

Introduction

Writing at the end of 1904, the American historian Henry Adams (best remembered today for his posthumously published autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams*) addressed his book *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* to an imaginary niece, beginning his preface thusly:

Some old Elizabethan play or poem contains the lines:—

... *Who reads me, when I am ashes,*

Is my son in wishes...

The relationship, between reader and writer, of son and father, may have existed in Queen Elizabeth's time, but is much too close to be true for ours. The utmost that any writer could hope of his readers now is that they should consent to regard themselves as nephews, and even then he would expect only a more or less civil refusal from most of them. Indeed, if he had reached a certain age, he would have observed that nephews, as a social class, no longer read at all, and that there is only one familiar instance recorded of a nephew who read his uncle. The exception tends rather to support the rule, since it needed a Macaulay to produce, and two volumes to record it. Finally, the metre does not permit it. One may not say: "Who reads me, when I am ashes, is my nephew in wishes."

The same objections do not apply to the word “niece.” The change restores the verse, and, to a very great degree, the fact. Nieces have been known to read in early youth, and in some cases may have read their uncles. The relationship, too, is convenient and easy, capable of being anything or nothing, at the will of either party, like a Mohammedan or Polynesian or American marriage. No valid objection can be offered to this choice in the verse. Niece let it be!



There follow, in my paperback edition (which I purchased in college over forty years ago, began and put aside at some point early on, to judge from the bookmark, but looking over it has moved me to put it on the list for this year) another four hundred pages, suggesting that once Mr. Adams (grandson and great-grandson of two well-remembered presidents) felt that he had a niece real or virtual in his power, he could permit himself to run on a bit. As I contemplate this collection of reviews, which at the outset I anticipated would be more concise descriptions of a considerably less varied catalogue of titles, I feel a modest identification with the great memoirist and vast sympathy for his put-upon imaginary niece. Writing for a different “public” I would likely have brought to bear greater powers of self-discipline, although I fear that these are eroding with age, and might also have been moved to rein in what one exasperated professor back at UC Santa Cruz called my “relentless levity,” but this has become rather by way of a stylistic tic after all these years, and I flatter myself that it’s at least more deftly executed than it lay within my powers to pull off at twenty. Anyway, put on your patient and indulgent niece face as you read this (*if you read this*), and pretend that you’re being, or at least appearing, attentive above and beyond the normal standards of consanguinity as you listen to the old guy ramble on interminably after he’s had a snootful—although in tragic fact he hasn’t had anything stronger than ginger ale throughout the composition. And after all, you can always put it aside without appearing rude.

Back when I was a skinny undergraduate, there was no such thing as “home video” (there was, from 1969 forward, a primitive form of the internet of which I was vaguely aware and in which, it pains me to relate, I took absolutely no interest, but it didn’t have the bandwidth for video streaming). Instead there were repertory cinemas, also known as “art house” theatres, and also on-campus subscription film series, and it was in these venues that I first became acquainted with films as the subject of serious study rather than as vehicles for transient entertainment. This is not to deprecate entertainment *qua* entertainment, but film has so many more possibilities, and these have been abundantly realized over the past century. To put it another way, even though your employer is said to produce a better-than-average product, few would be found—or am I being optimistic here?—who would willingly subsist exclusively on a diet of Smashburgers.

My first immersion in serious cinema took place over the course of two years, and generally in the company of my college sweetheart Veronica as we discovered these treasures together. We attended the same several campus series, and when we took an apartment together downtown, we lived about a five minute stroll from “The Nickelodeon,” an art house that showed three or four films each week. After I moved to Oakland, an establishment in downtown Berkeley called the “UC Theatre” had my custom: they showed a different film every night, and they published their schedule in advance in poster form. In those days, most people in my set had these posters affixed to their refrigerators with magnets (they would cover damn near the entire door), and highlight the films they particularly wanted to see. Hell (if I may be permitted to hammer the “in those days” theme for a moment longer), people would make room in their schedule for these things a month or more beforehand: “No, we can’t go to Mendocino that weekend. *The 400 Blows* is playing on Saturday.” Because, you see, video rental was not an option (and when it gradually became one, it was still a long, long time before the classics became available, and anyway, videotape, and the horrible old televisions of that era), and there was no telling when *The 400 Blows* (or *L’Avventura*, or *Wild Strawberries*, or *Forbidden Games*) would come round again. I sometimes think my cohort was more serious about film back then precisely because of that intermittent availability whereas now, with these treasures as it were strewn at our feet, we have come to take them for granted—or maybe it has more to do with not being twenty-seven anymore.

One issue I see potentially limiting the appeal of art house fare, and of older films generally, to *your* cohort is the very different pace that dominates cinema editing today. To someone raised on this style, many of these cultural artifacts* from half a century ago might seem unbearably pokey. There’s nothing I can think of that will bridge this disconnect, except to aver that there are pleasures to be had here if you are prepared to gear your expectations down to what may sometimes seem the unduly stately rhythms of these movies.

Commenting a few weeks ago on a big-budget release, the most recent installment of a well-known franchise, one critic wrote something to the effect of, “To review [title] is like reviewing a Big Mac, large fries and a milkshake. You already know what to expect. It’s just like the last time, and it’ll be the same next time.” Of course, he then went on to review it—that’s what the magazine was paying him for—and wasn’t too hard on the flick. But I sympathize with his exasperation. Even granting that sophisticated special effects, car chases, explosions, gruesome violence and battles in space can have their gratifications, it has long been a lamentable characteristic of the film industry that it will repeat a formula forev-

*The first college course I attended, in 1970, opened with these words from the professor: “Art is constantly in the process of turning into mere document.” What he meant was that as suburban Americans in the latter third of the twentieth century, we did not, could not, appreciate *Beowulf*, the epic poem we were about to study, on the same terms as its original audience had a thousand years earlier. The same principle applies in the present instance, although obviously the degree of cultural divergence is here by comparison but a hairsbreadth.

er, or at least for as long as people continue lining up for tickets. And while that approach has certainly yielded the studios some handsome profits, and apparently continues to gratify the debauched tastes of the Teeming Millions, it does tend to serve up—how shall I put it?—rather formulaic material. There must be an upper limit to the number of feature films based on comic book characters that can be released in a given calendar year, but I fear we've not yet reached it.

So what I'm interested in, and a realm to which I hope your own consideration may be summoned, are films that engage the emotions at least in part via the mind rather than exclusively through the viscera, and to this end I'm afraid, as you might have gathered from looking over the contents of this package, that I've let my enthusiasm run away with me a bit. Some of the titles—I will indicate these in the dedicated remarks—are decidedly heavy lifting, but I have tried to leaven the consignment with more accessible, yet still intelligent, selections (and even stupid isn't necessarily a dealbreaker if it's stupid with style: see *Gothic* and *Zardoz*). Obviously they are all to my way of thinking worthy of your attention, but there are at least a couple regarding which individuals known to me personally or by reputation whose opinions I respect have vigorously dissented, and in these instances I will register their objections, which might after all have a bearing on your viewing choices.

It goes without saying, I trust, that you need not feel yourself obliged to sit through a single one of these films, but I venture to hope that you and your young man could enjoy watching some of them together, and even discussing them afterward. And of course, I would be delighted to learn of your responses to any among them that might particularly engage you.

The Collection

In arranging this “catalogue” I’ve begun by separating the English- from the foreign-language films. Some people are allergic to subtitles (which can distract from the visual compositions, but as I read pretty quickly, this has never been a problem for me), whereas I generally cannot endure the practice of “dubbing.” In terms of accessibility, though, it has to be acknowledged that a film in one’s native language has a leg up over one that must needs be absorbed through a translation layer. Beyond the language categories I have assigned to each title a subjective and speculative grade of approachability: “Introductory” denotes a film that, while representing an original and/or thought-provoking example of the art, will make no unusual demands in technique, subject material or pacing on the viewer’s attention, although attention will be amply repaid. “Advanced” may require a measure of patience or study owing to a novel or unfamiliar approach, to a leisurely progression of events, or to the absence of one or more expected narrative conventions.* “Cinema 301” is for graduate-level material. The foreign-language stuff all defaults to at least “Advanced.” All of the discs include a paper insert with a précis, but I permit myself the (phantom of) liberty to go on at greater length(!) in some of the narratives that follow.

Films in English (*titles in alphabetical order throughout*):



After Hours (Introductory): “Different rules apply when it gets this late, know what I mean? It’s, like, after hours,” says an affable bartender to our hapless hero Paul Hackett. Poor Paul doesn’t yet know the half of it. This engaging film straddles the boundary between our “Introductory” category and mere popular entertainment.

There’s no need to overthink the story, but, there’s fun to be had if you do. We first meet Paul at his soul-destroying workplace, where he’s a data-entry munchkin in a cubicle farm. That evening, following a chance encounter in a coffee shop, he is lured to the artsy SoHo district, where what promises at first to be a night of blooming romance turns into something...fraught. The screenwriter was twenty-six at the time, and it’s certainly possible to read into the story, as many have, a catalogue of a young man’s sexual insecurities: for example, pretty much every woman he meets either intimidates him or ought to, including a sadomasochistic sculptress, a vengeful waitress, the driver of a Mister Softee truck whose job is *not* boring, and a deranged artist who works in papier-mâché. The late Roger Ebert called the film “the tensest comedy I can remember,” which seems a fair assessment.

*The best-known example of this is probably Antonioni’s visually stunning *L’Avventura* (not included in this consignment), of which it has been said that you could blow up any given frame of the thing and hang it to good effect on your wall. Early in the film, a party of bored rich people take a yacht for a day trip to a tiny, barren volcanic island in the Mediterranean. One of the group, a young woman, disappears. Back on the mainland of Italy, her lover and her best friend embark on a search for the missing woman. Presently they get distracted, and move on to other matters. The disappearance is never resolved. When it was first screened at the Cannes Film Festival in 1960, the audience practically burned down the theatre. Definitely Cinema 301.

My favorite scene is the one in which Griffin Dunne, as Paul, delivers an epic rant about his ordeal to a clearly bored and disappointed gay man who has picked him up with expectations that, it dawns on him, are not to be realized. Incidentally, our hectic half-day in Manhattan six years ago did not, as I recall, include any time in SoHo (for “South of Houston Street”), which was at one time in New York’s history a bustling industrial district before a long period of decline set in—by the 1950s the locals were calling it “Hell’s Hundred Acres.” Beginning in the sixties, artists began to move to the area, attracted by the large loft spaces of vacant and abandoned old buildings, and by the low or even nonexistent rents. There followed what has since become a familiar sequence: the pioneering artists were followed by the hipsters, then by yuppies, by (as rents commenced their climb) richer yuppies and finally by the not-real-people rich. This transition was still in its early stages at the time *After Hours* was made.



Chinatown (Advanced): If, as it has been averred, slavery was this country’s Original Sin (a spirited case can be made as well for the near-extirpation of the continent’s original inhabitants, to be sure), then water rights, and what became called the rape of the Owens Valley (known at one time as “the Switzerland of California”; afterward more nearly the state’s “Sahara Nevada,” heh-heh) was the Original Sin of Los Angeles. The ruthless measures by which the young city secured its water supplies form part of the backdrop rather than the actual subject of Roman Polanski’s 1974 *Chinatown*. A canny critic has pointed out that upon its initial release, *Chinatown*, while universally lauded, was regarded as a pastiche, a remix of the tradition of American detective thrillers, whereas now that it is closer in time to those screen progenitors than it is to the present day, it seems authentically one of them, perhaps the best of them. Jack Nicholson, then in his prime, stars as wisecracking private eye Jake Gittes, and he is onscreen for every . . . single . . . scene. You want more of him. Faye Dunaway plays the troubled wife of the city’s chief engineer, and legendary director John Huston inhabits the role of Noah Cross, the reekingly villainous tycoon whose daughter Dunaway’s character is (it’s what you call a . . . dysfunctional family).

It’s odd: for many years it has been fashionable even among people my age, who came to adulthood in that era, to disparage the seventies, and it is not to be denied that there is much there to mock. Some unfortunate choices were made in personal grooming, in fashion choices, in automobile design and quality control. Rock music became bloated and overproduced, and then degenerated into disco. People thought that kitchen appliances in puke green and in a kind of dark bilious yellow were a good idea. But for a few years, before the era of formulaic big-budget summer blockbusters secured its stranglehold on the industry, the decade saw a remarkable renaissance in American filmmaking. *Chinatown* is one of the greatest achievements of that period.



Dr. Strangelove (Advanced): When I wrote up *Melancholia* (see below), it set me to thinking about end-of-the-world themes. Von Trier wrings poetry from the topic; half a century earlier, expatriate American director Stanley Kubrick played a marginally less cosmic catastrophe gloriously for laughs in *Dr. Strangelove*. In this macabre tale a general of the U.S. Air Force's "Strategic Air Command," the outfit

that used to fly manned nuclear-armed bombers round the clock for the purpose of blasting the Soviet Union to radioactive slag should that become necessary, gets tired of waiting for World War III and decides that he will start it himself, and to this end he dispatches the thirty some-odd SAC B-52s under his command to targets deep within the Soviet Union, and takes measures to prevent civilian authority from recalling them. Fanciful as the idea may seem, it was not so far removed from the realities of the time as one might imagine today. Since its inception as a separate uniformed service in 1947, and continuing to the present day, the Air Force has attracted ten times the number of homicidal lunatics to its upper ranks than any of the other military branches, including the Marines. In the 1950s and 1960s the commanders of the SAC even attempted, on their own initiatives, to provoke the USSR into armed conflict in the belief that nuclear war with that country was inevitable, and that it was best to get it over with before the Soviets became any stronger. An early exponent of this view was USAF General Curtis LeMay—your cousin Mark used to mow his lawn—and another was Tom Power, who came *this* close to triggering a nuclear exchange during the Cuban missile crisis, and whom even LeMay regarded as batshit crazy. Peter Sellers plays three roles, including US President Merkin (look it up) Muffley and unreconstructed Nazi advisor Strangelove. Sterling Hayden channels the Air Force's institutional insanity as he portrays the flamboyantly mad General Jack D. Ripper, George C. Scott plays General Buck Turgidson, who has the thankless task of explaining how the Air Force could start a world war without permission ("Well, I, uh, don't think it's quite fair to condemn a whole program because of a single slip-up, sir"), cowboy movie stalwart Slim Pickens plays B-52 pilot Major T.J. "King" Kong, and James Earl Jones, later to win fame as the voice of Darth Vader, has a small role as a bomber crewman. Funny as the picture is, it falls short of the high comedy essayed by terminally stodgy New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther (was ever a stuffed shirt more aptly named?) when he reviewed *Strangelove* in 1964:

I am troubled by the feeling, which runs all through the film, of discredit and even contempt for our whole defense establishment, up to and even including the hypothetical Commander in Chief. . . . when virtually everybody turns up stupid or insane—or, what is worse, psychopathic—I want to know what this picture proves. The President, played by Peter Sellers with a shiny bald head, is a dolt, whining and unavailing with the nation in a life-or-death spot. But worse yet, his technical expert, Dr. Strangelove, whom Mr. Sellers also plays, is a devious and noxious ex-German whose mechanical arm insists on making the Nazi salute.

Well, Crowther lived barely long enough to see doltish Ronald Reagan elected president, but at least the Gipper had a nice head of (dyed) hair, so I suppose that made it all right. And this government put “devious and noxious ex-Germans” on the payroll by the boatload after World War II, an inconvenient truth of which Crowther could not have been unaware. What a tool.

