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**DAVID THOMSON**, 'without doubt, the greatest living film historian' (*LA Times*), is the author of the seminal *New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, now in its sixth edition, *"Have You Seen…?"*, *Nicole Kidman* and *The Big Screen*. Born in London, Thomson now lives in San Francisco.

# HOW TO WATCH A MOVIE

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For Kate, Mathew, Rachel, Nicholas, and Zachary
—I'll try not to raise the subject again

It was fairly obvious that the cinema should be my chosen means of expression. I made myself understood in a language that bypassed words, which I lacked; music, which I have never mastered; and painting, which left me unmoved. Suddenly, I had the possibility of corresponding with the world around me in a language that is literally spoken from soul to soul, in terms that avoid control by the intellect in a manner almost voluptuous.

—INGMAR BERGMAN,
on receiving the Erasmus Prize, 1965

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# HOW TO WATCH A MOVIE

# 1

# ARE WE HAVING FUN?

Some people believe film critics are cold-blooded. Whereas many audiences hope to come away from a movie shaking with fear, helpless in mirth, or simply bursting with happiness, a critic sneaks away from the show, a little hunched, with a secretive smile on his face. It's almost as if the film were a bomb, or a *bombe,* an artful explosion, and the critic was a secret agent who had planted it and now takes a silent pride in the way it worked. And how it worked. Audiences believe they deserve a good time, and some feel that dismantling the machine can get in the way of the fun.

That's some people—thank God it's not you. If it were you, you wouldn't be holding me in your hand or your lap, ready to read a book about how to watch a movie. Your being here suggests you feel the process is tricky enough to bear examining. In the first sixty years or so of this medium, the cinema

behaved as if pleasure was its thing, and its only thing; but in the sixty years since, new possibilities have emerged. One is that pictures are not just mysteries like *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Third Man,* but mysteries like *Blow-Up* and *Persona,* or *Magnolia* or *Amour,* which ask, well, what *really* is happening, what do these cryptic titles mean, and what are those frogs in *Magnolia* meant to be? There is something else: a wave of generations now think some movies might be as fine as anything we do, as good as ice cream or Sondheim, things you can't get out of your head, where watching (or engagement) becomes so complex and lasting that you may welcome guidance.

In the 1960s, when "film study" first took hold in academia, there were well-meaning books that tried to explain what long shots and close-ups were, with illustrations, and what these shots were *for.* Such rules were at best unreliable. They felt as if assembled by thought police, and they depressed anyone aroused by the loose *Bonnie and Clyde*–like impulsiveness on screen. I pick that film because it's symptomatic of a sixties energy in movies, a feel for danger and adventure: hang on, this is a bumpy ride, and should we be having such fun killing people? Is it a genre film about 1932 or some cunning way of talking to 1967?

I'm more interested in discussing *that* experience: the way film is real and unreal, at the same time; what a shot is, or can be, and a cut; how we work up story from cinematic information and the helpless condition of voyeurism; what sound does (its apparent completion of realism, as well as its demented introduction of music in the air); the look of money in movies (no art has ever been as naked about this, or such a prisoner to it); the everlasting controversy over who did what; and the myth known as documentary (is it salvation or just another story-telling trick?).

More than that, the ultimate subject of this book is watching or paying attention (that encompasses listening, fantasizing, and longing for next week) and so it extends to watching as a total enterprise or commitment. Driving can be fun, too, and its passionate progress resembles movies—its motion is emotional. But a driver has to watch not just driving, but the road, the light, the weather, and the unexpected action of strangers. So as well as discussing movies, I will speculate on reading, looking at paintings, watching wildlife at the beach, or the wilder life in people close to you, and the total matter of how we see ourselves in life. It comes to this: a hundred and fifty years ago, people lived a life and referred it to books, games, and works of moral instruction. But in the time since then we have acquired this mechanism that mimics the way we attend to the world as a whole. Often enough, it supplants living, to say nothing of moral instruction. So we watch, but we watch ourselves watching.

Think of these models: there is watching as surveillance, or bearing dispassionate witness: you see waves breaking on the shore; you see flowers bloom and wither; you see your own infants become adults. This watching takes years; it lasts out your life. And it dismisses most schemes of judgment, even if that lesson takes time. But then something happens in the spectacle: one wave coming in bears a body—is it a corpse or a mermaid? That flower you're seeing is picked by a good-looking person. Your child is doing something dangerous. The melodrama of story begins, and movies cling to melodrama.

Once upon a time, movies had elementary and appealing mysteries or quests in their shape. Like "the lost girl." So many movies had that mythic pursuit: in *Way Down East,* Lillian Gish plays a fallen woman—can she be rescued? In *Sunrise,* Janet Gaynor is a wife on the edge of being murdered—will

she be saved? In *City Lights,* the tramp loses the blind girl once she can see. In *Casablanca,* Ingrid Bergman was lost to Humphrey Bogart, but here she comes again—can she save him? In *Out of the Past,* Mitchum loses Jane Greer, but then he has the bad luck to meet her again. *Gone Girl* is about a wife who has vanished, leaving the husband to explain the black hole.

