



Premiere: Loss of “Grounding” in Film History



Over the past ten years, I have attempted to complete this book on several occasions. My procrastination can be excused in part because of the numerous “greatest movies” books already in print (some of which I have drawn upon), Entertainment Weekly’s ability to analyze and categorize their greatest movies by genre more rapidly than I and the sheer magnitude of reducing the thousands of movies I have seen in my life down to a few hundred of the greatest movies ever filmed. Recent events caused me to reassess the need for this book.

The publication in 1998 of the 100 Greatest Movies Ever Made by the American Film Institute (AFI), convinced me there was a need for a more objective historical appraisal of what might be considered the great films of the last century. This author recognizes that no one could expect the American Film Institute or any other observer of films to magically produce a listing of films that would instantly achieve critical consensus. However, the AFI films selected, in their totality, did not begin to present a historically accurate picture of American society (as depicted collectively on film) during the twentieth century. As I anxiously scanned the AFI listing of greatest films in my USA Today, it was as though the AFI was trying to produce a revisionist version of the history of American Cinema and a bad version at that. Certain genres of American film were demoted in prominence or not even represented in the AFI listing of greatest movies. The historical prominence of musicals in the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s was ignored. Fred Astaire who was possibly the greatest musical star of American Cinema, was not represented on the AFI list of greatest films.

Westerns as a major film genre were relegated to second class status. Certain films of John Wayne that for years have appeared on many top one hundred lists of greatest films, disappeared altogether from the AFI list. Where is *Red River*, or *My Darling Clementine*? Most film historians would expect at least one of these films

to have made it into the AFI top one hundred list of films. There seemed to be a conscious attempt by the AFI list makers to lessen Wayne's mythic status by not recognizing many of his greatest films. Other great western films such as *Winchester 73* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*, were also conspicuous by their absence from the AFI list.

As a genre, action adventure swashbuckler films were with the possible exception of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, totally ignored by the American Film Institute. Many film critics with a better historical grasp of this genre, would have included *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Great Escape* or *Goldfinger* as other representative movies of this genre on their list of greatest films.

Great films based upon literary classics were conspicuously absent from the AFI compilation of greatest films. The books of Charles Dickens have generated one of the greatest collective body of films: *A Tale of Two Cities*; *David Copperfield*; *Oliver Twist*; and *Great Expectations*. The works of Victor Hugo have also resulted in some of the greatest films ever made: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Miserables*. Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* is on many film historians' list of greatest films. With the single exception of *Wuthering Heights*, this genre was not considered historically significant by the American Film Institute.

Some of Stanley Kubrick's films are represented among AFI's greatest films. Yet most of his films that are either too quirky or that achieved an underground cult status were apparently "black balled" by the American Film Institute. One might suspect that other films like the *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Dead on Arrival* made on small budgets were never even candidates for the AFI's top one hundred films.

Many of America's greatest film directors were historically short changed by the American Film Institute. The films of Preston Sturges were no where to be found. John Ford's status as one of America's greatest film directors was diminished like his star John Wayne. Most of the film historians researched for this book, would have included *Sullivan's Travels* and the *Quiet Man* among their list of greatest films.

The American Film Institute's rankings of the greatest fifty male and female stars of the 20th century, is far better balanced than their list of greatest films. However, there were major stars who have made great film after great film but who did not have any films represented on the AFI compilation of greatest films. Ronald Colman, Fredric March, Greer Garson, Steve McQueen, Charles Laughton, Basil

Rathbone, Paul Muni, Errol Flynn and Robert Mitchum were not represented anywhere among the AFI's list of greatest films. While Spencer Tracy starred in pieces of AFI ranked fluff like *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, none of his best films made the AFI cut.

Beyond Marilyn Monroe who has become a sexual icon and John Wayne, only Betty Davis Jimmy Stewart, Humphrey Bogart, Doris Day, Rock Hudson, Charlie Chaplin and Judy Garland have retained strong historical identities. Most of the younger generation has some historical awareness of Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Marlon Brando, Katherine Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn, Gregory Peck, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, Bing Crosby, Laurel and Hardy, Henry Fonda and Gary Cooper but many are no longer aware of the great movies they made. James Cagney, Joan Crawford, Spencer Tracy, William Holden, Lawrence Olivier, Robert Mitchum, Kirk Douglas, Shirley Temple, Bob Hope, Burt Lancaster, Garbo, Rita Hayworth, the Marx Brothers, Yul Brynner, Errol Flynn, George C. Scott and Ava Gardner barely register in the memory of many movie fans under the age of forty.

Actors such as Fredric March, Ronald Colman, Stewart Granger, Vivian Leigh, Greer Garson, Irene Dunne, Robert Taylor, Lionel Barrymore, Barbara Stanwyck, Will Rogers, Al Jolson, Norma Shearer, Dick Powell, Charles Laughton, Basil Rathbone, Claude Rains, Jean Harlow, Wallace Beery, George Raft, W.C. Fields, Charles Boyer, Maurice Chevalier, Howard Keel, Susan Hayward, Jeanette MacDonald, Paul Muni, Alan Ladd, Myna Loy, Orson Welles and Tyrone Power have all but disappeared from the public consciousness.