Anyway, a savagely hilarious look at the murderous imbecility of military-industrial-bureaucratic power. I assigned it an “Advanced” tag because, well, Kubrick, but it’s as approachable, and as funny, as *After Hours*.



Dead Again (Introductory): At one time actor/director Kenneth Branagh (he fills both roles in *Dead Again*) was thought to be the second coming of Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles (see *The Third Man*), an impression he appears to have found agreeable. The comparison to Welles, in particular, arose from his accomplishments on stage and in film at a fairly early age. He was nominated for the

Academy Award as both actor and director for his justly well-regarded *Henry V* before he was thirty. He and then-wife Emma Thompson played opposite one another in so many plays, films and television productions that it give rise to a joke in performing circles (**Thompson:** “Kenneth, I’m home! Where are you?” **Branagh:** “I’m in the kitchen.” **Thompson:** “Ooh! can I be in it too?”). They appear together in *Dead Again* as well, each of them in two roles as the movie switches back and forth between late 1940s and late 1980s Los Angeles. Rather like Welles, Branagh has not entirely lived up to his early promise, although he’s yet to reach the point where he’s pitching low-end wines on television, and while *Dead Again* (like *After Hours*, pretty user-friendly stuff) is clever and competently directed, no one has ever mistaken it for *Citizen Kane*.

ex MACHINA

Ex Machina (Introductory): “Creating something smarter than you is a basic Darwinian error, like sparrows in a nest deciding to adopt a baby owl so it’ll help them and protect them once it grows up.”—some git on a discussion board.

Ex Machina (original title: *My Dinner with Android*) was released less than a year ago as I write this, making it by far the most recent title of this compilation, and was critically well-received. I was impressed as well. I’m pretty certain it’s the only flick in the package that includes any CGI. Yeah, *The Lathe of Heaven* technically sports some “special effects,” but that production’s budget was so miniscule that these were paid for by the expedient of turning out the sofa cushions for change. The setup of *Ex Machina* is fairly simple: eccentric billionaire/computer genius, played as the love child of Larry Ellison and Steve Jobs, only without either man’s empathy, human warmth or diffident humility, invites an employee (the mogul owns “Blue Book,” a kind of uber-Google that has replaced its inferior search engine

predecessors—hold that thought!) to spend a week at Xanadu to evaluate the performance of humanoid fembot AI “Ava,” nicely portrayed by a Swedish ex-ballerina with a healthy dollop of CGI. Intelligently scripted, and works in a lot of conversations on the nature of intelligence and of consciousness; of authenticity versus simulation and/or deception; appearance, reality, and their overlaps. What would it mean for human beings to devise true machine sentience? On what basis would relations between the two kinds of consciousness be conducted? In less competent hands the script could have turned out sounding like a particularly cringeworthy undergraduate bull session, but the writer/director has the chops to pull it off. Speaking of love children, this is a movie that might have resulted had *Blade Runner* ever done a one-night stand with *My Fair Lady*, with Dr. Frankenstein subsequently appointed OB/GYN. Watch for the dance sequence that one reviewer has described as “exhilaratingly stupid.”



The Game (Introductory): There's an advertising slogan that dates back to before my birth: “What do you get the man who has everything?” It's a conundrum: if he wanted it *that* badly, a rich guy has probably thought of it, and bought of it, already. So if the rich guy is arrogant, disagreeable banker Nicholas Van Orton, played by Michael Douglas with a stick up his ass, and if you're Nick's flaky kid sibling

Conrad, played by Sean Penn, why you spring for a sticectomy for Big Nick! Specifically, you enroll him in a pricey, life-changing “experiential Book-of-the-Month Club,” as another character explains it to Nicholas.

Pure fun, even if control freak Van Orton finds the humor of the situation eluding him at points (“I'm being toyed with by a bunch of depraved children!”). It's not a film that takes any benefit from a rigorous examination of the plot points afterward, and after all, the authorities would shut down that magic show in a heartbeat if the headliner started really sawing his pretty assistants in half (the temp agencies would probably also have some issues), so don't overthink this one. What I particularly liked about it was that the filmmakers, those depraved children, were toying with the audience as well: every time I started to think that *The Game* was going to turn into another conventional, i.e., stupid thriller, they deftly pulled that assumption right out from under me. Lots of wonderful little touches: watch for the t-shirt near the end. It's also worth mentioning that San Francisco hasn't looked this mysterious on film since Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo*.

Ken Russell's

GOTHIC

In Switzerland, no one can hear you...ah, fuck it.

Gothic (Introductory): This one almost didn't make the cut, because it's just too, too silly. On certain levels it's undeniably a bad movie, but from a director who could bring a kind of glory all his own to bad moviemaking. Also, when your Uncle Greg and I first watched it together one afternoon in 1987 or 1988, I well

remember gasping "This is the greatest goddamn motion picture ever made!" I was on a big thumping dose of Ecstasy, my first, at the time, so YMMV. Certainly it's far from being a vital element in the curriculum, and you could omit this from your cinematic education with an easy conscience, but it's loopy fun in its own way, and if you've got a reliable supplier of quality X...but if course, I mustn't go there. See also *Women in Love*, for Ken Russell, and *Zardoz*, for too stupid to live.

KOYAANISQATSI

Life Out of Balance

***Koyaanisqatsi* (Introductory):** You will look in vain, as you watch *Koyaanisqatsi*, for many of the elements you are entitled to expect in a moving picture: characters, dialogue, plot or even screenplay. But you do get spectacle, for both the eyes and the ears, and the rudiments of a storyline, or at least of a sort of worldview, that boils down to something like, pastoral living in harmony with Mother Earth = good; resource extraction-intensive industrial/technological/urban earth-raping society = bad. This stance is conveyed in music and imagery so hypnotic and so beautiful (beauty, indeed, even in scenes of some of the direst disruptions of nature) that it seems churlish to observe that a resource extraction-intensive industrial/technological/urban civilization was a necessary precondition for the production of a cultural artifact like *Koyaanisqatsi*. And this might be just me, but I don't think the three Hopi "prophecies" cited at the end of the movie pass the smell test for authenticity, and I've been unable after an hour or two of sifting online sources to find any persuasive provenance for them. But these are mere cavils viewed against the feast that director Godfrey Reggio and composer Philip Glass have laid out for us: to find and convey poetry in the violent destruction of three thousand blighted, abandoned units of low-income housing requires artistic gifts of a high order. See also, for informational purposes only, my note on *Gothic* as to the possible advisability of arranging one's consciousness into a receptive configuration, possibly by means of a soon-to-be-legalized neurotransmitter release inhibitor, before viewing.



***The Lathe of Heaven* (Introductory):** "We are about to embark upon a magnificent collaboration. Using your gift, I'm going to do what no politician, no philosopher, no scientist has ever done. I'm going to make the world **right**."

I include *The Lathe of Heaven*, produced for television in 1979 for about as much money as a family of four might spend on groceries over the course of a couple of months, not because it is a cinematic milestone, and certainly not for visual spectacle, but because it's an intelligent meditation on serious themes. Did I say "intelligent?" I recently sat through one of last year's bloated spectacles costing 600 times more than *Lathe*, that featured approximately one six-hundredth of the smarts to be had in this modest piece. As rendered here, Ursula LeGuin's novel is a piece for three voices: a psychiatrist, his patient, and the patient's lawyer, and is almost musical in its

construction (there are two minor speaking roles—the psychiatrist’s receptionist, the patient’s casual friend at his seedy boarding house—and a couple of one-offs, but the three principals are where the action is). The story: the patient, George Orr, is remanded to the care of the psychiatrist to treat him for drug abuse. The psychiatrist, having discovered that Orr can literally make the world over while he sleeps, decides to guide the process so that a better world results. One of the first improvements in the modified world is that Dr. Haber goes from being a county employee in a cramped office to the head of his own massive and prestigious research establishment (“The William P. Haber Institute of Oneirology”)—funny how that works. Orr becomes concerned about the wisdom of this therapeutic approach, and seeks legal help. As the doctor continues to use George’s dreams to tinker with reality, the law of unintended consequences kicks in early on: he doesn’t really think through his approach to overpopulation, and “peace on earth” arrives in a form he hadn’t counted on. You want “special effects?” A film with the money to spend—let’s say *World War Z*, a stinker—would convey a lethal global pandemic by dropping a couple of million dollars on set design and CGI. The producers of *Lathe* pull it off very well with a dozen extras, a couple of yards of cheesecloth, and a dining room set the size of the one at Amaya Drive. Also worthy of note is Michael Small’s soundtrack, by turns spooky and jaunty.

This one comes with my highest recommendation. Paired with that recommendation, I am obliged to warn you off the execrable 2002 remake, which cost much more than the original while retaining little of its sense or its integrity. How to put it in terms that might personally resonate with you? Imagine that someone decided to remake, say, *Inception*, only instead of industrial espionage, it’ll be all about a group of seniors at a prep school who plot to steal the answers to the final exam in English class! Oh, yeah, and we’ll leave out all that stuff about the dreams. The 2002 *Lathe of Heaven* is that bad, and if I were Dr. Haber I’d hypnotize my patient to conjure up a world in which it didn’t exist.



Max (Introductory): *“I’ve seen the future. Believe me, it came straight at us. There’s no future in the future.”*

In the early stages of this project, before it ran away with me to the point where I’m going to have to charter a goddamn shipping container to transport these platters to Folsom, I had not planned to include *Max* among the titles, although it’s a worthwhile undertaking honorable in its intentions even if imperfect in the execution. Once I selected *Downfall* as one of the German-language flicks, however, *Max* seemed as though it would serve as an appropriate bookend, showing its subject at the beginning rather than at the end of his career in public life. Many others had already pondered the counterfactual: altering the narrative of the young Adolf Hitler, who prior to World War I had been an aspiring painter, first in Vienna and later in Munich. The surviving samples of his work display competent draughtsmanship but a rather conventional eye, and compared particularly with some of the exciting

work being done during this period by the so-called “Vienna Secession,” with which Gustav Klimt was associated for a time, the paintings are unremarkable: certainly they didn’t have gallery owners beating a path to his door. Suppose that after his wartime experiences the thirty year-old Hitler had taken up art again rather than turning his energies to rabble-rousing? Suppose someone had taken an interest? *Max* imagines just such an individual in its protagonist Max Rothman, a prosperous Jewish art dealer in postwar Munich, a former painter who lost his arm in the conflict. A chance meeting with the embittered ex-corporal Hitler—many Germans didn’t understand how the nation had lost the war when at its end its soldiers were still everywhere fighting on foreign soil, and the notion took hold in certain quarters that the country’s fighting men had been “stabbed in the back” (*Dolchstoßlegende*) and robbed of the victory they had earned*—rouses Rothman’s sympathy, and although he finds Hitler (played with a kind of clammy brilliance by actor Noah Taylor) personally unsympathetic, he attempts to channel his fellow veteran’s energies back into art. Meanwhile, a German army intelligence officer sees gifts of another kind in Hitler, and encourages him to pursue politics, with consequences the world well remembers. The two contenders for Hitler’s “soul” never encounter one another onscreen, and of course we already know which side won *that* struggle. Max’s story ends badly; so too, oddly enough, did that of the real-life intelligence officer, who ultimately turned against der Führer and left the country, was arrested by the Gestapo after the Germans invaded France, and died in a concentration camp in 1945, a rather vivid instance of what-goes-around-comes-around.

The critical consensus was that *Max* was an “honorable failure,” a judgment I can understand without entirely endorsing (the “failure” part, I mean). The film’s detractors have mercilessly derided it for one unfortunate line (“Hitler, come on. I’ll buy you a glass of lemonade”), but the screenplay is actually quite good. John Cusak as the title character engages our sympathies (although his “performance art” piece involving a very large meatgrinder is a bit over the top), and Noah Taylor is entirely persuasive as the demagogue-in-embryo. Worth a look.

PERCIVAL DUNWOODY, IDIOT TIME TRAVELER FROM 1909



*You’re going to hear a lot of this from our home-grown fascists when the US finally gets the hell out of Afghanistan and Iraq.



Melancholia (Cinema 301): *Melancholia* should probably come with a warning label. This one isn't just Cinema 301, it's Cinema 301 with a poison oak leaf cluster. I was impressed, obviously, but many others loathed it, and even I have to acknowledge that it can be tricky to enjoy a movie in which likable characters are not exactly thick on the ground (now I think of it, I'm not certain that there *are* any). Of the

English-language flicks under consideration here, this one most resembles in atmosphere the European art films of half a century ago (see *Last Year at Marienbad*), only with considerably better effects. It will scarcely constitute a "spoiler" to tell you in advance that the major plot element involves the end of the world as a consequence of its smacking into a considerably larger planet, a development that ruins everyone's day, and makes several of the characters a bit glum in advance of the fact. I say it's not a spoiler because the film begins with a wordless, surreal, quite beautiful prologue, with some quite extraordinary imagery, that previews from space the cosmic collision we see again from the ground at story's end.

But in the face of the extinction of the earth and all who sail in her, life goes on until it doesn't, and our cast of handsome, privileged people pass their days celebrating, quarreling, making love, being beastly to one another and being kind, facing the end and denying it—in other words, business as presumably usual in those tax brackets. Against this backdrop our protagonist Justine, whose ill-fated(!) wedding takes up the first half of the film, is in the grip of severe depression, apparently unconnected with the impending apocalypse and persuasively portrayed by Kirsten Dunst's performance. As the "gravity" of the unfortunate planetary alignment becomes more starkly apparent in the second half, Justine waxes progressively perkier while her sister Claire, hitherto the sane one, finds it correspondingly difficult to cope.

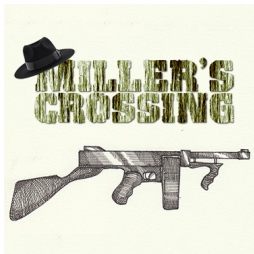
The end of the world! Let no one accuse writer-director Lars von Trier of thinking small. It's a big theme, and the film industry has visited it before (*When Worlds Collide*, a big-budget production for its time, was released the year before I was born, although that plot element is the *only* thing the two movies have in common), but never, that I'm aware of, with such resonance. When we watch the sisters, with Claire's young son, at the end, they stand in for all of us as the embodiments of individual lives in the face of universal (in the parochial sense of that infinitesimal corner of it that is all that any human has ever tasted, smelled, touched) destruction. And when you think of it as I believe von Trier intends us to, the totality of that negation, with everything gone, everything the sisters may have cherished, everyone they loved, everyone who might ever remember them... this depicts as occurring collectively and in an instant the fate that awaits us all separately and incrementally. The implications are depressing as hell (*Melancholia* didn't make the list of Academy nominees in the category "Best Feel-Good Motion Picture of the Year"), and it's got to be one of the lousiest date movies ever, but the execution commands our awe.



