HOW

MOVIES

HELP MAKE THE WORLD BETTER, OR WORSE

BY GARETH HIGGINS

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CHAPTER 1

WITHOUT ADEQUATE IMAGES, WE WILL DIE OUT LIKE DINOSAURS

WE COMPREHEND...THAT NUCLEAR POWER IS A REAL DANGER FOR MANKIND, THAT OVER-CROWDING OF THE PLANET IS THE GREATEST DANGER OF ALL. WE HAVE UNDERSTOOD THAT THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT IS ANOTHER ENORMOUS DANGER. BUT I TRULY BELIEVE THAT THE LACK OF ADEQUATE IMAGERY IS A DANGER OF THE SAME MAGNITUDE. IT IS AS SERIOUS A DEFECT AS BEING WITHOUT MEMORY. WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO OUR IMAGES? WHAT HAVE WE DONE TO OUR EMBARRASSED LANDSCAPES? I HAVE SAID THIS BEFORE AND WILL REPEAT IT AGAIN AS LONG AS I AM ABLE TO TALK: IF WE DO NOT DEVELOP ADEQUATE IMAGES WE WILL DIE OUT LIKE DINOSAURS.

- WERNER HERZOG

My friend the architect Colin Fraser Wishart says that the purpose of his craft is to help people live better. There's beautiful simplicity, but also enormous gravity in that statement. Just imagine if every public building, city park, urban transportation hub, and home were constructed with the flourishing of humanity - in community or solitude - in mind. Sometimes this is already the case, and we know it when we see it. Our minds and hearts feel more free, we breathe more easily, we are inspired to create things - whether they be new thoughts of something hopeful, or friendships with strangers, or projects that will bring the energy of transformation yet still into the lives of others. If architecture, manifested at its highest purpose, helps us live better, then it is also easy to spot architecture that is divorced from this purpose. In our internal impressions of a building or other space made to function purely within the boundaries of current economic mythology - especially buildings made to house the so-called "making" of money - the color of hope only rarely reveals itself. Instead we are touched by melancholy, weighed down by drudgery, even compelled by the urge to get away. But when we see the shaping of a space whose stewards seem to have known that human kindness is more important than winning, that poetry and breathing matter beyond bank balances and competition (a concert hall designed for the purest reflection of sound, a playground where the toys blend in with the trees, a train station where the transition from one place and way of being to another has been honored as a spiritual act), we know that it is possible to always be coming home.

This is not just true for architecture, but for all art; all human endeavor, actually. So when occasions arise to speak to the well-worn question of the greatest movies ever made, my criteria may differ from the dominant wisdom in the film critic community. Instead of 'greatest', what about 'most humane' or 'transformative' or 'courageous'? What about 'films that made me laugh to the point of tears as I felt more part of the human race', or 'films that led to healing social change', or 'films that made me want to grow up'?

Movies, like all stories, have engaged moral and cultural questions since they began. Even the notional very first movie - the Lumière Brothers' silent short *Workers Leaving the Factory* (in which, surprise surprise, workers leave a factory) - invites such questions. Who are these people? What is the factory? What are the conditions in which the workers find themselves? Who are we to be recording them? Early movies were marketed as window box entertainments, like circus acts or rollercoasters, but the potential of the medium to explore and help make sense of real life soon revealed itself. The best-known early examples are probably Charlie Chaplin's silent comedies of the underclass, which unfolded tales of poverty, opening up the audience either to compassion for the oppressed, or self-recognition as a target of economic injustice.

The movies have always been sources of solace and provocation across genres:

The battlefield epics *All Quiet on the West Front* (1930), *Paths of Glory* (1957), *Come and See* (1985) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998) confront audiences with the futility of war.

Imaginative explorations of family and community life like *Fanny and Alexander* (1983), *Paris, Texas* (1984), and *Smoke* (1995) invite us to take love more seriously than we take ourselves.

Evocations of the inner life and outer expression like *Andrei Rublev* (1966), the *Three Colors Trilogy* (1993-94), and *Yi-Yi* (2000) wonder aloud about ambition, power, and the undeniability of spiritual transcendence.

We dance (because dancing is great and heals the world!) with Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* (1954), we laugh and learn about managing our various personas with Bing-Bong in *Inside Out* (2015), and we see the journey toward spiritual maturity in *Groundhog Day* (1993).

And films like *Munich* (2005), *The Village* (2004), *Of Gods and Men* (2011), *Lone Star* (1996), *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *The Great Beauty* (2013) investigate the relationship between individuals and history, and nudge us toward the hope that we might learn something from the past.

