BOOK OF THE MONTH

Command performance

Tony Rayns *welcomes a new Sternberg biography that sets the record straight*

Von Sternberg

By John Baxter, The University Press of Kentucky, 304pp, £35.95, ISBN 9780813126012

The critical battle lines around Josef von Sternberg were drawn very early, and positions have moved surprisingly little over the decades. Michael Atkinson's glowing review of Criterion's DVD set of Sternberg silents in last month's 'Sight & Sound' marvels at the "seriousness" of 'Underworld', 'The Last Command' and 'The Docks of New York' and laments that "a degree of eloquence and mature observation" went missing from the subsequent talkies with Marlene Dietrich.

This boils down to the assumption that the director's phenomenal skills as a metteur en scène were best deployed in the service of a psychological naturalism, abandoned when he began worshipping "Dietrich's slow-motion goddess act". The charmless Scottish documentarian John Grierson used rather different words to diss the Dietrich films at the time ("When a director dies, he becomes a photographer"), but the argument was essentially the same: Sternberg was a huge, expressive talent in the late 1920s who lost it when he enslaved himself to Dietrich in the early 1930s.

John Baxter's new biography (distantly based on his slim Tantivy Press monograph 'The Cinema of Josef von Sternberg', 1971, long out of print) is not a work of criticism, but it starts from the assumption that Sternberg did excellent work throughout his career, even if very little of it reached audiences in the form that Sternberg wished.

Baxter reports the fluctuations in Sternberg's critical standing but, crucially, takes the work as seriously as Sternberg himself took it: that is, not at all when the director tried to repress his own ambitions in order to meet the demands of such producers as Harry Cohn and Howard Hughes, but very seriously indeed whenever he had the chance to direct without interference, whether under Schulberg and Lubitsch at Paramount or in a converted aircraft hangar in Kyoto after the war. The Dietrich films, in particular, are seen as brilliantly imagined fantasias with roots in Sternberg's personal memories and his sado-masochistic view of relationships.

Sternberg's autobiography 'Fun in a Chinese Laundry' (1965) stands up superbly well as a manifesto for a director's cinema, and as an argument that cinema was the equal of any other artform in the 20th century, but in other respects it's highly problematic. It's full of evasions, elisions and outright lies, not to mention petty recriminations, insults (many ex-friends and key collaborators are written out of history) and sarcastic asides, all garnished with a smattering of disingenuous self-deprecation.

KOBAL COLLECTION (1)

Serious fantasist: Von Sternberg with Emil Jannings on the set of 'The Blue Angel'

All but useless, in other words, as a commentary on the career. Better researched than any other account out there, Baxter's book provides a valuable objective correlative to Sternberg's autobiography. It fills in gaps, corrects mistakes and challenges Sternberg's accounts of everything from his plans to take control of his own productions to the dates and frequency of his visits to Germany in the anti-semitic 1930s.

The proof copy under review contains quite a few howlers (some, like the citing of 'Bezhin Meadow' as one of Eisenstein's last films, call into question Baxter's standing as a cinephile), but these will presumably be corrected before the first edition hits print. More seriously, the book is let down by a vein of tabloid-esque comments and speculations: frequently updated lists of Dietrich's lovers, sleazy anecdotes about the likes of JFK and his father, repeated rhetorical questioning of Sternberg's own sexuality. Still, the rebuttals of claims about Sternberg's intentions by Leni Riefenstahl and of behind-his-back put-downs of Sternberg by Eisenstein are spot-on, and the overall balance between respect for Sternberg's achievements and regret over his often self-destructively arrogant behaviour seems about right. And when he needs an authoritative critical voice on his side, Baxter has enough good taste to quote from Raymond Durgnat, still the best writer on Sternberg; Durgnat's 'Six Films of Josef von Sternberg' (published under the name O.O. Green in 'Movie #13') remains the most perceptive, unrefuted vindication of Sternberg's talkies yet written.

Sternberg's antagonists in the 1930s included Graham Greene, who was remarkably wrong-headed for most of his six-year stint as a film critic, while his supporters included Jorge Luis Borges, never blind to metaphor, allegory or the implications of images. Baxter, to his credit, is in the Borges camp.

It provides a valuable objective correlative to Sternberg's autobiography

FURTHER READING

The Art of Drew Struzan

By Drew Struzan and David J. Schow, foreword by Frank Darabont. Titan Books, 160pp, £24.99, ISBN 9781848566194

If you never queued to see the new Steve Guttenberg, and have no happy memories of Harrison Ford brawling to a John Williams score, this book is perhaps not one for your coffee table. Struzan was *the* Hollywood poster artist of the 1980s and 90s, his portfolio an acrylic time machine to the golden age of Lucas and Spielberg, Amblin and Touchstone – all the *Star Wars*, Indiana Jones and *Back to the Future* films, most of the *Police Academy* and Muppet series.

