

## Me and the Movies

### Reflections on a life-long love affair with film

I remember the first movie I ever saw at a theater. It was *The Greatest Show on Earth*. I saw it with my mother at the Paramount Theater in Denver in 1952. It was about the circus. I wet my pants.

That's been the model for my experience with the movies ever since: I remember them vaguely but was affected by them deeply.

I love the movies. Here I am a writer, someone who cherishes the written word, yet I'd rather watch a bad movie than read a bad book.

Why is that? What is it about movies that makes them so . . . irresistible?

People talk about the combination of sight and sound, of the interplay of image and music and sound effects, of the willing suspension of disbelief, of the power of film to draw us into another world and let us experience it, vicariously but still as a simulacrum of reality.

We readers often talk about "getting lost" in a book, of being driven from page to page, of staying up all night reading and not realizing it until morning. But a book to me has always been an odd, artificial medium. We put symbols on a page that our brain then has to interpret and, using our imaginations, we need to conjure a face or a place or a sensation or an emotion.

The movie, on the other hand, *plunges* us into the experience. I've cried a few times reading books, but I've cried many times watching movies. (Actually, I've cried in more stage plays than movies, which is an ever-weirder phenomenon because the proscenium stage is definitely artifice, but maybe that's a flaw of my own psychology.)

George Lucas once said that sound was 50% of the movie experience. Think *Jaws*, think *The Exorcist*, think *The Godfather*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Star Wars*, the list is endless that proves his point exactly.

Some movies nowadays seem to take this to the extreme—think any Michael Bay *Transformers* movie, which are visual and aural assaults.

But the point is, you can't get any of that with a book: You can't get the stimulation (or is it manipulation?) of your ears and your eyes and your brain from the act of reading.

Some of us prefer novels because we want to use my own imaginations, and don't want some filmmaker telling us what each character looks like and what emotion we should be

having at this particular time and when we should laugh—that's what movies do, they disinvite our participation.

I don't get most movies on the first viewing. I often leave a theater puzzled, like not understanding what motivated certain behaviors or what elicited certain responses. Some movies—most movies, in fact—aren't worth a second viewing, many not even a first.

I watched *Paranormal Activity* long after it was out simply because I wanted to understand why a movie made for a nickel could make a jillion dollars. It was an interesting technique, built some pretty good suspense (or was it just the impatient anticipation that *something* had to happen, finally, please!), and had a few scary moments at the end. But really, folks, was it worthy of a sequel? And another sequel? And—what are we now, *Paranormal Activity IV*?

There are other “small” movies that are not so “high concept,” but that tell wonderful stories in wonderful ways, magical ways that touch us and move us and inspire us, but that don't seem to catch on with viewers or at the box office. Look at *Local Hero* or *Chocolat* or *Another Earth* or *Queen to Play* or *Waitress* or . . . you get the picture.

These kinds of movies, I think, are like novels in many ways: They are nuanced, they are rich, they are engaging, they are literate. The words in these movies matter, just as they do in a novel. Maybe they lack the depth or the explication or the complexity, but they are nevertheless gems of art that thrill us for having experienced them.

*The Greatest Show on Earth* was a Cecil B. DeMille spectacular—big picture, big sound, big event, big effects. I happened to catch it showing on television a few years ago and I watched it again, recalling what it had done to me when I was five. And I was disappointed. It had become, in these intervening years, just a circus movie; it had a love story, lots of scenes from the real circus, some dramatic conflict, a big fire, stampeding animals, all the stuff you'd expect. But *Like Water for Elephants* was a “circus movie,” too, for that matter—and I'd sooner watch it again than *The Greatest Show*.

Why is that? Have I simply grown up? Have I moved beyond the key demographic? Have my tastes matured? Or have the movies themselves changed?

*Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Doctor Zhivago* all were big-screen spectacles that won tons of Academy Awards and earned boatloads of money. *Cleopatra* was a big-screen spectacular that bombed at the box office and almost sank Twentieth Century Fox. Maybe that's why they say that in Hollywood they can tell you want *made* money but not what *will make* money. Every success seems to come out of the blue, break new ground, change the course of movie making. Then we get a dozen knock offs of the same kind of movie, and they all tank in varying degrees.

It's an inevitable consequence of the law of supply and demand: If people are buying Ivory Soap, they must *want* Ivory Soap, so let's give them ten other kinds of Ivory Soap that

maybe vary in shape and color and maybe fragrance but are still recognizable as Ivory Soap because, by golly, what people want to buy is Ivory Soap. Obviously.

Before *Paranormal Activity* there was *The Blair Witch Project*, which sort of broke the ground on the subjective-camera, you-are-there, we-just-happened-to-find-this-footage school of filmmaking. But *Blair Witch* didn't earn *Paranormal's* box office, not the first time out, not any other time. Why? It certainly wasn't production values. *Blair Witch* relied on the night and a reality soundtrack of voice-over dialog and, ultimately, some irritating panicked reactions, while *Paranormal* relied more on some neat editing tricks and jump effects.

But *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Premature Burial* are all ultimately more horrifying to me, maybe because the concepts are more gruesome or because Poe knew how to slowly turn the horror-screw into our brains—or maybe it is the very fact that such stories *do* force us to use our imaginations, which are capable of much worse horror than could ever be conjured up by any movie.

I mean, let's face it, starting maybe with *Aliens* and moving on to the remakes of *The Thing* and *The Fly*, and I suppose *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and that whole cut-em-up genre that I have never watched, special effects have gotten pretty grisly and realistic.

