



Lessons from the "never-ending film school": (top left, clockwise) *Blue Velvet*; Krzysztof Kieslowski; *Pulp Fiction*; Alfred Hitchcock.

Reinventing The Reel

Mark Cousins' mammoth series *The Story Of Film* is warm, far-reaching and utterly original. Here's all 900 minutes of it

THE STORY OF FILM: AN ODYSSEY

Starring Gus Van Sant, Lars Von Trier, Bernardo Bertolucci and a cast of thousands.

Directed by Mark Cousins (2012) NETWORK



By Ali Catterall

IN MARK COUSINS' EPIC AND altogether wonderful *The Story Of Film*, the critic singles out the 1990s as an especially golden age for cinema. Whether or not you agree with him – and he makes a good argument – what's in no doubt whatsoever is that it was an absolute boom time for film, and film shows, on terrestrial telly. It seems unthinkable now, but there was a glittering period back then when the *Radio Times* listings read like the curriculum for a particularly adventurous Film Studies course. Certainly, this generation's film critics received much of their education via the small screen at silly o'clock in the morning – in thrall to a Movie-drome double-bill, a Moving Pictures special or something highly unusual on Channel 4. The days of those serendipitous late-night discoveries, breeding lifelong romances and piles of VHS tapes, seem so very long ago.

During an era, then, in which television typically treats film like a job-lot of shiny baubles it needs to get rid of quickly, the mere existence of *The Story Of Film* feels like something

of a miraculous throwback. As if to acknowledge its own anomaly, it all but tiptoed into the schedules last September on the digital More4 – not even on the mother channel itself, which tells you everything you need to know about that once-great broadcaster – with an almost total absence of fanfare or fuss. As taciturn, in fact, as Cousins' own lilt-ing tones (next to Tom Paulin, the thinking pop-culture junkie's impersonation of choice).

That distinctive voice, unobtrusive yet quietly persuasive – and firmly behind the camera, letting thousands of images speak for themselves – is perfectly suited to this project, now available on DVD. (And if, like this reviewer, you decide to watch all 15 hours of it in one go, don't be surprised when the next time you venture out of the house the world appears to have turned into one gigantic film set.)

Cousins sets out his stall from the off. Contrary to popular belief, cinema isn't driven by money or marketing, he insists, but ideas: "The money men don't know the secrets of the human

heart." And over the course of the next 900 minutes he explains how visual ideas and innovations were introduced, discredited and picked up again by successive generations of filmmakers in a never-ending film school. Some pupils have been more attentive than others: here's what Welles learned from Howard Hawks; what Spielberg learned from Hitchcock; what Tarantino learned, or rather "borrowed" from Ringo Lam's *City On Fire*. Biggest class swot, as ever, is Martin Scorsese, whose homework has always been so diligent it's a wonder fellow directors haven't scrawled "Teacher's Pet" on the back of his jacket in chalk.

It's particularly concerned with rescuing unsung reputations – for example, the hugely important role women played during the early days of Hollywood as directors, screenwriters, and even studio bosses like Alice Guy, in what is generally considered a boys club. Iran, meanwhile, "is the only country in the world where the founding filmic father (Forough Farrokhzad) is a mother".

We come to understand the connection between film style and politics (in a nutshell, realism = left-wing), and how film can "speak truth to power": Kieslowski's *A Short Film About Killing* helped abolish Poland's death penalty. And generally, as much time is afforded to world cinema and post-colonial "Third Cinema" as those movements and movies closer to home, such as the French new wave or *Star Wars*: when Luke turns off his X-Wing's sat-nav and allows the Force to guide him, "the knight learns to feel rather than think... which, in a way, is what happened to American cinema in general during the 1970s".

This isn't some dry lecture (and it sure ain't Slavoj Žižek), but an accessible, if subjective, examination. Hitchcock "was the greatest image maker of the 20th century – more significant even than Pablo Picasso". And, all power to him, Cousins immediately gives us seven reasons why he thinks this is. Yet certain potted lyrical descriptions and observations are so right: Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is a "charcoal down-pour"; "We float into David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* like a spaceship landing on Earth."

This superb piece of work – and serious kudos, incidentally, to its producer John Archer and editor Timo Langer – concludes that "the future of cinema is in provocative hands". And with brilliant, passionate archivists like Cousins working in the field, we may also surmise that the future of film criticism is too. ■

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