

ON JUDGING MOVIES

Daniel Asperheim on What Makes a
Movie Good

People have very strong opinions about movies, opinions that rival, in passionate fervor, those of politics and religion. For example, many middle-aged *Star Wars* fans take personal offense to *The Phantom Menace* ('99); and SW fans, a few years older, complain about *Return of the Jedi* ('83); a number of my acquaintances feel “violated” by *Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull* ('08); and quite a few Trekkies are ashamed of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* ('79). Whether or not hated movies are *actually* bad (they very well may be), I've come to realize that many people don't know what makes good movies *GOOD*, especially given the common criterion of most cinematic judgments: that quality movies must provoke feelings of excitement. Movies are good, rather, when their cinematic elements beautifully and harmoniously conspire to bring truth-telling stories to life.

Defining Story

When I say “story”, I mean both *what* is told in a narrative and *the way* it is told. In other words, when I refer to a *cinematic* story, I mean the unity of:

(1) a narrative’s plot (as provided by the script and arranged by a director),

(2) the characters (as portrayed by their actors, sound effects tracks, etc.), and

(3) the setting (as portrayed by the visuals, by the composite track of sounds, and so on).

Just as a multiplicity of ingredients unite to make a cuisine, a multiplicity of cinematic elements brings a film’s story to fruition. A movie story, therefore, is that unified multiplicity in which we will find a movie’s goodness.

A Lousy Criterion For Criticizing Films

An aesthetically misguided expectation about stories has skewed people’s judgments of movies: many think that every story, depending on its *assigned* genre, needs a set of predetermined ingredients in order to be good. In other words, they think that all good fantasy/sci-fi stories need fast paces and explosions; that all good love stories need people who have sexual encounters; and that all good horror movies need blood and gore. In short,

people expect a particular kind of excitement when they watch a movie.

I admit that these expectations are sometimes helpful in diagnosing unappealing movies, but they can also lead people to wrongly criticize genuinely *good* films. Let's use *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (TMP) as Exhibit One in our case against the occasional misdiagnoses of good stories.¹

It is NOT About Excitement

No matter how many times I watch it, TMP keeps on giving. As you can probably tell, I really like this movie. TMP was released in 1979, almost 10 years after the original *Star Trek* television series was canceled, so it was highly anticipated by sci-fi buffs and Trekkies. Unfortunately, after the hype died down, people were disappointed. Fans and filmmakers alike thought it was cinematically less than successful.

Because of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*'s lack of laser shootouts, intergalactic naval battles, and quick scene changes, it has been given nicknames like *Star Trek: The Slow-Motion Picture*. Those who do not like TMP suggest that more action and shorter scenes will improve it. I'm not sure if those changes

¹ *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, directed by Robert Wise (Paramount Pictures, 1979)

will make TMP better, but they will certainly give it a different tone, a tone that is, to me, nails on a chalkboard.

I must confess that *The Motion Picture* is one of those movies that I crave to watch at least once a year. Before I knew what others had thought about the movie, I was more outspoken about liking it. Eventually an Internet community of Trekkies indirectly told me that I wasn't supposed to enjoy it. So after discovering that TMP was a "failure" — "the worst" of the *Star Trek* movies — I confined my hankering to the closet. And, to be honest, I couldn't argue with the critics of TMP. Their facts were not wrong: the "suspenseless" scenes are, indeed, so-many-minutes ("too") long; and the film is, admittedly, heavy on visual effects. So without a reasonable defense of TMP, I caved in and removed the film from my mental list of all-time favorite movies. (Despite my explicit rejection of it, I still ended up re-watching TMP more times than the publicly approved ST movies.)

Eventually I found the courage to go public with my preference of TMP. This openness led to debates. Someone once told me that he considered ST:TMP "only art" and that he could not bring himself to call it a *movie*. (So movies are not art?) TMP was apparently too calm and monotonous to be a "real"

movie. I believe that this critic speaks for many people. In order for pop culture to consider a motion picture a “real movie”, it must, as Neil Postman says, play a kind a peek-a-boo with our senses; it must satisfy our glut for information while increasing our heart rates.

