

ΩΩΩΩΩ Classic
ΩΩΩΩ Excellent
ΩΩΩ Good
ΩΩ Mediocre
Ω Poor

The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes' Smarter Brother (1975; 91 min.)

Directed by: Gene Wilder
Written by: Gene Wilder
Cast: Gene Wilder, Madeline Kahn, Marty Feldman, Leo McKern, Roy Kinnear, Dom DeLuise

Look at that cast: how could this movie be anything less than screamingly funny? Writer/director/star Wilder is unabashed about yanking out all the comedic stops and Feldman and Kahn are only too happy to join in on the fun.

The evil Dr. Moriarty (McKern) is up to no good but his celebrated arch-rival has something else on his plate. The case gets turned over to Holmes' younger brother Sigerson (Wilder), who is more than slightly resentful of his sibling's fame. The plot is unimportant, really, mayhem the order of the day.

Conan Doyle purists might be offended but everyone else can join me in a rousing round of the ever popular "kangaroo hop".

ΩΩΩ1/2

Alien (1979; 117 min.)

Directed by: Ridley Scott
Written By: Dan O'Bannon
Cast: Tom Skerritt, Sigourney Weaver, Ian Holm, Yaphet Kotto, John Hurt, Veronica Cartwright, Harry Dean Stanton

A sci fi thriller of the highest order.

The freighter *Nostromo* is diverted from its flight home, the crew awakened from hypersleep, so they can investigate a signal from a previously uncharted planet. The place is a rock but they set down and a party is sent out to find the source of the beacon. What they encounter is a creature from nightmare, terrible and relentless, driven by its own instincts and motivations.

The cast of Americans and Brits make for a bitchy and believable crew. They're ordinary people, thrust into an impossible situation. The hunters swiftly become the hunted. The narrow corridors are warrens, the walls closing in a little more each time the creature attacks. Scott handles pulp-y material with finesse, the ship and its environs transformed into a high tech haunted house. H.R. Giger's creature design is the *piece de resistance* and, taken as a whole, this is a first-rate, expertly crafted feature, regardless of the genre.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

The American (2010; 105 min.)

Directed by: Anton Corbijn
Written by: Rowan Joffe
Cast: George Clooney, Violante Placido, Paolo Bonicelli, Thekla Reuten

Stylish but fairly formulaic thriller, Clooney as charismatic and photogenic as ever. This time around he's a specialist, creating custom-made weaponry for anyone willing to pay his price. But somewhere along the way he's run afoul of powerful enemies and must seek refuge in a remote Italian village until the danger passes...or his adversaries manage to find him.

Beautifully composed and shot feature, Corbijn's photographic eye absolutely unerring (as amply demonstrated in his Joy Division biopic "Control"). This time around the material isn't as first-rate and, I think, he's somewhat constrained by his chosen genre.

The real find here is the lovely Ms. Placido, whose easy sexuality and unaffected charm play nicely against Clooney's stoic, virtually monotonic performance.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Another Year (2010; 129 min.)

Directed by: Mike Leigh

Written by: Mike Leigh

Cast: Jim Broadbent, Ruth Sheen, Leslie Manville, Peter Wight

Tom (Jim Broadbent) and Gerri (Ruth Sheen) are a happily married couple, longtime companions who are settled, comfortable and still very much in love, even after decades of sharing home and hearth. Unfortunately, among their circle of acquaintances, they are an exception.

"Another Year" is divided into four parts, paralleling the seasons; over the course of the year, Tom and Gerri offer solace to their troubled friends and Tom's brother (recently widowed), even as they privately express

exasperation with their loved ones and wonder when they'll summon the strength and courage to escape the deep ruts they've dug for themselves.

Broadbent and Sheen present a credible couple, one never doubts for a moment that they've spent decades together (a tribute to the enormous amount of rehearsal time Leigh devotes to his projects before a single frame is exposed). Characters in this movie are fully inhabited by the actors who play them and I came away from "Another Year" feeling as if I had spent two hours eavesdropping on private lives and intimate disclosures.

There's no happy ending, no huge, dramatic scenes or epiphanies; Mr. Leigh is too good a director and too perceptive an observer of the human condition to allow treacle or sentiment to mar his creations. While "Another Year" might lack the firepower and intensity of Leigh's masterpiece "Naked", it is a compassionate, thoughtful examination of the problem of loneliness and the depths to which men and women will descend in order to escape their solitude. *A drowning person will clutch the point of a sword*, as the old saying goes. And even a lost cause is eminently preferable to waking up and facing the world alone.

Sad, sad, sad.

ΩΩΩΩΩΩ

Apocalypse Now (1979; 153 min.)

Directed by: Frances Ford Coppola

Cinematographer: Vittorio Storaro

Written by: John Milius, Michael Herr & Frances Ford Coppola

Cast: Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando, Robert Duvall, Dennis Hopper, Frederic Forrest, Laurence Fishburne

“Flawed masterpiece”...”Coppola’s folly”...“Apocalypse *when?*”...

Wayyyy back in the 1970’s, a great and popular American film-maker took his personal fortune, along with a sizeable crew and hand-picked cast and disappeared into the Philippine jungle. The word around Tinseltown was that he was making a Vietnam-era war film, loosely based on “Heart of Darkness” and the film starred Harvey Keitel—no, suddenly Keitel was out and Martin Sheen brought in. But the rigors of shooting take their toll and Sheen suffers a heart attack...the production increasingly dogged by rumours of cost over runs, sets lost to monsoons, Brando showing up grotesquely overweight and under-prepared, etc., etc.

When Frances Ford Coppola finally returned home, he was a changed man. His dream project had just about destroyed him, his hubris finally coming home to roost. Anguished audio recordings from that time reveal a man who has lost his way.

But the footage, my God, the *footage*...

Months of post-production follow, trying to assemble the miles of film into something coherent. Working along side Coppola, Walter Murch, one of cinema’s great cutters. Both of them marveling at the artistry of director of photography Vittorio Storaro. An unfinished print is shown at Cannes and ends up splitting the Palm D’Or with “The Tin Drum”. Vindication! Returning to the task of editing with renewed vigor.

The completed picture is two and a half hours long and *mesmerizing*. But immediately upon release it divides critics

and audiences alike. The greatest war picture ever or a pretentious dud, a “mess” as David Thomson calls it?

Coppola described “Apocalypse Now” as an “experience” and I think that’s the best way to view the film. Not as an interpretation of *Heart of Darkness*, a linear work, a war story with a beginning, middle and end. It’s hallucinatory and otherworldly; watch it with the same eyes as you would “2001: A Space Odyssey”. To my mind, it shares a spot in the pantheon with “2001”, “Citizen Kane”, “Metropolis” and a few select others. A gorgeous, 24-track nightmare, a sublime and demanding artistic achievement.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Arsenic and Old Lace (1944; 118 min.)

Directed by: Frank Capra

Written by: Julius Epstein and Philip Epstein; also Howard Lindsay, Russel Crouse

Cast: Cary Grant, Josephine Hull, Jean Adair, Raymond Massey, Peter Lorre, Priscilla Lane

A rarity: a Frank Capra picture I love through and through.

Totally madcap comedy with everyone comporting themselves admirably. Cary Grant is at his manic, fretting best as Mortimer Brewster, a newly married man who has just discovered his charming maiden aunts are serial killers. If that isn’t bad enough, his lunatic cousin thinks he’s Teddy Roosevelt and his murderous brother Jonathan (Raymond Massey) has unexpectedly shown up with a body of his own to dispose of. And, meanwhile, the lovely Elaine (Priscilla Lane) waits patiently for Mortimer to arrive and sweep her off her

feet, bearing her away to an unforgettable honeymoon...

As soon as Mortimer inadvertently discovers the first body, the movie (based on a popular stage play by Joseph Kesselring) never lets up.

Suggestion: watch "Arsenic" on a double-bill with another hilarious Cary Grant offering, "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House" (1948).

ΩΩΩΩ

Atlantic City (1980; 104 min.)

Directed by: Louis Malle

Written by: John Guare

Cast: Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon, Michel Piccoli, Kate Reid, Al Waxman

Relatively minor Malle film, rescued by a first-rate cast.

Lancaster plays Lou, a career criminal years past his prime, and Sarandon a young woman who dreams of a better life. A cache of stolen drugs brings them some hope of escaping their dreary existence but trouble isn't long arriving. Lancaster, Sarandon and Canadian character actress Reid are good but the pacing is slow and the story meanders.

ΩΩ1/2

The Atomic Submarine (1959; 72 min.)

Directed by: Spencer G. Bennet

Written by: Orville H. Hampton

Cast: Arthur Franz, Dick Foran, Brett Halsey, Bob Steele

One for the late, late, *late* show.

Somewhere around the North Pole, danger lurks in the form of an underwater flying saucer. It has attacked shipping and cost many lives, and now it's up to the atomic submarine *Tiger Shark* to hunt it down and destroy it before the saucer inflicts further harm.

The special effects are primitive, both the sub and saucer look exactly like what they are: small, plastic models.

The odd thing is, this film (along with "First Man Into Space") was remastered and restored by the good people at Criterion. I can only guess the decision based on pure nostalgia, since there is little evidence of craft or talent apparent on-screen.

ΩΩ

Being There (1979; 130 min.)

Directed by: Hal Ashby

Written by: Jerzy Kosinski

Cast: Peter Sellers, Shirley MacLaine, Melvyn Douglas, Jack Ward, Richard Dysart

From the moment he came across Jerzy Kosinski's short novel *Being There*, Peter Sellers *knew* he was meant to play the role of Chance the Gardener. It is hard to imagine anyone else playing a monotonic, deadpan, remote character like Chance and making him so bloody funny.

Chance has worked in the garden of the big house for as long as he can remember but now "the old man", his employer, is dead and Chance is left to fend for himself. He has no experience in the real world, no way of

understanding it except from what he has observed on television.

Sellers amazes and he gets solid support from Shirley MacLaine, who is magnificent as a sexually repressed Washington hostess.

If you get the opportunity, see if you can find a copy of this movie that comes with out takes. Sellers “corpsing” for take after take. Good stuff.

ΩΩΩΩ

The Big Sleep (1946; 114 min.)

Directed by: Howard Hawks
Written by: Leigh Brackett, William Faulkner, Jules Furthman
Cast: Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, John Ridgely, Martha Vickers, Regis Toomey, Elisha Cook, Jr.

Chandler, Hawks, Bogie & Bacall. You aren't going to go wrong with *that* combination.

A movie that easily withstands multiple viewings; it's a treat to watch all that talent working with material of the highest caliber.

Detective Philip Marlowe (Bogart) is summoned to the Sternwood residence. The aging patriarch is concerned about the activities of his youngest daughter, Carmen (Vickers) and wants Marlowe to prevent a possible scandal. But it's Carmen's older sibling (Bacall) who catches Marlowe's eye and she's the reason he sticks with the case despite the murders, beatings and sordid disclosures.

The two leads definitely have on-screen chemistry, their exchanges, by turns, frank,

biting and suggestive. The story is pretty steamy (and unseemly) stuff for 1946, but it's a Raymond Chandler novel they're adapting, for heaven's sake, what do you expect?

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Blade Runner (1982; 117 Min.)

Directed by: Ridley Scott
Written by: Hampton Fancher and David Peoples
Cast: Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, Sean Young, Daryl Hannah, William Sanderson

Which version do you prefer: the original theatrical release or the Director's Cut, *sans* that annoying narration? Never mind, you can get every single inch of “Blade Runner” ever shot on the deluxe, special 5-disk edition and—

Or not.

“Blade Runner” is a beautifully executed movie, the combination of Ridley's Scott's direction and Douglas Trumbull's special effects guarantees a visual feast. The Los Angeles of 2019 is tall and humid, drenched in a seemingly constant drizzle. The rich and privileged live high above it all but the ordinary proles—including many minorities, a mishmash of cultures—aren't nearly so fortunate. They're a captive audience for the floating billboards that drift between the towers, lighting up the night sky, hawking popular beverages and recruiting colonists for off-world emigration.