There are thousands more where those came from - a place where the mind of an artist organized other artists in community to enter into the highest standards of craft, and the most humane vision of the world, to produce a work of surpassing beauty. Now it's important to know that while a great film helps us live better, this doesn't mean a film needs to be happy, or "safe" to be great. That would deny greatness to Greek tragedy, *King Lear*, and *Schindler's List* alike. Can the art of movie-making be an act of social justice? Of course it can - the Polish film *A Short Film About Killing* (1988) was instrumental in the abolition of the death penalty there; *Thelma & Louise* (1991) upended the portrayal of women as second class citizens; Michael Moore's films have been a mirror to injustice (and his recent *Where to Invade Next* proposes solutions); the very fact that the Iranian director Jafar Panahi, threatened by his own government, makes films is a challenge to political repression; the astonishing *The Act of Killing* (2012) both memorializes genocide victims and has some of those responsible begin to take on the burden of their own violence.

To ask whether or not cinema can be dangerous is to state the obvious. Stories shape our lives, and the limits of what we believe to be possible or preferable in life. Movies are among the most powerful story delivery mechanisms the world has ever seen, and with power comes not only the potential to heal, but the risk of danger. And while they may

be overtaken by social media, video games, and news-infotainment, there's something unique about how we receive and process movie images and stories. To take just one aspect that seems ubiquitous in movies, I think that the way movies deal with violence is enormously important. I think we are posed a simple question: do movies tell the truth about violence? Do we see the impact of a killing, not just in gore but the ripple effect of trauma and loss (not to mention a plausible portrayal of what leads people to kill in the first place)? Is movie violence portrayed proportionately? Research shows that the world appears to be getting less violent, but are our movies tuned into the reality that one of the factors why violence reduces is when people are encouraged to empathize with "enemies", and to see lethal force as a last resort? Is the movie challenging, transcending, or simply reinforcing or even worshipping the belief that violence brings order out of chaos? (If you want to define paradox, sit down with these questions after a triple bill of *The Godfather Part II*, *Kill Bill*, and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*. One is a tragedy revealing the repeating damage that violence does even to those who commit it, one is nationalistic propaganda for the war on terror, and one is either a cartoonish, dehumanized celebration of horrific killing, or a hymn to motherhood. The question may be simple, but the answer isn't.) But also of course, most movies are not very good; and many of the best movies are hard to find at theaters, because of the assumption that they won't make money. Yet today we also have the opportunity to see more movies at home than ever. Experiencing the best of cinema requires us to become conscious participants rather than passive consumers. We're in this welcome cultural moment where the underrepresentation of women and people of color in cinema is being challenged. Choosing to diversify what we watch (especially movies told from the perspective of someone other than white men) would be a step toward embracing the best of this extraordinary, exquisite medium of storytelling and image revelation.

WHAT IS A GREAT MOVIE?

In case some may say that the central idea here fails to account for the aesthetics and technical craft of filmmaking, let me be clear: For me, it's simple: the purpose of cinema - as an art-form, and as a communal and individual experience - is to help us live better.

The best movies help us understand more of who we are, and how to transcend our brokenness without excluding our shadows. My definition of a great movie?

A great movie is what results when humane wisdom and grace, and technical and aesthetic craft operating at their highest frequencies kiss each other.

What the distinguished peace theorist and activist John Paul Lederach calls "the moral imagination" with which artists dance can expand the possibilities of violence reduction and healing, or reinforce the terms on which violence seeks to justify itself. This is the artist's highest calling - whether we find ourselves in a situation of escalating dehumanization, or one in which violence is already decreasing. If our task as storytellers is to tell the truth in a way that escalates humanization, and if part of the truth is that violence isn't entertaining, and that stories and images can heal or destroy, then what, indeed, are the greatest films ever made?
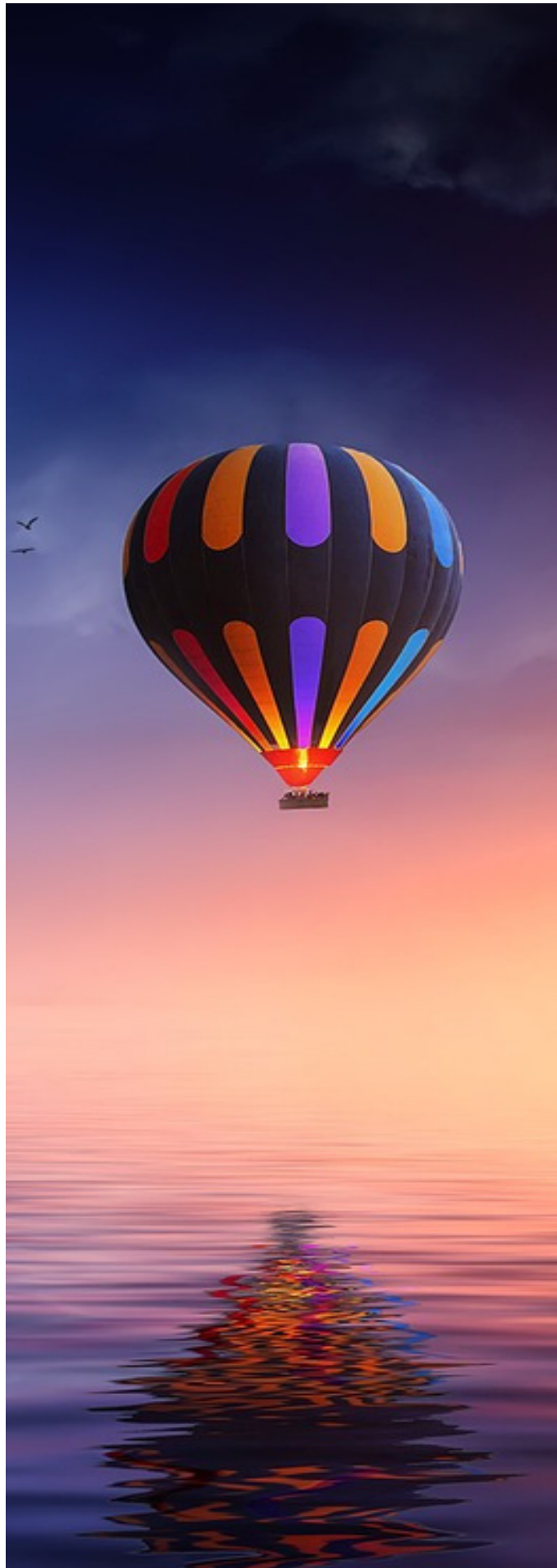
WHAT MOVIES MAKE THE WORLD BETTER?

