

In Response to the AFI: Top 100 American Films by Women Directors

By Erin Hill and Brian Hu

In 1998, the American Film Institute celebrated the centenary of cinema by announcing its list of the 100 greatest American films of all time. Needless to say, their list, topped by Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, sparked more than a little controversy. The AFI responded that dissent was exactly their mission: their list was meant to elicit discussion about a century of American cinema.

However, *Chicago Reader* critic Jonathan Rosenbaum was one of the few commentators bold or astute enough to pinpoint the AFI list's *real* mission: to get viewers of the AFI's CBS TV special to go out and view all of these movies again. Rosenbaum draws attention to the "holy or unholy alliance of the AFI, Blockbuster Video, CBS, TNT, Turner Classic Movies, and the home-video division of 13 film studios," all of which had financial incentives for revitalizing interest in their classic film libraries. His main point is that the American Film Institute's list is more a product of "corporate greed" than any cultural reflection, and so he came up with his own alternate list of 100 American films, many of which were not distributed by the major studios, and of those that were, many at that time were not available on home video.ⁱ

Nine years later, it looks like Rosenbaum's list, predictably, had little impact on public demand, and even less on the AFI's criteria for their "10th anniversary edition" of their original list, to be announced the night of June 20, 2007. Like any DVD anniversary edition, this list promises to sell the same product to the same consumers, with a few updates to re-whet the public's appetite.

Mediascape took a look at the AFI's ballot of 400 eligible films, and instead of writing the usual criticism against canonization, bad taste, or corporatization, decided to "review" the AFI's new list with a top 100 of its own. Of the 400 films on the ballot sent to AFI voters, only 4 were directed by women. (Five if you include *Shrek*, which was co-directed by a woman.) Does that mean that women are inferior directors? Hardly. Does that mean that women have been kept out of the director's chair? Yes and no. What our list aims to demonstrate is that, while women have certainly faced sexism in Hollywood, both in and outside of the mainstream American film industry (which the AFI list represents almost exclusively), women directors have made extraordinary achievements in filmmaking. But *100 films*? That's the challenge we put to several dozen film scholars, filmmakers, and movie buffs.

From their responses, we compiled a list of the 100 greatest American films directed or co-directed by women. What we discovered was that there are indeed many great American films by women—in fact, many more—but to come to this realization, one must alter how we define such terms as "great," "American," and "films."

We'll start with the last term. The AFI list is limited to feature narrative films—a format traditionally monopolized by Hollywood—at the exclusion of documentaries,

experimental films, or shorts, formats in which women directors have traditionally excelled. For that reason, we opened our list to non-narrative films and video works. While our intention was never to rank our top 100 list, it's worth noting that our top vote-getter was Maya Deren's 1943 experimental short *Meshes of the Afternoon* (co-directed by Alexander Hammid). Deren's film may not be very well-known to mainstream audiences, but it's generally accepted among film buffs and historians as perhaps the most influential work of the American avant-garde. But if we play by the AFI's rules for how to define "film," Deren's landmark work won't see a spike in Netflix rentals, as *Citizen Kane* certainly will after June 20th.

Any attempt to define "American" will certainly be problematic, so we at *Mediascape* had no intention of doing so. Officially, we defined "American film" as the AFI does on their ballot: "Motion picture with significant creative and/or production elements from the United States." Beyond that, it was up to the voter to define "American." As with the AFI list, many of our titles were foreign co-productions, and given how complicated the world of co-production is (which includes both culturally-hybrid films, as well as "American" productions that take advantage of foreign financing benefits), we decided to simply accept them all.

However, the AFI ballot of 400 films has a rather whitewashed definition of "America." Few films by American-born minority directors are represented, even though many European-born directors working in Hollywood (such as Alfred Hitchcock and David Lean) had multiple films on the AFI list. Here at *Mediascape*, one of the biggest inspirations for our own list was Chon Noriega's 1998 list of the 100 greatest films by Chicano filmmakers, which was published in the journal *Aztlán* as a response to the stark absence of minority American films on the AFI list. Noriega prefaced his list with the stirring proclamation: "But why should we care? Because the list is being done in our name: Americans."ⁱⁱ *Mediascape* is proud that its voters have a more comprehensive definition of "American" than the AFI list does.

