

The 100 Greatest Movies of All Time

By [Peter Debruge](#), [Owen Gleiberman](#), [Lisa Kennedy](#), [Jessica Kiang](#), [Tomris Laffly](#), [Guy Lodge](#), [Amy Nicholson](#)

The movies are now more than 100 years old. That still makes them a young medium, at least in art-form years (how old is the novel? the theater? the painting?). But they're just old enough to make compiling *Variety*'s first-ever list of the 100 Greatest Movies of All Time a more daunting task than it once might have been. Think about it: You get an average of one film per year. A great deal of ardent discussion and debate went into the creation of this list. Our choices were winnowed from hundreds of titles submitted by more than 30 *Variety* critics, writers and editors. As we learned, coming up with which movies to include was the easy part. The hard part was deciding which movies to leave out.

Variety, which recently celebrated its 117th anniversary, is a publication as old as cinema. (We invented box office reporting, in addition to the words "showbiz" and "horse opera.") And in making this list, we wanted to reflect the beautiful, head-spinning variety of the moviegoing experience. We don't just mean different genres; we don't just mean highbrow and lowbrow (and everything in between). The very spirit of cinema is that it has long been a landscape of spine-tingling eclecticism, and we wanted our list to reflect that — to honor the movies we love most, whatever categories they happen to fall into.

Do we want you to argue with this list? Of course we do. That's the nature of the beast — the nature of the kind of protective passion that people feel about their favorite movies. We invited prominent filmmakers and actors to contribute essays about the movies that are significant to them, and that passion comes across in all that they wrote. No doubt you'll say: How could that movie have been left off the list? Or this one? Or that one? Trust us: We often asked that very same question ourselves. But our hope is that in looking at the films we did choose, you'll see a roster that reflects the impossibly wide-ranging, ever-shifting glory of what movies are.

We invite you to find out how many films from the list you've seen [on this poll](#).

These film writers and critics contributed suggestions for movies: Manuel Betancourt, Clayton Davis, Peter Debruge, Matt Donnelly, William Earl, Patrick Frater, Steven Gaydos, Owen Gleiberman, Dennis Harvey, Courtney Howard, Angelique Jackson, Elsa Keslassy, Lisa Kennedy, Jessica Kiang, Richard Kuipers, Tomris Laffly, Brent Lang, Joe Leydon, Guy Lodge, Amy Nicholson, Michael Nordine, Naman Ramachandran, Manori Ravindran, Jenelle Riley, Pat Saperstein, Alissa Simon, Jazz Tangcay, Sylvia Tan, Zack Sharf, Adam B. Vary, Nick Vivarelli, Meredith Woerner.

100

The Graduate (1967)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Mike Nichols' indelible comedy of alienation is that rare thing, a movie that really does define a generation. That's because there has never been another movie like it (and no, "Rushmore" doesn't count). Dustin Hoffman, with the halting prickly-pear neurotic charisma that would make him a star, plays

a clueless college graduate who drops out without quite rebelling, and it's that combination of hostility and passivity that elevated Hoffman into a culture hero. His Ben has an affair with Anne Bancroft's deliriously blasé Mrs. Robinson, then stalks her daughter (Katharine Ross) to campus and breaks up her wedding by screaming like a banshee. Now that's an original romantic comedy. One that showcases the new spirit of antisocial passion in a socially acceptable — and divinely infectious — way.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Graduate." Rent or purchase the film on Prime Video.

99

12 Angry Men (1957)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

How elemental — and riveting — is this: an entire courtroom drama set inside the jury room, where Henry Fonda, as the only member of the jury who suspects that a teenage defendant might not be guilty of murder, questions, cajoles and gradually convinces his fellow jurors to look more closely at the evidence. Sidney Lumet's direction makes the back-and-forth dialogue so electrifying that it's almost like music. The greatness of "12 Angry Men" is that it finds drama in discovering what America really is: a place where one man with an open mind can change the world.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "12 Angry Men," and stream "12 Angry Men" on Prime Video.

98

Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (1988)



Photo : ©Orion Pictures Corp/Courtesy Everett Collection

You never forget your first. That may be how many American art-house habitués think of Pedro Almodóvar's riotous comedy. It wasn't his first film to get international distribution, but with its vivid palette and lush score, the movie heralds his genius and obsessions: women; their moods, hysterical and amusing; Hollywood cinema, camp, desire and, yes, spiked gazpacho. Before Penelope Cruz, Carmen Maura was for a spell the director's muse. Here she plays a voice-over artist whose co-worker and lover is leaving her. The director gathered artists — on camera and on the set — who became his go-to company and underlined his wholly original sensibility.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown". Stream the film on Prime Video.

97

Alien (1979)



Photo : ©20thCentFox/Courtesy Everett Collection

A smothering tentacled thingy attaches itself to an astronaut's face. Several scenes later, an alien fetus erupts right out of his belly, and the cinema would never be the same. Director Ridley Scott, drawing on the imagery of H.R Giger, staged a kind of Skinner box sci-fi nightmare that left audiences in a state of primal shock. Scott envisioned the film's spaceship not in clean Kubrickian whites but in shades of murk that could speak to the film's queasy fusion of the organic and the inorganic. And once Sigourney Weaver's Ripley starts to take on the monster all by herself, a paradigm shift is born: the female action hero, who Weaver invested with such fierce, industrious, yet tossed-off authority that it's as if she'd always been there.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Alien" [here](#), the film is available for streaming [on Starz](#).

96

A Hard Day's Night (1964)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

The most transportive rock 'n' roll movie ever made. Richard Lester, drawing on cutting-edge film techniques that are still bracing, fulfilled his assignment of directing a Beatles movie at the dawn of Beatlemania by staging it all as a day in the life of the Beatles as they really were. It's like seeing a documentary, a postmodern backstage burlesque and a joyful early-Beatles musical all wrapped up into one black-and-white vérité rock reverie. The beauty of it is that the band members, with faces as beguiling as that of any movie star, had the instinctive showbiz wit to portray themselves as gods who'd swooped down on earth and were mingling with everyone else, the happy joke being that they suffuse every encounter with magic.

Read *Variety*'s original review for "A Hard Day's Night" [here](#), and stream "A Hard Day's Night" on HBO Max.

95

Toy Story (1995)



In the early '80s, director John Lasseter tried to convince Disney to invest in CGI. Instead, the studio fired him, so he went to work for the Graphics Group at Lucasfilm. When the team (scooped up by Steve Jobs and renamed Pixar) released the first fully computer-animated feature, the engineers still hadn't perfected human skin — or feathers or fur, for that matter. Practically every surface looked fake, like plastic, which made a buddy comedy starring a bunch of toys ideal for the new medium. Bugs and fish and monsters would follow, but even as the technology evolved — liberating the heretofore hand-rendered form — nothing has surpassed that first toon, thanks to great writing and voice work that, even more than the CGI, brought Woody, Buzz Lightyear and their pals to life.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Toy Story" here, the Pixar film is available for streaming [on Disney+](#).

94

Bridesmaids (2011)



Photo : ©Universal/Courtesy Everett Collection

A decade has passed since “Bridesmaids” launched a thousand think pieces about the future of female-driven films, but Hollywood has yet to produce a funnier movie from any corner. With most comedies, audiences are lucky to get one hall-of-fame set piece. “Bridesmaids” serves up no fewer than five, from Maya Rudolph’s food-poisoned dress-fitting to Kristen Wiig’s mile-high anti-anxiety high to the scene on an airplane that single-handedly catapulted Melissa McCarthy to superstardom. Wiig said she and Annie Mumolo set out to write “not a female comedy, just a comedy that has a lot of women in it.” That they did, collaborating with producer Judd Apatow to create an uproarious, insightful look at personal insecurity and self-delusion.

[Read Variety's original review of “Bridesmaids” here](#). The film is available to [stream on Peacock](#).

93

Le Samouraï (1967)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Long before Tarantino, Jean-Pierre Melville obsessed about movies, admiring American directors and absorbing their codes. In the early '50s, when the restrictive French film industry wouldn't let him direct, Melville opened his own film studio and did it anyway, inspiring the nascent New Wave (and later, John Woo's "The Killer"). Melville made crime movies mostly, taking the essence of film noir from Hollywood and filtering it through his own streetwise sensibility. "Le Samouraï" is his chef d'œuvre, featuring a stone-faced Alain Delon in one of cinema's most understated performances: a gun for hire who dedicates his life to protecting the eyewitness pianist who spares him from the slammer. Featuring meticulous attention to procedural detail and long stretches of near silence, it's the essence of cool, with an existential twist.

[Read Variety's original review of "Le Samouraï" here.](#) Stream the Melville film on HBO Max.

92

Pink Flamingos (1972)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

It was panned by *Variety*, which called it “one of the most vile, stupid and repulsive films ever made.” And, of course, it became famous for the scene in which Divine, its snarling drag-queen star, eats a handful of dog poop. (Eat your heart out, P.T. Barnum!) But we’re here to tell you that *Variety* was wrong. John Waters’ ultimate midnight movie is, in fact, one of the funniest, most audacious and scandalously compelling films ever made. That’s because every moment in it is touched with a gleeful outlaw rageaholic danger too weirdly joyous to be faked. Divine was a stupendous actor, and in “Pink Flamingos,” he’s the clown demon of the Baltimore underground taking revenge on the world.

Read *Variety*‘s original review of “Pink Flamingos” [here](#).



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

In the '50s and '60s, Ingmar Bergman became the poster boy for the mystique of art-house cinema by filling his black-and-white movies with symbols, metaphors, dreams. Yet his great searing drama about the experience and meaning of divorce carries none of that literary burden. It's a straight-up naturalistic drama about a bourgeois Swedish couple going through the five stages of marriage, and Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson bring these loving, warring characters to life in a way that makes them feel like people in your own orbit. Bergman, tearing into the very meat of middle-class experience, made what now looks like the defining cinematic statement about how modern marriages live and die.

Stream "[Scenes From a Marriage](#)" on HBO Max.