There's a stunning moment toward the end of *Make Way For Tomorrow*, Leo McCarey's unimpeachable 1937 masterpiece, and the film that Orson Welles described as the saddest movie ever made, when our heroes – and victims, Barkley and Lucy, aging parents reduced by the Great Depression to not being able to afford their home, and about to be split up by their grown children, none of whom are willing to care for them meaningfully, spend an afternoon reminiscing about their honeymoon. They share a meal at the hotel they had visited 50 years before, they recite poetry to each other, they decide to dance together. The audience knows that this is quite possibly the last time they will see each other. At the dinner table, Barkley and Lucy, played by Victor Moore and Beulah Bondi do something usually associated with Brechtian theatre; or a more recent postmodern sensibility. They turn toward the camera, and stare piercingly into our eyes. Into our souls. They are asking us to visit with them, to sit still for a second and really identify with them, to actually face their sorrow, and our complicity in the sorrow each of us may cause in the course of a lifetime. It's an astonishing moment; *Make Way for Tomorrow* may well be the saddest movie ever made.

Make Way For Tomorrow, 1937 (Paramount)

We may also feel that the position many movie critics and audiences find themselves in today is an embodiment of the kind of moment captured on film at the end of *Make Way for Tomorrow* – with those of us whose vocations as critics seem to be being forced aside by the callous children of social media, non-paying super-blogs, and film studios who don't care what we think. To this, I would want to offer a note of caution – there's something else about tomorrow that the movies teach us; and all is not lost. We'll get to that teaching on tomorrow later; for now, let me tell you a story about myself.

The places that matter to me are frequently not real. They're places I've seen dancing on a white screen, animated by dusty light in a darkened room. They're places I've been to without leaving the (dis)comfort of a plush red seat with no legroom. They're places that seem bigger than real life.

These places exist, because In The Beginning, the Creator, in the form of two French engineers, down on their luck, perhaps too dependent on Maman, and not sure what to do with their lives, had an idea. On a winter's night in the early 1890s, it occurred to them that what the world in mid-Industrial Revolution needed most was to have the opportunity to watch pictures dancing with light and dust. The well-being of the planet could be nurtured by thirty feet high images of men with guns, women with perfectly fake breasts, and young men having sex with cherry pies. That was the gift of the Lumiere Brothers. If you visit the cemetery where they're buried, you can find their grave easily – it's the one with the neatly tilled soil – they've turned over in shame so many times that it always looks like their plot was freshly dug.

In spite of the sometimes embarrassing nature of their legacy, when I reflect on what makes me human, or at least what makes me feel human, because, God knows, there's enough out there that tries to deal death to any sentient notion of experiential human-ness, I find my thoughts turn, more often than not, to the movies.

I think my soul finds rest when the curtain goes up, in the way that, for some people, visiting the Sistine chapel or the Musee D'orsay, watching football on television can make them feel at home in themselves. I often feel whole when I'm in a cinema; partly, I think, because it connects me with the innocence of childhood, and partly because, for the two hours or so that I'm in that space, nothing else can touch me. One of the characters in *Death of a Salesman* iterates, even lives by the shibboleth 'attention must be paid', that's a call so powerful that it can kill – and I wonder if it's also because the film I'm watching has no choice but to pay attention to me that I like to go to the movies so much.

And every once in a while, someone on the screen says or does something that makes me feel understood, as when William H. Macy's Donnie Smith in *Magnolia* cries 'I really do have love to give, I just don't know where to put it', or when Gene Hackman's master thief in David Mamet's *Heist* explains how he gets away with it: 'I'm not smart, I just imagine what people smarter than I would do in the same situation and then I do that', or when I watch *The Wizard of Oz* every December and am reminded that my fears are just an old man behind a curtain,

who only has the power I give to him.