Finally, there is the tricky term "great." It's not very important to us that we have criteria for greatness (in fact, we didn't specify any such criteria in our invitation to voters). It's not that we're necessarily against canonization, but simply that our time and resources were limited. A better top 100 list could be possible if we had a larger sample size. (Let's forgo the old "canon wars" debates for now; refer to *Mediascape*'s review of Jonathan Rosenbaum's book *Essential Cinema* for more of our thoughts on the topic.ⁱⁱⁱ)

A few conclusions can be drawn from our list of 100 films by women directors. First, it's clear that women directing is not a new phenomena, and that in fact, before Sofia Coppola, Penny Marshall, and Amy Heckerling, there were prolific pioneers like Lois Weber, Dorothy Arzner, Ida Lupino, Stephanie Rothman, and others who worked both outside the industry and within it.

Second, this list asks that we divorce the idea of "classic" from "greatness." If CBS's presentation of the AFI's top 100 is like a nostalgic stroll down memory lane, our list is a contestation of expectations and conventions. "That was directed by a woman?" "I

forgot about that film.” “Why is it that I tend to forget the titles of great documentaries I’d seen in the past?” “Why is it that I can’t find any of these films on video?” Our list forces readers to ask questions rather than simply throw around the old titles in a new order.

Third, the list asks that we give more attention to non-mainstream formats and distribution channels. As our list demonstrates, many of the great works by women are documentaries, experimental films, exotica—not formats one typically thinks of when thinking about the “greatest American films of all time.” They are also aligned with social movements off the mainstream radar: African American cinema, Asian American cinema, queer cinema. And while they may not be available at Blockbuster, they can be found at public libraries, specialty rental stores, or educational outlets. In fact, one of the most important American distribution companies of all time, Women Make Movies, specializes in films directed by women.

Lastly, we hope that our list shows that it’s not hard to come up with a list of 100 American films directed by women. You just have to know where to look, and to realize that some of your favorite films, unbeknownst to most, may actually have been made by a woman.

Here is our list, in chronological order:

MABEL’S BUSY DAY (Mabel Normand, 1914)
SOMETHING NEW (Nell Shipman & Bert Van-Tuyle, 1920)
THE LOVE LIGHT (Frances Marion, 1921)
THE BLOT (Lois Weber, 1921)
TWO WISE WIVES (Lois Weber, 1921)
THE WILD PARTY (Dorothy Arzner, 1929)
LINDA (Dorothy Davenport aka Mrs. Wallace Reid, 1929)
CHRISTOPHER STRONG (Dorothy Arzner, 1933)
DANCE, GIRL, DANCE (Dorothy Arzner, 1940)
FIRST COMES COURAGE (Dorothy Arzner, 1943)
MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON (Maya Deren & Alexander Hammid, 1943)
NOT WANTED (Ida Lupino & Elmer Clifton, 1949)
OUTRAGE (Ida Lupino, 1950)
THE BIGAMIST (Ida Lupino, 1953)
THE COOL WORLD (Shirley Clarke, 1964)
BAD GIRLS GO TO HELL (Doris Wishman, 1965)
PORTRAIT OF JASON (Shirley Clarke, 1967)
FUSES (Carolee Schneemann, 1967)
RAPE (Yoko Ono & John Lennon, 1969)
WANDA (Barbara Loden, 1971)
A NEW LEAF (Elaine May, 1971)
THE VELVET VAMPIRE (Stephanie Rothman, 1971)
TERMINAL ISLAND (Stephanie Rothman, 1973)
DYKETACTICS (Barbara Hammer, 1974)

