
THE GREAT
MOVIES

ROGER EBERT

{ THE GREAT MOVIES }

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T H E
G R E A T M O V I E S

R O G E R E B E R T

Photo Stills Selected by Mary Corliss,
Assistant Film Curator, Museum of Modern Art

Broadway Books
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This book is dedicated to

Daniel Curley
Manny Farber
Pauline Kael
Stanley Kauffmann
Arthur Knight
Dwight Macdonald
Donald Richie
Andrew Sarris

Teachers

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a box of space and time. Movies are windows in its walls. They allow us to enter other minds—not simply in the sense of identifying with the characters, although that is an important part of it, but by seeing the world as another person sees it. François Truffaut said that for a director it was an inspiring sight to walk to the front of a movie theater, turn around, and look back at the faces of the audience, turned up to the light from the screen. If the film is any good, those faces reflect an out-of-the-body experience: The audience for a brief time is somewhere else, sometime else, concerned with lives that are not its own. Of all the arts, movies are the most powerful aid to empathy, and good ones make us into better people.

Not many of them are very good, however. Yes, there are the passable Friday night specials, measured by critics including myself in terms of their value in entertaining us for two hours. We buy our tickets and hope for diversion, and usually we get it, but we so rarely get anything more. Especially in these latter days of the marketing-driven Hollywood, and a world cinema dominated by the Hollywood machine, films aim coarsely at low tastes. “If you put three thoughts into a movie you’ve broken the law and no one will come,” Sean Penn told an audience at the Edinburgh Festival in 2001. The movies in this book have three thoughts, or more. They are not “the” 100 greatest films of all time, because all lists of great movies are a foolish attempt to codify works which must stand alone. But it’s fair to say:

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If you want to make a tour of the landmarks of the first century of cinema, start here.

I began writing these essays at a time when new Hollywood product seemed at a low ebb (it has ebbed lower) and many younger filmgoers seemed to have little sense of the cinema's past. Every spring since 1968 I have attended the Conference on World Affairs at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and conducted a week-long exploration of one film. We sit in the dark and use stop-action to creep through a film, sometimes at a shot-by-shot pace. At first we used 16mm; then laserdiscs and DVD made it easier. Everybody engages in the discussion. It is democracy in the dark, with an image frozen on the screen. In earlier years I did mostly classics (*Citizen Kane*, *The Third Man*, *La Dolce Vita*, *The General*, *Notorious*, *Persona*, *Ikiru*, *Taxi Driver*). In recent years, reflecting the death of film societies and the rise of home video, the students were less interested in the past. One year I suggested *Vertigo* and they begged me to do *Fight Club*.

We did both. *Fight Club* was not a film I approved of, although I recognized its skill and knew from countless e-mails how strong an impression it made on its admirers. Seeing it over the course of a week, I admired its skill even more, and its thought even less. It lacks an intelligent drawing-together of its themes, but that is not held against it in a time when audiences are assaulted with sound and motion, when shots get shorter and movies get louder, when special effects replace or upstage theme and performance. The ability of an audience to enter into the narrative arc of a movie is being lost; do today's audiences have the patience to wait for Harry Lime in *The Third Man*?

At Boulder and on other campuses, talking with the students, I found that certain names were no longer recognized. Even students majoring in film had never seen one by Buñuel, Bresson, or Ozu. They'd seen one or two titles by Ford and Wilder, knew a half-dozen Hitchcock classics, genuflected at *Citizen Kane*, knew the *Star Wars* pictures by heart, and sometimes uttered those words which marked them as irredeemably philistine: "I don't like black and white." Sixty of these films are in black and white, and three use b&w and color; you cannot know the history of the movies, or love them, unless you understand why b&w can give more, not less, than color.

I came to believe that the classics of earlier years were an unexplored country for many filmgoers, even the best ones. As a film critic for a daily newspaper, I didn't want to spend my life locked in the present. In 1997 I went to Nigel Wade, then the editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and proposed a biweekly series of longer articles revisiting the great movies of the past. He gave his blessing. Not many editors would have; the emphasis in American film journalism is on "celebrity news," box office results, and other forms of bottom-feeding. Every other week since then, I have revisited a great movie, and the response has been encouraging. I received letters and e-mails from movie lovers; got into debates with other critics; heard from a university trustee and a teenager in Madison who both vowed to watch every movie on the list. The Library Media Project made discounted DVDs of the movies available to public libraries.

The relative invisibility of classic movies is directly related to the death of film societies. Until the rise of home video, every campus and many public libraries and community centers had film societies which held cheap and well-programmed 16mm screenings. My early film initiation took place at two such clubs at the University of Illinois, which also inspired me to see first-run films I might otherwise have avoided. I saw *Ikiru*, *The 400 Blows*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Swing Time* for the first time in those campus rooms—knowing little or nothing about them except that they cost only twenty-five cents, and that afterward people got together in the student union and drank coffee and talked about them.

