

MICHAEL WALKER 1942 - 2022

A tribute

Michael's long and productive association with *Movie* began in the 1960s and he remained a member of its editorial board until the journal's final issue in 2000. Together with other *Movie* veterans, he then became a founding editor of its online successor, co-editing two early issues. He recalled that, from its first appearance in 1962, *Movie* helped to guide his viewing as a student film enthusiast and led him a few years later to attend courses in London taught by Ian Cameron and Robin Wood. It was through Robin that an essay he had written as coursework on *Pierrot le fou* was accepted for the second edition of the *Movie* paperback on Jean-Luc Godard (1969). Michael's article on Bergman's *Shame* appeared in *Movie* 17 (Winter 1969/70), and the first of what became his many works on Hitchcock in *Movie* 18 (Winter 1970/71). He contributed to another *Movie* anthology, *Second Wave* (1970), and – the highest profile of these early publications – he co-authored the *Movie* paperback on Claude Chabrol (1970) with Robin Wood. By the end of the 1960s both Michael and Jim Hillier, his equally film obsessed contemporary at University College, Oxford, had been invited to join the editorial board and became major contributors to *Movie* 19 (Winter 1971/72),

the issue on Elia Kazan, which proved to be the last in Ian Cameron's original design. It was an impressive opening to a remarkable writing career.

Important aspects of Michael's writing are already present in these early essays. His arguments are developed with extensive and meticulous reference to the detail of films and marked by authoritative cross reference and comparison to a director's other works. It seems clear not only that he had rapidly mastered notetaking in the dark (a skill he attributed to Ian Cameron's teaching) but was able to create from the viewing notes rich resources for his writing to draw on, processes that laid the basis for lifelong, highly systematic record keeping. As he would cheerfully acknowledge, his scientific training and an early job in the civil service involving systems analysis left their mark, as they would on the ways in which he increasingly thought and wrote about movies.

Movie reappeared after a three-year gap, in a new format and design, with issue 20 in 1975, and a further six issues were published through the rest of the seventies, a period marked by the challenge and stimulus of new forms of film theory and approaches to criticism that rapidly began to dominate the emerging film academic world. Michael started teaching in further education in 1973, the time in which film was being developed as a wholly new subject within the formal O and A level examination system, and he later commented on how the pressures of work began to erode his previously free evenings and curtailed his cinemagoing. Yet it's clear that through this time he was also formulating and researching what became a major change of direction, responsive in part to new debates and forms of analysis.

Michael attached particular significance to his article on *Black Narcissus*, published in *Framework* in Winter 1978-79. Probably owing to the uncertainties of small magazine publishing, it appeared before his article on melodrama, to which it refers, but it belongs firmly to the phase of work that followed, although as the sole essay on a British film it can seem something of an outsider. Countering dismissive accounts of the film, it is rooted in an appreciation of *Black Narcissus* as remarkable melodrama and develops an intricate, extended psychoanalytical reading, the combination of approaches

central to what followed. The basis for this work appeared two years later in the first of Michael's longest articles to date, both published in the double issue, 'Max Ophuls and Melodrama' (*Movie* 29/30 Summer 1982).

'Melodrama and the American Cinema' marked a significant departure from his previous writing, which had focused largely on individual films and directors, and signalled a direction that his interests would increasingly take, in tracing continuities and transformations within the rich traditions of popular cinema. It is also one of the most valuable discussions of a form within Hollywood history that was increasingly absorbing film scholars as critical attention moved from what Michael, absorbing great swathes of Hollywood cinema into one multi-faceted grouping, called 'melodramas of action' to those of 'passion'. The article sets out to provide a theoretical grounding for the gathering interest in melodrama by drawing on and developing approaches from several sources on theatrical and literary melodrama but adapting these in a remarkably wide-ranging consideration of Hollywood movies from their earliest days. He cites literally dozens of films and, as was clear from any conversation with Michael about his work, none was included casually – he could happily discuss each at length.

