HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD

What exactly is it about the movies that fascinates us? If they are crafted well – with the plot, setting, editing, actors, music, lighting, and cinematography all working together in harmony – the viewer gets an imaginative, transcendent personal experience that leaves an immediate, unique impression and, later, a lasting memory.

My first movies I recall seeing as a child were Disney animations. Then, it was on to thrilling dinosaur and 'radioactive mutant-monster’ flicks, such as The Lost World, Godzilla, Gorgo, and Rodan. Next came horror movies like The Mummy, Dracula, and Frankenstein, followed by sci-fi ‘flying saucer/alien invasion’ offerings such as The War of the Worlds, Forbidden Planet, and The Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Adaptations of Jules Verne’s classic novels were another favorite of mine: Journey to the Center of the Earth, Mysterious Island, and 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. And I thrilled to tales from mythology and legend, such as Jason and the Argonauts, and The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad. Lastly, as a kid, the movie The Time Machine was one I would eagerly watch again and again.

Older movies would often be available on television for free, but going to an actual theater was more fun. There you had the palace-like architecture and often opulent interior, the enormous screen revealed when the stage curtains rose or parted, the audience spellbound in the dark, and yummy concessions to purchase. To save money, families in those days also went to drive-in theaters (when the weather was favorable), because they often charged simply by the carload. A silver metal sound speaker was hung on the rolled up driver’s side window. The children were often dressed already in their pajamas, with pillows and blankets at the ready if they fell asleep during the second feature. Families were also allowed to bring their own snacks, candy, and soft drinks. Teenagers used drive-ins as ‘passion pits’ to make-out and canoodle, their fogged up car windows giving evidence of their youthful ardor.

As a youngster, the closest neighborhood movie house was the Chelten Theatre, located about four blocks from my childhood home in Chicago. The price of admission for adults was fifty cents, children were twenty-five cents, and popcorn sold for a dime. Saturday afternoon often featured a special “kids matinee” of fifty consecutive cartoons for a quarter. Frazzled mothers would drop their kids off for the entire afternoon at the Chelten as a kind of babysitting. My mom would fill a brown paper grocery bag with greasy, salted popcorn -- made on our kitchen stove top – and my friends and I were allowed to take it into the theater for the show. If we had an extra dime or two, we would buy and share a box of Milk Duds or Jujubes from the candy counter. The few (an vastly outnumbered) theater ushers probably hated working those events, because the floor level and the balcony level were both packed with screaming and laughing youngsters, many there just for the basically unsupervised mayhem. Hence, candy pieces were sneakily tossed at people’s heads in the dark, and cups of soda were routinely dumped off the balcony on the faceless, unsuspecting victims below.

Another popular (and much more elaborate and larger) movie theater was The Avalon. Located several miles from my house, you could either ride your bicycle there or take a CTA bus for fifteen cents down 79th Street to Stony Island Avenue. The Avalon was built in the Moorish-style, complete with minarets and a tiled dome like something out of The Arabian Nights. It even featured ornate, decorative water fountains in the lobby. The stage (and audience seating area) was big enough to host live music acts and concerts as well as movies. Kids went to see weekend matinee acts such as Duncan yo-yo tournaments and magic trick demonstrations.

One movie I recall seeing there was The House on Haunted Hill. The theater advertised that bats would be released to fly during the feature, and that particular ‘scary objects’ would actually emerge from the movie screen at certain suspenseful moments! Well, those dual promises lured us kids like an all-you-could-eat-for-free candy store. Sure enough during the horror flick, we saw fluttering and swooping bats, but they were just plastic or paper fakes attached by hidden strings. Yet we were generally surprised and screamed as one during an especially scary part of the movie, when a large skeleton jumped out of the screen (on a thin wire, later discovered) and soared over the heads of the terrified audience! For a kid, it was 25 cents well spent to get that shock.

When I was thirteen in 1964, I saw the alarming movie Fail-Safe at The Chelten. It was about an accidentally triggered nuclear missile attack between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. I was so devastated at the ending that I sat stunned, glued in my seat, unable to move as the film credits rolled. After a few minutes, when the theater lights went up and I happened to look behind me, I realized that I was the only one left inside! I remember walking home alone that night in a daze, contemplating World War 3 and my atomic annihilation – unfortunately a common consideration in those frightening days during the height of the Cold War.