Together, this ensemble of electronic techniques called into being a new world—a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not ask us, indeed, does not permit us to do anything; a world that is, like the child’s game of peek-a-boo, entirely self-contained. But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining.²

It is disturbing to hear someone say that a narrative requires exciting elements to attain movie status. Such a person is like the man who insists he watches pornography for the plot: “I just can’t enjoy a film without the rush — stories worth watching need exciting movement.”

I question his taste in movies.

A soap opera or a rollercoaster ride would serve just as well if the only aim of moviegoers were to

² Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Doubleday Books, 2006), 77

excite “a rapid flutter of the nerves”³ (to borrow a phrase from literary critic, C.S. Lewis, who wrote on a similar subject). Stories, therefore, should not have to rely on emotional and physical stimulation to be good; they need to deliver people to the truths that they are embodying — like rollercoasters, movies that are made just to excite bring passengers back to where they started, hardly closer to truth.

Of course we must not confuse *excitement* with *danger*. Lewis, himself, admits that dangers “there must be: how else can you keep a story going?”⁴ But the danger need not always be the kind that gets our adrenaline pumping. The danger of a heroic cancer patient — or that of a funny newscaster who is miraculously trapped in an ever-repeating Groundhog Day — makes for a very engaging and mind-altering story.⁵

If we take the excitement logic to its conclusion, we’d have to say that Michael Bay movies are better, overall, than Steven Spielberg movies. Because, for example, *Transformers* (‘07) offers more rollercoaster suspense than *Schindler’s List* (‘93), we

³ C.S. Lewis, “On Stories,” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1982), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵ *Groundhog Day*, directed by Harold Ramis (Columbia Pictures, 1993)

would have to conclude that the former is better. We'd be forced to say, in other words, that a relative lack of excitement demotes a movie to "mere art".

If you still think excitement is the key to a movie's aesthetic success, consider these three questions:

1. Is a previously exciting movie still as exciting when you re-watch it?

If not, excitement is not your main criterion for valuing movies. You presumably value said movie given that you had re-watched it, so there must be something else about the movie that draws you in, some meaningful truth in or about it that you recognize.

2. Does already knowing the twist endings or startling moments of a movie discourage you from re-visiting it?

If not, excitement is not your main criterion for valuing movies. Even though you know the plot twist, you found yourself watching it again. Why?

3. Have you ever had the urge to re-watch, and re-re-watch a film that doesn't always excite you?

If yes, excitement is not your main criterion for valuing movies. Again, there must be something else about the movie that is delectable given your revisit.

When judging films, we need firm ground on which to base our criticisms. A movie may excite us once, but — if we're in the wrong mood or if the excitement depends on never having watched the movie before — never again. If excitement were really the basis of a movie's goodness, the goodness of a movie would be relative, and such subjectivity would give us no grounds to disagree. In other words, saying "that movie was bad" would be the same as saying "I wasn't excited watching that movie." It would be futile, therefore, to defend or criticize movie reviews. An appropriate reply to "This movie is good!" would be "Oh, are you? That's nice." We would end up saying something about our own feelings than about the movie itself.

You may be thinking, "Okay, I see your point. Excitement doesn't necessarily make a movie good. So what is it that makes us want to re-watch, and re-watch, a movie?"

Putting First Things First

Excitement is not an indispensable ingredient of good movies, but the opposite is also not true: excitement is not necessarily dispensable. Admittedly, it is crucial to some stories. But excitement must not take priority. In fact, stories have several elements — characterization, setting,

dialogue, and so on — and none of them should be considered first things.

Movies, like soup, have several ingredients. A good cook should not give any one ingredient priority over the dish itself. If a chef loses focus and mistakenly considers the consumption of salt the main purpose of his cooking, he will end up with soup that is too salty. In other words, salt must accommodate the soup; soup does not exist to give people a reason to eat salt.

Suspense, like salt, is essential as long as it is in its proper place — it should *serve* a story, not *use* it. We have to have better rationale than “it’s slow and lacks action” to explain why a film is bad. Such criticisms beg the question: Why, *exactly*, does a lack of excitement make a particular film bad? (If your answer is, “because *all* movies, as a rule, require exciting movement to be good,” then you might want to re-read the first argument of this article.) Criticizing movies for not having roller-coaster thrills is like saying that nobody would prefer saltless dishes. The addition of more excitement *for the sake of excitement* is one way in which we worsen a movie (whether or not the movie is already good to begin with).

