

# SIR CHRISTOPHER

## *Cinema now/Cinema future: Are we watching Titanic on a sinking ship?*

**A**re movies today as culturally significant as they once were? In the next in his series of articles on the subject, Mark Trompeteler questions the UK's leading commentator, author, broadcaster, educator and curator on popular culture — Professor Sir Christopher Frayling.

**MARK TROMPETELER:** One blogger on recently wrote that *movies have lost their cultural caché. They're no longer the signature moments of pop culture of our time.* What do you make of statements like that?

**CHRISTOPHER FRAYLING:** I am not sure. That is right certainly about cult movies. They tend to be discovered, not made. If you set out to make a cult movie and put squillions of dollars behind the ad campaign, people will see it as naff. But if someone discovers a cult movie for themselves — it is usually a film that has not done quite so well as in the *Bladerunner* phenomenon — they feel, yes, I discovered this film myself and they were not bludgeoning me to see it. So you are not going to get cult movies of that kind from the blockbusters.

I am always having to revise my opinion, however. I went to see *Life of Pi* and I was completely agnostic on 3D — I thought it is a gimmick and it is “a lion

in your lap” all over again. That film, however, is largely set on a little boat in the middle of the ocean, where the vanishing point is the brow of the boat. The 3D was astonishing. You were cooped up on this tiny boat with a tiger and the 3D forced you to watch where the vanishing point was. It completely convinced the audience that they were on that boat. I suddenly understood 3D — it was one of those films that could not have been made flat. I thought perhaps I was too hasty in my opinion of 3D. In the hands of a master like Ang Lee, it is used properly. Against that you get a bad comic book something-or-other, re-processed in 3D, when it wasn't shot in 3D, just to give it a bit of depth, and that I cannot cope with at all. There was of course *Hugo*, a little overblown I thought, but a lovely film.

What we are talking about is a medium, a tool. In the hands of someone with vision, like Hitchcock making *Dial M for Murder* in the middle of the first 3D craze, he knew how to use it. Like everything, if it is in the hands of someone who knows what they are doing, you can do something with it. In the hands of someone who doesn't — a journeyman — you get rather a boring film experience. It is as if they think using the medium is the point of the film. The medium is just a tool. One of the things about the disappearance of

**“THE LIFE OF PI COMPLETELY CONVINCED THE AUDIENCE THAT THEY WERE ON THAT BOAT. I SUDDENLY UNDERSTOOD 3D CINEMA”**



Sir Christopher Frayling firmly believes our young people need to develop visual literacy

the middle ground of movies is that with all the different outlets, not necessarily theatrical, for example satellite, cable, and terrestrial television, you would think you could get the investment for a middle ground film more easily than you used to be able to. But it doesn't seem to happen like that. Instead HBO gives us rather superior American television series with high production values.

**MT:** And the signature moments of popular culture in our time?

**CF:** What a question! Well, in the past decades, rock concerts — certain

# FRAYLING



moments in rock concerts. I suppose the London 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, *Isles of Wonder* with Danny Boyle as artistic director, people will remember that. It was cinematic in a way and certainly made all kinds of reference to the history of cinema.

It's a difficult question. It is as if the blog you mentioned earlier is suggesting we are now in a world where everything is in quotation. So there is Hitchcock's *Psycho* and then there are all those "slasher" movies that came out of it. "Slasher" movies have been big in popular culture, but you have to trace them back — and they are all in quotation marks. You can go back to *Citizen Kane* for just about everything and there are all kinds of neo-, neo-, neo-, neo-versions of it. It is as if your blogger

is arguing that we no longer see the influential movie that keeps everything going. I am not sure that he is right about that. But it is interesting that we do have to look back at the first impact. It is as if everything has been a riff on *Citizen Kane* and everything subsequently has been a variation on a theme. It is as if all the big stories were told a long, long time ago. I don't know though because, again, the odd film pulls you up.