The Wizard of Oz, 1939 (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

And if the notion of using a fairy tale wizard as a psychological tool strikes you as odd, I guess I should say that I have long believed that the way cinema portrays life doesn't have to be 'real', as long as it's not fake. But my reasons for seeing film as something worthy of an investment of precious time are more than psychotherapeutic; they're sociological, and perhaps even prophetic. Arthur Miller, author of that same attention-giver *Death of a Salesman* was described on his death by *Time* magazine as a 'slayer of false values', and the best cinematic art does just that. Chuck Palahniuk told me once that he wrote the section in *Fight Club* about IKEA catalogues as postmodern pornography because he wanted to satirize his own superficiality – the book is about the author's own attempts to break free from mediocrity. And so, failing thought it may be, is this paper. And the films I most give a damn about are the ones that give a damn about me – or at least about people generally, and the struggle to be human in a technophiliac world, driven by the forces of what it's too easy to call (because it's real) the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex.

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Martin Scorsese famously spent his early years in a movie theatre because of asthma; I did it because I didn't like playing rugby – and that's the only other thing that was available on bleak Northern Ireland Saturdays. I wonder now whether or not I would have been any good at rugby had Marty McFly not gone back to the future in such compelling fashion.

It was the first movie I saw more than once at the cinema; and on the day my elementary school exam results were issued I chose to see it a third time rather than take a family day trip to Dublin, which at the time was the most exciting place I'd ever been. That kind of commitment is a bit like that of the smoker who can't afford to buy groceries, but can always find enough money for cigarettes. Friends and lovers alike have found my willingness to drop everything in favor of the movies endearing, at least the first time, although the charm of considering cinema more important than real life soon wears off.

But that's only because the world is made up of two kinds of people – those who get movies, and those who don't. The first kind, my kind of people, can sit in the enclosed darkened room at any time of day, and get excited when the lights go down, no matter what is about to appear on screen. We travel halfway round the world to visit film festivals to see movies that will be released at home in a few months anyway; we pay good money to go to Berlin for a morning just to see the statue the angels perch on in *Wings of Desire*; we fall into ourselves with delirium when we catch a glimpse of Isabella Rossellini on the street; we stay up late to watch films we've only vaguely heard of because our fellow cinematic nerds have said the cinematographer 'has a wonderful eye', or that the movie influenced the mid-wave of the post-apocalyptic Mongolian agricultural documentary movement, or perhaps merely because someone told us the director's dog has a great bark.

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For what it's worth, this is what I think about the power of cinema: it makes us imagine something bigger than ourselves. I'm not sure I can do that with words, but not being fulfilled by the real temples of organized religion has allowed me to kneel at the altar of the white screen and demand that it answer my life's questions.

I think about the magic of cinema, the God's-eye view we have of those on screen; and how when I met a Big Star I felt weird because he wasn't as tall as he should be. Given that that would be around 18 feet, this shouldn't have come as a surprise, but inasmuch as Al Pacino's character in Michael Mann's *Heat* believes that holding onto his angst keeps him sharp, I suppose for me, risking appearing naive might keep me in touch with the kind of innocence of which a cynical world needs a great deal more.

I think of a hundred heroic films that made me feel like anything was possible, or romantic comedies that taught me something about love, or dramas that helped explain the meaning of life.

I think of *Magnolia* and wonder at its capacity for squeezing in what is wrong with modern North American middle class life, and how the opportunity for redemption cannot be engineered, but must simply be received. And *Broadway Danny Rose*, and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *Limbo* and everything else John Sayles has ever made.

I think of Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources and how they begin as innocuous dramas about a dispute between neighbors, but conclude with you being terrified for the characters, and you want them to love and not destroy each other, because they make you think about how knowing one extra piece of information about a person can change everything. The fearful miracle is that it can make you love instead of killing them. And *Fanny and Alexander*, and *Au Hasard Balthasar*, and *La Regle du Jeu* and *The Grey Zone* (a concentration camp drama by Tim Blake Nelson, one of the most undervalued/underrated/underknown director working today).

I think of the best double bill I ever curated – two films that have far more in common that you would think, both stories about the search by ordinary people for a sense of purpose and success, centered on 'making it' in the film industry, and raising issues of what might get sacrificed along the way, these two films which are, of course: David Lynch's *Mullholland Dr*. and Jim Henson's *The Muppet Movie*. Trust me – they belong together.

*Mullholland Dr.*, 2001 (Les Films Alain Sarde)   *The Muppet Movie,* 1979 (Henson Associates)

I think about how sometimes I'd prefer the magic of cinema to stay where it used to be – in my heart; and I wish that I didn't have to force myself to become innocent every time I see a movie – I wish for the time when there was no difference between my belief about what was possible, and Hollywood's vision. I wish for a time when I didn't have to work to put myself in the frame of mind that believed in the possibility of hope.