The combination of noir *and* science fiction is intriguing but never quite pans out. The streets are too bright and overflowing with life and the best use of shadow comes at the end

of the film, lights sweeping across boarded-up windows as Ford attempts to elude a murderous pursuer.

Is a sufficiently advanced artificial being by any standard of the term *alive*? Does it have a soul? If you manage to kill one of these so-called “replicants”, is it murder or “retirement”? What’s the difference between memories and embedded programs? Can you love someone who might be incapable of loving you back?

I’m not sure “Blade Runner” answers any of the questions it asks. It does, however, make for an entertaining and stunningly presented movie. A bit of a dud when it was first released but it’s gained stature in the intervening years. Definitely a “must see” film.

Whichever version you choose.

ΩΩΩΩ

Bonnie and Clyde (1967; 111 min.)

Directed by: Arthur Penn
Written by: David Newman & Robert Benton
Cast: Warren Beatty, Faye Dunaway, Gene Hackman, Estelle Parsons, Michael J. Pollard

Those making this film--the screenwriters and director Penn--have admitted their debt to the French "New Wave", particularly the movies of Truffaut and Godard.

But for all that, in structure and scope, in its ambition and superb production values, "Bonnie and Clyde" is still fundamentally an *American* film, preoccupied with themes like celebrity and fame, the violence at the core of that culture. This is not a "guerilla" effort, made outside the bounds of the Hollywood

system, it is a carefully considered, flawlessly designed motion picture, filmed and acted by professionals of the highest caliber.

Beatty and Dunaway play the celebrated (and doomed) desperados and a host of fine supporting players help elevate this tale of crime and punishment to a *near*-classic status.

ΩΩΩΩ

Brazil (1985; 142 min.)

Directed by: Terry Gilliam
Written by: Terry Gilliam, Tom Stoppard, Charles McKeown
Cast: Jonathan Pryce, Ian Holm, Kim Greist, Robert DeNiro, Michael Palin, Katherine Helmond

“A genuine individual is an outright nuisance in a factory.”
(Orson Welles)

Neo-Orwellian political satire...or a cautionary tale of how bureaucracy, efficiency and conformity can dehumanize a society to the point where repression and authoritarianism thrive?

Pryce is *wonderful* as Sam Lowry, a petty bureaucrat who finds himself embroiled with terrorists, hunted as a fugitive, captured and hideously tortured...and all because of a simple typographical error. The protagonist is not a rebel, not even remotely a threat to the state but thanks to a few inadvertent plot twists, this placid, blameless man finds himself in the direst straits, fighting for survival.

Gilliam's visual and cinematic eye has never failed him--the set design, special effects and overall *look* of the film as good as it gets. The supporting cast is stellar, Greist the only one who doesn't quite fit in. Not *my* idea of a dream girl. There's a wonderful bit with two semi-competent plumbers, one of them played by Bob Hoskins, who discover our hero has had some illicit duct work done. The dream life of Pryce's character is delightfully rendered. Altogether too many lovely scenes and tableaux to describe.

One of my "desert island" movies. A magical, marvelous creation.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Charlie Wilson's War (2008; 102 min.)

Directed by: Mike Nichols
Written by: Aaron Sorkin
Cast: Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, Ned Neatty

Entertaining fluff about how a Congressman with a reputation for wild living helped arm the *mujahiddeen* warriors in Afghanistan, playing a pivotal role in the Russians' ignominious retreat and, eventually, the Evil Empire's long sought after demise.

Well...that's as may be. But I also sense a hagiography in the making: Wilson's sexual peccadilloes are tastefully conveyed but we never see him indulging in less savory vices, nor do we get the full story of his involvement with ultra-right patriots who wanted to fight a "proxy war" with the Soviet Union. This inept tampering in Afghani affairs had longterm consequences that still haunt us today.

A likable, cynical take on politics during the Reagan era. Endearing, if not always credible.

ΩΩΩ1/2

The Chase (1966; 133 min)

Directed by: Arthur Penn
Written by: Lillian Hellman
Cast: Marlon Brando, Robert Redford, Jane Fonda, Angie Dickinson, James Fox

Considering the talent involved, this picture should have been far better.

Redford is the local black sheep, recently escaped from prison and on his way back home. Brando is the sheriff, responsible for keeping order in a town of armed rednecks, adulterers and teenagers who appear to have escaped from the set of a bad exploitation flick.

Stereotypical, unbelievable and overlong, "The Chase" features yet another dull Brando performance. He only comes to life when he's being beaten; otherwise he appears to be sleep-walking, a somnambulist with a seven-figure contract.

ΩΩ

Chinatown (1974; 131 min.)

Directed by: Roman Polanski
Written by: Robert Towne
Cast: Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Huston, Burt Young, John Hillerman

Boy, the planets were in alignment when they put this movie together. The perfect director for the perfect screenplay. And a roster of actors who combine to make the most beautiful music imaginable.

Jake Gittes has been hired to find out who offed the city of L.A.'s water manager...but then he becomes romantically involved with the widow Mullwray (Dunaway), while running afoul of the business interests of her powerful father (Huston).

The script is a textbook of structure and economy and Polanski gives it its due. He and director of photography John Alonzo light and frame each shot to give weight and extra significance to the words being spoken (or left unsaid).

There is real electricity between Nicholson and Dunaway; she has never been more glamorous, beautiful and vulnerable. In this one, the ice queen melts. Nicholson was still an actor at this point—"Chinatown" and "The Last Detail" (1973) came out within a year of each other and were definitely high water marks as far as his career goes. That was when he was still capable of amazing us.

Towne made his name with "Chinatown" and rightfully so. Now he's a hired gun, a script doctor for the likes of Tom Cruise. It seems like a terrible waste of talent...and where, oh where is his golden touch evident in "Days of Thunder", "Ask the Dust" and "Mission Impossible II"?

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Chungking Express (1994; 102 min.)

Directed by: Wong Kar-Wai
Written by: Wong Kar-Wai

Cast: Brigitte Lin, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Tony Leung, Faye Wang

Superb film and superb entertainment.

Consisting of two stories set in Hong Kong, one involving Lin losing a string of drug "mules", the other a lonely policeman and a woman (Wang) who takes a fancy to him, slipping into his apartment while he's at work and subtly, gradually transforming it.

The editing, camerawork and acting combine to create a thrilling film-going experience. Kar-Wai is a student of film and his influences (Godard and the New Wave) peek through at various points.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Citizen Kane (1941; 119 min.)

Directed by: Orson Welles
Cinematographer: Gregg Toland
Written by: Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Welles
Cast: Orson Welles, Joseph Cotton, Susan Alexander, Everett Sloane

Even after 60 years, "Kane" still compels near universal respect, bordering on veneration. Is it deserved?

Hell, yes...

Who was Charles Foster Kane: a great American? A demagogue? Reformer? Fascist? A team of reporters is given their marching orders—uncover everything there is to know about the recently deceased newspaper magnate and one time political candidate. Turn over every rock, talk to ex-wives, embittered friends, find out what made

the man tick...and caused the decline and fall that led to him living in near seclusion in a remote, art-filled redoubt. And most of all, who or what was “Rosebud”, literally the last word to pass his lips? What was the significance, what does it *mean*?

It turns out to mean very little and yet, quite possibly, explains everything. Just one of the amazing feats Welles and his talented cast and crew pull off. “Citizen Kane” is a smart film and a beautiful film but it makes no effort to ingratiate itself and it does not reassure and it is for that reason that casual filmgoers have never warmed to it. It’s masterfully made, so the cinephiles can coo and murmur sagely about the use of deep focus and perspective, but there’s an underlying cynicism and darkness to “Kane” that keeps it at an emotional distance. We *admire* it but can we honestly say we *love* it, the way we love, say, “Casablanca” or “My Life as a Dog”?

There is ample evidence that Charles Foster Kane’s character was not based solely on William Randolph Hearst. Welles’ partner and confidante John Houseman acted as caretaker for Mankiewicz as he worked on the initial drafts of the script—during breaks the two of them undoubtedly swapped anecdotes and impressions about Welles, his burning ambition and overweening pride. There’s plenty of that visible in the finished film and perhaps that’s why Welles, despite being a newcomer to film, acquits himself so well in the title role.

I’ve seen “Citizen Kane” at least fifteen times and it’s still teaching me something about the structure and nature of film. I admire it *and* love it. It represents what talented men and women can accomplish, with vision and originality, imagination and daring. It shows us what it means to make *Art*.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

City of Lost Children (1995; 112 min.)

Directed by: Marc Caro & Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Written by: Gilles Adrien, Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Cast: Ron Perlman, Judith Vittete, Dominique Pinon, Daniel Emilfork

An old fashioned yarn, a spooky fairy tale hatched by the same folks who brought us “Delicatessen”.

Hard to believe but “City of Lost Children” is an even *better*, more imaginative film than its predecessor. Krank (Emilfork) is a scientist who dispatches minions to kidnap children and spirit them back to his hidden lair, where he attempts to extract their dreams in order to arrest the aging process.

The sets and overall design are amazing but it’s the story that draws us in. We really do care about Miette (Vittete) and her strongman friend (Perlman) and cheer their efforts as they set out to rescue his little brother from the evil Krank. They make a formidable team and nothing this side of death will dissuade them from their task. Watch out, Krank!

ΩΩΩΩΩ1/2

Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977; 135 min.)

Directed by: Steven Spielberg
Written by: Steven Spielberg
Cast: Richard Dreyfuss, Melinda Dillon, Teri Garr, Francois Truffaut, Bob Balaban

My favorite Spielberg movie and, I suspect, the one closest to his true sensibilities.

Dreyfuss plays Roy Neary, a power company employee who's sent out on a service call one night and returns a changed man. Roy has had a "close encounter" with an entity so strange, so far outside his normal, operating parameters, that he has something of a meltdown. And he isn't the only one affected.

Around the world there have been numerous sightings and manifestations—a squadron of planes missing for decades turns up in the desert and, everywhere, reports of unexplained lights in the sky. Francois Truffaut leads a team of investigators and becomes convinced that certain individuals have been singled out for contact and are being guided to a special location for unknown reasons.

Dreyfuss is excellent and Teri Garr deserves special citation as his harried wife. Their chaotic family life is well-depicted and credible.

The last portion of the movie features some mind-boggling special effects and the mother of all motherships. The ending is a bit of a letdown but then Spielberg made it worse by tacking on extra footage in his "Special Edition". This review refers only to the original theatrical release.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Control (2007; 122 min.)

Directed by: Anton Corbijn
Written by: Matt Greenhalgh
Cast: Sam Riley, Samantha Morton, Joe Anderson, Alexandra Maria Lara

Dramatization of the all too brief life of Ian Curtis, lead singer of the influential post-punk band the Joy Division.

Sam Riley is Curtis's doppelganger, to the extent that he even performs the songs live (i.e. without benefit of lip-synching). No mean feat, especially when you're trying to emulate a voice that distinct and identifiable. Manchester, England in the mid-1970's was a rough place to live: double digit unemployment, industries shutting down, the future leaving the mines and mills of northern England to rust away. The music of Joy Division was sinister and infectious and the words, if people had actually been listening, made it all too clear that Curtis was troubled, conflicted and not long for this world.

Director Corbijn photographed the band during their hey day and knew the principals. He has captured the essence of the place that inspired them and the desperate sadness and hopelessness it engendered. The black and white photography adds another layer to the grime. But the fierce, determined light of Curtis' genius still shines through. Nothing will extinguish that, not even time.

ΩΩΩΩ

Dante 01 (2008; 82 min.)

Directed by: Marc Caro
Written by: Marc Caro & Pierre Bordage
Cast: Lambert Wilson, Linh Dan Pham, Dominique Pinon, Simona Maicanescu, Gerald Laroche

Interesting premise, gorgeous design and solid acting, a film ruined by a ridiculous, incongruous conclusion.

At a facility for the criminally insane orbiting a hellish planet, a cargo ship has just arrived, bearing the latest inmate, a man found adrift in space after some strange, undefined contact with an alien species. The man, quickly dubbed Saint-Georges, soon reveals extraordinary powers that *might* make him a threat to the facility, possibly even a menace to the future of humankind.