Then something shifted in the potential of the myth, as movies became more searching. Finding the girl, or saving her, was no longer a simple means to happiness. In *Vertigo,* Jimmy Stewart falls in love with a lost soul, and loses her, but then her twin appears—is this to save him or destroy him? In *L'Avventura* a woman goes missing and we search for her . . . until we forget the search because there is a new woman. In *Persona,* a great actress stops dead one night onstage—and a nurse takes her over. In *Chinatown,* the full tragedy hits when the lost girl is rescued. And then in Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire,* a man's search for a magical woman is confounded because there are two of her. (The way there were in *Vertigo*?) That's a brief history of the movies in which the message is not just "aren't movies fun?" but "are you watching closely enough?"

You'd better be, because these days, as you know, a carefree state of mind usually means you are being watched.

There are so many ways of watching—and so many definitions of what a movie might be. You can observe as a helpless onlooker, even one as neutral or powerless as a camera. But when the camera's detached record is examined, many watchers may say, "Look—look at the power of the camera!" Sometimes to understand that power we have to watch someone watching.

Already, I've used words that require attention. Take "fun" as a starter. It's the automatic assumption of many people still that we go to the movies for "fun," though others say the "entertainment" industry has done its best in the last few decades to kill that habit. But "entertainment" is another tricky word. It easily translates into having or being given "a good time," and over its history the business has described that as escapism, relaxation, getting away from real life and its insoluble problems for ninety minutes—taking it easy in the midst of a life that can be unbearable.

In Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1942), we meet a very successful Hollywood director, John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea), who has had hits like *Ants in Your Pants of 1939.* But he's troubled—the look of vexation on McCrea's swell face is one of the film's first comic delights. He wants to be serious, to have respect and . . . books written about him? He yearns to encounter real life and put its tough tales on screen. So he dresses up as a hobo and goes on the road. To cut a long story short, he ends up sentenced to six years on a chain gang in the South. (Hard stuff now—worse in 1942.)

His life there is grim and without prospects. But on Sunday the prisoners are taken to a nearby church for a movie show. They see a Disney cartoon, starring Pluto, and Sully starts to laugh along with the other no-hopers and feel better.

Now, Sturges is a great director, and this film is a merry satire on Hollywood and pretentiousness, as well as a sweetly organized comedy. Moreover, it was made at a desperate time across the world in which the relief of movies was as treasured as it has ever been. And there is Sturges warning filmmakers against undue gravity and self-importance. Why not let the chumps laugh and have a good time? I like that attitude (I was

born in 1941 and grew up in a strange nostalgia for the war and its uneasy deal with happiness), and I still cling to the hope that there can be good movies that entertain nearly everyone without being stupid or dishonest.

Don't forget that, even in 1940–45, the world was making some of its best and most enduring pictures—*The Shop Around the Corner* by Ernst Lubitsch; *The Lady Eve,* another Preston Sturges picture; *His Girl Friday* and *To Have and Have Not* by Howard Hawks; *The Letter* by William Wyler; *The Maltese Falcon* by John Huston; *Laura* by Otto Preminger; *Meet Me in St. Louis* by Vincente Minnelli.

Those Hollywood pictures easily qualify as "entertainments" and they were all popular successes. But the list can be expanded to include riskier ventures from dangerous times and other countries: *Henry V* by Laurence Olivier; *Rome, Open City* by Roberto Rossellini; *Les Enfants du Paradis* by Marcel Carné; *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger; *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* by Robert Bresson; and even *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles. Not all of those were hits, or comfortable to watch. Yet they have passed into history as classics because enough people have become accustomed to expecting films to be more than fun. They might be art, too. Don't be put off by that word: art can be appealing and informing (another word for entertainment). It can be fun, too.

Not that "fun" covers film in the war years adequately. In 1945, British and American military film crews went into concentration camps that had just been liberated: Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald. Russian crews had been at Auschwitz. The footage shot in those places was not fun, yet it was reasonable to say it demanded to be seen. Film has that power: seeing can be believing. Under Sidney Bernstein of the Psychological

Warfare Division, the British planned a filmed report to be called "German Concentration Camps Factual Survey." Alfred Hitchcock was one of the professionals called in to help on the project. The footage is hideous, terrifying, and the record of a turning point in human history, as well as necessary evidence. It is worse than anything you have seen before, yet absolutely essential.

Then, in the recovery effort after the war, the authorities determined that the planned film risked upsetting viewers and deterring progress and reconciliation. So it was shelved. The material would not be seen widely until 2014, when André Singer released *Night Will Fall,* a documentary that describes the 1945 attempt. It is still something everyone should see, and watch and talk about.

There are situations in our lives where the way we watch the world may be necessary for the continuation of life. *How to Watch a Movie* is a guide to studying film, and having more fun and being more moved. But watching is a defining part of citizenship, a bearing witness. Ordinary Germans who lived close to the camps elected not to "see" them. Some of the most striking scenes in *Night Will Fall* are of those citizens being marched through the stench, the horror, and the neighborliness of the camps. If you can't or don't watch, you have no chance of knowing what is happening, and film—in all its uses—offers some prospect of seeing the facts. For while the camera is a machine, you are not.