90

The Shining (1980)

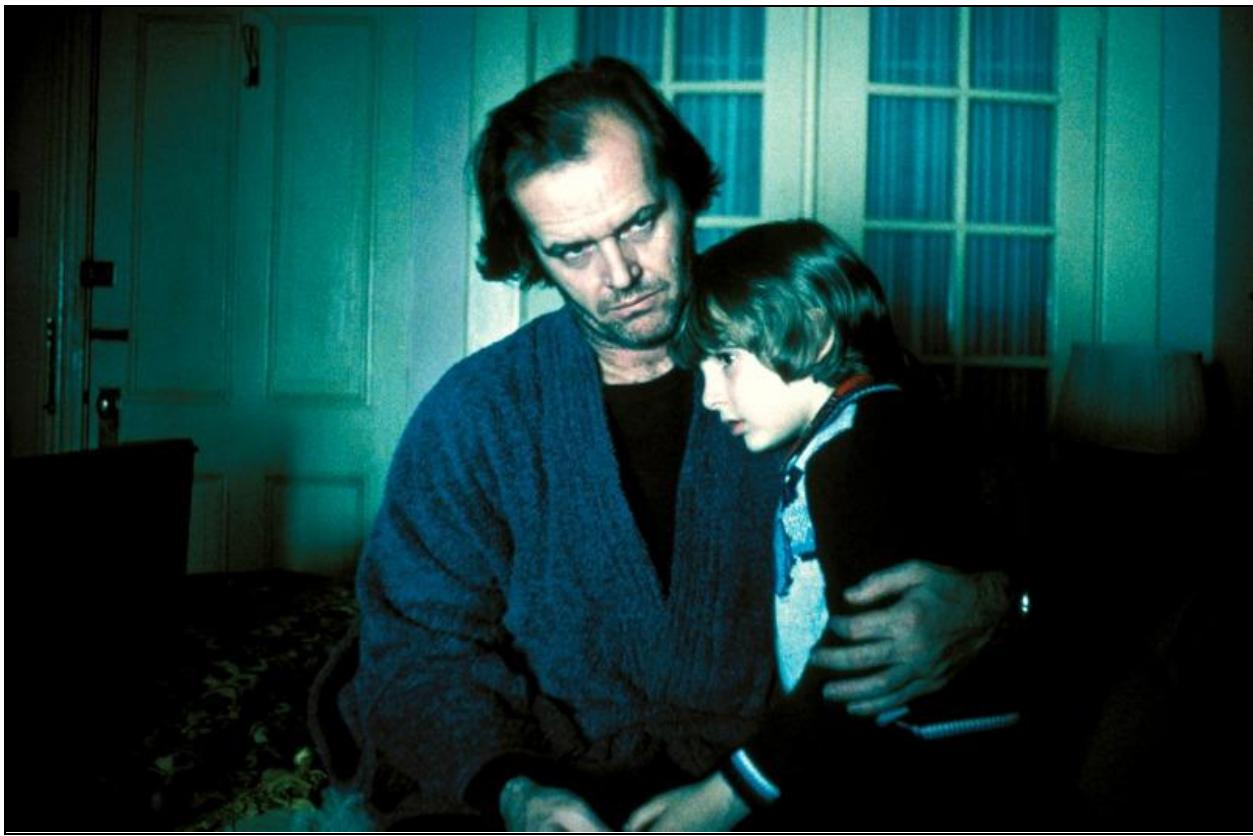


Photo : ©Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

No offense to Stephen King, who's vocally dismissive of Kubrick's adaptation of his work, but "The Shining" is a mind-bending (and wildly entertaining) horror masterwork, encapsulating the filmmaker's signature labyrinthine fixations. Stalked by a snaky camera alongside an ear-splitting tricycle, the spine-tingling Overlook Hotel on the brink of *redrum* with torrents of crimson blood is its own battlefield here. So is the mind of Jack Nicholson's superbly maniacal Jack Torrance, host to the creepiest writer's block in history. It's the most insidious of nightmares.

Read the original *Variety* review of "The Shining" [here](#) and it's available to stream [on HBO Max](#).

89

Belle de Jour (1967)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Catherine Deneuve comes across like an alabaster doll in Luis Buñuel's still-shocking, since-unparalleled exploration of the erotic fantasies of a bourgeois French housewife, who dabbles in prostitution by day (or does she?). Whereas the character's seemingly impassive face betrays only a fraction of what she is really thinking, the film — from the key pioneer of surrealism on screen — reveals to us alone what's really going on in her head: The sound of bells heralds sadomasochistic daydreams, in which she is whipped and humiliated. This isn't just some male director's fetish, mind you, but an empowering portrayal of forbidden sexuality, depicted almost entirely through suggestion, as with buzzing box and bloody towel, which leave so much up to the imagination.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Belle de Jour" [here](#), and stream the film on HBO Max.

88

Malcolm X (1992)



Photo : ©Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

The studio initially wanted Norman Jewison to direct this monumental biopic of the human rights activist, but Spike Lee lobbied hard for Warner Bros. to hire a Black filmmaker instead. Lee won that fight, with severe restrictions. Then the studio and bond company pulled the plug, so he solicited donations from the likes of Oprah Winfrey, a strategy that allowed Lee to make the film as he saw fit. *Malcolm X* was an undeniably controversial and widely misunderstood figure, and Lee dedicates no fewer than 201 minutes to capturing the deep introspective complexity of a man who was constantly leveling up in his pursuit of justice, from teenage criminal to Muslim convert to Black nationalist leader and beyond. Denzel Washington is there at every step, working with his director — who fuses prestige-movie gravitas with his own curveball style — through the seismic shifts of a man who had the courage of his fury, but ultimately sought a greater enlightenment. Every bit as impactful as the assassination sequence is the montage that precedes it, which evokes all that could have been as Malcolm drives to the Audubon Ballroom, haunted by the perception that martyrdom would be his final evolution.

Read the original *Variety* review for “*Malcolm X*” [here](#), and stream the film on HBO Max or Paramount+.

The Sound of Music (1965)



Photo : ©20thCentFox/Courtesy Everett Collection

Julie Andrews is most famous for two movies, “Mary Poppins” and “The Sound of Music” (made in 1964 and ’65), and her character in the latter film — a nun-turned-governess who looks after the seven Von Trapp children, teaches them to sing and brings them to life, all under the watchful gaze of their stern military father (Christopher Plummer) — is such a goody-two-shoes that her stardom, on occasion, gets mocked and dismissed. Yet if you really watch her in “The Sound of Music,” you’ll see that Julie Andrews has her own sublime and saintly incandescence. The whole movie makes goodness into something larger-than-life. Yes, it turns the true story of the Von Trapp Family Singers into the squarest of romantic fairy tales, yet the songs lift the film into the heavens, and so does Andrews’ beaming belief in every note.

Read the original *Variety* review of “the Sound of Music” [here](#). The musical is available for streaming on Disney+.

Close-Up (1990)



Photo : Facets/courtesy Everett Collection

Hailing from a country with some of the strictest limits on cinematic expression, Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami's rule-bending docufiction hybrid dissolves the line between representation and reality. The hook: In the late '80s, a nobody was arrested for passing himself off as director Mohsen Makhmalbaf to a wealthy Tehran family. He flattered them into thinking they might appear in his next movie, borrowing money before he was busted. Intrigued by the case, Kiarostami visited the impersonator in jail, filming their conversations and the subsequent trial. He also re-creates the so-called crime, making good on the con man's promise by casting the parties involved as themselves in a playful meta-examination of how ordinary people can be seduced by the allure of filmmaking.

Read more about "Close-Up" [here](#). The film is available for rent or purchase [on Prime Video](#).

85

Natural Born Killers (1994)



Photo : ©Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

Oliver Stone possesses a hypnotically fierce, at times reckless talent that, for 40 years, has sprawled in all directions. But his greatest period arrived in the '90s, when he made "JFK" and fastened onto a new kaleidoscopic aesthetic — a born-again burst of filmmaking energy that culminated in his mesmerizing, one-of-a-kind head-trip psychodrama about two homicidal criminals in love. Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis play Mickey and Mallory Knox like Bonnie and Clyde on a psychosis bender, but the black magic of the film's MTV-on-peyote imagery is that it literally becomes the experience they're living inside. "Natural Born Killers" is about love and murder and tabloid sensationalism, but more than that it's the cinema's great hallucination of media-age madness, rendered haunting by the music of Leonard Cohen.

Read the original *Variety* review of "Natural Born Killers" [here](#). The film is available for streaming [on Netflix](#).

84

Pan's Labyrinth (2006)



Photo : ©Picturehouse/Courtesy Everett Collection

With “Pinocchio,” Guillermo del Toro has finally made a fairy tale for children. Prior to that, the Mexican fabulist wove fantasies much too dark for impressionable eyes. Although this id-tickling anti-fascist allegory stars an 11-year-old girl, the grimmer-than-Grimm inversion of “Alice in Wonderland,” set in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, would give underage audiences nightmares for life. For adults, it’s like witnessing someone else’s dreams, as young Ofelia escapes into a macabre underworld of now-iconic characters, including the Faun and the Pale Man. Together with compatriots Cuarón (“Roma”) and Iñárritu (“Birdman”), del Toro elevated Mexican cinema to international attention. All three are visionaries, but this film leaves the strongest imprint.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Pan’s Labyrinth” [here](#), and stream Guillermo del Toro’s film on Starz.

83

Kramer vs. Kramer (1979)



Photo : ©Columbia Pictures/Courtesy Everett Collection

Landing the first of three Oscar wins for Meryl Streep, this dramatic study of a family reshaping itself through divorce — at a time when separations were skyrocketing — pits the chameleonic star against fellow acting titan Dustin Hoffman. Where Streep's future roles sometimes called for elaborate accents and physical transformations, this one demands vulnerability and a willingness to be unlikable. Meanwhile, Hoffman's performance caught mainstream American manhood at a key moment of transition, trying to balance old-fashioned “strength” with a new kind of nurturing. “Kramer vs. Kramer” benefits from having been made as popular entertainment, trading straightforwardly in big, relatable feelings and demanding suitably broad, open-hearted reactions from us in turn. It's piercingly perceptive grown-up filmmaking, all too rare today.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Kramer vs. Kramer” [here](#). The film is available [on Showtime](#).

82

Parasite (2019)



The wealthy Park family lives high on a hill; the broke Kims wallow below in the slums of Seoul, sometimes in sewer water up to their waists. Social mobility — in this case, ascending from their city's literal bottom to its top — is impossible unless the poorer clan is willing to lie, betray and even kill, and yet, Bong Joon Ho's breakthrough best picture winner refuses to make the Kims the villains, when the class system itself is to blame. It's a thriller both pointed in its intentions and universal in its appeal, which today marks a tipping point both in the global conversation about the one percent, and in the Academy Award's sense of what kinds of films can seriously contend for the big prize.

Read *Variety*'s original "Parasite" review [here](#). The film is available for streaming [on Hulu](#).

81

The Dark Knight (2008)



The greatest comic book film ever made, Christopher Nolan's second Batman movie has the sprawling urban film noir grandiloquence, and the ripe sense of evil, to live up to its operatic ambitions. It's at once a heady treatise on corruption and one of the most innovative action spectaculars of our time, with Christian Bale's seething, obsessive Batman poised between two poles of moral decadence: the mangled Gotham City district attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) and Heath Ledger's Joker, a scarred sick puppy who dominates the movie wearing crooked lipstick the actor slicked on himself to create a character of pure disruptive insanity. Co-star Michael Caine lauded Ledger's as "one of the scariest performances I've ever seen." He was right; it has yet to be topped.

Read the original *Variety* review of "The Dark Knight" [here](#). The film is available for streaming [on Hulu](#).

80

Pixote (1980)



Brazil was still under dictatorial control when Héctor Babenco directed this shocking indictment of how terribly authorities had been treating street kids in São Paulo, testing the limits of what state censorship permitted at the time. With the film's nonprofessional cast and stripped-down, documentary-style realism, you can draw a line from De Sica's "Shoeshine" to Buñuel's "Los Olvidados" to "Pixote" — and on to such eye-openers as Larry Clark's "Kids" and Fernando Meirelles' "City of God." So much of the power of "Pixote" depends on the tough scowl of young Fernando Ramos da Silva, who, in a cruel turn of fate, was killed by Brazilian police at age 19. It's both a time capsule and cutting edge, especially in its nonjudgmental depiction of Pixote's trans friend Lilica.

Read the original *Variety* "Pixote" review [here](#). The film is available for streaming [on the Criterion Channel](#).