CHAPTER 4

WHAT ARE CRITICS FOR?

think about going to see Julian Schnabel's *Basquiat* in a Kansas City art house on a day in the summer of 1996 when it appeared that only single men were allowed into the theatre. Thirteen of us, sitting alone, dotted around the cinema, enraptured by the imagery that told of this broken artist and Reagan-era Warhol cohort. The film ends with the telling of a medieval myth about a prince locked in a tower by his evil relatives; to alert the local peasantry to his predicament, he bangs his crown off the wall, but they hear this only as music...it was an image with the potential to become the definition of cliché, but to us in the audience, it spoke only of the way we feel about the world. As Henryk Gorecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* reached its long crescendo and the prince banged his head harder, a guy in the front row of the Kansas City theatre flung his arms in the air, and held them there, as if this were a worship service. This was worship – of a kind; worship of the divine so many of us still want to believe in or hope for, and perhaps also of the extraordinary creative urge of which humans are sometimes capable.
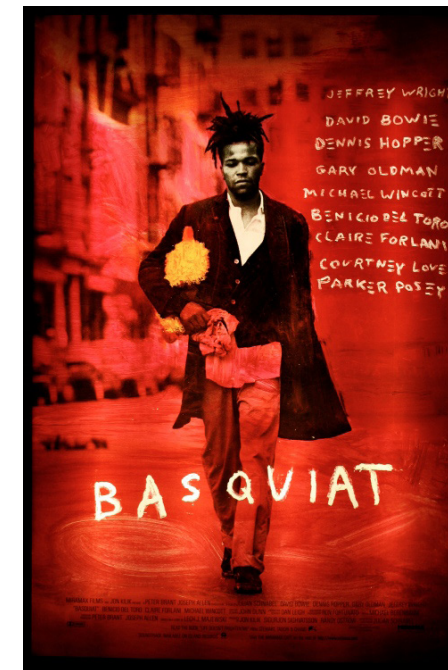
Basquiat, 1996 (Miramax)

Basquiat is the kind of film that might make the Lumiere Brothers feel their endeavours were not wasted; and this is germane to our discussion for one simple reason: I would not have gone to see *Basquiat* if it had not been for film criticism. I would not have gone to see *Basquiat* if it had not been for Roger Ebert, who at the time of its release wrote the following:

Anyone who has ever painted or drawn knows the experience of dropping out of the world of words and time. A state of reverie takes over; there is no sensation of the passing of hours. The voice inside our head that allows us to talk to ourselves

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falls silent, and there is only color, form, texture and the way things flow together.

There is a theory to explain this. Language is centered on the left side of the brain. Art lives on the right side. You can't draw a thing as long as you're thinking about it in words. That's why artists are inarticulate about their work, and why it is naive to ask them, "What were you thinking about when you did this?" They have given it less thought than you have.

And this is why the critic is necessary. Because the function of the critic is not the same as the function of the artist. Criticism, of course, may be artful, just as film-making is sometimes artless; but the primary function of criticism is closer to that of spiritual director than poet. In short, if we are ultimately all one person made in the image of God (that's a hypothesis, of course, but you don't have to agree with it to keep reading), and the task of being human includes freeing ourselves from mutually exclusive interpretations, or what Freud in Nicholas Meyer's *The Seven Per-cent Solution* calls "less finite solutions" to human problems than killing each other, and to become more than the sum of our parts by hearing the voices of – and thereby honoring the image of God in – others, then the role of the critic is supremely important: because critics show us what it is that we're doing.

This matters because – obviously – art matters. And, as Ebert said in his *Basquiat* review, artists don't always know what it is they are doing.

For instance, *Shutter Island*, for me, one of the most artful and theologically important films released in recent years (and by di Caprio's presence evidence that massive celebrity does not necessarily preclude high art's potential) speaks profoundly about the lament that America needs to sit with if the wound of 9/11 and the projected shadow that followed are to be integrated into the national psyche; but I'm not sure than even Martin Scorsese knows that. It takes the hermeneutic community that becomes possible when people who didn't make the film but live as informed audience members to reflect back on what the film may mean so that readers might be provoked to think further about the value of this art object in their lives.

Shutter Island, 2010 (Paramount Pictures)

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Because none of this makes sense apart from everyday human experience. I project my desire onto the narrative arcs stewarded by films as various and diverse as *Andrei Rublev*, *Field of Dreams*, and *The Exorcist*.

Field of Dreams, 1989 (Universal Pictures)

As Proust wrote of characters in novels, I see myself revealed in cinematic representations of 15th century Russian icon painters, 20th century hippy farmers in Iowa, and ancient but new Catholic demon expellers. Now, I don't paint icons, and I don't farm, and the last time anyone threw up in my face it wasn't Linda Blair – but the archetypal journeys of Andrei Rublev, Kevin Costner's hippy farmer, and Jason Miller's Fr Karras in *The Exorcist* speak profoundly to me about my own journey.