THE WORKING GIRLS (Stephanie Rothman, 1974)
HARLAN COUNTY U.S.A. (Barbara Kopple, 1976)
NEWS FROM HOME (Chantal Ackerman, 1977)
GIRLFRIENDS (Claudia Weill, 1978)
CHILLY SCENES OF WINTER (Joan Micklin Silver, 1979)
OLD BOYFRIENDS (Joan Tewkesbury, 1979)
THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROSIE THE RIVETER (Connie Fields, 1980)
TELL ME A RIDDLE (Lee Grant, 1980)
THE DECLINE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION (Penelope Spheeris, 1981)
LOSING GROUND (Kathleen Collins, 1982)
FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH (Amy Hecklering, 1982)
SMITHEREENS (Susan Seidelman, 1982)
VALLEY GIRL (Martha Coolidge, 1983)
YENTL (Barbra Streisand, 1983)
DESERT HEARTS (Donna Deitch, 1985)
DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN (Susan Seidelman, 1985)
WORKING GIRLS (Lizzie Borden, 1986)
CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD (Randa Haines, 1986)
BORDER RADIO (Allison Anders, Dean Lent, & Kurt Ross, 1987)
NEAR DARK (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987)
WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN? (Christine Choy & Renee Tajima-Pena, 1987)
DAMNED IF YOU DON'T (Su Friedrich, 1987)
ISHTAR (Elaine May, 1987)
BIG (Penny Marshall, 1988)
SURNAME VIET GIVEN NAME NAM (Trinh T. Minh-ha, 1989)
BLUE STEEL (Katherine Bigelow, 1990)
SINK OR SWIM (Su Friedrich, 1990)
PARIS IS BURNING (Jennie Livingston, 1990)
RAMBLING ROSE (Martha Coolidge, 1991)
A PLACE CALLED LOVELY (Sadie Benning, 1991)
DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST (Julie Dash, 1991)
LITTLE MAN TATE (Jodie Foster, 1991)
MISSISSIPPI MASALA (Mira Nair, 1991)
DOGFIGHT (Nancy Savoca, 1991)
GAS FOOD LODGING (Allison Anders, 1992)
A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN (Penny Marshall, 1992)
WAYNE'S WORLD (Penelope Spheeris, 1992)
HISTORY AND MEMORY (Rea Tajiri, 1992)
MI VIDA LOCA (Allison Anders, 1993)
GO FISH (Rose Troche, 1994)
THE ELEGANT SPANKING (Maria Beatty & Rosemary Delain, 1995)
STRANGE DAYS (Katherine Bigelow, 1995)
CLUELESS (Amy Heckerling, 1995)
THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY (Jane Campion, 1996)
WATERMELON WOMAN (Cheryl Dunye, 1996)
FOXFIRE (Annette Haywood-Carter, 1996)

WALKING AND TALKING (Nicole Holofcener, 1996)
MANNY & LO (Lisa Krueger, 1996)
ALL OVER ME (Alex Sichel, 1997)
PRIVATE PARTS (Betty Thomas, 1997)
COMING SOON (Collette Burson, 1999)
HOLY SMOKE (Jane Campion, 1999)
BOYS DON'T CRY (Kimberly Peirce, 1999)
AMERICAN PSYCHO (Mary Harron, 2000)
GIRLFIGHT (Karyn Kusama, 2000)
LOVE AND BASKETBALL (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2000)
THINGS BEHIND THE SUN (Allison Anders, 2001)
SOUTHERN COMFORT (Kate Davis, 2001)
STRANGER INSIDE (Cheryle Dunye, 2001)
LOVELY & AMAZING (Nicole Holofcener, 2001)
THE ANNIVERSARY PARTY (Jennifer Jason Leigh & Alan Cumming, 2001)
THIRTEEN CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ONE THING (Jill Sprecher, 2001)
THE KID STAYS IN THE PICTURE (Nanette Burstein & Brett Morgen, 2002)
PERSONAL VELOCITY (Rebecca Miller, 2002)
FRIDA (Julie Taymor, 2002)
AMERICAN SPLENDOR (Shari Springer Berman & Robert Pulcini, 2003)
LOST IN TRANSLATION (Sofia Coppola, 2003)
MONSTER (Patty Jenkins, 2003)
SOMETHING'S GOTTA GIVE (Nancy Meyers, 2003)
YES (Sally Potter, 2004)
THE TIME WE KILLED (Jennifer Todd Reeves, 2004)
ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW (Miranda July, 2005)
SHERRYBABY (Laurie Collyer, 2006)
MARIE ANTOINETTE (Sofia Coppola, 2006)
LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE (Valerie Faris & Jonathan Dayton, 2006)
OLD JOY (Kelly Reichardt, 2006)

ⁱ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "List-o-Mania: Or, How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love American Movies" (26 June 1998)
<<http://www.chicagoreader.com/movies/100best.html>>. Another version of this article appears in Rosenbaum's *Movie Wars: How Hollywood and the Media Conspire to Limit What Films We Can See*. Chicago: A Capella Books, 2000.

ⁱⁱ Chon Noriega, "The Aztlán Film Institute's Top 100 List." *Jump Cut* 42 (1998) 65-67. Republished online at: <http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/Media/Top100List.asp>

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian Hu, "Taking Film Studies to the Streets (and Back Again): On the Necessity of Criticism," *Mediascape* 1.1 (2005)
<<http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/archive/volume01/number01/reviews/hu.htm>>