My experience as a former video store owner, also provided me with a practical perspective from which to approach this book. My family and I opened our video store with the belief that there was a "market niche" for great film classics that not only had great entertainment value but that also reflected the historical evolution of the film industry itself. We quickly realized why *Blockbusters*, *Hastings* and other large video rental chains are purging their video inventories of movie classics. While we anticipated that younger age renters would have less interest in classic movies than people of our own generation, we were not prepared for renters who had virtually no historical memory of movies made before 1960. The best collection of movie classics in the Midwest gathered dust, while movies made like video action games rented briskly. My renters for the most part had no "historical memory mass" to discriminate between good or bad movies. Paradoxically, I knew that Americans still get most of their history (no matter how short term or flattened) from films and television. In his book [History Goes to the Movies](#),

Joseph Roquemore, has observed that “films have an extraordinary power---- a power unmatched by any other medium to leave you with a strong sense of what is right and what is wrong, of who is bad and who is good, even though critical details presented in films may be slanted or even false.” It is alarming to this author that American History is increasingly reconstructed through a “distorted counter culture lens” of directors like Olivier Stone. This historical distortion is exacerbated, when a young film viewer has no historical film grounding against which to compare films like *JFK* and *The Doors*.

This lack of grounding in film history was recently illustrated when this author overheard two young men in their late twenties (or early thirties) talk about their favorite movies during a rain delay at a St. Louis Cardinal’s game. Like baseball fans discussing their favorite hitters or World Series and games of a bygone era, these gentlemen proceeded to rank their greatest movies of all time. Virtually all of their greatest films were made in the last fifteen years. Their favorite actors were either “techno hunks” such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Claude Van Damme, and Steven Seagal or contemporary pop culture comedians. Eddie Murphy, Jim Carrey, and Adam Sandler were some of the comedians they named. Jackie Chan another of their favorites seemed to bridge both groups of their favorite actors. Nicholas Cage, was the only actor they mentioned who did not neatly fit into these stereo types. They vigorously debated the greatness of such films as *The Terminator*, *Total Recall*, *The Glimmer Man*, *Rush Hour*, all of the *Rambo* films, the *Beverly Hills Cop* films, *The Rock*, *Con Air*, *Dumb and Dumber*, and *The Water Boy*. Someone faintly recalled *Rocky III* but quickly admitted that the films of the early eighties were vastly inferior to current films because they did not have enough “action, sex and blood.” Not a single female actress was mentioned among the actors nominated as their all time favorites and it was clear that they usually selected films where women had secondary roles as recreational sex objects for the “techno hunks.” To them and probably many others of their generation, movies began with actors like Stallone, Schwarzenegger, and Seagal and will never include most of the film genres chronicled in this book.

Paul Newman has observed that “the human beast is a naturally escalating animal. If you offer violence, sex and explosions, the next time (a new film is introduced) you are going to have to kick it up a notch higher it’s like dope.” Sadly the gauge of movie satisfaction for many younger film fans, is whether the next film they see has more violence, sex and explosions than the last film they saw. This seemed to be the criterion that these young men followed in their selection of greatest films.

It occurred to me that while I had grown up in the fifties and sixties watching classic movies during many prime time slots on the major television networks, the explosion of cable and satellite channels in the seventies and eighties had actually diminished the number of viewers watching old movies. Whereas it was an easy decision for my parents and I to choose to view an old movie of the thirties or forties on television, the typical viewer of today can choose between 150 to 200 different channels. Of those channels, there may be four to five channels that carry old movies with possibly two of those channels being dedicated solely to classic movies. It should have come as no surprise to me that the younger patrons of my video store had absolutely no interest in renting or viewing classic movies. They are being raised on a steady diet of *World Championship Wrestling*, *MTV*, and the talk shows. The movies they were renting from my store mirrored their television viewing habits. Technology has forged a marriage between the television and movie arms of the entertainment industry that promotes the “lowest cultural denominator” in our society: violence and sex for profit.

My video store owner experience also caused me to postulate that a “paradigm shift” had occurred in the way movies impact American society. Movies were no longer a reflection of good values and bad values in our society. Movies in the last quarter of this century had become the central force in shaping and polluting American culture with violent images. Images disconnected from traditional American values. Younger film fans were starting to replace those values with the twisted cultural landscape manufactured by Hollywood.