James L. Brooks wrote a line worth the $120 million budget of *How Do You Know?*, a Reese Witherspoon film not thought by many to be the revelation of a profound mystery about human existence, but nonetheless worth reflecting on –

Life is about finding out what you want, and learning how to ask for it.

This may sound selfish at first, but understood more thoughtfully could be seen as a postmodern variation on what St Augustine understood as the injunction to "love God, and do what you want". And all fiction is about this: people finding out (or not finding out) what they want (or don't want) and learning how to ask (or not ask) for it. All fiction is reflective of the nature of being human: because to be human is to be a storyteller. We tell the story of our lives, and this story circumscribes for us what we believe to be possible. Film-makers tell us a story about their lives, and their vision of what is possible in the world. Critics are supposed to interpret this story. It was ever thus. This happened, surely, in biblical times – the carpenter Jesus was a critic of his social order, and of the stories people believed and

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lived from. It happened at regal courts when jesters whispered satire in the ear of the king. It happened in 19th century Denmark when Soren Kierkegaard suggested charging a fee to theologians who wanted to attend his bible studies, as they/we make our living off the crucified Christ, we should be prepared to pay for the privilege of participating in the Christian community. It happened in the 1970s when the New Zealand poet James K Baxter quit his high-paying job as a university professor to found a community in the wilderness, the sole entry qualification to which was a willingness to admit personal brokenness. And it happens today, every time film critics manage to bypass snark and shortcut to share humbly and with grace our response to the art objects we are privileged to see before the public do.

I want to conclude by acknowledging the economic precariousness we face as critics. Some of us are lucky to be paid to be critics. I am not one of them. Some of us are lucky to be paid to work full-time as theologians or philosophers. I am not one of them. But as I think that all of us are called to be storytellers and theologians, I get to do the work, whether I get paid for it or not. The economic model that has sustained film criticism (and academic theology and philosophy) for the past half-century will give way to something else. If I ruled the world, I'd want that something else to be reminiscent of an egalitarian locavore non-nuclear family community, where we work and live together, earning what we can from meaningful income-generating work, sharing our goods with each other, and sitting round tables talking about what the latest movie says about the nature of being. But that's a few years off.

For now, let us recognize this, with humility:

It's a high calling, to be a critic (or a thoughtful audience member). I don't intend that to enlarge our egos – there are many high callings, chief among them in my view is that of getting to be a human being, so recognizing the importance of the act of criticism is certainly not any kind of avowal of superiority over others. But it is a spiritual discipline that can assist ourselves and others in learning how to take that universal calling – being human – more seriously, and to understand it better. In the sacred act of call and response that we watchers and the artists and the storytellers whose work we are watching are stuck in together, whether we like it or not, criticism is half the work. They call, we respond. We do not best serve our calling by resorting to easy snark, personal insults, or by equating the task of criticism with just criticizing.

Critics have a role to play in helping the world tell its own story. We have privileged access to the newest variations on that story, every time we go to a preview screening. And we get to help hold cultural, psychological, and spiritual memory.

We can look back on *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and write about how it still feels ahead of its time, and more than that, speaks profoundly to our hope that ancient truth doesn't need to be adapted: in short – love does conquer all.
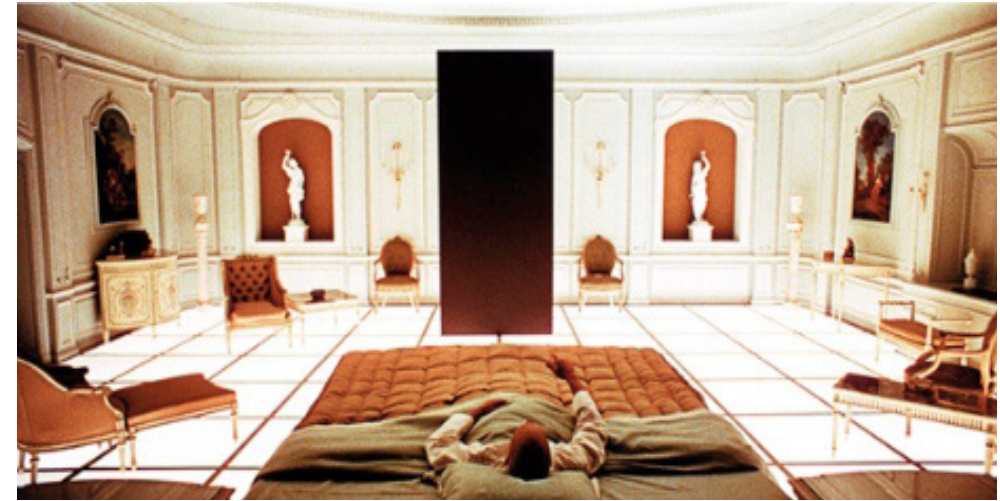
2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968 (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer)

We can help our audience respond to *Shutter Island* or *Once Upon a Time in America* by saying how each feels like a religious icon of lament, and that if you don't learn to face the darkness of your past, you will simply keep hurting yourself, and everyone around you.

