

America at 250

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



The United States at the age of 250 is the youngest civilisation in the world. If civilisations are defined by the existence of cities, writing, metalworking and social classes, they began about 5,000 to 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia and Egypt. From then to now arose the contemporary civilisations of China, India and others. By their yardstick, America is a Johnny-come-lately, the newest kid on the block, the historical underling, the great upstart, the perfect impersonator of the passing human face in endless time.

That is not true because America has found its place in the imaginative geography of the world through its cultural products, principally films. They tell the truth about America.

What is that truth? It is that, for all of America's military and economic prowess, even when it was almost unquestioned, the US remained an inward place for its citizens, a halfway house of refuge for wayward souls wandering down new roads that led nowhere. Conflict, rejection, failure, alienation and indeterminacy — the classical themes of all aesthetic experiences of reality — informed the everyday representations of American life on screen. They revealed the reality of American civilisation.

I mean the best representations, not *Spiderman* or *Saturday Night Fever*. They are good films in the entertainment genre, but entertainment is not the highest form of art. The highest form of art is the representation of anguish.

What explained America far, far better than entertainment was how systems come, stay for a while pretending to be eternal, and then go — but then how every human breath captured in art continues to heave and fall forever.

The ancient Greeks recognised that level of tangible sensibility as being mimesis — the artistic mimicking of reality. The American mimesis was to the 20th century AD what the Athenian mimesis was to the 5th century BC. The Greek tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides continue to contour art's capacity to convey suffering even to this day. Every performance of the great tragedies, whether in Greece or abroad, attests to the staying power of Greek and Western civilisation.

Likewise, American civilisation is not doomed to decrepitude because it has globalised its artistic representation of reality. The greatness of American films can be traced to the novel and the stage. Here are just two examples. F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925

novel, *The Great Gatsby*, is a secular parable about a republic of wealth and the fallible patricians that it creates. The story ends in tragedy, in an indictment of the American Dream that resonates to this day.

Then, Arthur Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, premiered on Broadway in 1949 and ran for 742 performances. It captures the final hours of Willy Loman, an ageing and chastened travelling salesman confronting his professional and personal failures. Not exactly a celebration of America's economic success. But that is why the play worked. It revealed that in a capitalist America engaged in a do-or-die struggle with the communist Soviet Union, there were Americans who were neither owners of capital nor fomenters of revolution. They were simply Americans trying to make a living. And then they died.

The Chinese production of the play opened at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in May 1983. It played continuously to packed houses through the autumn. It must have made an impact on Chinese audiences, who were making their transition from a Maoist to an Americanised economy.

American films draw on that tradition of personal disquiet. The best actors and actresses of the American screen bring their talent to bear convincingly on the themes and structures that affect everyone in some way. Love, sex, hope, failure, suffering, politics, deliverance or despair — these everyday manifestations of the eternal tie the rest of the world to America through its films.

Screen greats

Dustin Hoffman, the Great Outsider of American films, embodies the cause of the alternative cinema which celebrates the heterodoxy of American life. Arriving in New York, he saw someone urinating against a car in broad daylight. Oops, but Hoffman was delighted: He knew that he was in the right place because it was real and not plastic. He told an interviewer: "I was an outsider. I came to New York, and I was cleaning toilets."

His other accomplishments before fame grabbed him included working in a psychiatric hospital, as a sales assistant in a toy department, and as a weaver of Hawaiian garlands. Nothing special there, but he was also Jewish — and certainly no matinee idol. Indeed, he was short and actually slightly odd-looking. He was not the stereotypical Anglo-Saxon hero exuding manliness. He was riven with insecurities.

And those insecurities were exactly what turned him into a superhero. His insecurities, in real life as in screen characters, reflected the insecurities of the millions who watched and adored him. He did not pretend to be one of the screen immortals: He turned his insecure mortality into a source of artistic affiliation with his country and his people.

In fact, people outside America observe the country through him and understand that no nation is perfect. The best nations and the best citizens are those who own up to their shortcomings, take responsibility for them, and try to rectify



The Godfather series brings the Sicilian underworld — patriarchal, brooding, introspective, unforgiving and brutally violent, yet deeply human within the family — before mainstream America

fy them. Art drives them to action. Hoffman's 1967 film, *The Graduate*, has been celebrated as an attempt to satirise the alienation of modern youth, although that effort falls off during the progress of the story. Yet, the film draws on the incendiary sociology of American life during the Vietnam years, when the system itself was beset with insecurity.