This paradigm shift can be demonstrated by comparing the reviews of the same film (*Cape Fear*) which was made in 1962 and again in 1991. The classic version starred Gregory Peck and Robert Mitchum, Polly Bergen, Lori Martin, Telly Savalas, Martin Balsam and Barrie Chase. It was directed by J. Lee Thompson. This review of the 1962 version of that film appeared in the third edition of The Movie Guide compiled by the editors of CineBooks in 1998:

Cape Fear (1962 version): “ Unforgettable villainy. Suspenseful and very frightening, thanks to Robert Mitchum’s lethally threatening performance and the frightened reactions of a pro cast. Sexual deviate and lethal psychopath Mitchum is released from prison after serving a six-year term for rape and assault. He is bent on revenge against Peck, the witness whose testimony put him there, who is a family man and a lawyer with a private practice in Florida. When Peck learns Mitchum is in town, he goes to Balsam, the sheriff, who tries to make life miserable for

Mitchum until a lawyer threatens to file suit on charges of harassment. Peck's dog is poisoned, then Mitchum takes to the phone, calling Bergen, the lawyer's wife, plaguing her with obscene remarks. Though he makes no overt threats, he intimates a dire fate for the family, including their teenage daughter, Martin. Because the police are helpless to jail the lunatic and the calls and oblique threats continue, Peck decides to handle matters himself. J. Lee Thompson directs at a clip, until the crawl toward the bayou climax, where the minutes feel like hours, and your heart sits in your throat. Peck is careful not to act the fear; he's an interesting foe for Mitchum. Bergen's performance reminds one that she should have been a bigger star, given her beauty and undeniable talent, and Martin recalls an era when teenagers really were innocent. Balsam, Savalas and Chase contribute effective cameos. The musical score by Bernard Herrmann is a nerve-beater."

The 1991 remake of *Cape Fear* starred Robert De Niro, Nick Nolte, Jessica Lange, Juliette Lewis, and Joe Don Baker. It had cameo appearances by Gregory Peck, Robert Mitchum, and Martin Balsam who all had roles in the 1962 version. The remake was directed by Martin Scorsese. This review of the 1991 remake also appeared in the 1998 version of the Movie Guide compiled by the editors of CineBooks:

Cape Fear (1991 version) - "Martin Scorsese's loose remake of J. Lee Thompson's 1962 thriller is an exercise in audience manipulation, with every frame designed to stagger the senses. During quiet scenes, the camera is in constant unsettling motion. During big scenes, shock cuts to weird menacing angles and reality-bending, high-tech optics accompany dark images of eroticism and violence. In a telling twist on the original film, Nick Nolte plays lawyer Sam Bowden as a mean-spirited womanizer who has cheated on his burnt-out, embittered wife Leigh, played by Jessica Lange. (In the 1962 version the Bowden's were morally pristine, impossibly upright citizens.) Leigh broods at home, venting her bile on teenage daughter Dani (Juliette Lewis), who stumbles through the film pathetically shell shocked and alone. One of Sam's past professional betrayals comes home to roost. As a public defender, he railroaded client Max Cady (Robert De Niro) into a 14-year prison sentence for sexual assault by buying a court report attesting to his victim's promiscuity. Now

Cady is out and hungry for revenge, having spent his sentence remaking himself into a wily lawyer and con man psychologist. Cady's plan is to destroy Max's career and family from within. He poisons the family dog, beats up and mutilates Bowden's employee Lori (Illeana Douglas), and comes close to twisting Dani's adolescent frustrations into sympathy with his cause, successfully goading Same into violence. There are no heroes in *Cape Fear*, only victims and their tormentors. De Niro rolls through the film like a demented descendant of Popeye the Sailor, his sinewy body awash with jail house tattoos (giving Mitchum the film's best line: "I don't know whether to look at him or read him). Nolte winces, cowers and sweats; even normal activities like brushing his teeth are filmed in extreme close-ups that make him look subhuman. Lange looks pinched and drawn throughout, with the 17 year old Lewis giving the movie's most impressive performance. Scorsese's contempt for his characters extends to his handling of the scenario, credited to Wesley Strick (*True Believer*). The death of the Bowden's dog is treated with more genuine gravity than the notably gruesome crime against Lori. Though Scorsese throws in the occasional touch of humor, *Cape Fear* remains an overblown assault on the senses that leaves the viewer feeling physically and morally drained."

So how had Scorsese's approach to the remake of this film changed in the thirty years since J. Lee Thompson's classic version was released in 1962. The character development of the 1962 version "clearly signals a juxtaposition of "good" and "evil" and makes a value judgment of the difference." The review of the 1962 version begins with a reference to its "unforgettable villainy" while the 1991 version is characterized as an "exercise in audience manipulation, with every frame designed to stagger the senses." Peck plays a man protecting his loving family in the early version. In the Scorsese version the Peck character is played by Nick Nolte as a mean spirited womanizer who has cheated on his "burnt out embittered wife." In the early version, the Bowden's were a mainstream well adjusted family devoted to each other. In the 1991 version, the Bowden's became a dysfunctional shell of a family with a teenage daughter who "stumbles through the film pathetically shell shocked and alone." The reviewer of the original version commented that the teenager played by Lori Martin "reflected an era when teenagers really were innocent."