Story is the First Thing

If the main purpose of films is to tell stories,⁶ then every element in a film must be there *for the sake of the story*, not vice versa. Excitement, in fact, isn't the only cinematic ingredient that people inappropriately put on a pedestal. For example, sometimes they ruinously demand that a story be there for the sake of *the characters*, which the late Leonard Nimoy unfortunately did when criticizing TMP.⁷

Nimoy, a veteran actor of *Star Trek* who is widely known for his iconic character, Spock, decided to change some of his lines with a Spock-esque joke in order to capture “the right ‘feel’ of the characters and relationships from the [original television] series.”⁸ Director, Robert Wise, gently rejected his suggestion and asked him to stick to the script. Wise was correct to think that the change, for the character's sake, would have been “inappropriate in light of what's gone before”⁹ in the story: the character ought to be there for the story's sake, not vice versa, otherwise

⁶ “Movie” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed March 2019.
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/movie>.

⁷ Leonard Nimoy, *I Am Spock* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 170-1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

the whole story is tarnished, like a bowl of soup with too much salt.

There are consequences when we put elements of a story before the story itself: focus on characters or suspense (Second Things), at the expense of the story (the First Thing), risks turning a movie into a medium for something other than a story. It would be like cooks of an Italian restaurant adding a large amount of kimchi to pizza so that it would appeal to Korean guests — but the pizza would no longer be Italian. Koreans intending to experience an authentic Mediterranean taste would be out of luck. Moviegoers intending to see the world through different eyes would be shortchanged if out-of-place action and obtrusive characters buried a storyteller's narrative.

Actors of TMP, William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy, have said that the studios demanded a “special-effects extravaganza.”¹⁰ That is, they suggest that its story took a back seat to the effects shots. Their criticism supports my argument about putting first things first: they agree that stories ought to organize, and not be organized by, the cinematic ingredients. If they are right about

¹⁰ Nimoy, *I Am Spock*, 172, 245. Also see Shatner, *Star Trek Movie Memories* 62

ST:TMP's special effects eclipsing the story, they have a good reason for criticizing the film.

But their objection to *Star Trek's* special effects may still be missing the point. It is evident that their criticism comes from a desire for more excitement. They are merely valuing one Second Thing (fast-paced action) over another Second Thing (special effects), and they are not keeping the First Thing (the story itself) in mind. In Wise's opinion, the special effects support TMP's story. Cutting them from the film would change it, perhaps negatively so, as kimchi would change Italian food. TMP's director even admits that "there was no way to tell this particular story without"¹¹ the effects. It is this particular story, which would not exist without the effects, that appeals to so many people.

Questions to Ask Before Judging a Movie

1. What is a filmmaker saying? What is he or she suggesting?

In other words, identify the story (or determine the cuisine). Knowing the unifying theme or organizing truth of the film may give you a place from which to better objectively judge it.

¹¹ William Shatner, *Star Trek Memories*, with Chris Kreski (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 95

2. How is a filmmaker expressing the Story?

That is, be aware of the subordinate elements (or examine the ingredients). Without an awareness of all of the cinematic elements (cinematography, dialogue, music, sound, and so on), you will not be able to answer the third crucial question.

3. Do the cinematic elements support the story?

The answer to this question will help you intuit the ideal ratio and form of the film's components (that is, it will give you knowledge about an ideal cinematic recipe). Are the cinematic elements appropriately balanced? — in other words, if the cuisine is supposed to be a dessert, does it have more sugar than salt? Are the elements in the right form? — that is to say, if it is supposed to be a cupcake, is it in the shape of a cup? Identifying whether or not various components support a film's unifying theme or organizing truth can help you be more objective in your criticisms of movies.

Receive Films, Don't Use Them

Movies with disproportionately elevated Second Things might appeal to us for a short time, but once they're used — like a pack of cigarettes — they get tossed. In order for a film to continually appeal on a deeper level, (1) its *story* must be the First Thing, and (2) people must *receive* it rather than use it. A good

filmmaker allows a story itself to be desirable. He or she doesn't *use* a story only as a vehicle to provide goodies—for instance, psychological or physical stimulation, the demand for beloved characters, or information that quenches curiosity.

The ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, had pointed out that good things must be good in themselves, or at least be once removed from final goodness.¹² For example, happiness is good in itself — we want *It*, happiness itself, not some product of happiness. When, for instance, we watch a movie just to excite our libidos, it is not the film, itself, we want but the pleasure that it provides. If a work is valued merely for its results, it is a frying pan for the food, not the food itself.

For a carpenter and a geometer investigate the right angle in different ways; the former does so in so far as the right angle is useful for his work, while the latter inquires what it is or what sort of thing it is; for he is a spectator of the truth. We must act in the same way.¹³

Aristotle is right. We should watch movies as spectators, not users. Works that put Second Things

¹² Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, tr. David Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pages 10-11, book 1, section 7.

¹³ *Ibid.* 10 17

first belong to the class of phone books, crossword puzzles, and paper cups. Such movies give us very little reason to re-watch them: used things are usually disposable.

We have tracked cinematic goodness to its hideout: it lives in a film's story. But making a story the First Thing will not always guarantee a win. Not all stories, even in their proper places, are good; there are many well-executed films that have unattractive stories.

The Flavor of Unity

People sometimes argue about their favorite movies, but most people use criteria too dependent on current fashion. The problem with fashion is that it doesn't last. Bell-bottoms or baggy jeans might be cool to one generation, but probably not to the next. A story that only appeals to a small group of people in a small corner of the world is doomed to be buried under the trash heap of history. The goodness of movies has to depend on something that transcends every generation.

So far we found that good movies don't always depend on excitement; slow-paced movies of the same genre can be better than faster and more action-packed ones if they are done right—that is, a movie's level of excitement is not proportional to its

goodness. We also found that good filmmakers put a movie's story first. Movies are like dishes: cooks who value salt consumption above everything else risk making food too saline. Good chefs cook from a desire to feed people cuisines, not to feed them a particular ingredient. In the same way, a good filmmaker of narratives creates from a desire to artistically express a story, not to spotlight a particular action or to market a popular character.

The Key to Good Movies

If I'm not mistaken, we all have one or two movies that we crave to see at least once a year. Every year. Stories of this kind lead receptive minds out of themselves, changing them into something that they were not before: after seeing a good musical, many have the urge to speak in song; after a good adventure, viewers feel bold; and after a powerful epic, people see reality more grandly.

The power that stories have over many of us — that is, over those who surrender themselves to the magic — partly explains why we are drawn back to the same movies. Since it wouldn't be our first choice to re-watch an unremarkable movie, or to re-read a bad novel, it is safe to say that an important mark of a good story is its ability to compel a

frequent revisit. But what is it about our favorite story that attracts us?

Lewis, had an idea about what it was that kept people coming back to a narrative, and he pinned it down in an essay called “On Stories.”¹⁴ Talking to “an intelligent American pupil”¹⁵ about a book he had read, they disagreed about what made a certain scene especially enjoyable. The book’s setting takes place more than a century ago in America’s frontier. About the scene in question, Lewis’s American friend thought that he was attracted to “the breathless excitement with which he had read the passage, the agonized suspense with which he wondered whether the hero would wake up in time”¹⁶ to see a native American quietly moving against him with a tomahawk. Lewis was sure, however, that his “friend was misrepresenting his experience, and indeed leaving out the real point.”¹⁷ Lewis thought that it couldn’t be the excitement of the scene that made it especially attractive and memorable.

Any dangerous scene could duplicate that kind of excitement. If mere *suspense* brought us back to a

¹⁴ Lewis, *On Stories*, 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

story, then *any* setting would do. But that does not explain why some readers, for example, might desire the dangerous woods of early America more than, say, a traveling circus with a silly clown clumsily endangering a hero with scissors. Lewis thought that it was not the danger but *the entire atmosphere* of the story that keeps a person coming back: “For I wanted not the momentary suspense but that whole world to which it belonged — the snow and the snow-shoes, beavers and canoes, warpaths and wigwams, and Hiawatha names.”¹⁸

In other words, it is the flavor of a story’s united multiplicity of elements that attracts readers and watchers. It is not any one ingredient that makes pizza so appealing; it is the unity of ingredients that creates a pizza’s distinct flavor. And it is the unity of literary, theatrical, and musical elements that contribute to a cinematic story’s overall atmosphere or flavor.