Metropolitan

Metropolitan (Introductory/Advanced): I haven't tried this one out yet on your Uncle Greg, but based on the reasons he has given for disliking *Brideshead Revisited* and refusing to read the novels of Jane Austen, to say nothing of his loathing for *My Dinner with Andre* (see below)—that he has no interest in reading about or watching depic-

tions of the lives of the privileged—I fear he might be unreceptive, which is a shame, because preppy director Whit Stillman's first film (he's directed only a few more since this one in 1990) is a minor masterpiece. A cast of unknowns, most of whom have remained unknown, portray young members of Manhattan's "urban haute bourgeoisie," upper-class college students on winter break who party, flirt and talk—wittily, incessantly. Stillman's screenplay is splendidly, unapologetically, literate and clever. We see these scions of wealth and privilege through the eyes of a semi-outsider, who is from a slightly lower stratum of the same class background. One curious thing about *Metropolitan* is how unmoored it seems from a particular era: when I saw it for the first time, I had a vague notion that the story was intended to take place in the early seventies. When I sat through it again in the company of a friend of ours who was born in 1943, she thought that it was set in the early sixties, and when I lent the disc to another friend, ten years younger than I, *she* was certain that the film portrayed the early years of the Reagan administration: in other words, all of us identified the setting with the era in which *we* were the characters' age. I don't know how much of this was intentional on the director's part, but it's an interesting trick to have pulled off, deliberately or no. I'll single this one out for especial commendation to your attention: it's one of my very favorites. I give it an intermediate rating between Introductory and Advanced because it might be a little talky for a young audience today. On the other hand, it will be good training for *My Dinner with Andre*.



Miller's Crossing (Introductory): A few months back, as we knocked back a carafe of wine in San Francisco's North Beach district (distantly akin to Boston's Little Italy) a friend of mine asked me to name my favorite gangster flick, and at first all I could think of was *The Godfather*, which was recognized with little dissent as a classic upon its initial release, and has enjoyed that status these forty ears past.

Indeed, had I been called upon to name the greatest film in this genre, I'd likely have named Coppola's masterpiece, but for my *favorite* I offered, after a moment's thought, the Coen Brothers' *Miller's Crossing*, which is a worthy representative of its category for this kitchen-sink consignment.

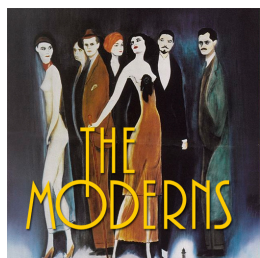
The Coens, Joel and Ethan, have shared directing and screenwriting credits since their first feature, *Blood Simple*, back in 1984. You may have seen their more famous films: *Fargo*, *True Grit*, *The Big Lebowski* (I feel certain you'll have seen the latter, else I would surely have thrown it in). *Miller's Crossing*, their third feature, deserves to be better known. It's set during the 1920s in an unnamed city that I always assumed was intended to suggest Boston, although principal filming was done in New Or-

leans, and tells the story of rival gangs contending for control of the municipality's various criminal enterprises, particularly the sale and distribution of contraband alcohol. Our protagonist, the moody Gabriel Byrne (in a performance considerably dialed down, I am gratified to report, from his antics in *Gothic*), is cast as Tom Reagan, the senior enforcer for the boss of the Irish mob. Leo, the said boss, is played by the great Albert Finney, of whose character an associate says admiringly, "The old man's still an artist with a Thompson [submachine gun]." The kingpin's love interest, shared unbeknownst to Leo by his henchman Tom, is Verna, portrayed by Marcia Gay Harden (don't. Just...don't), whose worthless shmuck of a brother is destined to take a memorable walk in the woods with Tom...

Taut story, well-acted, some great set pieces (the walk in the woods; Leo demonstrating his artistry), and, beginning with the very first scene, beautifully, beautifully photographed. I'll close with a dissent from the late critic Roger Ebert:

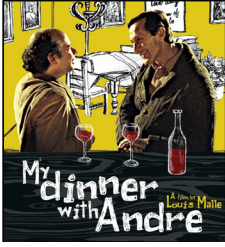
This doesn't look like a gangster movie, it looks like a commercial intended to look like a gangster movie. Everything is too designed. That goes for the plot and the dialogue, too. The dialogue is well-written, but it is indeed written. We admire the prose rather than the message. People make threats, and we think about how elegantly the threats are worded.

Sheesh. He says that last like it's a *bad* thing.



The Moderns (Introductory): Your late Grandfather Careaga is now permanently in residence at the San Francisco Presidio cemetery, which surely counts as one of the lovelier specimens of that melancholy class of real estate, but I suspect that he'd have been well-content to be laid to rest in Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, because he dearly loved Paris for decades before he finally visited it. He often spoke of how

he wished he'd been a young man there in the nineteen-twenties, when it was a magnet for a generation of disillusioned young Americans: writers, artists, musicians and assorted hangers-on. That Paris is the setting for Alan Rudolph's *The Moderns*, about American painter Nick Hart (Keith Carradine) whose own works are not in particular demand, but who parlays his technical skills into a potentially lucrative commission as an art forger. Linda Fiorentino, she of the bagel paperweights in *After Hours*, is Hart's ex-girlfriend Rachel, Rudolph regular Geneviève Bujold plays an art dealer, Wallace Shawn (*My Dinner with Andre*, *The Princess Bride*) is expat journalist "L'Oiseau" ("If it weren't for me, these people would think surreal was a *breakfast food!*"). We also glimpse such expatriate luminaries as Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Some of the cultural references will likely elude you at this point in your development, as they would have at the corresponding point in mine, but even these may form the likely seed crystals of context for when you do encounter related allusions later on.



My Dinner with Andre (Advanced): Like *Melancholia*, *My Dinner with Andre*, in other respects a far less challenging picture, seems to resist the middle ground in the reactions it has elicited since its release. I count myself among its champions, who are apt to be fervent in their approbation; Uncle Greg and Aunt Lina will each be found in that camp distressingly prone to toss around terms like “pretentious” and “annoying” when the film comes up in conversation. The premise is both simple and unlikely: two old friends who have not seen one another for several years meet at a restaurant and, over dinner, catch up on one another's lives. Actually, one of them (Wallace Shawn, playing Wallace Shawn) does the catching for most of the movie while his companion Andre Gregory, as himself, recounts a series of, ah, unusual experiences he has had among theatre folk around the world. That's all: pretty much nothing but talk, talk, talk. First time I saw it, ten minutes in, I was thinking—by jove, I was thinking “pretentious and annoying!” But I continued watching, and after not too much longer I was drawn in, and fascinated. Because some people will need to overcome their initial resistance to a film in which almost the entire drama is conveyed, so to say, at second hand, I've placed this on in the “Advanced” category, but if you take it on faith—and how could you not, knowing that it arrives bearing the imprimatur of a cultivated old gentleman whose taste in these matters has been called “impeccable” by some? (his tastes have been called other things by other people, but these bitter individuals almost certainly do not have rich interior lives)—I'm confident that it will win you over.

I've often thought it a pity, incidentally, that no one else has ever picked up on the film's “gimmick”: I'm thinking Steven Spielberg directing Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones going out for an evening meal with, say, Paul Giamatti, and for two hours he just describes a series of fabulous adventures and hairsbreadth escapes from Nazis and Communists and terrorists all over the world. No need for location shooting, or stuntmen, or extras, or special effects! We could call it *My Dinner with Indy*. Alternatively, we bring back the principals from *My Dinner*, only this time instead of a fashionable Manhattan restaurant, they swap anecdotes in a swampy, dank cave full of scorpions and spiders and dagger-wielding death cultists: *Wally and Andy in the Temple of Doom*. Sheesh. I gotta start drinking again.



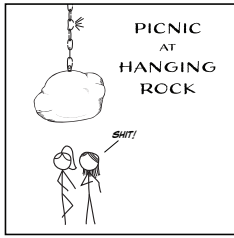
North by Northwest (Introductory): Sure, and what kind of uncle would I be were I to omit an Alfred Hitchcock title from a compilation like this? Well, my poppet, I'd lose my avuncular credential the next time I came before the licensing board for review: I'd be demoted to second cousin, I would. Of the four masterpieces he made in the fifties, *Vertigo* is probably the greatest (the other two contenders are

Rear Window and *Psycho*), but *North by Northwest* is way more fun. If you've never seen it before, you're in for a treat. If you *have* seen it before, you should break out the popcorn and sit down to it again. Cary

Grant plays New York advertising executive Roger O. Thornhill, who takes a phone call at the wrong moment and thereby becomes the target of an international spy ring whose leader and minions believe him to be counterespionage operative George Kaplan. Thornhill is kidnaped by the minions and taken to the suave Phillip Vandamm for interrogation. Vandamm is played by James Mason in the kind of part Hollywood tended to assign him in those years (as he later observed, “*Lolita* was my breakthrough role. Before that, the studios used to cast me as the sinister foreigner. After *Lolita*, I was the sinister foreigner who molested children”). The outcome of the interview being, from the bad guys’ standpoint, unsatisfactory, Thornhill is persuaded to drink to excess—he is given the choice between alcohol poisoning and lead poisoning—so that his death may appear to the authorities as a simple case of DUI. He survives this dastardly scheme, which is fortunate because otherwise we’d be way short of the running time for a feature film, and thereafter plunges into a series of increasingly outlandish adventures in unusual locales, including the United Nations headquarters (where he is framed for murder), a moving train, a lonely stretch of road in an agricultural district and, famously, the top of Mt. Rushmore. Everything about the film is appealing, starting with the title sequence by über-graphics god Saul Bass, the music by über-soundtrack god Bernard Herrmann, the over-the-top cropduster sequence... I could go on, but if this is your first time at the rodeo, I wouldn’t want to spoil the fun.

Amusing non-factoid: until fairly recently there was much snickering about the fact that actress Jessie Royce Landis, who plays Cary Grant’s mother, was actually slightly younger than her on-screen “son.” Indeed, I was on the point of passing on this fable before thinking to undertake a bit of due diligence (I owe a cherished niecelet nothing less) and uncovering the inconvenient truth that Ms. Landis shows up on the 1900 US Census as having been born late in 1896, so she’s accordingly Grant’s (b. 18 January 1904) senior by seven years, which still makes her young for the part. Apparently, and by no means unusually for actresses of her generation, she shaved a few years off her age* when she compiled her résumé. Incidental intelligence: there is a scene in the film where Grant and leading lady Eva Marie Saint, in a private railway “sleeping compartment,” are clearly about to enjoy the carnal knowledge of one another, something rather routinely depicted onscreen in recent decades, but which would have given the censors aneurysms in those distant days, so instead Hitchcock does a jumpcut to the train *going into a freaking tunnel*, which I think we can all agree would have occasioned some amused throat-clearing from Dr. Freud. The tunnel is in Chatsworth, down at the edge of Los Angeles County, and apart from being used in numerous films, is well-known to your mother and her brothers. Hiding in the tunnel while the trains went through was a near-universal teenage rite of passage back there and then.

*A high school chum of mine has subtracted twenty years on her Facebook profile. “How well I remember,” I wrote her after noticing this, “those stimulating conversations you and I used to have late into the night, three years before you were born!”



Picnic at Hanging Rock (Advanced): When it comes to inconclusiveness, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* can't hold a highway flare to *L'Avventura*, but audiences accustomed to receiving narrative resolution for their box office dollars have registered disappointment with this one times past. Me, I think that what *Picnic* lacks in closure it makes up for in atmosphere, and that in spades. The story is not complicated. On

Valentine's Day 1900, a group of Australian schoolgirls from Appleyard College pass a day at Hanging Rock, an ancient geological formation Down Under. There, in bright sunlight, in the middle of what passes in Australia for lush terrain, three of the girls and one of the teachers climb to the upper reaches of Hanging Rock, and do not return. A search is presently organized. More questions are raised than answers provided, and the few answers merely beget additional questions. Appleyard College begins to look as though it might have a "rocky" time of it come the next accreditation cycle. Handsomely photographed, and most reviews properly employed the adjective "haunting" at some point. It's sublimely, subtly spooky. I can't think of another film that achieves its strange emotional tone, a distantly-sensed horror in the face of a blank, indifferent yet somehow living landscape.



The Red Shoes (Advanced): To describe *The Red Shoes* I am going to yield the floor to Anthony Lane, who writes about film for *The New Yorker* (filling thereby the Birkenstocks of the late, great Pauline Kael, who had that beat for many decades):

New York has always been kind to the movie, which, to the dismay of its creators, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, faltered and flopped when it opened on British screens in 1948. Salvation arrived in the form of the Bijou Theatre, at Broadway and Forty-fifth Street, where the film showed for more than two years. Ballet-crazy children—or "half the little girls in America," as Powell put it—were an important sector of that audience, and I trust that some of them, now in their limber seventies, will head downtown to reforge an old acquaintance.

What will they find? A blindingly rich and refulgent print, digitally restored by the Film Foundation and the U.C.L.A. Film and Television Archive. I've seen the same version on DVD, but watching "The Red Shoes," whatever the quality, on the small screen is like drinking champagne, whatever the vintage, through a plastic straw. The movie should fill one's vision no less comprehensively than a sunset, and Powell, like Turner before him—another hearty, romantic Englishman, whose eye gloried unashamedly in a given world—knew that reds, even at their most flaming, are never the whole story of a sunset. Consider Boris Lermontov (the incomparable Anton Walbrook), the impresario of a ballet company, who strolls into breakfast in a full-length gown of verdigris and gold. No Chinese emperor was more resplendently arrayed. As for the cigarette that he holds out,

half smoked, to be taken and deposited by his valet, a whole civilization—urbane, authoritative, preposterous, and doomed—resides in that single gesture.

The film is a legend built on a legend. Lermontov, having acquired a new prima ballerina, Vicky Paige (Moira Shearer), plus a new composer, Craster (Marius Goring), mounts a production of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes," in which a woman is danced to death by her own footwear. We see that work in its entirety, and the abandon with which it is sprung from the prison of the auditorium, into an unfeasible freedom of space, glances back to the opening scenes of Olivier's "Henry V" (1944) and forward to "An American in Paris" (1951). Yet this is not, in the end, a film about ballet; it is a hymn to the risks of investing all that you are, and have, in the fugue and fury of the imaginative act. Look at Vicky as she dances solo, to a crummy gramophone, in a tiny London theatre on a rainy afternoon. She is not yet a star, but Lermontov has come to observe her; we see first his face, watching fiercely, and then hers, staring back—a milk-white death mask, filling the frame, with red and black dashes swooping from the corners of her eyes, and lips gleaming like the poisoned apple in "Snow White." It is the most striking closeup in the history of cinema: not for Powell the yearning of Garbo, or the perplexity that Bergman found in Liv Ullmann, but a sudden, bright ecstasy that verges on the demonic, and more than enough, you might think, to scare those girls of 1948 out of their tutus. "The Red Shoes" is both suitable for children and beyond their ken: it treats art not as sedative or diversionary but as hard and supercharged, quite lethal to the danceless rhythms that most of our lives obey. No wonder Britain, still rationed in color, food, and feeling in the wake of an exhausting war, could not cope with what the movie proposed. Catch it here now, and you will not just be seeing an old film made new; you will have your vision restored.



***Roman Holiday* (Introductory):** You may have noticed a convention in movie title sequences that goes something like this:

[Really Big-Name Star]

(and sometimes)

[Equally or Almost as Big-Name Star]

in

[Movie Title]

with

[Actor Name]

Actor Name]

[Actor Name]

(and sometimes)

[And Another Big-Name Star]

as

[Character Name]

The Hollywood film industry is one of the more rank-conscious fields of human endeavor, and for many, many decades the placement of an actor's name before the film title was a signifier of very high status indeed. Gregory Peck was nominated for an Academy Award in his second film, in 1944, and by his nineteenth, *Roman Holiday*, he was an A-list star routinely granted the coveted top-o'-the-title slot in the credit sequence. Audrey Hepburn, by contrast, was just starting out in 1953—she'd had what amounted to a few walk-on parts before she was cast, largely on the strength of her stage performance as the title character in *Gigi* on Broadway the previous year, as the female lead opposite Peck. Because she was virtually unknown to the moviegoing public, the most she might ordinarily have expected would have been an “and Introducing Audrey Hepburn,” which was the sort of token recognition studios were in the practice of giving first-time actresses whom they hoped might become better-known over time. Peck, however, before the film's release, went to the studio chiefs and said in effect, “Look, you know and I know that Audrey's going to bring home the Best Actress Oscar for this, and the rest of us are going to look like complete clowns if her name isn't above the title.” And so, rare for a fledgling starlet, her name appeared up front. The studio never regretted it.