79

Waiting for Guffman (1996)



Christopher Guest's cracked ensemble comedies are as funny as anything by Woody Allen, Monty Python, or the "Airplane!" crew, yet they have a personal quality that sets them apart — an obsessiveness about how human ego and human cheesiness dance together. Guest's most delectable creation is this mockumentary about a small-town theater troupe struggling to put on a musical; it's a comedy as touching as it is hilarious. Guest's performance as the troupe's director, Corky St. Clair, with his beaming eyes and bowl cut, his flamboyant-but-closeted mannerisms, his flat-out passion equaled only by his lack of talent, is one for the ages. He's a character at once so retrograde and so affectionately observed that "Guffman" became the ultimate cult film for a newly liberated generation.

Read the original *Variety* review of "Waiting for Guffman" [here](#). The film is available for streaming [on HBO Max](#).

78

Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975)



For three minutes, middle-aged single mother Jeanne Dielman (Delphine Seyrig) sits peeling potatoes. She washes the dishes. She makes the bed. Belgian director Chantal Akerman radically expanded what movies could and should be with this cornerstone entry in the slow-cinema canon — a rigorous style of filmmaking that emphasizes duration over action. Confined largely to the kitchen, dining room and hallways of a nondescript apartment, Akerman's debut challenges what the experimental auteur called the “hierarchy of images,” concentrating on mundane domestic rituals associated with women, typically overlooked in movies. Over three-plus hours, the film re-creates tasks that Akerman observed her mother practicing for years, though in this case they're disrupted by Jeanne's double life as a prostitute — a feminist twist that builds to a shattering climax. Maddening at times yet never less than mesmerizing, it's the very best film of its kind. But hardly the best film of all time.

Stream "[Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles](#)" on HBO Max.

77

Goldfinger (1964)



The DNA of the James Bond series was forged in “North by Northwest,” and the series itself came into being with startling finesse in “Dr. No” (1962), the first Bond film. But it wasn’t until two years later, in “Goldfinger,” that the Bond films hit their quintessential pitch of pop exhilaration — a note-perfect blend of audacity and spectacle, danger and ’60s erotic cool, unforgettable theme song and iconic villain, not to mention Sean Connery at his most royally cutthroat and commanding. The Bond series is in all our DNA now, and there’s a reason: It’s one of the greatest escapes the movies have ever given us. “Goldfinger” marks the moment it becomes a popcorn epiphany.

Read the original *Variety* review of “Goldfinger” [here](#). The film is available for rent or purchase [on Prime Video](#).

76

The Tree of Life (2011)



Time will tell how much higher this film can climb. Despite being one of the younger entries on the list, Terrence Malick’s metaphysical wrestling match with grace and grief — and God’s very existence — has already made an indelible imprint on other directors, most notably in its reverence for the natural world and the way DP Emmanuel Lubezki’s gravity-defying camera captures it. Malick takes the loss of his brother as subject, factoring the creation of the universe into his soul-searching exercise. He casts movie stars, but refuses to treat them as such, stripping them of their lines and the chance to “act,” while privileging impressionistic fragments from his own memory (plus empathy among dinosaurs!). It’s like “2001” turned inward, posing impossibly big questions.

Read the original *Variety* review of “The Tree of Life” [here](#). The film is available for rent or purchase [on Prime Video](#).

75

Boogie Nights (1997)



Every Paul Thomas Anderson film now seems to be greeted with reviews more awestruck than those that greeted the previous one. But sorry, we'll stick with his youthful gem about the '70s and '80s porn world — a drama of such empathy, virtuosity and Tarantinoid sprawl that every moment in it gives you a buzz. As Dirk Diggler, Mark Wahlberg plays a simpleton of sweetness teetering into the hedonistic outer limits. The film's drama, more than just a ride, is driven by a visionary perception: that as measured by the ironic yardstick of porn, the rise of technology paralleled the rise of a more detached and doom-struck world.

Read the original *Variety* review of “Boogie Nights” [here](#). The film is available to stream on Paramount+.

74

My Neighbor Totoro (1988)



Walt Disney may have pioneered the field of hand-drawn animated features, but Japanese master Hayao Miyazaki elevated it, bringing down-to-earth storytelling and attention to everyday detail (raindrops falling in puddles, a snail inching its way up a plant) to the realm of the fantastic, where a plush orange Catbus offers lost kids a lift. Later Studio Ghibli achievements, such as “Princess Mononoke” and “Spirited Away,” may have been bigger hits in the U.S., but this bucolic trip down memory lane is by far Miyazaki’s most beloved achievement around the world. Through its title character, “Totoro” introduced a benevolent forest spirit — whose fuzzy, round, owl-eyed design rivals Mickey Mouse in its appeal — that generations have adopted as their imaginary friend of choice.

Read the original *Variety* review of “My Neighbor Totoro” [here](#). The film is available for streaming on HBO Max.

73

Intolerance (1916)



In the silent era, D.W. Griffith did nothing less than build the ground floor of what filmmaking became, inventing the nuts and bolts of visual storytelling and doing it with breathtaking imaginative sweep. Yet the movie in which he first codified this achievement, “The Birth of a Nation” (1915), was a scandalous and morally toxic epic — a celebration of the Ku Klux Klan that helped to construct Hollywood on a foundation of racism. It was “Intolerance,” the film Griffith made in response to the outrage triggered by “The Birth of a Nation,” where he rose to his most visionary heights. A three-and-a-half-hour parable spanning 2,000 years and told in four parts (a modern saga of poverty and crime; the story of Jesus; the St. Bartholomew Day’s Massacre; and the fall of the Babylonian empire, complete with elephants), the movie is one of the most soul-boggling spectacles ever attempted: tender, hyperbolic, spellbinding and half-mad. It seems to contain the glorious seeds of everything that movies could, and would, be.

Read the original *Variety* review of “Intolerance” [here](#). The film is available to stream on Prime Video or Paramount+.

72

Breaking the Waves (1996)



Lars von Trier's greatest work was shot on film with a hand-held camera and then transferred to video, and it looks and feels like a home movie — yet it's about a woman, a winsome Scottish newlywed named Bess (Emily Watson), who speaks directly to God, and the film's herky-jerky naturalism makes you believe that that's actually happening. Especially when she asks God to bring her husband (Stellan Skarsgård) back from a construction site, and sure enough the husband returns ... after sustaining a paralyzing injury. Did God do that? And if so, what's she going to do in return? Von Trier, striking a tone of solemn enchantment that begs comparison with that of Dreyer or Bergman (even the '70s-glam-rock chapter interludes are like something out of the world's most electric church mass), creates a drama of loss, faith and soul-scalding sacrifice that will move you to the core, as Watson's heroine of destiny becomes the very essence of love.

Read the original *Variety* review for "Breaking the Waves" [here](#). The film is available to and rent or purchase [on Prime Video](#).

71

My Best Friend's Wedding (1997)



When you think of Julia Roberts, you think of her 1,000-watt smile — and behind that, her complete and total movie-star radiance. Yet in P.J. Hogan's splendid romantic comedy, Roberts gives a performance rooted in moodiness and anger and despair, and it's the most transcendent acting of her career. She plays a food critic who arrives at the wedding of her lifelong friend (Dermot Mulroney) with a plan to sabotage it, all because she realizes she's really in love with him. You may think you know where this is going, but you don't, and that's one reason (along with Rupert Everett's slashing wit and the all-time perfect use of a Burt Bacharach song) why "My Best Friend's Wedding," with apologies to Nora Ephron, remains the most delectable and heartbreaking rom-com of its era.

Read the original *Variety* review of "My Best Friend's Wedding" [here](#). The film is available to purchase on Prime Video.

70

12 Years a Slave (2013)



How do you make a film that stays true to the brutal obscenity of America's "peculiar institution" yet is also a compelling and, at moments, even hopeful drama? British director Steve McQueen brings off that staggering balancing act in his grueling and essential adaptation of Solomon Northup's 1853 memoir. Chiwetel Ejiofor, in an intensely physical yet stunningly internal performance, plays Solomon, a free man living in New York State who, in 1841, was kidnapped and trafficked to a plantation owner. This horrific scenario allows McQueen to dramatize the evils of slavery with more detail, psychological understanding and complex emotional power than we've ever seen in a dramatic feature. An extended image of Solomon with a noose around his neck, his tippy toes working the dirt so that he can breathe, is one of many that sear themselves into your memory.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "12 Years a Slave" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

69

Beau Travail (1999)



Whether in “Beau Geste” or Van Damme’s ludicrous “Legionnaire,” the French Foreign Legion tends to be treated on film with a kind of reverent machismo — one brilliantly unraveled in French auteur Claire Denis’ audacious reworking of Herman Melville’s “Billy Budd.” Foregrounding the homoerotic yearnings in Melville’s moral tale of military power plays, Denis turns it into a sinuous, mesmerizing film ballet of male beauty and physicality, shot by Agnès Godard in stark, orderly formations against the African desert, in which desire becomes as competitive an exercise as everything else in the army. No other filmmaker has better captured the military’s masculine crisis.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Beau Travail” [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

68

King Kong (1933)



The 1930s was an astonishing decade for Hollywood monster movies. “Frankenstein,” “Dracula,” “The Mummy,” “The Invisible Man” — these divinely spooky fairy tales of humanized horror colonized our nightmares. Yet the grandest of them all was a creature feature about an island beast who was less monstrous than misunderstood. That was Kong, the giant ape who remains the most innocently awesome and poetic special-effects feat in film history. The Skull Island sequence has a primeval magic, yet the longevity of Merian C. Cooper’s landmark also hinges on scenes where the filmmaking is stripped to its spine, notably an unbroken shot of a fledgling ingenue being guided through her first screen test. Fay Wray raises her eyes toward an imaginary monster, feigns to choke on her own terror and unleashes a scream that has echoed for 90 years.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “King Kong” [here](#). Stream the film on [Peacock](#).

67

Bicycle Thieves (1948)



The timeless humanist gem of Italian Neorealism. With urgent working-class concerns around financial despair at its center, Vittorio De Sica's soul-crushing classic delicately perceives its unforgiving post-World War II Italy where the poor must own bikes for below-minimum-wage jobs. There's no holding back tears while De Sica's dignified yet underprivileged Antonio desperately searches for his stolen pedals and tries to set an upstanding example for his impressionable young son, a luxury heartbreakingly denied to him that De Sica affectionately showers with empathy.

Read *Variety*'s original review for "Bicycle Thieves" [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

66

Paris Is Burning (1990)



While a list like this could include any number of documentaries, Jennie Livingston's legendary celebration of the queer haven that Harlem drag balls provided for Black and Latino, gay and trans youth signifies a pre-reality-TV apotheosis of the form: It educates and inspires, while illuminating a vibrant demimonde all but invisible to mainstream society at the time — despite Madonna's hit "Vogue" appropriating the scene's strike-a-pose dance style. After immersing herself in that world, Livingston brought the culture of rival "houses" (ersatz families with names like Xtravaganza and LaBeija) into the light, letting the fierce den mothers define such concepts as *reading*, *realness* and *shade*. The movie paved the way for RuPaul and "Pose," while exponentially expanding LGBT visibility at large.

Stream "Paris is Burning" on [HBO Max](#).

