

Why Bad Movies Keep Coming Out And What To Do About It

By [John Pilger](#)

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*As an inveterate film fan, I turn to the listings every week and try not to lose hope. I search the guff that often passes for previews, and I queue for a ticket with that flicker of excitement reminiscent of matinees in art deco splendour. Once inside, lights down, beer in hand, hope recedes as the minutes pass. How many times have I done a runner? There is a cinema I go to that refunds your money if you're out the door within 20 minutes of the opening titles. The people there have knowing looks. My personal best is less than five minutes of the awful *Moulin Rouge*.*

The other day, I saw 'Blue Jasmine', written and directed by Woody Allen. The critics' applause was thunderous. "A work of brilliance" ... "Pure movie-going pleasure" ... Smart, sophisticated and hugely enjoyable" ... Brilliantly funny". One journalist called it a "miracle". So I queued for a ticket, even conjuring the wonderful scene from 'Annie Hall' (1975) when Woody Allen, standing in a movie queue, meets his hero, Marshall McLuhan: he of "the medium is the message".

Today, he might as well call up Hans Christian Anderson's parable about a naked emperor, which applies to his latest "work of brilliance". By any fair and reasonable measure, it is crap. Every character is cardboard. The schematic "plot" is crude. Two adopted sisters are thrown together, implausibly. There is a wannabee politician whose name should be Congressman Stereotype. The script is lazy, dated and patronising. Clearly, Allen wrote it during a night sweat. "If Cate Blanchett doesn't receive an Oscar nomination," wrote The Times critic, "then I will eat a Chanel hat." Actually, Blanchett deserves a Lifeboat medal. By sheer dint of her acting, she tries and ails to rescue this wreck.

PR has subverted much of our lives, making unconscious acolytes of those who once might have operated outside the pack. The drumbeat of crap movies with big promotional budgets, mostly from the US, is incessant. The US market share of cinema box-office takings in Britain is more than 70 per cent; the small UK share is mainly for US co-productions. Films from Europe and the rest of the world account for a tiny fraction. Ironically, in the US, quality film-making has absconded to television.

The hype of public relations – Edward Bernays' euphemism for propaganda – is now regarded as truth. The medium has become the message. Prime Minister David Cameron, himself a former PR huckster for a media asset-stripper, saw the hyped 'The Fifth Estate', and declared: "Benedict Cumberbatch – brilliant, fantastic piece of acting. The twitchiness and everything of Julian Assange is brilliantly portrayed." Neither he nor Cumberbatch, nor the makers of this fiction have ever met Assange. Based on a dodgy, axe-grinding book, the

DreamWorks juggernaut is a perfidious, unethical exploitation of a man fighting for his freedom, if not his life.

Not surprisingly, Cameron's government is slashing at the budget of the British Film Institute, keeper of the world's greatest film archive and one of this country's most liberating institutions. Like the National Health Service, it would not be established today. If you yearn to avoid Hollywood's "babbling brook of bullshit" (to borrow from Richard Lewis in 'Curb Your Enthusiasm'), join the BFI. As a longtime member and supporter, I am often found in one of its acoustically-excellent cinemas, seeing films, past and present, classics and unknowns, that are reminders of how pleasurable an hour or two in front of celluloid can be. For more than 30 years, my own films have had their premieres here.

The antithesis of 'Blue Jasmine' and 'The Fifth Estate' has just ended a run at the BFI. This is Nothing but a Man, one of only two fiction features directed by Michael Roemer, a German Jewish refugee who grew up in England before emigrating to the US. Made in 1964 and set in the Deep South with an almost entirely African-American cast, it is the story of Duffy (Ivan Dixon), a tormented young black man whose life is consumed and distorted by his refusal to accept his "boy" status. Aware that only collective action can beat racism, he is constantly looking for solidarity and failing to find it.

Is Duffy's anger the product of an obstinate nature or a principled struggle against The Man? In keeping us guessing, Roemer (he wrote the script with Robert M. Young) ensures the anger is real, almost a presence in the cinema. Yet it is masked behind smiles; almost everyone in this remarkable film smiles as a way of trapping if not containing their despair. The jazz singer Abbey Lincoln, who plays Duffy's wife Josie, is brilliant at this emotional and political sleight of hand. There is hope, too, but not a dribble of sentimentality.

None of the main cinema chains in the US wanted to show Nothing but a Man. No major distributor picked it up. Like Peter Watkins' 'The War Game', which the BBC banned for 20 years, Roemer's film did the rounds of church halls, youth centres and later video recorders. The point about the film is that it is as timeless as its director is ageless. At 85, Michael Roemer still teaches at the Yale School of Art and worries that he could not make "commercial" films that people wanted to see.

He need not worry. A film is judged by how or whether we remember it. Unlike the babbling brook of Hollywood - with its suppression of truth, fake heroes and warmongering - a masterpiece, or just a good movie, is unforgettable. Join the BFI.

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