Some have said that the movie's Princess Anne was the role that the actress was born to play. What they meant was that *Audrey Hepburn* was the role Audrey Hepburn was born to play, and she incontestably did so to perfection, although this also limited from early on the range of roles she'd be offered, and perhaps she never did reach her full potential with so many *gamine* roles stacked up waiting for her to perform them: lazy directors just wanted her to be herself, or at least her image.

This mid-century fairy tale begins, as so many fairy tales will, with a princess: “Princess Anne” is touring the capitals of Europe on behalf of her unnamed country (presumably not the UK, since London is one of the capitals she is depicted visiting in newsreel footage), and her entourage has tightly scheduled every waking hour for her. She's getting bored, tired and cranky. Sure, first-world problems and all that, but after all, being a princess in European royalty has been known, even in living memory, to be a bit of a drag, with the princesses in question being treated variously as trade goods and as brood mares in the service of dynastic succession. It's not all musical numbers and singing animals, let me tell you. Anyway, after she pitches a mild tantrum, Anne's handlers stuff her full of tranquilizers to calm

her down. These appear instead to have the unanticipated effect of parting the princess from a normal person's fear of falling from a great height, and she nimbly escapes from the embassy grounds and onto the streets of Rome (smuggling herself to freedom disguised as a load of soiled laundry inside a delivery van, if I recall aright) before she passes out. If she tried such a stunt today, of course, Audrey/Anne would likely find herself in a Tunisian brothel when she came to, but this is a fairy tale, remember, so instead she doesn't completely lose consciousness until she has first run into stand-up guy Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck), a lazy reporter for an American wire service who, initially unaware of Anne's royal identity, reluctantly takes her to his small apartment, where nothing untoward happens. He draws the line at giving up his narrow bed, and makes the girl sleep on the divan—there are limits to knight-errantry!—but before she revives in the morning he has checked in briefly at work, where he realizes to whom he has extended his hospitality. He rushes back to his flat and moves the sleeping princess onto the bed so that she won't know that she only rated the divan. A favorite scene, early on: Anne, still a bit groggy from the drug, wakes up in Joe's apartment, in Joe's bed and in. . . "Are these your pyjamas?" "Umm-hmmm." A look of panic crosses her features, and her hands dart under the covers. Joe, drily: "Lose something?" Anne (with visible relief): "No." That was pretty racy stuff for 1953. There follows an enchanted interlude of cross-purposes as Joe, his photographer pal Irving, and the princess tool around Rome, visions of Pulitzer prizes dancing in the men's heads, with Irving surreptitiously snapping photographs of the royal, who is innocently unaware that her incognito has been compromised, or that she is being squired around the city by a couple of jackals of the press. Meanwhile, of course, everyone's in a panic back at the embassy, and badass-looking truant officers are flown in from home to track down the country's delinquent princess. Anne has only a few hours out from under her professional responsibilities ("I'm in public relations," she tells Joe at one point), but Joe and Irving help her make the most of them and ultimately cannot bring themselves to betray her trust.

Certain films appear to have been made under a supremely favorable alignment of the stars: there's a reason that *Casablanca* (the cast and crew of which didn't realize they were working for the ages) is beloved today. Carol Reed's *The Third Man* is, albeit on a higher level of artistry, another one that clicks on all cylinders, and I submit that it's tough to conceive how *Roman Holiday* could have been any better than it was. Gregory Peck used to joke that for years it was certain that any role he was considered for had first been offered to Cary Grant. So it was with *Roman Holiday*, and you know what? It wouldn't have worked as well. True, Peck had to stretch a bit to portray his character's raffishness, which Grant could have communicated in his sleep, but by the same token it's hard to imagine Grant matching Peck's bedrock solidity and decency: there would inevitably have been a knowing smirk to spoil the illusion. The producers wanted Elizabeth Taylor to play the princess: I do not think that the film would be remembered today

had they got their way. Fortunately, posterity has been delivered a perfect movie, shot on location(!) in Rome(!), a romantic comedy overlaid with a poignant fable of duty, escape, responsibility, renunciation and decency, in which a princess sacrifices freedom and perhaps love for the obligations laid upon her, conjoined with vast privilege, by rank and birth, and an ambitious reporter foregoes professional success and a nice bundle of cash as chivalry summons him to the better angels of his nature. And to return for a moment to the subject of movie credits, the screenplay was written by one Dalton Trumbo, a gifted victim of the Hollywood “blacklist” whom no one in 1953 would hire because of his supposed communist affiliations. Upon the original release the script was credited to another writer, a common practice at the time, and won an Oscar for best screenplay, which Trumbo of course could not acknowledge or accept. His name was finally restored to the credits in the 1990s, and the Academy at last gave him that Oscar, a gesture he would doubtless have appreciated had he not died almost twenty years earlier.



The Third Man (Advanced): In discussing *Women in Love* (below) I have mentioned that the process of transmuting a novel from the page to the screen unavoidably involves some measure of diminution, often drastic, of the source material. *The Third Man* is one of the rare exceptions to that rule, taking as its point of departure one of novelist Graham Greene’s lesser tales and turning it into one of the supreme

achievements of postwar film noir. A certain amount of credit is due to Greene himself, who wrote the screenplay, but the author has acknowledged that director Carol Reed’s handling of the material (including some creative differences in points of plot development on which Reed prevailed) was decisive. Also, Orson Welles, whose character dominates the picture all out of proportion to his actual screen time, contributed some of his own dialogue, including the memorable, oft-quoted “cuckoo clock” speech.

A little historical background might be in order here: At the beginning of the nineteenth century, “Germany” consisted of, oh, three or four hundred pissant little kingdoms and principalities (I exaggerate for effect here), plus half a dozen bigger ones, the most powerful of which was the Kingdom of Prussia. In the 1870s, Prussia’s gifted and overbearing statesman Otto von Bismarck oversaw the unification of these disparate components into the German Empire, with the Prussian king as emperor (or “Kaiser”) and Bismarck as the Empire’s first Chancellor. Left outside of this amalgamation was German-speaking Austria, which was already the center of its own empire, then known as Austria-Hungary, and which included in its subject territory large swatches of present-day Hungary, Poland, Romania, the former Czechoslovakia and the former Yugoslavia, and little bits of Italy. Fast forward fifty years, and after being on the losing side in World War I, Austria is shorn of its empire, thereby freeing a lot of its former subjects to go back to their former pastimes of burning one another’s homes, violating one another’s womenfolk and cutting one another’s throats, a social dynamic toward which it sometimes seems as though our own unhappy fractious

imperium is latterly tending. Austria, once a big, honking (albeit ramshackle) polyglot multi-ethnic empire, is now reduced to a smallish, mainly German-speaking country (I trust you're taking notes: there'll be a quiz afterward). Fast forward another decade or so, and neighboring Germany, under the dynamic leadership of, by golly, a transplanted Austrian, seems to be going great guns compared to its still-demoralized southern neighbor:

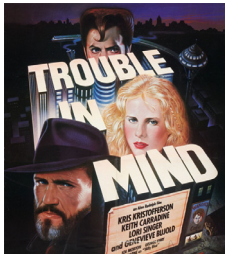
*Springtime for Hitler and Germany,
Deutschland is happy and gay!
We're marching to a faster pace:
Look out, here comes the master race!*

The way the Austrians prefer to remember it, Hitler rolled into Vienna in 1938 and forcibly incorporated it into Germany (or the "German Reich," as they were styling themselves by then) in what became known as the *Anschluss*. To much of the rest of the world, it didn't even meet the "date rape" test, and when the Third Reich went to war with the other major powers of the world the following year, the Austrians were not found wanting by their cousins in martial zeal. Hitler's project ended badly (from the Nazi standpoint) in 1945, and although Austria had its national identity restored, it was subject like its senior partner to occupation by the victorious belligerents, France, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, with each power governing a section of the country. Vienna, the capital, was likewise subdivided, and it is against this backdrop that the story of *The Third Man* is laid. Here endeth the historical digression.

Holly Martins is a writer working the lower end of the literary food chain: he pens cowboy novels of the mass-market paperback variety, and although he appears to have a devoted following among the lower socioeconomic strata, he's not doing so well that he can afford to turn down an invitation to join his old pal Harry Lime, who has set himself up as a successful businessman in occupied Vienna. Precisely what kind of business Lime has been engaged in is not initially made clear, and in any event, the clueless Martins comes to the rather knocked-about city with his head planted securely up his arse, where it remains for much of the movie, and is shocked to discover that Harry has been tragically killed in a traffic accident. Arriving just in time to attend the funeral, Martins attracts the notice of a world-weary British military policeman (a starchy Trevor Howard, who does not trouble to conceal his disdain from the American), who advises him to go home. Instead, the writer undertakes his own investigation into the circumstances of Lime's death, in the course of which he forms an attraction toward his friend's mistress (who regards him with the sort of affection and esteem in which you and I might hold something we were obliged to scrape from the soles of our shoes), and discovers some very uncomfortable truths about the nature of Lime's enterprises. Fun factoid: Penicillin had been produced in limited quantities during the war, and for military use only. It did

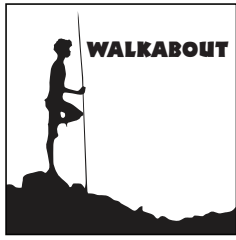
not become available for civilian use in the United States until almost the end of the conflict and was direly needed, and extremely hard to come by, in war-ravaged Central Europe throughout the latter 1940s.

Stylishly photographed (an industry colleague jokingly sent director Reed a spirit level afterward, so that he could set up his cameras straight) and highly atmospheric, and not without its moments of levity, as when the hapless Holly Martins is mistaken for a “serious” novelist and hauled before a literary audience to give a lecture, *The Third Man* is among the greatest English-language films produced since the last world war, and it's a little surprising that it isn't better known. The usual qualifier applies that the pace of editing, although brisk for its time, may be a little downtempo by your cohort's reckoning. Some people have found the movie's once-famous zither music an intolerable annoyance. Final fun factoid: the director's stepdaughter, Tracy Reed, was the only woman in the cast of *Dr. Strangelove* (as General Turgidson's “secretary,” and as “Miss Foreign Affairs” in the Playboy centerfold seen in the B-52 in that film).



***Trouble in Mind* (Introductory):** American director Alan Rudolph (*The Moderns*)

hasn't made a film in almost fifteen years, which is a shame, because he had a real sense of style. I mentioned that at the time of its original release *Chinatown* was viewed as a sort of remix of the old film noir genre. A remix, a riff, is what *Trouble in Mind* is. In “Rain City,” a noble ex-cop is released eight years after being imprisoned for a crime he—well, for a crime he jolly well *did* commit, we are given to understand in broad outline, but whoever he committed it upon, it is further intimated, had it coming. Anyway, John Hawkes, “Hawk” to his associates (Kris Kristofferson, looking rugged), returns to his former hangout, Wanda's Cafe, whose proprietress used to be his main squeeze. Wanda (Genevieve Bujold) provides him with a room above the restaurant on the condition, established after a preliminary misunderstanding, that the arrangement is not to be construed as tenancy-with-benefits. Into this mix come Coop and Georgia and their infant, who, having wearied of rural poverty, come to Rain City to seek their fortune. Coop (Keith Carradine) who appears to have brought a chip on his shoulder from the piney woods, soon drifts into a life of crime, a field for which he displays no very conspicuous gifts. Wanda lets the pair park their trailer behind the cafe, and gives Georgia a waitress gig. Hawk takes a fancy to Georgia. Coop hooks up with “Solo,” a freelance thief, and begins spending more time away from girlfriend and tyke, and also makes some questionable fashion choices. The two small-time crooks come to the attention of Rain City gangster Hilly Blue, ably played by the late Harris Milstead, better remembered as “Divine.” in his only non-drag role, and thereafter things get complicated, and Hawk has to step in and sort them out. Seattle, as “Rain City,” may never have looked as seedy on film, but it's also oddly seductive. It doesn't hurt that Rudolph always knew how to pick his soundtracks.



Walkabout (Introductory): This was one of those films we used to make a special effort to catch when it came round to the UC Theatre every year or so. Long-time cinematographer Nicholas Roeg's first solo directorial effort (he had co-directed *Performance*, starring Mick Jagger, a couple of years earlier), *Walkabout* was an impressive debut. Its subtext is a little heavy-handed (innocent savage in state of nature=good; jaded, trivial European "civilization"=bad), but the execution is magnificent. Australians who loved the 1959 novel that Roeg and screenwriter Edward Bond took as their point of departure were shocked at the liberties taken with the source material. In the book, the two children (the girl as well as the boy being, unlike the lovely Jenny Agutter, pre-pubescent) are stranded in the outback after the small aircraft in which they are traveling crash-lands, leaving them the only survivors, whereas in the film they arrive at their predicament by more...startling means. Also absent from the book is the erotic tension between Agutter and David Gulpilil, as the teenage aborigine who finds the castaways and escorts them out of the desert (the tension is conveyed at one point by some darned suggestive shots of...*eucalyptus trees?*). Roeg's chops as a cameraman show off to fine effect, and his son, credited only as "Lucien John" in this, his only screen role, turns in one of the best performances I've ever seen from a child actor. John Berry's musical score is at points what they used to call "lush," but not annoyingly so. It took me years after I first saw this in 1971 to track down the lines recited in a voice-over at the end of the film (it would take about fifteen seconds today). They're from A.E. Housman's "A Shropshire Lad":

*Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?
That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again.*

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WOMEN IN LOVE

Women in Love (Advanced): Thousands of novels have been transmuted into film, and while it must be acknowledged that more than a few of these were actually improved in the process, I maintain that long-form television is actually the more appropriate medium for these renderings of text into visual drama. For example, Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* has twice been carried to the screen:

for TV in 1981, over the course of 659 minutes, and for theatrical release in 2008, telling the story in just a fifth the time. The latter was, as I recall, an honorable attempt, but it was more a distillation of

the novel, whereas the longer television adaptation poured the entire tale intact into a new vessel (or, I suppose, into eleven vessels): the most utterly faithful re-rendering of a literary work into another medium that I have ever seen. All this is by way of observing that you should not imagine that Ken Russell's version of *Women in Love* is or ought to be considered as any substitute for D.H. Lawrence's 1920 novel—the late, great critic Pauline Kael opined that “to see this particular movie before reading the book is [a] desecration,” adding “it's mad to jeopardize one's vision of [the novel] by reading it in terms of the actors and images of the film (the movie is rather like Lawrence's accounts of bad sex).” Well, nobody ever accused the famously opinionated Kael of diffidence in these matters, and she was incomparably better-informed in points of both literature and film than I am, but I'm going to give you a pass to go ahead and watch the movie even if you haven't read the book. It so happens that I *did* read the novel before I got round to catching the film, and it's the latter that's stuck to my ribs. Set in England (and partly in Switzerland) a little over a hundred years ago—in other words, before World War I, that massive historical and cultural divide, so that to its initial reading audience the book already seemed to describe a vanished world—the story follows two couples: sisters Gudrun, an artist, and Ursula, a teacher, who hook up with industrialist Gerald Crich and school inspector Rupert Birkin, respectively. The sisters are portrayed by the fiery Glenda Jackson and the rather mousey Jennie Linden; their boy-friends are Oliver Reed in a smoldering performance and Alan Bates, who seems intended to stand in for Lawrence himself. In the novel Lawrence tries to explore how men and women might come together in some fashion more honest and more intimate than the means permitted in that era, and how men as well might form friendships of equal intensity and profundity—not necessarily erotic, although the wrestling scene (see below) has often been so construed. The friendships between women seem here to be glossed over, possibly because Lawrence regarded these as a given. He was a brave and an honest man; also a bit of a crank, and certainly in this latter quality he is well-paired with the director.