65

A Man Escaped (1956)



The economical style developed by French auteur Robert Bresson reached a pinnacle with his fourth film. The dispassionate prison-break procedural, based on a memoir, proved a perfect vehicle for the “pure” filmmaking now known as “Bressonian” in which nonprofessional actors (here François Leterrier plays Fontaine, the aspiring escape artist) are often shot in close-ups of hands and faces, with minimal dialogue but minute attention to offscreen sound, to create an extraordinarily absorbing cinematic experience. To watch Fontaine painstakingly shave wood from his cell door, or quietly assess the other convicts, or tap messages on his wall, is like watching a colossal mechanism being assembled piece by piece from scratch. Once it’s finally set in motion, you may have to remind yourself to breathe.

Rent or purchase “A Man Escaped” on [Prime Video](#).

64

Carrie (1976)



Brian De Palma, with his virtuosic film-freak fetishism, is one of the most celebrated directors of the past half century, and if you ask De Palma stans what his greatest movie is, a lot of them will tell you it's "Blow Out." Actually, it's this delectable and terrifying gothic bloodbath "Cinderella." Adapted from Stephen King's first novel and starring the incomparable Sissy Spacek as a telekinetic high-school wallflower who gets invited to the prom as a prank, plus Piper Laurie as her seething fundamentalist mother (a relationship as resonant as anything in Tennessee Williams), "Carrie" is a mesmerizing emotional chiller that remains the most revered movie fairy tale of former teen geeks everywhere.

Read *Variety*'s original review for "Carrie" [here](#). Stream the film on [Pluto TV](#).

63

Bambi (1942)



Photo : Walt Disney / Courtesy: Everett Collection

Animation may not strictly be a children’s medium, but one reason it’s thought of as such is the splendid way Walt Disney used the hand-drawn form to bring dreams to life. In “Snow White,” the wildlife doesn’t talk, but within five years, Disney was making it seem perfectly normal that wide-eyed forest animals might chatter among themselves (e.g., “He can call me a flower if he wants to”). There’s a purity to “Bambi” — evident in the scene where Thumper encourages the wobbly fawn to walk — unmatched by any cartoon since, though the death of the mother at the hands of man has traumatized countless kids. What makes this Disney’s best is the simple way it invites audiences to empathize with creatures.

Read *Variety*'s original review for “Bambi” [here](#). Stream the film on [Disney+](#).

62

Dazed and Confused (1993)



Photo : ©GramercyPictures

Richard Linklater's free-flowing comedy about the last day of high school in 1976 is the cinema's most shaggy-dog lyrical and authentic depiction of teenage life ... ever. It's also the greatest Robert Altman film that Altman never made. Every detail (the cars, the clothes, the jocks who look like hippies, the stoners who look like nerds) makes you feel like you've entered a time machine, as Linklater lets his characters ramble and roam, turning every setting — a Little League game, a midnight kegger in the woods — into an opportunity to eavesdrop that leaves the audience feeling alright, alright, alright. He also captures that pivotal moment when the idea of "counterculture" first became embedded in the culture it was countering.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Dazed and Confused" [here](#). Rent and purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

61

The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

Somehow stringently severe and ecstatic at the same time, Carl Theodor Dreyer's imposing obelisk of silent cinema is one of the most soulful and emotionally immediate historical portraits ever made.

Sticking to the record of the 15th-century French warrior's trial and execution, Dreyer's film offers little in the way of dramatic embellishment, relying instead on the extraordinary, transparently expressive face of star Renée Jeanne Falconetti for its steadily escalating, finally devastating power, with no words required.

Read *Variety*'s original review for "The Passion of Joan of Arc" [here](#). Stream the film on Prime Video.

60

Moulin Rouge! (2001)



Photo : ©20thCentFox/Courtesy Everett Collection

The movie musical, already not a genre given to restraint, has never been so gloriously maximalist as it is in Baz Luhrmann's fin de siècle jukebox romance, which throws so many contrivances, naked anachronisms and ornamental formal flourishes at the screen that they somehow balance each other out into the purest kind of old-Hollywood showmanship — one that appears to believe its naive credo (Truth! Beauty! Freedom! Love!) with such sincere intensity that you can't help but buy into it too. It's a neon-lit landmark that changed the way musicals could be constructed in the 21st century, did for Elton John's "Your Song" what "Muriel's Wedding" did for "Dancing Queen," and relaunched Nicole Kidman as the gutsiest actress of her generation.

Read *Variety*'s original review for "Moulin Rouge!" [here](#). Stream the film on [Starz](#).

59

Vagabond (1985)



Photo : BFI

In 1955, while still in her mid-20s, a young French photographer named Agnès Varda picked up a camera and made a movie, beating the likes of Godard and Truffaut to the task. For the next six decades, she continued to make films on her own terms, without asking permission or worrying about commercial prospects. Varda was as independent a filmmaker as the medium has ever seen, and that uncompromising but deeply humanist sensibility is best reflected in “Vagabond.” The intricately crafted film opens with the discovery of homeless Mona (Sandrine Bonnaire) dead in a ditch, then works backward as the people whose lives she touched seek to explain this elusive free spirit. Thus, Mona serves as a mirror for them and the audience.

Read *Variety's* original review for “Vagabond” [here](#).

58

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (1982)



Photo : ©Universal/Courtesy Everett Collection

Seven films into his career, the child inside of Steven Spielberg finally shot a movie that sees the world as if the towering director were still just 4½-feet tall. This generational touchstone about an alien who befriends a home of free-range kids portrays adults as intimidating shapes shielded behind masks and impenetrable mutterings about contagions. Empathy and awe, curiosity and adventure — these emotions are for the young, and are made literal in E.T.’s beating heart. While it’s no easy task to settle on Spielberg’s masterpiece, “E.T.” is his only film to bring Princess Diana to sobs, inspire the United Nations to award him a Peace Medal and, upon its Cannes premiere, move François Truffaut to send Spielberg a telegram that read, “You belong here more than me.”

Read *Variety*’s original review for “E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial” [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

57

Brokeback Mountain (2005)



Photo : ©Focus Films/Courtesy Everett Collection

Taiwan-born Ang Lee had already made a Marvel superhero movie (“Hulk”) and the highest-grossing foreign-language film in American history (“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”) when he assumed the relatively intimate task of adapting Annie Proulx’s short story about two cowboys’ decades-spanning secret. Now considered among the most indelible Hollywood love stories, the tragic queer romance might have been a niche release, as opposed to the culture-shifting crossover phenomenon it became, were it not for a pair of peerless movie-star performances from Jake Gyllenhaal and especially Heath Ledger, who conveys so much within the character’s muffled reticence to speak. Lee has often credited his grasp of America’s aching truths to his status as an immigrant, but it’s his poetic capacity for restraint that makes “Brokeback” so powerful.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Brokeback Mountain” [here](#). Rent and purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

56

Rosemary's Baby (1968)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Some say “The Exorcist” is the scariest movie ever made. But even the explicit way the devil reveals himself in that classic of demonic possession doesn’t get under your skin the way the devil does in Roman Polanski’s majestically creepy everyday nightmare about the Satan cult next door. It’s a thriller worthy of Hitchcock, with Mia Farrow’s Rosemary — a woeful waif, hair shorn like a prison-camp victim — going through a pregnancy from hell, which the film elevates into a feminine trauma of shuddery profundity.

Read *Variety*’s original review of “Rosemary’s Baby” [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

55

Pather Panchali (1955)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Long before Richard Linklater’s “Boyhood,” there was Satyajit Ray’s exquisitely paced and structured Apu Trilogy, the holy peak of all chaptered coming-of-age narratives. Restrained but also universally relatable, the Bengali filmmaker’s debut is the first of those three movies, which put Indian cinema on the international art-house map. Like a regional riff on Italian Neorealism, the inherently humanist “Pather Panchali” is both a loving portrait of a mostly matriarchal upbringing and an awe-inspiring vision of rural life, as reflected through the impressionable eyes of its young protagonist. The film’s captivating images include chasing after a passing train and playing in a monsoon, which add up to a pure and soul-nourishing experience.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Pather Panchali” [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

54

The Road Warrior (1981)



Photo : ©Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

Hollywood has given us some good action films in the past 100 years. But no one, simply put, has made an action film as great — as combustible and thrilling, as surgically shot and edited, as poetic in its close-to-the-ground nihilism — as George Miller’s “Mad Max” films. We adore all of them (well, OK, not “Beyond Thunderdome”), but this is one that lives in our dreams. It’s the movies’ most vivid and threatening dystopian fairy tale, with Mel Gibson’s Max going up against a crew of terrifying punk marauders. The vehicular chases (we’re hesitant to call a number of these contraptions cars) are such extraordinary duels of velocity and aggression that they make speed itself into the film’s main character.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “The Road Warrior” [here](#). Rent and purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

53

In the Mood for Love (2000)



Photo : ©Miramax/Courtesy Everett Collection

Easily one of the most beautiful movies ever made, Hong Kong master Wong Kar Wai's rapturously repressed romance unfolds between two never-more-gorgeous stars: Maggie Cheung, an elegant sliver of sadness in a high-necked silk cheongsam, and Tony Leung, the model of smoldering, yearning hesitation. Christopher Doyle's sensuous cinematography glories in jewel tones, frames-in-frames and the smoky layers of separation between the pair, drawn together when they discover their spouses having an affair. But most of the mood flows from Wong's feel for the tantalizing erotics of the near miss: the door left ajar, the phrase left unspoken, the burning gaze met then reluctantly broken. Wong has made more complex films, but none that lingers quite like this one, like incense and unconsummated desire.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "In the Mood for Love" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

52

The General (1926)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Upon its release, critics considered this tight Civil War epic to be Buster Keaton's least funny film, missing what has since made it his most respected achievement: The vaudeville-trained silent-film comedian took the true story of the robbery and recovery of a Confederate steam engine as a creative opportunity to stage reckless stunts aboard a moving train. His comic timing and daring combine in the scene where he stands astride the General's cow-catcher, tossing a railroad tie to dislodge another blocking the tracks ahead. To understand his genius, watch how Keaton pantomimes clumsiness in order to mask the precision required to pull off the gag. Keaton, who co-directed, was meticulous about historical detail, creating images — like the climactic collapsing-bridge crash — of an immortal quality.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The General" [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

51

Apocalypse Now (1979)



Photo : ©United Artists/courtesy Everett / Everett Collection

A war movie that's never been surpassed for sheer cataclysmic spectacle. In 1976, Francis Ford Coppola journeyed into the jungles of the Philippines, emerging more than a year later after a shoot ravaged by a typhoon, the heart attack of 36-year-old star Martin Sheen and Coppola's own cultivation of chaos. Yet in the movie that emerged, we see elements of all that disaster and madness onscreen. Coppola's delirious and druggy Vietnam bad trip features one of the greatest sequences ever filmed — the "Ride of the Valkyries" helicopter attack, which channels the adrenalized rush of war that's inseparable from its horror — and the rest of the movie works on you with a slow-burn hypnosis. The vigorous excess of Coppola's visual language and the spiritual force of its antiwar messaging all slap you in the face every time.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Apocalypse Now" [here](#). Rent and purchase the film on Prime Video.

