Chicago. When Doc Films imported ‘la politique des auteurs’

The struggle for cinematic power in universities is not a recent development. The oldest of the student film groups, Doc Films – which first began showing documentaries but quickly enlarged its purview – confronted stiff competition in the form of another student film society in the 1960s: Contemporary European Films, which presented the films of Bergman and Fellini while Doc Films adhered with strict conformity to the tastes of the era’s Cahiers critics. In the mid-sixties, Doc Films attached itself to ‘la politique des auteurs’ after one of its students returned from Paris with a suitcase full of the classic, yellow cover issues of Cahiers. In Autumn 1964, they sponsored a series directly inspired by their readings, titled “Techniques in Terror,” which focused on the films of Welles and Hitchcock. This period was the richest for Doc Films, which published, between 1967 and 1973, an internationally renowned journal, Focus!, which published the first excerpts of [Robin Wood’s] work on Howard Hawks and a collection of article on The Wild Bunch. During these years, a great many auteurs – including Ford, Hitchcock, Fuller, Hawks, Lang, Cukor, Losey, and Preminger – came to present their films on the campus, which also hosted the American premieres of films by Warhol and Godard.

Chicago students began screening films in 1932 with a selection of French talkies and continued in 1936 with films from the 16mm collection of the then-quite-young Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). The group takes its present name from the December 1940 formation the Documentary Film Group, founded by a group of communist students. Their aim was to present a realistic vision of their time that excluded fiction. As it was a fallow period for the distribution of documentaries, the same works (by John Grierson, Pare Lorentz, Robert Flaherty, or Joris Ivens) were shown quite frequently. Very quickly Doc Films realized it needed to screen some fiction films to attract an audience. By the fifties, documentary screenings became rare. A number of auteurs came to lecture, including Pabst and Brakhage. Ingeniously, Doc Films members presented avant-garde films, like Kenneth Anger’s Fireworks, to a large public attracted by their sexual reputation.

Thanks to Doc, the student cinephiles of Chicago could see films they had only heard about in books. The ‘auteurist’ period of Doc lasted until the 1980s, by which time the rival groups had either disappeared or been absorbed into Doc. Thanks to an alumnus who endowed the group in the 1980s, Doc now occupies a 480-seat cinema that bears its donor’s name – Max Palevsky. The programming continues steadily with 240 screenings per year. Ang Lee came in December to present Brokeback Mountain. – Clarisse Vezin

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