A huge improvement over most contemporary SF movies...but that ending. What was director/writer Caro *thinking*?

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Day of Wrath (1943; 105 min.)

Directed by: Carl Theodor Dreyer
Written by: Carl Theodor Dreyer, Poul Knudson, Mogens Skot-Hansen
Cast: Thorkild Roos, Lisbeth Movin, Sigrid Neidendam, Anna Svierkier

For those of you who find Bergman films a trifle on the light side.

Oppressive and enthralling film about the superstitious dread witches inspired throughout Europe in less civilized and enlightened times. The torments these innocent women endured at the hands of their sadistic interrogators defy comprehension.

Dreyer perfectly describes the atmosphere, the miasma of dread and fear that permeated spiritual life in the pre-scientific era. "Day of Wrath" is a film that might tempt you to avert your eyes; it is a ghastly evocation of "the burning times", a blood-curdling reminder of the terrible toll un-reason and fanaticism can exact.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

District 9 (2009; 112 min.)

Directed by: Neill Blomkamp
Written by: Neill Blomkamp and Terri Tatchell
Cast: Sharlto Copley, David James, Jason Cope, Dirk Minnaar

Twenty years ago, a gigantic spaceship containing over a million alien creatures settled into position over Johannesburg, South Africa. Since then, the "prawns" have lived in a squalid internment camp on the outskirts of the city, their close proximity causing social unrest and xenophobia. The decision has been made to forcibly relocate the aliens to another facility. A mid-level bureaucrat (Sharlto Copley) is put in charge of the operation, which quickly (and horribly) goes awry.

A good concept, a terrific, star-making performance by Copley, great special effects... but the movie is clumsily executed, frequently shifting from documentary to fictional mode, the lurches in point-of-view inexpert and, frankly, a cheat. The shoot-'em-up finale and leave-room-for-a-sequel resolution also didn't sit well with me.

Coulda been a classic.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Down by Law (1986; 107 min.)

Directed by: Jim Jarmusch
Written by: Jim Jarmusch

Cast: John Lurie, Tom Waits, Roberto Benigni

Second indie feature for Jarmusch, a buddy movie (of sorts), featuring low-key humor and very little by way of high drama.

Three men are cast together in a jail cell, gradually form a bond, devise an escape and live on the lam. Benigni's character and his notebook of English phrases is immediately likeable and, gradually, we warm toward his sullen companions as well. Waits acquits himself well and Lurie resembles a brooding Montgomery Clift.

Jarmusch's films are an acquired taste but "Down by Law" deserves praise for its cool, deliberate approach to the subject matter and striking black and white photography (courtesy the great Robbie Muller).

ΩΩΩ

Easy Riders, Raging Bulls

How the Sex 'n Drugs 'n Rock 'n Roll Generation Saved Hollywood
(2003; 119 min)

Cinema buffs will enjoy this adaptation of Peter Biskind's account of the remaking of Hollywood that took place once the moguls went into decline, television cut into the box office take and the old ways of making films were rejected by a hipper, more demanding viewership.

Enter the mavericks. Thanks to directors and *auteurs* like Dennis Hopper, Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Sam Peckinpah and Peter Bogdanovich, cinema was transformed. For a few glorious years, the lunatics ran the asylum and some truly provocative,

unprecedented and brain-expanding movies were released to the world.

And then the corporations took over.

Interview subjects include Kris Kristopherson, Ellen Burstyn, Paul Schrader, Martin Scorsese, Hopper and numerous others.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Ed Wood

(1994; 127 min.)

Directed by: Tim Burton

Written by: Scott Alexander

Cast: Johnny Depp, Martin Landau, Sarah Jessica Parker, Jeffrey Jones, Bill Murray

Affectionate bio pic of one of the all-time *worst* directors, the man who brought you "Plan 9 From Outer Space" and "Glen and Glenda".

Depp gives an endearing performance as Wood and Landau deservedly won an Oscar for his bang-on portrayal of Bela Lugosi. This picture has often been overlooked in favour of other, more high-profile Burton pictures. That's unjust. "Ed Wood" shows what the director can do with superior material that doesn't overwhelm us with visual imagery. The final result is a melancholic comedy, a fwarm-hearted portrait of a lovable loser, a legless man who dreams of running.

ΩΩΩΩ

El Dorado

(1966; 126 min.)

Directed by: Howard Hawks

Written By: Leigh Brackett

Cast: John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, James Caan, Charlene Holt, Ed Asner

From the terrible theme song to the closing credits, a rehashing of every western cliché under the sun. Leigh Brackett was initially commissioned to adapt Harry Brown's novel *The Stars in their Courses*, but Hawks didn't like the material and fell back on tried and true formula. Brackett made the changes but wasn't pleased with the end result, referring to "El Dorado" as "son of 'Rio Bravo' rides again".

A town drunk and his old friend face off against a hardened gang of killers. The odds are long but, after all, there are tropes to satisfy, expectations that must be met.

Everyone seems past their prime; even Hawks' usual economy deserts him. Wayne and Mitchum are on familiar ground and enjoying themselves far too much to be effective. There are no surprises, no dramatic flourishes. This is a film completely out of step with its times, the old, conservative values espoused in the Hawks/Ford worldview appearing simplistic, if not naïve.

"El Dorado" was obsolete, even as it was being shot. It amounts to a nostalgia trip, an appeal to gilded memories of past glory. Instead it falls prey to stale repetition, the chance you take when offering up a thrice-told tale.

ΩΩ

Les Enfants Terribles (1950; 105 min.)

Directed by: Jean Pierre Melville

Written by: Jean Cocteau

Cast: Nicole Stéphane, Edouard Dermithe, Renee Cosima, Jacques Bernard

How's this for a "dream team": a collaboration between artist/author Jean Cocteau and one of the true greats of French cinema, Jean Pierre Melville.

The collision of talents creates an unusual and disturbing drama that centers around a brother and sister whose "game" removes them from the real world and eventually leads to tragic consequences. There's a hint of incest, an unnaturalness and obsessive quality to their relationship that is creepy and unsettling.

The soundtrack is occasionally jarring, particularly during the first half, Vivaldi blaring out at various points (I despise Vivaldi), the music sometimes incongruous and, in my view, badly chosen. But the film itself is unique and original; it simply does not cater to ordinary rules and convention. For that reason alone it deserves to be seen and will undoubtedly reward repeat viewings.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Eraserhead (1976; 89 min.)

Directed by: David Lynch

Written by: David Lynch

Cast: John Nance, Charlotte Stewart, Allen Joseph

I have real admiration for this film.

It is so uncompromising, so unapologetically weird and unique, that it deserves serious regard as a movie *and* a genuine work of art. Some critics dismiss "Eraserhead" out of

hand as an ill-conceived surrealistic exercise but I think they're selling it far short.

For one thing, there *is* a coherent plot, a story arc (of sorts). The characters are consistent and the world in which they exist fully formed and plausible (in its fashion). This isn't "Un Chien Andalou"—the dream-like ambience created by David Lynch and his collaborators, while beholden to surrealism, is not slavishly imitative. Right from the beginning ("Eraserhead" was his first feature), Lynch was an *auteur* and every frame of his films, for good or ill, bears the imprint of his twisted psyche.

The black and white photography and lowkey acting further enhance the sense of otherworldiness. The malformed, repulsive off-spring that results from the loveless coupling of "Henry" and "Mary" is the byproduct of its polluted, dehumanized environment.

"Eraserhead" defies expectations and refuses to concede to convention; it is deliberately elusive, denying viewers familiar patterns and reassuring backdrops. It inhabits a realm of space/time close to but not directly adjacent ours'. The faces are hauntingly familiar but the perspectives are alien and unnerving.

Caveat emptor.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Extreme Prejudice (1987; 104 min.)

Directed by: Walter Hill

Written by: Deric Washburn, Harry Kleiner

Cast: Nick Nolte, Powers Boothe, Maria Conchita Alonso, Michael Ironside, Rip Torn

Two old friends find themselves on opposite sides of the law. Nolte is a Texas Ranger with a hankering for the same gal (Alonso) as his former best friend (Boothe), a drug runner and fugitive from justice.

A guy flick all the way, over-flowing with gun play and chatter about loyalty and friendship. The women are afterthoughts, extras and human set dressing. Ms. Alonso has little too do except pout and take her clothes off.

It comes down to a final showdown and the pitiless aftermath, the loser stripped and left to rot in the sun, is sobering and downbeat (for a movie of this kind).

Not *great* film-making but Hill knows how to direct and cut together an action movie. Today's directors could learn a thing or two from the crafty old vet. That is, if they'd put away their video games and laptops for an hour or two...

ΩΩΩ

Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas (1998; 119 min.)

Directed by: Terry Gilliam

Written by: Terry Gilliam & Tony Grisoni and Tod Davies & Alex Cox

Cast: Johnny Depp, Benicio del Toro, Christina Ricci, Ellen Barkin, Gary Busey

One of the most faithful and vivid adaptations of a literary work I have ever encountered. It is immediately evident that all involved were intent on making a film almost slavishly observant of the original novel by Hunter S. Thompson. One can only applaud their devotion to a surreal, brilliant and revolutionary work of American literature.

The only problem is the two central characters are hopelessly miscast. Depp tries but it's del Toro I mainly take issue with. By all accounts Oscar Zeta Acosta (Thompson's travel companion on that ill-fated Vegas junket) was a towering, volatile figure who exuded menace from every pore. Del Toro plays him too manic, mercurial...only in the scene at the truck stop near the end (Ellen Barkin plays the terrorized waitress) do we get a hint that the actor has done his homework.

The movie is suitably trippy, the hallucinations startlingly authentic, by turns terrifying and hilarious (as hallucinations tend to be).

Cameos by Mark Harmon, Tobey McGuire, Cameron Diaz, Busey and Thompson himself are annoying and distracting. Gilliam should have known better; smarter casting would've made this one a classic.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Fingers (1978; 90 min.)

Directed by: James Toback

Written by: James Toback

Cast: Harvey Keitel, Tisa Farrow, Jim Brown, Michael V. Gazzo, Danny Aiello

I read somewhere that Francois Truffaut was a big fan of "Fingers".

Hardly anyone else, it seems, has seen this taut little beauty and that's a shame. Keitel plays a small-time hood and debt collector who aspires to be a world class concert pianist. He plays exquisitely well...until he has to perform in front of other people.

Keitel is superb, every bit as good as he was in "Mean Streets" and "The Bad Lieutenant". He's a man caught between two worlds and the dark source of his brutality is the disappointment and fury he feels when his aspirations are thwarted by forces beyond his control.

Writer-director Toback isn't looking to enlighten or reassure us. "Fingers" is an unpleasant film and there's a sordid feel to the material. Not just grit, something else: a stickiness that is retained no matter how many times you try to wash it off.

ΩΩΩΩ

First Man Into Space (1959; 78 min)

Directed by: Robert Day

Written by: John C. Cooper & Lance Z. Hargreaves

Cast: Marshall Thompson, Marla Landi, Robert Ayers, Bill Nagy, Bill Edwards

Grade D science fiction, with all the good and bad that implies.

Lieutenant Dan Prescott (Edwards) is determined to be the first man to venture past the outer limits of the Earth's atmosphere. He pushes his rocket plane beyond its limits and achieves his goal, then finds his craft buffeted by mysterious space dust, which transforms the unfortunate pilot into a blood-thirsty creature.

Not quite as bad as it sounds, though the overuse of stock footage is annoying. The cast are game, especially Thompson, and director Day does the best he can with the material at hand.

Note: This flick was chosen for the full treatment by the wonderful folks at Criterion and they certainly did a fine job. But...why?

ΩΩ1/2

Fixed Bayonets (1951; 92 min.)

Directed by: Samuel Fuller
Written by: Samuel Fuller
Cast: Richard Basehart, Gene Evans, Michael O'Shea, Skip Homeier

Superb war picture by B-movie vet Fuller.