I have the sense that the novel is not much read today, although it remains in print. The sexual attitudes that scandalized some of its original readers (“I do not claim to be a literary critic, but I know dirt when I smell it, and here is dirt in heaps—festering, putrid heaps which smell to high heaven” huffed one observer in a review published exactly a week before your late grandfather's birth in 1921) will seem rather tame to this century's audiences. The film, too, will seem a bit dated, refracted through a lens of sixties-era sensibilities: the sexual sequences in particular will strike the viewer as a little ham-fisted and corny (they already seemed that way by 1973, when I first sat through it). On the other hand, the most famous, certainly the best-remembered scene in the movie, in which Crich and Birkin engage on a spot of manly wrestling by the fire, still retains its power, and there are several other remarkable set pieces over the 131 minutes running time.



Zardoz (Introductory/Silly): Okay, now I'm just fuckin' witya: notwithstanding my facetious liner notes, *Zardoz* is not essential viewing for any serious, or even frivolous, student of film, but I happened to have a copy lying around, and there was room in the box. That said, it's firmly in the so-bad-it's-good category, like *Gothic*, and it comes from a writer-director (John Boorman) who, unlike Ken Russell, had not previously demonstrated such stratospheric levels of eccentricity. How on earth did a group of talented, intelligent people, including such gifted actors as Sean Connery and Charlotte Rampling, end up in the middle of a shitstorm of silly? From the opening scenes, in which a gigantic stone head flies over a foggy countryside, vomiting weaponry onto a grateful populace and proclaiming in a voice like thunder "The gun is good! The penis is evil!" (say, didn't I hear that line in one of the Republican debates earlier this year?) to the end, an hour and forty-five minutes later when, as you tell yourself that the thing couldn't *possibly* get any more preposterous, and then it *does*, this is a glorious train wreck of a motion picture. It is said that after a dozen years playing James Bond on and off, Sean Connery wanted to fight typecasting by taking a radically different kind of role. I'm inclined to think that he signed a contract with some dire non-completion clauses before anyone told him he'd spend almost the entire film in a red diaper. At several points in the movie he looks straight at the camera with an expression of something like despair on his rugged features (one could have imagined him silently praying "Please, God, let this go straight to home video," had home video existed then) as if to beg the theatre audience to forgive him, or better yet to go straight home without even stopping by the snack bar. The pity of it is, everyone involved probably thought they were making something profound. There are some interesting ideas strewn about, such as societies exhausting their energies (here rendered rather ham-fistedly as "virility") and the uses of "creative destruction," but it's as though these had been carried to execution by a bunch of energetic, undisciplined teenagers who couldn't be troubled to think their concepts through. Still, forty years have given the thing a certain patina of esteem that it lacked when the hilarity was still fresh. "It went from failure to classic without passing through success," Boorman has ruefully remarked. I'm put in mind of the famous line from *Chinatown*, delivered by the villainous Noah Cross: "Of course I'm respectable. I'm old. Politicians, ugly buildings, and whores all get respectable if they last long enough." We may perhaps say the same about film. Still another selection that might take some benefit from an altered state: Veronica and I stuffed her freshman roommate full of LSD and took her to downtown Santa Cruz to see *Zardoz* when it first screened. As I recall, she enjoyed the film unreservedly.

Foreign Affairs (*alphabetical by language; thereafter by title*):

In Dutch



Soldier of Orange (Advanced): The Dutch are widely regarded as among the most photogenic of the world's "cute" peoples, as, in their distinctive white bonnets, they tool around Amsterdam on bicycles (pedaling these with some difficulty owing to the cumbersome wooden clogs they wear), smoking marijuana, plugging

dikes, promoting housepaint, speculating in tulip futures and running the International Court of Justice at "The Hague," presumably so called to distinguish it from other, lesser hagues. Long ago, the Netherlands used to punch considerably above their weight—they had colonial possessions in the Americas and in the south of Africa, and owned pretty much every island of any consequence between Australia and the Asian mainland. For a time, they were the only western power permitted a commercial presence in Japan. The Brits resented them as an economic, political and imperial rival. Dutch science was among the world's most advanced. They had some of Europe's best painters. They invented stock market manipulation. There was lots of chocolate.

Those glory days were largely behind the country by the time the gentle Germans moved on them in overwhelming force in May 1940, the royal family fleeing after five days, the point at which, following some narrative throat-clearing to establish the various characters, the action of *Soldier of Orange* commences (incidentally, whenever you watch a film set during this period that includes a scene where several characters gather for a group photo, it is certain as tomorrow's sunrise that some of 'em are wearing red undershirts, so to speak). Based on the memoirs of Dutch resistance fighter Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema, the film follows a group of school friends, principally Erik and his pal Guus LeJeune, as they trace different paths—some decisively abbreviated—through the war years. Erik is portrayed by the pre-*Blade Runner* Rutger Hauer, then in his early thirties and looking, in the clichéd formulation, as though he'd just stepped out of a Nazi recruiting poster. His "ideal Aryan" features, combined with an affect of Teutonic hauteur he assumes in one dicey situation during the course of the movie, stand the character in good stead. He ends the war as adjutant to the Dutch queen, and accompanies his sovereign back to liberated Dutch soil at film's end.

Although even adjusted for inflation its total budget probably wouldn't cover the catering tariff for *The Force Awakens*, *Soldier of Orange* was, at the time of its 1977 release, the costliest film ever made in the Netherlands, and the money shows to good effect in this handsome and elaborate production. And because it's Dutch, and particularly because it was helmed by bad-boy director Paul Verhoeven, who, lured to Hollywood, subsequently gave the world such productions as *RoboCop*, *Starship Troopers* and

the infamous *Showgirls*, *Soldier of Orange* is engagingly . . . flaky. The Huns are predictably evil, the Dutch are mostly plucky, Rutger's character jumps anything in skirts and Verhoeven seldom lets pass an opportunity for one of his round-heeled actresses to step out of her knickers. That said, there are some moving scenes, and many sequences convey the dread of foreign occupation, and the hatred of it that persists beneath the acquiescent face the public may show to the occupying forces. Our own country could draw some useful foreign policy conclusions from a screening. It's certainly a minor entry among the foreign films herein, but a useful sample of mass entertainment, continental style.

In French



Alphaville (Cinema 301): Audiences in the pre-*Star Wars* era (or more properly the pre-*2001: A Space Odyssey* era, although Kubrick's extraordinary vision, unlike the space operas of George Lucas, remains *sui generis* almost half a century later) used to put up with some pretty cheesy sets, costumes and effects in their science fiction—the original “Star Trek” television series was considered cutting-edge in 1966, but even then we could see that the instrumentation on the *Enterprise* bridge consisted of plywood and Christmas tree lights. So prolific French director Jean-Luc Godard (not to be confused with Jean-Luc Picard) decides to do a science fiction flick, and he spends *nothing* on sets and effects when he makes *Alphaville* (full title: *Alphaville: A Strange Adventure of Lemmy Caution*), and that “nothing” is money well (un)spent. The result might be off-putting to an American audience today—hell, they weren't exactly lining up around the block fifty years ago, and poor old Bosley Crowther, not surprisingly, didn't know *what* to make of this shit—but after all, like the most intelligent sci-fi, *Alphaville* was not about how human beings will live in the future, but about how we're living now. That's the “now” of then, of course, but the sterile, alienating future that Godard saw from 1965, and conveyed by means of shooting some of the most anti-human modernistic architecture of the “new” Paris (trends which have, mercifully, been held in check in Paris proper, which remains one of the fabled beauties among the world's cities), will not look entirely unfamiliar to contemporary audiences.

You needn't pay much attention to the story, which is the sheerest twaddle: I don't think that Godard did. In brief, tough-guy detective Lemmy Caution, a character who had already been played by expat American actor Eddie Constantine in a dozen cheapoid French movies with titles like *Dames Get Along*, is plucked out of his accustomed genre and into this tongue-in-cheek, highly philosophical production, wherein his character is assigned to go undercover in Alphaville, a city on a planet in a distant galaxy (he arrives there by car). No one's striving for verisimilitude here, of course (if they were, you wouldn't hear “light year” being employed as a measure of time), but particularly to French

audiences accustomed to Lemmy Caution's usual vehicles, this must have seemed like...oh, not just William Shatner cast as Hamlet, but William Shatner playing *Captain Kirk* as Hamlet. Gumshoes don't get much more hard-boiled than Eddie Constantine, who has what you call a "lived-in" face. He looks like an iguana in a trenchcoat, suffering from a bad hangover. He's up against the faceless masters of Alphaville, including evil Professor von Braun (a tip o' the hat to then-NASA chief scientist and ex-Nazi Wernher von Braun) and his most fearsome creation, the supercomputer Alpha 60, which is much given to spouting weighty Gallic aphorisms on the order of: "Once we know the number one, we believe that we know the number two, because one plus one equals two. We forget that first we must know the meaning of plus." "Everything has been said, provided words do not change their meanings, and meanings their words." "Sometimes reality is too complex for oral communication. But legend embodies it in a form which enables it to spread all over the world." "Is it not obvious that someone who customarily lives in a state of suffering requires a different sort of religion from a person habitually in a state of well-being?" And so forth. It's all very French and, to my mind, more fun than a barrel of ferrets, but it's decidedly too weird for casual viewing, hence the "301" designation.

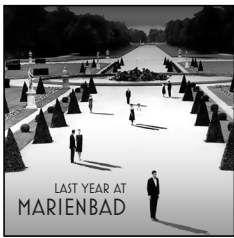


The City of Lost Children (Advanced): If Jules Verne and M.C. Escher had worked together on set design, Walt Disney and Timothy Leary co-produced, and had Alfred Hitchcock been French, their collaboration probably *still* wouldn't have yielded up *The City of Lost Children*, a delightfully grotesque live-action cartoon set in a quasi-Victorian seaport town, in which a tormented Mad Scientist abducts children so that he can feed on their dreams, as he is incapable of producing his own. By appropriating the tots' dreams the scientist, Krank, hopes to retard the aging process, but since the frightened children have only bad dreams, their visions are useless to him—not that he falters in the attempt, because, science. Our doughty researcher sets the plot in motion when he kidnaps the baby brother of a carnival strongman (American actor Ron Perlman, whom your brother so enjoyed as a motorcycle gang leader in *Sons of Anarchy*) who then sets out to retrieve his purloined sib. You don't fuck with Ron Perlman. It's a funny, creepy visual treat, and includes a disembodied brain and the damndest set of conjoined twins you've ever seen. "Advanced" only because, you know, French.



Diva (Advanced): Had this been made in English, I could have slapped the "Introductory" label on it with an easy conscience, because *Diva* is a lighthearted, supremely approachable French film. Well, I suppose that the fact of a minor character taking a shiv in the back about ten minutes into the movie (and our hero himself requires medical attention before the closing credits roll) imposes a certain upper limit on the lightheartedness, but there is much in the production

that commends itself to our exhilaration. There is the ravishing Cynthia Hawkins, an American soprano in Paris for a series of recitals, whose performance of an aria from the opera *La Wally* provides the musical backbone for the film, and who has never been recorded until a lovesick postman smuggles a high-end tape recorder into a performance. There are ruthless Taiwanese record pirates (the Taiwanese used to be very big in their disregard of international copyright conventions at the time *Diva* was made—this was before China proper got into the act) who want the said recording. There is a criminal network running the prostitution and heroin distribution networks in the city, and another recording incriminating the mysterious “Mr. Big” who heads that organization. And there is Gorodish, the mysterious, slightly portly hipster of apparently limitless resources *and* resourcefulness, and Alba, his enchanting teenage sidekick, who help the postman out of the fix into which his possession of both recordings has landed him, thwarting the pirates and putting paid to Monsieur Big. Pour these ingredients into a medium mixing bowl, whip until fluffy, and enjoy. If you haven’t sat through many foreign-language films as yet, *Diva* is absolutely the one I’d recommend as an introduction.



***Last Year at Marienbad* (Cinema 301):** In packaging this one (mastered, I grieve to report, from an inferior digital edition—the vastly higher-quality Criterion Collection version is out of print, and I’ve somehow lost track of my copy) I have only half-facetiously incorporated a warning label such as you might encounter on tobacco products or prescription drugs, because *Marienbad* is a challenging fantasy, surreal, ambiguous, hypnotic (though what some of us consider hypnotic others will find soporific) and withal the quintessence of the mid-XX century European art house flick: it’s practically generic that way, in that for many years images from the movie came up in almost everyone’s conception of films for “intellectuals.” Oddly, the kind of people in whom the film rouses a visceral dislike seem many of them also quite violently to resent the kind of people who *do* like it. I have accordingly forborne to share it with Uncle G, just to remain on the safe side (it’s *full* of toffs and swells).

There’s not much of a story: at a fashionable hotel/resort/château/watering hole somewhere in Europe, sometime in Europe—there are indications that it could be sometime during the interwar period (1918-1939), but the makeup and hairstyles, particularly those sported by the dazzling Delphine Seyrig, are very much of 1961—a man, X, approaches a woman, A, and asserts that they met “last year at Marienbad” (a fashionable spa town in then-Czechoslovakia, although probably not, during the Cold War, a typical destination for the continent’s upper crust), with the implication that a certain amount of whoopee was made in the course of that assignation. “A” claims that she neither recognizes X nor recalls the purported affair; a second man, M (possibly A’s husband), hovers about. There are dreams, flashbacks—continuity and sequence do not loom large in the film, nor are they intended to—and an

interesting game played with matchsticks. There is a running narration provided by X that does not particularly clear anything up, and rather melancholy organ music. The cinematography is stunning, and includes a famous wide-angle shot (I worked it into the artwork for the DVD insert) of human figures along a broad promenade: the people cast shadows, the landscape does not. It's all very, very mysterious, and neither director Alain Resnais nor screenwriter Alain Robbe-Grillet were ever to my knowledge particularly forthcoming about their intentions and, being dead and all, are unlikely to shed any light on the subject going forward. This hasn't deterred a lot of critics and film scholars from jumping in during the past half century with their own interpretations. As to the critics, their reception has been all over the map. Pauline Kael, as I recall, didn't care for it; Bosley Crowther, not surprisingly, was left scratching his balding head, but was on the whole favorably impressed. I see that Michael Medved gives it a place among "The Fifty Worst Films of All Time," but I would not take this as a particularly severe indictment given that Medved would easily take a slot in "The Five Worst Film Critics of All Time."

