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The Notion of Mainstream Film in Contemporary Cinema

The origin of this paper was a discussion about two American films, *Deadpool* (2016) and *The Big Short* (2015). A question arose about whether they might be called “mainstream films”. On the one hand, both of them are American films produced in Hollywood, featuring major stars and which performed well at the box office. On the other hand, both of them have rather complicated structures. Moreover, *Deadpool*, has some features that not long ago were considered innovative elements of arthouse cinema, such as the great number of allusions to films, comics, songs, and novels, as well as constant breaking of the fourth wall; likewise, *The Big Short*, with its ‘heavy’ penchant for economy and finances and outlandish editing, looks like a fulfillment of Sergei Eisenstein’s dream to film Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*. Taking that into account, can they actually be called “mainstream”? Asking this question I do not intend to determine what a mainstream film is or is not. My endeavour is rather of a linguistic nature, its aim being to establish how the term is used and understood, what meaning is assigned to it in contemporary discourse about cinema.

Overview

Before we go to the crux of the matter, a more general view is necessary. According to Oxford Dictionaries the word “mainstream” means “The ideas, attitudes, or activities that are shared by most people and regarded as normal or conventional” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). A definition provided by the Cambridge Dictionary is very similar: “mainstream” means “considered normal, having or using ideas, beliefs etc. that are accepted by most people” (Cambridge Dictionary). Among synonyms, we find words like: normal, conventional, ordinary, orthodox, conformist, accepted, established, recognised, common, usual, prevailing, popular.

If we focus on the sphere of culture, it turns out that the word is frequently used, but rarely discussed or defined – this is a common complaint of research-

ers who have dealt with this issue (Toynbee, 2002, p. 149; Thornton, 1995, p. 92-96; Huber, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, it is used in many different contexts and is assigned many different meanings.

It is sometimes imagined to be a place (when things “go mainstream” or “cross over into the mainstream”); sometimes it is a cultural force, a natural energy which “sweeps” things with its magnetic pull (...); at other times it is used as a marketing synonym for the “mass audience” of popular culture products; frequently it is used as an adjective, attached to a noun to signify some inherent aesthetic trait; you’ll hear it used in the place of the word “normal” or “normative”; it can also refer to a socio-economic category used by politicians to refer to the majority of their constituency. The mainstream is, in some ways, a schizophrenic category (...) (Huber, p. 4/5)

In another place, discussing Dick Hebdige’s classical book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Huber underlines not only the ambiguity of the term, but also its extremely negative connotations, which make it a “subcultural other”, against which proper tastes and attitudes can be discriminated:

In its many guises, mainstream becomes, at various times and sometimes all at once, a synonym for hegemony; a social group; the opposite of art; the epitome of “straight-ness”; the enemy of creative youth culture; the repository of cultural artefacts ripe for resignification with subversive meaning; the site of artifice; the locus of all that must be resisted (...) here we find an inkling of the mainstream that is banal, homogeneous, unsophisticated, undiscerning, uncultured, low, inauthentic, fake, commercial, conservative, unimaginative, conformist or just plain stupid. (Huber, p. 8)

Yet, against all these odds, Huber is defending the use of the term. She is pointing out to its metaphorical potential (mainstream as the river, “all-encompassing, homogeneous and homogenizing”, which “stands for cultural dominance”) (p. 10), and is stressing the necessity of considering “mainstreamness” not on an abstract level, but at the level of particular manifestations. A case in point was the song “Say It Once” by Ultra – after some months of immense popularity it fell out of regular circulation and was not mainstream any more. “This is where thinking with and through ‘mainstream’ reveals its usefulness: as a conceptual tool that illuminates the ways in which certain kinds of music (and other aspects of culture) come to temporarily dominate everyday life at certain times and in certain places.” (p. 12). Huber refers to a view of Jason Toynbee, who defines mainstream as “a formation that brings together large numbers of people from diverse social groups and across large geographical areas in common affiliation to a musical style” and links it to the “currents” of hegemony (in the Gramscian sense), “aesthetics of the centre” and economy. (Toynbee 2002, p.150-156; Kärjä, 2006 p. 11).

Mainstream in Cinema

A preliminary venture into the field of film culture confirms the above-mentioned complaints: definitions are scarce, usages – haphazard, meanings – multiple, index searches – frustrating. None of the film encyclopedias that I have consulted contain an entry on “mainstream film” or “mainstream cinema”: neither Ephraim Katz’s *Film Encyclopedia* (2001), nor *L’Encyclopédie du cinéma*, ed. Roger Boussinot (1967), nor the Scandinavian *Bra Böckers Film och Tv Lexikon*, ed. Bo Heurling, Höfanäs (1985), nor the *Dictionnaire du cinéma*, ed. Jean-Loup Passek (1995), nor the *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant, Detroit, N.Y. London (2007), nor the Polish *Encyklopedia kina*, ed. Tadeusz Lubelski, Kraków (2010). A search in general encyclopedias does not fare better. One will not find an entry in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, or in the *Big Polish Encyclopedia*. I have also looked through various academic texts from various sectors of film studies (theory, analysis, production and reception studies) and I have found very few attempts to define the term. Presumably, it is widely assumed that the notion of mainstream film should be taken for granted, that everybody knows ‘more or less’ what it means and there is no need for any further explanation.