Around this time, Cinerama was a new viewing concept for motion pictures, with pictures filmed using three specialized cameras and shown in special theaters using three, slightly curved screens. With added surround-sound, it made the movies uniquely seem to come alive, with you in the center of the action. I saw How the West Was Won (1962), Grand Prix (1966), Khartoum (1966), and 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) all in Cinerama. Tickets were sold ahead of time, with reserved seating, such was the technique’s popularity. Sadly, the innovation was short-lived, but it was later superseded by seventy-millimeter Super-Panavision, and ultimately by the towering IMAX format.

In 1968-69, I began to write movie reviews for my high school newspaper (“Sales Talk”). I wound up winning a national contest for those writings – an all-expenses paid trip for two to Hollywood. (You can read the details of this adventure in Volume One of my Collected Stories.) Some of the movies I reviewed at that time were: The Lion in Winter; The Thomas Crown Affair; Romeo and Juliet; The Heart is a Lonely Hunter; The Fixer; Yellow Submarine; The Stalking Moon; Planet of the Apes; and 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Because I lived in Chicago then, I devotedly followed the film reviews of my two favorite (and often rival) critics: Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times, and Gene Siskel of the Chicago Tribune. During those days, I spent much free time downtown at the city’s immense old-time movie palaces: The Oriental, McVickers, Woods, Chicago, State Lake, United Artists, and others. Seeing blockbusters on such gigantic screens was always an awesome experience. I especially remember seeing: Once Upon a Time in the West, The Good the Bad and the Ugly, Papillion, Love Story, Goldfinger, Thunderball, and The Sand Pebbles. Interestingly, some of these old theaters had problems with feral rats, and I recall having my feet occasionally ‘bumped’ in the darkness --undoubtedly by the frantic, scurrying rodents!

Next, I moved to DeKalb, IL and attended Northern Illinois University. On Friday nights, they had free classic movies shown in a large lecture hall. This venue was called Cine Club. It was here that I got my first exposure to foreign films, which were either dubbed or subtitled in English – masterpieces from Sweden, France, Russia, the U.K., Spain, Italy, Germany, Australia, India, and Japan. Soon, I became educated in the works of Bergman, Fellini, Truffaut, Bunuel, Ray, Kurosawa, Eisenstein, and others. My horizons were expanded as I saw how other people and cultures viewed the world through cinema. I recall seeing The Seventh Seal, Potemkin, The Seven Samurai, M, The Informer, The Andalusian Dog, Repulsion, The Bicycle Thief, and more. My favorites were the films of Ingmar Bergman, because he dealt with serious, deep philosophical themes. My friends and I would often go out for beer and pizza after seeing these movies, and have long analytical discussions about them for hours!

Also at NIU, I took a History of Film class. Although the professor was rather lackluster, he did show some fascinating films, using a reel-to-reel projector right in the class room with the window shades drawn. Here, I saw for the first time such classics as: Citizen Kane, Rebecca, Birth of a Nation, The Grapes of Wrath, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, Red River, All Quiet on the Western Front, and Lord of the Flies. We then discussed our viewings and wrote critical papers about them. Citizen Kane was so impressive – the surprise ending, with the gradual close-up of Kane’s burning wooden childhood sled ROSEBUD…it totally overwhelmed me! The incredible power of motion pictures in releasing dormant emotions was proven to me then and there!

On my (previously-mentioned) first trip to Hollywood in 1969, I visited four movie studios: Universal, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, and Walt Disney. In 2017, I revisited Paramount in depth on a deluxe, behind-the scenes, five-hour tour with lunch. I also visited Sony Studios, formerly RKO-Columbia-MGM. Such studio tours are so interesting, because you get to see all of the work that goes into making a movie – constructing the sets, scoring the music, arranging the lighting and cameras, editing the completed shots, writing the screenplays, getting the necessary props and costumes, rehearsing the actors and actresses after applying their make-up, etc. The creativity on display when making a film is formidable and remarkable! An expertly crafted movie can truly be a multi-dimensional work of art. On a studio tour, you also get to see the ‘magic’ of brick walls actually made of nothing but painted plasterboard, trees and plants made of realistic-looking plastic, facades of entire city streets, or interior rooms with no ceilings so as to accommodate proper lighting on the filming action.