In theory home video should be a godsend for lovers of great films, and indeed most of these titles are available on video in one form or another, and that is how most people will have to see them. But when you enter the neighborhood video chain store, display boxes near the door push the latest "new on video" Hollywood blockbusters, and you have to prowl in the shadows to find "foreign films" and "classics"—often a pitiful selection. Independent local video stores and Web-based operations like netflix.com and facets.org give access to a much larger range of films, but does the average moviegoer ever find them? In the 1960s Stanley Kauffmann coined the term "the film generation" to describe the phenomenon of younger filmgoers who were film-obsessed. I was a member of that generation, and can personally testify that I waited in line at ordinary theaters to get into sold-

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out performances of Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* and Godard's *Week-end*. Today even the most popular subtitled films are ignored by the national distribution oligarchy, mainstream movies are pitched at the teenage male demographic group, and the lines outside theaters are for Hollywood's new specialty, B movies with A budgets.

I've seen some of the movies in this book dozens of times, and have been through forty-seven of them a shot at a time. But I made a fresh viewing before writing each essay; that was the whole idea. I was reminded of a similar selection by the British critic Derek Malcolm, who said his list simply reflected films he could not bear the thought of never seeing again. I have revised and lengthened these pieces for book publication, and made adjustments where necessary—for example, discussing the new longer version of *Apocalypse Now*. The 100 titles were selected from about 150 I had written up to publication date, and the biweekly series continues.

Revising the essays, I realized what a wonderful task I'd set myself, because I remembered the circumstances under which I'd seen the films. There was a cold London night in January when I took the tube to Hampstead and saw *Written on the Wind* at the Everyman. I joined Donald Richie, the great expert on Japanese film, as we went through Ozu's *Floating Weeds* a shot at a time at the Hawaii Film Festival. At the Virginia Festival of American Film, I did *Raging Bull* with its editor, Thelma Schoonmaker (nobody knows a film quite as well as its editor). The cinematographer Haskell Wexler joined me for *Casablanca* on the Floating Film Festival. Peter Bogdanovich and I went through *Citizen Kane* together on the Telluride Film Festival's anniversary cruise on the *QE2*. I was at the world premiere of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and saw it again in 70mm on a giant screen at my own Overlooked Film Festival at the University of Illinois. *Apocalypse Now Redux* was screened at Cannes 2001, in the best movie theater in the world. *Battleship Potemkin* I saw projected on a screen on the outside wall of the Vickers Theater in Three Oaks, Michigan, while the audience sat on folding chairs and Concrete, a group from Benton Harbor, played a score it had composed. At the Overlooked again, I saw *Nosferatu* with music by the Alloy Orchestra of Cambridge, Mass. I remembered seeing the original version of *The Big Sleep* on 16mm in the Los Angeles living room of the late David Bradley, a curmudgeonly and beloved film collector. The best time I

saw *City Lights* was outdoors in Piazza San Marco in Venice, and after it was over Chaplin came out on a balcony and waved. The first time I saw *Gates of Heaven*, Milos Stehlik of Facets Multimedia in Chicago called me up and said he had a film I had to see and he would not tell me what it was about. That mysterious masterpiece has suffered all its life because people *think* they don't want to see a documentary about a pet cemetery.

What happens when you see a lot of good movies is that directorial voices and styles begin to emerge. You see that some movies are made by individuals, and others by committees. Some movies are simply about the personalities they capture (the Marx Brothers and Astaire and Rogers). Others are about the mastery of genre, from *Star Wars*, which attempts to transcend swashbuckling, to *Detour*, which attempts to hide in the shadows of noir. Most good movies are about the style, tone, and vision of their makers. A director will strike a chord in your imagination, and you will be compelled to seek out the other works. Directors become like friends. Buñuel is delighted by the shamelessness of human nature. Scorsese is charged by the lurid possibilities of Catholic guilt. Kurosawa celebrates individuals in a country that suspects them. Wilder is astonished by the things some people will do to be happy. Keaton is about the struggle of man's spirit against the physical facts of the world. Hitchcock creates images that have the quality of guilty dreams. Sooner or later every lover of the film arrives at Ozu, and understands that the movies are not about moving, but about whether to move.

ROGER EBERT

STILL AND MOVING

I live in the past.

My job, as assistant curator in the Department of Film and Media at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is to operate the Film Stills Archive, one of the largest collections of film stills in the world. Scholars and journalists request photographs from important movies, or of notable film personalities; and, as I have for the past thirty-four years, I open those venerable filing cabinets in the archive and find a century's worth of art and folly, commerce and kitsch, invaluable documentation and, most of all, indelible memories.