50

Breathless (1960)



Photo : Courtesy of Studiocanal

Jean-Paul Belmondo glances at a vintage movie still, traces his lips with his thumb and utters the enchanted word “Bogie.” In that simple moment, a cinematic ocean gets crossed. The baton of Old Hollywood has been passed to the French New Wave — but what that means is that it has passed into a new way of seeing. Jean-Luc Godard’s astonishing first feature is the breakneck tale of Belmondo’s small-time car thief and the American cub reporter he fancies, played by a perfectly pert Jean Seberg. Their affair still feels strikingly “modern,” as the two hang out in an apartment, together but separate. Yet the film’s most indelible gestures come from Godard, the director who revolutionized movies. In “Breathless,” he teases sound and silence, layers musical themes and casually invents the jump cut, so that what looked at first like the tale of a petty gangster turns into a tsunami of new perception.

Read *Variety*'s [original review of “Breathless” here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

49

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

A vanful of kids snaking their way down a sunbaked highway. An old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. The most terrifying psycho since “Psycho” — a human runt, hidden behind a mask of human skin, wielding his buzzing phallic chain saw not just as a weapon of death but as an instrument of sadistically surreal torture and fear. Tobe Hooper’s brilliant grindhouse landmark has been imitated so often that it has become nothing less than the paradigm of contemporary horror. Yet the film’s mastery is that it’s an existential nightmare told with lyrical cunning, right down to the legendary final shot of insanity at dawn.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre” [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

48

The Piano (1993)



Photo : ©Miramax/Courtesy Everett Collection

There has never been another character like Holly Hunter's Ada, a mute Scotswoman who journeys to the bleak colonial bush of 1850s New Zealand to join in an arranged marriage, and who wills herself to silence just because. Jane Campion's masterful drama is hypnotically torn between inchoate feminist fury and a kind of desolate romantic yearning. Ada is not about to confess her soul to the men who lay claim to her, be it her husband (Sam Neill) or the tattooed lover (Harvey Keitel) who controls her access to a piano, her supreme instrument of self-expression. Yet Hunter's austere performance becomes a testament of silent passion, speaking to the audience so directly that it's as if she were wired to us.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Piano" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Apple TV](#).

47

Mean Streets (1973)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Martin Scorsese has made many masterpieces (who'd want to live in a movie world without "Taxi Driver" or "Raging Bull"?), yet the film that established him as a major artist — not to mention the cinema's foremost chronicler of mob life from the ground up — still stands above nearly all of them. It's that electrifying and memorable an experience. "Mean Streets" is brilliantly staged (to the most ecstatic rock 'n' roll score in film history), yet every scene in it just seems to *happen*, as Charlie, a Little Italy numbers runner played with wormy ambition by Harvey Keitel, tries to rein in his firecracker of a cousin, Johnny Boy, played by Robert De Niro as the very id of '70s Hollywood. Imagine Coppola, Cassavetes and Kenneth Anger mixed into one explosive cocktail, and you have the timeless genius Scorsese showed here.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Mean Streets" [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#) or [Paramount+](#).

46

Notorious (1946)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Of the 50-odd features Hitchcock made in his career, this is the one where every element fits together perfectly, like a Swiss watch. The director's technical brilliance shines through at multiple points, as in the crane shot from the balcony to the key hidden in Ingrid Bergman's hand. But it's the three lead performances that make this cloak-and-dagger love triangle so engaging ... and perverse: A secret agent (Cary Grant) falls for the woman (Bergman) he recruited to dupe a dapper Nazi (Claude Rains), complicating the mission to uncover the MacGuffin — as Hitchcock called the whatsit everybody wants — locked in his wine cellar. The movie is elegant, sexy and the most suspenseful of his oeuvre, because we sense how much is at stake for the couple.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Notorious" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

45

Titanic (1997)



Photo : 20th Century Fox Film Corp.

It's possible that no movie in history has been as simultaneously beloved and attacked as James Cameron's jaw-droppingly spectacular love story. It's arguably the only disaster movie that's a work of art. Yet the carping began almost immediately ("The script is terrible!" — actually, it's quite good, though with a few lines that clink), to the point that the movie became one of the foundation stones of hater culture. Yet listen to the heart of the ocean and forget that noise! "Titanic" has a primal sweep that evokes the majesty of D.W. Griffith, and there's a regal irony built into the romance that the haters all missed. Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet have an enchanting chemistry, yet the film knows all too well that these two characters are just having a starry-eyed youthful fling. It's *only* the close encounter with an iceberg that renders their love timeless.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Titanic" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

44

L'Avventura (1960)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

A young woman goes missing during a pleasure-boat vacation. Her best friend (Monica Vitti, in a star-making role) and her lover search for her, but gradually fall in love. Michelangelo Antonioni's first masterpiece — there are several more, notably "La Notte" and "L'Eclisse," also starring Vitti, which form a thematic trilogy with "L'Avventura" — has the bones of a Hitchcock thriller. But this solution-less mystery is essentially an inversion of that model, which is what made it, and Antonioni, so revolutionary: He renders the eerie areas of story and character psychology, which would ordinarily be the negative space between plot beats, not only visible but achingly, inexpressibly beautiful.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "L'Avventura" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

43

Shoah (1985)



Photo : ©New Yorker Films/Courtesy Ever

Many a cinephile has put off watching Claude Lanzmann's expansive, illuminating and cumulatively shattering Holocaust documentary in the course of their film education: Nine and a half hours of confrontation with the victims and perpetrators alike of systematic genocide is no easy watch, after all, and nor should it be. Yet there's an essentially human pull to the film's witnessing of lives and communities broken and sometimes rebuilt in the 40 years following the Holocaust that makes it riveting — an urgent historical chronicle recorded at the precise time it needed to be done, distant enough from the events to take in their multigenerational impact, and close enough to hear its voices firsthand.

Rent or purchase "Shoah" on [Prime Video](#).

42

Moonlight (2016)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

The dramatic Oscar-night twist — which saw Barry Jenkins' queer Black indie drama upset old-school front-runner “La La Land” — revealed a major shift in sensibility from the Academy, which had snubbed “Brokeback Mountain” and “Do the Right Thing” (the unacknowledged best pictures of their respective years). At a moment when the industry was coming to terms with a lack of diversity in its stories and storytellers, “Moonlight” sublimely illustrated what had been missing: an opportunity to discover someone like Chiron, deemed “soft” by his peers, taken under the wing of a compromised father figure (Mahershala Ali), who gives in to love and aggression alike. Told in three distinct chapters, this hopeful portrayal of what the character’s future might bring paved the way for so many other voices.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Moonlight” [here](#). Stream the film on [Hulu](#).

41

The Wild Bunch (1969)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

For the first half-century of cinema's existence, the Western was the medium's defining genre, in America at least. But hundreds of movies — plus primetime television series like “Bonanza” and “Gunsmoke” — wore it out, until Sam Peckinpah gave things a New Hollywood kick. The director learned at the feet of action maestro Don Siegel (master of the montage) but brought his own macho sensibility to “The Wild Bunch,” subverting the idealism of “Shane” and other iconic Westerns. Even the kids are violent by nature here. The film focuses on an aging gang of outlaws who go down in a blaze of glory. It’s bloody as hell, culminating in an epic shootout that rivals the “Psycho” shower scene or the “Saving Private Ryan” beach landing in sheer bravura.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “The Wild Bunch” [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

40

Fargo (1996)



Photo : Courtesy of Gramercy Pictures/Everett Collection

Over the course of their eccentric, uncompromising careers, the Coen brothers have contributed some of cinema's most colorful characters: human meltdown Barton Fink, baby-snatching H.I. and evil-incarnate Anton Chigurh. But their greatest invention is pregnant police chief Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), the Midwestern-accented voice of reason in this sly, subzero crime drama, which is just deranged enough to sell its cheeky "true story" claim. Look past the carnage and the Coens' more-serious-than-it-seems colloquial satire serves as a contrast in marriages. On one hand, you have a spineless used-car salesman (William H. Macy) so desperate for cash that he kidnaps his own wife. On the other, there's good-natured Marge — as diligent a detective as any Dude — who takes time away from the stressful investigation to pep-talk her husband.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Fargo" [here](#). Stream the film on [Hulu](#).

39

Some Like It Hot (1959)



Photo : United Artists/Kobal/Shutterstock

Men dressing as women has been fuel for comedy for longer than cinema has been around, but never so cleverly or chaotically as in Billy Wilder's note-perfect bauble, which races through one genre template after another — gangster thriller, backstage musical, bedroom farce — without missing a comic beat. Playing Jack Lemmon's nebbishy charm against Tony Curtis' alpha suaveness is a recipe for laughs, while their fumbling attempts to pass as two classy dames subversively critique the duo's own sexism. Wilder, who had directed Marilyn Monroe's iconic subway-grate scene in "The Seven Year Itch," recognized better than anyone the hyper-feminine star's potential, using her luminous, so-dazed-it's-almost-Zen comic timing to upstage her cross-dressing co-stars. It's a treat with teeth.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Some Like It Hot" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

38

Lawrence of Arabia (1962)



Photo : Courtesy of Columbia Pictures

Six decades of changing attitudes toward colonialism, feminism and militarism should have dated this men-only story of an arrogant British Army lieutenant's exploits in the Middle Eastern theater of World War I. But David Lean's epic, shot by Freddie Young with unparalleled panoramic majesty, is both a spectacular celebration and a lacerating critique of such endeavors. From his sand-gold hair to his sky-blue eyes, Peter O'Toole plays T.E. Lawrence as a man possessed by the Arabian Desert, a towering hero and a hubristic narcissist, a manipulator and a pawn, a genius tactician and a monster of repressed sadomasochistic impulse. Such fertile contradictions mean that aside from its eternally jaw-dropping technical virtues, exemplified by Omar Sharif materializing on camelback out of the heat-hazed desert horizon, "Lawrence of Arabia" still feels thrillingly current.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Lawrence of Arabia" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

37

Annie Hall (1977)



Photo : Courtesy of MGM

For most of the first decade of his movie career, Woody Allen made what we now call his “early, funny films,” and some were as inspired in their lunacy as the movies of the Marx Brothers. So it was a pleasurable shock when he embedded his hilarious sense of surrealist vaudeville in a romantic comedy that turned out to be as sophisticated and transporting as it was funny. Diane Keaton’s Annie Hall, all adorable thrift-shop charm and enchanting ditherer, became an immortal screen heroine of the ’70s, and Allen pushed the neurotic narcissism of “the Woody Allen character” to such a pesky, honest extreme that he seemed, at least for that cultural moment, to stand in for a generation of men who had never learned to commit.

Read *Variety*’s original review of “Annie Hall” [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

36

On the Waterfront (1954)



Photo : Courtesy of Columbia Pictures

Marlon Brando redefined American acting, first onstage and then on-screen with “A Streetcar Named Desire.” But it was this reunion with The Actors Studio founder Elia Kazan that repped the pair’s greatest collaboration: a street-level redemption story about an ex-boxer (Brando) who decides he’s tired of being pushed around by the corrupt union bosses — the same guys who forced him to take a dive in the ring. In his pursuit of realism, Kazan insisted on shooting on the New Jersey docks, while trusting Brando’s instincts to bring the character to life. The “I coulda been a contender” scene with Rod Steiger is classic, but study how Brando picks up and plays with Eva Marie Saint’s glove to appreciate the unpredictable, improv-ready brilliance of his Method.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “On the Waterfront” [here](#). Stream the film on **HBO Max**.