“There are no heroes in the 1991 version of *Cape Fear*, only victims and their tormentors.” The reviewer of the 1991 film clearly saw Scorsese’s efforts to exaggerate the depravity of *Cape Fear*’s characters for profit and shock value (ears being bitten off and buckets of blood and tattoos everywhere). However, his (her) most telling comment was about the original version. “In the 1962 version, the Bowden’s were morally pristine, impossibly upright citizens.” If that same reviewer had lived in 1962 and had reviewed the original version of *Cape Fear* at that time, the Bowden’s (as depicted by Peck, Bergen and Martin) would never have been characterized as “morally pristine, impossibly upright citizens.” The public who saw *Cape Fear* in 1962 and the critics who reviewed the film at that time, simply saw the Borden’s as normal mainstream Americans struggling to save their lives.

Thus the paradigm shift has occurred in part because of images created by directors like Scorsese. Images that not only create a false perception of the people that inhabit America, but that collectively become “an overblown assault on the senses that leave film viewers feeling physically and morally drained.” To this author and to Steven Earley the author of *An Introduction to American Movies*, “the most disturbing element of characterizations like those found in the 1991 version of *Cape Fear*, is that they neither explain the maladjustment’s and sicknesses of their characters nor imply that there is anything in their actions to condemn or forgive. Rather, these films frequently give the impression that their characters represent normal people.”

In his insightful book, Earley traces the shift from the sentimental escapist films of the forties and fifties to the “relevant sixties.” He notes that while directors like John Ford, Howard Hawks, King Vidor and Fred Zinnemann were out of touch with the social problems of the day, many new wave directors chose to concentrate on “the town outcast, the misfit, and the loner.” Characterizations of community leaders, and heroes of another time were rejected in favor of social deviants who came from outside the cultural mainstream “questioned old truths, rejected traditional values and were unsure of new ones.” These anti-heroes if they could be called that, had little hope for a better future as they were so consumed with rebelling against the complexities of modern times. The passage of film making through the sixties that Early describes in his book, became the popular culture of film making during the rest of the twentieth century:

“ Heroes and villains are often one and the same; morals no longer appear to be fashionable. Frequently the protagonists do not fit into society. They take sex on the run, hate the Establishment, openly denounce the government, break the

old moral code, denies tradition, and in many cases, are unable to develop satisfying meaningful ways of life to replace those they have destroyed. Finding neither true love, freedom, nor self knowledge, they frequently have no wish to examine themselves or to change their lifestyles.”

The time frame for Earley’s book ends with a reference to the vigilante as hero which began with films like *Walking Tall* (1973) and *Death Wish* (1974). The antiheroes of films like *Taxi Driver* (1976) can only take so much and as victims of a complex society that has lost its moral bearings, they take their guns and seek revenge. This is how Earley describes Robert De Niro’s performance in *Taxi Driver*:

“ As an insomniac Vietnam veteran, Robert De Niro, a taxi driver, is sickened and disgusted by the seamy world he sees through his windshield. He is the very spirit of urban alienation. Alone, he sets out to bring order to chaos. He is the avenging angel, his taxi a yellow chariot. Politics and human relationships both reject him. He prepares for a conflict to cleanse. He kills and the camera glides from blood stained walls to a clean wall. De Niro has become a hero for his night of massacre. He has been reborn. He establishes rapport with fellow drivers and cheerfully greets a girl who spurned him. The vigilante is the hero.”

Most of us identify closely with the places, times and movies of our youth and this author was no exception. Even though I was brought up on films of the thirties, forties and fifties, I quickly embraced the “new wave” of film directors that infiltrated the movie industry as the studio system of the “golden age” of films declined. As a young man in my twenties, I saw directors like John Ford, David Lean, George Stevens and William Wyler as passé. To the baby boomer generation, the films of these directors “with their simplistic answers to sociological questions, failed to offer proper solutions to growing social problems in American society.”

In his book Great Expectations: American & the Baby Boom Generation, Landon Jones postulates that films of the sixties and early seventies rejected the values of the established adult culture but offered nothing to replace that culture. With films such as *The Graduate* (1968) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970), Jones contends that

Hollywood “was offering the baby boomers like myself generational solidarity and separateness at the cost of generational continuity.”