During the Korean War, a squad of 48 men is selected to fight a rearguard action while thousands of their fellow soldiers execute a strategic withdrawal. Basehart plays Corporal Demmo, a man terrified at the notion of responsibility and Evans a wily old sergeant.

Authentic and gripping, "Fixed Bayonets" is the equal of "Steel Helmet", vividly portraying the lot of an average soldier, their acts of bravery and cowardice, their sudden, violent ends.

Not to be missed.

ΩΩΩΩ

Flight to Mars (1951; 71 min.)

Directed by: Leslie Selander
Written by: Arthur Strawn
Cast: Cameron Mitchell, Margaret Chapman, Virginia Huston, Arthur Franz, Morris Ankrum

Purportedly shot in five days, "Flight to Mars" is silly, inexplicable, primitive. Backyard production values, community theater quality performances.

So bad, it's fun.

The title tells you all you need to know and the fact that "Flight to Mars" is shot in color makes its mistakes and flaws all the more grievous (and glaring). Morris Ankrum plays the leader of the Martians with his usual zest and vigor.

One for a slow Saturday night.

ΩΩ1/2

Forbidden Planet (1956; 98 min.)

Directed by: Fred Wilcox
Written by: Cyril Hume
Cast: Leslie Nielson, Walter Pidgeon, Anne Francis, Warren Stevens, Earl Holliman, Robby the Robot

The very best of the 1950's science fiction flicks—well, having good source material helps (Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), as well as a good, solid cast.

A star cruiser has assumed orbit around the planet Altair IV, seeking to re-establish contact with a mission that was sent to the planet some years before. The ship lands and Captain J.J. Adams (Nielson) soon discovers there are only two surviving members of the original party: Dr. Edward Morbius (Pidgeon) and his beautiful young daughter (Anne Francis). They were spared while the others were wiped out by some kind of creature native to the planet—a detail that Adams finds suspicious.

Before long the creature awakens once more and Adams' men start dying. He confronts Morbius, seeking to discover the origins of the beast and a means to destroy it.

The sets and special effects are marvelous; this is the film that introduced me to Robby the Robot...and the lovely Anne Francis. God bless its creators, on *both* counts.

ΩΩΩΩ

Force of Evil (1948; 78 min.)

Directed by: Abraham Polonsky
Written by: Ira Wolfert & Abraham Polonsky
Cast: John Garfield, Thomas Gomez, Marie Windsor, Roy Roberts, Howland Chamberlain

Super film, remarkable for its general air of pessimism, its insistence that everyone in the world is compromised or can be, if the price is right.

John Garfield plays Joe Morse, a lawyer in the employ of organized crime. He is helping set up a scheme that will bring all of the numbers rackets in the city under the control of one man, his boss Ben Tucker (Roberts). But Joe's brother Leo (Gomez) is one of the small operators who will be wiped out by these intrigues and it's Ben's efforts to shield his brother that lead to tragedy...and a small hope for redemption.

The shot of Garfield running down early morning streets, trapped within the steel and cement canyons that tower above him, is a perfect film noir image.

Note: Both Polonsky and Garfield were victims of the infamous HUAC-inspired "black list", their careers suffering irreparable damage as a result.

ΩΩΩΩ

The Forbin Project (aka Colossus: The Forbin Project) (1969; 100 min.)

Directed by: Joseph Sargent
Written by: James Bridges
Cast: Eric Braedon, Susan Clark, Gordon Pinsent, William Schallert

Before "The Terminator", there was another evil machine mind bent on enslaving the human race...

Colossus is a super-computer designed by a team led by Dr. Charles Forbin (Braedon). Weapons, tactics, and strategy have become so complex that responsibility for protecting the United States from hostile attack has been assigned to Colossus. It is Colossus that will oversee all military capabilities and initiate any response it deems necessary. The free world has never been in safer hands...until the Soviet Union announces the creation of their own mechanical sentinel.

A prescient and downbeat thriller. The technology seems dated now but the message is still as relevant today, forty plus years later. Humankind can never abdicate our moral and intellectual responsibilities and become *too* dependent on the machines that serve us.

ΩΩΩΩ

The Ghost Writer (2010; 128 min.)

Directed by: Roman Polanski
Written by: Robert Harris & Roman Polanski
Cast: Ewan McGregor, Pierce Brosnan, Kim Cattrall, Olivia Williams

Formulaic, paint by numbers thriller.

Roman Polanski continues a long, downward spiral. While "The Pianist" was redeemed by its subject matter and an otherworldly performance by Adrien Brody, "The Ghost Writer" is ground down by leaden pacing, humorlessness and, worst of all, *faux* significance--i.e. it has a false, exalted sense of its own importance. Few scenes ring true and the picture is a letdown, utterly contrived and unconvincing.

Ewan McGregor plays the title character and exerts himself very little. Pierce Brosnan as the Tony Blair-like former Prime Minister manages the occasional flicker of menace...but the film is utterly lacking in suspense or surprise.

ΩΩ

Gonzo: The Life & Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson (2008; 118 min.)

Directed by: Alex Gibney
Written by: Alex Gibney
Narrated by: Johnny Depp

The best of two recent documentaries on one of the true iconoclasts of our time, journalist Hunter S. Thompson.

"Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride" (2006) was first out of the gate and certainly covered the territory but "Gonzo" was made with the participation of Thompson's widow(s) and son Juan and it's the latter that presents a more fleshed out, warts-and-all depiction of HST. The good, the bad...and near the end, when it got downright ugly.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Greed (1924; 140 min.)

Directed by: Erich von Stroheim
Written by: Erich von Stroheim
Cast: Gibson Gowland, Zasu Pitts, Jean Hersholt

"I never truckled; I never took off the hat to Fashion and held it out for pennies. By God, I told them the truth. They liked it or they didn't like it. What had that to do with me? I told them the truth; I knew it for the truth then, and I know it for the truth now."

-Frank Norris, from a title card preceding "Greed"

It was appropriate that such a fierce, uncompromising talent like Frank Norris should find a champion in Erich von Stroheim. The director's ego and independent spirit had made him powerful enemies, including Irving Thalberg. Stroheim quarreled with his bosses, spent extravagantly and was a figure predestined for an Olympian fall from grace.

There is still so much that is good in "Greed"; it may not be the ten-hour version von Stroheim dreamed of releasing, but it *is* an ambitious and important work. In the

guise of telling the story of John McTeague, he manages to say a great deal about the acquisitiveness and pettiness of human nature. McTeague's ultimate failure might be due to bad genes but what about Irina's miserliness and Marcus' betrayal? What are *their* excuses?

Certain scenes persist: Irina's growing terror as she envisions a wedding night with her brute of a husband. The lovebirds attacking each other in their cage as Irina and McTeague quarrel bitterly. McTeague pinching and *biting* his diminutive wife until she reluctantly hands over a few coins he can spend on liquor. And, of course, the closing scene, in the desert, when—

Shhh! No spoilers!

“Greed” is unsentimental, depressing; cinematically and philosophically mature. Undoubtedly the work of a master—tarnished by tampering, no question, but *not* irreparably harmed.

From *Wikipedia*:

“In 1999, Turner Entertainment (the film's current rights holder) decided to ‘recreate’, as closely as possible, the original version (of ‘Greed’) by combining the existing footage with still photographs of the lost scenes, in accordance with an original continuity outline written by director Erich von Stroheim. This restoration runs almost four hours. The re-edit was produced by Rick Schmidlin.”

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Grizzly Man (2005; 104 min.)

Directed by: Werner Herzog

Narrated by: Werner Herzog

The true story of eco-twit Timothy Treadwell, a man whose obsessive (and unrealistic) view of nature as benign and cuddly led not only to his death but also that of his companion, Amie Huguenard.

For a number of summers, Treadwell filmed himself in Alaska's Katmai National Park. He lived in close proximity to grizzly bears, believing himself immune to their notoriously ferocious appetites.

He was wrong.

Herzog, clearly, has little sympathy with Treadwell's woody optimism; anyone who has seen Les Blanks' documentary "River of Dreams" recalls scenes of Herzog railing against the perversity and vileness of the natural world. Nonetheless, he presents us with a portrait of Treadwell that would not, I think, offend his admirers, even while it condemns him for his willful stupidity and the responsibility he still carries for the death of Ms. Huguenard.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Hombre (1967; 111 min.)

Directed by: Martin Ritt

Written by: Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank

Cast: Paul Newman, Richard Boone, Fredric March, Diane Cilento

Based on a novel by Elmore Leonard.

A *classic* western.

Paul Newman plays John Russell, a white man captured as a child and raised by

Apache Indians. Russell exists in the latter days of the Old West, progress rapidly changing the land and life he's always known.

He buys passage on a stagecoach and finds himself the reluctant guardian of his fellow travelers after they are robbed by a gang of desperados led by Boone. He drives them hard, especially a crooked Indian agent (March), who is trying to abscond with funds earmarked for starving Apaches.

Boone, as usual, is superb, a worthy adversary for Russell. Newman gives a restrained, convincing performance, stoically enduring racism and hostility, acting with ruthlessness and cunning (whatever the situation requires). The final showdown is suspenseful and satisfying, the film one of the finest examples of its kind ever released.

ΩΩΩΩ

House of Bamboo (1955; 102 min.)

Directed by: Samuel Fuller
Written by: Harry Kleiner & Samuel Fuller
Cast: Robert Stack, Robert Ryan, Cameron Mitchell, Shirley Yamaguchi

Stack assumes the identity of an American G.I. to infiltrate a well-organized gang of Yanks operating in post World War II Japan. He befriends the outfit's leader (Ryan) and works to bring them down before his cover is blown.

Echoes of the much superior "White Heat" but Fuller handles his duties proficiently, as usual, crafting an effective thriller. Too bad Ryan under acts; if he had invested his character with real menace, it would have

added to the conflict and heightened the suspense.

(Note: DeForest Kelley of "Star Trek" fame has a small role as one of the gangsters.)

ΩΩΩ

The Incredible Shrinking Man (1957; 81 minutes)

Directed by: Jack Arnold
Written by: Richard Matheson
Cast: Grant Williams, April Kent, Randy Stuart, Paul Langton

Let's have a special round of applause for Jack Arnold, a largely unheralded director who performed stout service on behalf of science fiction and fantasy in the 1950's. Over a short span of time, Arnold directed "It Came From Outer Space" (1953), "Creature From the Black Lagoon" (1954), "Tarantula" (1955) and "The Incredible Shrinking Man" (1957). An impressive run of solid, tight B-pictures, each of which can rightfully be called minor classics.

The latter is the best of the lot. Richard Matheson turned in a spot on adaptation of his novel and Arnold does the rest. The cast is competent but it is Williams' encounters with a housecat and then, once he achieves tiny proportions, a predatory spider, that resonate. The special effects are very good, the sets and staging ingenious.

ΩΩΩ1/2

The Killer Elite (1975; 122 min.)

Directed by: Sam Peckinpah
Written by: Mark Norman & Sterling Silliphant
Cast: James Caan, Robert Duvall, Bo Hopkins, Burt Ward, Arthur Hill, Mako

Caan and Duvall play two operatives employed by a private security firm with ties to American intelligence agencies. They are assigned to protect a valuable defector but Duvall sells out to the other side, kills the defector and leaves Caan a cripple with vengeance on his mind.

Minor Peckinpah, the beginning of his rapid decline as a film maker. Overlong, with silly martial arts fight scenes...but Caan is quite good and the supporting cast composed of some fine character players.

(Note: "The Killer Elite" is currently being remade and this might be one case where the knock-off is superior to the original.)

ΩΩ1/2

King Kong (1933; 100 min.)

Directed by: Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack
Written by: James Creelman and Ruth Rose
Special Effects: Willis O'Brien
Cast: Fay Wray, Robert Armstrong, Bruce Cabot

A magnificent work of the imagination.

The lord of Skull Island is *the* great movie monster and what I like most about this version of "Kong" is that there is less of an effort made to anthropomorphize the big fella. He is, as he perches atop the Empire State Building, swiping at weaving, dipping

biplanes, a thoroughly infuriated *beast*, ignoring the entreaties of Anne Darrow (Wray), maddened by pain and rage.