And guys like Quentin Tarantino have never shied away from squeezing every last drop of in-your-face gruesomeness from human agony. I wasn't a particularly big fan of *Inglorious Basterds*, but I absolutely LOVED the scene where Christoph Waltz sits down in his Nazi uniform and has that long, convoluted, beautifully rendered "conversation" at the table with the peasant man, who is hiding his children under the floor. The way that scene builds, the way Waltz modulates his evil, the way Tarantino slowly reveals the inevitability of the scene, that, to me, is wondrous movie-making—and wonderful storytelling.

I wonder how that scene would have worked in a novel. I've thought a lot about that. As a writer, I've asked myself how a uniquely powerful scene that I've seen in a movie might be written as a fictional narrative that would convey the same emotional impact as the movie scene. It's not just the setting or the clothing or the casting, it's that intangible quality that an actor and a director bring to a performance, the tone of Waltz's voice, the coldness of his eyes, the curl of his lips, his changing cadence, his nonchalance, the breathtaking evil that lurks just beneath the skin of his entire being—how can you convey that in words without losing the very essence of the thing you're trying to convey? I haven't read the screenplay for *Inglorious Basterds*, but I'll bet that as brilliant a writer as Quentin Tarantino is, his words didn't really "come alive" until Christoph Waltz said them—no actually, until he *performed* them.

Or how do you capture in a novel the incredible story-telling choreography of the three-minute-and-thirty-second no-cut opening scene in Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* or the equally stunning seven-minute-and-forty-seven-second no-cut opening of Robert Altman's *The Player*? Does this kind of directorial tour-de-force get in the way of the storytelling or does it enhance it? The casual movie-goer may not realize that is happening, but today's

audiences are pretty visually savvy, and after a minute or two of no cuts, you start to get uneasy and you suddenly realize, “Holy shit, this is a single shot!”

Maybe this kind of cinematic bravura is a distraction, the director calling attention to his own virtuosity. But when Hitchcock follows the just-stabbed Martin Balsam as he falls backwards down the stairs in *Psycho*, it is no less a virtuoso camera move, but the effect on the viewer is not to ask, “Gee, how did he do that?” but rather to experience an almost stomach-dropping vertigo that makes palpable the shock and helpless inevitability Balsam is feeling right then. This is virtuosity in service of what the audience experiences emotionally rather than what they might realize intellectually.

That is the challenge for many novels, I think: Virtuoso technique is marvelous to behold but it’s almost like admiring *The Mona Lisa* for da Vinci’s brush strokes. It misses the whole point.

A lot of novels, many popular novels, I think are crap. They are, at least to me, impossible to read because they are so poorly written. People who read paperbacks on airplanes maybe aren’t interested in good writing but more in a fast-moving story that takes them out of the discomfort of flying in coach for a few hours. And people talk about some book being a good story. But I’ve personally never been able to get past the weak writing to get to the story to find out. That’s not to be some literary snob, but simply to recognize that even we novelists are in the *communication* business, and that poorly chosen words and badly constructed sentences produce poor communication. It’s jarring, inelegant, disruptive, it lacks flow and finesse.

Unlike a movie where the audience is virtually trapped, sometimes literally by all the people sitting in the same row, sometimes figuratively by the darkness and the overwhelming compulsion to watch all the dancing images on screen, the person reading your book can close it after the first sentence or the first page or any other time they like. Readers *choose* to read your book, and they invest considerable time and attention to do so, time that probably has many competitors these days.

So I honestly feel that writing well is an absolute obligation that the writer has in that personal contract with the reader. If the reader is expected to spend time with your book, then you damn well better make sure you respect that reader’s commitment by delivering the very best writing you can.

We all know the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, I happen to think that a motion picture is worth ten thousand words, maybe even a hundred thousand words. Movies are *dense* with information, and a lot of it us might not even be aware of it if the filmmakers are skilled enough to make us *experience* the movie rather than just *watch* it.

I’ve always thought, simplistically I admit, but in trying to make some minimal sense out of the order of the universe, that novels are about thoughts, plays are about talk, and movies are about action. Christoph Waltz in that delicious quiet scene talks a lot and performs

very few actions, but his “body language” is rich and descriptive and menacingly unmistakable.

I’ve written a couple of screenplays, and I’ve written a lot of commercials and corporate films throughout my career, and the challenge of the form is considerable. Every scene has to be pared to the raw nerve, every line of dialog tight and crisp and dead-on. Screenwriters are after quintessence.

Novelists, on the other hand, are after gestalt. Screenwriters have hundreds of other professionals working with their material, from directors and actors to costume designers, set decorators, sound-effects people, and musicians, whereas novelists need to create the entire world of experience all by themselves.

That’s why I love writing novels: It’s just you and your paints and brushes against the blank canvas. If you succeed in telling a compelling story, if you manage to bring your reader *inside* your world rather than just giving them something to read at arm’s length, then you’ve done your job.

Watching a movie in a theater is a collective social experience. You’re influenced by the people around you, by the seats, by the sound system, by the popcorn. But reading a book is a highly personal experience. Even if we each come away from a movie with a different take on it, because we’ve brought our own personal experience to the theater and we’ve seen the movie through that filter, reading a book is a solitary experience, with nothing but our own thoughts and surroundings to accompany us.

I have tremendous respect for people who make wonderful movies; I can’t imagine how hard that is to do.

But I have even more respect for the person who writes a wonderful novel, because that is exponentially harder.

I love movies. Maybe I’m lazy, maybe I’m just a voyeur, maybe I have beer taste, whatever it is, movies have always held a special place in my heart.

But I love writing even more. Good writing, engaging writing, thoughtful writing. It’s rare. It’s very hard to do. And I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to write at that level myself.

But that’s my goal: To write a novel that will keep you in your seat for several hours and make you wet your pants.