Hoffman's Jewish-American insecurity is complemented by Denzel Washington's portrayal of Black realities in a White-majority country. He reconciles his colour with the colours of the American flag, as Hoffman does his Jewishness with a wider ethnic spectrum. Washington does this in the most American of ways, which is to accept that there are differences and discrimination, and then to bring these ethnic differences into an eclectic social landscape in which Blacks prove that they are as indigenous as other Americans are to the evolution of a common history. Washington's films such as 1987's *Cry Freedom*, 1992's *Malcolm X*, 1995's *Crimson Tide* and 2004's *The Manchurian Candidate* have established him as emblematic of America's demographic inclusiveness.

Robert Redford in 1976's *All the President's Men* connected Hoffman's and Washington's America by questioning the workings of executive power at the highest levels. That power was, and is, predominantly White and male. Redford's balancing of traditional leading-man charm with serious dramatic work brought that film, and many others, to vivacious screen life. What attests to the greatness of his acting skills is that hardly anyone sees him as a White actor to this day: He is all-American, his ethnicity having been transformed into a radiant Americanness by the plot of his films and his ability to be a character actor. All actors play roles: Character actors make roles play them. That was Redford.

Robert De Niro and Al Pacino have carved out a special Italian space in America's screen life. *The Godfather* series literally raises the Sicilian underworld — full-blooded, patriarchal, introspective, brooding, unforgiving, mercilessly violent and yet humane in its family relationships — into the public gaze of mainstream America. To humanise crime is not to condone it but to say that individuals, social groups and ancestral inheritances — the constituents of the Italian mafia in the US — must not be treated as repellent aberrations but as products of the dysfunctional aspects of soci-

ety at large, no matter how benign it is generally. Easy benevolence has no place in art. The audience must recognise that life is raw, nasty, foul and evil for many. So for America.

What helped to bring mainstream America and its discontents into the international mainstream was the treatment of war. There is nothing more intimate than war: not peace, which leaves people free to be themselves so long as they can; not love, which means everything and nothing; not sex, which is extremely enjoyable unless a landmine has destroyed both legs. War reduces everything to physical immediacy. Bombs kill people, raze buildings, send people into exile and destroy the will to live. Yet, and yet, not even war kills the imagination of survivors. Tom Hanks' unsentimental depiction of defiant human impulses in the face of war makes 1998's *Saving Private Ryan* a testament to the human spirit. Hanks is an American idealist in the guise of a pacifist.

The American Feminine

There is no American Masculine without the American Feminine, whether in real or reel life. Marilyn Monroe and Meryl Streep are both archetypal figures who combine the fragility of feminine existence in a stubbornly patriarchal world with the feminist defiance that comes precisely from being born a stubborn woman in a man's world. How American!

Film critics note how Marilyn Monroe transcended the "blonde bombshell" stereotype once favoured by audiences by infusing her characters with vulnerability matched by emotional resilience. Monroe's performances have been grouped into three core archetypes. The first was that of the Child-Woman: It combined intense physical attraction with the helpless innocence of a child. The second was that of the Female Buddy, the feisty, diamond-hunting pragmatist (men are but gold-diggers; women are diamond-hunters. Men cannot ever match women). The third was that of the Woman-Partner, a grounded, earthy yet wounded woman.

Each stage of Monroe's evolution on screen answered to the periods through which American femininity and feminism moved as the country matured from a patriarchal society to one contested by classes, races and genders.

Meryl Streep completed what Marilyn Monroe had begun. In one analysis, her films demonstrated the ability of a woman to say 'no' to whatever

society calls acceptable. 1978's *The Deer Hunter*, the Vietnam War drama, initiated the process, which matured in 1979's *Kramer vs. Kramer*. There, Streep played a woman who had walked out on her unhappy marriage, leaving not just her husband but her son. Streep carried along the audience with her in spite of the obvious problem of portraying a woman who had abandoned her child.

In 1992's *Death Becomes Her*, Streep proved that her serious roles did not exhaust her: She could do comedy to perfection as well. Her performance brought about the greatest of compliments — the comment that there was something almost wearying about the reliability of Streep's brilliance and, indeed, that her consistency was boring.

2006's *The Devil Wears Prada* scared the fashion industry to its soul, so to speak metaphorically. The terrifyingly severe magazine editor Miranda Priestly, whom Streep plays, is humanised by her portrayal of a woman who insists on being respected in an industry where humans turn into commodities and women into second-hand goods.

Journalism did not escape Streep's attention. Her brilliant portrayal of Katharine Graham, publisher of *The Washington Post*, in the 2017 film *The Post* (with Tom Hanks playing Ben Bradlee, the paper's executive editor) reminded the world of the complex ecosystem within which the press operates.

Taken together, these great American actors and actresses attest to the staying power of 250 years of American history. Yes, these are films; they are culture on screen. But they will outlast physical changes to the world's economics and politics.

Athens of the 5th century BC has vanished, but Greek tragedies remain modern to this day. America of the 21st century is not in danger of perishing, but the cultural works that define America at its best will continue to shape the emotional landscape of the world. ■

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