Struzan's style, much imitated, remains distinctive: striking, often witty compositions lavished with detail; uncanny, Ingres-like portraiture; chunky outlines and bold brushwork. Inclined, he says, "to make things beautiful", he elevates a film as no photo can, painting sunsets and lightning, wind-tossed hair, Manhattan skylines and the odd alien with stirring panache. Frequent comparisons to Norman Rockwell stem not only from the just-so draftsmanship, but also from the inherent bonhomie of Struzan's work. (Detractors find the results twee, their toes curling at the sight of Kurt Russell looking as polished as a wax apple, or Eddie Murphy lovingly airbrushed like Elvis and co in Syd Brak's kitsch poster classic *Hollywood Diner*.)

Titan's handsome book gathers posters (*sans* title and credits) and 'comps' (concept ideas and sketches) from 41 projects. Struzan explains his craft and charts his career from the early days (creating the poster for John Carpenter's *The Thing* overnight with virtually no knowledge of the film) to his heyday (his *Phantom Menace* poster is, apparently, the world's "most seen" painting) to the present, when Photoshop has consigned hand-drawn posters to the dustbin. Struzan retired in 2008, still smarting at a marketing suit's rejection of his tender *Pan's Labyrinth* poster for looking "too much like art".

For an undiluted hit of the finished posters, the book to get is *The Movie Posters of Drew Struzan* (2004, over 100 films). Yet this volume cannot be ignored. Harrison Ford fans will just have to buy both. **Patrick Fahy**


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Time machine: 'Back to the Future'

Adoor Gopalakrishnan: A Life in Cinema

By Gautman Bhaskaran, Viking India, 240pp, ISBN 9780670081714

At two recent festival screenings of his film *Four Women* (*Naalu Pennungal*, 2007), Keralan director Adoor Gopalakrishnan did a most un-directorly thing: he asked the projectionist to turn the sound down. This is revealing. He says of himself, "I am basically an introvert," and perhaps, as with the work of directors as diverse as Jacques Tati and Elia Suleiman, it is his films' introversion which gives them their tone.

Gopalakrishnan's third feature *Rat-Trap* (*Elippathayam*, 1981) – his first in (beautiful, coded) colour, and the only one released on DVD in the UK – is about a wealthy, manipulative aristocrat who withdraws from life when his younger sister falls ill; he entraps himself, but also the people in his life whom he controls. The other Gopalakrishnan film available on (Region 1) DVD – *Shadow Kill* (*Nizhalkkuthu*, 2002), about the corroding guilt of a state hangman in Travancore in 1941 – enacts a similar silent scream. Like Kiarostami, Gopalakrishnan is a master of the unsaid. He made only one thriller, *The Servile* (*Vidheyan*, 1994).

This authorised biography by Gautaman Bhaskaran is the first in English (another English-language book, *A Door to Adoor* is a collection of essays on the films), and it details the main influences on Gopalakrishnan's themes and style. His three beautiful documentaries on the Kathakali style of folk dance (extracts of which are on YouTube) show how its measured pace, fine symbolic movements and bold colouring influenced the performative qualities of his films. Gopalakrishnan even claims that if Eisenstein had ever had the chance to see Khatakali, he would have valued it more highly than Kabuki.

The quiet man: Keralan director Adoor Gopalakhrishnan

Gopalakrishnan was born in a palatial home, but his mother was liberal (and the culture was matrilocal), hence his anti-feudalism and hatred of caste. English-language theatre was in the air of his childhood, and he wrote his first play when he was 12. Unsurprisingly he was a passionate follower of Gandhi, who "taught us the dignity of work". *Shadow Kill*'s denunciation of capital punishment is profoundly Gandhian.

In 1962 Gopalakrishnan applied to the Pune Film Institute, one of the world's great film schools. Unlike Satyajit Ray, for example, he'd seen few Hollywood or European films, but at Pune he saw lots, as well as the work of the Indian master Guru Dutt and, of course, the legendary lion of Pune, Ritwik Ghatak. Ghatak's punky rage ran underground in Gopalakrishnan, whose work showed none of the older director's Naxalite-influenced Marxist militancy; nonetheless, he fell under Ghatak's spell.