Among the interpretations I've read there was one I came across some years back (I'm unable to locate it) that made the persuasive case that *Marienbad* retells, or at least riffs upon, the ancient tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. Now just in case they scanted on the classics at Folsom High, Orpheus was regarded by the ancient Greeks as the greatest poet and musician who ever lived, although whether there was an actual human being corresponding to the legends that came to accrete around the name remains the subject of historical speculation. He is credited with devising the lyre, a harplike stringed instrument of the era, and playing it so beautifully that not only mortals, but also gods and animals were moved to dance (also plants and rocks, according to some fanciful accounts, but we should keep in mind that Greece, like coastal California, is earthquake country). Orpheus loved the beautiful Eurydice, but on their wedding day, while she was dodging the unwelcome advances of a tipsy satyr, she wandered into the tall grass. There she was bitten on the ankle by Ted Cruz and, thus envenomed, toppled over stone dead. This being the world of classical mythology rather than our own coldly prosaic and secular age, her spirit was chucked down to the Underworld. Orpheus, bereft, sang his grief so movingly that the gods issued him a day pass to the nether regions, where he persuaded Hades and Persephone, the proprietors, to release Eurydice back to the world of the living (again, pay attention: there'll be another quiz in the morning). The two proceeded single-file back toward topside, Orpheus leading, the terms of his bride's parole requiring him not to look back at her on the way up. He predictably violates the condition and—darn!—Eurydice is lost.

So is X Orpheus? Is A Eurydice? Is M Hades (but wait! If M is A's husband...?). People have been scratching their heads over this and over other readings of the film for fifty years. No consensus is expected during the next fifty. You might want to let this one go until you are feeling particularly jaded

and/or ambitious (and I might have tracked down my missing Criterion Collection version by then), and should in any event approach it with a receptive mind, by which I do not, for a change, mean a chemically-mediated one.



The Phantom of Liberty (Advanced/Cinema 301): OK, for *this* one you have my leave to get stoned if you like. Treat it as a shaggy-dog story with continuity issues and you won't go far wrong. There's no story here, or rather, there is a superabundance of stories, one following upon the other, with only the barest skein of connective tissue shared among them. Best to approach it without preconceptions, and enjoy it rather as you might one of your more outlandish dreams: certainly *TPoL* better replicates the randomness and abrupt shifts of scene that characterizes certain night visions. An early convert to surrealism, Spanish-born director Luis Buñuel was active for five decades, and in the opinion of many, following a strong start with *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) his work got better and better over the course of that long career. This 1974 production was his penultimate film, so you are at liberty (heh, heh) to draw your own conclusions.



The Triplets of Belleville (Introductory): Notionally in French, but—*quelle horreur!*—with every single line of dialogue dubbed into English for its American release. Fortunately, that amounts to just a single line and a few seconds, so I'm giving *The Triplets of Belleville* a pass on that score. We commence our adventure with a black-and-white cartoon done in the early style of legendary animators Tex Avery and Chuck Jones, with more Paris-in-the-20s & 30s visual references'n you could shake a stick at (Greg and I were certain that der Alte would enjoy the thing for that reason, and for the scat singing, but in the event he was unmoved), before the scene switches to 1950s Paris, and color, and the distinctive graphic approach of French animator Sylvain Chomet. We are introduced to the elderly, indefatigable Madame Souza and to her chubby, melancholic orphaned grandson Champion and to Bruno, Champion's puppy, to whom an early episode with a toy train has imparted long-term issues with rail transit. Fast forward to Champion's young adulthood and he is now a gaunt professional cyclist preparing to race in the Tour de France. When Champion is abducted for rather preposterous purposes by sinister organized crime figures and transported across the sea to the distant metropolis of Belleville, Granny and Bruno, now a rather stout and flatulent old creature, pursue them, and in Belleville fall in with the Triplets, whom we first encountered scat singing (and I do mean "scat" singing) in the opening cartoon. Thereafter...well, see for yourself. Since apart from the music there is no spoken French in this one, it gets the "Introductory" rating that such an accommodating feature deserves.



***The Wages of Fear* (Advanced/Chemistry 101):** The first chemical explosive, today known as gunpowder, was originally devised by the Chinese over a thousand years ago, refined over the next few centuries after that, and remained the go-to compound for making things go boom until an Italian chemist synthesized nitroglycerin in 1847. Nitroglycerin yields a great deal more explosive “bang for

the buck” than powder does, but it early on gained a quite justified reputation for being tricky to work with. Fill a Mason jar with nitro and give it a good shake, and a moment later there will be a large crater where formerly your apartment stood. Twenty years later the Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel turned nitro into dynamite, a considerably more stable substance that is still in use today.

Let us now turn our attention to the setting of this 1953 feature, which begins in a charmless burg in South America in which an equally charmless contingent of drifters, vagabonds, layabouts, conmen and tramps have found themselves stranded in the years following World War II. They're all desperate to be somewhere else, almost anywhere else. Most of the locals wouldn't wouldn't mind it if they went away either, but nobody has the busfare out of town. Henri Clouzot, the film's director, takes his time setting the scene, and while this helps make for a lengthy film, it's never boring, and the long lead-up makes the suspenseful stuff, when it comes, all the more white-knuckle. Having established our characters (motley, restless) and our venue (bleak, unpleasant) and the regional economy (based around and dominated by “Southern Oil,” a rapacious American energy company), Clouzot introduces the McGuffin: a catastrophic fire at one of Southern Oil's major wells three hundred miles away. I'll yield the floor briefly to critic Matthew Dessin, who summarizes the point of departure for all that follows:

- As long as the oil well is on fire, it's costing Southern Oil money.
- To put out an oil well fire in 1953, you need explosives (at least, according to this movie; you put charges all around and they suck the oxygen out of the surrounding air).
- Southern Oil has 200 gallons of nitroglycerin available.
- Those 200 gallons are 300 miles away from the fire.
- Nitroglycerin explodes if shaken, spilled, or heated.
- Southern Oil doesn't have any trucks with shock absorbers or safety equipment.
- Southern Oil has plenty of trucks without shock absorbers.
- A lot of people in town are desperate for work.

The company's own drivers are understandably reluctant to take on this assignment, so its managers offer the very lucrative bounty of US \$2000 (a nice piece of change in 1953) each to four drivers to pilot two trucks loaded with nitro to the distant oilfield so that the costly fire can be snuffed out. The down-

side, of course, is that if the nitro is jostled en route, trucks and drivers will also be snuffed out. There is a real incentive here not to tailgate. There is also the complication that, to all appearances, the unnamed South American country in which the drama is set has not paid a lot of attention to infrastructure upkeep. The roads are . . . a little rough. Four of our expats are selected to transport the juju juice. Will all of them survive? What do *you* think?

The cast is almost exclusively male—the only female speaking part of any consequence is still fairly minor, and portrayed by the director's wife Vera—and the sensibility is perhaps more attuned to the Y-chromosome set (I'm rather confident that young Moloch will enjoy it), although its admirers over the years have spanned all the demographics. High marks were given upon the film's 1955 American release by, of all people, my man Bosley Crowther, although ol' Bos is his reliably clueless self (my annotations in italics) and rises in his review to high comedy:

At the outset, this lethally laden thriller looks as though it is taking off to be a squalid and mordant contemplation of the psychological problems of a group of men, stuck without hope of salvation in a fetid South American oil town. And, in this area, the prospect of achievement grows progressively dim, as H. G. Clouzot's screen play of Georges Arnaud's novel goes wandering down slimy back alleys and gives evidence of having been trimmed (*no shit, Sherlock. It was cut to somewhere under three-quarters of its original length so as to spare domestic audiences a view of US exploitation as well as a view of Vera Clouzet's bosom*).

There's a vague bit about a young Frenchman who lives with a fat Italian, then mocks and deserts him to latch onto an older Frenchman who blows into town. What lies in this cryptic liaison is never clarified. It smacks of some noisome perversion (*"some noisome perversion" was as close as Bosley could bring himself to say "a couple of fags"*), but the matter has obviously been cut. The film ran for two hours and a half in the original. It runs for an hour and forty-five minutes here.

There is also a tow-headed German knocking around the town, being oddly sarcastic and mysterious. He, too, remains a blur.

Further—and this is most bewildering—there are hints of resentment and fear on the part of these men and the natives against the American oil company that runs the town (*I'm shocked, **shocked** to find resentment and fear directed toward a US oil company! Who could imagine such a thing?*). Suggestions of hard-boiled exploitation dangle barrenly here and there. But nothing is ever made of them.

—The man was a national treasure, I tell you.

Foreign Affairs (continued):

In German



Aguirre, the Wrath of God (Advanced): *“Anyone who even thinks about deserting this mission will be cut up into 198 pieces. Those pieces will be stamped on until what is left can be used only to paint walls. Whoever takes one grain of corn or one drop of water more than his ration, will be locked up for 155 years. If I, Aguirre, want the birds to drop dead from the trees, then the birds will drop dead from the trees. I am the wrath of God. The earth I pass will see me and tremble.”*

As the doomed party of conquistadores commanded by this charismatic speaker, who has clearly resolved his self-esteem issues in the self's favor, makes its way down the Amazon by raft, savage aboriginal bands are glimpsed through the dense stands of trees lining the river, and their excited shouts are heard. The Spaniards demand a translation from one of their native captives. “Fresh meat is passing on the river,” the Indian reports. It's that kind of adventure.

The late German actor Klaus Kinski (1926-1991) who plays, or rather inhabits the title character, was by all accounts, including his own, a... colorful character whose portrayal of the erratic Don Lope de Aguirre, the sort of individual for whom the term “crazier'n a shithouse rat” might have been devised, did not require him to reach very deeply into his turbulent psyche. He got his start performing in amateur theatricals during his months as a prisoner of war—he was one of the German soldiers in occupied Holland (see *Soldier of Orange*, above) before he was captured by British troops—and subsequently graduating, after a checkered stage career, to minor movie roles. He came to international prominence beginning with a series of films directed by Werner Herzog, *Aguirre* being the first of these.

The film was made, as they say in the industry, on a shoestring, which is difficult to comprehend from the scale of the production, visibly vast and majestic from the opening shot, and was beset by numerous difficulties, this being not at all hard to credit. It was shot “on location” in the Amazon rainforest, and Kinski, not an easy actor to work with even under clement circumstances, reacted badly to the hazards and privations imposed by the venue, and according to one report was only induced to remain on the set by the director's threat to shoot him if he left (if true, rather remarkable that the two men then returned to South America a decade later to work together on *Fitzcarraldo*).

Whatever the travails attending its creation, the result is unique, surreal, vast, operatic, like the most vivid dream you ever had. Here's one to go near the top of the foreign-language pile.



The Lives of Others (Advanced): *Did you know that there are just five types of artists? Your guy, Dreyman, is a Type Four, a “hysterical anthropocentrist.” Can’t bear being alone, always talking, needing friends. That type should never be brought to trial. They thrive on that. Temporary detention is the best way to deal with them. Complete isolation and no set release date. No human contact the whole time, not even with the guards. Good treatment, no harassment, no abuse, no scandals, nothing they could write about later. After ten months, we release. Suddenly, that guy won’t cause us any more trouble. Know what the best part is? Most Type Fours we’ve processed in this way never write anything again. Or paint anything, or whatever artists do. And that without any use of force. Just like that. Kind of like a present.*

—spoken to Captain Wiesler by a Stasi colleague

The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, colloquially but by no means affectionately known as the “Stasi” by the citizens on whom it sedulously spied for forty years, was the secret police agency of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), or “East Germany” as we used to call it, between 1950 and 1990. The formal German name of the outfit translates as “Ministry for State Security,” a handle tellingly evocative of an institution that looms rather large over our own “homeland” these days, *nicht wahr?* Indeed, three years ago I read the following account in a respected American paper:

Wolfgang Schmidt was seated in Berlin’s 1,200-foot-high TV tower, one of the few remaining landmarks left from the former East Germany. Peering out over the city that lived in fear when the communist party ruled it, he pondered the magnitude of domestic spying in the United States under the Obama administration. A smile spread across his face.

“You know, for us, this would have been a dream come true,” he said, recalling the days when he was a lieutenant colonel in the defunct communist country’s secret police, the Stasi.

In those days, his department was limited to tapping 40 phones at a time, he recalled. Decide to spy on a new victim and an old one had to be dropped, because of a lack of equipment. He finds breathtaking the idea that the U.S. government receives daily reports on the cellphone usage of millions of Americans and can monitor the Internet traffic of millions more.

“So much information, on so many people,” he said...

Both the breadth and the granularity of the Stasi’s surveillance operations were breathtaking. It’s estimated that at its height the agency employed one full-time agent for every 166 citizens (Hitler’s Gestapo had only one agent per two thousand people), and that when informants are factored in, roughly one East German in seven was passing information to the secret police about the other six. In one notorious case, a

political dissident discovered, following the reunification of Germany, that her husband of twelve years, the father of her two sons, was a Stasi informant who had been filing reports on her to the authorities throughout the entire period of their marriage. So the Stasi was bad news: and even the average citizen, who after all was just trying to get through the week, and didn't have a lot of energy left over for serious subversion, *really* didn't want to get on their bad side.

It is against this historical background that *The Lives of Others*, set appropriately in 1984, is to be viewed. Its two principals, intimately bound up with one another although they never actually meet, are both idealists, both supporters of the East German state, both, you could say, "patriots." One is a Stasi man, Captain Gerd Wiesler, a coldly loyal, efficient servant of the regime whom we first meet as he conducts the interrogation of a man accused of assisting in his neighbor's unauthorized removal to West Berlin, and then as he plays the tape of that interview for a class of young Stasi cadets. Those early minutes establish the captain as professional, pitiless, and a fanatical believer in the system he serves. When the luckless prisoner protests that he does not understand why he has been detained, Wiesler is merciless: "Do you think we imprison people on a whim? If you imagine our humanistic system capable of such a thing, that *alone* would justify your arrest." He says this without a trace of irony or insincerity. I work for people who believe in "homeland security" with a like measure of dedication.

Wiesler's opposite number is Georg Dreyman, his country's most prominent playwright. "He's loyal," Wiesler's boss says to him of the playwright. "If they were all like him, I'd be out of a job. He's our only non-subversive writer who is also read in the West. He thinks the GDR is the greatest country on earth." That part's understandable: like the other Soviet bloc countries, East Germany took capital-C "Culture" seriously (here in the Land of the Free, we take Celebrity seriously. There's a difference), which is why these regimes took the trouble to persecute poets who seemed critical of the system, whereas *here* such poets are ignored, and honored those who believed in it, whereas *here* such poets are... ignored. Dreyman writes plays celebrating the noble purpose of the GDR (we see a few minutes of one of these, which does not serve entirely to convey its author's alleged genius), and enjoys in consequence a life of privilege in a stately, spacious apartment and ready access to a greater range and variety of food and consumer goods than those available to the *hoi polloi*. What's not to like, from that standpoint, about the GDR? And indeed, as we glimpse Dreyman, tellingly through Wiesler's eyes in an early scene, he seems cheerful and complacent, well-satisfied with the station in life to which socialism has called him. Wiesler detests him on sight: "An arrogant type, the kind I warn my students about. I'd have him monitored," he adds. "I could oversee it myself." As it happens, in short order the secret policeman is granted his wish: a senior Communist party figure has developed a lech for the playwright's actress

girlfriend, and would find it convenient were Dreyman to fall from official favor, and so be removed from the picture. The couple's apartment is accordingly wired up the wazoo, and from a garret room in their apartment building, the two are monitored 24/7, and as part of the clandestine campaign to undermine the writer, his friends and associates come under increasing pressure and persecution.

The great English novelist Joseph Conrad once devised a memorable phrase, "the sombre imbecility of tyranny;" and so it comes to pass that even as the regime gradually forfeits the devotion of one of its most gifted sons, a matter of indifference to the scheming apparatchiks who orchestrate the harassment, so too do the first stirrings of irresolution start to appear in the mind of one of the state's hitherto reliable operatives of repression: Captain Wiesler begins to have his doubts.