We can declare from the rooftops that it is entirely consistent to be thrilled, moved, and even inspired by the horrific sacrifice in *The Exorcist*
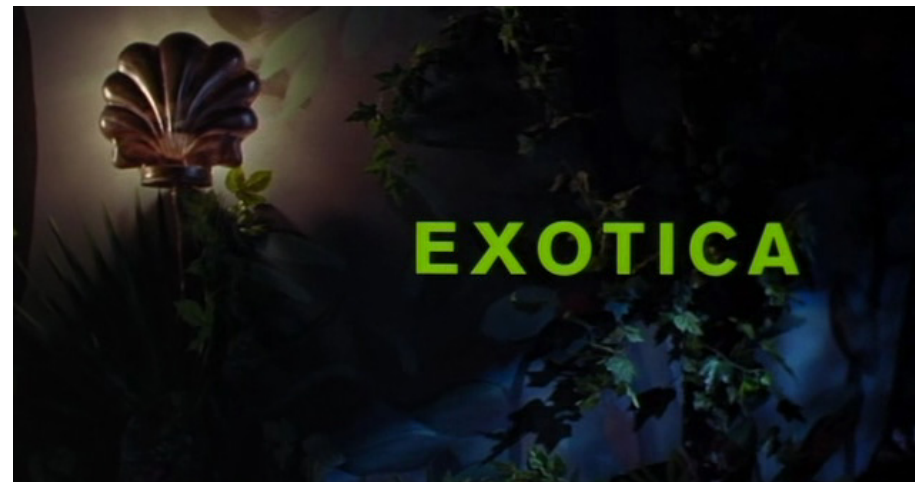

The Exorcist, 1973 (Warner Bros.)

and moved by the end of *ET*

E.T. The Extra Terrestrial, 1982 (Universal Pictures)

and stimulated to be more compassionate for the suffering people of the world by Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*,

Exotica, 1994 (Miramax)

and moved by *The Elephant Man*

Elephant Man, 1980 (Paramount Pictures)

and provoked to think about the relationship between dreams and reality by *Eyes Wide Shut*

Eyes Wide Shut, 1999 (Warner Brothers)

and historically challenged by Theo Angelopoulos' *Eternity and a Day*. And that's just a few films beginning with the letter E.

In short, critics can nurture a space in which people can find their own way toward interpreting the art they are watching, and to dialogue with themselves about what it

means to be human. This is a high calling indeed. We owe it to ourselves, and to our calling to respect the difference between criticizing and critique; between snark and thoughtful challenge; and between personal insult and encouraging improvement. It's a high calling that doesn't depend on money, isn't determined by the market, and isn't even about whether or not we get to do this for a living. It's about who you are, how transparent you are willing to be with your readers about how your projected desires found (or didn't find) resonance on the screen. In my judgement, there are only two qualifications: you need to know something about movies; and you need to want to be more human.

In the new world of the democratization of criticism, we may feel threatened by how 140 characters or less might have the power to undermine our work. But as the Franciscan activist priest Richard Rohr says, the best response to the bad is the practice of the good. Social media doesn't have to be a threat: in fact, it actually opens up space for more authentic dialogue between critics and our audience, and between critics and film-makers than was ever previously possible. So please, tweet away. Facebook your desire to live differently after seeing Gaspar Noe's *Enter the Void*; blog how your hopes and dreams are in a recursive relationship – shaping and being shaped by – your experience of Abbas Kiarostami or Steven Spielberg or Wim Wenders or Samira Makhmalbaf or Lynne Ramsay or Edward Yang or Hirokazu Koreeda or Mike Leigh or Mira Nair or Jim Jarmusch. But above all, be faithful to the calling of being a critic in the context of something called the arts and humanities:

Your calling is to help rehumanize the world.

THE MOVIES AND MEANING POLL: 50 MOVIES THAT HELP US LIVE BETTER

**MOVIES & MEANING PRESENTS:
50 MOVIES THAT HELP US LIVE BETTER**

Movies & Meaning is a community gathering in the spirit that the stories we tell and the images we make can help us live better. We watch movies together as icons that illuminate, inspire, challenge, and help us to rehumanize ourselves and the world.

We provide tools for hosting screenings and conversations that build community and offer transformation.

We encourage filmmakers and other artists by providing a platform for their work to be experienced in the best possible environment and by advancing the idea that beauty can save the world.

We host small events in the U.S. and elsewhere to bring the community together to experience this beauty.

And once per year we host the Movies & Meaning Experience in a beautiful space for watching iconic classics, recently overlooked masterpieces, and new films that help us live better.

We've hosted artists including Pulitzer Prize winning author Alice Walker, actor Hal Holbrook, director Godfrey Reggio, poet Jessica Helen Lopez, and contemplative activist Richard Rohr, and offered an exquisite platform for films such as *The Tree of Life*, *Good Vibrations*, *Koyaanisqatsi*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Make Way for Tomorrow*, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *Tocanda la Luz*, and *Love is Strange*.