Gopalakrishnan came to make his own first feature *One's Own Choice* (*Swayamvaram*) in 1971-72, exactly at the time directors like Mani Kaul and Mrinal Sen were creating the European- and Ghatak-influenced Indian New Wave. It's no surprise, therefore, that he didn't set sail for Bollywood's commercial tinsel, but instead became one of Southern India's standard-bearers of "parallel cinema" in which – in contrast to Hindi cinema – psychology and the specifics of place and time mattered. In fact fidelity to the historical moment and the fine grain of locale became one of Gopalakrishnan's trademarks.

All these gave rise to – and describe – Gopalakrishnan's unshowy cinema of middle-aged men, slow to anger, rich in mercy. Bhaskaran's book shares some of these qualities. About as far away from film theory as you can imagine, it reads at times like a simple fable about an exemplary man – almost the definition of hagiography. Assertions that "there was nothing artificial or superficial" about the films take us nowhere, while the statement "his beginnings probably hold a clue to the greatness that lay ahead" is distinctly pre-Freudian. We shouldn't expect an Asian book about an Asian artist to deploy Western ideas about neurosis – or, for that matter, class – but the thinking in this book often needs to pull focus.

That said, there's a lot of useful information between these covers, and it's an easy read, with a warmth and humanism very much in line with the films it describes – films that led Satyajit Ray to claim Adoor Gopalakrishnan as his favourite Indian director. **Mark Cousins**

2001: A Space Odyssey

By Peter Krämer, BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 116pp, £9.99, ISBN 9781844572861

It must have been around 1980 that the number of books about Stanley Kubrick first exceeded the number of films he had made. Since then the rate of publication has grown exponentially. Already we have around seven books devoted to *2001: A Space Odyssey* alone.

What distinguishes this volume is that Peter Krämer, senior lecturer in Film Studies at UEA, has had access to the papers in the Kubrick archive donated to the University of the Arts in London by the Kubrick estate in 2007. No previous writer has had this benefit, and it proves both a plus and a minus.

In eight short chapters Krämer discusses and analyses the film's origins, its development, production, release, reception and influence, and generally acquits himself well in providing an introductory study. Chapter six contains the best narrative description of *2001* I've ever read. Krämer is also revealing about the film's initial critical reception, showing that it was generally acclaimed rather than panned (as folk memory has it) and that it didn't just appeal to acid heads but had a wide family audience.

BFI STILLS, POSTERS AND DESIGNS (1)

Family entertainment: Kubrick's '2001'

One failing, however, is that the book isolates *2001* in the context of science fiction's history in the cinema. Before the release of *2001*, science fiction had become, with one or two notable exceptions, the minor fodder of Buck Rogers and Saturday-morning serials. Serious film-makers rarely ventured there. Though Krämer isn't blind to the film's uniqueness, his researches have convinced him that Kubrick set out to make a "family entertainment" with a high educational content, courtesy of a voiceover narration. He writes that, "MGM recognised that the film could be marketed as the ultimate (virtual) tourist experience." But this doesn't sound like Kubrick.

The problem is that Krämer takes the reports, memos and letters of the Kubrick archive at face value (he's also overfond of box-office returns), and fails to see that had the director approached MGM with anything resembling the completed film, he would never have got past their revolving doors. Selling the idea to MGM involved some fancy footwork. Kubrick didn't know how the film would evolve, but we can be confident that he wasn't intending to make a companion piece to *Cinerama Holiday*.

Krämer makes much of the voiceover narration in most of the script drafts and writes of the "momentousness of the drastic last-minute decisions" that resulted in it being abandoned. Kubrick was still writing narration in script drafts up until main-unit shooting began, but these drafts were sent out to mollify MGM and author Arthur C. Clarke. By the time I started working on the film in September 1965, the narration idea was dead. Kubrick never sent out for voice tapes to sample actors, never discussed it, never recorded any of it. So, not exactly last-minute.

It's a point of debate in film studies as to what extent one should look to a film's novelisation in order to understand it. Clarke's *2001* was written while Kubrick worked on the film (though Clarke's 1948 story 'The Sentinel' had been the film's initial inspiration), and Krämer mines the novel for clues. At the time Kubrick felt obliged – contractually – to push further remuneration Clarke's way. However, in my view Kubrick would have been happier with no novelisation (he put his foot down about the book appearing before the film). What we have finally is a film by Kubrick and a novel by Clarke – two discrete entities, as unalike as apples and oranges. **Anthony Frewin**

Anthony Frewin was an assistant to Stanley Kubrick on '2001: A Space Odyssey' from 1965-68, and then again for other projects from 1980-99