



The Greatest Movies of All Time

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Around the beginning of the twenty-first century, movies came to have a living history, let's call it. Movie buffs now enjoy the same freedom as fiction buffs. They are no longer limited to watching new releases and the occasional retrospective or old chestnut (larded on television with commercial breaks). Many people can now watch—albeit at home; not on big screens in theaters—many movies from the past. We can watch the same movie over again and study particular scenes. Never mind the critics, or our memories, tonight at home “I” can compare movies from different time periods, or countries, and come to my own vast conclusions.

I do not wish to move from this opening statement to a pronouncement about the genre (or a subset: feature films). And it would be doubly strange for me to do so because I am an odd film lover. That is, on one level: in an average year I go to see fewer than five new feature films, watch fewer than a dozen on my TV at home, and never watch movies on my computer or on airplanes. (By contrast, *Zeteo* once received a submission that was about Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. One of our readers commented that the writer seemed not to have watched the movie more than once or twice. It was a movie this reader greatly admired and had, at home, watched half a dozen times at least.)

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And yet, even I, in my primitive state—there are movies that have made a great impression on me, that I have considered great art works, and even if, in some cases, I hardly dare watch them again. In these regards, the Chinese movie released in the United States with the title *Farewell My Concubine* leaps to mind. In quite another vein (comedy), it seems to me hard to make a better comic film than *Un air de famille*. (Though, note, comedy rarely translates well; this may be “only” a great French comedy. English title: Family Resemblances). As regards American movies, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen *All That Jazz*, but I used to think I could teach that movie, as literature. One could compile other lists that focused on movies that had one outstanding feature—cinematography, for example. I have written previously about movies (*Groundhog Day*, *Le Bal*, Laurent Tirard’s *Molière*) that are, on one level, about the craft of acting.

Charlie Chaplin seems in a class by himself, to include for his ability to combine comedy and social commentary (and the mime techniques of silent movies). I am prepared to say that the greatest love scene Hollywood has ever produced, will produce, or could produce is the scene in *The Kid* where the authorities take away from the poor Tramp the boy that circumstances forced him to adopt and who he has raised with nothing but love. It’s been a decade since I last watched this movie (alone with my son), but even if I just read a few words about it—first the tears and then sobbing.

Returning to the task at hand, what I would like to do is to encourage reflection. What, do we now feel—or what do *you* now feel—makes a good movie? One way I came to this question was in looking for movies to watch at home with my son (15) and at the home of a friend (60). I googled search strings such as “greatest movies of all time” or, say, “greatest movies of the 1970s” (considered to be one of the great decades for US moviemaking). I was struck that, out of a list of fifty greatest American movies, there were almost none that I wanted to see. They all seemed to me canned, overproduced entertainments, repeating for Americans the familiar plots, the familiar array of good and evil, the familiar repartee of the not-yet-in-love and the already married.¹

¹ Into this category of “canned entertainments” I would add the current release *Carol*, but with the following addition. *Carol* is a movie made by someone(s) steeped in the history of Hollywood movies, and it was made with a faith in the value of this history. And thus one of the ways that *Carol*, like other similar films, can be viewed is not as a story or *motion* picture, but rather as a quilt of quotations from Hollywood history. One of the actresses recalls a previous famous actress; the sets, costumes, and lighting recall sets, costumes, and lighting from various well-known films. The story was taken from a book by a Patricia Highsmith whose books have provided the stories for many American and foreign movies, both well-known and forgotten—*Strangers on a Train*, *The American Friend*, *Eaux Profondes*, *Plein Soleil* (Purple Noon) . . .

A useful contrast may be to Paolo Sorrentino’s *Youth*, which has been playing in the same New York multiplexes as *Carol*. I cannot recall ever seeing as uneven a movie as *Youth*; there are parts that fall flat and parts that soar. There are script, casting, and directing decisions that make me think the director has become too successful; it is no longer possible for him to realize or be told when things aren’t working. But then, again, the scene of Roly Serrano repeatedly kicking a tennis ball in the air is so extraordinary, and so beyond anything that even *could have* been found within *Carol*. And the main relationships—between the two aging artists and

There were also movies that had once entertained me well. Or, for example, in the case of *All the President's Men*, the movie had entertained me well on first release and again forty years later when I had watched it with my son. So should this, then, be our expectation for the genre—good entertainment—and should the filmic arts we admire be those that contribute to entertaining us well (and once or repeatedly)? *The Godfather*, *Casablanca*, *Cabaret*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Goldfinger*, *Star Wars*, *The Lady Vanishes*, *A Night at the Opera*, *The Remains of the Day*—tastes differ, but certainly one might list any number of movies here. And one might begin to develop some hypotheses with phrases like “carefully constructed,” “well acted,” “witty dialogue,” “suspense,” “romance.”

The stills I have assembled to illustrate this piece suggest that I (like moviegoers in general?) like buddy movies. The offspring of *Don Quixote* (and Sancho Panza), I am tempted to call these; our pleasure stems from the relationship of the two leads. (Footnote 1 discusses Paolo Sorrentino's *Youth*, yet another film based around such a relationship.)