A number of unforgettable scenes, including Kong's battle with a pterodactyl and the destruction of an elevated train during the great ape's rampage through New York.

None of the remakes can hold a candle to this one. They didn't have Willis O'Brien—it was Obie who breathed life into "Kong", animating him with meticulous movements, fooling us for nearly 80 years now, one careful frame at a time.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

The King of New York (1990; 103 min.)

Directed by: Abel Ferrara
Written by: Nicholas St. John
Cast: Christopher Walken, Larry Fishburne, David Caruso, Giancarlo Esposito, Wesley Snipes

A guilty pleasure.

Violent, stylish, thoroughly amoral. Frank White (Walken) is a crime boss, a ruthless thug and murderer...and the hero of our story. There's a lot to admire about Frank: he's an equal opportunity employer and bears no prejudice against anyone, regardless of their colour (unless they cross him). Like Pablo Escobar, Frank wants to use his drug money to reinvigorate slum neighborhoods, build hospitals and playgrounds...a living saint, our lad Frank.

That golden aura somehow protects him when a crew of rogue cops decide to perform a little extra-judicial execution and raid Franks' stronghold. The body count ticks

ever higher, the deaths well-choreographed, right down to the blood splatter patterns.

Walken and Fishburne are superb, whereas Caruso and Snipes chew the furniture. *Newbies.*

Won't try to defend the appeal this film holds for me. When I'm in a bad mood, looking for some hardcore violence, "The King of New York" is the one I reach for. It pulls no punches and never once pretends to be anything other than what it is: good, *dirty* fun.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Last Tango in Paris (1972; 129 min.)

Directed by: Bernardo Bertolucci
Written by: Bernardo Bertolucci and Franco Arcali
Cast: Marlon Brando, Maria Schneider, Jean-Pierre Leaud

There are actually *two* courageous and soul-baring performances in "Last Tango". While Brando usually gets the lion's share of attention, his co-star, Maria Schneider, endured graphic simulated sex, psychological and professional pressures most actors can't imagine, usually while in some state of undress (*naked* in every sense of the word). I recall the comment someone made about Ginger Rogers, that she had to execute the same moves Astaire did, only *backwards and in high heels.*

Paul and Jeanne are having a torrid affair, using sex to, alternately, reward or punish themselves for their transgressions. Neither wants to acknowledge the intimacy of the act but by exposing their bodies and libidos, they

reveal much about their fears, desires and dreams.

Unendurable at times and not only because of the sex. Neither of the leads holds anything back and their disclosures, what they look like with their flesh masks off, are as unnerving as anything you'll experience at the movies.

Essential (but never easy) viewing.

ΩΩΩΩ

Lawman (1971; 99 min.)

Directed by: Michael Winner
Written by: Gerald Wilson
Cast: Burt Lancaster, Robert Ryan, Lee J. Cobb, Robert Duvall, Sheree North

Lancaster is Jared Maddox, a no-nonsense marshal determined to bring in the men responsible for a drunken shooting incident in the town of Sabbath. But Maddox finds himself in conflict with a powerful rancher (Cobb)—they are two stubborn men, both used to getting their way. Only one of them will survive the confrontation.

A good western, surprisingly bloody. But its overall effect is diminished by a bad, poorly conceived ending. As final showdowns go, this one is a bust.

ΩΩΩ

Laws of Gravity (1992; 98 min.)

Directed by: Nick Gomez
Written by: Nick Gomez

Cast: Peter Greene, Edie Falco, Adam Trese, Arabella Field

I try to tell everyone about this film, a “sleeper” if there ever was one.

The life and daily routine of small time crooks, their interactions and feuds. I love the documentary-like feel, how *close* we get to these people. There is an improvisatory, naturalistic feel to their exchanges. No one seems to be reading lines.

There’s no huge story arc, the film unfolding over the course of a few hot summer days in Brooklyn. Something is going to happen and someone is going to get hurt, we know that much. Greene and his fellow cast members carry on like they don’t see it coming...and we buy into the subterfuge like the dumb marks we are.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

The Life and Death of Peter Sellers

(2004; 120 min)

Directed by: Stephen Hopkins

Written by: Christopher Markus & Stephen McFeely

Cast: Geoffrey Rush, Charlize Theron, John Lithgow, Miriam Margolyes, Emily Watson, Stanley Tucci

Geoffrey Rush is stellar as the notoriously enigmatic Sellers and I find it admirable that the movie makes no effort to excuse or gloss over the dark side of the man. His cruelty and thoughtless behavior, particularly toward his first wife, Anne (Watson), and oldest son, Michael, are hard to countenance. Sellers’ child-like nature was an effective cover for insensitivity, chronic solipsism, serial

philandering, excessive spending...and a willingness to squander his considerable talents for the almighty dollar (or the equivalent in pounds sterling).

The other performers, with the exception of Charlize Theron as Britt Ekland, are one-dimensional and stereotypical. Lithgow (Blake Edwards) and Tucci (Stanley Kubrick) are dreadfully miscast—Tucci misses the mark completely, failing to capture Kubrick’s nervous, twitchy energy and active, searching intellect.

A better bio pic than the usual fare but its limited scope and formulaic structure frequently betray its made-for-cable-TV roots.

ΩΩΩ

The Long Riders

(1980; 99 min.)

Directed by: Walter Hill

Written by: Bill Bryden, Steven Philip Smith, James Keach, Stacey Keach

Cast: James Keach, Stacey Keach, David Carradine, Keith Carradine, Robert Carradine, Randy Quaid, Dennis Quaid

Exceptional western by Walter Hill (who later went on to produce “Deadwood”).

Real life brothers play the siblings who made up the James-Younger-Dalton gang. David Carradine is especially fine as Cole Younger, his bar room knife fight with Sam Starr (James Remar) one of the highlights of the film. After the gang is shot to pieces in the famous Northfield, Minnesota raid, Carradine looks up at the sky and sighs: “Where the hell is Missouri?” It’s a *wonderful* screen moment.

James Keach is far too wooden as Jesse James but that's my only quibble with this superb offering. Walter Hill sets a fine table and his fare is usually pretty meaty stuff. "The Long Riders" was the last really *great* big screen western, all the others since (including "The Unforgiven") pale by comparison.

They simply don't make 'em like this any more.

ΩΩΩΩ

Metropolis (1927; 124 min.)

Directed by: Fritz Lang

Written by: Thea von Harbou and Fritz Lang

Cast: Alfred Abel, Gustav Frohlich, Brigitte Helm, Rudolf Klein-Rogge

In February, 2010, I had the privilege of attending a screening of "Metropolis" at the restored Roxy Theatre in Saskatoon. The chance to see a classic film on a big screen, accompanied by musicians from the Saskatoon Symphony playing the live score, was just too good to pass up.

My wife and I were *captivated* by the film; for over two hours we were transported to another time, the silent era coming to a close, the pictures forever changing, an evolutionary impulse to always get *bigger* and *better*.

"Metropolis" cost a fortune (nearly bankrupting UFA) and fared poorly with critics and the public, even after it was re-edited, precious footage cast into the scrap heap.

Freder Fredersen is the crown prince of Metropolis, leading a pampered, protected life. But, like Siddhartha, he comes face to face with real suffering and his soul is

convulsed by the experience. His spoiled lifestyle is maintained thanks to thousands of workers who plod off cheerlessly to work in satanic mills, returning home spent, drained of their essence. But the slave class is inspired by a vision presented to them by Maria, part prophetess, part saint. She speaks of peace and brotherhood and Freder falls passionately in love with her, not knowing that she has been targeted by his father, the overlord and *uber*-manager of Metropolis, and the mad professor Rotwang, her popularity destined to be exploited for the good of the elite.

The aerial shots of the city bring to mind the gorgeous skylines of "Blade Runner" (forty-five years on). The birth of the robot Maria is an amazing bit of cinema; the editing and direction throughout are dazzling and Lang's world-building abilities formidable.

"Metropolis" isn't merely a place, a collection of sets and set pieces. It is a state of mind, present in the sense of oppression and depersonalization one feels from the opening frames. The buildings are monumental in scale and dwarf the humans who constructed them. These great works are the products of slave labor and a mentality more in keeping with the ancient pharaohs of Egypt.

No amount of trimming could make "Metropolis" a pleasant night out at the movies. Lang would be heartened by the recent discovery—in South America, of all places—of a version of the film sporting 30 extra minutes of footage. Now, maybe we'll finally see what he had in mind when he initially pieced together his vision of things to come. Before the money men lost their nerve, drew their knives and made the first cut...

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

My Best Fiend

(1999; 100 min.)

Directed by: Werner Herzog

Narrated by: Werner Herzog

Werner Herzog's enthralling take on his long-standing relationship with actor Klaus Kinski.

At various points it's evident that even Herzog is perplexed by his involvement with a man who was frequently psychotic, belligerent, an absolute horror to deal with, either personally or professionally. And yet his admiration for Kinski, the power and intensity of his on-screen appearances, is also manifest. A *bete noir*, certainly, but also a performer who refused to work with a net, a tightrope walker who was never afraid to *look down*.

Despite the animosity, the vitriol and lunatic antics of his star, Herzog endured a number of collaborations with Kinski, and together they made one of the two or three best films German cinema has ever produced, "Aguirre, Wrath of God".

It was never an easy association and, as Herzog's respectful documentary makes clear, he still bears the scars and, years after Kinski's death, remains in awe of his mercurial, manic colleague and, yes, alter ego.

ΩΩΩΩ

Naked

(1993; 131 min.)

Directed by: Mike Leigh

Written by: Mike Leigh

Cast: David Thewlis, Katrin Cartlidge, Leslie Sharp, Claire Skinner

Savage, unsparing exploration of a psychopathic personality.

Johnny (David Thewlis) is on the run and needs to lay low for awhile. He ventures down to London, where he knows some people...and proceeds to wreak havoc on the lives of everyone he encounters.

Thewlis gives one the greatest performances *ever*—he simply doesn't miss a note. He has climbed inside Johnny's skin and assumed his prickly, dangerous persona. Sallow-faced, sweaty, soul sick. At once venal and irresistible. The rest of the players are superb, as well. Leigh worked closely with his actors, rehearsing and improvising relentlessly; they all seem *real*, without the pretensions that often accompany naturalistic trappings.

"Naked" is a tough film to watch and redemption is nowhere to be found. Leigh is too principled an artist to offer pat solutions and his cast too courageous to permit accommodation. Collectively, they have wrought a savage, nihilistic masterpiece. It's not for everyone, which is to say it's utterly magnificent.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

Narc

(2002; 105 min.)

Directed by: Joe Carnahan

Written by: Joe Carnahan

Cast: Ray Liotta, Jason Patric, Lloyd Adams, Dan Leis, Chi McBride

A cop movie with a sharp, cutting edge. The energy and passion of its creators are evident in every scene and breakneck editing enhances the action and conflict.

Jason Patric is a plainclothes cop who is suspended after accidentally shooting a

pregnant woman while in pursuit of an armed suspect. His career is hanging by a thread and he's in no position to bargain when his superiors offer him a chance at reinstatement...as long as he helps them investigate another cop.

Relative newcomer Carnahan shows skill and poise behind the camera, eliciting electrifying performances from his two volatile leads. "Narc" ran out of money partway through production but filming forged on until further financing was secured, a credit to director, cast and crew.

Eventually Tom Cruise liked what he saw and signed on as executive producer. He annointed Carnahan director of "Mission Impossible III", only to later remove him for "creative differences" (I guess he wasn't giving Tommy enough close ups). Carnahan's next film is the lamentable adaptation of "The A-Team". A waste of talent...and celluloid.

ΩΩΩΩ

Near Dark (1987; 94 min.)

Directed by: Kathryn Bigelow
Written by: Eric Red and Kathryn Bigelow
Cast: Adrian Pasdar, Jenny Wright, Lance Henriksen, Bill Paxton, Jenette Goldstein

A likable vampire flick from Ms. Bigelow who, of course, went on to direct the highly acclaimed "Hurt Locker" (and not much else of any merit).