Significant in 'Melodrama and the American Cinema' and its 'provisional model' of melodrama are ideological and psychoanalytical perspectives that, absorbed into the detailed analysis of movies that was always the foundation of his writing, would remain vital aspects of Michael's work. Much of 'Ophuls in Hollywood', the other major piece from *Movie* 29/30, develops his approach to melodrama into detailed analyses of specific movies, the theme that Michael explored further in several articles published in the early 1990s, notably on films that had previously received limited extended discussion, such as *All I Desire*, *Secret Beyond the Door* and *King's Row*. The group also included a remarkable comparative analysis of *Orphans of the Storm* and *The Searchers* under the heading of 'Melodramatic Narrative'. Who else but Michael would have come up with that unexpected juxtaposition?

This article and *Kings Row* were published in *CineAction*, the journal Robin Wood and colleagues had established in

Toronto, and which had warmly welcomed contributions from several other *Movie* writers. This was a period, from the 1980s into the 90s, during which *Movie* appeared irregularly, with gaps of up three and four years, before the final and much longer gap until its final issue, *Movie* 36, at the turn of the century. Michael contributed to the end, with a fine piece on Ophuls' *La Signora di tutti* in *Movie* 36. During this period, however, a number of major *Movie* books were developed. Michael was central to *The Movie Book of Film Noir* (1993), for which he wrote the introduction and two other chapters, and he contributed a long exploration of the westerns of Delmer Daves to *The Movie Book of the Western* (1996). Two other *Movie* books – on Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang – were planned and largely written but never published, their essays appearing in other publications over the next few years, including several on Lang in Issues 2 and 3 of *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, which Michael co-edited.

Throughout, in addition to continued appearances in *CineAction*, he wrote substantial articles for *The Hitchcock Annual* and over 40 shorter contributions to *Film Dope* which cover a striking range of Hollywood directors, actors, writers, and cinematographers, plus a sprinkling of names from other traditions.

It was after he retired and free from the demands of teaching that Michael was able to devote time to longer projects and in the following years he produced innovative books in three very different fields: *Hitchcock's Motifs* (2005), *Modern Ghost Melodramas: 'What Lies Beneath'* (2017), and *Endings in the Cinema: Thresholds, Water and the Beach* (2020). All are linked, though, by Michael's long preoccupation with motifs in film and by his characteristically detailed and searching comparative study – the latter two making cross-cultural comparisons that range across movies from America, Europe and, in *Ghost Melodramas*, South Korea and Japan.

For Michael, there were always new projects and two, both intended to become *Movie* e-books, had preoccupied him for some time. He worked extensively on the 'persecuted wives' cycle of films in 1940s and 50s Hollywood, and we hope it will be possible to publish material from this study at a later point. The second, *Modern Female Agent Thrillers*, was nearing completion when he died, and we are hoping to publish it shortly

as part of our tribute. From forty years earlier, we include here the key article, 'Melodrama in the American Cinema', one of Michael's many contributions to *Movie*, and an article that deserves to be better known. Thanks to Jill Hollis' generous permission, we are able not only to include it but to reproduce Ian Cameron's splendid design for *Movie* 29/30.

We have focussed here mainly on Michael's writing, but we also remember him – some of us across many years – as a friend and as a colleague in *Movie* and *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*. He was passionate about movies and loved sharing his enthusiasms. Exchanging work in progress with friends was invariably part of the writing process for Michael; he genuinely welcomed comments and was generous with comment and critical support for others. He was intensely serious about his work, but one of his charms was that for him thinking and talking about movies were clearly also fun. Although for years he suffered from a serious lung condition, he remained apparently tireless, pursuing new projects, watching movies (rarely missing either Bologna's *Il Cinema Ritrovato* or Pordenone's *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*), and always keen to talk, exchange views and argue. In a field in which debate has often become very strident, Michael had firm opinions but invariably remained calm and good-humoured, his wonderful smile and a laugh never far away.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

With thanks to Alex Jacoby