35

The Silence of the Lambs (1991)



Photo : Screenshot courtesy of Youtube

The serial killer has become a talismanic figure in pop culture, maybe because one can't rationalize away his drive to murder. And no drama of serial killers — their dread, fascination and mystery — has cast a greater spell than Jonathan Demme's exquisitely crafted landmark of a thriller. It's a plunge into evil made with so much humanity — as well as a perverse spirit of play — that it leaves you both unnerved and exhilarated. Anthony Hopkins' performance as Hannibal Lecter, the genius serial-killer cannibal, didn't take long to become a meme, and that's because Hopkins makes Lecter as witty as he is mad, dispatching his victims as a cathartic form of superiority. And Jodie Foster, as the FBI agent who bonds with Lecter to catch a killer of twisted terror, gives her most valiant performance, playing a solo woman warrior poised against a patriarchy of fear.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Silence of the Lambs" [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

34

Stagecoach (1939)



Photo : 20th Century Fox Film Corp. All

It took John Ford, one of the greatest American filmmakers, to elevate the image of the Western and earn the genre the respect it deserved. For more than half a century, Ford found poetry in frontier stories, and though his thorny rescue saga “The Searchers” (which came much later) is his most modern, this groundbreaking love and revenge picture set the high-water mark. Starring an iconic John Wayne as a reckless outlaw, in a collaboration that would span 12 movies, and navigating the tale of a band of outsiders against the majestic backdrop of Monument Valley, Ford’s influential epic is sweepingly rich with artistic shots and exacting framing, as well as surprisingly intimate in its exploration of a much fabled land.

Read *Variety*’s original review of “Stagecoach” [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

33

8½ (1963)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Col

After achieving international acclaim with increasingly expressionistic portraits of the world as he saw it — from the simple circus performers of “La Strada” to the decadent Roman nightlife of “La Dolce Vita” — Italian maestro Federico Fellini lost confidence in his capacity to create. Instead of giving up, he channeled that artistic despair into his most uninhibited triumph: a freewheeling and shamelessly autobiographical movie about a philandering filmmaker’s crippling case of direcile dysfunction, full to bursting with past mistresses, childhood memories and psychoanalytic symbology. From the opening anxiety dream, in which Marcello Mastroianni (as Fellini’s self-flattering/flagellating stand-in) claws his way out of a traffic jam, to the climactic rondelet around the rocket set, the blocked director found surrealistic inspiration in his subconscious.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “8½” [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

32

Vertigo (1958)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

No, it's not Hitchcock's greatest film. But it *is* his most rapturous and formally head-spinning dream-poem of romantic fatalism. The entire movie seems to take place in a hypnotic trance, as James Stewart's wayward San Francisco detective follows, and falls in love with, Kim Novak's walking specter of a temptress, only to learn that she's not who she seems. But can he turn her back into who she seemed? "Vertigo," a mystery tucked inside an enigma, is really the cinema's most solemnly fantastic vision of fetishism, and the gliding-camera visuals turn the Bay Area into a deliriously sculptured game board of fate.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Vertigo" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

31

Network (1976)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

In the sharpest, most scathing screenplay in American cinema, Paddy Chayefsky gave us the line, “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not gonna take this anymore!” blurted from the lips of a mad prophet, burned-out UBS anchorman Howard Beale (Peter Finch). Since the introduction of television, the movies saw their existence threatened by the boob tube’s lowest-common-denominator approach. In “Network,” the big screen bites back, taking to task the culture of distraction — what Neil Postman called “amusing ourselves to death” — and fearmongering practiced by ratings-thirsty execs, like Faye Dunaway’s ethically challenged programming chief. Without the cynical spitfire genius of Chayefsky’s script (in Sidney Lumet’s hands), there would be no Aaron Sorkin, no “The Morning Show,” no film by which the industry could keep itself honest.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Network” [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

30

The Empire Strikes Back (1980)



The “long, long ago” preamble at the top of “Star Wars” established George Lucas’ interstellar adventure saga as a kind of space-age fairy tale. But it wasn’t until the sequel — when Luke Skywalker discovered Darth Vader was his dad, Leia was his sister and he could bench-press X-wings by using the Force — that the series showed its full potential. Handled differently, the Irvin Kershner-directed follow-up could’ve killed the franchise. But instead of merely repeating the thrills of the blockbuster original, “Empire” introduces new information — and characters, like Yoda — that lend an emotional dimension to what had come before. Plus, the heroes really take a beating, all of which made audiences profoundly invested in seeing the revenge of the Jedi (as the next movie was tentatively called).

Read *Variety*'s original review of “The Empire Strikes Back” [here](#). Stream the film on [Disney+](#).

29

Double Indemnity (1944)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

The moody seductive apex of film noir, Billy Wilder's lustrous drama sizzles with the most elegant offerings of a filmmaking style defined by the era's World War II-infused paranoia: a gleaming cinematography of dark shadows, deceit, homicide and plenty of cigarette smoke. Emerging out of the picture's Los Angeles enclave of Spanish-style houses is Barbara Stanwyck's definitive femme fatale and Fred MacMurray's defenseless insurance salesman, who can't help but get caught in the conniving double-crosser's scheming web. With this gripping tale of the dark side of romance, the genre-defying director set the bar for the famously hard-boiled genre.

Read *Variety*'s [original review of "Double Indemnity"](#) here. Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

28

City Lights (1931)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Four years after the invention of talkies, Charlie Chaplin stuck to what made him the world's biggest star: keeping his mouth shut. The silent comedian had spent years finding the right mix of silliness and sentimentality, and the combination was never more sublime than in this romantic pearl of a film. Chaplin reprises his signature "Little Tramp" character, who falls for a blind flower girl (Virginia Cherrill). Unable to see his tattered suit, the young woman falls for what she thinks is a millionaire. To get the poetic moment where these two meet just right, Chaplin shot and reshot the scene a total of 342 times. Better still is the moment after her sight is restored where she touches his hand and recognizes the truth.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "City Lights" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

27

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

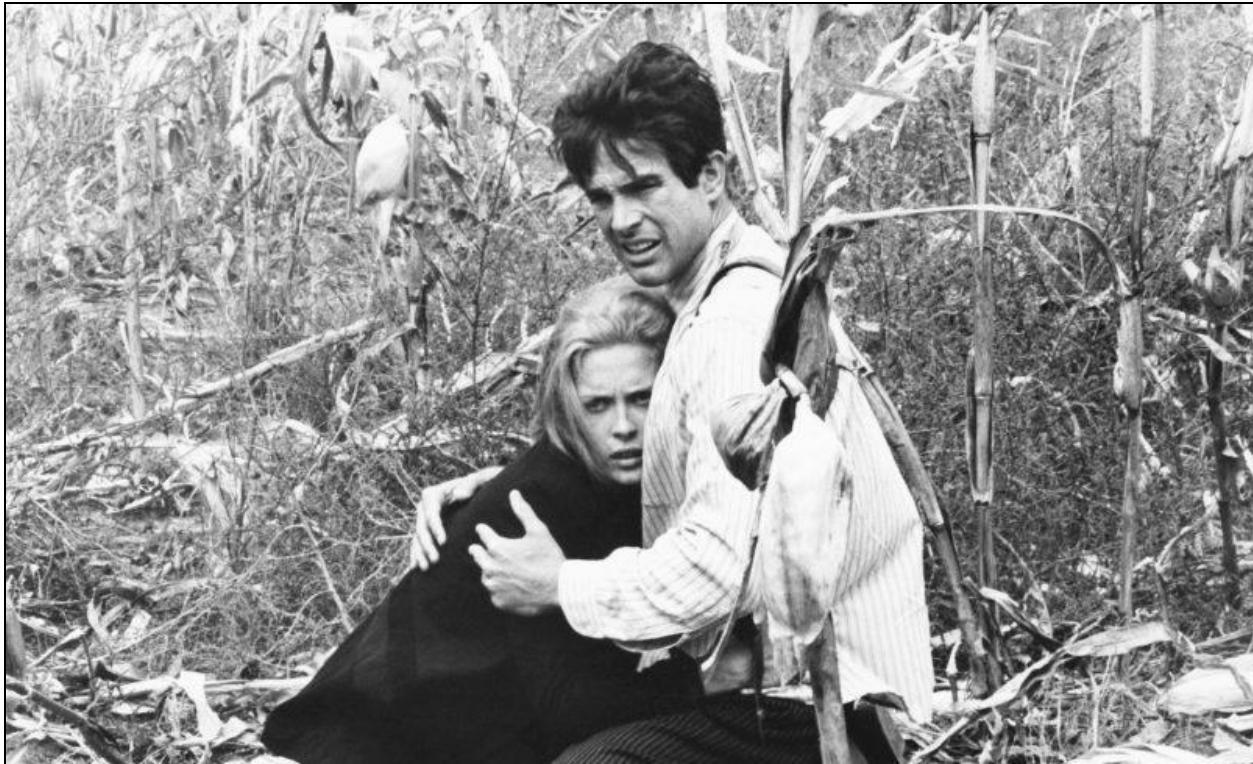


Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

A gangster movie so fresh and bold, so brazen in its eroticism, so shocking in its bullet-in-the-eye violence that it effectively became the stake through the heart of the Hollywood studio system. Yet the aesthetic secret of “Bonnie and Clyde” is that it’s actually poised, with a one-of-a-kind perfection, between the cinematic world that came before it and the one that came after. Telling the story of the infamous 1930s bank robbers Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, who are played with breathtaking glamour and heartbreaking vulnerability by Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, the film kicked open the door to the flowing freedom of the New Hollywood, yet Arthur Penn directed it with a visual rigor and an iron-clad design that can only be called classical.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Bonnie and Clyde” [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

26

The 400 Blows (1959)



Photo : Jerry Tavin/Everett Collection

Many a canonized classic has had its edges softened by intervening years of admiration. But the debut from foundational French New Wave François Truffaut, a film critic of notoriously brutal insight, resists this certain tendency, just as Truffaut, although mining his own childhood, resists nostalgia. Instead, this portrait of parentally neglected adolescent Parisian truant Antoine (Jean-Pierre Léaud, in one of the greatest-ever juvenile performances) remains beautifully raw, playing not as memories meticulously re-created but as incidents being lived for the first time. After this, Léaud would be an actor, and Truffaut not just a director but an auteur (a theory he'd passionately advocated). But here, nothing is yet written and "The 400 Blows," from its classroom opening to its stunningly evocative final freeze frame, stays eternally new.

Read *Variety's* original review of "The 400 Blows" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

25

Bringing Up Baby (1938)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

The funniest, and most zany-sublime, of the four Cary Grant-Katharine Hepburn collaborations, Howard Hawks' uproarious farce is fast, wild and awash with feisty chemistry in all the ways the screwball genre of speedy wisecracks and chaotic couplings demands. But what's perhaps most special about "Bringing Up Baby" is its commitment to high levels of absurdity in a disorderly and unusual playpen, one that embraces both an on-the-loose leopard and a misplaced dinosaur bone. From ahead-of-its-time observations on gender norms to blistering zingers exchanged between a nerdy paleontologist and a frantic socialite, Hawks' dizzying romantic comedy is an ageless classic.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Bringing Up Baby" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on Prime Video.