I have hence decided to apply two different approaches. First, I searched the Internet. The goal was to find out how this term is understood by people who write about films on the web, (such as bloggers or film forum members, or, simply put – film buffs). It turns out that some people find the notion unclear and either seek out its definition or try to define it themselves. I have found six bloggers who have tackled the issue and two internet forums where it was discussed. This suggested that a certain need exists to clarify the notion of mainstream cinema. Secondly, I turned to academia, analysing the scarce definitions that I found, as well as some academic texts in which the term was used but not defined. The goal was to identify how the notion of mainstream cinema is understood by people in academia, who apparently take its meaning for granted.

Both groups share certain traits. The notion of mainstream cinema is often used interchangeably with such notions as popular cinema, commercial cinema, standard film, and dominant, typical, or even classical, cinema – all these terms have been treated as synonymous, or, at least, the supposed differences between them have not been clarified. To this we can add such notions as “middlebrow cinema” (Faulkner, 2016) and “high concept films” (Wyatt, 1994). Besides, the notion of mainstream cinema has usually been juxtaposed with terms such as arthouse cinema, avant-garde cinema, experimental cinema, independent cinema, parallel cinema, or even oppositional cinema. So, in parallel with Huber’s findings, “mainstream film” often plays the role of the subcultural “other”.

Mainstream Film as a Blockbuster

It is convenient to start an Internet search with its most popular source of knowledge: Wikipedia. Here is the definition:

Mainstream movies can be defined as movies that cost much to make and are created for profit. To pay the cost and make the profit they are made so very many people will want to pay to see them. They have a wide release to first run theaters. Those are movie theaters that run mostly new mainstream movies from the major movie companies. After their time in first-run theaters, mainstream movies are sold at popular stores. Hollywood and Bollywood movies are usually considered mainstream, and may also be blockbusters. The boundary is vague. An example of the opposite of mainstream movie is art films. (Wikipedia)

This definition focuses on production and distribution. It says nothing about the films themselves – what they look like, or what their style or structure is. What matters is that they cost a lot, and are made and distributed to maximise profits. The only description of films is that “they are made so very many people will want to see them”, without, however, any further elaboration. This general attitude – defining mainstream cinema basically on the basis of its budget, producer (major film companies), and distribution (first-run cinemas) – with almost total neglect of the features of the films themselves, prevails among bloggers. They put forward several similar definitions or descriptions of the term (Wyres, 2014; Bromley, 2010; Arts and Faith, 2006; Singh, 2013; Culture Snob, 2009; Balcerzak, 2013), out of which the most exhaustive and detailed one was provided by Jake Bromley, who juxtaposes it with independent cinema. The biggest part of his text concerns marketing and distribution. Mainstream films – “examples of which are Hollywood movies and blockbuster movies” – are produced by major film studios and supported by intensive marketing in all forms of media. They “use trailers on television and DVDs, they advertise on the internet, magazines, posters and the radio”, whereas independent films, due to their very limited budget, “often rely on word of mouth (...) or entering a film festival”. Mainstream films “are released on a wide scale in different cinemas internationally”, so it is easy to see them, and then “released for home use and sold in usually popular stores”; whereas independent films are either not shown in cinemas, and immediately directed to DVD distribution, or are shown in specialised, local cinemas.

Jake Bromley also devotes some attention to the films themselves, relating the differences between a mainstream and an independent film, which are “easily noticeable when watching the film and paying attention to certain aspects of the way in which it was shot”, to the differences in the budget. Mainstream filmmakers, quite unlike independent filmmakers, can afford to employ “A-list actors”, to shoot in expensive, easily recognisable locations, to use “extravagant special effects”, and to adapt bestselling novels (Bromley, 2010).

An interesting discussion on the subject took place on the Internet forum called “Arts and Faith”. It started on 5 January 2006, from the question “What makes a film/movie mainstream”, posted by a person nicknamed “Thom”.

The answers, which give a good image of how people understand the term, are as follows:

To my mind, what makes a movie mainstream is some combination of its marketing and the number of theaters it is shown in.

I would say I have always defined the difference between ‘mainstream’ and ‘not mainstream’ [as] based on where it happens. If it shows in a multi-plex, it is mainstream or attempting to be so. If it shows in an art house, it isn’t.