I embraced the films of younger experimental directors such as Arthur Penn, Roman Polanski, Francis Ford Coppola, Mike Nichols, Martin Scorsese and Robert Altman. Films such as *Easy Rider*, *Woodstock*, *Mash*, *The Graduate*, *Carnal Knowledge*, *Vanishing Point*, *The Godfather I & II*, and *Mean Streets* helped shape my generation. These and many other films of that generation were to a large extent an out growth of the sixties counter culture. Present day directors like Olivier Stone and Brian De Palma were shaped by that culture. Many members of the sixties counter culture (this author included) fought for civil rights, protested Vietnam, and became more cynical of American political institutions as a result of Watergate. However, most baby boomers also married into traditional nuclear families, had children, moved into corporate business enterprises, and became integrated into local community structures. Their historical view of American society and its institutions expanded and was moderated by many of the same life experiences encountered by older generations. By comparison, a large number of the “new wave” directors of the sixties and seventies still seem to be trapped in the sixties “days of rage.” They are like an “island different from all of those around them.” Afraid of being just an aberration of an earlier generation, they continue to try and reconstruct the present to reflect what they failed to accomplish in their youth. Like the youth movies of the sixties many of the Hollywood counter culture that came out of the sixties “continue to celebrate youth itself ----- a cause that , in the long run can only lose.” This time warp disconnect between some in the Hollywood counter culture and a larger society that has moved beyond that period of history, can be illustrated by comparing the reviews of two films made in the nineties about the “sixties.” In 1990, Olivier Stone’s chronicle (some would say personal tribute) of the sixties counter culture *The Doors* was released and received this review from Leonard Maltin:

“ Vivid impression of famed rocker Jim Morrison’s rise to fame, and eventual undoing. Stone masterfully recreates the late 60s/early 70s rock and drug scene, and Val Kilmer is perfect in the lead (as Morrison)but when its all over you don’t know very much more about Morrison than when the film began. The film’s excesses also tend to parallel Morrison’s. Stone appears briefly as a UCLA film professor.” Rating: ★★ ★

In 1993, *What's Love Got to Do With It* the film biography of Tina Turner hit movie theaters. Leonard Maltin has also reviewed this film:

“Highly charged musical bio of singer Tina Turner, who joined r&b musician Ike Turner as a naive teenager and went on to become a dynamic performer while she suffered various forms of abuse at home and on the road. Vivid, immediate and persuasive (though Tina’s personality is never explored and she’s painted as something of a saint), but the real attention here is the phenomenal performances of Bassett and Fisburne as Tina and Ike.” Rating: ★★ ★

based upon these reviews, it would appear that *The Doors* and *What's Love Got to Do With It*, were both better than average films that evoked the atmosphere and rock culture of the sixties. Each of these films had knockout musical production numbers and outstanding performances from their lead actors. However, these films were radically different in the choice and depiction of subject matter. In *The Doors*, director Olivier Stone gave loving attention to Jim Morrison’s “drug addiction, epic alcohol consumption, unassailable egotism, violent temper, cruel and exploitative personal relationships, wasted poetic talent and the public exposure of his private parts.” In his book Hollywood vs. America, Michael Medved interviewed Ian Whitcomb (a former rock performer of the sixties) who offered his perspective on *The Doors*: “How can people admire Jim Morrison of The Doors, who was no kind of example to anybody----- a complete and total failure? This destructiveness and suicide, which is what Jim Morrison was about is to me anathema and is to be fought.” While some might contend that Olivier Stone’s characterization of Morrison was unnerving in its realism, Tina Turner (whatever her faults) has great strength of character. She overcame physical and mental abuse, mounted one of the greatest comebacks in show business history and in the year 2000 at the age of sixty grossed more dollars than any other rock performer. Olivier Stone chose to waste two hours of film glorifying and raising to cult status a despicable human being like Jim Morrison. Tina Turner is a survivor of the sixties rock/drug culture who has become a legend and a role model. Her story deserves to be told. Jim Morrison is an aberration of an earlier generation who should have been left in his grave. *What's Love Got to Do With It* was embraced by critics and the public while *The Door's* was a costly box office failure.

The violence, sex and anti-heroes in many contemporary films are part of a continuing assault on American institutions that began in the sixties and seventies.

Institutions like the American military which has undergone profound changes since the Vietnam era. Like Tom Brokaw and other observers of the twentieth century, I have after much reflection, concluded that my parents generation (during the Great Depression and World War II) made far greater sacrifices and contributions than anyone of my generation the baby boom generation that was the counter culture of the sixties. With this realization, came a greater appreciation for the films of the thirties, forties and fifties that I loved as a child. Films that can be closely linked to the values and accomplishments of Brokaw's *Greatest Generation*.

Shielded in this kind of time warp Hollywood enclave, the counter culture of the sixties lives on in many of the films of Olivier Stone, Martin Scorsese, James Cameron, Bryan De Palma, Quentin Tarantino and others. The new wave of the sixties and seventies, is rapidly becoming the old guard of the new millennium entertainment complex. An old guard that promotes the "lowest cultural denominator" in its continuing assault on American values and institutions. To be sure, the Hollywood dream machine of the thirties and forties with the Hays Code and studio boss system served up a heavily sugar coated view of America and its people. Yet the films of that era still reflected the best instincts and values of a society that aspired to be better than it was. What a cultural contrast to the standard film product now dished out by the counter culture entertainment moguls. Films that celebrate the violence inflicted upon society by the depraved, depict the nuclear family in a state of chronic dysfunction and that portray anti-heroes as dim dimwitted cartoon like characters unrelated to mainstream society.

