

King Halliwell versus God-Norman?

When I was still a teenager and a budding film addict, my critical judgement lay in a state of atrophy with my unswerving advocacy of the opinions of these two men: Leslie Halliwell and Barry Norman. For then, as more than ever now, Leslie on the printed page and Barry on the TV screen ruled over the filmic consciousness of the never exactly cinephilic Great British public.

Those were the days of *Film 81* and a dog-eared yellow paperback copy of the First Edition of the *Film Guide*. I still use my hardback Fourth Edition and watch *Film 88* every week but I am more than ever aware of the shortcomings of these popular doyens of the profession of telling us what is worth seeing, on the one hand in the product of yesteryear cropping up on television, on the other in our local cinemas – assuming we still go to them or that the film ever gets there.

Both these men are opinionated. This is one of the things which makes them attractive to the public: they present their views in an entertaining and articulate way. Anyone would rather watch Barry than Iain Johnstone, but the latter (who devised the *Film* programme back in the early 70s and took over for a time a few years ago) often had more interesting things to say, when he wasn't trying to imitate Barry's style. In order to appreciate how such great potential went to waste we must look at how Leslie and Barry got where they are today.

They are both about the same age – Leslie, at 59, perhaps a touch older – so they grew up in the 30s and 40s watching the great and awful Anglo-American product we now see after lunch or bedtime. This is important for a start: unilateral exposure of this kind can produce untold damage to the film buff's sense of adventure. Leslie got up from nowhere (i.e. Bolton) into film exhibition and eventually Granada Television during the 60s. From '68 onwards he was programme – and film – buyer for the ITV network and for Channel 4 too when they came along. He published the *Filmgoer's Companion* in 1965, now up to the 9th Edition or so, a handy tome on everything from potted appraisals of classic films to mini essays on subjects like 'Lesbians' and 'Boo-boos'. Unfortunately, the emphasis on filmographies in the biographical entries results in a mass of dating material which is only loosely cross-referred.

Other books followed but none so popular as the *Film Guide* in 1976. The book is renewed every two years and is now up to its Sixth Edition, containing something like 16,000 titles. Popular as ever, it is deeply flawed. Leslie was once a critic for *Picturegoer* but I am afraid it was too long ago. His preferences are irrevocably geared to the 30s and 40s, at a pinch the 50s; for these periods his judgements are generous enough to be reliable, but even so strongly biased towards comedies and sophisticated dramas, literary works and musicals at the expense of action movies. This becomes apparent once the films treated start becoming mediocre or worse. By his own admission he rarely goes to the cinema anymore (!) How then does he see the 200 or so-strong batch of new films due for inclusion in each new edition? In some cases he obviously hasn't, and one wonders how judgements as damning as the following, on *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, can be justified: 'Bloodthirsty actioner in the star's usual mould; likely to prove unintentionally funny for hardened addicts.' His rating system more than anything, however, reveals his prejudices. The maximum is four stars. About 120 of these are rationed out in the *Film Guide*, but after 1960 only 3: *A Hard Day's Night*, *A Man for all Seasons* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. Weird,

huh? Even allowing for a settling-in period, twenty years seems unduly long without any honoured films. In any case it is his practice to revise ratings by removing stars, never to add them.

Leslie is not a film critic but a film buff, and not even qualified for that title any more. Now, since Halliwell's Hundred a few years ago, which basically condemned the Film Guide by providing a subjective elaboration of parts of it which was actually no different from the original, a new Halliwell opus has been appearing every year: the movie monsters, the funny men... no one is safe anymore. His gracious resignation as Film Buyer was presumably to leave more time for writing. The result this year is his first 'novel': *Return to Shangri-la*, inspired – you guessed it – by that perennial Leslie favourite, *Lost Horizon*. Alas it seems he is well and truly set in ever decreasing circles with the evangelical indulgence of his own convictions.

I suppose we can be thankful Leslie never deluded himself he was cut out to present a film programme. There was a time when he would introduce old movies on Channel 4, and that was probably quite enough. This is Barry's province, and fifteen's years' practice have fully honed his technique, even to the point of smooth predictability (and why not?) The only trouble is that Barry, son of producer-director Leslie Norman and who made his way to the Beeb through journalism, though a craftsman with words, could do with a little of Leslie H's knowledge if he is to convince us with his rhetoric. He is prone to making careless slips in his actuality programme, than which any filmgoer should know better (and Barry does go and see 150 films a year): for example, he referred the other week to the Clint Eastwood film currently in production as the fourth *Dirty Harry* movie, whereas it will actually be the fifth. Equally distracting are his running obsessions, such as Mickey Rourke's stubble in *Angel Heart* and, as of this week no doubt, his underpants in *Bar Fly*. This is entertaining enough but does not really credit the viewers with watching the programme every week. Finally, Barry's judgements can be as unreliable as Leslie's – who else would opine that David Cronenberg's *The Fly* was inferior to the 1958 original? (Leslie, perhaps) Most often, though, he is disappointingly non-committal. And this brings us on to *Talking Pictures*.

Barry's new book/TV moneyspinner loses all the charm of his *Greats* series by failing to provide opportunities for his journalistic talents. Where before he was adept at suggesting mockery of his subjects' lifestyles through totally inoffensive commentary, now actors who are older than ever – or rather technicians since most of the actors are dead – tell far from scurrilous anecdotes we've heard or read a dozen times before, while Barry reduces himself to connecting these and the film clips with the most simplistic and sketchy history of Hollywood and Hollywood genres imaginable. No assessment of the individual films whatsoever is mooted, there is no examination of the classic Hollywood shooting style, nor of the psychological import of the movies. In short, the history of popular cinema is presented as nothing more than a vaguely socio-historical-economic phenomenon. Even the severest critic of Hollywood films must admit that such a thing as aesthetics comes into them somewhere. If *Talking Pictures* is meant to cater for the average punter who does not give a fig for aesthetics, why is it on so late? No, Barry could have done this sort of programme if he had been able and willing to. But it is evidently not his speciality. He should never have undertaken it.

To sum up in a conciliatory mood I would say that I do not think any of us need worry too much about Leslie anymore, as the senility of his work will grow increasingly apparent, and I would be the last person to wish that Barry should vanish from our screens – we might end

up with Terry Wogan – but there is decidedly a vacancy for an appealing personality who can talk intelligently about film.

*Editor's note: this piece was written in 1988 and, while I would withdraw relatively little of it now, it does seem a little unkind towards these two giants who fed my passion for film for so long, and of course I wasn't to know that Leslie would soon pass on to that great movie theatre in the sky. Further, TV film criticism has naturally not got better with their passing, witness years of Jonathan Ross and his colourless, eugenically chosen successors. The one happy exception was Mark Cousins's series *The Story of Film*, which provided all those things whose absence I lamented, perhaps naïvely, in *Barry's Talking Pictures*.*