So what are my twelve favorite movies, you may ask? Well, here they are: Doctor Zhivago, Ben-Hur, Citizen Kane, Lawrence of Arabia, The Bridge on the River Kwai, The Last Picture Show, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, Vertigo, El Cid, Hawaii, The Godfather, and A Man for All Seasons. Seeing as three of my favorites are from the same director, you can deduce that David Lean is my premiere moviemaker!

My favorite film genre is historical epics. Here are some of the best: Khartoum, The Sand Pebbles, Spartacus, Gone with the Wind, The Last Emperor, Saving Private Ryan, Ben-Hur, Nicholas and Alexandra, Lust For Life, The Agony and the Ecstasy, Titanic, El Cid, Hawaii, Gladiator, Chariots of Fire, and Apollo 13. Charlton Heston, my favorite actor, starred in four of these films.

The best movies filmed in glorious black & white, utilizing the full range of subtle and dramatic shadings and shadows, are: In Cold Blood, Raging Bull, Hud, Rebecca, Citizen Kane, Red River, The Last Picture Show, Paper Moon, The Grapes of Wrath, The Seventh Seal, and Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf.

Many “film noir” movies of the 1930’s-40’s-50’s were done in black & white rather than color, which added to the moody, dark atmosphere of wet city streets, betrayal, murder, and night-time existentialism. Some of the best of this genre are: Sunset Boulevard, Double Indemnity, Out of the Past, Touch of Evil, The Third Man, Laura, Casablanca, High Sierra, Key Largo, To Have and Have Not, and The Maltese Falcon. As you can see, Humphrey Bogart starred in the last five of these.

In addition to Heston and Bogart, some of my favorite actors are: Montgomery Clift, Jimmy Stewart, Gregory Peck, Alec Guinness, Max Von Sydow, Anthony Hopkins, Gary Cooper, Tom Hanks, Steve McQueen, Gene Hackman, Denzel Washington, Liam Neeson, and Joel McCrea. For actresses, I always liked Jean Simmons, Olivia de Havilland, and Natalie Wood. I also have autographs from several of these fine male and female performers.

Westerns are another favorite film genre of mine. As I get older, I especially enjoy the elemental dramas of good versus evil, set in spectacular outdoor settings. Some of the best are: The Big Country, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Dances With Wolves, The Shootist, Open Range, A Man Called Horse, The Wild Bunch, Tombstone, Shane, Once Upon a Time in the West, The Good the Bad and the Ugly, How the West Was Won, The Revenant, Red River, and The Grey Fox.

Prison movies have always fascinated me – basically, how can one get out alive? Here we have: The Great Escape, Midnight Express, The Shawshank Redemption, Cool Hand Luke, Papillion, The Last Castle, Runaway Train, The Green Mile, I Want to Live!, The Wrong Man, and Escape From Alcatraz.

The best war movies, in my opinion, are: The Guns of Navarone, Apocalypse Now, Saving Private Ryan, Das Boot (The Boat), Full Metal Jacket, The Deer Hunter, Platoon, Johnny Got His Gun, and Hacksaw Ridge.

Biblical and religious epics were especially popular in the 1950’s and at other times. Notable ones were: The Ten Commandments, The Robe, The Egyptian, Samson and Delilah, Song of Bernadette, King of Kings, The Greatest Story Ever Told, and Quo Vadis. Two other excellent religious offerings are A Nun's Story, and (most recently) The Silence.

In the mood for some romance? You can’t go wrong with: Somewhere in Time, An Affair to Remember, Interlude, Romeo and Juliet, Brief Encounter, Summertime, Obsession, and Love Story.

The best science fiction movies are: Forbidden Planet, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, The Andromeda Strain, Contact, Gravity, Alien, Interstellar, 2001: A Space Odyssey, and the entire Star Trek film series.

Want a good scare? The best horror films are: The Exorcist, The Shining, The Mothman Prophecies, The Omen, The Silence of the Lambs, and The Ring. (Two rather ‘unsettling’ movies I might add that are not officially ‘horror’: The Snake Pit, about a woman committed to a mental institution, and The Lost Weekend, about a man’s descent into alcoholism.)

