I Like Movies

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I had for a few years carried on the seeds for an essay called "I Like Movies" but I had never gotten around planting them to see what would sprout. Then, in the winter of 2024, as I was struggling with a depression and spent most of my time locked in my room, reading everything from Aldous Huxley's wonderful collection of essays "Music at Night" to Amor Towles' charming novel "A Gentleman in Moscow", I decided to try this peculiar form of gardening they call writing. Whether a thistle or an orchid, this is what grew.

◇ 1 ◇

I like movies. I like dark, gritty movies, such as ***No Country for Old Men***, ***Låt den rätte komma in***, ***Un prophète***. And I like lighthearted, uplifting movies, such as ***The School of Rock***, ***Paddington 2***, ***Once***. I like conventional, dramatic movies, such as ***12 Angry Men***, ***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***, ***Atonement***. And I like quirky, playful movies, such as ***Marcel the Shell with Shoes On***, ***The Princess Bride***, ***PlayTime***. I like movies about love and longing, such as ***About Time***, ***Before Sunrise***, ***Blue Valentine***. And I like movies about hate and contempt, such as ***Relatos Salvajes***, ***Le Haine***, ***This is England***. I like black-and-white noirs, such as ***Double Indemnity***, ***The Third Man***, ***The Night of the Hunter***. And I like colorful adventures, such as ***The Grand Budapest Hotel***, ***The Fall***, ***Mad Max: Fury Road***. I like silent movies, such as ***Metropolis***, ***The General***, ***City Lights***. And I like musical movies, such as ***Singin' in the Rain***, ***A Hard Day's Night***, ***Mamma Mia!***. I like feature animations, such as ***Spirited Away***, ***The Iron Giant***, ***Les Triplettes de Belleville***. And I like real-life documentaries, such as ***The Act of Killing***, ***The Remarkable Life of Ibelin***, ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters***.

Looking back at my life, it would seem that this is the one particular drum I've been beating. I've a very clear memory of being about 11 years old and being allowed by my parents to stay up late on a school night to see a television screening of the first Indiana Jones movie, ***Raiders of the Lost Ark***. It was the most exciting thing I had ever seen. Here was a movie that seemed to contain almost everything

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conceivable to an 11-year-old mind. It had rolling boulders, hidden spears, and snake pits; motorcycles, trucks, tanks, a Pan Am Clipper, and a U-boat; whips, swords, revolvers, machine guns, and a rocket launcher; two secret intelligence officers, a few scheming Frenchmen, and a lot of sadistic Nazis. For location, it took place in the mighty jungles of South America, the snowy mountains of Nepal, the golden deserts of Egypt, and at a classroom in an American university. There was a supernatural element in it too, as the Ark of the Covenant released some terrifying spirits, melting faces and blowing up heads. And then you had the title character himself, who was witty, fearless, and who, even when he got beaten, turned out to be as indestructible as Wile E. Coyote. Of course, it was impossible for me not to talk about it for months.

When I was about 16, and a high-schooler, I discovered Italian neorealism. Above all, it was ***Ladri di biciclette*** that had the greatest impact on me. It was something very far removed from ***Raiders of the Lost Ark***. There were no rolling boulders or hidden spears, just the unrelenting challenges of poverty. There were no secret agents or sadistic villains, just thieves. There were no sweeping jungles or deserts, just the weary streets of post-war Rome. There were no supernatural forces or exploding heads, just real-life injustice and fading hope. And the main character, Ricci, was already a destroyed man from the onset. But ***Ladri di biciclette*** had bicycles – there were no bicycles in ***Raiders of the Lost Ark*** – and it was so free of intentions to impress that it became unforgettable.

Strange as it may seem, it was easier to convince people to watch ***Raiders of the Lost Ark*** than it was to get them to see ***Ladri di biciclette***. I was beating the same drum as before, but this time it would appear that I was the only one who could hear the music. I'll admit this didn't make me the most popular guy in high-school, although there was a brief moment, when three female exchange students from Italy came to stay with us, when I thought it was my time to shine. It wasn't. They were no more interested in Italian neorealism than I was in the categorization of fungus subspecies found in German parking lots. I know I didn't impress them, but I think I left an impression. If there was a lesson to be learned from this experience – and there probably was – I didn't stick around long enough to get it. There were too many movies to see and too little time. Besides, I was on the brink of discovering the French New Wave.