**MT:** The variants of cinema exhibition are so many and diverse now with: "sing-along" screenings, where fancy dress is encouraged, "pop-up" and open air cinema, magnificent and historic venue cinema, private hotel and room-above-the-pub cinema, cinema where the luxury of the seat and the hospitality >

## THE STORY SO FAR...

When I started this series of articles, writes Mark Trompeteler, I was attempting to explore some of the recent debates that have taken place about the nature of contemporary cinema, not technologically, but socially and culturally, and in what directions might its future be going. I also had the opportunity to discuss all of this with Sir Christopher Frayling.



I have outlined in the previous articles the ways in which:

- ◆ The digitisation of film content and stories has accompanied the digitisation of cinema exhibition and how in the past 10-15 years there has been a real predominance of films that fully exploit the fantasy, magic, action and spectacle that can be created with CGI and visual effects.
- ◆ Sir Christopher Frayling confirms an opinion that the graphic novel, fantasy and science fiction have become the crucible of mainstream Hollywood cinema.
- ◆ There has been an increasing concern amongst many well-known and respected critics, cultural commentators, filmmakers, writers and actors about the way in which the former traditional elements that made up a film, such things as theme, narrative, the development of character, their moral dilemmas, plot development and story have now often been subjugated and overwhelmed in a film by elements of fantasy, spectacle and action.
- ◆ There has been an increasing divergence in cinema between massively expensive "tent pole" movies on the one hand, and very low-budget indie films on the other hand, and the former medium-budget "intelligent" story-driven studio movies seem to be less evident in the mainstream output of studios.
- ◆ Television has taken up the former middle ground of medium-budget "intelligent" cinema, with many directors, actors, writers and commentators noting that the most interesting work is now within television. Important cinema individuals such as Steven Soderbergh have even come out with statements such as this: "I just don't think movies matter as much any more, culturally."



In the right hands, 3D technology can further the story as well as the spectacle

and catering served to your seat seems as important as the film, village hall cinema, and even “roof-top cinema”, where patrons are expected to view a film sitting inside a hot tub drinking sparkling wine! What do you think this all means?

**CF:** The whole dressing up and hospitality and catering thing is about trying to bring back a sense of occasion to cinema. It is also about revisiting your favourite box of chocolates, but seeing it in a slightly different way. I guess I could fantasise about what would be the total cinematic cinema experience. It would be seeing *The Fall of the House of Usher* in a cinema that is slowly sliding into a bog while you were watching it with,

## “I HOPE IN THE FUTURE OUR YOUNG PEOPLE WILL BE SUFFICIENTLY DISCRIMINATING TO SAY THEY DON’T WANT TO SEE ROCKY 77”

presumably, lifeboats to rescue the patrons at the end. Well, that’s a thought! What about watching *Titanic* on a sinking ship?

**MT:** The future of cinema?

**CF:** The future of cinema? Obviously there is diversity of experience. I also think the rebooting and re-issuing of the back catalogue and presenting it in different contexts is a potentially huge area. It is a thought — thinking about old

movies. In a way, all movies are like ghost stories. For the first time in history, we can watch people who no longer live. Well the future? Obviously diversity of experience, diversity of distribution, increasing “blockbusterisation”, the increasing output of HBO-land, so this missing middle ground begins to re-emerge through bigger budget television productions.

I hope also that there are improving signs that film-appreciation in schools is taking off. I hate the way in which media studies or visual studies have become the great pejorative. When everyone wants to criticise the school curriculum, the first things they point to are media and visual studies. It is important that young people develop visual literacy. I hope in the future that we will have young people who are sufficiently discriminating to spot the rubbish and say they do not want to see *Rocky 77* or *Comics 37*.

When interest in a film is in its detail — will he be wearing his cape or not? what does the new Batmobile look like? — and you already know the story backwards, then something’s wrong. **CT**

## THE DOMINANCE OF CGI: IT’S NOT ALL BAD

Sir Christopher, with his history of art background, doesn’t wholly subscribe to such a pessimistic view about the dominance of the graphic novel, fantasy, science-fiction and CGI in today’s film catalogue.

“Look I come from a background in the history of art,” he says, “Fashion happens, the pendulum swings, one moment realism is in, then next fantasy is in, then expressionism is in, then, after photography, hyper-realism is out, then it is back in — all of these things co-exist as part of the history of the medium. I never buy those philosophies that say there was a golden age and we are in a decline from it. It is all part of the history of the medium.”