Bullies and sadists are undoubtedly overrepresented in an outfit like the Stasi (or even in the average US metropolitan police force) relative to the general population, not that there is any shortage of these types among the Teeming Millions. What makes Wiesler interesting, and perhaps more appalling to us than a garden-variety brute would be, is his dispassionate professionalism. He believes that he labors on behalf of a system worthy of his toil, and against enemies deserving of the full measure of his rigor. Although it would be a very considerable stretch to describe Wiesler as he is first presented to us as a "decent" man, he possesses, unlike his cynical and self-interested superiors, a bedrock element of integrity, and it is from this austere and stony medium, this thin, unpromising soil, that seeds of decency take root. As he spends his waking hours closely monitoring his subjects' lives in moments routine and intimate, a sympathy for the couple develops alongside the growing awareness that his assignment does not serve the interests of the state but rather the prurience of a corrupt official and the self-advancement of an unprincipled careerist. Over the course of the film, as Wiesler becomes convinced of Dreyman's essential innocence (even as the persecution of his friends begins gradually to push the playwright out of the "comfort zone" in which he has hitherto dwelt vis-à-vis the regime), his reports are initially colored by this sympathy, which then manifests itself as omissions from the official record and finally as a professionally dangerous intervention on the writer's behalf. The policeman's iron carapace fractures, and a human being emerges at last.

Two final points. First, *The Lives of Others* is so note-perfect throughout its running length that, the first time I sat through it, I was seized with dread when it began to appear to me as though the filmmakers were going to blow the finale with a sappy, sentimental coda. They do not: the ending is perfect; they "stick the landing." Second, while the cast is very good, particularly the tragic figure of Christa-Maria, Dreyman's lover, the movie is carried by Ulrich Mühe, as Wiesler. Mühe, himself a citizen of the GDR until its dissolution in 1990, was already seriously ill as *The Lives of Others* was being shot, and he died

the following year of stomach cancer at the age of 54. He gives an astonishingly persuasive performance, grounded in part in his own experience as the target of Stasi surveillance: when the GDR police files were opened following German reunification, he learned that not only four of his fellow actors but also his wife had been filing reports on him with the security apparatus. Asked afterward how he had delivered such a compelling portrayal, Mühe replied simply, "I remembered."

WINGS OF



DESIRE

***Wings of Desire* (Advanced):** OK, we've done your Nazis, we've done your com-mies, and I don't want to leave you with a bad impression of the Krauts, so we'll finish up on the side of the... you know. *Wings of Desire* is not, as you might be forgiven for guessing on the basis of its title, a documentary about the creative team behind the "Victoria's Secret" catalogues. The US marketers probably should have gone with the original German title, which translates as "The Skies Over Berlin," but they decided for their own base reasons that they needed to sex it up, so I suppose we should be grateful that it wasn't released here as "Horny Heavens" or "Blazing Seraphs."

When the film was made in 1987, Berlin was still a divided city, separated administratively since 1945 and physically by the infamous wall since 1961. Few anticipated at the time that in two years the barriers of doctrine and of concrete would each be pulled down. The story is set in then-"West" Berlin, a physically isolated territory of the German Federal Republic located a hundred miles east of the heavily-fortified border that divided the two German states in that period. That's all the politics or history we need to discuss in this connection, because *Wings of Desire* plays out in the personal and spiritual realms rather than the geopolitical and ideological. We are introduced to a pair of angels, Cassiel and Damiel, who watch over the people of Berlin from sundry vantages high above the city, observing with compassion, occasionally intervening, or attempting to intervene in human affairs to the extent that their ethereal insubstantiality permits, which is not much. In an interesting touch, when we are vouchsafed glimpses of the city from the celestial visitors' eyes it appears in a kind of pale cyanotype, drained of almost all color. A similar approach was used forty years earlier in much the same context when Powell and Pressburger made their wartime fantasy *A Matter of Life and Death*, in which the earthly scenes, done up in The Archers' trademark balls-out Technicolor, contrast with the sequences set in "Heaven," which is monochrome. Surely *Wings* director Wim Wenders couldn't have been unaware of the earlier work.

Being an angel probably has its perks—flight, immortality, really great office parties at Christmas—but apparently it's short on some of the sensuous elements that we on this plane take for granted. There's the colorblindness, for one, and also the absence of homely minor pleasures like eating an orange or scratching a pet behind its ears or (almost forgot) the intimacies and impedimenta associated with

romantic love. Angel Daniel is portrayed by Bruno Ganz, seen here working the celestial-facing side of the street as, a couple of decades later, he was to embody in *Downfall* history's leading infernal German in his subterranean redoubt. Daniel yearns for the gratifications of the senses, for transience, for the love of a (wait for it) trapeze artist. It's a serene, thoughtful, visually quite lovely production.

In Italian



BICYCLE THIEVES ***Bicycle Thieves* (Advanced):** I actually had a hard time settling upon candidates in the Italian language category that I thought might interest you, which is odd because I have a fairly vast collection of these films, and have watched and enjoyed at least fifty or sixty of these. I didn't want to try your patience with *L'Avventura*, to which I have previously alluded, or *The Leopard*, which includes a single sequence (a 19th century party) that lasts longer than some feature films, or *The Desert of the Tartars*, in which nothing in particular happens to its protagonist over the course of forty years he spends at a lonely frontier military fort, even though I cherish all three titles. I settled finally on two significant films that look at Italy in two very different periods (though these are only fifteen years apart) and through two very different sensibilities.

Bear with me for here for still another historical digression: like most of the rest of Europe, Italy emerged battered and beggared from the war of the nineteen-forties. After twenty years in power, Benito Mussolini's Fascist Party government fell in mid-1943, and shortly after that Italy, which up until that point had been allied with Hitler's Germany, withdrew from the war, a policy shift to which the Third Reich took violent exception, moving large bodies of its own troops into the country, where for the next two years they battled Allied forces, and still held much of the Italian north at the time of the German surrender. The peninsula was greatly knocked about in the course of this conflict.

During the period of Fascist rule, Italian cinema was dominated by *Telefoni Bianchi*, the so-called "White Telephone" style of films, highly artificial, highly stylized comedies or melodramas filmed on lavish sets and depicting leisure-class, or at least prosperous, characters—not unlike a lot of frothy American pictures of the period, but at least the US market also supported some gritty (albeit, in their way, equally stylized) depictions of less privileged social strata.

A radically different approach to filmmaking emerged literally (I use the term, well, literally) from Italy's ruins, heralded by Roberto Rossellini's groundbreaking *Rome Open City*, a wartime drama filmed while the war was still going on in the north of the country. Instead of studio sets, Rossellini shot on location, using mainly a cast of non-actors, and filming on whatever stock (frequently of sup-par quality) he could could scare up. Although *Rome Open City* was a scripted film, it had the feel, both to the Italians

and to audiences abroad, of something intensely authentic, documentary: the crudeness of the thing, the technical limitations imposed upon the finished film by the vicissitudes of production, turned out to be features rather than bugs, as we might say today. Nothing could have stood in starker contrast to the White Telephone genre. After an initially tepid reception among the Italians, many of whom fancied a spot of escapism after the rigors of the war years, this new approach, which became known as “neo-realism,” was taken up by other young filmmakers.

One of these was former matinee idol Vittorio De Sica (1901-1974), no stranger to white telephones, who jumped on the bandwagon in 1946 with *Shoeshine* and then, two years later, directed *Ladri di biciclette* (for many years known in this country under the title *The Bicycle Thief*; today, more properly, as *Bicycle Thieves*), one of the first true masterpieces of the neorealist school. The scene: Italy is at peace, but it is poor. Money is scarce; jobs are even scarcer. Unemployed family man Antonio Ricci lands a gig posting advertising flyers around Rome, but he's going to require a bicycle in order to make his rounds, and his bike has been pawned to buy food. To redeem it, he and his wife pawn in turn the family bed-sheets, which they are confident of retrieving once Antonio begins to collect his salary. Instead, on his first day at the new job, a thief makes off with the bicycle.

There follows a depiction of the next day or so as, accompanied by his young son Bruno, Antonio scours Rome in search of his stolen livelihood. Does he find it? Yes and no. The film, whose leading characters are all played by non-professionals, is one of the most touching and poignant depictions of fathers and sons I have ever seen: you might want to try it out on your brother Nick later on. De Sica went on to make many more films right up until his death in the mid-seventies, and although he later reverted to some frothier stuff (because neorealism had a relatively brief vogue among the Italians, who by and by decided that they liked them some escapism after all), he made another certifiable masterpiece in the genre with *Umberto D* in 1952. Incidentally, this copy of *Bicycle Thieves* is derived from a restored print issued under the “Criterion Collection” imprimatur. The edition formerly available was visually much tattier, and also sounded as though it had been miked over a bowl of Rice Krispies.



La Dolce Vita (Cinema 301): The Italians, as I say, soon tired of tales about the poor, since they were already living that dream, and Italy itself, like the rest of Europe, was starting to see a rise in its living standards—they could scarcely have gone lower from 1945's baseline—and also in its stylishness: by the end of the fifties audiences in Italy and abroad were flocking to see films like Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, about the so-called “jet set,” international air travel then being largely the province of the upper and trendier income brackets, and I have chosen this title as another iconic Italian film, albeit in almost

every respect the polar opposite of *Bicycle Thieves*. Jaded tabloid journalist Marcello Rubini works for the mid-century Italian version of *People* magazine: his beat is the rich, the famous, the beautiful, or preferably all three (fun factoid: there's a minor character, a particularly aggressive celebrity-chasing photographer named Papparazzo, who has given the plural form of his name to that class of verminous shutterbugs still known, half a century later, as *paparazzi*). Marcello moves in circles of privilege and sybaritic luxury, but entertains dreams of living the life of the mind, of poetry, philosophy, intellect, contemplation. Over the course of several days and an all-nighter or three, in a series of episodes, most of them set decidedly on the "glamour" side of this divide, Marcello confronts this dichotomy in his spirit (sex, money and power, or poetry and contemplation? Decisions, decisions...), and while the film toys with the notion that a spiritual emptiness lies beneath the glittering surfaces (or as someone once observed in a similar context, "beneath the false tinsel of Hollywood you'll find... real tinsel"), I have the sense that Fellini hasn't convinced itself. Certainly there's no evidence at the end that Marcello's going to leave off "la dolce vita" and go to graduate school or enter the priesthood. Still, it's entertaining, if lengthy, full of incident and full as well of visual spectacle, and it remains one of the best-remembered films of Fellini's long and colorful career. Lina finds Fellini a bit hard to take, says he's *way* too closely in touch with his inner sixteen year-old when it comes to relations between the sexes, and between deference to my wife's sensibilities and acknowledgment of the film's sheer duration—there's an "orgy" scene (pretty tame and depressing orgies they held back then, apparently) that goes on for a long time, although it doesn't rival for length the party in *The Leopard*, and some of *La Dolce Vita's* critics have observed that there's a good two-hour movie hiding in here somewhere, although the film's partisans wouldn't have it a minute shorter—I've bumped its rating to 301. Our pal Bosley, incidentally, gave it a "thumbs up," but of course he made this gesture from atop his usual high horse and in his usual moralizing tone: "a brilliantly graphic estimation of a whole swath of society in sad decay and, eventually, a withering commentary upon the tragedy of the over-civilized."

In Japanese

KWAIDAN



***Kwaidan* (Advanced):** Although visual splendor has not been my sole or even principal criterion in assembling this catalogue, it is certainly an element that I take into account in making my selections, and loomed very large when I chose *Kwaidan* from among several worthy Japanese candidates. It's a very beautiful production (in particular episode two, "The Woman of the Snow"), very stylized,

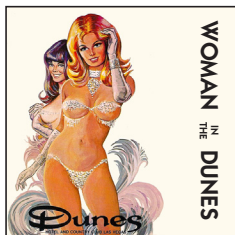
based on a series of ghost stories collected by Lafcadio Hearn, an interesting character (his Wikipedia entry is worth a look) who settled in Japan and did much to make that country's culture better known in the West, where it was then little understood.

I risk becoming tiresome on the subject of CGI, which I actually enjoy as much as the next guy (provided the next guy is a middle-aged man), but *Kwaidan*, which relies solely on sets, backdrops—and what backdrops!—and makeup for its effects, reminds us of what filmmakers were capable of before they passed the responsibility for realizing their visions onto code jockeys and server farms. This one comes with the avuncular “gold standard” seal of approval, with the incidental bonus that the four episodes can be taken individually when you haven’t the time or sustained attention for a feature-length film.



***Sanjuro* (Introductory/Advanced):** There's not a great deal to say about *Sanjuro* other than that it's the sequel to *Yojimbo*, although its gestation was a little kinked. Kurosawa had originally intended to adapt an unrelated short story, but his antihero samurai had proved so popular in the earlier film that, with visions of box office yen doubtless dancing in his head, he was persuaded to insert that rugged ronin

into this one. I slightly prefer *Yojimbo*, but mine appears to be a minority opinion, and I have to acknowledge that *Sanjuro* is a bit more tightly plotted. That said, Kurosawa and Mifune have rather smoothed the character—we knew that he was a big softie with a sword underneath that cynical, prickly exterior, but now the rough edges have been sanded down a bit, and he's lost a bit of menace thereby: too bad. Still, it's a romp, and if you liked the original, you'll certainly enjoy this followup.



***Woman in the Dunes* (Cinema 301):** Lina grumbled for a solid half hour after I cajoled her into sitting through *Woman in the Dunes* a few years ago. “Why are you making me watch this? It's pointless. It's stupid.” At some point these protests died down (I didn't register exactly when, being too engrossed with the picture, which I'd wanted to catch for many decades), and at the end she was silent. “So did you

like at after all?” I demanded. After a few seconds she said “I...guess so,” adding, over coffee the following morning, “I can't stop thinking about it.”

A lot of people have reacted that way.

This must have played occasionally at the UC Theatre (possibly not: it was apparently out of circulation for many years), but if so I did not contrive to catch it, and still regret never having seen it on the big screen—not that it features spectacle or special effects, but the cinematography is stunning. A school-teacher/amateur entomologist travels from the city to an isolated village near the coast in search of specimens for his collection, and is sufficiently preoccupied with this undertaking that he misses the last bus home. The locals helpfully suggest that, in the absence of a proper hotel or inn, he avail himself of the hospitality of a young widow who lives at the bottom of a vast sand quarry nearby, accessible by means of a rope ladder. What an excellent idea! “I love staying at local homes,” he says, apparently

never having seen an American teen slasher movie. In the morning, he finds the ladder withdrawn. The woman is employed by the community to dig sand, which the village sells to the construction trade, and production has fallen off since her husband died when a portion of the dune collapsed upon him, making the teacher a handy replacement. He will, it is made clear to him, be a sand navvy for the open-ended duration. Job security, yes, but not exactly tenure, and the benefits mostly stink. Also, the villagers in addition to their many other unattractive characteristics prove to be voyeuristic assholes.

This prospect understandably is received with a notable want of ardor and enthusiasm, but the teacher's negotiating position is not strong. For the essentials of life the couple are obliged to rely upon supplies lowered from topside; nor is a strike or work stoppage a practical tactic, since if they leave off their daily shoveling, the hut at the bottom of the dune, their only shelter, will shortly be engulfed by sand. It's the Airbnb from hell.