Each generation of the last century will ultimately be judged by history for what they contributed to the larger society. The Great Depression/World War II generation clearly made the most significant contributions to motion pictures during the last century. In the forties (when the golden age of film peaked) that contribution was reflected in films like *Casablanca*, *Random Harvest*, *Citizen Kane*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Notorious*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *Red River* and the *Third Man*. Fifty years later, there are still a few memorable films like *Schindler's List* made that could be in the same league of great films. Yet films produced and directed by the baby boomer generation in the nineties, largely reflect the "lowest cultural denominator" of American Society. How can the mainstream entertainment culture of the forties be so co-opted by the counter culture of the sixties? The generation who in their youth had the greatest expectations for improving society but that now makes film after film attacking every American institution and presenting the lowest moral values? That is the question historians must ponder as they compare films like *Natural Born Killers*,

The Crying Game, *Pulp Fiction*, *Last Man Standing* and *Batman Returns* with the great movies of the golden age of film. As I have grown older, I find less and less to celebrate about the baby boom generation. In his reference to the “Greatest Generation,” Michael Medved observed that James Stewart, Henry Fonda, Clark Gable, Myrna Loy, Bob Hope, Tyrone Power and a host of others were more than willing to take time off from their hugely successful careers to serve their country (in one capacity or another) during World War II. Medved suggests there is little probability that the current generation of stars (Tom Cruise, Bruce Willis, and Brad Pitt) would ever accept military duty in a time of crisis to serve their country. Yet it must be acknowledged that it is difficult to set military service expectations for anyone in a nation that is coming unraveled socially and economically. Movies at least offer an avenue of escape from those trapped in a vanishing middle class with dimming hopes for a better future. If the Hollywood elite choose not to serve because of moral reservations that is in the American tradition. However, involvement in foreign wars result in the death of young Americans and to profit from depicting terrorist attacks as just a new video game on the big screen is more evidence of the twisted moral compass of Hollywood in the new century. Within days after the devastating terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., Arnold the “Terminator” Schwarzenegger appeared on Fox Network’s *The O’Reilly Factor*. The banter between Schwarzenegger and Bill O’Reilly centered around the decision of film distributors to postpone the release of Schwarzenegger’s latest film about terrorism, *Collateral Damage*. O’Reilly pressed Schwarzenegger about the propriety of ever releasing that film and future films that treat terrorism like a series of comic book special effects desensitizing viewers to terrorism threats. Schwarzenegger responded that he and his Hollywood backers were only giving the public what they wanted and the terrible events of September 11, 2001 should not be used as an excuse to suppress the kind of movies he appears in. Schwarzenegger, whose career is in a tailspin, is obviously not about to let patriotism or attacks on this country stand in the way of reaping profits from a film like *Collateral Damage*. As Schwarzenegger was serving as a mouthpiece for the popular film culture bent on protecting their profits, maverick film director Robert Altman broke ranks with that culture. Altman took on the entire Hollywood establishment (the counter culture that once embraced him) when he said:

“ The blame for the September terrorist attacks can be partially lay at the feet of Hollywood filmmakers. There is a direct link between the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 and contemporary films that inspire many of these acts. American films with exploding buildings, hijacked planes and terrorist

acts against fictional leaders of the American Government, is a ready made script for terrorists to follow. Now is the time for Hollywood producers and directors to return to films with humor, dialogue and characterizations.”

While Altman is to be commended for his courage to stand up against his industry for polluting our society with violent images, he has taken a bite out of the hand that feeds him. The Hollywood establishment will publicly disparage Altman’s comments as an attack on artistic freedom but will really see him as someone threatening their ability to exploit youth audiences for profit. He (Altman) will be blacklisted from film projects like someone in the fifties targeted by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

As a fierce opponent of the Vietnam conflict in my youth I helped rationalize my opposition to that war by serving in the Peace Corps. Yet I have come to harbor a nagging guilt about my own lack of contributions to public service in war or peace and have a growing sense of shame about my own generation..... the generation of great expectations and invisible achievements.

There have been a few attempts by the current generation of filmmakers to atone for America’s treatment of Vietnam veterans such as *Rambo* (1985) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). *Rambo* (a feeble attempt), is comic book violence that exploits the Vietnam tragedy for profit. *Born on the Fourth of July* is a great film that needed to be made.