Researching these stills for Roger Ebert's *The Great Movies* has given me a refreshed look at movie history—a century of cinematic miracles in a hundred photographs. Similarly, when I rummage through bulging “personality files” of movie-star stills, I can see a compressed life story: the freshness and gawky promise of a young actor; the radiant maturity as the star's appeal is complemented by the filmmakers' artistry; then, as age writes its cruel lines on a face, the poignant battle against decay, waged with heavy makeup and lighting that is ever more carefully soft-focus. Any of these personality files is a flip-book that grants me a God's-eye view into both the intoxicating nature of human beauty and the inevitability of mortality. In a film still, though, an actor can remain forever at the apogee of his appeal.

STILL AND MOVING

Such is the archival and emotional power of film stills, a relic of nineteenth-century technology that holds priceless treasures for the twenty-first. Like the images in a movie theater—which run through a projector and escape to lodge in the viewer’s mind, sometimes forever—film stills document the cinematic event. They are the images of record, representing the movie when they are published in newspapers, books, and magazines. This is how generations of audiences—the readers of all that prose, the gazers at all those photos—were taught to remember movies. Film stills return movies to their basics: a succession of images. They are the equivalent of photos in an old family album, a face or a caress petrified in time. These are the pictures a moviegoer is likely to retain, in the portable museum of his or her own imagination.

As you look through this book, your eye will occasionally be seduced away from Roger’s peerless prose to focus on the image accompanying each essay. Whether or not you are familiar with the films under discussion, you will find that the stills evoke the films’ visual and emotional content. From *Casablanca*: Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman discussing times gone by. From *City Lights*: the sightless Virginia Cherrill offering a flower to the tramp Charles Chaplin, who would in turn offer his undying love to her. From *Psycho*: Anthony Perkins, as the cinema’s most dutiful son, with his hand clasped onto his mouth in horror at the crime his mother has just committed. From *The Seventh Seal*: the Knight (Max von Sydow) in a confessional, whispering his most intimate fears to white-faced Death (Bengt Ekerot). From *Raging Bull*: Robert De Niro standing over a defeated foe, the men’s bodies a Picasso assemblage of welts and bruises.

François Truffaut acknowledged the potency of the still image when he ended his first feature, *The 400 Blows*, with a freeze frame of his young hero. It captured Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) in a moment in time, his future uncertain, his face seemingly asking “Now what?” at the end of the first turbulent chapter of his experiences. That’s what film stills do. They freeze the emotion and excitement of an actor, a scene, a film, an era; they are the pin through the movie butterfly that somehow gives this lovely, ephemeral creature lasting life. Stills distill; stills preserve. Most of the stills in this book are not, exactly, from the films they accompany. That is to say, they are not frame enlargements—blowups of single 35mm frames.

They are usually the work of “unit photographers,” men and women hired by the production company to take pictures on the set while the scenes are being shot. They are designed to sell the product: to whet the prospective ticket buyer’s appetite with publicity photos of the stars and alluring scenes from the film.

But like much commercial art, film stills have their glories, both sentimental and aesthetic. A glance at a still from an old Hollywood film conjures up an era in an instant. The photo suggests the film’s directorial style; it recalls the lavish, precise design of sets and costumes; it anatomizes the look and attitude of the stars and forgotten players of an age gone by.

The still photograph’s density, its search for the perfect single image, lends it a unique grip on our memories. In the 1930s, plenty of newsreel footage was expended on the Depression’s poor, but the most telling portraits were those taken by photographer Dorothea Lange for the Farm Security Administration. The artful rawness of these pictures—the panhandlers and dirt farmers, the families ravaged by poverty and staring into a bleak future—lodges in the mind like a doctor’s sad diagnosis to an anxious patient. Here is the poetry of deprivation and despair.

Hollywood movies were after a different kind of poetry: inspiring, reassuring. They told fairy tales about gorgeous people chasing their dreams. And they did this by taking pictures of ordinary actors and turning them into icons. The movie still refined this process even further: it isolated the light fantastic. Its mission was to encapsulate, in a single frame, the enthrallment of movies—all the glamour, and much of the art. At its best, the film still captured the heart of a movie, and the essence of star quality.

Not all stars were suited to the still photograph. The more bustling type of performer—James Cagney, Gene Kelly, Jerry Lewis—might be only a blur in the shutter. But the still camera was ideal for celestial bodies like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, whose screen personalities suggested goddesses in watchful repose, aloof and attentive as they waited for their men to make a false move. These actresses had an allure that was literally statuesque; and for this stillness, the still camera was the ideal machine to record it and improve on it. The best actresses recognized this symbiosis and had some of their most productive professional relationships with stills photographers: Garbo with

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