Pasdar is a good old country boy who falls in with a roving band of murderous vampires. After proving his worth in a daylight shootout, he is grudgingly accepted into the clan. But eventually their murderous antics prove to be

too much for him and he seeks to break away.

As the head of the gang, Lance Henriksen gives off a cool, under-stated sense of menace and Paxton just out and out *steals* the best scene in the movie, a bloodbath at a country and western bar.

Above average horror fare.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Night of the Creeps (1986; 90 min.)

Directed by: Fred Dekker
Written by: Fred Dekker
Cast: Jason Lively, Jill Whitlow, Steve Marshall, Tom Atkins

An alien science experiment goes awry and extraterrestrial space slugs create havoc in a sleepy American campus town.

A sweet-natured *homage* to the creature features we all grew up on. The gore is cartoonish, rather than stomach-churning; the makeup and mechanical effects, while crude by today's standards, serve the purpose of the storyline. The script is far from stellar, the performances, except for screen veteran Atkins, at best average. But the film is cheery, tongue-in-cheek and, after all, it's supposed to be a tribute to "B" movies (with all their attendant flaws).

Note: This review is based on the "Director's Cut", which was released on DVD in 2009.

ΩΩΩ

Night of the Following Day

(1968; 94 min.)

Directed by: Hubert Cornfield

Written by: Hubert Cornfield & Robert Phippeny

Cast: Marlon Brando, Richard Boone, Pamela Franklin, Rita Moreno, Jess Hahn

A gang of professional criminals kidnap a wealthy heiress (Franklin) but tensions within the group leads to conflict and a fatal falling out.

Boone is a force to be reckoned with but Brando, who apparently lost faith in the project (particularly the admittedly silly coda), basically phones in his performance. Not a great picture in the first place and the star's indifference is painfully obvious, robbing the film of its power and dramatic impetus.

ΩΩ1/2

Night of the Living Dead (1968; 98 min.)

Directed by: George Romero

Written by: John A. Russo

Cast: Duane Jones, Judith O'Shea, Karl Hardman, Keith Wayne

Full disclosure: this movie was playing the night my father's body was found, so it has always put a special *whammy* into me.

A brother and sister bicker as they drive out to a country cemetery. A thunderstorm is brewing and Johnny (Russell Streiner) just wants to get this over with as quickly as possible. As the gravesite, Barbra (O'Shea) glances over and sees a man lurching toward them. The man seems to be ill, in some kind

of difficulty...until he reaches her and lunges for her throat—

And the nightmare begins.

Eventually a disparate group of people find themselves holed up in a house, besieged by the living dead. They hatch a desperate plan to flee to safety but everything goes awry and the zombies seem to be gaining the upper hand, when help arrives. Sort of.

Gruesome stuff and Romero never flinches. After this film, his legend was made. Followed by a host of sequels, spin-offs and sick-making imitations.

ΩΩΩ1/2

North Dallas Forty (1979; 118 min.)

Directed by: Ted Kotcheff

Written by: Peter Gent, Frank Yablans, Ted Kotcheff

Cast: Nick Nolte, Mac Davis, Dayle Haddon, G.D. Spradlin, Charles Durning, Bo Svenson

Based on an excellent novel by former NFL flanker Peter Gent and a bitter counterpoint to feel good crap like "Jerry Maguire". This is big time corporate football the way it *really* is, folks: it's all about money and no one gives a damn about the welfare of the players or the beauty and integrity of the game.

Nolte is a banged up receiver who's nearing the end of his shelf life. The only reasons he still makes it on the field are his relationship with the team's star quarterback (a surprisingly good Mac Davis) and his willingness to put his body on the line Sunday after Sunday. But he pushes his luck when he butts heads with his autocratic coach and

threatens team unity with his refusal to conform and *play by the rules*.

The entire culture of football is exposed, from sex-starved groupies to spying conducted on behalf of league headquarters. It's the most cynical and realistic depiction of professional athletes I've seen to date. The gladiators, it seems, are still with us...and will be for as long as we choose entertainments where the blood is real, the pain genuine and unrehearsed.

ΩΩΩΩ

Out of the Past (1947; 97 minutes)

Directed by: Jacques Tourneur

Written by: Geoffrey Homes

Cast: Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer, Kirk Douglas, Rhonda Fleming, Richard Webb, Steve Brodie

The best film *noir* ever? You won't get any argument from me.

Robert Mitchum is hired to find a woman (Greer) and bring her back to her mobster boyfriend (Douglas) but she throws a monkey wrench into the works by making him fall in love with her.

No one is without sin and no one's heart completely unsullied and pure. And, by the way, they don't call them femme *fatales* for nothing. The three leads mesh nicely; Mitchum and Douglas make worthy adversaries and their on-screen encounters are rife with menace.

Top flight entertainment.

ΩΩΩΩ

Phase IV (1973; 84 minutes)

Directed by: Saul Bass

Written by: Mayo Simon

Cast: Nigel Davenport, Michael Murphy, Lynne Frederick

Well-acted and intriguing science fiction film, sporting a cast of millions.

Ants are exhibiting some rather odd behavior and a small team of scientists is dispatched to the Arizona desert to find out what's going on. What they discover might represent a threat to the future existence of humankind...but before they can raise the alarm, they are isolated and besieged by the resourceful insects.

Not just another creature feature, a cerebral and moody film with a downright trippy ending.

ΩΩΩ

Raging Bull (1980; 119 min.)

Directed by: Martin Scorsese

Written by: Paul Schrader, Mardik Martin

Cast: Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci, Cathy Moriarty, Frank Vincent

Isabella Rossellini tells the story of watching Martin Scorsese snip a single frame out of one of his films, a superstitious ritual he apparently performs on all of his finished movies. Perfection perceived as an offense against the greatness and supremacy of God? How *Catholic* of him...

That single frame is the only thing missing from “Raging Bull”—the film boasts two spectacular performances (DeNiro and Pesci), some of the most gorgeous cinematography ever (Michael Chapman’s b/w photography sumptuous, grainy, fluid), all of it shaped and stewarded by a director at the very top of his game.

The fight scenes are visceral and gory (the real life Jake LaMotta serving as advisor), the epic battles with Sugar Ray Robinson thrillingly re-enacted. Once again DeNiro and Scorsese take an unattractive, dangerous character and somehow draw us into his corner so that, in the end, we are left conflicted, sullied, morally compromised. Quite the trick.

ΩΩΩΩΩΩ

Reds

(1981; 196 min.)

Directed by: Warren Beatty

Written by: Warren Beatty and Trevor Griffiths

Cast: Warren Beatty, Diane Keaton, Jack Nicholson, Maureen Stapleton

An epic with heart *and* brains. A labour of love for its director, star and co-writer; Beatty started filming the testimonials that frame the film in the early 1970’s.

The story of John Reed, a celebrated journalist and socialist who wrote the seminal book on the 1917 Russian revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. Reed moved in the highest circle of the Left, well-acquainted with Emma Goldman, Pancho Villa and, eventually, many of the figures pivotal to the overthrow of the Czarist regime. *Ten Days* is an insider’s view of the

revolution and that’s what gives it the power and authenticity it retains to the present day. Reed and his wife, Louise Bryant, were vilified for their politics, including their opposition to the First World War. In one early scene in “Reds”, Reed is asked at a public function to comment on what the war is all about and curtly replies “Profits”. A sentiment not likely to go over well in such a highly charged, jingoistic atmosphere.

Reed also has friends in the artistic community, including the playwright Eugene O’Neill (a carefully crafted and superb performance by Jack Nicholson). Louise and O’Neill become embroiled, creating a fascinating love triangle, resolved only when Louise and Reed depart for Russia.

“Reds” is long but never for a second *over*-long. Vittorio Storaro’s cinematography is wonderful, as always; he’s what gives the movie such *scale*. The soundtrack is well-chosen and the editing seamless. Nicholson and Maureen Stapleton (Emma Goldman) shine and even Keaton, an actress I don’t normally like, is fine. But it’s Beatty’s show and he deserves credit for a solid performance, as well as persevering in his efforts to make a movie *within the Hollywood system* that describes a less than bright and shining era in American history. Dissidents and “radicals” were ceaselessly hounded, imprisoned, in the case of Emma Goldman *deported*, for rallying and organizing on behalf of their working class comrades.

But Reed was also disillusioned by what he found in Russia. Power was concentrating into the hands of a few individuals and the ordinary people were still suffering incredible hardship. The revolution had been betrayed but Reed, at least, was spared the even gorier aftermath, including the rise of Stalin. His body was interred, along with other heroes of

the Revolution, beside the Kremlin wall. A singular honour for a singular man.

One of the best films of the 1980's.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Reservoir Dogs

(1991; 99 min.)

Directed by: Quentin Tarantino

Written by: Quentin Tarantino

Cast: Harvey Keitel, Tim Roth, Michael Madsen, Steve Buscemi, Chris Penn, Lawrence Tierney

Oh, baby, what a debut!

Kingpin Lawrence Tierney has a plan but he needs a crew of eager young crooks to help him carry it out. The job is a sweet one and promises ample rewards for all involved. Nothing can possibly go wrong...

An ensemble to die for ensured that Tarantino's first venture behind the camera would be a memorable one. Thanks to this flawless thriller, he became what he is today...with dozens of wannabes and hacks trying to emulate his brazen magic.

Madsen and Penn are the two who create the greatest impression—the potential for violence they effortlessly radiate, the depths behind their cool regard. In a film featuring some truly bad men, they make me the most nervous. They are capable of anything and that makes them very, very dangerous indeed.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Rocketship X-M

(1950; 77 min.)

Directed by: Kurt Neumann

Written by: Kurt Neumann

Cast: Lloyd Bridges, John Emory, Osa Massen, Hugh O'Brien, Noah Beery, Jr.

Weak science fiction flick raced into production to compete with "Destination Moon".

A mishap *en route* to the moon sends a space craft careening out of control and when the crew finally recover their wits, they find themselves approaching...*Mars?* A good cast can't save a talky, stereotype-spouting, yawner of a script. But I had to smile when I spotted Morris Ankrum (as Professor Fleming)—my God, the man seemed to be in every SF or giant bug picture in the 1950's!

ΩΩ

Scanners

(1980; 103 min.)

Directed by: David Cronenberg

Written by: David Cronenberg

Cast: Stephen Lack, Jennifer O'Neill, Patrick McGoochan, Michael Ironside

Lack and O'Neill are "scanners", genetic mutations, capable of using their minds as weapons. McGoochan plays a doctor who is trying to help them to atone for his past mistakes, Ironside a ruthless rival, seeking to use their special gifts for his own, selfish ends.

Lack gives an odd, detached performance in the lead role (it works, somehow) but O'Neill just plain can't act. It's up to Ironside and McGoochan to do the heavy lifting and they manage quite well, thank you.

I like the way Cronenberg uses *sound*—disembodied voices, uterine burbles—to imply the experience of living inside a “scanner’s” mind. It adds to the overall creepiness, yet another tool the director is willing to employ in his determined effort to get under our skin.

And, oh, yeah, don’t forget the famous “exploding head” scene near the beginning. It’s a pissar.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Seance on a Wet Afternoon (1964; 111 min.)

Directed by: Bryan Forbes
Written by: Bryan Forbes
Cast: Kim Stanley, Richard Attenborough, Judith Donner

Director/writer Forbes delivers a stylish, atmospheric chiller, edge-of-your-seat entertainment with nary a drop of blood spilled.

Stanley is superb as medium Myra Savage, an unbalanced woman who aspires to fame and fortune. She concocts a plan to kidnap a child and then use her “powers” to aid the police in finding her. She enlists her husband (Attenborough) in the scheme and he willingly goes along...at least until her dark designs are revealed and he is forced to make a difficult choice.