Now we've compiled our first survey of the *Movies That Help Us Live Better*, or perhaps even the *Movies That Save the World*. Based on a combination of a poll of the M&M community and the contributions of critics and film-makers, this list is a contribution to the conversation about art and life, and we hope it serves as an invitation to watch more, think more, and live better. (To expand the diversity of our list, when a director has been nominated more than once, we identify their highest ranked film and then add their other nominated films in parentheses.) We invite you to watch these films, and let them work their magic.

This is not a list of the greatest films ever made, such are available in many other places. It's also not a list of my favorite films, although many of these do hold great affection in my heart. Many wonderful films and filmmakers are not represented here - although they do show up when I write about greatest and favorite - and we can talk about them anytime...But for our purposes here, instead, what I've tried to do is to make a suggestion of fifty movies that can help us live better, by trying to tell the truth about life, lament its wounds, celebrate its wonder, and explore the boundaries of how humans might evolve more kindness, more connection, more... better. I've wandered off the beaten path, seeking something beyond the most popular films; teachers have challenged me to move beyond the narrow and often blinkered circle of stories in which only one kind of person gets to shine.

So this list includes thirty four movies not set entirely in the US, twenty-five directed by women, eighteen not only in the English language, and voices from India, France, Denmark, Uganda, Canada, Japan, Aotearoa New Zealand, Iran, Germany, Brazil, Indonesia, Scotland, Sweden, Italy, Native America, Belgium, Vietnam, and more. The films listed range from a small drama about the Great Depression made in 1937 to an epic about miniaturization made in 2017.

The wonderful Indian-American director Mira Nair told me recently that "*I think now more than ever is the time to transcend our boundaries with the other. I think the world would be a much better place if there were a greater balance in popular cinema, between the violent tent-pole franchises that take you on a ride but don't provoke you or let you see the mirror of real life, and the cinema from all over the world which shows you that my street is actually kind of like your street. We don't see stories from the different countries in Africa. We don't see stories from Thailand. We don't see stories from even Hawaii. It should not be so rare for people to tell their own stories. We have to rage and rail against homogeneity.*"

This list, then, is partly a response to Mira Nair's call (and one of her films is more than deservedly on it). It's not a perfect list, nor a comprehensive one, but an invitation to step into other worlds that may help us make our own better.

So without further ado, *Movies & Meaning Presents: Movies That Help Us Live Better*.

2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)

The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn, and Anonymous, 2012)

After Life (Hirokazu Kore-eda, 1998)

After the Wedding (Susanne Bier, 2006)

Babette's Feast (Gabriel Axel, 1987)

Being There (Hal Ashby, 1979)

The Before Trilogy (Richard Linklater, 1995-2013)

Brave (Brenda Chapman, Mark Andrews, Steve Purcell, 2012)

Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005)

Children of a Lesser God (Randa Haines, 1986)

Cameraperson (Kirsten Johnson, 2016)

Cloud Atlas (Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, and Tom Tykwer)

Daughters of the Dust (Julie Dash, 1991)

Downsizing (Alexander Payne, 2017)

Faces Places (2017, Agnes Varda & J.R.)

Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989)

The Fisher King (Terry Gilliam, 1991)

The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009)

The Great Dictator (Charlie Chaplin, 1940)

I am Belfast (Mark Cousins, 2015)

Inside Out (Pete Docter, 2015)

Jean de Florette/Manon des Sources (Claude Berri, 1986)

Life is Beautiful (Roberto Benigni, 1997)

Iran in 9.11.01 (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2002)

Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola, 2002)

Make Way for Tomorrow (Leo McCarey, 1937)

Mudbound (Dee Rees, 2017)

Munich (Steven Spielberg, 2005)

Old Joy (Kelly Reichardt, 2006)

The Piano (Jane Campion, 1993)

Paris, Texas (Wim Wenders, 1984)

Queen of Katwe (Mira Nair, 2016)

Ratcatcher (Lynne Ramsay, 1999)

Selma (Ava DuVernay, 2014)

The Secret Life of Words (Isabel Coixet, 2005)

Smoke (Wayne Wang & Paul Auster, 1995)

Smoke Signals (Chris Eyre, 1998)

Stories We Tell (Sarah Polley, 2012)

The Snowman (Dianne Jackson, 1982)

Three Colors Trilogy (Krzysztof Kieślowski, 1993-1994)

Toni Erdmann (Maren Ade, 2016)

The Tree of Life (Terrence Malick, 2011)

Together (Lukas Moodysson, 2000)

Two Days, One Night (The Dardenne Brothers, 2014)

Waste Land (Lucy Walker, 2010)

Whale Rider (Niki Caro, 2002)

Water (Deepa Mehta, 2005)

Winter's Bone (Debra Granik, 2010)

Wonderstruck (Todd Haynes, 2017)

Yi-Yi (Edward Yang, 2000)

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www.moviesandmeaning.com