

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Life in Film: Ed Ruscha

In an ongoing series, *frieze* asks artists and filmmakers to list the movies that have influenced their practice



Ed Ruscha was born in Omaha, USA. In 1956 he moved to Los Angeles, where he still lives. The city continues to be an influence on his work, which comprises painting, drawing, photography and artist's books. His interest in the vernacular language of advertising, automobile culture and urban architecture led him to be associated with the early years of the Pop art movement, and in 1962 he was included in the exhibition 'New Painting of Common Objects' at the Pasadena Museum of California Art, the first museum survey of American Pop art. His work has since been the subject of retrospectives at numerous museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 2004, and the Jeu de Paume, Paris, in 2006. He represented the USA at the 51st Venice Biennale in 2005. 'Ed Ruscha: Fifty Years of Painting' opened at London's Hayward Gallery in October. It will travel to Haus der Kunst, Munich, and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in 2010.

I began seeing commercial Hollywood films when I was nine or ten years old, at a neighbourhood theatre in Oklahoma. Most of the films I saw at that time were black and white. I've got a vivid memory of what they looked like on a big screen and the silvery feeling that I got from them; I'm sure it had everything to do with my thoughts about painting and it probably scooted me onto the world of art. Not that film was the major thing, because street iconography, sign-painting styles and things like that were probably my original influences, along with cartoon strips. The illustrator Basil Wolverton had a big influence on me – I couldn't get enough of his stuff. That was Surrealism brought down to a popular level, where the kid on the street could see it. He wouldn't have to go to a museum, he could get it through comic books and movies

Above:
Ben Maddow, Sidney Meyers and Joseph Strick
The Savage Eye
1960
I'd been living in L.A for about four years at the time. I saw it by accident and it really bit me.

Below:
Max Fleischer
Betty Boop's Rise to Fame
1934
Cartoon imagery put to film had a direct effect on me that I still look back on.



John Ford
The Grapes of Wrath
 1940

It was my first experience of something that really moved me, both as a story and something filmic.

were two events in my life that dovetailed and began to move me towards the greater 'A for Art!' Disney films were an influence, and I'd even go back as far as *Krazy Kat* and some of those Max Fleischer cartoons where, say, the animal jumps out of the inkwell. All of that cartoon imagery put to film had a direct effect on me that I still look back on but it's more historical in my mind because it's all so long ago.

The Grapes of Wrath (1940) was my first experience of something that really moved me both as a story and as something filmic. The story never got in the way of the film and the film never got in the way of the story, but it had a direct effect on me because I grew up in the Dust Bowl territory where the film is set. Although that era was ten or 15 years before my time. I still knew that the area was affected by these great sandstorms, and knew of the Dust Bowl experience, in which all these Okies left for California to pick peas.

One movie that really hit me hard was called *The Savage Eye* (1960). I guess it's what's popularly known as a *noir* film – one of those black and white movies of the late 1950s and early '60s. It had a very documentary style, although it was acted throughout, and it really got down to the gut level of the city of Los Angeles. It's the story of a woman living in Arizona, whose divorce has really messed her up. She can't think of anything else to do so she takes off on a Greyhound bus bound for Los Angeles. She stays at the Chateau Marmont hotel, falls in with a certain crowd of people and through them experiences the underbelly of LA. I'd been living in LA for about four years at the time, and I saw *The Savage Eye* by accident; it really hit me and I haven't forgotten it.



Stanley Kubrick
Paths of Glory
 1957

I saw it around 1959 when I was in Aspen, and they had some films up there that were thought of as 'art films'. I always consider that one of my favourite movies.



In fact, I just resurrected it a couple of weeks ago when I was talking to Jeremy Strick, the former director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and he was telling me that his father, Joseph Strick, directed *The Savage Eye* in 1960, and I said, 'Wow that's the movie I saw!' Another fine *noir* movie is *Private Property* (1960), about a couple of drifters who come in from the east and hitch out to Malibu and terrorize people.

There's also *The World's Greatest Sinner* (1962), a black and white opus written, directed and produced by, and starring, Timothy Carey, who also appears in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) in a brilliant role as one of the court-martialled soldiers. *Paths of Glory* was a big production movie that grabbed me hard and fast. I saw it around 1959 when I was in Aspen, and they had some films up there that were thought of as 'art films'. I always consider that one of my favourite movies.

I'm not as eager to see films today, especially ones that have a sentimental tone. Any movies to do with nostalgia, love or any kind of sappiness leave me cold. I don't even see 99 percent of movies today; I'm not interested in them, although occasionally there will be one I'll go and watch. However, I do feel that

movies are one hell of a lot better than television, which I don't watch at all, except for sporting events. I don't watch any serials, and I don't watch news: I listen to the radio. So I've missed a great chunk of popular culture by just following my instincts. It's not because I'm searching for any sort of maximum density in my life, I just don't happen to be interested in television, and I have a sort of resentment towards it. It's too fast, too thought-out; it's not art to me. That could be argued from different positions but I'd rather read a book, see something else or go for a drive along the street.

The early movies I mention had a more intense influence on me because there was a romance to the movie capital when I first moved here. When I left Oklahoma to go to an art school, I knew I could go to New York, Kansas City, Chicago or LA. I'd already visited LA and this great accelerated city really appealed to me. I thought: 'That's the place I should go – they've got jazz there, they've got a red hot culture, and better weather than New York!' I still get that same buzz from LA although I've gone through periods when I've hated this place, but now I think I love it again.