A French filmmaker recently said to me that, to him, the greatest movie of all time was *Lawrence of Arabia*. Particularly given that the script of that movie has seemed to me extraordinarily weak, the only way I could explain my friend's taste was that *Lawrence* was the movie which, in his youth, had introduced him to the magic of the cinema. It was perhaps not for nothing that he made this comment when we were coming out of a screening of a documentary about Orson Welles, one of the great movie magicians.²

From this perspective, we might each of us seek to identify that one magical film of our youth. (*Jules et Jim* comes to my mind, and even as I can't imagine bearing it now.) We might then see how, or if, this one film had cast its glow over our movie preferences ever after.

I would again insist that my goal is not to advance my own theories. (I have done some of that elsewhere and may well do it again.) We might even develop a theory about writing (and about movies?) that the best works could be or should be those that do not convince us of something; rather, they help us articulate, develop, and explore our own thoughts and feelings.

between one of these artists and his daughter—are so warm and full of life. By contrast, *Carol* feels mechanical; impressively consistent the way a well-made machine can be.

In *Youth* there is a man preparing to levitate, and this, to me, is no good, because—just as we know that Carol is going to have to use her gun eventually—so we know that the man is going to succeed (and that Sorrentino will make the levitation into a gorgeous scene). But also in *Youth* the masseuse has braces on her teeth. I do not know what value Sorrentino saw in this or what meanings we might like to find in it (braces = symbol of youth? its constraints? one of its few constraints?). But this detail suggests that *Youth* is part of an expanding universe, ever to be explored. *Carol* offers the comforts of a very well-known place—not home, but Hollywood.

² Élisabeth Kapnist, *Orson Welles : Autopsie d'une légende*, 2015.

Since a few words from Chairman Mao will appear later on (and since *Farewell my Concubine* offers, *inter alia*, a brutal critique of the Cultural Revolution), a few more of Mao's words (from 1957) can be slipped in here:

Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting the progress of the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land. Different forms and styles in art should develop freely and different schools in science should contend freely. We think that it is harmful to the growth of art and science if administrative measures are used to impose one particular style of art or school of thought and to ban another. Questions of right and wrong in the arts and sciences should be settled through free discussion in artistic and scientific circles and through practical work in these fields.

This said, let us return to our listological exercise of looking through “greatest movies” lists for old movies to watch. Some of the movies I ended up selecting—*The Searchers*, *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves), *Persona*—were movies that seemed to me significant moments in the history of the movies (and, in the case of *The Searchers*, a link in the chain of Americans’ ideas of themselves).³ Another of the movies, Robert Altman’s *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, was a movie I remembered having quite liked in my youth, and I was now curious to see why this might have been so. (I also have a theory, and not just for movies, that the early works of people who become celebrated artists are often better than their later works. It was for this reason that I also picked David Lean’s *Brief Encounter*.)

Last but not least, I would like to call attention to a social aspect of movie watching. Of course nowadays people watch a lot of movies by themselves (and on quite small screens). So what is social is talking/texting/posting about movies (or TV shows) with other people, stating one’s preferences, recalling favorites scenes and lines. Yet there remains the fact that—unlike with novels, for instance—one can watch a movie together with another person, or several.

Long ago, my first wife and I used to walk across a dirt road from our rural North Carolina hideaway to our neighbors’ hideaway. Our neighbors had two daughters who were in their early twenties and redolent with the local sexual mores—tales of obliging, half-drunk young women taking their tops off at parties and so forth. With the cats and cat hairs, we’d sit on and around the big, old living-room couch and watch movies in which—as was once *de rigueur* for a certain type of American movie—there would be “sex scenes,” the lead actors appearing naked, the woman doing her best to feign orgasm. (I can’t say this is a type of movie that I would like to watch again.)

³ See Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post 9/11 America* (Metropolitan Books, 2007).

This might be the place, too, to note my son's most contemporary—and to me, most annoying—habit of getting up in the middle of movies to go fix himself a sandwich, go to the bathroom, check his cellphone. And of course there are plenty of older people who cannot let go of their cellphones or resist the vibrations, or who need, every ten minutes or so, if not more frequently, to slip away from the present scene and company in order to check their messages, Facebook posts, news feeds.

A friend went to see *La Sapienza (Divine Wisdom)* with a woman he was dating. Just before the film began, she told him, based on something her cellphone had just told her, that a politician's son had just died. As if there were some value in their sharing that news before they watched the movie. Of course the real news was that this woman did not feel comfortable just being with her companion or, perhaps, with anyone to whom she had an erotic attachment. Apparently, moments of silence, of disconnection, and of connection made her anxious. Thank God for the phone! And less thanks for the current state of we Americans' social and erotic lives.

“Do you want me to put it on pause?” I always ask my son when he wanders away from the living room and the movie we are watching. He always says no. Why do I continue to propose we watch movies together? This points to another piece, on parents and children. For present purposes I will note only that my son's real or feigned lack of interest in or commitment to watching a given movie takes the fun out of the movie-watching experience for me and makes me wonder if the movie might be making him anxious. The latter judgment may often be true, and this might also be to say that, since we are rarely captive audiences in darkened movie theaters—since we can and do so easily get up and turn our attention elsewhere—moviemakers cannot work with and off our anxieties in the ways they used to do.