24

Tokyo Story (1953)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Over and over in his astonishing career, Japanese legend Yasujirō Ozu proved his miraculous facility for a piercingly precise, intimate humanism that unfurls in every direction into an epic thematic landscape. The last film in Ozu’s “Noriko trilogy,” after “Late Spring” and “Early Summer,” “Tokyo Story” takes the director’s deceptively quiet domestic focus to its most transcendent height. Out of the minutely observed story of an aging couple visiting Tokyo and treated with different flavors of neglect and disrespect by their grown-up children, Ozu, abetted by a superlative cast led by Chishū Ryū and Chieko Higashiyama as the elderly parents, fashions simply the greatest and most devastating film about the generation gap ever made.

Stream “Tokyo Story” on [HBO Max](#) or [Prime Video](#).

23

The Apartment (1960)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

In 1960, Billy Wilder was convinced that corporations were ruining Hollywood. He spun that cynicism into this mordant comedy that casts a cold eye on the effect of big business on human decency, where Jack Lemmon's cubicle worker Bud Baxter might sell out the woman he loves (Shirley MacLaine) for a key to the junior executives' washroom. As MacLaine's depressive elevator operator sighs, "Some people take and some people get took." Many critics took offense at the film itself, discomfited that Wilder refused to lecture audiences that Baxter was acting like a louse. That ambiguity gives Wilder's film its lasting depth — its satire feels more relevant every year — and, in a stroke of irony, proved that great art could be made under corporate Hollywood after all.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Apartment" [here](#). Stream the film on [Sling TV](#).

22

Chinatown (1974)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

A stray bullet, a car horn, a thin scream, and Roman Polanski's "Chinatown" pulls off perhaps the greatest dumb-luck downer ending in American cinema. But the ironic finale derives its tragic heft from a cast (Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway and John Huston especially) working, alongside every crew department, to career-best form, on a Robert Towne screenplay dripping with malice and bristling with hidden agendas. Drought, incest, orange groves, murder and money, this is the L.A. neo-noir to end all L.A. neo-noirs, so controlled you could clone the entire gloriously grimy affair out of any single detail, from the bandage across Jake Gittes' nose to the flaw in Evelyn Mulwray's eye.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Chinatown" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#) or [Hulu](#).

21

Gone With the Wind (1939)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

For a long time, it was simply the quintessential Hollywood movie: the spellbinding definition of how star power and spectacle, soap opera and history, could merge into an experience that swept audiences away. There are two ways that we now see it differently. Embedded in the film's romantic vision of the South during and after the Civil War is a shameful insensitivity to the lives of Black Americans who were enslaved on plantations. Time has not been kind to "Gone With the Wind's" blinkered vision of race. Yet it's been very kind indeed to the thorny majesty of the film's drama. Once viewed as the province of "women's pictures," the saga of Scarlett O'Hara now stands more clearly than ever as an American narrative of transcendent power, with Vivien Leigh delivering the most wrenching performance by a female actor of the studio-system era.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Gone With the Wind" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

20

Blue Velvet (1986)



Photo : ©De Laurentiis Group/Courtesy Everett Collection

In the 1980s, the roots of the independent-film revolution sprouted overnight when David Lynch released his most sensational and talked-about movie. It was a mesmerizing freak-show dream that was equal parts shock theater and film noir, with a performance by Dennis Hopper that seemed to redefine evil, a scene with Dean Stockwell that's as strange and hypnotic as any scene in history, and an ominous wide-eyed storytelling eagerness that looked back at old movies and forward into how they could be reconfigured as surely as Quentin Tarantino would do in the next decade. Some think Lynch's "Mulholland Drive" upped the ante on "Blue Velvet." In more ways than not, we think it — brilliantly — rehashed it, and that "Blue Velvet" remains the essential thriller symphony of Lynch's career.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Blue Velvet" [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

19

The Godfather Part II (1974)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

The most masterful sequel ever made, which is one reason that some think it's superior to "The Godfather." Yet with the rigid cold stare of Pacino's Michael Corleone at its center, his soul already in its death throes, this Shakespearean gangster epic shot in shades of pitch-black expands "The Godfather's" heart of darkness in a way that's more tragic but not, perhaps, as emotionally devouring. Its most operatically stunning achievement — destroyed by Coppola in his assorted alternate versions — is the cross-cutting between Michael's descent and the rise to power of the young Vito Corleone, played by Robert De Niro as a family man and close-to-the-vest killer who chooses crime because it's the only way to join America that has chosen him.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Godfather Part II" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on **HBO Max**.

18

Persona (1966)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

As revered as he is, Ingmar Bergman also gets something of a bad rap as a dour intellectual, isolated from humanity on his windswept island. “*Persona*” may be his most daunting achievement, an avant-garde two-hander that has confounded and fascinated audiences for more than half a century. (At the time of its release, it was a massive art-house phenomenon.) The formal and philosophical playfulness of this prismatic psychodrama is exhilarating — not to mention bracingly modern — as Bibi Andersson’s obsessive nurse melds with the recovering stage star, played by Liv Ullmann, in her care. Where most directors seek clarity, Bergman embraces a certain blurring of the lines uniquely suited to cinema, deviating from the formal and narrative rulebook in intimate sympathy with his characters’ mental breaks, ruptures and reversals.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “*Persona*” [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

17

Nashville (1975)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

In the 1970s, Robert Altman devised a way of making movies that was so intoxicatingly lifelike — the overlapping dialogue, the slow-zoom documentary look, the characters who seemed to drop in and out of the narrative until their dropping in *became* the narrative — that it's as if he'd reinvented cinema as an entrancing new form of social vérité mirror. In "Nashville," his densely packed and ebullient tour de force, Altman follows the seemingly random actions of 24 characters over five days in the country-music capital, and what it all adds up to is an astonishingly moving and forward-looking vision of an America that's falling apart and coming together at the same time.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Nashville" [here](#). Purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

16

Casablanca (1942)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Studio director Michael Curtiz wasn't exactly what the French would call an "auteur." Turns out, that doesn't amount to a hill of beans. "Casablanca" illustrates how well the Hollywood system could work, no matter who was behind the camera — especially when those in front included Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman (and their respective accents). In just 102 minutes, the movie telegraphs a deep personal history between these two ex-lovers, reunited at Rick's Café Américain in Morocco; a terrific romantic dilemma in the picture's World War II present (to pick up where they left off or send her packing with her Resistance fighter husband?); and a bittersweet sense of the future without regrets ... or each other.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Casablanca" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

15

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans (1927)



Photo : ©20thCentFox/Courtesy Everett Collection

Released just two weeks before “The Jazz Singer,” F.W. Murnau’s turbulent love-triangle drama marked the pinnacle of silent expressionism, including dramatic lighting (a signature of German directors at the time, imported here to Hollywood), elaborate tracking shots and impressive in-camera effects. While the acting clearly belongs to an earlier time — one that made intertitles nearly unnecessary — “Sunrise” still looks downright avant-garde compared with the relatively conservative direction film language took once sound recording forced production back indoors, making it impossible for talkies to replicate the way Murnau moved the camera through outdoor scenes and custom-built sets (like the busy street scenes). There’s no telling what movies might look like today had cinema continued in this direction.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans” [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

Do the Right Thing (1989)



Photo : ©Universal/Courtesy Everett Collection

When Spike Lee's outspoken portrait of interracial, inner-city tensions was first reviewed, several critics voiced concerns that it might spark riots. The film was plenty provocative at the time (Barack and Michelle Obama famously made this conversation starter their first date), but Lee's prescience explains how it achieved the status of American cinema's most potent protest statement. The film's fight-the-power finale — in which the director's livid alter ego, Mookie, chucks a trash can through the window of Sal's Bed-Stuy pizzeria — anticipated the contemporary wave of demonstrations against police brutality. From Rosie Perez's defiantly hyperkinetic opening-credits dance, Lee plunges audiences into a heat-wave-heightened version of his own Brooklyn neighborhood, where the locals loom larger than life. He shows members of the Black, Latino and white communities trying to coexist. But the divisions become impossible to ignore after what happens to Radio Raheem, still one of the most upsetting fates in screen history. It wasn't until Spike Lee came along and rocked the status quo that Hollywood seriously started making room for the consciousness of Black voices.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Do the Right Thing" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

The Rules of the Game (1939)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

A searing sociopolitical satire of France's ruling class on the brink of World War II, Jean Renoir's immersive and studiously choreographed ensemble drama — once destroyed after the furious response it received, later reconstructed — still stuns through graceful camera movements in deep-focus long takes. “‘The Rules of the Game’ taught me the rules of the game,” Robert Altman once said. With an operatic ensemble portraying the two ends of an upstairs-downstairs class divide during a countryside hunting party, Renoir’s cumulatively dizzying comedy of manners indeed came to influence countless filmmakers all the way into the 21st century, if a gleaming New Year’s Eve sequence in Alfonso Cuarón’s “Roma” is any indication.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “The Rules of the Game” [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#).

Goodfellas (1990)



Photo : ©Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

“The Godfather” may be the great mob-saga-as-Greek-tragedy, but it was also a work of fiction, adapted from a novel, whereas Martin Scorsese’s slick, no-apologies treatment of Nicholas Pileggi’s “Wiseguy” was rooted in reality. That’s at once the film’s appeal and the thing that makes it so unsettling: These brutal suburban gangsters really existed and seemed relatable enough to be our next-door neighbors ... or ourselves. Scorsese overtly encourages such identification, seducing us with the roller-coaster run-up of the first act, while breezing past the moral compromises made by charismatic antihero Henry Hill (Ray Liotta). It looks sexy at first from the perspective of his wife, Karen (Lorraine Bracco): DP Michael Ballhaus’ famous Steadicam shot through the side door of the Copacabana puts us in her position, swept up in Henry’s swanky new world. Then the whackings start and the mood changes, unpredictable as Joe Pesci’s trigger-happy Tommy DeVito, and we realize what an astonishing balancing act this elaborate network of allegiances has been, not just between characters, but also with our sympathies.

Read *Variety*‘s [original review of “Goodfellas” here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

Singin' in the Rain (1952)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

A quarter-century after movies found their voice, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen teamed up to honor that transition, using song and dance to show what's so splendid about the medium. In a 2007 interview with *Variety*, Ray Bradbury described MGM's glorious homage as a "great science-fiction musical." In his words, "It is science fiction because it is about the invention of sound and how that invention changed the history of Hollywood." The rest of the world sees this as a romantic comedy in which Debbie Reynolds' ingénue gets swept off her feet — and onto the big screen — while Kelly taps his way into her heart. The swoony, seemingly spontaneous lamppost sequence is pure bliss, topping even Fred Astaire's dancin'-on-the-ceiling number from "Royal Wedding" the year before.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Singin' in the Rain" [here](#). Stream the film on HBO Max.