Regarding The Exorcist, this was one of the most terrifying movies ever! I saw it in 1973 at the Granada Theater, a grand old movie palace in Chicago. I went with a group of seven college friends. The line to get in stretched around the block, such was the movie’s reviews and ‘word-of-mouth.’ Once inside the packed house, a hush of anticipation swept through the audience. Soon, the terror began – based a true event adapted from a best-selling book about a young girl possessed by the Devil and the priests trying to exorcise the demon. People quickly started screaming, some actually closing their eyes or hiding under the seats, with others actually running up the aisles and out of the theater! The movie was officially pulled from theaters across the country after just a few weeks, because it was so scary. It was re-edited with some of the shocking scenes and gore excised, and then re-issued with about twenty minutes cut. Even so, it remained a powerful experience, and was extremely successful at the box office.

Returning now to our category lists, some of the finest foreign films not already mentioned that you might enjoy are: Jean de Florette, Manon of the Spring, Pelle the Conqueror, The Immigrants, and The New Land.

Then let’s not forget the wonderful world of animation: Lady and the Tramp, Cinderella, Mulan, Anastasia, The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, Atlantis, and Fantasia.

The best of fantasy would include: Jason and the Argonauts, The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad, The Incredible Shrinking Man, Mysterious Island, The Wizard of Oz, Clash of the Titans, The Lord of the Rings trilogy, and the entire Harry Potter film series.

Biography movies often deeply impressed me. Some of the best in medicine, politics, exploration, and invention are: Madame Curie, Louis Pasteur, Edison the Man, Young Mr. Lincoln, Stanley and Livingstone, Elmer Gantry, Alexander Graham Bell, The Miracle Worker, and All the King’s Men.

Musicals can sweep through our emotions and often lift our spirits with some catchy tunes long after the end credits roll. How many of these have you seen? West Side Story, The Sound of Music, South Pacific, Grease, Carousel, Oklahoma, Brigadoon, My Fair Lady, Mary Poppins, The Fiddler on the Roof, and Oliver. (I would also recommend the film American Graffiti, both for its early 1960’s music soundtrack and its related teenage-era nostalgia.)

In the crime/courtroom drama category, beyond those mentioned in “film noir,” I would recommend: House of Games, Chinatown, Shadow of a Doubt, Strangers on a Train, Witness for the Prosecution, Experiment in Terror, The Fountainhead, 12 Angry Men, The Spanish Prisoner, White Heat, Primal Fear, Double Jeopardy, The Thomas Crown Affair, and the Godfather trilogy.

Action/adventure is another major movie category. The following films filled me with thrills: the entire James Bond 007 series (now up to 24 entries!), the Jason Bourne spy series, the Indiana Jones series, the Mission Impossible series, Air Force One, The Fugitive, The Mountains of the Moon, The Wind and the Lion, On the Beach, The Last Valley, The Day of the Jackal, The Bounty, and Moby Dick.

Comedies are our last category. The Marx Brothers -- with their quick,witty dialogues -- are hilarious. I can also easily laugh along with the antics of John Candy, Billy Crystal, Dana Carvey, Mike Myers, Bill Murray, Steve Martin, and Martin Short. Funny movies I like would include Wayne's World, Animal House, There's Something About Mary, The Blues Brothers, Trains Planes and Automobiles, Groundhog Day, Airplane!, Annie Hall, and the Austin Powers series.

Finally, here are a few movies that I have enjoyed just for sheer entertainment: Back to the Future, Castaway, Con-Air, and Starship Troopers.

The invention of the video cassette recorder in the 1980’s with their VHS tapes (and later, the DVD disk player) made it possible for anyone to record movies for free right off of your television set. You could even fast-forward through those annoying commercials – hurrah! No longer was the viewer restricted to the broadcast timetable of the networks – you could tape a particular movie anytime it aired, day or night, and then watch it whenever you wanted. Soon, complete movies would also become available for purchase from stores and later on-line. You could amass an entire private film library of your own! (I own about 250 VHS tapes and 200 DVDs at the present time.) ‘Home theaters’ next became the vogue, with people buying larger and larger television screens, and complimenting their viewing experience with elaborate stereo speaker systems.

The movies will forever be part of my life. Along with books and music, they are my ‘go-to’ for excitement, introspection, solace, escapism, and wonder. And if you are looking for the best website for movie facts, reviews, analysis, and trivia, check out International Movie Database at [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

I leave you now with the three most famous movie-making words:

“Lights…camera…action!”

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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