Around the age of 19, I got a job at the local record and movie store. I was very proud of that job. I felt that I belonged there, like I was part of a drumline. Roger Ebert once said that one of the great gifts a movie lover can give another is the title of a wonderful film they haven't yet discovered. Working there, I got to do that

almost every day. One Saturday stands out in my memory. I had seen ***The Way Way Back*** the night before, and it had charmed me to my bones. I wanted everyone to know about this little gem, so I spent the day passionately recommending it to everyone who walked through the door. By the end of my shift, I must've sold a hundred copies of ***The Way Way Back***, and I remember having a few customers stopping by a week or so later to tell me they had loved the film. I might not have been able to sell Jordan Belfort, the main character of ***The Wolf of Wall Street***, his pen, but I'm pretty sure I could've sold him a copy of ***The Way Way Back***. Not that the sales really mattered – like Lester Bangs said in ***Almost Famous***, "The only true currency in this bankrupt world is what you share with someone else when you're uncool." And sharing that movie felt like the most valuable thing I could do.

All recommendations must, I suppose, contain a piece of the one doing the recommending. They speak to who one is, what one knows, and what one has to offer. They say, "Here is a movie *I* like, and I want *you* to like it too, and, by extension, to like *me*." I met one of my best friends at that job, and he once recommended to me ***Anvil! The Story of Anvil***. I like that movie, a lot, but I cherish it even more because in recommending it to me, he – consciously or not – showed that he knew who I was and that he cared enough to give it thought. For three years, we worked together at the store, spending our modest pay on weekly visits to the local cinematheque, not just for the films (and the affordable beer) but also for the shared experience of discovering a new film together. I didn't pick up any good moves going there, but I got to see a lot of good movies.

I give all this background information because what I want to do here is write a bit about movies, to reflect on my attitudes toward this art form, and, to echo George Orwell in his famous essay *Why I Write*, I don't think it's possible to understand this attitude without knowing something about my early development. My experiences have, of course, accumulated over time, and my perspectives have evolved – if not glacially, then at least gradually – but this is the thread, woven through conversations at the store, shared discoveries with friends, and countless solitary screenings, that I believe is binding me to the medium. Along the way I'll mention a few films that I, for reasons I can't always fully articulate, like, but mostly all I have to say is captured in the title of this essay. I'm not a filmmaker, and I don't have the grasp of film of someone like, say, Roger Ebert or Thomas Flight. François Truffaut once said, "Film lovers are sick people," and like many film lovers, I have only this one "sickness," this one "area": I like movies.

◇ 2 ◇

I can remember seeing ***Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*** in the cinema and liking it in 2003. I can also remember watching it and liking it almost as much quite recently, a few months ago, when a streaming service suggested it to me. The experience was different, of course. In 2003, I saw it in a packed theater. The audience was laughing and gasping together, and that energy made the whole thing feel bigger. Watching it at home, alone on a quiet evening, felt smaller, quieter, but still enjoyable – except for the moments when I caught myself glancing at my phone.

To see, or not to see, that's the question – how rarely we're truly seeing! At least the kind of seeing I'm talking about – active, questioning, deliberate – feels increasingly rare these days. We glimpse, we observe, we scroll, but we don't see. "We only see what we look at," writes John Berger in his brilliant book *Ways of Seeing*, "to look is an act of choice." When it comes to movies, it appears to me that this choice is fading. Our attention is fractured by the distractions of home viewing – the buzzing phone, the temptation of multitasking – and further viewing is "chosen" by algorithms based on what we've already seen. I don't know the ultimate causes, but an effect can become a cause, reinforcing itself in a self-perpetuating cycle. George Orwell gives this example in his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*: "A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks." It's much the same with the way we see movies. It becomes fragmented and shallow because we're not fully engaged, but our diminished engagement makes it easier for us to have fragmented or shallow habits.

That's not to say that it's just about half-engaging viewers. The way movies are delivered to us has also changed. In a recent essay titled *Il Maestro: Federico Fellini and the Lost Magic of Cinema*, Martin Scorsese laments how "the art of cinema" has been reduced to its lowest common denominator, "content." As recently as fifteen years ago, he observes, the term "content" appeared only, although I should add not always felicitously, in serious discussions about film, and when it did, it was generally contrasted with and measured against "form." Today, "content" is a business term that applies indiscriminately to all moving images: a film, a TikTok, or a YouTube video. The word is no longer defined by theme, story, or characters, but by brand identity, corporate lineage, and mass-market appeal. And this shift happened, of course, all the while streaming services overtook the theatrical experience.

