The *Sight and Sound* Poll and Eastern European Cinema

The *Sight and Sound* polls for the Best Films of all times, conducted from 1952 every decade, are an important barometer of changes in the cinematic tastes of broadly understood specialists: film critics and, in due course, filmmakers. Such judgement is not entirely subjective and neither does it reflect an objective aesthetic value of films. It is shaped by changes in cinema itself; resulting, for example, from evolutions in technology and film distribution, and many extra-cinematic factors, such as political events, as well as age, gender, race and national and regional loyalties of the judges, or their lack thereof, to list only some of the factors.

The latest *Sight and Sound* poll for the Best 100 Films of all times, published in December 2022, attracted much attention, at least online, with commentators highlighting the difference in results from previous polls. The most revolutionary change was the de-crowning of *Vertigo* (1958) by Alfred Hitchcock, which is now number 2 on the list, by *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) by Chantal Akerman. This is the first time a female filmmaker has taken the number one spot since the poll's inception. *Jeanne Dielman* appeared on the previous poll, but its jump of 35 places from the 2012 poll is remarkable. Another difference across the poll is the large proportion – in comparison with previous polls – of films made by women. Apart from two films by Akerman - the second being *News from Home* (1976) - we also find films by Claire Denis, Maya Deren, Agnès Varda, Julie Dash, and Věra Chytilová. Relatively new films also found their way into the first 100 rankings, including *Parasite* (2019), directed by Bong Joon-ho in 90th position, *Moonlight* (2016), directed by Barry Jenkins (60th) and *Portrait of A Lady on Fire* (2019), directed by Céline Sciamma (30th). Films made by Black and Asian directors also did well, as exemplified by the successes of Bong Joon-ho and Jenkins, in addition to Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki. The last poll also stablished two directors at the forefront of what can be regarded as classics of postmodern cinema: David Lynch and Wong Kar-Wai. Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) reached 8th place and Wong's *In the Mood For Love* (2000), entering the top 10 in 5th, and each of these two directors also have a second film on the list. Their films are gaining in (critical) significance.

On the other hand, a notable difference from earlier incarnations of the poll is the departure of many classics, such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Raging Bull*, *Rio Bravo* alongside the disappearance of films from such directors as Nicholas Ray, Ernst Lubitsch, Luis Buñuel, or Robert Altman. Equally, films from many important younger directors, such as Pedro Almodóvar, Lars von Trier or Paul Thomas Anderson, also failed to reach the first hundred best films.

By and large, the dominance of films made by white European and American male directors in such 'best of' tables is coming to its end. This is reflected not only by *Jeanne Dielman* being promoted to the top position, but the demotion of the work of many giants of cinema. In particular, Jean-Luc Godard, whose death in 2022 might have previously occasioned a boost to the profile of his works and who dominated the 2012 poll with 4 films in the first 50 - has now only one film in the first half of the list, *À bout de souffle* (1960) in 38th position; this being some 24 places behind its placing in 2012, and 24 places in the current poll behind *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962) by Varda, who was arguably honoured with such a high ranking because her work is perceived as classic of women's cinema, rather than because it belongs to the French New Wave.

From our perspective, of greatest interest are the positions of films representing the territory of Eastern European cinema and the old Soviet bloc. The status of films from this region in the last S&S poll has significantly diminished. We can only find two films from Eastern Europe (excluding the old Soviet Union): *Daisies* (1966) by Chytilová in 28th place and *Sátántangó* (1994) by Béla Tarr in 78th place. While we should celebrate the success of Chytilová and Tarr, it is worth noting that Tarr's film was effectively demoted from the stronger 36th place it held in 2012. In this respect, his position follows that of Krzysztof Kieslowski, whose *Decalogue* was included in the 2002 poll, in 69th place, to disappear altogether by 2012. Moreover, *Daisies* probably functions on this list more as a representative of feminist cinema, than as a representative of Eastern European, Czechoslovak and Czech cinema. A notable absence is also Polanski's *Chinatown*, which was present in the 2002 and 2012 polls but, by 2022, disappeared from the critics' poll, although retained its position on the directors' poll.

Other notable changes concern Russian and Soviet cinema. The highest position of a film from this region is *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), at number 9. Dziga Vertov's film, the highest place held by a documentary film, almost retained its earlier position, which was 8th in 2012. However, other Russian and Soviet films did relatively badly. *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein - which was once voted the best film of all time - slipped to 54th position. This follows the slow downhill trajectory of this film in the canon of global cinema, given that, in 2012, it was in 11th position, and in 7th in 2002. Other Russian/Soviet films which made it into the poll were two films by Andrei Tarkovsky: *Andrei Rublev* at 67 and *Mirror* at 31. There are no Russian films dating from after the fall of the Soviet Union on this list, despite many of this body of work having been pronounced as masterpieces, such as the films by Andrei Zvagyntsev, including *The Return* (2003), *Elena* (2011) and *Leviathan* (2014).