The *Rambo* films gave way to *The Terminator* and host of imitators cranked out by the new filmmakers. The dreams created by the early filmmakers (however flawed) are turned into an urban nightmare of alienation, violence and sex on demand. The “lowest cultural denominator” later described in this book is sadly represented by film after film on the American Film Institute’s list of greatest films.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the AFI ranking, was the selection of movie after movie that depicted men as “whacko psychopaths” operating on the fringes of society. *Raging Bull*; *The Deer Hunter*; *The Wild Bunch*; *Taxi Driver*; *Goodfellas*; *The Godfather*; *The Unforgiven* and *Pulp Fiction* do not collectively reflect the contributions men have made to American society or to their families. Where are movies like *Pride of the Yankees*, *Sergeant York*; *Sullivan’s Travels*; *My Man Godfrey*; *The Yearling*; *The Quiet Man*; and *Friendly Persuasion*? Not on any list of greatest movies generated by the American Film Institute. Even with their shortcomings, the men depicted in these movies exude too much decency, love of

family and civic duty to reflect the stereotypical AFI male. AFI's list of greatest films recognized *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *It's a Wonderful Life* and only a few other films with heroic male role models. Beyond Katherine Hepburn in *African Queen*, and Vivian Leigh in *Gone With the Wind*, it is difficult to find any movies on the AFI list with women in heroic roles. Unless of course you include Jodie Foster's performance in *Silence of the Lambs*. Where is the balance? Truly great movies like the *Godfather* films, *The Wild Bunch* and *Raging Bull* deserve to be on any list of greatest films. The blatant commercialism and over the top depiction of men as brutal misfits and women as cold sex machines, should eliminate other films like *Pulp Fiction* and the *Unforgiven* from consideration. Such films were produced to titillate market segmented audiences and not to reveal historical events or uplift and educate the broader American public. One wonders whether the "1500 members of the American film community" valiantly struggled with a token decision to move a "sentimental relic" like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* with its patriotic themes into the top one hundred films..... ahead of *Natural Born Killers* or other current films that present comic strip violence for profit.

Many of the films ranked on AFI's list of greatest films, epitomize "the film industry's thirty year addiction to violence, casual sex and brutality. " A brutality I might add that encourages antisocial behavior and escalating violence with devastating consequences for our society." One of these consequences is a growing lack of civility that young audiences learn from the violent images and foul language permeating the movies of today.

Film historians and sociologists recognize there is a legitimate debate concerning whether films and their directors are simply mirroring changing events (and the society encompassing those events) or whether they are actually impacting and changing cultural values with the images they present on the screen. Aside from that debate, movie fans can either soar with the boundless optimism and faith in humanity depicted by the greatest generation of film makers, or descend into the depths of an artificial hell in America created by the Hollywood counter culture of the nineties.

As the reader of this book has probably already discovered, I yearn to renew the civility and decency depicted in the films of the 1930s and 1940s. To renew a "vision of how people ought to be and perhaps could be by the application of the few simple rules we lump together under the word *integrity*." It is still possible to "present a generous view of people's nature while at the same time not concealing the ills of society." For this to occur, younger viewers must begin to become more

aware of the greatest movies produced by the film industry in the twentieth century.

Film historian Barry Norman contends, that the 1930s and 1940s represented the “golden age” of the American film industry. “This was the time when the Hollywood studios were totally in control of the actors, the writers, the directors, the producers, the time when films were devised for specific stars. The power, affluence and command of the studio system led to the production of films of such skill, elegance, style and wit as no other national cinema has ever been able to approach.” Norman further contends that the light from the golden age of movies began to dim in the later 1940s and went out completely in the mid- 1950’s. “Television robbed the cinema of its audiences and destroyed the power of the studios.” The loss of civility in American society can in part be traced to what Peter Bogdanovich characterizes as the “juvenilization” of the movies where style has become more important than content. To this author and many films historians, movies like *Pulp Fiction* and *Natural Born Killers* are “stylized violence” recycled as the latest special effect to make money. This book then is an attempt to set the record straight by weighing the critical assessments of noted film historians and critics along with my own assessment of the greatest movies of this century. This kind of critical historical assessment, was to this observer, largely lacking in whatever process the American Film Institute followed in selecting the AFI’s greatest 100 films of the century.

This book presents a historical anthology of the 500 greatest movies made in the 20th century. Those movies are organized and presented within the genres described in the Premiere chapter of this book.