I actually don’t use the word ‘mainstream’. Movies are either independent (no studio funding) OR studio productions (has funding from day one, has a big marketing budget, etc.). Many times independents blow up while big budget studio films go under the radar. Like *Napoleon Dynamite*: it was produced independently for about \$400,000, but was bought by Fox Searchlight (owned by Newscorp) who put over \$10 million into the marketing campaign. And now it’s hard to find an American between the ages of 10 and 50 who hasn’t seen that movie. So, IMO, what makes a movie ‘mainstream’ probably has more to do with the advertising than the production budget.

If it is around 90 minutes to four hours and is showing in a theater, the odds are 99% that it is mainstream. If it has a narrative flow of any type, even an anti-narrative flow, the odds are that it is mainstream. If anyone anywhere put a large chunk of money into it, it is most likely mainstream. Everything you watch is mainstream. [...] The audience is now large enough in every social niche that what is marketed as non-mainstream is clearly mainstream to that niche.

I think that while most films may then be produced to be mainstream, many will never be. (Arts & Faith, 2006)

Most of these voices confirm that the notion of mainstream cinema is commonly regarded as a function of distribution and – to a smaller extent – budget production. Some points, however, shed light on other interesting factors. First, mainstream status may be sought, but not achieved, depending, I assume, on the film’s success or lack thereof. Secondly, if the main criteria are marketing and distribution, then any film may become mainstream, provided that someone puts enough money towards these two activities. This has actually been the fate of many independent productions which became blockbusters, like *El Mariachi* or *The Blair Witch Project*. Thirdly, the remark about niches makes it plain that the notion of mainstream fares better in a more uniform society, as the more the audience is diversified, the more the notion of mainstream becomes relative and difficult to define. Fourthly, the remark that a mainstream film must have a narrative

flow, even of an anti-narrative sort, points out that the dominant narrative structure on which past mainstream films were supposedly founded has been broken down, and that many different types of structures are now fair game.

The views discussed so far define “mainstream” on the basis of features that are basically extratextual, that is, which do not refer to the films themselves but rather to the circumstances of the film production, marketing, and distribution. Even if some remarks about the films appear, it is also in the context of their production, or, to be precise – budget. This ‘external’ attitude is characteristic of the views expressed on the Internet; so, to the extent that blogs and forums echo popular understanding, one may say that this is how the vast majority of filmgoers understand the term.

Mainstream and Ideology

Academic texts are different in this respect, because they tend to focus on films rather than on external circumstances. A case in point is the definition of the entry “dominant/mainstream” provided by Susan Hayward in her book *Cinema Studies. The Key Concepts*. Admittedly, it also mentions wider circumstances, but it generally focuses on “a filmic text”. It goes as follows:

Dominant cinema is generally associated with Hollywood, but its characteristics are not restricted to Hollywood. As Anette Kuhn says (1982, p. 22), it is in the relation between “the economic and the ideological” [that] the dominant cinema takes its concrete form”. Thus all countries with a film industry have their own dominant cinema and this cinema constantly evolves depending on the economic and ideological relations in which it finds itself. Given the economic situation, the film industry of a particular country will favour certain production practices over others. For example, the assembly line system and vertical integration of Hollywood **studios** in the 1930s and 1940s have now given way to a fragmentation of the industry and to the rise of the independent film-makers whom Hollywood studio companies now commission to make films. On the ideological front, the dominant filmic text in Western society revolves round the standardised plot of order/disorder/order restored. The action focuses on central characters so the plot is character-driven. **Narrative** closure occurs with the completion of the **Oedipal trajectory** through either marriage or a refusal of coupledness. In any event closure means a resolution of the heterosexual courtship (Kuhn 1983, p. 34). This resolution often takes the form of the recuperation of a transgressive female into the (social) order (Kuhn 1983, p. 34). Visually, the ideological relation is represented through the “reality” effect – the illusion of reality. The **continuity** of the film is **seamless**, the **editing** does not draw attention to itself. The **mise-en-scene**, **lighting** and **colour** are appropriate to the **genre**. **Shots** confirm to the **codes and conventions** dictated by the generic type. (Hayward, 2013, p. 118/119)

This definition consists of many different parts, each of them taken from a different methodological inspiration, and the stitches between them are far from being seamless. The part that deals with economy seems to me rather inconclusive and inoperative. It is difficult to establish how a passage from “vertical integration” to “fragmentation” of the industry can influence the ideology of films and, especially, how it can help to distinguish between mainstream and non-mainstream films. The part on film structure is too broad, for practically all fiction films (not only from Western societies) revolve around an order/disorder/order restored plot and are focused on the central character. The part inspired by psychoanalysis coupled with feminism is at the same time too broad and too narrow. Too broad, for it can also be applied to many films which have never been considered “mainstream”; too narrow, because in some films which have been qualified as mainstream a romantic plot is either non-existent or subsidiary. The “illusion of reality” discriminant is particularly troublesome in an era where most blockbusters belong to the “phantasy” genres. The last part of Hayward’s definition refers obviously to the concept of classical Hollywood cinema, as it was conceptualised in the seminal book by Bordwell, Steiger and Thompson (1985) – no surprise that this book is recommended for further reading. Yet, the notion of mainstream film, insignificant in this book, and the idea of seamless transparency as a distinguishing feature of mainstream film, seem to be obsolete nowadays, when jump-cuts and various forms of breaking the fourth wall belong to the staples of popular cinema (*Deadpool* being the obvious example, among many others).