The Good and the Bad Flavors

To make a potentially long point short, the stories we most crave reflect the universe or reality as it really is. The poems, novels, movies, and TV dramas that most closely hit truth’s bull’s-eye — and

¹⁸ Laurie *On Stories* 5

do it in a beautiful and pleasing way — have the best chances of becoming classics.

Truth can be perceived in two ways: quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative truths relate to objectivity, facts, and measurements. For example, meter sticks, thermometers, and scales reveal truth by quantifying. Qualitative truths relate to subjectivity, intuition, and personal experience. Take poetry, painting, and music: they reveal truth by qualifying.

Both ways of perceiving truth are important. Sometimes we need to *quantify* our bodies with a thermometer and a scale in order to gauge our health. And sometimes we need to *qualify* food with our noses and tongues in order to gain a different kind of knowledge. It would be quite odd trying to measure a banana's length by tasting it; and it's equally strange to think that a scale could tell us an apple's flavor. We need tongues to tell us about food's *qualitative* properties, and we need scales to tell us about their *quantitative* ones. We must use different instruments for different modes of truth.

Judging movies is tricky because we need to examine them with several instruments: we need to use our intuition, for the most part, to judge whether a movie is being *qualitatively* truthful, and we need

to use reason to determine whether it is being *quantitatively* consistent with reality. The more a story faithfully reflects reality, the better it will be. The very best stories will be the ones most suggestive of truth. If, for instance, the caring for and protection of the innocent is a genuine truth about how we ought to live, and if a movie properly reflects that truth, it will be better than a movie glorifying cruel violence.

A disclaimer: When I say that a story must reflect truth, I don't mean that it should be preachy. A preachy story violates good story telling: it inappropriately puts an element of the story first. As I write above, *the story* must come first, not its ingredients. The whole atmosphere of a movie or novel must radiate truth, not only particular items or dialogue. For example, if our universe came about by a big accident and if there is essentially no meaning to life, that truth shouldn't only (if at all) be stated in the dialogue — that truth should permeate the entire world of a story: every bird, every stone, every tone of voice, every sound effect, color, and shape should convey it. (Woody Allen, Stanley Kubrick, and Christopher Nolan seem to reflect that assumption about the universe in their movies.)

A Sign of a Good Story: Applicability

Take, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*. Its story has been wildly successful, both as a novel and as Hollywood movies. I attribute its success to its powerful ability to tell the truth. It is relatively consistent in its quantitative truths: its setting and characters are bound to the laws of Middle-earth's nature — what goes up in Middle-earth must come down, as in our world. And LOTR is a beautiful reflection of qualitative truths: it satisfies our gut denial of “(in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat”¹⁹ and our gut feeling that there is a “Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”²⁰ LOTR is so good, in other words, because it powerfully reflects truths about reality. Because J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of LOTR, so successfully irradiated truths of existence throughout his world of Middle-earth, people have been able to apply his story, almost effortlessly, to politics, to humanity's relationship with technology, to their own lives, and so forth.

C.S. Lewis was Tolkien's good friend and had significantly influenced Tolkien's writing of LOTR. They were part of a literary group called The

¹⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories: Expanded edition, with commentary and notes* (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 75.

²⁰ *Ibid*

Inklings who made truth, and the literary sharing of truth, their business.²¹

Lewis once wrote that,

Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.²²

Lewis is right. If you find a story that you can't get enough of — a story that is strangely applicable to real life, that deeply moves you, that gives you a stab of joy or a curious longing, and that you want to be immersed in again — it has likely hit the bull's-eye of truth. And it is probably safe to say that this story you have just enjoyed is objectively good.

²¹ For more about The Inklings, and about its influence on Tolkien, I highly recommend *Bandersnatch: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the Creative Collaboration of the Inklings*, by Diana Pavlac Glyer.

²² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 226

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