The changes to the poll results can be explained by many factors. On some I can only speculate, but speculation is allowed here. One of them is an immense expansion of the voter pool, from 800, who voted in 2012, to over 1600 voters in 2022. The new pool of critics covers a wider geographic area, preventing the choices being Western-centric to the extent that this was probable in earlier pools. It is also worth mentioning at this juncture that, when the first poll was conducted in 1952, the history of cinema was less than 60 years. Now it is over 120 years. Across this period not only were many masterpieces made, but also several generations of critics and historians entered – and exited - the stage. Inevitably, contemporary judges/voters are aware of a different history of film to that with which earlier generations were familiar, more likely knowing more recent films better than the older canons of work. We also access films differently today, even when compared to the recent past of the only a decade or so agowith 'classics' being most likely viewed on DVD or VOD platforms rather than on a cinema screen. Hence, it is more difficult to argue about forgotten gems, which are overlooked by critics, because many more obscure films are available now than it was the case in the past.

Other factors for emerging patterns across the poll might be, broadly speaking, political. One socio-political concerns the promotion of the ideas of diversity and inclusivity, by ensuring that representatives of specific, typically previously marginalised or persecuted groups, are represented. In practice it means a quota system – making sure that the list includes a film made by a member of this group. The question is what minority groups are regarded as important enough to be included in the system. Women belong to them, because female directors are still a minority. We can conjecture that a large chunk of critics polled made their lists with the intention of including at least one female filmmaker within their list of ten. It is likely that they chose *Jeanne Dielman*, which functions as a feminist classic, ensuring Akerman's film winning the poll. This also explains the high positions of Varda, Denis and 'our' Chytilová, whose *Daisies* likewise enjoys the status of a classic. Similarly, the BLM movement most likely made many voters keen – or at least compelled - to include films made by Black directors.

We can further speculate that Eastern Europeans no longer hold the position of a marginalised or persecuted minority, being largely incorporated into western economic and political 'Bund' structures, such as the EU and NATO; which to some extent explains the previous successes of Kieslowski and his disappearance from the list. As a colleague from Poland put it to me in correspondence, we as 'others', became replaced by more deserving or exotic 'others'. With Russia, the situation is even more profound, as the war in Ukraine resulted in widespread – and often successful - calls to boycott numerous examples of Russian and Soviet art and culture, ranging from giants of classical music, such as

Tschaikovsky and Stravinsky, to the series of stories for pre-school children, inspired by a folk-tale, *Masha and the Bear*. This deplatforming of all things Russia might account for the demotion of Eisenstein and the absence of contemporary Russian films, which are associated with Russian imperialism. By contrast, the excellent position of *Man with a Movie Camera* can be explained by the fact that the film was commissioned by the Ukraine State Studio, and its author, a Jew born in Białystok, a city currently belonging to Poland, whose adopted name translates loosely from Ukrainian as 'spinning top', can be reclaimed as Ukrainian or, at least, non-Russian artist. This cannot be said about Eisenstein, who, although also Jewish and born outside the current territory of Russia, in Riga, cannot be reclaimed as Latvian in the same way Vertov can be perceived as Ukrainian. Political issues, most importantly the rise of #MeToo movement, is also a probable factor in the demotion of Polanski's *Chinatown*, given Polanski's statutory rape of Samantha Geimer and flight from prosecution in the United States in the 1970s attracted much new attention and condemnation during the last decade and the half.

All these reasons do not change the fact that a film has to be outstanding to reach the 100 best films of all time in this poll. However, during the 120 years-plus of cinema's existence, many more than 100 masterpieces have been produced. Choosing ten films, as I'm sure all polled people felt, including myself, constitutes a painful task of leaving aside plenty of films one loves, and using some additional criteria to come up with the ten films we were required to provide. As I mentioned earlier, some of these criteria might be entirely subjective, for example reflecting watching a film at hand in a particular time and place, but others might reflect the current political and cultural reality.

We should also note that this poll reflects the tastes and predilections of specialists, rather than ordinary viewers or, for that matter, film fans. If such polls were created on the basis of box office results or streaming data we would receive very different results with, to be blunt, Akerman's film most likely failing to reach the top hundred, whilst films made by white men, such as Hitchcock, Kubrick, Spielberg, and Polanski, doing much better than they did inthe critics' poll. An interesting question raised is whether these polls, over the decades, have converged or diverged from the popular taste. My feeling is that this poll in particular has moved further away from the popular sentiments of filmgoers, but I have only anecdotal evidence to support such a claim.

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