The notion of ideological conditioning of mainstream films informs also a definition provided by Pieter Jacobus Fourie from South Africa (his provenance is significant here): “mainstream cinema is usually associated with and seen as the product of dominant production industry in a society; the production of Hollywood, for example. Oppositional cinema sets itself the goal of analyzing and interpreting dominant ideology” (Fourie, 2001, p. 225). Fourie also gives an interesting example:

In South Africa, film production, for decades, was dominated by mainstream cinema of a few production companies set in the mode of apartheid ideology. Since the eighties these films were questioned by so-called oppositional cinema or alternative films, such as *Jobman* or *Taxi to Soweto*, which set itself the goal of questioning apartheid ideology. (Fourie, 2001, p. 225)

So, the defining feature of mainstream cinema is that it contains and propagates dominant ideology. What is more, there is no one mainstream cinema, but many mainstreams. Each dominant ideology has its own mainstream cinema, provided it has film production companies at its disposal. Incidentally, a similar concept has been developed by an Indian blogger, Naorem Mohen Singh. In his view, mainstream cinema in India is the opium served to the masses in order to help them “escape to a world of fantasy. In a bid to reach the masses, mainstream cinema has become melodramatic and rhetorical. The presentation of extremes has been

common”. According to Singh, the definition of a mainstream cinema can vary by country. For example, a mainstream cinema from China would not be considered a mainstream film in India. But from a global perspective, mainstream cinema could be defined as Hollywood films, because it is these films which make up the majority of the most widely distributed films in the world. This makes Hollywood films the worldwide mainstream.

Singh juxtaposes mainstream cinema, at least the Indian mainstream cinema, to parallel cinema, a well-defined movement which originated in Bengal in the 1950s. Parallel cinema is not escapist; on the contrary,

[It] concentrates on contemporary socio-political problems of the country. These films are made for the elite audiences and they are expected to change their thought processes. Mostly, there are no idols or stars in the art movie. There are only ideas that shake the minds of the viewer. (Singh, 2013)

This dichotomy is typical of descriptions of mainstream cinema, but Singh breaks through it, for he also introduces two other kinds of cinema, namely middle cinema and regional language cinema. In my opinion, this is a valuable idea which helps avoid reductive binarism.

Mainstream as Realism and Continuity

The above-mentioned authors attempted to define mainstream. Many academics, though, use the term, without defining it, so the meaning which they attribute to it must be extracted from their writing. This is the case of Robert Rosenstone’s article, “The Historical Film as Real History” (1995). Rosenstone, a renowned historian who has always occupied himself with the issue of presenting history in film, does not analyse the term; he simply uses it, juxtaposing it to “experimental films”. For him, the main characteristic of mainstream cinema is “realism”. Mainstream films “want to make us think they are reality”, so that “we can somehow look through the window of the screen directly at a ‘real’ world”. This effect is achieved through the convention of “cinematic realism”, made up of “certain kinds of shots in certain kinds of sequences, seamlessly edited together”, (which seems to refer to continuity editing). Thus depicted, “standard film” is separated from experimental film, which “contests the characteristics of mainstream film”. It does not “make the same claim on us as does the realist film. Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, it opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past” (Rosenstone, 1995, p. 11).

The concept of seamless editing brings to mind, among others, William Brown’s *Supercinema*. The book’s theme is the influence of digitality on cinema. Brown, like many other authors, does not analyse the terms; he seems to take them for granted. Yet, at one point he makes a remark that sheds light on his understanding of the notion of mainstream cinema. Recounting discoveries in the “burgeoning field of neurocinematics,” William Brown states that mainstream films lead

human brains to ‘tick together’, in that the same parts of the human brain fire in different humans as they watch the same sequences from the same films. [...] Interestingly, the more ‘mainstream’ a film is – i.e. the more it employs the techniques of continuity editing – the more ISC [intersubject correlation – MP] is shown to occur. (Brown, 2013, p. 135-136).

This remark makes continuity editing the defining factor of mainstream cinema. Mainstream film is simply a film which uses continuity editing. Moreover, “mainstreamness” may be graduated – the more a film employs continuity editing, the more mainstream it is.

David Bordwell: Tradition, Innovation, Comprehensibility

Many authors who either define mainstream cinema or just use the term refer implicitly or explicitly to David Bordwell’s findings. Interestingly enough, he has neither seemed to define this term nor has he used it too often. Its use in such seminal books as *Film Art. An Introduction*, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (written with Kristin Thompson and Janet Steiger) and *Narration in the Fiction Film* is insignificant. In some of Bordwell’s books it does not appear at all, and where it does appear, its meaning must be inferred. I carried out a close examination of its usage in the book *The Way Hollywood Tells It* (2006), which is particularly interesting, because it concerns the moment of a big change in cinema, when – according to many researchers – the classical mode, so convincingly depicted by this author, was on the wane, and a new, post-classical cinema was emerging.

