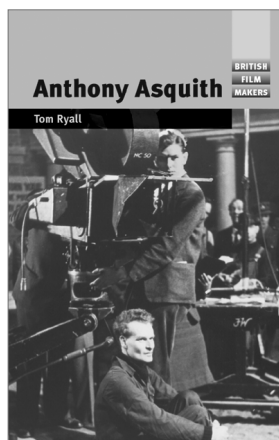
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Asquith's silent films were compared favourably to those of his eminent contemporary Alfred Hitchcock, but his career faltered during the 1930s. However, the success of *Pygmalion* (1938) and *French Without Tears* (1939), based on plays by George Bernard Shaw and Terence Rattigan respectively, together with his significant contributions to wartime British cinema, re-established him as one of Britain's leading film-makers. Asquith's post-war career includes several pictures in collaboration with Terence Rattigan, and the definitive adaptation of Oscar Wilde – *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1951) – but his versatility is demonstrated effectively in a number of modest genre films including *The Woman in Question* (1950), *The Young Lovers* (1954), and *Orders to Kill* (1958).

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