All this is, among other things, a reminder that with movies, as with fiction, Plato's dialogues, and most other works of art and science, we can never quite recapture the context in which and for which they were first made. We can construct a history of the movies from the perspective of 2015 or another year, and we can from this perspective develop theories about the genre and about what makes great movies great, but these judgments are, necessarily, ineluctably, of the times in which they are made.

I feel that I should close with the names of more possibly great movies. In my googling, I quickly came across a list, from 2010, of “The 100 Best Films of World Cinema.” *Farewell my Concubine* was only #97, but the little commentary included this vital observation translated from the sayings of Chairman Mao: “There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics.” Another thing I liked about the list was that, while I had heard of many of the films on it, I had seen very, very few of them. *The Leningrad Cowboys*, awaits, as do *Festen*, *Touki Bouki*, and Satyajit Ray's Apu Trilogy.

Afterword from Virginia Woolf, 1926

Coincidentally, during the weeks I was putting together the above piece, I happened to read Virginia Woolf's critique, "The Cinema." Her argument, which seems as valid in 2015 as it was in its time, is that our (commercial) movies are "accretions of alien matter" taken from other arts, from fiction in particular. If the movies "ceased to be a parasite," she asks, "how would it walk erect?"

... at a performance of *Dr. Caligari* the other day a shadow shaped like a tadpole suddenly appeared at one corner of the screen. It swelled to an immense size, quivered, bulged, and sank back again into nonentity. For a moment it seemed to embody some monstrous diseased imagination of the lunatic's brain. For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words. The monstrous quivering tadpole seemed to be fear itself, and not the statement 'I am afraid'. In fact, the shadow was accidental and the effect unintentional. But if a shadow at a certain moment can suggest so much more than the actual gestures and words of men and women in a state of fear, it seems plain that the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression. . . . Anna and Vronsky [in a hypothetical *Anna Karenina*] need no longer scowl and grimace. They have at their command—but what? Is there, we ask, some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye? . . .

[S]o much of our thinking and feeling is connected with seeing, some residue of visual emotion which is of no use either to painter or to poet may still await the cinema. That such symbols will be quite unlike the real objects which we see before us seems highly probable. Something abstract, something which moves with controlled and conscious art, something which calls for the very slightest help from words or music to make itself intelligible, yet justly uses them subserviently—of such movements and abstractions the films may in time to come be composed. Then indeed when some new symbol for expressing thought is found, the film-maker has enormous riches at his command. . . . [A]s smoke pours from Vesuvius, we should be able to see thought in its wildness, in its beauty, in its oddity, pouring from men with their elbows on a table; from women with their little handbags slipping to the floor. We should see these emotions mingling together and affecting each other. . . . The most fantastic contrasts could be flashed before us with a speed which the writer can only toil after in vain; . . .

How all this is to be attempted, much less achieved, no one at the moment can tell us. We get intimations only in the chaos of the streets, perhaps, when

some momentary assembly of colour, sound, movement, suggests that here is a scene waiting a new art to be transfixed. And sometimes at the cinema in the midst of its immense dexterity and enormous technical proficiency, the curtain parts and we behold, far off, some unknown and unexpected beauty. But it is for a moment only. For a strange thing has happened—while all the other arts were born naked, this, the youngest, has been born fully-clothed. It can say everything before it has anything to say. It is as if the savage tribe, instead of finding two bars of iron to play with, had found scattering the seashore fiddles, flutes, saxophones, trumpets, grand pianos by Erard and Bechstein, and had begun with incredible energy, but without knowing a note of music, to hammer and thump upon them all at the same time.

Credits & Links

Chairman Mao. The first quote comes from a 1957 text (translated as “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People”). The second quote comes from “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art” (1942), *Selected Works*, Vol. III. Both quotations may be found at [a marxists.org website](http://www.marxists.org).

The still at the top is from *Touki Bouki*.

Farewell My Concubine 97th place was accorded by a website titled [The 100 Greatest World Cinema Films](http://www.100greatestworldcinema.com).

A blogpost by one Katia Zoritch, [On Paolo Sorrentino’s latest film, “Youth”, and its place among earlier works](http://www.katiazoritch.com/2015/12/05/on-paolo-sorrentinos-latest-film-youth-and-its-place-among-earlier-works/) (December 5, 2015), includes this report from the director’s presentation of his film at the 2015 Cannes film festival: “The film’s idea is how we think about future, how the future always offers a possibility of liberty, and liberty is a state inherent to youth”. Nicely, this statement is called into question by the braces on the teeth of the film’s youthful masseuse.

My latest recollection of *The Kid* came while reading an old piece on Chaplin by the director, producer, and actor John Houseman. This piece, “Chaplin’s Chaplin” (October 12, 1964), appears in a wonderful collection: *Cinema Nation: The Best Writing on Film from The Nation 1913-2000*, edited by Carl Bromley (Thunder’s Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2000).