The word “mainstream” appears about 20 times in this book, in various contexts. Apart from mainstream films, we also have “mainstream audience”, “mainstream filmmaker”, “mainstream storytelling”, “mainstream story principles”, “mainstream construction”, “mainstream moviemaking”, “mainstream directors”, “mainstream theaters”, “mainstream style”. It seems that “mainstreamness” touches every aspect of film culture; it defines people (mainstream filmmaker, mainstream audience), distribution (mainstream theater), and some features of the film itself (mainstream style, story principles, construction, etc.).

A closer analysis of Bordwell’s book reveals that he uses the term in several different ways. One of them is the opposition between mainstream and innovation. For instance, referring to the situation of the 1990s, when a new generation of viewers appeared, Bordwell asserts that “the young audience was drenched in modern media, from cable TV to computers, and viewers knew the standard moves of the mainstream storytelling. They were ready to embrace innovations” (p. 74). Mainstream storytelling is something rooted in the past; a cultural heritage against which innovations are measured. Elsewhere, when writing on so called “puzzle films”, Bordwell remarks:

We are guided through the games of gap making and gap filling by genre conventions, the redundancy built into mainstream story principles. [...] As

the zone of indeterminacy widens, however, our reliance on classical closure wanes and we must call on more rarefied comprehension skills. (p. 82)

Here, mainstream is clearly equated with “classical closure” which enables an average viewer, a representative of the “mainstream audience”, to navigate the changing tides of contemporary cinema. The conclusive statement is found in a paragraph devoted to the notion of spectacle, where one reads:

Spectacle is expensive, so the bulk of any picture will consist of stretches of sheer story, mostly conversation. How else would one fill these stretches if not by appeal to canons of mainstream construction [...] in short, all the resources of tradition? (p. 107)

So, mainstream appears to be a certain abstract film form, rooted in the tradition of American cinema, which on the one hand opposes innovations, while on the other makes innovations possible, in a sense that it provides the viewer, the mainstream viewer, with a firm ground from which they can venture into less familiar territories. However, it is not the only meaning of the term which can be drawn from Bordwell’s book. He quotes a manual for beginning directors, stating that “[i]f you are going to make it as a director of mainstream theatrical features, you have to force perspective”¹ (p. 128). In this case, a mainstream theatrical feature is not a film rooted in history. On the contrary, it is a film which readily embraces innovations such as employing extreme lens length. Similarly, Bordwell lists basic features of a phenomenon which he calls “intensified continuity” (fast cutting rate, bipolar extremes of lens lengths, reliance on tight singles, free-ranging camera) and concludes that “virtually every contemporary American mainstream film will exhibit at least some of them” (p. 138). Here, too, the meaning of “mainstream film” is different – it is not an abstract film form which is rooted in the past and displays a reluctance, or at least a certain ambiguity, towards innovations. Here, I guess, the attribution is not textual – i.e. it does not depend on the film’s features – but rather institutional: a mainstream film is a film produced by a big studio, having big promotional means at its disposal, and is aimed at mass audience.

These two, to some extent opposing, meanings of the notion seem to reconcile in a third. Depicting a situation from the 1990s, when “a fresh batch of films seemed to shatter the classical norms, and [...] offbeat storytelling became part of business as usual”, Bordwell states that “the mainstream filmmaker who embraced the new complexities of plotting faced a problem. How could innovations be made comprehensible and pleasurable to a wide audience?” (p. 73). Elsewhere he argues that “mainstream Hollywood can stretch to accommodate even the time-warping repetitions of *Groundhog Day* (1993), as long as they rest on a clear pattern of goal orientation and cause and effect” (p. 94). Bordwell later continues:

¹ The manual quoted is: Gil Betman, *First Time Director: How to Make Your Breakthrough Movie*, Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese, 2003.

whatever new shapes degrees-of-separation plots take, most remain coherent and comprehensible, thanks to principles of causality, temporal sequence, and duration, character wants and needs, the motivic harmony that have characterized mainstream storytelling (not just cinema) for at least a century. (p. 100)

The notion of comprehensibility seems to be crucial here. Anything goes as long as it is comprehensible. Mainstream cinema can accept and accommodate all sorts of innovation, on the condition that the unambiguous nature of the movie be preserved. In short: comprehensibility is the defining feature of mainstream cinema.