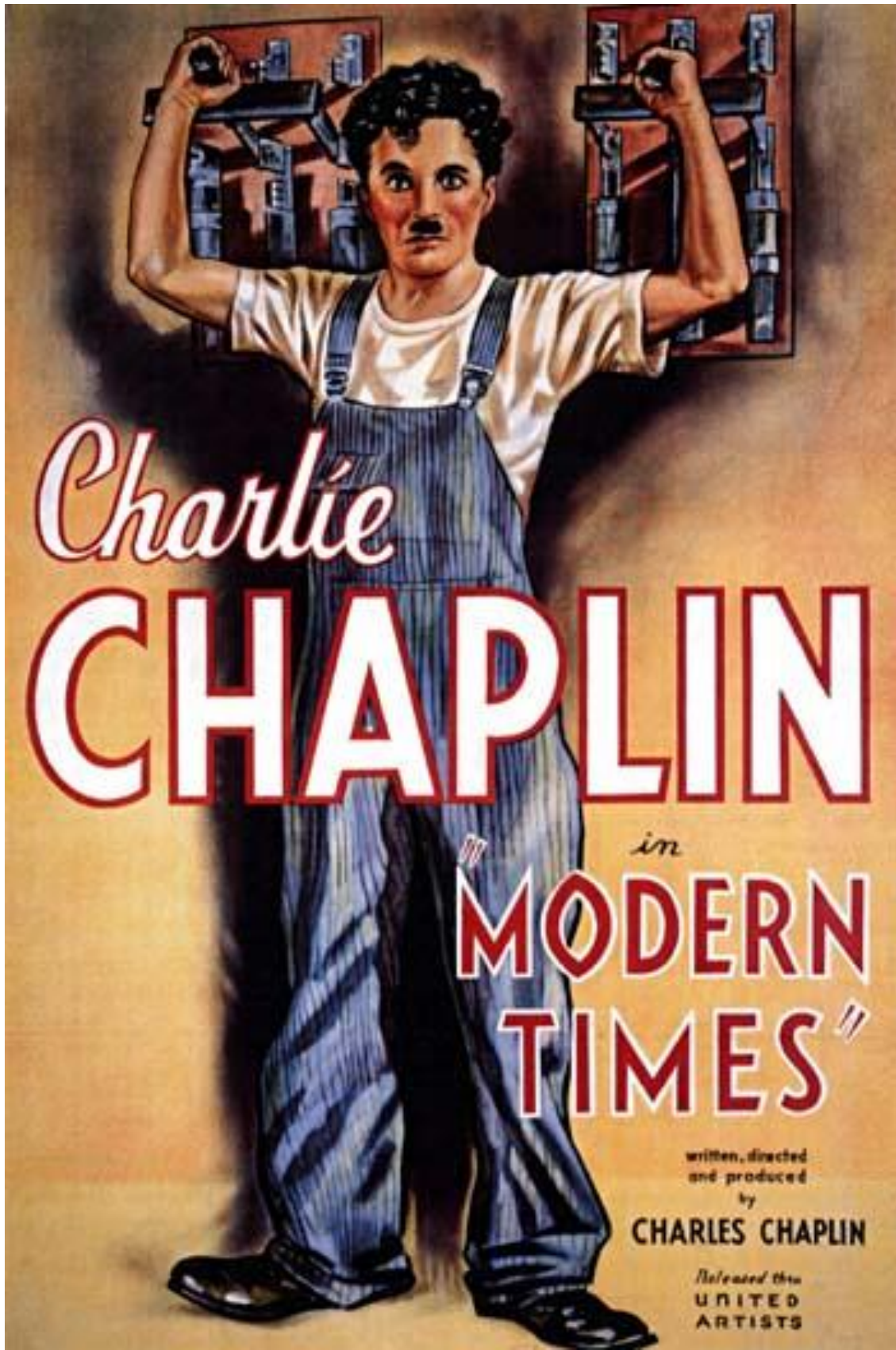
The word *genre* is defined “as a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form or content.” Genres are “classifications or groups of films that have similar, familiar or instantly-recognizable patterns, techniques or conventions that include one or more of the following: setting, content, themes, plot, motifs, styles, structures, characters and stars.” On his *Greatest Films* web site, Tim Dirks captures the importance and utility of film genres, when he states:

“ Genre categories are broad enough to accommodate practically any film ever made, although film categories can never be precise. By isolating the various elements in a film and

categorizing them in genres, it is possible to evaluate a film within its genre and allow for meaningful comparisons and some judgments on greatness.”

That is the essence of the approach followed in the development of this book. The genres identified by Dirks are generally consistent with those genres that frame the content of this guide. However, there are two important differences between standard film genres such as those proposed by Dirks and the genres that this author has used to categorize the greatest films of the last century.

The genres of Literary & Stage Classics, and Social Change & American Politics are not generally recognized movie genres by film historians. These genres along with Historical Epics emphasize the importance of films in depicting historical events and a social continuum from which to judge and internalize the good and bad values in our society. They help tell who we are rather than to titillate, sensationalize and escape or deny our historical roots. More importantly, films selected in these genres help us decide what we can become within the evolving historical continuum of American society. When viewed along with current film fare cranked out by Hollywood, films in these particular genres, can help balance the viewer’s cultural perspective of American society during the last century. While some film historians would identify separate film genres for “cult films, and classic films,” all of the films identified in this guide are classic because of their greatness. This author does identify some fifty plus films that for idiosyncratic reasons are deserving of cult status. However, cult films are not viewed as a separate genre because a cult film can emanate from any of the genres that frame the greatest movies in this guide. There will be those who will argue “sports” films are also a sub-genre, but like westerns, films such as *Eight men Out* (1988) provide important historical benchmarks in the evolution of American society.



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Released thru
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