It's not that movies are commercial *per se* that's the problem. As Erwin Panofsky reminds us in his classic essay *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures,* most art throughout history – from the paintings on the walls of the pyramids to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel – was made to meet the demands of a patron, and even Shakespeare wrote for a paying crowd. But as movies have been swallowed up by the larger category of "content," they've been stripped of their individuality and it has become harder to untangle them from their place within the massive corporate enterprise. Today, it's broadly true that movies are made less for their story and artistry than for their franchise potential and their ability to sell toys and even theme park rides. In this environment, viewers are merely consumers, consuming movies "suggested" by algorithms that survive by defining our interests as narrowly as possible. As demonstrated by the recent successes of ***Everything Everywhere All at Once*** and ***Poor Things***, the public will not refuse to accept good products if it gets them. That it doesn't get them very often is because in the environment I've described, where studios aim for their movies to dominate cultural conversations briefly before prompting you to move on to the next thing without a second thought, a movie is "good" if it's so bad that it can be quickly forgotten, but no worse.

I think it's important here not to confuse the general critique with a particular film. Having issues with the way certain movies are made is different from having issues with the movies themselves. I like ***The Dark Knight***, ***Guardians of the Galaxy***, ***Top Gun: Maverick***, and almost all the ***Mission: Impossible*** movies (I dislike the second), I'm generally unimpressed by ***The Dark Knight Rises***, ***Spider-Man: Far From Home***, ***Gladiator II*** and almost all the ***John Wick*** films (I like the first), and I curse the satanic forces that dreamed up the live-action or photorealistic remakes of the traditionally-animated Disney films (I hate them all).

I also think it's important to recognize that the access to movies we have today is truly remarkable. With a few streaming subscriptions we can see films that, not long ago, would've required a projector and access to rare 35mm prints. We can see almost anything, almost anytime, almost anywhere. But I believe that this comes with a burden on us, the viewers, who in any case amounts to more than the data collected on us; we must choose to see. For seeing isn't just an act of the eyes; it's a way of immersing ourselves in the present. And in this landscape I believe that there's space for movies that stand alone, not as content but as cinema. Movies that end when they end. Movies like ***Stand by Me***, ***Dunkirk***, ***La grande bellezza***, and ***Locke***. They don't ask for sequels or spin-offs. There are no cliffhangers, no setup for the next installment – nothing more to experience. All

they ask is that you try to follow the filmmaker in their experiment from the first shot to the last. And when they're over, all that remains are your thoughts, your feelings, and maybe a conversation with someone who's also seen them – truly seen them, not half-watching while scrolling through their phone.

I think back to ***Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*** and I realize how much my experience of it was shaped by how I saw it. It was big, it was loud, and it was shared. I still enjoyed it at home, but I missed the sense of discovery that came with seeing it on the big screen. I guess that's why I still like going to the movies. The lights go down, the screen comes to life, and for a little while, the rest of the world disappears. In that moment, all that matters is what's in front of me. I can see.

◇ 3 ◇

I like old movies, which immediately raises the question: when does a movie become old? I remember seeing ***The Blues Brothers*** when I was about 12 years old; at the time, it was nearing its 25th anniversary. It felt like an old movie. I also remember seeing ***Tarzan*** in the theatre with my mother when I was six. This year ***Tarzan*** celebrated its 25th anniversary, but it doesn't feel old. Thus, we may write down that a necessary, but unlikely sufficient, condition for a movie to be called old is that it was made before you started school.

The movies I'm talking about, however, are really old, because they were made before my parents started school. I'm talking about movies like ***Roman Holiday***, ***Rebel Without A Cause***, ***Rififi***, and even ***The Pink Panther***. For me, part of their appeal is that they offer a telescope into the past where I can get a glimpse of an era untouched by the complications of the present. They offer, in their different ways, something which, in the playground of my imagination, becomes a romantic idea of another time as my real golden time. I've sometimes wondered if others have felt the same way, and then I saw ***Midnight in Paris***, which seemed to capture everything I was thinking. At one point Gil, the main character, even says: "I don't get here often enough, that's the problem. Can you picture how drop dead gorgeous this city is in the rain? Imagine this town in the '20s. Paris in the '20s, in the rain."

The arts are never more applauded than when they are able to say "what I feel or think, but haven't been able to express, not even to myself." This sensation is difficult to explain, for it can resemble both a pleasure and an affliction, and among its symptoms we can find both laughter and tears. In his wonderful essay *The Rest is Silence*, Aldous Huxley writes: "From pure sensation to the intuition

of beauty, from pleasure and pain to love and the mystical ecstasy and death – all the things that are fundamental, all the things that, to the human spirit, are most profoundly significant, can only be experienced, not expressed." One of the magic things about cinema is that it has the capacity to evoke in the viewer a spark of these experiences. Sometimes it's dim, like a fading ember; sometimes it's bright, like a roaring flame; and sometimes it's almost as near and burning as the real thing. I suppose it's when we can feel this heat, which is to say that the recorded experiences correspond fairly closely to our own experiences or experiences which we feel we might have had, that we say that we're drawn to a movie. And the warmer the heat, the stronger the pull.