This interpretation may be corroborated by a text to which David Bordwell refers in an endnote, in which he writes: “On the user-friendly aspects of the mainstream style, see Noël Carroll ‘The Power of Movies’” (p. 246). Significantly, Noël Carroll does not use the term in this article, which was originally published in 1985 (Carroll, 1996). He prefers such notions as “movies” (as opposed to the broader category of “films”), “popular mass-media films”, “Hollywood International – films made in [...] the classical style” (p. 79), “typical” or “standard” movies. Whatever the name, the defining feature of this genre of cinema is its mass appeal, achieved principally because of its clarity. In this paper, Noël Carroll explains the “intensity of movies by examining those features that enable movies to depict situations with a very high degree of clarity. In a nutshell [...] the power of movies resides in their easily graspable clarity for mass audience” (p. 80). This clarity is achieved through “pictorial representations, variable framings, erotetic narration, and interrelation of these elements” (p. 92).

External and Internal Approaches

As is evident from the hitherto discussed views and papers, a current reflection on mainstream in cinema is devoid of classism and evaluative bias. In none of them could one read that mainstream cinema or its audiences is worse in any respect. More generally, the emphasis is put not so much on the viewers, their tastes and social background, as on the processes of production and marketing on the one hand and the characteristics of the filmic texts on the other. According to various definitions, a mainstream film can be understood as

A Hollywood blockbuster, which is made for profit and uses all strategies at hand to achieve this goal. Particularly prominent among these strategies are: big budgets (including a promotional budget), the presence of stars and celebrities as an attraction for a mass audience, and distribution in first-run cinemas.

A film which propagates dominant ideologies.

A realist film, with a special emphasis on either a closed structure or continuity editing; this realist film usually incorporates an uplifting message.

A film which employs continuity editing.

A film rooted in the tradition of classical Hollywood cinema, which employs its cinematic conventions.

A film that is easy to comprehend; Bordwellian excessively obvious film.

Until recently, all of these elements worked together and supported each other, such that it could be relatively easy to say that a mainstream film is a film rooted in the easily comprehensible, realist aesthetics of classical Hollywood cinema, with continuity editing, a closed structure, and very often an uplifting message, designed as mass entertainment, and usually produced by big Hollywood companies, with a big budget, large-scale marketing, and wide distribution. It was possible because of a relatively high degree of uniformity within film culture. Contemporary cinema is experiencing growing diversification in all spheres, including modes of reception, distribution, and aesthetic tendencies. It is therefore increasingly difficult to single out a dominant, “mainstream” tendency.

Let us take the two basic meanings of mainstream cinema into consideration, which are what I called “external” and “internal” or “textual”. In the “external” understanding, a mainstream film is a big-budget film screened in multiplexes and first-run cinemas and promoted by an aggressive marketing campaign, with its “textual” elements involving stars and special effects. If this is the meaning of mainstream cinema, it is quite obvious that these conditions are only fulfilled by a small percentage of movies, even among Hollywood productions. David Bordwell aptly reminds us of this, making a long list of films produced in Hollywood (such as baseball movies, golf movies, dolphin movies, Christmas movies, and several dozens of others), only to conclude that we too often concentrate on the peaks (that is, blockbusters), whereas “Hollywood dwells also in the valleys. Perhaps our orthodox account of the industry’s recent history, focusing on the rise of megapictures, lets all the other films slip too far to the periphery” (Bordwell, 2006 p. 10). This topographical metaphor is meaningful. In what way may a peak be “mainstream” in relation to a valley? The valley does not resemble the peak; the valley does not imitate the peak, nor does it attempt to; and the valley is in no way able to, nor ‘wants’ to, follow the peak. The peak is the peak, the valley is the valley. There is no point in subordinating one to the other, and that is precisely what the notion of mainstream does.

The “external” meaning of the term is problematic for other reasons as well. If one of its criteria is a mass audience, what can we do with films which were intended to be blockbusters, but failed. Are they mainstream, too? And if they are – why? And, to reverse this scenario, can we call a film which was produced as an indie film, but then gained popularity mainstream? Another thing – the notion of mainstream seems to have originated from the time when films were viewed in movie theaters. This is why distribution, first-run cinemas, and multiplexes are considered so important. However, nowadays the role of movie theaters in film culture is dwindling, and, it seems, it will dwindle even more. With this, the notion of mainstream cinema loses its meaning too.

Let us now shift to the “textual” way of defining the notion. In this line of reasoning, a film may be called mainstream if it observes certain rules. However, most of the rules recounted above are either not observed in contemporary cinema or are too broad and therefore devoid of any power to distinguish. The rule which has certainly lost its dominant status is continuity editing. Jump cuts of every kind can be found in all types of contemporary films, including the most popular ones. For that matter, rules concerning film space, like the 180° rule or the axis of action, do not have to be observed in contemporary cinema either, as films of different genres, including popular films, continually break them. The rule of realism is either too broad or not applicable. Too broad, because in a sense all movies refer to reality, so it is not helpful in distinguishing between various kinds of movies. Not applicable, because, first, the most popular genres nowadays, i.e. fantasy and sci-fi, are non-realist by definition, and secondly, because “traditional” realism, based on continuity, closed structure and transparency, which Rosenstone probably had in mind, is rather outdated today. Realism cannot be regarded as mainstream when the rules of transparency are commonly violated by countless quotations from other movies or by the actors’ direct addresses to the viewers, even in the most popular movies, like *Deadpool* or Tarantino films, among many others.