These days, a movie can be as short as ninety seconds, and you may find it just four inches by three on your computer. I am going to propose in this book that our old defnition of "a movie" is nearly worn out. For decades, we had a shared sense

of the word: a movie was something made, advertised, playing at your local theater; it was ninety minutes (once), and now it is over two hours; it tells a story according to certain conventions we all used to understand. But now . . .

Well, those conventions are in turmoil, and a lot of people don't actually go to see "a movie," but they watch movie, or moving pictures, which can be a friend making faces at you on an iPhone, television commercials, some weird twenty-second dream you find on the Net; or the eighteen-inning game between the Giants and the Nationals (2014), which has an apparent unity or story, but is also a chaos of fragments because of the ads, the graphics, and the slow-motion analyses. All of this and much more counts as "movie."

I was arguing with a friend as to whether Columbia University should confer an honorary degree on Derek Jeter, the longtime shortstop for the New York Yankees who was then nearing the climax to his farewell season, 2014. My friend felt Jeter was a natural candidate; I was less sure, even if my doubts were fixed on the rationale behind honorary degrees as a whole. But then another friend asked if I had seen Jeter's Gatorade spot. I went to YouTube for one of the most artful pieces of moviemaking of the year.

It is a small movie, and as old-fashioned as Tyrone Power, in black-and-white, and shot on a fine summer day. The "golden" patina of the imagery suggests well-being, contentment, and humidity-free bliss. This is added to by a persistent stress in the imagery so that it keeps surging from right to left in terms of camera movement, its line of action or the destiny of its hero. These devices have been used in movies for a hundred years, though some viewers hardly notice them because they are emotionally transported by their momentum.

The character here is Derek Jeter—tall, still young, with a shaved head, a simple collarless shirt, and an easygoing, genial regard. He is in a cab, on his way to a game at Yankee Stadium (a trip he has made thousands of times, if seldom in a cab). Then he stops the driver and says he'll walk the rest of the way.

I'm not sure how often Derek has done this in life, and I'm sure that on his journeys to the park Frank Sinatra's "My Way" was not playing in the air. But Sinatra's assurance now harmonizes with the warmth of the image and the thrust of its direction.

People notice Jeter—he is famous all over the country, never mind in the Bronx. He smiles, nods, and speaks to fans—I should say that I have no reason to suppose Derek Jeter is anything but a lovely, decent guy.

The song builds. He enters the clubhouse. He puts on the pinstripe uniform. He is about to go on the field. He reaches up to touch the inscribed motto, from Joe DiMaggio, "I want to thank the Good Lord for making me a Yankee," and then as seen from behind and at a reverent low angle, he is in the open air of the packed stadium, lifting his hand to acknowledge the worship. There is even a moment when he nods at our camera as if to say, I knew you were there all along. And we realize—because this has been going on all our lives—that something else is coming, like the insignia "G" for Gatorade, in color. The farewell tribute to maybe the best shortstop in history (his numbers vie with those of Honus Wagner and Cal Ripken) has been an advertisement. And that leaves us as suckers.

Jeter is a Hall of Fame player and he has had his rewards: money, to be sure (his net worth is estimated at $180 million); the honest affection of fans; ample victory; a career with one club; and an unflawed reputation—something not common in

athletics these days. But, I asked my friend, suppose the ad had been set on the campus of Columbia, with Jeter accepting the tribute of students and faculty, because he had decided to walk, would that strengthen or diminish his case for an honorary degree? Or would the process of commerce and aggrandizement in the filming begin to compromise a great university?

Perhaps, instead, the maker of the film deserves something. Perhaps he or she graduated from the film program at Columbia?

I pick on this mini-movie because it is wonderfully done, yet ultimately depressing, and because it supports a large part of my argument—that to watch movie properly you have to watch yourself watching.

Am I being hard on the "fun" of this little promotion? It had two million hits in a trice on YouTube and many people felt it was grand and cheering. Why shouldn't New Yorkers and the rest of us feel good about Derek and his modest charm? Well, if you felt uplifted when you saw the ad, nothing I say will erase that. But the stir of the Sinatra song (a testament to willfulness) and the texture of the imagery put me in mind of another exceptional piece of movie. I am thinking of the arrival by air in Nuremberg of Adolf Hitler in Leni Riefenstahl's inspiring but despised "documentary" of 1935, *Triumph of the Will.* If you think that's going too far, take a look (it's on YouTube, too). The sunlight, the hallowed black and white, the motion, the accumulation of music and the crowd, and the strangely meek persona of these gods—the ingredients are similar. Plus this: *we* are watching and being carried along.

Filmmakers like to say that newsreel and documentary are sacred or inviolable. But in so much of what we see now the sacred has been infiltrated by commercialism, propaganda, and the way history is turned into fiction.