"Are you shoveling to survive, or surviving to shovel?" Aye, that's the question, isn't it? You can read the thing as a parable of the struggle between the sexes told on a rather elemental level, or as a less gendercentric picture of the human dilemma, but there's no need to dig (heh, heh) that deeply: the tale can cast its spell on you from wherever you'd care to fix your gaze on the dune wall. I've designated this as a 301, but that's for depth rather than difficulty.

In Russian



Solaris (Cinema 3001*): I've returned repeatedly over the course of this treatise to the subject of pacing in the movies, cautioning you that many of these older titles are edited in such a way as may seem unduly leisurely to a modern audience. And then there's *Solaris*, which I'm confident would have been deemed slowish at any point in the history of cinema since the first paid admissions were taken in 1895.

Sit through *Solaris* and then cue up *Last Year at Marienbad*, and the latter film will feel like *Mad Max: Fury Road*. I'm saying that like it's a bad thing, but it really isn't. Nevertheless, you'll need to set aside three hours for this one, including what feels like about twenty-five minutes** of aimless driving along an urban freeway early on, time you can use to ponder the fact that in their discussion of director Andrei Tarkovsky's films, the good folks at Criterion call this "his most straightforward, accessible work."

Following a briefing and that interminable sequence on the freeway, the protagonist, psychologist Kris Kelvin, is ordered to travel to an orbital space station circling the distant planet of Solaris, which he seems to reach in less time than he spent looking for parking. Communications with the researchers

*I'm pretty sure I needn't belabor the joke, but you'll observe that I just did.

OK, I just timed it. Seven, maybe eight minutes. But it **feels like twenty-five.

on the station have become erratic and enigmatic. There are concerns for their mental well-being, and also that the cause of science is not getting much return on the ruble. Kelvin is to observe, report, and recommend whether the project be continued or shut down.

Much was made, when the first *Star Wars* was released in 1977, of George Lucas' brilliant innovation of a "used future," of spaceships that looked lived-in rather than gleamingly antiseptic, as even Kubrick's craft had been in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Well, I'm here to call bullshit on that: Tarkovsky did the "used future" five years before *Star Wars*, and *Solaris Station* makes the *Millennium Falcon* look like a chip-fab clean room. This is not because the filmmakers did it on the cheap, incidentally: they were *aiming* to create sets that looked as though they had been gleaming and modern at one time, and were now showing the ravages of a long interval of deferred maintenance (you get the sense the staff there has been taking an "in space no one can hear you drink" approach to these things). Kelvin arrives to find most of the crew unaccounted for, the colleague he was to meet a recent suicide, and the two remaining scientists a tad...fragile. Far below them the planet, its surface a vast ocean unbroken by land, seems somehow to have taken notice of the orbiting platform—could have been the x-rays with which they've been bombarding the world—and to have reached inside the minds of the researchers, to have rendered in material form their most intimate memories...in short, not to put too fine a point on it, *Solaris* appears to be fucking with 'em. Doc Kelvin soon finds he is not exempt from these visitations.

Tarkovsky had originally wanted to work on another project entirely, but the Soviet film industry was tightly controlled by a lot of doctrinaire geezers whose idea of a good time at the movies was a double feature consisting of a war flick and a heroic saga about collective farm workers overfulfilling their production quotas in the face of daunting obstacles, so it could be difficult getting more "individualistic" works to pass the smell test with this lot: they were apt to see even the absence of cheerleading *for* the Soviet system as an implicit criticism *of* it. Fortunately, they didn't take science fiction entirely seriously, reasoning that if a story was set in a distant imaginary future (and provided, of course, that it didn't draw any obvious, invidious parallels with the socialist status quo), it was harmless popular entertainment. We may speculate also that in the context of the cultural competition then existing between the USSR and the West, the prospect of a big-screen communist answer to *2001: A Space Odyssey* was not altogether without its appeal. That's certainly how *Solaris* was pitched to stateside distributors when it was released in this country, which is a laugh because the two pictures could scarcely have stood in starker contrast to one another. Kubrick's epic (which I believe to be among the most majestic cultural artifacts devised during the late century) concerns itself with the fate and the development of species, not of individuals—many have noted that far the most "human" character in *2001* is actually a machine—whereas Tarkovsky is concerned intensely with the personal, with memory, grief, nostalgia, homesick-

ness, with culture, philosophy, religion (necessarily danced around discreetly given that the production was being bankrolled by a state then officially atheistic), conscience, none of which loom large in the American director's chilly vision of transcendence. I hadn't considered it before, but in that sense *2001* is really a better communist film than *Solaris*, even as *Solaris* is intensely, profoundly Russian.

An American journalist stationed in Moscow in the seventies was talking to a Soviet about how both their countries' political systems had become corrupt, and had fallen away from the soaring rhetoric associated with their respective foundings. "I agree," the comrade replied, "but keep in mind that the ideals *my* country has betrayed are *nobler* than the ideals *your* country has betrayed." To understand that quote is to grasp something essential to the Russian national character insofar as such a thing may be said to exist. The small cast of *Solaris* finds time (finds *your* time, you may catch yourself thinking) for some leisurely and discursive conversations about Life, the Universe and Everything (spoiler: 42), at one point doing so in a weightless environment that includes a candelabra floating about. Wait, thinks the rational audience, transporting objects from earth to space, even to near-earth orbit, costs like a zillion rubles per kilogram, and you guys have brought a freaking *candelabra* across the interstellar void to Solaris station? Also, open flame inside a spacecraft? Dudes, what were you *thinking*? Well, unintentionally funny as the scene looked to the rational audience even back in the day, it's intended as a kind of poetry, and Russian poetry at that, so take it in the appropriate spirit. Looking back, it's clear why the Sovietskis took only second place in the final rounds of Cold War judging: they were way too dreamy and sentimental. Americans are much more pragmatic, much less sentimental, much, much nastier.

A bit of incidental intelligence: In 2002 *Solaris* was remade under the same name by American director Steven Soderbergh, with George Clooney in the Kelvin role. Actually, it would be fairer to say that Polish writer Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris* was adapted for the screen a second time, as both films, having taken the novel as their respective points of departure, thereafter proceeded in somewhat different directions. The American version underperformed, as they say, at the box office: audiences expecting a science fiction epic with George Clooney in an action role were baffled and disappointed at what was delivered instead, notwithstanding the very decent sets and effects. This one is also worth a look, but absolutely not before you have dutifully absorbed the original—which, however worthy, you'll probably want to put well back in the queue.

Incidentally, author Lem professed himself a little underwhelmed by both adaptations: "To my best knowledge, the book was not dedicated to erotic problems of people in outer space... As *Solaris*' author I shall allow myself to repeat that I only wanted to create a vision of a human encounter with something that certainly exists, in a mighty manner perhaps, but cannot be reduced to human concepts, ideas or images. This is why the book was entitled *Solaris* and not *Love in Outer Space*."

In Swedish



Ingmar Bergman's

PERSONA

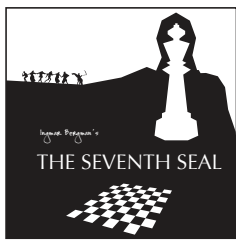
Persona (Cinema 301): Back when the popular imagination paid attention to these things, the films of Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007), the Bergman “brand,” if you will, carried a slightly intimidating cachet: this is not mere entertainment, you rabble, this is *art!* It wasn't *supposed* to be happy, or exciting (although Bergman can certainly be that), and the sorts of people who sought the bleak Swede's

pictures out when they first played stateside had the reputation of being awfully . . . earnest (“pretentious and social climbing,” says one critic, intending that, believe it or not, kindly). Well, the decades have sorted that out, no new Bergman works are forthcoming, and most of the backlist has stood the test of the years. Still, I'm going to recommend that notwithstanding its first place in the Scandinavian entries, a mere accident of my alphabetical scheme, you bump *Persona* back to the end of the line, not because it is inferior in any way to its fellows—on the contrary, it's a bloody masterpiece—but it's at the deeper end of the *oeuvre*, and you may wish to accustom yourself to these bracing Nordic currents beginning at knee- or waist-depth. But if you feel like diving in, by all means do so!

Part of that reputation of Bergman's involved the sense of a certain forbidding austerity, and there are certainly some titles that well merit this impression: I would not, for example, screen *Winter Light* for a random audience without arranging to engage a therapist on retainer and perhaps a suicide hotline on speed-dial. *Cries and Whispers* (not included this time out) is a work of profound beauty, and also utterly searing. I couldn't in good conscience recommend either title to the person ahead of me in line at the local video emporium who is about to rent *Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl* and *Fast & Furious XIV*.

But let us suppose that you've now sat through *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries* and perhaps *Shame*, and that you fancy Bergman's Scandinavian sensibilities and have a yen for something chewier: why, then, *Persona* might be just the thing. Some fanciful critics have called it a “vampire film,” and while this interpretation is not to be dismissed out of hand, it is intended very, very metaphorically. Two women share the screen: Elisabet Vogler, a stage actress who has been placed under psychiatric supervision following her inexplicable descent into silence, and the young nurse who has been assigned to look after her at the supervising physician's summer cottage (the “young nurse” is supposed to be about twenty-five and the stage actress around forty. The women portraying them were actually 31 and 28, respectively). In their seaside isolation Alma the nurse, who is gregarious by disposition and uncomfortable with her charge's smiling taciturnity, fills the silences with her own at first inconsequential chatter. Gradually the one-sided conversation becomes more intimate, more revelatory, and as it does,

Alma's own professional "mask," her persona, begins to break up, perhaps carrying with it the shards of her own identity. Throughout much of this short film (be patient with its first five minutes, which will appear on first viewing as mere avant-garde throat clearing), Elisabet seems to have the advantage, should we care to regard it in those terms, of the power dynamic between the two, but as the narrative progresses the dynamic shifts; the line between the two women's identities seems to become more and more porous and at points to vanish altogether. *Are there two women?* Lina, not alone, suggests that we should understand *Persona* as one woman's conversation with herself. I don't think Bergman would insist on one interpretation over another. The thing blew me away when I saw it at twenty, and again over forty years later.



The Seventh Seal (Advanced/Cinema 301): Lina's nephew Jonathan, who was raised in circumstances of deepest suburban barbarism, and whose "sullen Goth" phase lasted from about the ages of fifteen through twenty-eight (he is now thirty-four) took semi-permanent possession of my DVD of *The Seventh Seal* when he lived with us for two years early in the present century, and viewed it so frequently

that I worried that the laser might etch holes in the substrate. When I burned a copy for Veronica many years ago, my insert read merely: "Often parodied. Never surpassed," and indeed, to a generation the central image of the film, the gaunt-featured figure of Death in whiteface hovering over a chessboard, was both emblematic of the art house scene and the staple of high-end comedic references, of which perhaps the cleverest was the late George Coe's 1968 *De Däva*, which you are *not* to watch (an uncle's direst imprecations, anathemas, sharp reproofs be upon the heedless niece who disregards his ordinance on this matter!) until after you have sat through at least *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries*.

The Seventh Seal is laid in mediaeval Sweden, then being ravaged along with the rest of Europe by a series of deadly plagues. Antonius Block, a knight, has returned to Scandinavia from the "Holy Land," where he has fought in the so-called Crusades, regarding which the Arabs are still sore. Hard upon making landfall, Block is greeted by the figure of Death, come to claim him, which I think most reasonable people will agree makes for a pretty shoddy "welcome home" celebration, but contrives to forestall his fate by persuading Big D to engage him in a game of chess (why does Death bother? I don't know. It's a, what do you call it, an allegory, I'm pretty sure), which is conducted at intervals throughout the story, and there's not much doubt as to who's going ultimately to prevail, is there? Although—another fun factoid—the actor playing Death here pegged out back in 1971, whereas Max von Sydow (pronounced, I believe, "fawn-**zee**-doff") is, as of this writing, still among us.

Going up against Death, who has racked up an impressive win-loss record against humanity for as long as folks have been keeping score, would be enough to put most of us a little out of temper, and von Sydow's character is much given to muttering things like "I want to confess as best I can, but my heart is void. The void is a mirror. I see my face and feel loathing and horror. My indifference to men has shut me out. I live now in a world of ghosts, a prisoner in my dreams." This kind of table banter, needless to say, made Bergman a big hit at dinner parties. As Block and his squire/sidekick, who doesn't spend nearly as much time as his master does fretting about the big questions, amble around Sweden, they encounter priests, mystics, robbers, rapists, condemned witches and a traveling theatre troupe, to name just a few, all of them photographed very nicely indeed—Bergman and his cinematographers can always be counted upon to engage the eye. Come for the scenery and stay for the symbolism. Notwithstanding the doom that hovers over its principals and the squalor of the Swedish Middle Ages, the tone of the film is not uniformly dark: for that, try *The Virgin Spring* (not included here), set in the same period, which makes *The Seventh Seal* look like *Roman Holiday*.



Ingmar Bergman's
SHAME

Shame (Cinema 301): Sweden! Peaceful Sweden! Scenic, idyllic, prosperous Sweden! Neutral Sweden, socialist-welfare Sweden! Did I mention peaceful Sweden? These canny Scandinavians contrived to elude entanglements in the last century's bloody mass conflicts, although there must have been some nervous-making moments during WWII, what with neighbors Norway and Denmark writhing beneath

the Third Reich's boot to the west and south, and German-allied Finland being gnawed upon by Stalin in the east. But the country emerged with its sovereignty if not its conscience intact and without any serious bloodletting taking place on its soil. In 1968 *Shame*, one of Ingmar Bergman's lesser-known works, posits Sweden (or at least a Swedish-speaking country) in the throes of what appears to be a civil war. Max von Sydow and Liv Ullmann play married symphony musicians dwelling in an island village while the conflict rages on the mainland. When the war arrives, it turns out that not every social or intimate norm previously relied upon can be taken altogether for granted. You are probably familiar with the "First World problems" meme, although this was decades away from entering the idiom in 1968. In *Shame* we see how a comfortable, cultured couple respond—initially with disbelief; subsequently with desperation and callousness—when the complacent assumptions on which they have built their "civilized" existence are stripped away by conflict. It's a chilling little film. On a personal note, I still do a double-take during the opening scenes, because Liv Ullmann at certain angles bears a truly startling resemblance to the former Mrs. S.R. Careaga.



Ingrid Bergman's
WILD STRAWBERRIES

***Wild Strawberries* (Advanced/Cinema 301):** Like his character Isak Borg, veteran actor and director Victor Sjöström was a lonely old man in failing health when Bergman cast him as the central figure in *Wild Strawberries*, and much of the story is told in his melancholy ruin of a face. We are never entirely convinced that Isak Borg (“iceberg”—a bit of heavy-handed symbolism of a piece with the slightly

labored dream sequence with which the film begins) was such a nasty old bastard as the narrative would have us believe, but this scarcely matters as we follow Professor B on a journey (and who among us does not enjoy a road trip movie?) of memory, regret, reflection and reconciliation. It may be intrinsic to the subject matter that it will resonate more with an old man than with a young person, but I recall being intrigued by the film when I caught it on television (there was, I think, a late-night programmer on one of the local stations who had notions of goosing his audience's cultural awareness) as a teenager in 1966. The aristocratic Ingrid Thulin was never lovelier, and on the evidence Bergman, who appears routinely to have attained this level of rapport with his successive leading ladies, got to sleep with her earthly manifestations on a regular basis. I'm in the wrong line of work.

Here endyth the Garrulous Guide.



A curated introduction to some films
that might reward your attention

Oakland, California

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