Gripping from beginning to end.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

The Seven Per Cent Solution (1976; 114 min)

Directed by: Herbert Ross
Written by: Nicholas Meyer
Cast: Nicol Williamson, Robert Duvall, Alan Arkin, Vanessa Redgrave, Jeremy Kemp

The title refers to the cocktail of cocaine Sherlock Holmes injected when he was between cases and bored. Writer Nicholas Meyer (he also authored the book on which his screenplay is based) supposes that his reliance on the drug might become a problem, forcing his friends, including his colleague Dr. Watson, to intercede.

I like Nicol Williamson’s twitchy, neurotic portrayal of Holmes. It brings to mind Jeremy Brett’s interpretation of the cerebral sleuth (though Brett is, to me, the definitive Holmes). Duvall is miscast but does his best and Arkin, as Sigmund Freud, has the time of his life. Director Ross completes his ensemble with fine character actors and even a cameo by Laurence Olivier (as Dr. Moriarty).

Great fun, if a bit over the top.

ΩΩΩ

The Shining (1980; 119 min.)

Directed by: Stanley Kubrick
Written by: Diane Johnson and Stanley Kubrick
Cast: Jack Nicholson, Shelley Duvall, Danny Lloyd, Scatman Crothers, Barry Nelson

An error in judgment: “Barry Lyndon” had tanked and perhaps the Master was looking

to redeem himself with something more *commercial*. But *The Shining* (the novel) was no *Lolita*, and I don't think it speaks to any of Kubrick's great passions, notions or fetishes.

It is apparent from the outset that the movie was fatally miscast. Shelley Duvall is tolerable in smaller roles, a fragile and neurotic character actress; she can't hold our attention and sympathy for two solid hours. But Nicholson is the biggest problem. For some reason he and Kubrick decided to play Jack Torrance as nuts right from the beginning. After a mere two minutes in his company, I knew there was no way in hell I would ever consent to spending an entire *winter* snowed in with the guy.

What made the book so effective was Torrance's *gradual* deterioration; Kubrick dispenses with that and, frankly, with most of the scares, as well. He may have reinvented the science fiction film with "2001", but he didn't do the same for the horror genre with "The Shining". The epic movie treatment just doesn't work and the completed picture seems over-acted and over-directed, while consistently under-achieving.

"The Shining" required a lighter, more intimate touch. Kubrick never could be bothered with making us actually like and relate to his characters. And he didn't seem to understand that horror traditionally demands a *moral centre*, a strict delineation between good and evil. That was completely alien to Stanley Kubrick's way of thinking and, in a nutshell, why he was so wrong for this project.

ΩΩ1/2

Silent Running
(1971; 90 min.)

Directed by: Douglas Trumbull
Written by: Deric Washburn, Michael Cimino, Steve Bochco
Cast: Bruce Dern, Cliff Potts, Ron Rifkin, Jesse Vint

A gem that deserves a new generation of fans.

Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern) and his colleagues are caretakers of a spaceship bearing the last surviving trees indigenous to planet Earth. Humankind has decimated its eco-system to the extent that these trees are maintained in the hope that, one day, they can be re-introduced to the planet's poisoned soil, forests and fauna restored to barren, lifeless lands.

Lowell is especially passionate about their mission and is understandably devastated when headquarters transmits a message to blow up the domes and return to Earth. While his companions rejoice and set about their tasks, Lowell fumes...and decides to act.

Dern's performance is a marvel; he spends much of his time on-screen alone or interacting with one of ship's drones, robot helpers who patter about, tending the forests, doing odd jobs, exhibiting a rudimentary machine intelligence. They're no replacement for human company and Lowell's disintegration is inevitable and touchingly sad.

Special effects whiz Trumbull turns out to be a first-rate director—years later he helmed a decent techno-thriller called "Brainstorm" (1983), which, sadly, turned out to be Natalie Wood's swan song: she died just days before shooting was completed.

Warning: the title song for "Silent Running", warbled by Joan Baez, is truly nauseating. Once you endure that, however, you're in for a treat.

ΩΩΩ1/2

Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983; 95 min.)

Directed by: Jack Clayton

Written by: Ray Bradbury

Cast: Jonathan Pryce, Jason Robards, Vidal Peterson, Shawn Carson, Diane Ladd

Faithful adaptation of Ray Bradbury's classic novel. Jonathan Pryce gives the part of Mr. Dark an especially sinister reading. His travelling circus features attractions meant to appeal to yearnings, desires and baser instincts...and there are plenty of takers. Including 13-year old Jim Nightshade (Shawn Carson), who resents the restrictions and prohibitions of childhood. Careful what you wish for, Jim...

I've heard rumours that Bradbury and a sympathetic producer did a little post-production tinkering on the film and if that's the case, it's one of those rare instances where the retooling actually helped.

A good family picture, though a bit spooky in places for the young uns.

ΩΩΩ

Sorcerer (1977; 121 min.)

Directed by: William Friedkin

Written by: Walon Green

Cast: Roy Scheider, Bruno Cremer, Ramon Bieri, Francisco Rabal

This film has been unfairly maligned for far too long.

Okay, it might not be "Wages of Fear" (1953), but "Sorcerer" is a nervy and engrossing motion picture, brilliantly photographed.

After a botched robbery, Roy Scheider flees to South America, where he tries to lose himself among other desperate men in an ugly village a stone's throw from the end of the world. Work is hard to come by and the money running out—so when the man from the American oil company promises huge bonuses to anyone who will take on the job of driving three truckloads of nitroglycerine through the near impassable jungle, he's not short of volunteers.

Criticized for its hefty budget and for *daring* to remake Clouzot's classic film, "Sorcerer" tanked at the box office and Friedkin's career never recovered. But "Sorcerer" deserved better and I hope viewers will seek it out and realize what a gripping and suspenseful film it is.

Special mention should be made of the spooky electronic score provided by Tangerine Dream. It's the best film-related work they ever did.

ΩΩΩΩ

Star Wars (1977; 121 min.)

Directed by: George Lucas

Written by: George Lucas

Cast: Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Alec Guinness, Peter Cushing

It's Kurosawa's "Hidden Fortress"...with robots!

The sequels and franchising and name-branding and action figures have diminished but not completely effaced the power and sheer fun of the original. And I mean the original version of the very first movie, not the ten million-dollar retooling Lucas did in 1997 to goose up the CGI and crowd the frames with more creatures and gadgetry.

My friends and I were thirteen or fourteen when "Star Wars" came out and I remember emerging from the theatre feeling *electrified* by what I'd just seen. We went back again and again, just to re-experience, in increasingly diluted form, that initial sensawunda the film inspired. Luke Skywalker, an ordinary farm boy, suddenly finds himself swept up in events of enormous significance and despite his humble origins grows and matures...and by the end of the film has become a true warrior and implacable foe of an interstellar empire. That was a story we could *all* relate to.

It's a classic heroic journey, steeped in mythos; there's nothing very original about "Star Wars" and the ending is predetermined and obvious. But there was a freshness to the presentation and technically the film was such a leap forward that my teenaged mind was overwhelmed.

That said...I watched "Star Wars" again not long ago—I have an ancient VHS copy of the original theatrical release—and the clunky dialogue and cardboard acting made me wince. Even Alec Guinness can't do much with a script and director more interested in action and spectacle than characterization. What I could forgive as a child struck me as hopelessly clichéd and predictable 30 years on.

"Star Wars" and "Jaws" came out within two years of each other and helped create the blockbuster mentality that has dominated Hollywood ever since. While in some ways their release signified technical advances that took cinema in new and exciting directions, it also instilled a mindset that led to the rise of films by the likes of Michael Bay, James Cameron and J.J. Abrams.

For that (and more), Messrs. Spielberg and Lucas have much to answer for.

ΩΩΩΩ

Straight Time (1978; 114 min.)

Directed by: Ulu Grosbard
Written by: Alvin Sargent, Edward Bunker, Jeffrey Boam
Cast: Dustin Hoffman, Theresa Russell, Gary Busey, Harry Dean Stanton, M. Emmett Walsh

Forget Ratso Rizzo and the "rain man", "Max Dembo" is Dustin Hoffman's best, most nuanced performance.

Max is a habitual criminal, a man incapable of defeating the worst parts of his nature, always seeking the easier path, the one to which he is most closely attuned. Max is out on parole, someone almost guaranteed to re-offend. He gives straight life a shot, enduring an over-zealous parole officer (Walsh), even applying for a job. It's while at the employment office that he meets Jenny (Theresa Russell), who might be the one person he encounters who's as lonely and lost as he is.

But Max can't hold it together and after a botched holdup, he knows there are some

things that can't be fixed and some people who won't be helped.

"Straight Time" sports no frills or stylistic adornments. A small, fully realized film, it achieves its modest aims while keeping us entertained throughout. And for that, it is to be commended.

ΩΩΩΩ

Taxi Driver (1976; 114 min.)

Directed by: Martin Scorsese

Written by: Paul Schrader

Cast: Robert DeNiro, Jodie Foster, Harvey Keitel, Cybill Shepherd, Peter Boyle

This film is amoral, vicious, a monstrous thing to behold.

Don't miss it.

Travis Bickle (DeNiro) drives a cab in New York City and gazes out through bloodshot, sleepless eyes at a city consumed by vice, every institution and individual compromised, covered in filth. The sewers are over-flowing with garbage and there's a miasma of corruption and decay that permeates everything. Travis is an empty vessel and as he navigates through mean, ugly streets, NYC pours into him, flooding him with paranoia and violence.

There's something infernal and nasty about "Taxi Driver"—it's sordid and ugly through and through. Everyone involved, including cinematographer Michael Chapman and the great Bernard Herrmann (this was his last score), put their heads together and collaborated on a Dante-esque masterpiece, a trip through a shadow-filled netherworld

where a catalogue of human sins are constantly on display. There are no good guys, no one to cheer for.

The ending is blood-soaked and absolutely vital. It puts paid to any notion of expiation; Bickle has been swallowed by the dark side. And sweet Iris will always be a whore.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

The Tenant (1976; 126 min.)

Directed by: Roman Polanski

Written by: Gerard Brach and Roman Polanski

Cast: Roman Polanski, Isabel Adjani, Shelley Winters, Melvyn Douglas

Terrifying movie, to my mind every bit as frightening as "Rosemary's Baby" or "Repulsion".

Polanski plays Monsieur Trelkovsky, a timid, inoffensive gentleman who has just taken possession of a flat in Paris. The previous tenant was the victim of some kind of breakdown and attempted suicide by flinging herself from the window. The information is unsettling but not unduly alarming. Until M. Trelkovsky has reason to suspect his neighbors of hatching some kind of malign scheme against *him*...

A meditation on the effects of loneliness and isolation. Trelkovsky has no friends, no social network to fall back on when he begins to fear for his safety (and sanity).

I like Polanski's performance; it's convincing and restrained. Trelkovsky is not an altogether nice person but his eventual fate is still far too cruel and undeserved. The supporting cast of old vets acquit themselves

well and the film was shot by Sven Nykvist, who does his usual exemplary job.

ΩΩΩΩ

They Might be Giants (1973; 88 min.)

Directed by: Anthony Harvey
Written by: James Goldman
Cast: George C. Scott, Joanne Woodward, Jack Gilford

An oddball addition to the Sherlock Holmes canon and a sweetheart of a film.

George C. Scott plays a man who believes himself to be the great detective and Joanne Woodward is a psychologist who's supposed to certify him as mad so his avaricious brother-in-law can seize his money.

Scott and Woodward have terrific chemistry and the movie wins us over without resorting to treacle. A terrific closing scene: are they *both* mad...or never more sane?

ΩΩΩ1/2

Them! (1954; 92 min.)

Directed by: Gordon Douglas
Written by: Ted Sherdeman
Cast: James Whitmore, Edmund Gwenn, James Arness, Joan Weldon

One of the best of the 1950s "creature features".

Nuclear testing in the New Mexican desert has created a giant species of ants. First the FBI is called in, then scientists and finally the

army to prevent the ants from creating a global menace that might have dire consequences for the future of humankind.

Good cast (especially Gwenn), decent script and a considerable budget really help and the film is played straight, no campiness or shlock.

Only one quibble: surely a small role could have been found for the seemingly ubiquitous Morris Ankrum!