10

Saving Private Ryan (1998)



Photo : ©DreamWorks/Courtesy Everett Collection

No American director has demonstrated a more instinctive sense of how to engage and immerse an audience in someone else's experience than Steven Spielberg, who (as big-screen memoir "The Fabelmans" reminds) started out making amateur combat films with neighborhood friends. By the time the born entertainer got around to orchestrating this epic World War II rescue, he'd convincingly brought sharks, aliens and dinosaurs to life — all fantasies compared with the brutal Omaha beach landing in this film. The D-Day invasion builds on the achievement of "Schindler's List," vividly re-creating history so we feel as if we're experiencing it firsthand. Nothing in cinema can touch the virtuosity of that opening, but Spielberg keeps us riveted — amid sniper attacks and trial-by-fire bonding — as all-American Tom Hanks and his three-dimensional co-stars carry out their nail-biting suicide mission. The pinnacle of a spectacular but often cynical genre, this sobering call-of-duty drama brings us to the brink of hell while preserving the characters' humanity in the process, thereby honoring the sacrifice of all who've served.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Saving Private Ryan" [here](#). Stream the film on [Paramount+](#).



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Bette Davis is the Godzilla of showbiz monsters in this fire-breathing satire of the fragility of stardom. In an industry that didn't take long to figure out the easy-come-easy-go nature of success, Joseph L. Mankiewicz brilliantly transformed a short story from *Cosmopolitan* magazine in such a way as to amplify the shrewd insight of the woman who wrote it. The too-true fable sees aging Broadway legend Margo Channing (Davis) seduced by conniving up-and-comer Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter), who flatters her with praise, only to insinuate herself into the older woman's life. Eve and Margo are such strong, universal characters that they've since become a kind of shorthand — gender-agnostic archetypes for the vain but vulnerable diva and the viper who serves as that person's undoing.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "All About Eve" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#) or [Apple TV](#).

It's a Wonderful Life (1946)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Frank Capra's heart-wrenching classic failed at the box office in its original release, only to become Hollywood's ultimate populist Christmas fable. It's one of the most touching movies ever made — and if you look closely, one of the darkest. (That may be why it didn't connect in 1946.) Yet it's also one of the most profound movies ever made. The tale of a small-town family man, George Bailey (James Stewart in his quintessential performance), who can't seem to realize his big dreams until he realizes that the life around him is the dream he was seeking, it's the movie that instructs all of us to wake up to the miracle we're living.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "It's a Wonderful Life" [here](#). Stream the film on [Prime Video](#).

7

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

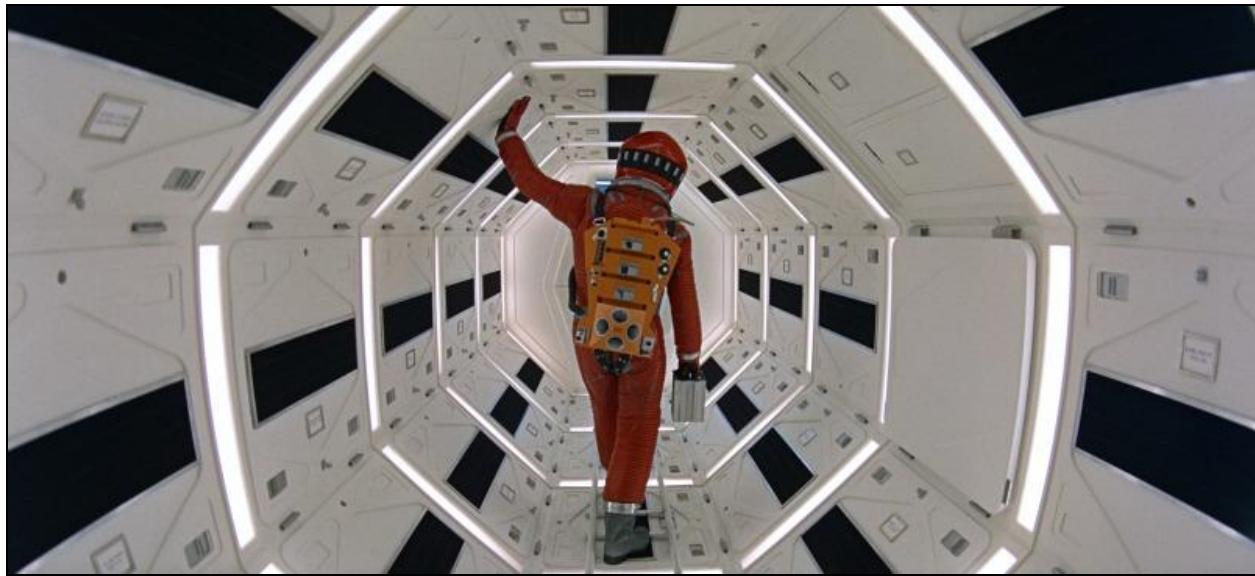


Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

The most exquisite line in the history of movie advertising got it just right. Stanley Kubrick directed what is still the ultimate trip — the only sci-fi spectacle that feels, at every moment, like it's taking you to another world. From the awesome glory of the "Also sprach Zarathustra" planetary-alignment prelude to the ape using a bone to discover human intelligence (and violence), from the "Blue Danube" ballet of orbiting satellites to the mission to Jupiter that becomes an outlandishly suspenseful astronaut-versus-computer showdown, from the still-eyeball-blowing psychedelic wormhole climax to the Star Child who is all of us reborn, Kubrick's trancelike thriller meditation on the place of man in the universe stands as one of cinema's monolithic achievements.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "2001: A Space Odyssey" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

6

Seven Samurai (1954)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Whereas Western action movies typically pit a lone hero against whatever evil might be threatening his family (“Die Hard”), town (“High Noon”) or planet (every Bond movie ever), Akira Kurosawa’s expansive ensemble drama is all about teamwork. The Japanese virtuoso, who had introduced the notion of competing perspectives with art-house breakthrough “Rashomon,” here worked to unify his cast toward a common goal: protecting a village of defenseless farmers from bandits. Despite its 207-minute running time, the resulting epic is ruthlessly economical in its storytelling. Kurosawa takes care to give each of his characters a distinct personality, some serious (e.g., “Ikiru” star Takashi Shimura as the group’s leader), others comical (like legendary scene-stealer Toshiro Mifune). Practically every rally-the-heroes movie since owes a debt to this OG testament to collective bravery.

Read *Variety*'s original review of “Seven Samurai” [here](#). Stream the film on **HBO Max**.

5

Pulp Fiction (1994)



Photo : ©Miramax/Courtesy Everett Colle

We all know what a fertile time the 1970s were for Hollywood, but it's a truth less commonly acknowledged that the '90s brought every bit as great a cinematic revolution — this one from the margins — with Quentin Tarantino as its motormouth mascot. Where fellow indie directors Soderbergh, Jarmusch, Haynes, et al. dug into the grittier corners of reality, Tarantino took his louche film-geek obsessions and remixed them into this monumental homage to the junk food that had nourished him as a video store clerk and B-movie addict. Unapologetically profane and infinitely quotable, "Pulp Fiction" transformed movies overnight. It inspired countless knockoffs, liberated movies to come from chronological storytelling and restarted the careers of Bruce Willis and John Travolta, while bringing a kind of hipster credibility to genre cinema that forever changed audience tastes.

Read *Variety*'s [original review of "Pulp Fiction"](#) here. Stream the film on [HBO Max](#).

4

Citizen Kane (1941)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

For decades it was commonly thought of as the greatest movie ever made, and there are a lot of reasons why: the visionary excitement of it, the through-a-snow-globe-darkly Gothic majesty of it, the joyous acting, the hypnotic structure, the playfulness, the doomy haunting symbolism of Rosebud, and on and on. Then-25-year-old Orson Welles charged into Hollywood as if it were the world's greatest toy store, directing his debut feature with such an ebullient, rule-breaking force of virtuosity that it's as if he'd made the first American independent film. That Welles took on the media tycoon William Randolph Hearst (whom he plays a barely veiled version of), only to see his movie — and, in a way, his career — stomped by Hearst's power, shows you that there were limits to what even a genius megalomaniac like Welles could bring off. But not many.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "Citizen Kane" [here](#). Stream the film on **HBO Max**.

The Godfather (1972)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Riding the crest of the New Hollywood, Francis Ford Coppola made what is still the greatest film since the fadeout of the studio system: a classical epic of indelibly dark sweeping grandeur, and a movie that embedded itself so richly in the popular imagination that for 50 years it has spoken to audiences on every level of experience. Watching the saga of the Corleones, we're plunged, vicariously, into a life of organized crime, in all its power and blood and influence and fear. At the same time, we're immersed in the drama of an Italian American family who, in their dance of loyalty and rivalry and devotion, connect with us in a way that's at once personal and primal. Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and the rest of the singular cast embody their roles as if they'd been born to play them. The eternal shattering paradox of "The Godfather" is that the Corleones are at once a cozy clan of Old World romantic role models, ruthless paragons of the American dream and profoundly relatable monsters. Maybe that's why their story became our story.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Godfather" [here](#). Rent or purchase the film on [Prime Video](#) or [Apple TV](#).

The Wizard of Oz (1939)



Photo : Courtesy Everett Collection

Wholesome Hollywood entertainment at its most upbeat and pure, Victor Fleming's joyous Technicolor classic has stood the test of time, gifting pleasure to multiple generations, while representing the gold standard against which all other cinematic enchantments are judged. That simple device of shifting from black and white to color when Judy Garland's Dorothy enters the Land of Oz sets up audiences for the magical experience ahead, minting the template for the "Avatar," "Star Wars" and "Lord of the Rings" franchises. We marvel alongside our wide-eyed heroine as she sets off with her three new friends — and her little dog too — to prove their smarts, hearts and courage. At their most successful, movies feel like waking reveries, which is also how one might describe Dorothy's fantastical quest. As it happens, this is how we as audiences engage with cinema, bringing every aspect of our life experience to the allegories presented on-screen, thereby making them our own. Meanwhile, in the character of the Wizard, young

viewers get an essential warning about how the medium can be used to manipulate us into believing in an alternate reality.

Read *Variety*'s original review of "The Wizard of Oz" [here](#). Stream the film on [HBO Max](#) or [Hulu](#).

1

Psycho (1960)



Photo : Everett Collection / Everett Collection

There's hardly a frame of Alfred Hitchcock's cataclysmic slasher masterpiece that isn't iconic. If you don't believe us, consider the following: Eyes. Holes. Birds. Drains. Windshield wipers. A shower. A torso. A knife. "Blood, blood!" A Victorian stairway. Mother in her rocking chair. For decades, "Psycho" enjoyed such a cosmic pop-cultural infamy that, in a funny way, its status as a work of art got overshadowed. Hailing it as Hitchcock's greatest movie — let alone the greatest movie ever made — wouldn't have seemed quite respectable. Yet there's a reason that every moment in "Psycho" is iconic, and that Anthony Perkins and Janet Leigh, as Norman Bates and Marion Crane, became fixed in our imaginations like figures out of a dream. The entire movie, while shot on late-'50s TV sets and conceived by Hitchcock as a prank-the-audience Gothic trapdoor thriller, came to exist (and, really, it always had) on

the level of riveting mythology. In 45 seconds, the shower scene rips the 20th century in half; what Hitchcock was expressing was profound — that in the modern world, the center would no longer hold. And once the movie kills off its heroine (killing off, in the process, the very idea that God will protect us), it turns into the cinema's most hypnotic, seductive and prophetic meditation on fear, lust, innocence, violence and identity. More than perhaps any movie ever made, "Psycho" is a film you can watch again and again and again. It's a movie that speaks to us now more than ever, because it shows us, in every teasingly sinister moment, how life itself came to feel like a fun house poised over an abyss.