I use the terms loosely, for I'm not making an argument but rather attempting to describe how we connect to a movie. Of course, I don't see a movie through your eyes and nor do you see it through mine. To each film, each of us brings a unique set of experiences which, although the images, the dialogue, and the music are the same, allows us to perceive the movie in our own particular way. By mysterious analogy, a movie can bring forth the same reaction at the same time in its viewers– the scene in ***The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*** where Bilbo snaps upon seeing the ring comes to mind here – but it can also, by even more mysterious analogy, bring forth different emotions in different people. The child that sees Joy in the memory dump in ***Inside Out*** doesn't perceive it in the same way as their parent.

It can be seen that since there's a variety of cinematic experiences, there can't be any wrong reasons to like a film. "I like this," says one person; "I like this," says another. They're obviously both right. To like is an incontrovertible act. Much like the Zone in ***Stalker***, it operates outside the conventional framework of reason. The Zone doesn't ask for justification, and neither does the act of liking. Someone may like ***The Big Lebowski*** because it makes them laugh, ***Perfect Days*** because it speaks to something within them, ***The Raid*** because it's badass, or ***Midnight Run*** because... just because. There's nothing wrong with any of that. The awe of amazement always belongs to the beholder.

I do, however, think that there are wrong reasons to dislike a movie. When ***La Strada*** was first released in Italy, it was criticized for betraying neorealism. Similarly, ***The Long Goodbye*** was dismissed in America for not being true to the noir genre. Both movies broke with expectations, challenged conventional wisdom, and have since become celebrated classics. As Roger Ebert later noted in his Great Movies review of ***The Long Goodbye***, "Most of its effect comes from the way it pushes against the genre."

In a similar vein, I've on a few occasions heard people say that they don't "like" musicals or that they "dislike" black-and-white films. I've also heard the same people say that they like ***Hamilton***, a musical, and ***Sin City***, a black-and-white film. When I've pointed out the contradiction, they've replied that these were the kind of musicals or black-and-white films they were talking about. Children often think that hearts must be heart-shaped, though naturally they are not. I would argue that those that can't get rid of preconceived ideas are not very different from these children. Cinema, like hearts, comes in different shapes, and those who cling to preconceptions risk missing some unforgettable experiences.

◇ 4 ◇

Ingmar Bergman's ***Persona*** opens with a projector showing a series of images, including a scene from silent slapstick comedy, a spider, a crucifixion, and the slaughter of a lamb. Then, the narrative begins. A young nurse, Alma, is assigned by a doctor to take care of an actress, Elisabet, who suddenly stopped talking in the middle of a performance and who has remained silent since that day. The narrative unfolds, the relationship between Alma and Elisabet evolves and then, in the middle of a climactic scene, the movie breaks. After the screen goes blank, we see the film in the projector burning followed by an extreme close-up shot of an eye. When the movie returns to the main story, a day has passed. Now, we may ask ourselves, what just happened? What did it mean? What's the right way to interpret it? Or more generally, how are we to make sense of ***Persona***? I shall not attempt to lay down laws upon a subject that has not been legalized, but I will try to lay down some thoughts on the wider scope of these questions.

On the one hand, they will often arise as an integral part of our engagement with a film. We've immersed ourselves in a mystery and desire completion. On the other hand, the issue of meaning is one that has haunted all the arts at least since the day Plato proposed his theory of art as *mimesis*. At school, we've all been subjected to questions like "What did Ibsen mean by" some phrase, or "explain in your own words the meaning of" some passage from whatever play of Ibsen that happened to be foisted upon us at the time. To quote Charles Babbage in *Passages from the Life of a Philosopher*, "I'm not able rightly to apprehend the kind of confusion of ideas that could provoke such a question." Surely, only Ibsen himself can "express" in his "own words" what Ibsen meant. Roland Barthes famously called this concept *The Death of the Author*: When we read a book, listen to a song, or watch a film, we don't have the artist's original experience in our mind – we have our own mind in our mind – so the best we can do is to say what the work of

art means to us.

