

When the Art House Was Home

A DVD set you would wait in line for

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Essential Art House: 50 Years of Janus Films

Boxed set of 50 DVDs, 240-page accompanying book

The Criterion Collection

I hate standing in lines, but there was a time when I loved it.

That was when standing in line for the movies got to the heart of modern cinema, even more than what went on inside the theater when the lights went down. That was in the nineteen-seventies, and standing in line was really why we bothered to go to the movies at all. Waiting in those lines, we shared a collective experience of conversation and anticipation of what we were about to witness; it marked a generation that now seems as lost in time as the generation that gathered around the radio in the pre-television era.

No matter how alone you felt while watching *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*, *Amarcord*, *Fanny and Alexander*, or a black-and-white classic in repertory, that evening at the movies was also a shared outward adventure—in world culture, politics, spirituality and sex (maybe sex with the person next to you in line).

While most of America numbed itself to the tragic debacle of the Vietnam War by regaining their willful ignorance and faked innocence through Hollywood studio fare, many of us went to the art-house cinemas to see the bubbling-up of cynical European and Asian ideas, cinematically and narratively. We were rewarded by participating in the most significant invention of a visual language since the works of Shakespeare and Jonson hit the stage in Elizabethan England 300 years before. The human soul was being re-created at the movies. Armed with a whole new vocabulary of being, we spilled back out into the street afterwards to talk and try to apply what we had seen to our own lives.

That ultimate *flâneur* of the moviegoers' line, Woody Allen, used to stand in line several times each week at New York's old (and recently revived) Thalia Theater for its famed repertory double-bills. Many of the best scenes in his own movies came right from the comic ironies going on all around him in line. As he told *The New York Times* in 1977, "I like to stand in line for movies."

We all did.

We gathered in lines that extended down the block at urban art-houses and rep theaters like the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, the Cerberus in Washington, the Angelika 57 in New York, the Lincoln in New Haven, and many others; and at college film courses and campus series. We went anticipating visual enlightenment we'd never realized we could experience, often on screens not much bigger than today's big screen televisions. We went to see European and Asian directors—Buñuel, Bergman, Truffaut, Godard, Kurosawa, Fellini, and a long list of others.

Those lines started forming long before I joined them, back in 1956. That was the year when Harvard friends Bryant Haliday and Cyrus Harvey formed Janus Films. The pair had purchased the Brattle and the 55th Street Playhouse in New York, but found themselves short on the art-house and classic revival film fare they and their audiences craved. Janus Films would become the pipeline bringing the explosion of new films from overseas and the classic backlists of RKO studios in Hollywood to American art-house cinemas. With the enormous success in 1958 of Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, a phantasmagoric wander through a medieval plaguescape ending in the luminous dance of death, the Janus Films logo, a two-faced head of Janus—the ancient god of open doors—on a coin became the mark of quality in film. Janus fare played around the country, to packed houses.

Hollywood eventually drew in many Janus filmmakers (Milos Forman, Roman Polanski, and others) from outside the U.S. at the same time that independent filmmakers like Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese, who had learned so much watching the Janus pictures, came into vogue, greatly improving American movie fare, at least at the commercial fringes. At the same time, the cities emptied out, the suburban multiplexes sprouted like dandelions, and home video-tape and DVD displaced theater screenings. Theater after theater shuttered its doors. New Haven's fine York Square Cinemas finally gave up the ghost in 2005. The art-house movement is all but gone

now—except at festival events and the rare holdover cinema. (Greater New Haven actually has two of those holdovers: the Criterion—no relation to the DVD maker—and the Madison Art Cinemas.)

But Janus Films lives on in part because the company

partnered with the Criterion Collection, a pioneer in high-quality laser disc and now DVD distribution. To mark last year's fiftieth anniversary, the Criterion Collection released a colossal and beautifully packaged boxed set of 50 films, *Essential Art House: 50 Years of Janus Films*. An enduring art object in itself, the beige sleeve case of discs sits within a brown fabric-wrapped slipcase alongside a sumptuous 240-page coffee-table book with an essay on the history of Janus Films and notes, cast, credits and stills from all 50 titles. Many of the films are found on most lists of the great cinema achievements of the century. The hours of viewing and re-viewing amount to the best course in cinema outside Hollywood that you can attend.

As Scorsese remembers in his opening tribute to Janus in the set's book, "They broke the medium wide open. They gave us a sense of art in cinema, a taste for it." The importance of that accomplishment in America, the birthplace and commercial command center of the movies, cannot be over-stated. From early on, film in Europe and Asia was a celebrated art form, but until Janus came along few Americans acknowledged it as such. Each selection in the Essential Art House collection, from *Wild Strawberries*, *Jules and Jim*, and *The Third Man* to *La Strada*, *The Rules of the Game*, and *Seven Samurai*, still shocks viewers with that sense of seeing a fresh moment in the invention of a new way of experiencing the world. The language of film that shows up today in even the most vapid Hollywood suspense thriller or the most intelligent indie director's take on the perception of time and space can be found in its original, raw and poetic form in these classic films.

This exquisite set includes a handful of films from the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties, like Fritz Lang's Expressionistic slasher film *M*, Jean Renoir's heartbreaking *Grand Illusion*, on the

passing of the noble worldview in the meat grinder of World War I, and Sergei Eisenstein's thirteenth-century war epic *Alexander Nevsky*, with a battle scene no CGI-juiced film has yet equaled, all providing the foundation for so much to follow.

Most of the films in the set are from the 1940s to the early nineteen-seventies, the post-war Golden Age of art-house film and the motion pictures with which Janus is most closely identified. The accompanying book provides a brief introduction to the context of each film. The discs themselves are barebones, containing only the films themselves. When mulling over the shocking sticker price for the entire set, realize that at about thirteen dollars per disc, you are paying less than half the cost of purchasing the individual Criterion releases—albeit without the accompanying bonus material they contain (though with the handsome book).

As for the selection of films, there are too many to list here and you may get into arguments about what's included and what's not. But that's just what we stood in line for.