ΩΩΩ1/2

Thief (1981; 123 min.)

Directed by: Michael Mann
Written by: Michael Mann
Cast: James Caan, Tuesday Weld, Willie Nelson, Jim Belushi, Robert Prossky

An eye-grabbing debut by Mann...and I would argue he hasn't been nearly as good since.

James Caan is splendid as a professional thief who dreams of going legit and leading an idyllic life. He thinks he's found the girl, now he needs a few more things to fall into place before he's free and clear.

But his first mistake is abandoning his independent status and taking on a job for Leo (Prossky)—the burglary goes without a hitch only now the thief discovers his new boss isn't one to relinquish his prize employee.

Solid, well-executed actioner, no nonsense to the last frame.

Great score by Tangerine Dream.

ΩΩΩΩ

The Thief of Baghdad

(1924; 135 min.)

Directed by: Raoul Walsh

Written by: Lotta Woods and Douglas Fairbanks

Cast: Douglas Fairbanks, Anna May Wong, Snitz Edwards, Charles Belcher

A stunner from the silent film era.

Fairbanks is Ahmed, the “thief of Baghdad”, a cutpurse with an insatiable appetite for bling. As the picture opens, he’s dozing by a water fountain but scarcely unaware of his surroundings. When a passerby stops for a drink, Ahmed nimbly relieves him of his valuables.

Fairbanks’ Ahmed has the soul of a true larcenist—he takes what he wants, when it suits him...including a magical rope employed by a holy man (stolen while its owner is praying!). Ahmed dreams of sneaking into the palace and claiming some real loot and gets his opportunity when he poses as one of a group of suitors, come to woo the princess. She is a true treasure and Ahmed is smitten by her—until he is discovered and flogged. Sent on a quest to prove his worth—which includes a memorable battle with a giant lizard—Ahmed succeeds and returns in time to save the city...and earn his rightful reward.

The design, photography and acting combine to make this version of “Thief of Baghdad” superior to all that followed. You simply can’t beat Douglas Fairbanks as a leading man: he’s *magic* onscreen. A robust physical presence, magnetic personality, exuding strength and indomitable will. A hero, even when he pretends not to be.

ΩΩΩΩ

The Thief of Baghdad

(1940; 106 min.)

Directed by: Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell, Tim Whelan, Zoltan Korda

Written by: Miles Malleon and Lajos Biro

Cast: Conrad Veidt, Sabu, June Duprez, John Justin, Rex Ingram

A great, old style yarn and a film that influenced the likes of Ray Harryhausen and a generation of fantasists.

And why not? You’ve got multi-armed silver maidens and flying horses and magic carpets...and a beautiful princess who needs rescuing from the evil, scheming Conrad Veidt.

The film is episodic and structurally not that sound—no doubt the result of different hands at the helm (four, count ’em *four* different directors)—and the musical interludes are unwelcome, but the overall charm of the picture wins out in the end. Sabu is engaging and impressively athletic in the title role and Veidt, of course, the perfect villain.

This film won two Academy Awards, both in the technical category, and is visually impressive, despite its vintage.

ΩΩΩ1/2

The Thing

(1982; 109 min.)

Directed by: John Carpenter

Written by: Bill Lancaster

Cast: Kurt Russell, Wilford Brimley, Richard Dysart, Richard Masur, T.K. Carter

There are some who consider the 1951 Howard Hawks/Christian Nyby version of “The Thing” superior to John Carpenter’s remake.

Um...*no*.

Carpenter far more effectively captures the claustrophobic, paranoid atmosphere of “Who Goes There?”, the novella that serves as the source material for both movies. The acting in the 1982 film is far superior to the original—Kurt Russell is especially fine as helicopter pilot J.P. “Mac” MacCready. Rob Bottin’s creature effects are amazing and Ennio Morricone’s score provides a little extra menace and atmosphere.

Love the ending.

Note: A location in northern B.C. doubled as Antarctica and the production designers are to be congratulated for carrying off such an elaborate ruse.

ΩΩΩΩ

Two-Lane Blacktop (1971; 103 min.)

Directed by: Monte Hellman

Written by: Rudolph Wurlitzer and Will Corry

Cast: James Taylor, Dennis Wilson, Warren Oates, Laurie Bird

Taylor is “The Driver”, Wilson “The Mechanic”, Oates “GTO” and Bird “The Girl”. That about sums up the effort that was exerted by Hellman and his scenarists to give their characters any kind of human attributes, and/or motivations. Oates does his best but

the other actors come off as ciphers. Long intervals when the only sound is the roar of a super-charged engine. *Bor-ing!*

An amateurish road movie, heedlessly shot, acted and edited by sniggering cronies, made up as they went along. Some half-decent photography, but the races and car chases become tiresome, especially when you don’t give a tinker’s damn for any of the principal players.

Similar in tone and general aura of inconsequence to another film from around the same time, Richard Sarafin’s “The Vanishing Point”.

ΩΩ

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968; 141 min.)

Directed by: Stanley Kubrick

Written by: Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick

Cast: Keir Dullea, Gary Lockwood, William Sylvester, Douglas Rain, Daniel Richter

Arthur C. Clarke has been quoted as saying that MGM had no idea they were getting “a ten million dollar religious movie” when they signed on for “2001”. I can’t imagine it was pitched to them that way—Kubrick’s name may have been golden at MGM (he had final cut and complete control over his films) but that might have been pushing his luck a tad too far.

It’s hard to talk about “2001”—so much has already been written about it, the superlatives all taken. This odyssey traverses great epochs and leaps across vast gulfs, exploring cosmic themes like extraterrestrial intelligence and the evolution of life in our galaxy. Religious? It must have been pretty close to a religious

experience if you watched the film in the late Sixties, a head full of good acid, that creepy Ligeti score screeching from the speakers as astronaut Dave Bowman defies the puny laws of physics and goes “beyond the infinite”.

How will those with shortened attention spans deal with the prologue, set in the prehistoric and can they sit through the extended docking sequence, the Orion shuttle keeping time with the revolving space station to the tune of the “Blue Danube Waltz”?

“2001” is not a showcase for any of the actors involved. They acquit themselves professionally but, really, the best performance is by someone in a non-human role. Douglas Rain’s silky, detached delivery is perfect for Hal, an A.I. whose actions are all the more terrifying because they are committed by someone utterly lacking in feeling or conscience. Big Blue gone bad.

“2001: A Space Odyssey” is the most optimistic of Kubrick’s films, affirming that humankind, despite its flaws and self-destructive tendencies, has a destiny written in the stars. While Stanley Kubrick was never an artist who was prone to waxing sentimental, in this instance he isn’t afraid to call upon higher powers and “2001” might be his most heartfelt paean, perhaps even a form of prayer.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

Vera Cruz (1954; 94 min)

Directed by: Robert Aldrich
Written by: Roland Kibbee & James R. Webb
Cast: Gary Cooper, Burt Lancaster, Cesar Romero, Denise Darcel, George Macready, Jack Elam, Ernest Borgnine

Passable western, redeemed by the two charismatic leads. Both are mercenaries for hire in revolution-era Mexico, selling their services to the highest bidder. Lancaster’s performance is a bit unnerving: he can be smiling and charming one moment and as cold-blooded as a rattlesnake the next. Cooper is his usual laidback, taciturn self, but there’s an extra dimension to his low-key acting, perhaps owing to a desire not to be upstaged by his co-star. He brings a certain dignity and gentility to the role of Ben Trane, as befitting a man who once owned a sizeable plantation and whose allegiance to the Confederacy cost him everything.

The final shootout brings to mind the conclusion of “The Wild Bunch”, though, of course, not nearly as gory and balletic.

ΩΩ1/2

A Walk in the Sun (1945; 117 min.)

Directed by: Lewis Milestone
Written by: Robert Rossen
Cast: Dana Andrews, Richard Conte, John Ireland, Lloyd Bridges, Sterling Holloway

Superb World War II drama, depicting an infantry platoon fighting their way inland from the Salerno (Italy) beachhead.

Unlike most war films from the era, this picture *oozes* authenticity. Director Milestone understands the virtues and vices of the average fighting man. He refuses to romanticize their lives or resort to silly jingoism and, as a result, this movie, like his 1931 adaptation of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, stands the test of time.

A strong ensemble cast, Richard Conte particularly splendid.

Warning: The movie features one of the worst theme songs you'll ever encounter.

ΩΩΩ1/2

The Wild Bunch (1969; 145 min.)

Directed by: Sam Peckinpah

Written by: Walon Green and Sam Peckinpah

Cast: William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Robert Ryan, Warren Oates, Strother Martin, Ben Johnson, Edmond O'Brien

The best western ever. Nothing else comes close.

Holden is the leader of the gang of and Ryan an old friend released from prison to help hunt him down. After a bloody daylight robbery, Holden and his confederates flee south of the border, where they come into contact with a people trapped in the midst of a bloody civil war.

But if the past threatens to catch up with the gang, the future has already arrived. One of the best scenes has them looking on in wonder as a corrupt and drunken general, brilliantly played by Emilio Fernandez, circles the village square in an early automobile. This is an era where cars are replacing horses and machine guns supplanting repeating rifles and Colt .45s. The bloody finale displays the killing power of these new weapons of destruction, the gore operatic, bodies spinning, bullets slamming into flesh, blood spurting, the carnage prolonged by slow motion photography; this is *not* a film for the squeamish.

The performances are uniformly first rate, the actors at the top of their game. Holden was never better but singling out anyone from this terrific ensemble is doing a grave disservice to the others.

Kudos to Lucien Ballard's photography and Jerry Fielding's muscular score.

Don't miss this one—but be sure to seek out the Director's Cut, it fleshes out more of the back story, particularly the relationship between Ryan and Holden.

ΩΩΩΩΩ

The Wages of Fear (1953; 140 min.)

Directed by: Henri-Georges Clouzot

Written by: Henri-Georges Clouzot

Cast: Yves Montand, Charles Vanel, Peter Van Eyck, Folco Lulli, Vera Clouzot

One of the most suspenseful, nail-biting movies you'll ever encounter.

A group of men, all of whom possess a shady past, take on the suicidal task of transporting three trucks filled with nitroglycerine through the jungle, across forbidding terrain, in order to snuff out an oil well fire.

Matinee idol and torch song singer Montand plays against type but it's Charles Vanel who our eyes seek out—the veteran character actor gives a sterling performance, earning him a special mention from the same Cannes jury who awarded "Wages" a Palm D'Or.

Clouzot's best film, with a heart as black and cold as deep space.

Mandatory viewing.

(Note: This film was remade in 1977 as "Sorcerer")

ΩΩΩΩΩΩ

Withnail & I (1987; 108 min)

Directed by: Bruce Robinson

Written by: Bruce Robinson

Cast: Paul McGann, Richard E. Grant, Richard Griffiths, Ralph Brown

Have I ever laughed harder while watching a movie? Not that I can recall...

Richard E. Grant was *made* for the role of the venal, cowardly, self-centered Withnail. When he utters the line "We've gone on vacation by mistake", I howl every single time.

Marwood (McGann) must endure his roommate's spasms of rage and self-pity and cope as best he can. The two of them make the oddest couple to grace the screen since Francis' pet mule started sassing back to him. And then factor in a cast of characters that includes Danny, the local drug dealer (Brown), and Uncle Monty (Griffiths), a lunatic relative of Withnail's, and you've got the makings of one of the five best comedies England has ever produced.

ΩΩΩΩΩ1/2

Yellow Sky (1949; 98 min.)

Directed by: William Wellman

Written by: Lamar Trotti

Cast: Gregory Peck, Richard Widmark, Anne Baxter, Henry Morgan

Above average western; Peck and his bad boys rob a bank and flee across an expanse of desert and salt flats to escape their pursuers. They arrived at a ghost town, more dead than alive, and discover Baxter and her grandfather. The old man is a prospector and they soon suspect he's got more treasure about than just his lovely young ward.

Good entertainment, slightly marred by a silly epilogue.

ΩΩΩΩ1/2

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