In this sense, any worthwhile criticism is subjective. It should seek to describe, not to explain. The limits of criticism are reached when the critic has given their account of what they have seen and what they felt about it. To go beyond the expression of personal opinion – and say "What X is saying is..." or impose a rule of translation, such as "X is really A" – is an active participation in a form of interpretive tyranny. London is the capital of England; Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*; those are facts; but the way we see things depends on who we are and what we believe. I'm reminded here of a sentence in Bertrands Russel's *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*: "The observer, when he seems to himself to be observing a stone, is really, if physics is to be believed, observing the effects of the stone upon himself." Thus, when the critic has said in their "own words" as much, or perhaps as little, as "own words" can say, all that remains is to direct the audience to the original film: let them see for themselves what impact it has on them.

To be sure, I'm not saying that movies, or works of art more generally, are ineffable, but rather aligning myself with Susan Sontag's call in her influential essay Against Interpretation, that movies are fundamentally a sensory experience and the search for hidden meanings, allegories, or symbols strips them for their immediacy and emotional impact. In particular, what I'm aiming at is that the best criticism comes from a sense of appreciation and it's capable of giving us a better and more complete experience than we might have without it. I can think of Roger Ebert's review of ***The Spectacular Now***, Every Frame a Painting's video essay on ***Drive***, and Very Bad Wizards' discussion of ***Unforgiven***, to mention just a few. These are three different forms of criticism in three different styles, but they all, paralleling Russell's observer, reveal the sensuous surface of the movies without mucking around in it. They respect these films because they don't try to replace anything in them with something else.

Of course, many films are made because there were some ideas to which their filmmakers wanted to draw attention. ***The Great Dictator*** and ***The Battle of Algiers***, for example, exist primarily because the filmmakers wanted to make us think. But even so, they fail or succeed not by the weight of their ideas, but by the artistry through which those ideas are brought to life. Their power, if it exists, is emotional and experiential, not ideological or didactic. It lies in how they make us feel first, and think later. Roger Ebert makes a similar point in his thought-provoking essay *Beyond Narrative: The Future of the Feature Film*. "If a film can make us feel well and deeply, it need not make us think," he writes, and continues: "Or, more correctly, if a film can make us feel, then it can inspire us to analyze our feelings, and perhaps

then come to a deeper understanding of their sources, powers, and (yes, now, in this context) their meanings."

Few movies come close to the number of interpretations offered about them as ***Persona***. That's fine. Those who want to interpret can interpret. My own view is that movies differ, and from different movies we must ask of different qualities. The first time I saw ***Persona***, I didn't know what to think. I wasn't even sure I liked it. But it stayed with me – its images, its silence – and I kept returning to it. But it's not the kind of movie that lends itself to such immediate experiences as entertainment, for it's a movie that puzzles. It raises questions and refuses to answer them. We are invited to see what Bergman sees, but are left to arrive at our own conclusions through our own way of seeing. It's a movie that we must let happen to us, possibly repeatedly and devoid of any narrative expectations, so it can carve out its inedible marks on our minds and souls. For those who want only to be entertained, there's always ***Gladiator***.

◇ 5 ◇

Howard Hawks was once asked what he thought made a good movie. "That's easy," he said, "a good movie has three good scenes and no bad scenes." It's not a scientific formula, but it's a good approximation. When I sit down to see a film, I don't say to myself, "I'm going to keep score." To see it is to discover it, and the initial delight happens when I find myself captivated by a scene without even realizing it. I have forgotten about life and death, and about time and space, and probably a few other dimensions too. I think of the opening scene in ***Inglourious Basterds***, final scene in ***The Last of the Mohicans***, the singing scene in ***Rio Bravo***, the border scene in ***Sicario***, the bomb-in-the-trunk take in ***Touch of Evil***, and ***Paprika***, all of ***Paprika***. If the moralists ask me how I can justify liking movies, I can echo Roger Ebert's famous description of film as "a machine that generates empathy." I don't usually cry during sad moments in movies, but I often get a few tears welling up in my eyes and feel a tightness in my throat when I see moments of compassion. Emma saying goodbye to her sons in ***Terms of Endearment***, Amanda comforting Brendan in ***Only the Brave***, and Carl and Ellie's marriage in ***Up***. There's sadness in all these moments, but what moves me is seeing good people doing good things. But if I'm being honest, I know no such justification is really needed. The truth is that movies give me something of an enjoyment; the truth is that I'm unable to say exactly what that enjoyment is, but that enjoyment – unnamed and unknown as it is – is true enough. And therefore I wouldn't find it the least surprising to discover on the day of judgement, when all truths are laid bare and all that's hidden is

brought to light, that the reason for my sickness was simply this: I have liked movies.