The rule of general comprehensibility is either too broad or too narrow. Too broad, because many films, including the ones aimed at a narrow target audience, are basically comprehensible, as far as the general structure of space, time and chain of events is concerned. The division of films into two groups, clear and unclear, seems to me a legacy of modernism, with the cult of the “difficult” avant-garde juxtaposed with “easy” mass culture. This division, tinged with an ideological bias, has never been particularly accurate, but now it seems nothing less than obsolete, at a time when films that are purposefully complex, ambiguous, and unclear have a devoted mass audience. Good examples are the so-called “puzzle films”, about which Thomas Elsaesser justly wrote that they “seemed to cross the usual boundaries of mainstream Hollywood, independent, auteur film and international art cinema.” (Elsaesser, 2009, p. 13). Moreover, even films which do not go as far as puzzle films are sometimes quite demanding and require notable effort of the viewer, as Henry Jenkins aptly proved referring to *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) (Jenkins, 2006, chapt. 3). In addition, the films with which this paper started – *Deadpool* and *The Big Short* – abound in allusions and quotes which demand at least some research in order to be fully understood.

The criterion of dominant ideology is too broad to discuss in detail here. Generally speaking, Hayward’s, Fourie’s and Singh’s definitions meet in three points: that there is one global mainstream, i.e. Hollywood cinema; that there are many local mainstems, practically each local film industry produces or can produce its own mainstream; that “mainstreamness” is informed by ideology and mainstream films are the ones that propagate a dominant ideology. The applicability of this criterion depends on characteristics of the market in which a given film is considered “mainstream”. Certainly, it fares better in relatively small markets

where the level of the audience's homogeneity is high and where the ideology of the produced films can be controlled – at least to a certain extent. States and/or nations seem to be natural candidates. Not surprisingly, the above-mentioned critics who have combined “mainstreamness” with ideology refer to the state/national cinemas of RSA and India, although the latter certainly cannot be called a small market. Furthermore, two articles in this volume, which use the combination, do so on a local scale, referring, respectively, to Slovakian (Mišikova, 2018) and Polish (Weiher-Sitkiewicz, 2018) cinema. Still, it is not always easy to determine what a dominant ideology is. This task is certainly easier with authoritarian countries, which must justify their power ideologically, than with liberal ones, which more readily accept differentiation of produced films' ideological background. I would be in real trouble if I were to say what a “dominant ideology” of the Polish film industry is nowadays, not to mention, for example, a Swedish or a British one. And even in an authoritarian system, a situation is not always that simple. Take an example of *Man of Marble* by Andrzej Wajda, produced in communist Poland. Although undoubtedly informed by leftist ideology, it was at that time perceived as an anti-communist movie by a communist establishment. This film spawned a very important current of Polish cinema, called “cinema of moral anxiety”, which drew big critical interest. In terms of resonance and critical interest it was certainly a dominant current of Polish cinema of the '70s. At exactly the same time many films were produced which faithfully reflected dominant political – i.e. communist – ideology, but which passed unnoticed by both the audience and the critics. Which of these two trends should be called “mainstream”? The situation with “worldwide mainstream” – to use Singh's phrase – is also far from clear. Are all films produced by Hollywood cinema mainstream movies, or only some of them, and which ones? Are all Hollywood movies informed by the same ideology, and what kind of ideology could it be? This question is particularly urgent when we take into account Thomas Elsaesser's idea that Hollywood films strive to provide “access for all”, which would enable them to appeal “to audiences of different gender, different age groups, different national identities and different ethnic as well as educational backgrounds” (Elsaesser, 2011, p. 248).

The last – and most difficult – criterion is the relationship between mainstream cinema and the tradition of, or, more precisely, the concept of classical Hollywood cinema. The extent to which contemporary cinema is a continuation of “classic Hollywood cinema” is a very complex question and a subject of ongoing debate. In my opinion, the continuation is difficult to discern when it comes to the stylistic level. On the structural level (chain of events), the link is stronger, but even here we must take into account new structures and film genres, which in the classical era were very rare or non-existent, such as puzzle films, reverse order films, loop films, forking narratives, and network narratives. We must also not forget about the new status of genres like science fiction and fantasy, which today have an established position in the market, but which were of secondary importance in the classical era. Overall, in my opinion, change prevails over continuation. True, many films are still produced in the classical vein (among many others that are not), but

I would not dare to call them mainstream. True, some elements of classical style and structure can be found in every movie, but to extrapolate them and on this basis claim that nothing has changed would mean to dismiss many traits which are characteristic, significant, and meaningful in contemporary cinema.

Conclusion

The notion of “mainstream cinema” is relatively easy to understand when it is used in a vague, “more or less” manner, and especially when pitted against some other form, which is “not mainstream”, for instance arthouse or independent. It fares much worse then when it comes to deciding whether a specific film is mainstream. A good example is the list discussed in the article “What Is Mainstream”, posted by Culture Snob (Jeff Ignatius) on Wednesday, December 23, 2009. This list, posted the other day by a Jim Emerson for MSN and which he called “pretty mainstream”, includes not only *The Lord of the Rings* and *WALL•E* (which Culture Snob regards uncontroversial, on the basis of their box office results), but also films like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Oldboy*, and others, whose “mainstreamness” can easily be questioned. A similar discussion took place on the above-mentioned Arts and Faith forum in 2006. The participants discussed, among others, such titles as *Napoleon Dynamite*, *Videodrome*, and David Lynch’s movies. As one might guess, this discussion remained inconclusive.

The question which must be asked is to what extent a dictionary meaning of the word “mainstream” is obligatory. If it is not obligatory, we can use the term in any manner, picking up any of the seven possible meanings extracted above, and possibly more, too. If it is obligatory, its usage should comply with dictionary definitions. In most definitions, mainstreamness connotes two features: wide acceptance by people and normality/conventionality. The former concerns people and societies. In the case of cinema, this society is the audience and its attitude is measured on the basis of box office results. The greater the box office performance, the higher the level of acceptance and the more “mainstream” a given film is. The latter feature concerns the things themselves, films in our case. Its “normality” and “conventionality” means that it is typical, similar to most other films. The idea of similarity underlies the Bordwellian concept of “classical cinema”, hence it is so often referred to in discussions about mainstream cinema. Yet, if the notion of mainstream demands both conditions – wide popularity and normality – to be fulfilled, then it is quite obvious that this can be difficult to achieve. The question lies in whether the most popular films, the blockbusters, are typical, i.e. similar to most films. Well, that depends where one looks for this similarity, but in many respects they are not typical, being much more sumptuous than the others. What makes them blockbusters is their uniqueness rather than their typicality; otherwise most films would be blockbusters. Moreover, nowadays, in an era of growing diversification in film styles, it is more and more difficult to establish what a typical film is.

On the other hand, this “statistical” approach to typicality can be misleading, because the blockbusters account for most of the audience. For instance, 355 films premiered in Poland in 2017 and 56,586,000 tickets were sold for them. Out of these tickets, 17,660,000 were sold for the 10 top movies, which means that 2.8% films accounted for 32% of the tickets. The top 20 movies (5.6% of the total) accounted for 44%; the top 50 (14% of the total) 68% (Adamczak, 2018; boxoffice.pl). That would mean that a lot of people watch mainly blockbusters, which in turn means that, for them, a blockbuster is a typical film. Two possible conclusions can be drawn from this. The first, which in a way closes the circle, is that mainstream films are blockbusters, because, for most people, they are typical films. This conclusion would need to be corroborated by field research, for sheer statistics can be misleading. The blockbuster audience is not homogeneous and consists of various viewers. Moreover, a viewer’s film consumption cannot be measured solely on the basis of his or her visits to the cinema, as people also watch movies on television and on the Internet. The second possible conclusion is that the notion of mainstream films is relative. If mainstream means typical, and typicality depends on the kind of films that a given viewer watches, then each potential viewer could have his or her own mainstream, which would in turn mean that even experimental film can be called mainstream – for some.

This plainly goes too far, though. I think that the best conclusion would be to stop using the term entirely, for it promises too much, trying to combine box office results, the audience’s tastes, marketing and distribution strategies, politics, ideology and aesthetics. Let us call blockbusters blockbusters, typical films typical films, comprehensibility comprehensibility, films that impart dominant ideology – likewise. There is no need to call them mainstream, very often implying combinations which are untenable. I, for myself, declare not to use this term from now on. Yet, at the same time, I do not believe that this appeal can be effective. After all, this notion of mainstream is so handy...

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The Notion of Mainstream Film in Contemporary Cinema

The goal of this paper is to establish how the term “a mainstream film” is used and understood, what meaning is assigned to it in contemporary discourse about cinema. Wide research was carried out, aimed at pinpointing its usage both on the Internet, among bloggers and film forum members, as well as in academic papers. It turns out that the term is widely used, but very scarcely defined. Moreover, it is understood in very different, often incompatible manners. At least six meanings were detected. A mainstream film can be a blockbuster, a film which propagates dominant ideologies, a realist film, a film which employs continuity editing, a film rooted in the tradition of classical Hollywood cinema, a film that is easy to comprehend. Until recently, all these meanings could be combined due to a relatively high degree of uniformity within film culture, but now, when cinema is experiencing growing diversification in all spheres, it is probably better not to use it at all.

Keywords: mainstream film and cinema, blockbuster, contemporary American cinema.